

# An Ethical Consideration: Problems of Force Sustainment in Littoral LSCO

*by Joel M. Giese*

## Introduction

In recent years, the US Army has recognized the changing nature of the “adversary” and has worked to realign itself from Counterinsurgency operations (COIN) back to the Large-Scale Combat Operations (LSCO) of the Cold War. As the Army pivots, it is also taking notice that LSCO in the Indo-Pacific will be of a littoral nature. Littoral zones are typically characterized by challenging terrain, political complexity, dense civilian populations, and critical maritime interests. These regions are strategically significant, and they offer both challenges and opportunities for military operations. As U.S. Army forces engage in large-scale combat operations in such areas, the concept of force sustainment—maintaining the resources, logistics, and personnel necessary to support extended engagements—becomes of vital importance to the success of the mission, as do the ethical considerations of such operations.

This paper will briefly explore two potential ethical questions which must be addressed as senior commanders consider future littoral-LSCO (LLSCO) in the Indo-Pacific. The first question addresses the ethical considerations of LLSCO on local civilian populations. The second is the ethics of failing to properly prepare for a future LLSCO war while having the knowledge that a LLSCO conflict is likely.

## What the Future May Hold

It is 2030. Due to social and economic reasons, a peer adversary in the Pacific has suddenly acted upon its claims over large swaths of territory. America saw the warning signs, yet failed to fully comprehend the urgency of the situation. In a matter of days, invading troops swept past the first island chain and made solid inroads in the second island chain. Because of the extreme rapidity and violence of the attack, American forces on Okinawa, the Philippines, and Guam are largely defeated. America’s response was swift. Special Operations units were immediately inserted to key locations. In order to secure several strategic airfields to mount a counter offensive, large elements of the Ranger Regiment and 82nd Airborne were airborne in hours. This was a massive effort by the U.S. Air Force requiring twenty four aircraft, or about fifteen percent of the C17 fleet. Despite the U.S. Air Force’s assurance that air-dominance had been achieved, the adversary was able to bring down six and damage several other C17 Globemaster III’s with its advanced anti-aircraft systems, which it had cleverly concealed. With the loss of these irreplaceable airframes and the loss of nearly 700 elite troops, the others were recalled. The first and second island chains would remain in the adversary’s possession for the time being.

After a month of planning and moving assets, U.S. commanders decide to focus on Guam. Fearing the loss of more aircraft, two U.S. Navy amphibious assault groups supported by three carrier groups and reinforced by Soldiers of the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division are repositioned and ready to strike. Though air-dominance was again achieved, hypersonic technology succeeded in damaging one aircraft carrier and several of the amphibious ships, sinking one. Guam is retaken, but at high cost in equipment and warfighters. Soldiers of the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division have particularly high casualties as they were not prepared for combat in and around the water. It becomes clear that retaking the first island chain will come at a high cost.

The vignette above is a vast oversimplification. The truth is that we do not really know what the next battlefield will look like until it emerges. This has been the case with every major conflict in which the U.S. has engaged in the last century. That said, Army strategists can take cues from past conflicts and the current conflict in Ukraine.

LSCO will involve the movement and engagement of large armies in the defense of a particular region or people (defensive LSCO) or in order to achieve a particular strategic outcome (offensive LSCO). These operations require vast supplies of troops and materiel to achieve operational goals. Logistics and force sustainment is critical to the success and failure of these operations. Because of this, LSCO is more intimately tied to the success of the associated force sustainment operations than was COIN. History shows that an army which fights a war but fails at force sustainment, loses the war.

While Europe currently experiences its first major armed conflict of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the latter's remarkable sustained defense, it seems more likely that the LSCO war the United States will face is on the other side of the world. There, large scale combat operations are less likely to be land-centric. What makes LLSCO different from land-based LSCO is not so much the fight as it is force sustainment and logistics. The war in the Pacific during World War II demonstrated this. While it is less than certain as to what a modern littoral LSCO war will look like, the Pacific war of World War Two may provide some ideas.

### **Littoral LSCO (LLSCO) and a Pacific War; Ethical Consideration: Civilians.**

Imperial Japan created a bulwark of regional control-supporting islands around the Pacific Ocean. As American military planners viewed this impressive array, they determined that the best option for overcoming this strategic advantage was to focus attacks on specific strategically located islands while skipping and isolating the others until a later time. This tactic was appropriately called "Island Hopping". During the island-hopping campaign, large masses of force: troops, supplies, and equipment were focused on the island of interest.

The attack was similar to an intricately planned dance with several parts taking place at selected intervals beginning with an intense bombardment from naval assets and ending with an amphibious ground assault. This involved Allied commanders placing as many troops on the beach as possible as fast as possible to create a beachhead. Once established, having blockaded the island, Allied forces eliminate all enemy resistance. It was time and material intensive. The cost in lives was high. The order of battle at the time did not take into serious consideration the civilian population. This resulted in uncertain numbers of civilian deaths from the bombardments and battle. The problem with battles on islands is that there is no place for the local populous to flee the fighting.

There are times in which strategic necessity makes it difficult to protect civilians to the degree we should like. This does not excuse the commander who does not consider and strive to protect non-combatants. Today, the Laws of Armed Conflict (LOAC) and the ethical application of military power by U.S. forces *always* takes the civilian population into consideration. Some considerations include:

- *Should an amphibious landing take place away from densely populated areas?* Yes. Ideally, the forcible entry operations of LLSCO will locate away from population centers. However, since the 1940s, world populations have increased, especially around coastal areas. It will be difficult to find a stretch of beach that does not have some population at or near by, and such operations will be necessary in a new Indo-Pacific war.
- *Should civilian populations be forewarned prior to attack to ensure they have time to seek shelter or evacuate?* Due to operational security, the answer must be "no."
  - As civilians move out, enemy troops could move in endangering civilians, causing higher U.S. casualties, and risking the success of the mission.
  - Furthermore, in island warfare, it is conceivable that there would be no safe place to which civilians could flee. Islands are often small, and few local governments have the resources for a mass-evacuation prior to the outbreak of hostilities. It is unrealistic to think that an invasion force could preemptively evacuate the civilian population, and it seems unlikely the defending force would be willing to do anything to protect them.

- Could an invasion force be reduced so as to provide a small point of attack or lessen impact. The answer to this must also be “no.” Doing this would reduce the probability of success. The attacking force must maintain sufficient strength to ensure success lest we endanger non-combatants and waste Soldier’s lives.

The United States Army works diligently to ensure the safety and security of non-combatants wherever it goes. However, as unsatisfying as it may be, there may not be a suitable ethical answer to the question of the danger to civilian populations in LLSCO. War, by its nature, is a wasteful, damaging, and unfair enterprise. Commanders must strive to take the safety of civilians into consideration as they plan combat operations, but it may be that the most that can be done is to avoid the most populated areas in favor of the less, even if that means accepting greater risk.

Therefore, moral application of combat power in littoral areas must include planning for the care and treatment of large civilian populations *post bellum*. As it is likely there will be many civilian casualties once fighting ceases or has moved beyond civilian habitations. This means the typical 30-day supply for a fighting unit will be inadequate. More food, blankets, and medical supplies should be brought with invading forces to meet the need. Increasing these supplies means placing greater strain on the force sustainment enterprise. More supplies mean more equipment and personnel are required to move such things to the proper locations for distribution. This means greater opportunity for the enemy to target such efforts. It also means the need for additional security to ensure that those resources are not stolen, befouled by saboteurs or destroyed. Continued resupply assumes that enemy area denial operations are successfully defeated.

Civilian considerations will complicate littoral-LSCO in ways that are different with land-based LSCO. The Just War principle of distinction is always difficult in the fog of war. However, littoral-LSCO will only make distinction between enemy combatants and civilians more difficult due to the restrictions of geography. In addition to this, force sustainment becomes much more complicated because if the invading force succeeds, it takes on responsibility for the civilian populous in a decimated post-battle space.

### **Littoral LSCO (LLSCO) and a Pacific War; Ethical Consideration: Failing to Properly Prepare for Future LLSCO War**

Military leadership has the moral responsibility to manage the risks associated with force sustainment operations, ensuring that soldiers are not unduly exposed to unnecessary danger. Strategic decisions must reflect an ethical commitment to the sanctity of life. This means protecting the lives of Soldiers to the greatest extent possible. Are we prepared for LLSCO today? It seems that we are not.

Looking once more to the past, the island hopping campaign of WWII required supplies in huge quantities to be brought by ship from American shores to remote islands. Those supplies were moved from the ship it arrived on through the littoral to the troops on the island. Most islands did not have surviving or operational port facilities. To facilitate force sustainment in this reality, the US created several specialized war machines to transport troops, supplies and equipment ship-to-shore.<sup>1</sup> Due to changing priorities; however, the U.S. military has none of these today.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the expertise needed to effectively operate such machines either no longer resides in the active force or is much reduced.<sup>3</sup>

During and briefly after WWII, the US had two amphibious corps, one in the Atlantic and one in the Pacific.<sup>4</sup> Now, U.S. Army amphibious capabilities are nearly non-existent<sup>5</sup>. Today, the U.S. Army’s water resources include a small transportation component and limited riverine and rear-echelon operations such as Landing-Over-The-Shore (LOTS).

The one division in the US Army that could be marginally prepared for LLSCO due to its location, is not. The 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, located in Hawaii and aligned for Indo-Pacific combat and partnership is nearly exclusively on land-based LSCO. Despite being on an island in the Pacific, for years it has had no water assets and does little to no water-borne training...not even a swim test.<sup>6</sup> Even its supporting helicopter units focus on over-land operations, though in a LLSCO battle, most of its operations will be over water. Only a few strategically minded commanders have attempted to change this practice, but without senior support and funds

these efforts quickly evaporate.

Nearly 15 years ago, President Barak Obama directed a “rebalance to Asia” strategy. The U.S. Marine Corps has taken the pivot seriously and shed many of the accouterments of land-based war it had once garnered. This includes heavy tanks. But the Marines are a small organization and cannot win the Pacific by itself. Contrarily, it seems the Army has been slow to act. Only recently has it taken small steps to increase its maritime capabilities in Hawaii. This is opportunity lost, and ethically questionable. Decades of knowing a conflict with an adversary in the Pacific was likely yet choosing not to prepare places the lives of those who will fight in that conflict in peril.

Just War Theory, particularly *jus ad bellum*, requires a military force to have the probability of success prior to engaging in military action. Morally, a military that is un- or ill-prepared should consider other options. Is the U.S. military prepared to go to war in the Pacific today? The Army is not. It certainly appears the machines and experience needed for success in the littoral is lacking. As such, we should expect high casualties.

### **What can be done?**

The Army is woefully ill-prepared for littoral combat. As immediate remedy, the following are recommended:

- Designate the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division as an “amphibious division”, increasing the 25<sup>th</sup> from two brigades to three and providing emergency funding for remedial water-borne training programs across the division.<sup>7</sup>
- Designate the division’s brigades as follows:<sup>8</sup>
  - 1st Brigade as Littoral Combat Brigade – specializing in combat operations from blue-water to two-miles inland from the beach.<sup>9</sup>
  - 2nd Brigade as Amphibious Air Assault Brigade – specializing in air operations in the littoral environment.<sup>10</sup>
  - 3rd Brigade as Jungle Combat Brigade – specializing in operations in jungle terrain that is found across the Pacific Island and coastal lands.<sup>11</sup>
  - 25th Aviation Brigade – designated “littoral” with specialized water-borne training, survival, rescue, and insertion.<sup>12</sup>
  - 25th Sustainment Brigade – designated “amphibious” specializing in force sustainment in joint littoral operations.<sup>13</sup>
  - 25th Division Artillery – designated “littoral”.<sup>14</sup>
- Outside the 25th, build more ship-to-shore force sustainment capabilities and place them in Hawaii to include new landing craft and new water focused force sustainment innovations.<sup>15</sup>
- Direct and fund more joint operations between Army, Marine Corps, and Navy assets in the region to include ship-to-shore resupply, rescue, recovery, communication, maintenance training and joint-combat operations.<sup>16</sup>

One of the core ethical responsibilities of military leadership is to protect the lives of their Soldiers to the greatest extent possible. The failure to adequately prepare for a looming conflict is an ethical lapse. There is still time to rectify the situation, but that time dwindles rapidly. Army and Navy leaders must come together to create a common training strategy and a joint operations plan for the defense of the Pacific. The Department of Defense must fund this, perhaps separately from other appropriations. If they fail to do so soon, the consequences could be catastrophic for the future of the Pacific and for the common Soldier called upon to fight.

### **Conclusion**

The U.S. Army finds itself at a crossroads. In the last few years, it has dabbled at preparation for a littoral LSCO

conflict, but it has done so half-heartedly. The time is rapidly approaching – if it has not already arrived – that further delay creates ethical dilemmas regarding the execution of combat operations. Both topics addressed within this paper are related to ethical preparation, *jus ad bellum*. The presence of civilians on a littoral battlefield is one that needs more attention impacting *jus ad bellum*, *in bello* and *post bellum*. As we move into new areas during combat, it is likely that we will encounter more and more civilians who are unable to escape the battle, and after the battle need levels of care that will impact our ability to sustain the force. In-hand with this is the apparent lack of preparation for littoral combat by the U.S. Army, particularly of force sustainment as the Army has extremely limited capability beyond airpower to sustain a force engaged in combat and after combat. This deficiency in preparedness creates an ethical dilemma as it places our Soldiers at risk and will further exasperate the urgent requirements for non-combatant care after the fight. To avoid these follies and ensure success on the littoral LSCO battlefield, the Army needs to act now.

## Endnotes

1 Larger landing ships called LST (Landing Ship-Tank) were designed to have extremely shallow drafts enabling them to get close to shore and off load large vehicles and supplies. Smaller landing craft such as the Higgins Boats and the like could navigate up to the beaches. Amphibious trucks called DUKW's or "ducks" were designed to float like a boat and then drive directly out of the water, and tracked amphibious support vehicles called alligators were able to transverse over shoals and coral reefs from ship-to-shore. All of these were designed and used intensively for force sustainment and logistics operations in the WWII littoral fight. Today, the Army has only a handful of equivalent resources.

2 Following the experience of WWII, a myriad of new machines was developed to overcome the logistical challenges of bringing supplies to combat areas not supported by an operational port. Sadly, after 25 years of operations focused on central Asia and the Middle East, most of this technology and the practical experience gained by these operations is lost. The LARC (Lighter, Amphibious, Resupply, Cargo vehicle) and BARC (Barge, Amphibious, Resupply, Cargo) designed for the Viet Nam era are gone and can be seen at the US Army Transportation Museum at Ft. Eustis, VA. The US Army retired all its hovercraft in the 1990's.

3 One could argue that water-borne littoral resupply operations are no longer needed, and that air re-supply is the modern norm. This view is a mistake. We have limited airframes, fixed and rotary. Of course, we will utilize them, but how many can be lost before it impacts our offensive capabilities? How long before we are able to replace them? With the advent of combat drones and next generation fire-and-forget technology, trusting in only one source for resupply is fool hearty, expensive, and dangerous. Perhaps new tech may assist us, but that requires preparation, testing and training now, before the need.

4 At one time, the U.S. Navy managed two joint Army-Marine "amphibious corps." These were gone by 1957. They were:

Amphibious Corps, Pacific Fleet (ACPF) – U.S. Army 3rd Infantry Division & 2nd Marine Division

Amphibious Corps, Atlantic Fleet (ACAF) – U.S. Army 1st and 9th Infantry Divisions & 1st Marine Division

5 This is quite the statement as the Army did more amphibious landings during WWII than did the Marine Corps.

6 As of late 2023, 25th Infantry Division does no universal swim training. Some individual units take it upon themselves, but there is no division-wide program despite having beaches all around and a purpose-built, world-class swimming pool.

7 The 25th needs to be redesignated in order to highlight its actual mission much as the 11th Arctic Division, 10th Mountain, 101st and 82nd Divisions are. This must be accompanied with a significant cash-flow increase to bring the division to the level of skill needed. Expect two to three years to accomplish this as new training programs will need to be developed and implemented. These skills are not easy, and littoral combat requires a lot of skill to ensure the Soldier does not perish before reaching the fight. The first enemy is the water. The second is the opposing force. Without this training, we are likely to lose more people to the first enemy than to the second.

8 Currently, 25th has only two combat brigades. The recommendation is for three smaller brigades which are specialists – elite in their skill sets. Once trained, Soldiers would stay in Hawaii for 4-years. The brigades would have the same structure as other brigades, but with fewer people due to Hawaii's space limitations. Similar to the Special Operations Forces model, the 25th would be strengthened by National Guard, Reserve and other non-organic forces attached for training

and combat operations.

9 Littoral combat requires Soldiers to be familiar with ships and loading procedures for travel ship-to-shore. Soldiers must know how to survive in dangerous waters as well as safely move from ship-to-shore without drowning. In addition, littoral combat requires specialized understanding of coastal topography, beaches, surf and structures.

10 Littoral air-operations includes forced entry and force sustainment. Both are more hazardous than traditional air assault operations and require Soldiers to be prepared to survive in blue water and green water (near shore). Air Assault on beaches means dealing with entry on sand and surf under combat conditions. It means loading and airlifting supplies from moving platforms in rough seas, all of which requires extensive training.

11 Here, the Army does extremely well. The 25th Infantry Division jungle training program is extensive and top-notch. Having a brigade specialized in jungle warfare prepares Soldiers for about 80% of the combat locations in the Pacific.

12 The 25th Aviation Brigade is unique in the Army as the only AV unit which operates over water as much as it operates over land. This requires special training, dunk-tank survival, ship-to-shore operations and extra funds for specialized maintenance for aircraft operating almost exclusively in salt-saturated air. Fortunately, the US Navy is very experienced with all of this and is located on the island of Oahu. The Army and Navy must work together to strengthen overall operational readiness for littoral operations. Mission success depends upon it.

13 The force sustainment brigade should be supporting the division while doing extensive joint training with the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps to become familiar with sister branch sustainment operations. Everything from fueling from barge-over-shore-to-storage to food preparation and storage in extreme temperatures to mortuary affairs in littoral operations are unique.

14 25th Division Artillery should receive specialized training in ship-to-shore fires, coastal defense, and joint fires.

15 New Army boats are needed, and these must start regular training with the 25th and the U.S. Navy for amphibious assaults and resupply. Right now, training with Army watercraft is rare. Expertise is woefully inadequate. Army and Navy do not/cannot effectively communicate and when it happens, even simple joint-tasks are laborious.

16 As proven in WWII, the US Army and US Navy cannot go it alone. We fight the way we train. Over the past 40 years, both convinced themselves they do not need the other. This may be true in other theaters, but not in the Pacific. Army and Navy assets must start actively and regularly training with each other. These two organizations will utterly fail unless they know how to work together. Without working together now, they will be in no position to work together when it really counts. The results will be mission failure and death of Soldier and Sailors alike.