

Che Guevara and Guerrilla Warfare: Training for Today's Nonlinear Battlefields

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Since the American Revolution, US Armed Forces have been confronted, and sometimes confounded, by low-intensity conflicts (LIC) and unconventional warfare (UW).¹ To protect US interests abroad, US military forces will be called on to conduct insurgency warfare and peacekeeping operations and to provide logistic support in a fluid, nonlinear environment.

Nonlinear battle challenges traditional military roles. Thus, logisticians, not infantrymen defending or destroying a supply convoy, would play a more effective part in seizing a key terrain feature than would conventional forces. This point is clearly made in the 1940 version of the US Marine Corps (USMC) *Small Wars Manual*: "[T]hat small wars are, generally speaking, campaigns rather against nature than against hostile armies . . . constitutes one of the most distinctive characteristics of this class of warfare. [They affect] the course of operations to an extent [that varies] greatly according to circumstances, but so vitally at times as to govern the whole course of the campaign from start to finish. [They] arise almost entirely out of the difficulties as regards supply which the theaters of small wars generally present."²

Guevara's "Small War"

Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara formulated his principles of guerrilla warfare from 1956 to 1958 during the revolt against President Fulgencio Batista. The war, which contributed to the fall of Batista's regime, helped install Fidel Castro as *El Presidente*.

Guerrilla warfare principles are part of the Marxist dogma to which many insurgent organizations adhere.³ Because US forces might face

similar situations in the future, it is important for commanders to study such tactics in order to be successful on nonlinear, changing battlefields.

Although not considered a strategic military genius, Guevara's effective, realistic principles served him well. They included mobility, movement by night, careful use of ammunition (supplies), flexibility, careful study of the ground and surprise and fury.⁴

Mobility. "The fundamental characteristic of a guerrilla band is mobility."⁵ Mobility is the ability to move vehicles, soldiers and equipment rapidly with relative freedom. Guevara's plan was to strike and move freely, avoiding detection. Mobility complemented surprise and flexibility. The guerrillas did not become comfortable or get tied to certain areas. They had to stay one step ahead of government forces. Their mobility put a constant strain on government forces, which had to spread their assets thin.

Mobility allows US forces to keep a potential enemy guessing in the same way. The US usually has an advantage in mobility since its industrial edge allows deployment of all necessary materiel. The ability to establish logistic resupply points (LRPs) at any place and time helps prevent ambushes or traps.

Developing mobility in small units within a support battalion requires the development of circumstances and attitude to ensure each soldier and vehicle has the proper tools to operate in any area at any time. This means having several days worth of food and water for each soldier and equipment and supplies needed for communication, minor repairs, signaling and first aid. Many innovative ideas are currently being explored to increase

every unit's mobility and safety.

Comprehensive training geared to developing confidence and initiative develops a person's attitude. To maintain mobility, land-navigation training is critical. Key leaders need to know the unit's mission and what each person's role will be. Well-conducted rehearsals develop soldiers' confidence and encourage planning for the unexpected. For example, no vehicle should stop without knowing where it will go next. If that decision depends on circumstances, the leader must know those circumstances and why he should or should not bypass an LRP.

Movement by night. Movement by night, another important characteristic of the guerrilla band, includes road marches, convoys, reconnaissance, emplacement of operational bases, resupply activities, rehearsals and attacks. Guevara believed his guerrillas knew the ground better than did government forces. Therefore, they would have more success while operating at night against government forces whose "garrison attitude" kept them safely indoors during the night. Guerrillas were free to move forces, conduct surveillance, attack with surprise then withdraw into the night, contributing to the impression that they were everywhere and could attack at any time.

In conventional operations, night operations are a strong component of force protection for the parent unit and for the group conducting the operation. Departing from a brigade support area (BSA) at night limits the enemy's knowledge of what supplies are loaded. If the enemy sees three palletized-load system trucks carrying 120-millimeter tank rounds leaving the BSA quickly, heading toward a certain task force's area of oper-

ations, it might be a tip-off that someone is short of ammunition. Weapons training also should be conducted at night, if possible, to take advantage of the cover darkness provides.

Careful Use of Ammunition (Supplies). “[T]he care which must be taken of ammunition and the method of using it are further characteristics of guerrilla warfare.”⁶ All armies have restrictions on available supplies, the care and management of which can contribute significantly to any operation’s outcome. For example, wasteful movement of unneeded supplies can detract from a battle in the same way as can the absence of needed supplies. Supply bases or depots are also high-payoff targets.

Ammunition was Guevara’s most critical supply item. It was only available from government forces, and it was quickly expended. Food, clothing and shelter were available from the local population, and weapons, taken from the government or guerrilla dead, had long, useful lives if properly maintained. But only small amounts of ammunition were available. Guevara trained his soldiers to fire only at certain targets and to never waste ammunition. Fire discipline and marksmanship were critical.

Ammunition is no less important. As one of the most industrialized nations on earth, the United States has an absolute advantage in available supplies. The ability to move a large amount of supplies rapidly is a key strength. However, there is needless waste of military assets, which causes support soldiers to expend unnecessary time and energy and places them in unnecessary danger if they must resupply a unit that could not forecast or manage its resources properly.

That the US Army is so powerful and fast compromises the logistic chain. The farther combat vehicles and troops move from their sources of supplies, the more resources are required to resupply them. Therefore, timely resupply from the forward supply brigade is critical. For example, a tank stationed at a road intersection still consumes fuel even while stationary because it must continue to run its engine to keep its battery

charged. If the tank’s wing-man is 10 kilometers away, the battalion’s support platoon must drive farther distances more frequently to resupply both. In turn, the support platoon is exposed to greater risk and must be protected and resupplied as well.

Flexibility. “Another fundamental characteristic of the guerrilla soldier is his flexibility, his ability to adapt himself to all circumstances and to convert to his service all the accidents of the actions.”⁷ Flexibility is the ability to adapt to changing circumstances to take advantage of change. Guerrilla armies are usually forced to limit their operations to targets of opportunity early in their campaigns. This requires flexibility and the ability to take advantage of an unguarded government asset or military target.

No operation ever goes as planned, and the skill and wisdom to recognize changing circumstance can change defeat into victory. However, the ability to do this is only present if there is decentralized control and if initiative is encouraged at every level. The higher up the chain of command that information must travel before a decision can be made decreases exponentially the time available to use the information.

To maintain and employ flexibility, US forces must have the proper equipment and training to allow them to seize the initiative and take advantage of changing circumstances. Properly equipped vehicles enable soldiers to maintain contact with higher headquarters and monitor ongoing operations.

Flexibility is further developed through training soldiers to use their mental tools to maximize their physical tools. The ability to call for fire and close air support as well as to coordinate with other units must be taught to every noncommissioned officer (NCO).

Initiative is the most important tool that can be taught and nurtured. A commander, platoon leader or section sergeant must underwrite subordinates’ honest mistakes. Soldiers must really believe their boss wants them to seize an opportunity. A battalion commander must ensure his soldiers know he believes in their ability to

adjust to a changing environment. A battalion commander who believes in only centralized control could find that his elements are dead or lost and his vehicles out of fuel and ammunition.

Careful Study of the Ground. “[G]uerrilla-defended positions, when they have been selected on the basis of a careful study of the ground, are invulnerable.”⁸ The value of reconnaissance and preparation, map reconnaissance, terrain walks, rehearsals, familiarity with the patterns of the enemy and the local population and a relationship with the local population cannot be overstated. Guerrilla forces usually are familiar with the people and the terrain in which they operate.

The most useful aspect of a study of the ground is recognizing patterns. Most large organizations, especially military organizations, fall into patterns of conduct. Convoys leave and arrive; guards change shifts; and units receive supplies. Patterns can tell how long it takes a unit to react to an enemy attack and what weapons it will use. Guevara’s guerrillas’ familiarity with the area allowed them to always have the most reliable information.⁹

US forces must recognize that there is more to the ground than just dirt. During an LIC, they must remember that the local population will be close. They must know who lives in the area of operations, what their politics are, whether they are primarily urban or agrarian and whether operations are aiding or hindering them in their daily lives. Soldiers will be interacting closely with the local populace, so training must go beyond learning to yell “stay away from the wire.”

Surprise and Fury. “The form of attack of a guerrilla army is also different; starting with surprise and fury, irresistible, it suddenly converts itself into total passivity.”¹⁰ Surprise is doing the unexpected and doing it rapidly—an action that gives no indication or warning when it begins or when it will end. However, surprise cannot be accomplished without mobility and flexibility. Also, movement at night increases flexibility and contributes to surprise.

Even with limited resources and personnel, Guevara insisted on maintaining the edge of surprise. Attacking government forces when they did not expect it was the only way to maximize limited resources. A critical part of his plan was to keep government forces guessing where he would strike next, forcing them to spread their resources thin to cover all, or the most probable, targets.

US forces can keep adversaries off balance by not establishing patterns. Units that establish routines that can be “read” by the enemy can fall victim to surprise attacks. In the mid-1990s, US Army Rangers in Somalia established a dangerous pattern by taking down buildings, thought to contain Somali warlords, in the same way every time. After seeing the US military continuously use the same tactics, the Somalis laid a successful ambush. Somali Colonel Ali Aden said, “If you use a tactic twice, you should not use it a third time.”¹¹

In 1999, a successful use of surprise occurred at the National Training Center in Utah. The opposing force (OPFOR) set a pattern of attacking the BSA with mortars about the same time every day. Their location was never the same, but their target was usually fuel tankers. The commander deduced the pattern and the next likely area from which the OPFOR would attack. He was right, and his troops destroyed the OPFOR mortar team.¹²

Learning by Example

Leaders can apply Guevara’s principles to the ever-changing LIC/UW environment, which has several distinctive characteristics, as the following examples illustrate.

No front lines and no clearly defined battlespace, enemy areas or safe areas. An LIC is not limited to the linear battle; the enemy might come from all sides. Therefore, it is unlikely that the conflict will have defined enemy areas or safe areas. The danger to convoys or supply areas will be just as great as or greater than to infantry soldiers. With no organized uniformed army to defeat or terrain to hold, battles will be ones of individual initiative.

During the Afghanistan guerrilla

war to repel the Soviet Army, the *Mujahidin*—Afghan rebels—roamed the countryside. They would choose an ambush site, destroy a convoy then disappear, forcing the Soviets to deploy more soldiers and armored vehicles on every convoy.¹³

Close proximity to local population. In an urban environment or countryside, the area of operations is usually tied to the civilian population. Protecting one civilian group from another requires a close relationship with the protected group. The mission will not be to defeat an enemy’s standing army but to maintain peace between two ethnic groups or to support a newly democratic government. Proximity to civilians might also affect logistics, since many receiving and distribution centers will be located in heavily populated areas and might employ local citizens.¹⁴

Specialized supply requirements. Individual water sources, fresh food, automotive parts, humanitarian-aid items, nonlethal weapons and infrastructure supplies are all nonstandard supply items that might be needed in a low-intensity conflict. A smaller quantity of these items, relative to a conventional war, will be needed over an area far wider than on a conventional battlefield. The US Army discovered this while conducting military operations in urban terrain training. Special ladders and other climbing aids, as well as forced-entry tools, were required.¹⁵

Specialized requirements for building democracy, such as food, voting equipment and public address systems, might also be needed.¹⁶ The USMC *Small Wars Manual* states, “In most small war situations, almost every accepted principle of warfare on a large scale is subject to modification due to the irregularity of the operation. It is this characteristic that sets the ‘small war’ in a class by itself. It is obvious then, that a successful supply plan in any small war theater must be ready to meet these irregular conditions.”¹⁷

Greater requirement for individual or small-unit operations. During LICs, combat units are broken into smaller groups and spread over the width and depth of the area of

operations. This altered battlespace requires a flexible, fluid supply-distribution channel because if combat units are not massed in small areas, conventional supply-distribution systems will not work. Support soldiers will have to travel longer distances to resupply the widespread combat units.

In the former Yugoslavia, US forces are currently confronting this problem. Since their mission is peacekeeping, forces are spread over a large area for maximum visibility, which creates considerable supply challenges.¹⁸ Creation of flexible supply teams is needed to meet these new demands.

Decrease in US ability to optimize mass or use heavy weapons. US industrial power might not be used because of political constraints or it might be ineffective. For example, tanks that can destroy targets at 2,500 meters might be used as roadblocks, or bombers that can deliver tons of ordnance might not be used at all. Consider the following examples of ineffective firepower.

During France’s attempt to defeat the Vietnamese communists from 1946 to 1954, they made considerable use of heavy artillery. However, they were surprised to discover that artillery had little effect on Vietnamese guerrillas. The Viet Minh—the predecessors of the Viet Cong—took cover until artillery barrages ceased then continued their attack. The Viet Minh also “hugged” French bases, keeping too close for the French to call in effective fire. The French also discovered that close air support was largely ineffective against the guerrillas.¹⁹

In another example, British soldier T.E. Lawrence directed Arab guerrilla warriors to avoid open battles with the Turks because the Turks outgunned them. He opted for attacks on supply and troop trains—areas where heavy firepower was absent.²⁰

These examples reveal firepower limitations that could affect US logisticians’ abilities to operate in an LIC area. With no heavy or effective firepower, guerrilla fighters might be more willing to risk confrontation, especially with less well-armed logistics soldiers.

Inability to distinguish friend from foe. Guerrilla fighters are civilians. If they are not carrying weapons, they are almost impossible to identify as adversaries. Civilians who are not guerrillas might be passing information to the enemy or to US forces. Each person will have loyalties, and some people will change loyalties daily.

The Russian occupation of Afghanistan provides many examples of "trusted" Afghan citizens committing acts of sabotage against the Soviets. In one instance, a Soviet officer's driver helped Afghan rebels kidnap the Soviet officer. In another, an Afghan employee at the communist party headquarters planted a bomb. After the explosion, and not being a suspect, she got a new job at Kabul University where she planted another bomb. Both bombs caused considerable damage and loss of life.²¹

An increase of nonaligned players. Apart from civilian populations, there are a number of nongovernmental organizations (NGO), government organizations from neutral countries, national and international businesses and religious organizations whose interests might be for, against or neutral to US interests.

The Center for Army Lessons Learned at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, currently lists 70 NGOs operating in Kosovo alone.²² While such organizations are for humanitarian reasons, how many could harbor a sniper or saboteur? How many might relay information about US forces if they felt it would further their interests? Also, simply conferring with representatives of extreme political organizations can sometimes lend them a legitimacy that could be detrimental to US interests.²³

Changes in the military decisionmaking process and battle rhythm. Conventional US warriors are accustomed to a well-established planning and execution cycle known as battle rhythm. A brigade battle rhythm for a major operation is 32 hours for planning and preparation and 21 hours for execution.²⁴ At the NTC, the battle rhythm is

one preparation day and one battle day, then the cycle repeats. In an LIC, many smaller operations might be required, each with varying time lines.²⁵ Therefore, the schedule that unit leaders have trained to throughout their careers might not apply.

The availability and use of advanced technology. Geographic positioning systems (GPS), night-vision goggles (NVGs), weapons, cellular phones and GPS jammers are available to anyone for relatively low prices and can be purchased from a military surplus catalog.²⁶ This availability of high-tech weapons presents a serious threat. Guerrilla armies might not be able to afford a tank, but they might be able to afford plastic explosives, NVGs and various small arms.

In a 1999 *Army Times* article, Colonel John Rosenberger, the NTC OPFOR commander, describes available technology: "For \$40,000 I can go buy a GPS jammer from Russia. They put it on the market two months ago. It's an 8-watt jammer that will take down both [commonly used GPS] frequencies for about 200 to 250 miles. Well, that levels the playing field. . . . [S]houldn't we be training against the forces that create a loss of GPS capability? You bet."²⁷

Training's Importance

A conventional army cannot be thrust into an LIC/UW environment without training or preparation. A UW environment is just that—unconventional. If soldiers are not trained or allowed to think for themselves, the US Armed Forces will lose. There are limited resources abroad and limited amounts of training time. Therefore, the US military must determine the correct training needed for tomorrow's battles and focus on it.

The military can prepare for changes in the plan, but the only way it can really prepare for unconventional war is to teach soldiers to take the initiative. Leaders must ensure that NCOs receive the proper resources and the confidence that they will be trusted with important missions.

US President John F. Kennedy said that unconventional warfare "is another type of war, new in its intensity, ancient in its origins—war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins; war by ambush instead of by combat; by infiltration, instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him. . . . [I]t requires in those situations where we must counter it. . . a whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force and therefore a new and wholly different kind of military training."²⁸ Kennedy's statement shows remarkable insight into the battles of the future. **MR**

NOTES

1. John Ellis, *From the Barrel of a Gun* (Conshohocken, PA: Stackpole Books, 1995), 64. Although many conventional battles occurred during the Revolutionary War, those in North and South Carolina, especially, were considered guerrilla warfare.
2. US Marine Corps (USMC), *Small Arms Manual* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office (GPO), 1940), 13, sec 3-17.
3. Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1985).
4. *Ibid.*, 58-61.
5. *Ibid.*, 58.
6. *Ibid.*, 60.
7. *Ibid.*, 61.
8. *Ibid.*, 61.
9. *Ibid.*, 115.
10. *Ibid.*, 61.
11. Daniel Bolger, *Battle for Hunger Hill* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1997), 167.
12. NTC Rotation 99-06, *Combat Service Support After Action Review* (April 1999).
13. MG Oleg Sarin and COL Lev Dvoretzky, *The Afghan Syndrome* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993), 97.
14. LTG William G. Pagonis, *Moving Mountains* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1992), 107.
15. Robert Hahn and Bonnie Jezior, "Urban Warfare and the Urban Warfighter of 2025," *Parameters* (Summer 1999), 74-86.
16. US Army, Training, Tactics and Procedures (TTP), Volume 1, "Bosnia-Herzegovina National Elections," *CALL Newsletter 98-18* (1998), <www.call.army.mil/call/newsletters/98-18/98-18toc.htm>.
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18. US Army, "Drawing a Line in the Mud," *CALL Newsletter 96-5* (1996), <www.call.army.mil/call/newsletters/96-5/sec3zos.htm>.
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20. T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (New York: Doubleday, 1926), 194.
21. Ali Jalai and Lester Grau, "Night Stalkers and Mean Streets: Afghan Urban Guerrillas," *Infantry* (January-April 1999).
22. US Army, <<http://call.army.mil/call/fmsos/ngos/organizations.html>>.
23. P.T. Simmons, "Learning to Live with NGOs," *Foreign Policy* (Fall 1998), 83.
24. Bolger, 206.
25. NTC AAR.
26. US Army, *US Cavalry Equipment Catalog*, 1999.
27. Sean Naylor, "Combat Training Just Got Tougher," *Army Times* (27 December 1999), 15.
28. John F. Kennedy as quoted in US Army Field Manual 90-8, *Counter Guerrilla Warfare* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1986), iv.

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