







## 4.1 IMPLICATIONS FOR SMALL UNIT OPERATIONS\*

Jeffrey Davis

### INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS BY THOMAS MAHNKEN

If we think about it, we are really in an era of small-unit warfare. The history of warfare from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century is primarily one of large-unit operations and command and control of large organizations. In recent experience, however, military operations have been dominated by small units, although the first phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom was the exception.

Even in the mid to late 1990s, a lot of attention was given to how dispersed, small units might operate on the battlefield. Early in 1996, the Marines Corps conducted an experiment, Hunter Warrior that tested concepts for dispersed, small units on the battlefield and how they might bring in remote firepower. In a way, this exercise was a prototype for Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. The Marines didn't follow up on that approach, but then, it was used to great effect in Operation Enduring Freedom.

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\*This paper is an edited transcript of Captain Davis' message.

Other operations going on, both in Iraq or across the globe, are also in the small-unit mode—whether a 12-man Special Forces A-team; a Seal platoon; an MTT; a training team; a military transition team in Iraq or Afghanistan providing advisory support to local forces; or general-purpose forces, platoons, and companies performing activities. Our panel is going to address some of the issues associated with small-unit operations.

If we consider the role of small units in our defense strategy—particularly, what is in the Quadrennial Defense Review—there’s a lot of emphasis on the need for small units to work with and through our friends and allies to build their capacity for counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. Also mentioned is the need for small units to conduct unconventional warfare in denied areas. This issue is not well understood or well analyzed. As the previous panel showed, much of our modeling and simulation is geared towards high levels of aggregation of force and how large units interact with one another.

Finally, there is the technological dimension. It is certainly true that the infantry is the least technologically intensive part of the U.S. military, or of any military. But even there, there has been considerable change over the last 15 or 16 years. Today’s infantryman has night-vision goggles, a GPS receiver so that he can reliably locate himself on the battlefield, access to an intra-squad radio so he can communicate with other members of his unit, body armor that will actually stop a 7.62 by 39-millimeter automatic rifle round, and a helmet that provides ballistic protection against a round rather than just against shrapnel. Technology is at work, even in the least technologically intensive part of the U.S. military.

## **JEFFREY DAVIS**

I’m not going to talk about tactics here, and I’m not going to talk about what’s currently going on in Iraq. That’s not the issue. Changing tactics and adapting to an ever-changing enemy is something that happens in every war. Unrestricted warfare is no different.

What is important to understand is that small-unit leaders who are conducting operations are making daily decisions that have strategic implications. These young men and women find themselves acting as experts in disciplines they've never had the advantage of studying. And they have to do it in front of the media on a world stage. Each Marine, soldier, sailor, and airman can affect policy on a national and local level, thus making them either a strategic asset or a liability.

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This situation was somewhat foreshadowed in the late '90s with the Marine Corps concept of the “three-block” war. In a three-block war, a single unit could find itself engaged in all out combat on one block, separating two warring factions on a second block, and conducting humanitarian assistance on a third block, all simultaneously or in rapid and unpredictable succession. The concept was to field agile, intelligent, and well-informed small units capable of the fighting vigor and soldierly discipline that has always been expected of them, but also politically and culturally savvy enough to keep centuries-long disputes from erupting and to earn the respect of the local populace.

With unrestricted warfare, those three blocks are multiplied by over 200 countries and an unknown number of nonstate actors. It's clear how much this problem impacts small units as they try to prepare to fully deploy. It's a battlefield that spans the globe, complicated by social, economic, military, and political issues. The same rifle company that fights in the Al Anbar province today may conduct disaster relief in Indonesia next month and antiterrorism operations within its own borders next year. In each one of these circumstances, the leaders and members of that unit must understand the legal, political, social, and military environment in which they operate and weigh every decision based on those factors. Simultaneously, that unit must contend as always with enemy tactics that continually adapt. Those tactics

will always adapt quicker than the scientific community can. Our technological advantages will never keep up with an enemy that can get better connectivity through a group of cell phones than we can get through a million dollars worth of satellite communications.

The units must also deal with enemy behavior that wholly defies western morals and law, creating both moral and psychological dilemmas for the individuals and their leaders. Once again, their actions transcend the local level of battle via the realities of international interests, 24-hour news broadcasting, and nongovernmental organizations. These elements, much like the weather, are unpredictable factors that company commanders must take into account as they conduct operations. Organizations such as special operating forces and other government agencies share the same battlespace as infantry units, sometimes in mutual support and, in other circumstances, with little knowledge of the other's presence.

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The effects of the decisions made by the corporals through captains are, in many cases, witnessed by the strategic leaders and the international community faster than the higher level field commanders can respond to them. In other words, tactical-level actions are the path to strategic effects. Higher level commanders must therefore develop and clearly articulate operational designs and end states to the lowest level. In addition to the traditional needs of warfare with well-trained units that are equipped with the best that we can offer, we have to add pragmatic cultural education and, most importantly, a clear understanding of purpose.

My challenge to the analysts and to the strategic community is how do you explain these ideas to the 19-year-old corporal who is walking on the battlefield because he is the one, in effect, that represents national policy to the rest of the world.



## 4.2 DISCUSSION GROUP INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Thomas Mahnken

We live in an era in which small-unit operations are playing a prominent role. During Operation Enduring Freedom, 316 Special Operations Forces (SOF) operators and 110 Central Intelligence Agency paramilitary officers, working with local forces and backed by large amounts of precision air power, overthrew the Taliban and denied al Qaeda sanctuary in Afghanistan. [1] Small units of SOF played an important role in Operation Iraqi Freedom as well. In southern Iraq, Navy SEALs seized Iraq's oil export infrastructure, preventing Saddam Hussein's regime from destroying it. In the north, Army Special Forces (SF), supported by Kurdish pesh merga militia, pinned down 40 percent of Iraqi divisions. [2] In the west, SOF seized Iraqi military facilities to deny Baghdad the ability to launch missiles against Israel and the coalition. [3] Across the globe, the basic unit of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations is the 12-man SF A-team or SEAL Platoon. Thirteen-man teams are training both the Afghan and Iraqi armies.

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The infantry is not the only practitioner of small-unit operations. Civil affairs and psychological operations forces, consequence management teams, and law enforcement forces all operate in small units as well. Indeed, there may be insights that general-purpose and special-operations forces can glean from these groups. However, blanket solutions are likely to be elusive, given the broad spectrum of local environments in which small units may operate.

The operational environment that small units face is complex. Success requires soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines to master not only the physical terrain of their area of operations, but the “human terrain” and “information terrain” as well. Technology can serve as a useful tool for understanding the environment. It is not, however, a guarantee of success.

The discussion group yielded several suggestions for U.S. strategy. Group members recommended that the Defense Department establish small, deployable, interagency units for counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, formed around a cadre with intimate knowledge of the location in which the team would be operating. Their main purpose would be to enable local forces to dismantle terrorist groups operating on their territory. To make this concept a reality, the Executive and Legislative branches must work together to significantly expand the capacity of the Department of State and Agency for International Development. Also needed are Defense Department personnel who understand how to tap the skills and capabilities of these and other federal agencies. Finally, a number of skills currently resident in Special Forces—particularly cultural awareness and language proficiency—must be exported to the general-purpose forces.

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The discussion group also made several recommendations to improve analysis of small-unit operations. First, there is a need for an extensive effort to collect, store, and analyze data from current military operations across the globe. All too often, valuable data are not being collected or analyzed systematically. Second, better modeling and simulation of small-unit operations is needed. Too many of today’s models were designed to portray the interaction of large, conventional forces, not small and often irregular units. Third, and related, is the need for high-quality Red Teaming of irregular warfare.

Finally, the group offered several suggested actions relating to technology. Although group members agreed that technology is not the key to success in irregular warfare, they also believed that certain technologies could play an important role in increasing effectiveness. For example, tools that would enable small-unit members to gain an in-depth knowledge of their area over time would be particularly desirable. Technologies that permit the intelligent filtering of databases would also be useful in understanding the mass of data confronting troops conducting counterinsurgency and counterterrorist operations. Biometric technologies would be similarly useful for separating insurgents from the population.

## REFERENCES

1. B. S. Lambeth, *Air Power Against Terror: America's Conduct of Operation Enduring Freedom*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005, pp. 160-161.
2. COL G. Fontenot, LTC E. J. Degan, and LTC David Tohn, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom*, Ft. Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004, p. 153.
3. L. Robinson, *Masters of Chaos*, New York: Public Affairs, 2004, Chaps. 9, 13.





**Q:** *Paul Shelton, APL – We’ve heard a lot today about Iraq from a lot of people who have never even been to Iraq. I was wondering if you could just give us a few minutes of your experiences and your views of the Iraqi soldiers of your battalion.*

**≡ Capt. Jeffrey Davis** – As far as Iraqi soldiers go, my opinion of them is, to use a term—probably not politically correct—that was used over there: they are good enough. Their solution to a problem is going to be very, very Iraqi. That’s not a bad thing; it’s just a different thing. At times, it tends to be more effective than American solutions to problems. In many of the units, they have formed cohesive single units—Shiite and Sunni, as well as Kurds—and have become very effective fighting teams.

**Q:** *John Shissler, APL – Captain Davis, could you talk a little bit about the challenges in preparing the Iraqi strategic corporal as opposed to the Marine strategic corporal. What are the similarities and what are the differences?*

**≡ Capt. Jeffrey Davis** – There is no strategic corporal in the Iraqi army. As a matter of fact, I think they would have trouble having a strategic major at some places. That raises another point about their army itself: it’s a different culture. They don’t value NCOs in the same way we do. I’m sure that there are plenty of gentlemen here with more experience working in a foreign internal defense mission who could tell you that’s a theme throughout the Third World. Outside of the Western communities, you very rarely see real trust, for lack of a better word, in the NCO corps.

There have been a lot of attempts, both by the Americans and by the Iraqis themselves, to build up pride in the NCO corps, including establishing training academies and pairing up

American and Iraqi NCOs. In the old Iraqi army, the more senior NCOs were treated more like people moving towards the Rhodes program. They were retired on active duty, and they had less and less responsibility as they got higher and higher in rank. With the officers, quite the opposite was true. The officers led in every aspect. The officers, the lieutenants, played the role of sergeants as well as platoon commanders.

**Q:** *John Shissler, APL – How do you rate the ability of the Iraqi enlisted to employ technology? My experience with other militaries has been that dumping a lot of American technology on a foreign military is not the best way to accomplish your mission.*

**☞ Capt. Jeffrey Davis** – While I was there, unless something has changed completely, there wasn't a lot of technology to go around to the Iraqi army to begin with. As a matter of fact, they had Motorolas as their operational radio system. Insofar as their ability to actually accept the technology, these are smart people. They are farmers. They are shop owners. Some of them are engineers. They are smart, smart people. Given very little, they will come up with some amazing solutions. So can they accept technology? I know they can. They are very capable with computer technology, and they are also very capable, as I said, in adapting technology to their needs. Their idea of a fair way of getting power is a piece of slash wire tied to a brick and thrown over a power line. That's not only ingenious, but pretty brave.

**Q:** *Larry Bulanda, APL – You talked about a 19-year-old infantry troop having to be a lawyer; having to be a diplomat, having to hand out candy to kids, and so forth, That's a heavy burden for an individual who is basically trained to fight a conventional force. Because unrestricted warfare is going to be a part of the warfare landscape for our lifetimes anyway, would it be smarter to establish a fighting force that is less of an infantry force and more of an occupying force, such as we need now in Iraq?*

**☞ Capt. Jeffrey Davis** – In the Marine Corps, and that's all I can talk about, I don't think that's a good idea because we're a forward deployed unit. Our deployment cycle has changed somewhat, but little compared to the Army's deployment cycle,

due to September 11<sup>th</sup> and subsequently OIF [Operation Iraqi Freedom] and OEF [Operation Enduring Freedom]. We've always been forward deployed. We've always had to respond to changing situations. We are consummate generalists, and that's probably our greatest strength. That idea might work with the Army, but I can't see it as a smart way to go with the Marine Corps.

To qualify what I said before – they don't have to be lawyers. There are lawyers in the units right now who can advise them on legal decisions. What they have to be is informed. If you walked into Iraq right now, grabbed 100 typical soldiers or Marines, and asked them why they were in Iraq, I think you would get 97 different answers. I don't think there is a clear understanding. I'm not focusing just on Iraq; we do a poor job in that area. Higher level commanders or commanders at the tactical level do a great job of presenting intent. When I was with Task Force Tower, I understood what my intent was. I knew what I was doing. When General Madis was on the ground, I think everybody in First Marine Division understood what their intent was.

The problem is not the higher level intent; it's the stuff that changes that policy. I would almost say that PFC England has probably affected the war in Iraq more than General Casey, not because he's not doing anything, but because she was the face of American policy. Every PFC that is out there has that ability. Unfortunately, it tends to be a liability more than an advantage.

The fact is that smaller units are going to continue to be out there. You couldn't make the unit that could specialize in every single problem that comes up. That's what I meant when I talked about the block war and multiplying it by 200 countries. They just have to be well trained, well disciplined. They have to understand the culture, they have to have some idea of the language. They have to have some language skills, whether through an interpreter or their own language skills. But most importantly, they must have a clear purpose for their presence. Otherwise, they are going to continue to make uninformed decisions.

**Q:** *Prof. Thomas Mahnken – I want to invoke Chair's privilege to draw out the rest of the panel on this issue. What one or two things can the U.S. military do to improve its effectiveness at the small-unit level?*

**Mr. Brad Andrew** – Obviously, the result of our effort has been the human informational overlaid on the physical dimensions of the battlespace. We came up with it, not because it was necessarily all encompassing, but because you could train young soldiers at the lowest levels to at least be cognizant of those aspects and to think about those three dimensions. We're trying to apply technology to that so that we can provide it to the soldiers at the lowest level.

**Mr. Mark Fultz** – I came here to brief this particular effort to model beliefs, perceptions, and influence. But speaking to the small unit, the majority of my efforts at the Pentagon are working on developing technologies very rapidly. One of my primary focuses is putting intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance-related technology into the field as fast as possible. That can be as early as 90 days or may take 18 months, but significantly faster than the defense acquisition cycle.

We believe we're providing the biggest impact for the small unit by putting something very simple in that person's hand, A soldier or a Marine today has to carry an enormous amount of kit and spend an enormous amount of time in memorization to learn all the various pieces of equipment. So, if you are not providing them an order-of-magnitude improvement over what they are currently carrying, they don't want it.

A lot of our effort is to get information to them, whether it's the relevance of a particular situation or full-motion video. We believe we can empower the small unit by putting their surroundings into context. If they are occupying a piece of terrain on a city block, let them know what is going on outside that city block, let them know something actionable.

**Mr. Sean Fahey** – This is a conflict where small units are the critical units engaged around the world. That poses a particular challenge to the nation in the sense that we are learning a lot of

lessons in a very distributed fashion. The people who are coming back with the most actionable information for how we should be training differently, learning differently, changing the tactics, are pretty much captains or below, distributed in a lot of points around the military. We need to design better systems to capture the information—everything about which neighborhoods are good and bad, what scrap metal is where, and which shop owners are the key points of contact—and use them for training. Then we need to find ways to quickly turn that around so that the nation can lend all of its support to small units. I think that's probably the biggest contribution that we can make.

