

Donkeys led by Lions

Sons of the Iron Lady

All names have been changed. A few facts have been bent in case any bad men subscribe to the British Army Review. We have aimed to be firm but fair in our assessment but readers should be aware that this article is a collective effort and probably biased.¹

Donkeys

Our enemies in Afghanistan call our soldiers and marines donkeys because of the loads they carry. Like the 'Old Contemptibles' in WW1, some of our infantry have turned this insult around and wear it with what Americans might call pride. Like our infantry, donkeys are cheerful, fit, hard working creatures that have a unique place in the hearts of the British public. But they are much put upon by their masters, especially in distant lands, where they have to carry recklessly heavy loads.



45 Commando Royal Marines conducting Operation Ghartse Palang in the Upper Sangin Valley (C Sgt Baz Shaw)

It is just getting light when ten smelly men and one smelly woman set off from their Patrol Base. All told they're carrying more than half their bodyweight in weapons, water, ammunition and gadgets. They carried less kit when they last came to Helmand but they have learned to value water and firepower. Everyone carries a litre more fluid than they think they'll need and the sharpshooters now carry belt-fed light machine guns as backup. These days their patrols go nowhere without a

Javelin launcher, two under-slung grenade launchers (UGLs) and a few other little extras. This particular patrol carries a few dozen UGL rounds and vast spools of link ammunition for its five machine guns. They move in a kind of tactical waddle.

Today they're going to be patrolling around and through a hamlet a thousand metres north of the patrol base. They'll be trying to dominate some ground, 'show presence' and maybe win a few hearts and minds. They'll never be more than a few thousand meters from the patrol base as they take a wide counter-clockwise loop from base to hamlet and back. They aim to be back in about five hours; taking it steady but back in the patrol base before the day gets really hot.

They move from wadi to compound to irrigation ditch, taking care to stay in the narrow lane cleared by the Vallon minesweeper men. Kneeling or going prone at the halt, using the ground as best they can, scanning their arcs and paying attention to known firing points, they reach the hamlet without incident. They get the Evil Eye from a few of the locals as they pass through and are clearly being dicked but their pidgin Pashto is aided by an interpreter today and the smiles outweigh the scowls. Presence has been shown; a small tick will be made in the hearts and minds spreadsheet.

The patrol moves on into to the half-cultivated, compound-dominated ground to the west of the hamlet. It's not yet 10am but the temperature is in the mid thirties. Despite the steady pace the patrol starts losing body water and salts faster than they can be replaced. They're fit people but by the time they swing onto the last leg toward the patrol base they've been plodding up and down in the heat for four hours. They've been at a high alert state for longer than their bodies can sustain it. Mental vigilance has dropped off and their reactions have slowed. Knees, necks and shoulders ache, eyes are gritty, vision is that little bit blurred. Dehydration, fatigue and the stress of being on the alert have already

biased their choices to the simple-but-risky; they've started to bunch up and the mine clearing drills have become a bit sloppy. And then they're bumped.

Two hundred metres to the west (the patrol's right) are four well-rested, well-watered, wiry little men. They have opened fire from the shady spot they've been lying in for the last half hour. The fire is 'ineffective' in cold war terms but our hot war patrol is pinned for a minute. Having already used up much of their high-alert reserve capacity it is difficult for the patrol to work out where the fire is coming from in this Afghan bogage.²

Corporals shout, radios crackle, fire is returned. After a few false starts and much shouting, the patrol's fire has been directed at the right bit of cover. In this environment locating the enemy is often as much luck as judgement but today the patrol has just enough of both. The patrol's fire builds until it looks like our guys are winning the firefight and can think about getting up close to the enemy. But the enemy have other ideas. Those four nasty whippet-men are already moving off to a secondary position. Well rested and carrying less than 20kgs apiece they can scramble through cover at quite a lick. A lucky UGL shot might cause some damage but their covered route means all the patrol's direct fire is just noise.

With a bit more shouting the patrol commander manages to drop the rate of fire to a level he calculates will keep the enemy occupied but not waste rounds. Then, after a quick chat in a ditch, he opts for a classic Brecon move. Another rapid fire surge from the machine guns (directed at the original firing point) is used to cover a move by a four-man fire-team led by the patrol commander. Taking a risk by using open ground that has not been Vallon-cleared, the fire-team tries to out-flank the enemy and heads off southwest at a clumsy trot. After seventy metres they've nearly reached the next bit of cover when they're engaged by another couple of well-rested men. A hundred metres to the fire-team's north, in the shade of

a compound wall, these two men are taking shots at the fire-team with an old but effective sniper rifle. The fire-team don't notice this fire for a while - at full trot they are already gasping and the noise of their own bodies half masks the crack and thump. Luck is on their side again; nobody is hit. But by the time they reach the cover of a knocked-down wall, the original enemy have reached their secondary position.

Now fire comes from north and southwest - and as far as they're aware from the west as well. None of their cover seems safe from all the threats but it's a whole lot safer lying round the knocked-down wall than moving or standing up. Feeling outnumbered, outgunned and out on a limb, the fire-team is pinned and only the patrol commander is able to risk returning fire. This is mostly bursts of spray and pray but includes a few grenade launches in the general direction of the enemy.

Things are looking bad for the fire-team but some smart work at company HQ is on their side. A quick reaction force has been despatched in manly vehicles that bristle with heavy weapons. While these guys are told where to apply their violence, a passing pilot has cheerfully made a few low-ish passes in his jet. By the time the quick reaction force puts down suppressive fire there is nobody there to suppress. The wiry men have weighed up the odds and sloped off before things get too dangerous. A Javelin round knocks down a goat shed and a stream of grenades has ruined some field drainage. The dust clears and the fire-team gingerly retraces its steps; the patrol heads back to base. Both sides claim a small victory. In the patrol debrief our people can say they have shown presence as requested and assume that all the rounds expended must have hit a few of the enemy. Unlike some of their patrols this one wasn't forced to end early because they ran out of ammunition or water. The patrol wasn't stalled by the ambush and it forced the enemy to withdraw under pressure. There were no friendly casualties.

Back in their boss's house, the wiry men know they won't get a bonus for injuring any British because no helicopter came and the plane didn't drop any bombs. But they know the patrol was lucky when it crossed the open ground, got the quick reaction help and missed the mines by the knocked down wall. A few tweaks and their ambush technique might pay a bonus. Their boss is happy though - he spent a hundred dollars to occupy half a company for most of a day and he knows that this one ambush cost the British maybe a hundred thousand dollars. He has drained a little money and resolve; on a good day he will drain blood.

Donkey Facts



A donkey crosses an unbridged river (the Ruwu River) by means of a cable and harness in German East Africa - WW1 (IWM)

Our use of the donkey analogy is trite but it actually understates the problem - compared to most pack animals soldiers have to carry a much higher relative load. The infantry in our patrol were carrying five-eighths of their bodyweight: pack animals generally carry no more than a third.

This may be a facile example but the seaside donkey code of best practice limits passengers to 51kg. Even with saddle and harness we have a 200-250kg, four-footed, a bred-to-harness animal carrying just over a quarter of its bodyweight. The seaside donkey will work six, eight-hour days a week and is put on light duties when the temperature approaches 30°C. Is this health and safety gone mad? No: in the early 1900s, New Zealand loggers limited mule and pony loads to 58kg. Granted, their animals were working in some mountainous country but it meant that in temperatures that rarely exceeded 25°C a 350-450kg beast was carrying

less than a sixth of its bodyweight.

This pampering was needed because the animals had to survive the logging season. And, in case you're wondering, these animals only had to walk. We can find no examples of pack animals having to run, scale walls, assault compounds, clear mines or liaise with locals. Tasks that need willpower or brainpower further compound fatigue and dehydration.

There are many figures floating around on soldier load in Afghanistan. The average is misleading because load is mission dependent and governed by pragmatism or preference. A big man going where a quad can't go will carry much more than a small man with vehicle support. But we know that 52kg is the average carried on workaday foot patrols going out from two typical patrol bases where the soldiers' average bodyweight is 80kgs.³ The infantry in our sample routinely carry 65% of their bodyweight - double the pack horse rule-of-thumb, more than double the maximum for a seaside donkey and about four times that of a logger's mule. Unlike the old days, where patrol load and fighting load were different, our soldiers can usually only remove their daysacks when they are firing. Their baggage contains things that will soon be needed or must be denied to the enemy so they have to put them back on for anything short of an immediate assault. This makes their fighting load more than double the historical average and the maximum proposed by Lionel Wigram, SLA Marshall and conventional wisdom.

The real problem with soldier load is not leg and back injuries but the tactical impact. Our infantry find it almost impossible to close with the enemy because the bad guys are twice as mobile. A straw poll of three multi-tour companies found only two platoons that had successfully closed with an ambushing enemy. Our unscientific poll might be showing exceptions but rumour control suggests the lack of closure is common. Some of our soldiers only do firefights because they know manoeuvre

is a waste of effort when they're carrying so much weight. The result is that apart from a few big operations where we have used machines to encircle the enemy there are so few uninjured insurgents captured in contact that it's simply not worth recording.

We expect that some readers might now be having a Tourette's outburst about the enemy being fanatics that can't be captured. Two points: a. most of them aren't fanatics, they're just disaffected lads who like a scrap; b. we used to get real fanatics like the Japanese and the SS to surrender so what's the difference with the current bogeymen? The difference is that our guys can't move fast enough to get close to them. The difference is that we have to rely on fire because we can't do movement very well. More firepower means more weight and makes for shorter, slower patrols where we make more mess of the countryside. It makes for inconclusive engagements that the enemy can claim as victory. Fire, even with our newer precision munitions only scratches at their fighting power and, when we're precise but inaccurate, helps their recruiting. Movement allows us to close with and capture the enemy - to let him know he's been beaten by a better man.

We're getting to a point where we are losing as many men making mistakes because they are exhausted from carrying armour (and the things that go with it) than are saved by it. The weight of protection and firepower also induces some unusual and undesirable combat behaviour. Sixty years since operational analysis underlined the well-know 'fear fatigues you - fatigue scares you' we have no hard facts on the problem. It infects a soldier's decision making; he knows the patrol will head back home once he's fired off enough ammo but the professional self-control that counters this is easily forgotten when he's scared and tired.⁴

Lions

Our lion analogy is worse than the donkey one. We've clearly stretched things a bit to make a lame joke. But lions, contrary to Victorian opinion,

aren't brave or noble; they are fat lazy creatures that lie around all day licking themselves. They only rouse themselves to eat the best bits of the hunt, mount one of the lionesses or to do some noisy lion infighting. They get others to do the dirty work and they have a penchant for infanticide. We are not saying our commanders are fat lazy child killers, far from it, but it has reached a point where their headquarters are.

Funnily enough, a few miles from our sweaty patrol, a meeting is being held where a brigadier is having a brainwave that could help our infantry out of its rut...

However, the brigadier's got a problem: he's in a twenty-man meeting that should help to align the intelligence, targeting and influence processes but, just for a minute there, he wasn't actually listening. He'd let his mind wander during an irrelevant semantic debate. Just as he's getting his focus back, one of the young gunner officers says something that might be important when he (the brigadier) is suddenly hit by an intense wave of *déjà vu*. The chat has moved on by the time he's shaken off that goosebumpy, dislocated feeling and he has to interrupt and get the gunner to do a say-again.

Now the brigadier's other problem: the *déjà vu* and the maybe-important something actually had nothing to do with what the young gunner was saying. While he was tuned out his subconscious mind linked the familiar setting and a few words to spark a mini eureka moment and fire up that illusion of prescience. His brain briefly linked a collection of facts and ideas to simplify a fundamental problem for the British force in Afghanistan. Sadly, his brain then tricked him into thinking the idea came from somewhere else. The ephemeral moment of clarity is already melting away.

By the time the gunner has worked out which bit he's been asked to say again, said it again, been interrupted by one of the intelligence gang, rearranged the words a bit, been corrected on jargon by

his boss, been asked a question by one of the Americans, had this translated into civilian speak for the cultural advisor, had this interrupted by the information manager... well, you get the picture. The brigadier's been running the main bit of the UK's effort for three months now but it seems he's spent the whole time in one big meeting. He has little time available for clear thinking - even less for keeping in touch with his troops. Despite his best efforts, the trivialities of management are slowly pulling him away from the fundamentals of command.

To the brigadier's right sits his chief of staff - a young thruster who's rapidly approaching a peak of frustration. One: he's sat in this pointless meeting about planning some other meetings about someone's big idea of how to complicate something simple. Two: some fool keeps using the phrase 'going forward' but there's no evidence of this going anywhere. Three: the boss has shown an interest in some arcane gunner-speak that's started everyone off down new rabbit holes. He really should cut out of this meeting and get back to doing something useful.

A particular concern for the chief of staff is how the HQ had been operating since the double hit of people going on leave and a diarrhoea bug that tied many of the rest to toilet seats. Some people had to be rearranged to keep the Ops room up to strength and there was still a shortage of signallers who could mend computers. Apart from that, everything is running with such ease that he is getting suspicious. Very suspicious. When the manning hit started he had some chairs moved around so that he could speak to most key people face to face. Now, when the staff has to make a quick plan it really is quick; 'dynamic' targeting meets really are dynamic. The mutual understanding that has developed since people thinned out reminds him of one the less turgid staff college lectures. The remaining staff are all singing from the same hymn sheet and showing an easy unity of effort that is completely unlike the decision-by-attrition they had a few weeks ago.

His real worry was how to maintain this momentum once manning ramped up again. If he could just sneak out of this interminable meeting he'd try and scribble some of his ideas down but right now one Int Corps guys was drawing his attention to yet another brightly-coloured PowerPoint schematic.

Lion Facts

Individually the people in headquarters are earnest, hard working and busy trying to improve the lot of the fighting soldier. Collectively they make a bloated over-complex system that sucks the life out of operations. It's nobody's fault but decision and action get lost in Chinese whispers and Chinese parliaments that turn most of operational staff 'work' into operational staff waste.



HQ 19 Lt Bde (Sgt Daniel Wells)

People have been saying this for years and a few tours have noted how their headquarters worked better when there were fewer people in them. But Brits are a cautious bunch and every staff officer likes to have a little staff of his own. Then the army makes us too polite to tell people that there's nothing useful for them to do. So we make something up. Our initial all-hands-to-the-pumps approach gives us too many people and then 'work' expands to meet capacity. Subsequent tours repeat the error making a feedback loop of self-justification: we've got as many people as the last tour but we're still really busy so we must need more people.

Unfortunately, a HQ isn't like a pump where more weight on the lever will make it shift more water. A HQ is more like a computer, where more applications make it run slower. (Adding more people is not like buying more memory. Each individual has their own process to run

and the need to aligning all the parts detracts from the whole.) The bigger a HQ gets the more it forces people into wasteful activity, particularly when functions overlap and compete.

The result is that at a lot of points between patrol base and Whitehall there are people who aren't doing anything about the enemy; they aren't even thinking about the enemy; they're thinking about how to make a pretty picture of how they think someone else ought to think about the enemy. They don't like doing this and it's certainly not what they joined up for but they do the best they can. Sadly this usually means producing more words that slow down everyone else.

Granted there are some lucky people who have landed jobs where they are able to use their talents to make useful things happen. (And it's a delight to be in one of the small teams that can cut through bureaucratic inertia.) But these lucky few are fighting against the friction created by all those people in lily-gilding jobs.

Last year, deployed UK headquarters produced a terabyte of written orders and reports every month. In one Afghan HQ it took a man nine days to read one day's worth of chat room and email exchanges – and he didn't have to open any of the attachments. This is a clear result of our command organisation having a wiring diagram like the spaghetti hanging out of our Heath Robinson computer servers. The further we get from the patrol base the worse the problem becomes; by the time we get back to UK there are more people involved in managing the operation than are actually deployed. The waste in deployed HQs consumes our capped manpower. With too few foot soldiers to do the job we've been set, a quarter of the people in theatre work in management or management support. Even with the contracted area of operations there are not enough people to cover the ground. When added to the patrolling problems it means we still have difficulty saturating our bit of Afghanistan.

In a Rut

Our patrol might be at the opposite end

of the food chain to the brigadier and his chief of staff but their problems are related. Each is in a Catch 22 that grew from classic British woolly over-engineering.

We tend to procure 'capability' like a boy buying a Swiss army knife, thinking that the more is better – even if those extra things do little other than confuse the main effort. The same approach has infected almost everything we do but it is most damaging when it comes to the weight of kit and weight of management that our soldiers and marines have to carry. Having mislaid the maxim that to defend everything is to defend nothing, we have reached a point where we're not fighting to win but fighting to not lose.

Patrols and HQs are both carrying weight that justifies yet more weight. Just as more protection demands more water and more firepower, extra HQ cells need more internal coordinators, more computers, more signallers and more managers. Patrol weight and HQ weight have developed a momentum that might only be stopped by a crisis.

Spotting the soldier load problem is easy; doing something about it will be very hard. No commander will ever risk the false ire of the press, the ill-informed judgment of coroners or the genuine grief of relatives by dumping body armour, firepower or gadgets. There aren't many soldiers or marines who would voluntarily dump kit and risk their own lives for some vague idea about the collective good. The geeks aren't going to invent a scientific solution anytime soon. We have to face the fact that we're probably stuck with infantry as donkeys for the rest of our time in Afghanistan. The same applies to HQs – our command system has got so busy and so full of vested interests that we'll never be able to sieve through it and fix it in contact. To change the structure of Bde HQs would require agreement from all the middle managers and administrators who would have to be sent home and there simply isn't the momentum to do that.

Like the good soldiers and civil servants we are, we know this is a battle we can't

win. So we're not going to fight it, we're going to focus on one that might be winnable.⁵

The Next War

Our concern is that by accepting the heavy load and the heavy HQ as the norm we won't be able to dump them in future wars.

These wars of choice seem to have made us forget the doctrine of necessity. Remember manoeuvre doctrine and mission command? They were big in the 90s but somehow tempo, simultaneity and surprise have been sacrificed for protection and firepower. Above platoon, maybe company level we have lost decentralization and trust by trying to enforce unity of effort by detailed control.

This has understandably infected training. We have some units who only ever train to fight cautious shura-centric battles (with all the tempo-sapping procedures that go with them). We

have infantry whose collective training is exclusively weighed down with body armour so they never learn the value of fighting light against an enemy with equivalent combat power.

Forget Afghanistan for a minute and remember a few of our past wars. Would the last generation have been able to tab across the Falklands carrying all the extra kit we have now? Would we have won at Goose Green or taken so few casualties at Mt Harriet if each of our blokes had been carrying an extra 20kg? Go back a bit further and consider what the logistical and tactical impact of that extra 20kg for Burma, Dunkirk or Normandy. How would these operations have played out if their brigade HQs had been the size of those for a corps or if it took weeks to plan minor actions? It will be difficult to lose the weight we have gained in recent years. If we don't work out now how we are going to lose that weight we will do the old trick of starting the next war by repeating the mistakes of this one. □

1. When we reviewed the first draft of this article we removed twenty-two acronyms that had slipped in without us noticing. Many of these three-letter and ten-letter abbreviations were unnecessary barriers to communication.
2. The Normandy bocage was unlike the bits of Afghanistan we fight in today but had many of the same tactical problems because its mix of open killing areas and very close cover was quite unlike the ground our infantry trained on.
3. This is a higher bodyweight than average. Even at the start of their deployment most infantry are closer to 70kgs. We suspect that our sample is at the more favourable end of the bodyweight/load spectrum for patrolling infantry. Female medics are among those statistical outliers who often carry as much as they weigh but their problems have a less obvious tactical impact so we have ignored them.
4. We found some figures for the effects of fatigue on vigilance, dehydration on fatigue and so on but could not pull these together to make a useful number for how soldier load degrades combat effectiveness.
5. We should point out that Toyota have now realised that their recent problems came from ignoring their own doctrine and employing too many managers. In a matter of months they have started to turn it around. Maybe it's too much to expect the army to do something like this. Maybe making cars is a more serious business than making war.



A Marine with a company from 2d Marine Special Operations Battalion, U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Special Operations Command leads his mule (L/Cpl Stephen Benson USMC)