INFANTRY MOBILITY IN THE JUNGLE

U.S.I Journal Oct-Dec 1965

INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest charms of the Infantry has been its characteristic mobility over all types of terrain. Our concern at getting bogged down in the jungle, therefore, should be equivalent to the concern of a woman who is fast loosing her feminine charms. The main factors that are contributing to our bogging down in the jungles are the scarcity (and in some cases non existence) of roads and tracks, the density of the jungles and scarce local labour to substitute MT and AT. On the other hand the cover that the jungle provides and our limited resources of troops are making more and pressing demands on Infantry mobility. Surprise, which assumes greatest importance in jungle warfare demands mobility for both countering it as well as achieving it. Mobile defence, demanding mobility of the Infantry, is another requirement of jungle warfare with limited resources. In short on the mobility of the Infantry in the jungles depends its own survival and the ultimate destruction of the enemy.

The problem of Infantry mobility should be closely related to its tasks. Mobility being only a means whereby the Infantry may fulfil its tasks of hunting out the enemy, closing in with and destroying him by using the bayonet. Any solution that may hamper its basic tasks is, therefore, no solution. It is in this context that we must judge whether the solution that we have found by making the Infantry-man carry all his loads on his back is a solution at all. Before being over optimistic during training, let us understand that during exercises, where the enemy factor is either totally missing or is conveniently placed and operated, it is not difficult to find a solution to any problem. In real war, however, certain questions will have to be answered by us per force. There is the question, for instance, whether with ninety pounds on the backs of the men, the Infantry is capable of performing anything like the advance to contact? Then, even after carrying so much weight on their backs, can an entire battalion with all its equipment become mobile? If not then where are the extra equipment and stores to be dumped before the battalion moves out? There is the other question: how much fighting can be done with the ‘on weapon’ scale of ammunition carried by a mobile column? Will be have sufficient air superiority to replenish the column by air as and when required. Or will be able to extricate the mobile column from the fighting as easily as is done during the exercise by calling off the exercise as soon as the administrative problems are about to run into trouble? Who is going to bring forward the loads dumped at the FUP before the assault, if the troops holding the objective are required to stay on it to ward off enemy counter attacks? Answers to all these and many more will have to be found for solving our mobility problem before the next Chinese attack.

The aim of this article is to set all minds thinking seriously on this problem more than offering concrete solutions to it. While looking for a solution to the problem we have to be prepared, if necessary, to break away from conventions and avoid hide-bound thinking. The problem is different to the one faced by us in Burma and Malaya in many ways and history, therefore, though a great help, cannot offer any set answers. The greatest difference is that now we do not have the whole world helping us against our enemy. More over with absolute air superiority over the Japanese the British had solved their problem of mobility in their own way. Even so standardisation of the solution is not advisable as each theatre will have its own problems. Greater freedom of action needs to be given to formation commanders or even down

to battalion commanders. What originality can be expected of the battalion commanders at present who are not even allowed to alter the contents of the pack 08 on their own?

The factors that dictate mobility are:

(a) Equipment
(b) Endurance
(c) Organisation
(d) Employment

EQUIPMENT

In jungles where practically every thing has to be carried by the soldier on his back, there the Infantry needs lighter type of equipment. The load on a soldier's back dictates both his mobility as well as his efficiency. It is common knowledge, that the Indian Infantry man carries a lot more useless weight on his back than is necessary in the present age of science and technology. The personal equipment of a soldier, specially, is long over-due for replacement: By using nylon, plastics and other synthetic fibres, the weight of ground-sheet, water cape, web equipment, mug, mess tin, mosquito net, blanket, jersey, socks and other clothing could be reduced to less than one half their present weight. Not only would such items be lighter they would also be durable. The equipment like wireless sets, telephone sets, exchanges, cables and many other items could be reduced in weight by greater use of aluminium and transistors. All this needs to be implemented quickly even though debatable items like the reduction of weight of small arms ammunition may take time. All this would, of course, cost money and foreign exchange, but then the defence planners will have to judicially balance expenditure with our efficiency requirements. At present we are so far away from the state of marginal utility that even a slight increase in expenditure in this direction will result in out of proportion increased efficiency. Infantry is more qualified to be the queen of the battle in jungles than else where and its efficiency requirements, therefore, need to be given top priority in defence expenditure.

If development takes time and finance needs further debating, then in the mean time the Infantry soldier should at least be provided with the means for carrying his heavy loads without having to dangle various items all over his body. Be it a rucksack that could be provided immediately. This and better quality socks and boots will go a long way in reducing the tortures of an Infantry man during long marches. Blisters and unwieldy loads account of greater number of fall-outs than tiredness through marching.

ENDURANCE

The plea for lightening the weight on the soldiers back should not be taken to mean that in that case a lower standard of physical endurance will be acceptable. Endurance will always remain the paramount factor in determining the mobility of the Infantry. The anticipated "push button" type of warfare has failed to materialise, whatever may have been the reasons. The US in Vietnam will, of course, bear this out. There is, therefore, no limit to the standard of endurance that can be achieved and the tougher the better. No wonder that much stress is already being laid on this aspect of training and we rank among the toughest troops in the world. The question now is of maintaining this standard. Our country has made tremendous economic progress providing its people with greater and greater amenities which tend to make them softer. A deliberate attempt, therefore, needs to be made to maintain our standards of physical endurance. Toughness will have to be instilled by deliberately living in discomfort till such time that discomfort is no

longer felt. We should strive to reach that stage where physical exertion during training becomes as pleasurable as playing of any hard game. That state where one would not avoid physical exertion even when the opportunity for doing so exists, but would go out for it with a sense of achievement.

Closely linked with the hard and Spartan way of life are the logistic requirements of the troops, which in turn determine their mobility. That logistic requirements are a variable, determined to great extent by the ability of the troops to endure discomforts, was proved during the war in Burma. Facing similar problems of mobility the XIV Army after a concerted effort slashed the minimum logistic requirements of a division from the then acceptable 400 tons a day to a meagre 120 tons a day. To decide on our minimum requirements we should compare them with those of other Asian nations rather than with the Western.

ORGANISATION

The present organisation of an Infantry battalion is not designed to enable it to move without transport. Even when all ranks carry 100 pounds on their backs, the entire battalion cannot move lock stock and barrel. Where, therefore, use of MT is not possible a substitute of AT and porters is essential. Even the use of AT and porters has its own problems and for increased mobility, therefore, the first requirement would be reducing its dependency on too much AT and porters by making the battalion lighter through some flexible organisation. The organisation of a battalion will, however, be dictated by the exact nature of the terrain where it is required to operate. The terrain on the other hand will vary not only in different theatres of operation but may be even within the same theatre. Organisation will also need revision in accordance with the pace of development of the particular area. This brings out the paramount need for flexibility in the organisation. Much more latitude of action and powers need to be given to local formation commander for formulation and modification of organisations within their area as and how required.

Battle Organisation

Our army today has to do very long tenures in field areas. As it is practically impossible for troops to keep living under battle conditions for a very great length of time they have to move into the field areas with practically all their bag and baggage. So is such a move dictated by or inability to adopt the war system of accounting and correspondence for such a large army committed for the defence and that too for an indefinite period. All this contributes towards the immobility of an Infantry battalion. Certain battalions are known to have employed to the extent of 80 porters for the movement of their ‘A’ office alone from one defensive position to another during the Chinese invasion. There is, therefore, a need for having a battle organisation in addition to the normal war establishment, which should be adopted by a battalion as soon as there is a likelihood of its going into action. This organisation should provide for the establishment of a rear for a battalion as far behind the front line as wireless communications permit. The normal move of the battalion in a particular theatre should not necessitate move of the rear. All stores unwanted for the battle, including Messes and offices, should be dumped at the rear. This rear could be commanded by the 2nd-in-command or a senior Major, helped by the Quarter Master, taking on the complete responsibility for indenting, accounting, reports, returns and other correspondence with the higher formation on administrative matters. Mutual trust and confidence within the various links, which would be the foundation of such an arrangement would, it is hoped, not be lacking during operation.

TRANSPORT

Land

It is while catering for transport for the battalion that we must show greater flexibility in its organisation for jungles. As pointed out earlier conditions in all jungles may not be the same. Some may be having some sort of roads, whereas others may not even be having good footpaths. Whereas in some places, therefore, it may not be possible to use MT at others it may not be possible even to use mules, and use of porters may have to be resorted to. Standardisation of transport is hence not correct. A particular area will dictate how much and what type of transport a battalion in that area should be given. Transport will also have to be related to the operational task of the battalion.

Whatever the other components of the transport organisation in a battalion, the element of porters will have to be made permanent. Their numbers could probably be varied. This is so because in jungles in general the use of MT and AT will always be restricted. A single nonnegotiable obstacle en route can make their entire use impossible and such obstacles are not difficult to find especially on routes a battalion will have to take for search or outflanking operations. Even if such obstacles are overcome through allotment of additional engineer resources, MT and AT columns will prove extremely vulnerable to enemy ambushes on the one hand and most unsuitable for carrying our infiltration on the other. This is not to talk of the "Government" mules having proved to be "white elephants" in the jungles.

Air

Over long distances where huge domestic loads of AT or porters make their employment impossible, use of helicopters for maintenance will have to be resorted to. Such helicopters will have to be permanently attacked to Infantry Battalions, whose operational commitment so demands. Without meaning any offence to the Air Force, it may be mentioned that no Infantry commander will be able to plan on helicopters unless they are under his command. Again there is a financial problem involved in this but considering that a single helicopter given to a battalion can contribute immensely towards its mobility it would be worth giving it one. A battalion that can move swifter is worth two, if not more, immobile ones. As a matter of fact there is hardly a way out either. Considering that there are little chances in the near future of our achieving air superiority, use of any other aircraft for supple may not be feasible. The low flying helicopter with its evasive capabilities would then be the only answer in mountainous jungles and for the best exploitation of its characteristics, the closest co-operation with the ground troops is a must.

Engineer Resources

Engineer resources go a long way in determining the mobility of the Infantry. Whereas such resources as will enable the Infantry to move by MT should be within its easy reach, resources that would enhance its foot mobility should be an integral part of it. The pioneer platoon of an Infantry battalion is hardly in a position to contribute to the mobility of the battalion in any big way. It lacks in both manpower as well as equipment. The main infantry obstacle is the water obstacle and the pioneer platoon hasn't even got simple equipment like nylon ropes and caribinars necessary for the construction of rope bridges. A battalion needs to be much better supported with engineer resources than at present. Greater decentralisation of engineer resources may have to be accepted in spite of all its other disadvantages, especially in case of battalions operated isolated from their brigades – and such cases are not few.

Light Infantry

Ever after its inception, the Infantry Battalion continues to be burdened more and more with supporting weapons with the idea of making it more and more self-reliant. The development

of the mechanical transport made it possible for it to bear such burden without losing in its mobility. With the restrictions that the jungle imposes on the use of MT, this burden is now hard to bear and the advantage of self-reliance is greatly off-set by the disadvantage of immobility. Mobility being the predominant requisite in the jungle it is suggested that the idea of Light Infantry be revived.

The Light Battalion should have no supporting weapons on its WE. Just four rifle companies supported by one Porter Company and, of course, controlled by a light battalion headquarters. The deficiency in supporting weapons will hardly be felt considering that s it is such weapons are not very effective in the jungles due to the limited ammunition that can be carried and the ranging difficulties. On the other hand, it will free the Infantry of its shackles to indulge in out flanking moves, infiltration and surprise raids; all great boons of the jungle. It will also be able to react much quicker to such moves by the enemy. For set pieces operations artillery units could be affiliated to it as and when required.

The same idea could be implemented in the present standard battalion also by providing the support and administrative companies with at least 18 light machine guns. The supporting weapons could then be detached from the battalion as and when required without having to face any problem of their defence. In order that these extra LMGs may not further burden the battalion, automatic rifles with light aluminium bipods could be used in lieu.

Manpower

However much outside help a battalion may obtain for carrying its loads, there is a requirement for certain of its loads of ammunition and equipment to be carried by the Infantry-man on his own back. These loads are the basic minimum requirements of the sub units to be able to function in their roles as such. The load tables of such ammunition and equipment have been worked on the basis of authorised strengths of such sub units. As a matter of fact, however, authorised strengths are never available and such loads, being the minimum requirements of the sub units, have to be carried by the lower strength present. This increases the load on the individual. Strengths of units in far flung areas have been known to have depleted to unbelievable figures. The numerous ‘rears’ at the rail-heads, road-heads, airfields, in many cases even at transferring points and the innumerable Transit Camps that the troops have to pass through all eat up troops. The situation is, of course, aggravated with the break-down of land and air communications. The Infantry battalion, therefore, needs a more liberal scale of manpower to be able to move self-contained at all times in the real sense of the term. Each sub unit needs to be increased by at least one fourth of its present strength to maintain a reasonable figure of normal strength present, even after this unavoidable depletion.

EMPLOYMENT

With the present organisation and equipment it is not possible to make an Infantry battalion fully mobile without the use of MT. If no change in the present organisation is anticipated in the near future, then the only way of imparting some sort of mobility to the Infantry battalions is through varying its employment in the jungles. Only some sort of mobility can be imparted because, whatever the method of employment it would be impossible to make the entire battalion mobile at one time. We shall have to sacrifice the use of a large portion of the fighting strength in order to give more mobility to the rest. This portion which will either be defending a firm base or carrying loads of the leading elements of the advancing column may be at times as large as one half of the total strength. The capability of such a battalion will also be proportionately reduced and we should take this into account during planning. The danger lies in

expecting too much from such a mobile battalion which in fact will be only two companies strong as will clear from succeeding paragraphs.

Firm Base

The battalion at present being heavy such as it is, and weight on the man's back being limited more for reasons tactical than physical, the battalion can only be made mobile for short periods by temporarily detaching from it all stores and equipment not required for that particular operation. This necessitates the establishment of a firm base and with the potentialities in a jungle for infiltration this firm base will have to be well defended. This will tie down a minimum of one company leaving only three rifle companies that can ever move out. On certain occasions this firm base may be vulnerable to bigger attacks by the enemy and in that case the firm base may require up to two companies for its defence, leaving behind only two companies for moving out. Even when three companies are available for moving out, it might be advisable to use one of them for making the Vanguard Company lighter and more efficient. In short there can seldom be more than two rifle companies mobile in a battalion.

Leap-frog System

When a definite requirement exists for the entire battalion to move out then method of leap-frog could be adopted, whereby a battalion moves from one firm base to another. One company could keep holding the previous firm base till the move is complete. One company acting as Vanguard could then move light using another company to carry its loads and the fourth company could follow them fully loaded. After the stipulated distance, the Vanguard could establish a new firm base and the other companies could go back to make a second trip and wind up the rear firm base along with the company that had been defending it. Other details like local protection of the companies moving fully loaded could be worked out quite easily. The rate of advance of the battalion like this will have to be, of necessity, slow and probably not more than five miles a day.

CONCLUSION

The problem of mobility of the Infantry stands before us like a monster. Let us not close our eyes towards it or make it look non-existent through unrealistic training. Let us face it with an open mind ready for radical changes if necessary and restore to the Infantry its charm. The main solution lies in re-organising the Infantry battalion for the jungle and of course obtaining lighter and durable equipment. Even when the Infantry battalion is up on its feet, the problem still remains of supplying it on the move to maintain its mobility. In the last war, air supply was found to be the answer. That answer is there even today but where are the chances of our air superiority over our enemy in the near future. The helicopter is probably one way out but for a poor country like ours the answer seems to be the porter. However, before shutting our eyes finally towards any solution on financial grounds let us first decide on priorities. Is any other expenditure on defence worthwhile if the Queen of the Battle is to remain immobile and ineffective? In the meantime, however, the grand Infantry soldier, even though handicapped by the sagging and unwieldy weight on his back, must move on – jungle or no jungle. For him there is no obstacle insurmountable.