

# **Inquiring Minds Topic – 15 November 2013**

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### **Reshaping the Army - The War Within the U.S. Army**

By Mark Thompson - TIME - Monday, Nov. 04, 2013

The sun was just rising in a leafy suburb of Tripoli, Libya, as one of the world's most wanted men returned home from morning prayers on Oct. 5. Nazih Abdul-Hamed al-Ruqai, an alleged al-Qaeda operative more commonly known as Anas al-Liby, was slowing his Hyundai Tucson to park on a narrow street when three white cars and a Mercedes van closed in.

Ten men clad in civilian clothes spilled out of the van. Three wore black masks and brandished silencer-equipped pistols. "Get out!" they shouted in Arabic, as one used his gun to smash the driver's window and pulled al-Liby from his vehicle. "What's going on?" al-Liby shouted before going limp, apparently stunned by his assailants.

As he fell unconscious, the man--with a \$5 million bounty on his head--probably knew he was falling into American hands. He had been on the run since 2000, when the Justice Department indicted him in the 1998 bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa that killed 224, including 12 Americans. The masked men dragged al-Liby to the van and pushed him in. They climbed in, slammed the doors and roared away. It was over in a matter of seconds. The U.S. Army's Delta Force had pulled off the daring dawn snatch without firing a shot. "Hooahs!" of approval echoed through Delta headquarters at Fort Bragg, N.C., and in the Army corridors at the Pentagon.

The al-Liby grab was a reminder that the Army, after generations of preparing to fight complicated land wars, is more likely to face enemies that are terrorists, insurgents and other small-bore bad guys than large standing armies. That's going to require bulking up its special-operations forces, shrinking the standing army it has maintained since World War II and re-examining its faith in all kinds of sacred cows. New technologies, new threats and tighter budgets are all conspiring to force the Army to reinvent itself fast. But the service shows virtually no sign of making any of these changes.

As Washington winds down two long and expensive wars (one, in Afghanistan, now entering its 13th year), unpleasant choices are the order of the day at the Pentagon, where the 10% cut required by sequestration is already inflicting budgetary pain. The Air Force may have to ground its A-10 attack planes and KC-10 aerial-refueling tankers to keep money flowing to its fighter and long-range-bomber programs. The Navy fears its fleet of 11 carriers could be cut to as few as eight. And the smallest service, the Marine Corps, may need to shrink by more than 20%, or about 30,000 troops.

But nowhere is the challenge as desperate--or the bureaucracy so resistant to change--as it is in the Army. In an era of targeted drone strikes and ever-more-daring Special Forces missions, the U.S. Army is something of an anachronism. It has 534,000 active-duty troops today and is trying to hang on to 490,000 by 2015. But deeper cuts look likely, and many experts believe the service could shrink to 390,000 by 2023. The Army's core mission is anyone's guess in an era of pilotless drones and spooky commandos. But its generals are slow to face the new reality. "What's the justification for a half-million-man Army?" asks Todd Harrison, military analyst with the independent Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. "The Army doesn't have a good answer for that yet or about why they exist and why they're relevant."

## **A Service at Sea**

**After a decade of war, the army is coping with the messy aftermath: a force exhausted by repeat deployments, waves of traumatic brain injuries and new epidemics of posttraumatic stress and suicide. Rebalancing the service is difficult: Too small and too lightly armed and the Army might not be able to deter--or defeat--North Korea or Iran in the event of war. Too heavy and it may forfeit the speed needed to keep skirmishes from becoming wars.**

**Besides, for a service that has its own in-house think tank designed to study the future and help shape it, the Army has become adept at confirming the wisdom of the status quo. As things stand, the future Army will look a lot like the pre-9/11 Army, built around 10 divisions, designed to wage and win tank battles against a foe that looks a lot like the U.S. Army. A strict, World War II-era command structure remains, with three-star corps commanders and two-star division commanders. The Army's weapons will consist largely of updated versions of the weapons bought during the Reagan buildup of the 1980s: M-1 tanks, 155-mm self-propelled howitzers, multiple-launch rocket systems and UH-60 Black Hawk and AH-64 Apache helicopters. The Army's Special Operations Command remains an afterthought, costing just \$1.5 billion of the Army's total \$185 billion budget in 2013.**

**Even after Afghanistan, the Army is marching into the future facing backward. At the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif., the Army continues to train against an "enemy" force that has more in common with the now defunct Warsaw Pact than al-Qaeda. "We still lack a coherent and comprehensive concept for dealing with the irregular and hybrid enemies we will continue to face in the foreseeable future," Lieut. General Charles Cleveland, the service's top commando, warned recently in the independent Army magazine.**

**Only now the Cold War money has run out. The number of active-duty Army troops peaked at about 780,000 during the final years of the Cold War and fell to 480,000 by 9/11. That force was too small to fight wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq without a draft, so it grew over the past decade, to 566,000 in 2010. Some experts argue that the Army can be cut by close to half. What is the right size? "Nobody knows," says military scholar Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution.**

**Nothing highlights the Army's denial problem more than its old-fashioned fixation on old-fashioned armored vehicles. Consider its desire for the new Ground Combat Vehicle (GCV) to replace its Reagan-era troop transport. The generals say their service needs to shrink in size and weight, yet they are planning to spend up to \$30 billion on a vehicle that could end up 22% longer, 7% wider and 67% heavier than what it would replace, the Bradley Fighting Vehicle. "The Bradley did not perform well in Iraq," General Ray Odierno, the Army chief of staff, has told Congress. "It did not protect our soldiers. It did not carry a full squad ... We have to have the Ground Combat Vehicle."**

**The Army has long wanted an armored vehicle capable of carrying nine soldiers; the Bradley carries only six. The service contends nine is the fewest needed to reduce the risk as troopers climb from the vehicle to engage the enemy. But at up to 65 tons each, the GCV would be as heavy as the M-1 tank and unable to cross many common bridges in most cities. "It's going to be at least three times as expensive as a Bradley, possibly four or five times," says an exasperated David Barno, a retired Army three-star general who commanded U.S. troops in Afghanistan. "The commonsense math does not come together here for me."**

The generals could shuck much of that weight if they moved to a lighter, agile force more reliant on special operations and unmanned systems. Army commandos date back to the Korean War, when the first such unit stood up at Fort Bragg with 2,300 troops. Today the Army's 23,000 special-ops soldiers account for 40% of the Pentagon's total commando force but only 5% of the total Army.

These elite soldiers don't mass by the thousands in armor but conduct their missions clandestinely, in unmarked cars. There is a growing sense that such units are a smarter, cheaper way of waging war against shadowy killers.

So long as the Army hasn't had to hack away at its conventional forces, its special operators have thrived. Their number has nearly doubled since 9/11. The special teams are detached from the military's traditional, and cumbersome, command structure. Working closely with the CIA, they've spent the past decade hunting down and killing thousands of terrorists on the fringes of the public wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and in secret strikes in Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen and elsewhere. Bagging someone like al-Liby--and whatever intelligence he may share under the milder interrogation methods ordered by President Obama on his second day in office--is even more vital. "Whenever we can capture somebody of that stature, the intelligence we can and will gain is significant," Michael Lumpkin, a onetime Navy SEAL tapped to become the Pentagon's civilian chief for special operations, said at his Senate confirmation hearing on Oct. 10. "That can lead to future operations and ultimately save Americans' lives." Al-Liby is now in the hands of civilian law-enforcement officials in New York.

The Army also should be investing more in unmanned systems. Whether flying over the battlefield or crawling atop it, robots represent the future, but the service lags when it comes to designing, building and deploying machines that can spy and kill. A third of the Pentagon's air vehicles are now drones, while only a tiny fraction of its ground vehicles are remotely controlled. Even as the Pentagon has been spending more than \$1 billion annually since 9/11 on flying drones, the Army has invested less than \$100 million per year on ground robots. Major General Robert Dyess, head of the Army's force-development office, acknowledged that it's fair to wonder "if the Army is actually committed to unmanned ground systems."

But the most urgent fix concerns the Army's love affair with its officers. It has too many. The nation had 2,000 generals and admirals in World War II, commanding 12 million troops (one commander for every 6,000 commanded). Now there are 900 in charge of 1.4 million (1 for every 1,500). In today's top-heavy Army, there are about 97,000 officers commanding 427,000 troops--basically one leader for every four followers. Army officers say the 20 years of service needed to earn a pension keeps many mediocre officers in uniform too long. That in turn perpetuates the Army's endless array of unnecessary agencies, offices and bureaucracies whose work far from any battlefield can often be of uncertain value. The Army argues that the surplus of commanders is needed in the event of war, since officers can't be trained as quickly as grunts.

One solution gaining popularity is to cut from the top. "Purge the generals" is the blunt recommendation of Lieut. Colonel Daniel Davis in a recent issue of the independent Armed Forces Journal. The idea: the last people who would change the Army are the men who have spent the past 30 years growing up in it. "Army generals are resistant to anything they don't understand," Douglas Macgregor, a retired Army colonel, says, "and they don't understand anything other than what they've been exposed to so far." Military author Tom Ricks takes the Army to task in his 2012 book *The Generals* for what he views as its self-perpetuating caste of dulled brass. "Our soldiers have done very well in Iraq and Afghanistan, but they were led by generals who were slow to adapt or even to understand the wars they were fighting," he says. "I don't think our current crop of generals is well prepared to shape the military for the unknown challenges that lie ahead."

Wherever the cuts come, the Army should be leading the way in retooling its force structure, not trailing behind. Instead, the military looks in budget terms increasingly like an employee-benefit program. Pay and fringe benefits have increased 52% since 9/11, more than twice what the private sector has seen in that period. The military's health care bill has jumped from \$19 billion to \$50 billion in 10 years. The increasing cost of soldiers--now nearly \$60 billion annually--is eating up an ever increasing share of the service's total budget. That leaves fewer dollars for weapons, infrastructure and training. "We're going to turn the Department of Defense into a benefits company that occasionally kills a terrorist" is how retired Marine major general and defense analyst Arnold Punaro puts it.

## **Change--or Just Fade Away**

History, old soldiers insist, doesn't give the nation the luxury of choice. President Johnson didn't want to fight in Vietnam, and President Clinton didn't want to put U.S. troops in the Balkans. The first President Bush didn't want to invade Panama, and his son didn't want to attack Afghanistan. Sometime in the future, the U.S. will require thousands of troops when a major conflict looms. Warns Odierno, the Army's top officer: "If you get too small, I believe, you lose your ability to deter conflict." Odierno created the Strategic Studies Group last year to help retool the Army, but its recently completed, classified, 500-page report is unlikely to call for fundamental changes.

One reason the Army isn't reinventing itself at its current size is that no one with any sway is forcing it to do so. Lawmakers, who increasingly lack any military background, give those in uniform wide berth. The Army has the clout to push, cajole and otherwise convince Congress that change is needed but shows no sign of taking on that mission. "The Army has a lot of professional knowledge, and it is sort of sovereign within that realm," retired Army lieutenant colonel and military analyst John Nagl says. "It's very rare for the Army's political masters to intervene." That includes, of course, Presidents who have never worn the uniform.

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel is an ex--Army sergeant who spent much of 1968 in Vietnam, earning a pair of Purple Hearts during the conflict's bloodiest year, when 16,899 Americans died. But even he sounds as if he's ready to shrink the Army without making major changes to its structure, roles and missions. One internal Pentagon plan calls for a 380,000-troop Army, but Hagel believes that would be too small. "We could still execute the priority missions," he says, "while reducing Army end strength to between 420,000 and 450,000."

That would bring the Army down by an additional 10% but would not fundamentally change how it buys, trains and fights. And there are some who think it could come down even more. Gary Roughead, the former chief of naval operations, made that clear earlier this year. "The military's current strategy sustains an Army that is far larger than necessary," he wrote. A 290,000-strong Army is sufficient, he argues (and would free up money to keep the Navy's budget plans intact).

Roughead's proposal is a reminder that no service in the Pentagon wants to be a hero and change the way it fights unless all the other services are forced to do the same. But the Army is the least likely to take the point. "The future of the Army is Special Forces and drones," says Lawrence Korb, Pentagon personnel chief during the Reagan Administration. "We should be moving more toward a smaller, more agile active-duty Army and save the bigger missions for the reserves." The Constitution provides for the common defense, which since World War II has meant a large standing army. But as the military remakes itself for a very different kind of battlefield than the one it faced just a decade ago, the last thing the U.S. Army can do is stand still.