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Close Quarters Battle: Urban Combat and “Special Forcification”

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Abstract

Many scholars have recognized the growing likelihood of urban military operations in the future. Understandably, given the seriousness of this prospect, most commentators have focused on the operational and political difficulties of fighting in cities. At the same time, precisely because of the intense challenges of urban operations, these scholars have also emphasized that urban operations increasingly require highly professionalized infantry and especially Special Forces. Nevertheless, they have tended to ignore recent innovations at the tactical level among these specialist infantry units. This article seeks to address this oversight. It examines contemporary developments in urban micro-tactics among Western forces. Specifically, this article addresses the dissemination of Close Quarters Battle techniques, originally developed by Special Operations Forces in the 1970s, to regular infantry in the last decade as a result of urban operations Iraq and Afghanistan. In this way, this article contributes to contemporary debates about professionalization in Western armed forces today.

Keywords

tactics, professionalization, Special Operations Forces, Iraq, Afghanistan

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Introduction

Urban warfare has been a feature of conflict as long as humans have lived in cities. However, the rapid and accelerating urbanization of the world's population and the increasing preference of the West's opponents to fight asymmetrically in cities have precipitated a potentially profound transformation in war in the last two decades¹: "Warfare, like everything else, is being urbanized."² Recent campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq and current conflicts in Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Ukraine would seem to confirm the growing salience of urban combat in this and future decades. Urban and street fighting was, of course, common during the major wars of twentieth century, as the battles over Stalingrad, Caen, Berlin, Seoul, and Hue demonstrated. However, at that time, mass citizen armies were typically so large that they formed fronts around cities and it was on these fronts that most of the fighting took place simply because that is where the bulk of the forces were able to congregate. Today, because armed forces are so much smaller, force densities have declined dramatically, transforming the geometry of the battlefield. In this situation, urban combat has become proportionately more significant not only because of rising urban populations and the asymmetric attractions afforded by the city, but because downsized forces can no longer form fronts. Today, opposing forces are necessarily drawn together on the key terrain to fight over decisive points in cities or particular parts of cities.

Up to now, scholars have conducted invaluable work on urban warfare and its future. However, for understandable reasons, they have been primarily interested in the evident operational and political difficulties of urban combat. In particular, they have plausibly claimed that because of the unique complexity of cities, political and cultural understanding is likely to prove essential for military success.³ The point is well taken. Yet, there is an obvious gap in the literature of urban warfare. Advanced digital technologies, so central to Western and, above all, American military dominance, are less relevant in the urban environment.⁴ Consequently, in the city, troops will be forced to rely primarily on their training and skill. Yet, tactical developments at the level of the small infantry unit have tended to be ignored by scholars, even though they have widely claimed that the fighting at this level is decisive for success in cities. Hills and Kilcullen briefly mention urban techniques in the margins of their work but do not discuss it at length.⁵ Despite their extensive research on the urban operations of the Israeli Defence Force (IDF),⁶ Eyal Ben-Ari et al. have concentrated on the company and battle group level; they have not analyzed urban combat tactics at the micro level of the platoon, squad, and fire team. Yet, in Iraq and Afghanistan, some of the most interesting developments in urban combat have occurred precisely at this level.⁷

This article aims to address this omission. It provides an analysis of new urban tactics at the small unit level specifically focusing, not on the seizure of cities, but on the new techniques which Western infantries have adopted to clear individual

rooms. It aims to show how new skills have been developed by and disseminated among Western forces in the face of the urban challenge. Specifically, the article explores the promulgation of “Close Quarters Battle” (CQB) tactics. CQB refers to precision urban tactics at the level of the infantry squad, first developed by the Special Forces in the 1970s, which have been adopted by regular Western infantry forces as a result of the special demands of the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. This article seeks to provide a micro-sociology of these skills. In this way, this article aims to make an empirical contribution, analyzing military practices that have been previously ignored in the literature. Given the importance of urban combat in recent campaigns and its likely importance on future operations, such a contribution would seem to be valuable in itself.

However, this article also simultaneously aims to contribute to the analysis of contemporary military professionalization much more widely. Many scholars have noted that urban combat requires highly professionalized troops and an increased role for Special Forces.⁸ Indeed, in their work on urban combat, Ben-Ari et al. propose an intriguing concept; they observe a process which they call “special forcification.”⁹ As a result of challenging urban operations against sophisticated opponents, regular IDF units have adopted methods and expertise once the exclusive preserve of the Special Forces.

Ben-Ari’s concept of special forcification has not been widely utilized but it is potentially suggestive, alluding to two separate but interconnected processes. Firstly, drawing on Huntington’s and Janowitz’s definitions of professionalism as a form of specialist and expert knowledge, special forcification refers the accumulation of skill and expertise. Through a microanalysis of new urban techniques and training methods, this article explores a detailed example of special forcification. Secondly, Ben-Ari’s concept of special forcification also speaks to broader institutional transformations in the armed forces. It is very easy to presume, in line with Huntington and Janowitz, that professionalism necessarily implies improvement and this is particularly the case with the process of special forcification. Since the Special Forces have attained a position of extraordinary prominence in Western forces structures, anything associated with them is often assumed to represent an optimal development. It is important to avoid facile ameliorism. This article explores the process of special forcification in a second way. Special forcification here refers not to improvements in combat effectiveness but to the way in which the armed forces—and individual services, arms, and regiments within them—employ professionalization to legitimate themselves, to protect their monopolies, or to advance their interests. Special forcification, on this definition, is not simply a matter of objective military improvement but of institutional self-promotion and status advancement. This article describes the distinctive features of CQB in order to identify the operational and institutional motivations for its widespread adoption among regular Western infantries.¹⁰ It begins with a detailed microanalysis of the new practices before going onto a critical assessment of their institutional implications.

The Research

In order to analyze CQB as a form of expertise, it is necessary to generate an understanding of the specific skills it involves and how these have been utilized on urban operations against insurgents. This is methodologically challenging. Close combat has always presented a problem to the social sciences because it is often difficult to gain an accurate, reliable, and representative account of the often confused and chaotic events on the battlefield. Urban combat compounds these problems of reliability and representativeness because in the urban environment, the micro-practices of CQB are executed inside buildings very quickly by small groups. In many cases, even members of the assault force do not witness the clearance of specific rooms; they are held outside or are clearing another part of the building. Consequently, in order to witness a specific clearance, an observer would have to be embedded in the assault squad entering the building and indeed individual rooms at the same time as soldiers themselves. Such a level of embeddedness would not only be highly dangerous (for an untrained civilian) but no military would allow the presence of a civilian in a small and specialized assault force since it would significantly reduce the effectiveness of the squad. Even if an observer were embedded into an assault unit, it would still be necessary to corroborate particular actions against other cases in order to ensure representativeness.

Accordingly, in order to generate an evidenced account of CQB and to explain how it represents an example of special forcification, two requirements must be filled. It is necessary to gain a detailed understanding of the official doctrine and practice of CQB as well as its pedagogy. Training is optimal here since it depicts CQB in its ideal, institutionalized form, and shows how it is currently inculcated. However, although training is realistic, it is not real. Consequently, in order to understand the operational application of CQB, evidence from training has to be corroborated against accounts of its actual usage on military operations in urban combat to ensure that the methods, which are officially taught, are those which have actually been practiced in close combat. In order to address both these requirements, this article is based on two methods of data collection, namely, ethnographic observation and interviews.

CQB training was observed in the major North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) powers; Germany (Hammelburg, five days), Canada (Gagetown, five days), the United States (29 Palms and Infantry Immersion Trainer, Camp Pendleton, six days), France (*Centre d'Entraînement aux Actions en Zone Urbaine* (CENZUB), five days), and the United Kingdom (Commando Training Centre Royal Marines, eight days; Stanford Training Area Norfolk, three days; Sennybridge Training Area, one day; Police Training Facility, Okehampton, one day; and Salisbury Plain Training Area, one day). In all, I observed thirty-four days of urban training in five countries. Because the training involved the use of blank or “simunition” rounds, it was possible to observe CQB tactics at close range, following assaults into the building or, on occasions, witnessing assaults from inside rooms as they were attacked.



Figure 1. The Compound. Note that the directing staff on the back wall are using the body armor to body armor drill to cover potential threats, behind the sofa and the hidden corners (see discussion below). This is the room which caused students difficulty when the directing staff reorganized the layout. The directing staff had opened the door in the foreground and reorganized the closed wooden barricade beside the directing staff to the left, so that it had a door leading into a small oblong alcove. The doors to the alcove and to the adjacent room were, therefore, opposite each, presenting equal and simultaneous threats (see discussion below).

The most important site of observation was at the Royal Marines Commando Training Centre at Lympstone in Devon, UK, for two reasons. Firstly, I was able to observe ten days of the Royal Marines Modern Urban Combat course, over two courses in May and September 2011. Secondly, the Royal Marines have constructed a special CQB instruction facility, the “Compound,” which consists of a series of rooms and half-rooms in which urban micro-tactics are taught and developed (see Figure 1). Crucially, the Compound featured a viewing gantry. The gantry was designed for the benefit of instructors, affording them with a perfect view of students on the course, as they cleared rooms; it represented an ideal location for research. As a result, the Royal Marines Compound became the prime ethnographic fieldwork site (producing the best and most extensive data), supported by material from the Canadian Army, the French Army, the US Marine Corps, and the German Army.

Typically, when conducting an international study, there is a problem of comparison; practices at one site are not corroborated at another and findings from one location cannot be transposed. This research does not minimize the problems of international comparison and the Royal Marines cannot be taken as a global

Table 1. Interviewees.

Number	Royal Marines	British Army	US Special Forces	German Army	French Army
11	5	1	2	1	1

Table 2. Interlocutors.

Number	Royal Marines	British Army	Royal Air Force	US Marines	French Army	Canadian Army	German Army
36	13	3	1	9	4	3	3

standard, their techniques replicated transparently everywhere else. On the contrary, a number of differences emerged between the British Royal Marines, the US Marines, the Canadian Army, and the French Army, reflecting national military cultures. However, there has been close interaction between these military organizations, particularly between the US Marines and British Royal Marines, and the Canadian and US Armies. Consequently, although there are differences in some microtechniques, the parallels between their CQB methods are striking. On the basis of these observations, it was possible to develop an evidenced account of contemporary CQB doctrine and its instruction.

These observations were augmented with formal interviews with selected combat veterans who had used these techniques in combat in Afghanistan or Iraq and informal discussions with instructors and students on urban combat courses; formal interviews were recorded as they took place, while informal discussions were recorded in field notes afterward. These data included descriptions of training techniques and, most importantly, their utilization of these methods on operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The research included formal interviews or informal discussions with forty-seven service personnel (see Tables 1 and 2).¹¹

The sample was random or rolling, based either on acquaintances developed during the fieldwork or on introductions from other interlocutors. It might be claimed that the randomness of the sample potentially vitiated the reliability of the findings. The opposite case seems more likely. Precisely because most interlocutors were unknown to each other, were of different nationalities, and participated in different operations in often different theaters increased the chances that they would explain urban combat techniques in different ways. It was remarkable that overwhelmingly, excepting some minor differences in specific techniques, interviewees and interlocutors converged on their descriptions and explanations of urban tactics and training. However, there is a clear bias in the research which has to be recognized. The Royal Marines are overrepresented in it in terms of the number of both interviewees and interlocutors. Because of the design of their urban training facility and of close relations with the directing staff of the Modern

Urban Combat, the data from the Royal Marines were also qualitatively the richest. This is not significant in understanding new urban combat techniques, since other forces adopted very similar techniques, but it is relevant in terms of the organizational argument about special forcification. As an elite infantry force, the argument about special forcification and status is particularly applicable to them and some of the key evidence to support that analysis is derived from discussions with Royal Marines.

The Origins and Dissemination of CQB

Before analyzing CQB techniques and its institutional implications, it is clearly necessary to provide a brief account of its origins. Although in the case of each nation, the precise processes of diffusion, often along transnational networks, were both complex and specific, the broad history of the invention of CQB and its subsequent promulgation are well documented. Although NATO periodically expressed an interest in urban warfare during the Cold War,¹² there was no systematic investment in urban combat especially at the small unit level at that time.¹³ Urban warfare became an area of concerted concern only with the experiences of Grozny and Mogadishu in the mid-1990s; at that point, there was significant discussion in military journals of the problems posed by urban combat, especially against an irregular enemy.¹⁴ Nevertheless, once again, there was no significant change to military training for regular forces and, indeed, little fundamental tactical change from the Second World War.¹⁵ Indeed, as Alice Hills rightly observed in 2004, urban tactics had remained “remarkably consistent for the past 60 years.”¹⁶ For instance, although the US Marines, one of the most forward leaning of Western forces in this area, had developed their combined infantry-tank doctrine under “Project Metropolis” while adopting the “multiple” system which the British army had developed in Northern Ireland for patrolling cities in peace-enforcement operations, small unit urban tactics remained unchanged.¹⁷ Urban combat doctrine in the 1990s prescribed the profligate use of grenades and automatic fire to clear rooms just as it did in 1944: “Get in fast; fire automatic. As soon as the hand grenade goes off, rush into the room as fast as possible. The first man into the room backs quickly against a near wall where he can observe the entire room. He should engage any targets with short bursts of autonomic fire.”¹⁸

Innovation among the regular infantry did not occur until the mid-2000s with the period 2004–2007 being decisive, specifically in response to operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. CQB did not, therefore, evolve from conventional twentieth-century infantry doctrine; it had quite different origins. Specifically, CQB was developed in the 1970s and was bound up with the emergence of the Special Operations Forces at that time.¹⁹ Following the Munich Olympic crisis of 1972 and the growth of international terrorism across Europe, Western governments began to develop specialist counterterrorist units capable of conducting hostage rescue missions; the Special Air

Service (SAS), Delta Force, Seal Team 6, *Groupement de Securite et d'Intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale*, *Grenzeschutzgruppe* (GSG) 9, and Joint Task Force 2 all appeared in the light of this threat.²⁰ Close transnational connections developed between these groups so that they shared tactics and procedures, trained, and, in some cases, conducted joint operations together.²¹ Between 1972 and 1976, these Special Operations Forces units developed new methods of assaulting buildings, planes, and ships in order to eliminate terrorists while minimizing the risks to their hostages. These methods of rapid entry and precision marksmanship became known as CQB. They were most famously utilized in the SAS's assault on the Iranian Embassy in London in May 1980.

For approximately three decades after 1972, these CQB techniques remained the preserve of the Special Operations Forces and specialist paramilitary or gendarmerie units, such as French counterterrorist units or American Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams; designed specifically for hostage rescue, CQB was not taught to conventional infantry. It is true that in the US Marine Corps, which eschewed a Special Operations Forces capability until 2006, CQB techniques were adopted by the US Marine Force Reconnaissance Companies from the mid- to late 1980s. However, providing a highly skilled deep reconnaissance capability to the Marine Expeditionary Forces (MEF), these companies, directly responsible to the three-star MEF commander, could hardly be described as regular infantry.²² Moreover, the CQB techniques the Marines Force Recon Companies adopted were derived from the US Special Operations Forces.

However, initially in response to new challenges in the Balkans and experiences in Mogadishu and Grozny, dramatically accelerated by operations in Afghanistan and Iraq since 2003, the Special Forces monopoly began to be broken at the small unit level. A crucial event here was the 2004 US Marine assault on Fallujah. Following the murder of four US contractors in the city, political pressure was exerted on the US forces to suppress the insurgency in the city and to reestablish control of it.²³ In the event, the US Marines adopted a conventional combined arms approach to this urban operation, causing many civilian casualties and much collateral damage. Specifically, ignorance of precision techniques at the squad and platoon level was seen to have resulted in many unnecessary deaths.

Fallujah was certainly an important episode in the dissemination of CQB tactics, not only for the American but also for their allies, especially in the America–Britain–Canada–Australia (ABCA) alliance, but it was not the only precipitating factor. For the British armed forces, their increasingly difficult experiences in Basra, especially from 2004, reawakened their concern about urban operations. The deployment to Helmand only affirmed the salience of urban fighting where they were involved in bitter struggles especially in towns like Sangin.²⁴ For the Canadians, who took responsibility for Kandahar province, including the city of Kandahar itself, the single most important population center outside of Kabul, the special demands of urban operations also quickly became apparent. Operational realities have propelled the dissemination of CQB tactics, which had once been the preserve of Special Operations Forces.

Individual Drills

As we have seen, traditional urban combat methods from the 1940s to 1990s involved the profligate use of machine-gun fire and grenades to clear rooms. These techniques are now widely disparaged as “spraying and praying” and are rejected as unprofessional (i.e., unskillful and indiscriminate). Their shortcomings have become very evident in the last decade. Firstly, in the nonpermissive urban environments in which Western forces have been operating, throwing grenades, or spraying machine-gun fire into a building indiscriminately was likely to inflict civilian casualties. In Iraq and Afghanistan, even relatively small numbers of collateral casualties have had major reputational repercussions for Western forces. There has been an imperative to reduce these accidental deaths and it is in this changing context that CQB has been developed as a solution.

Secondly, and more surprisingly, sprayed fire, although apparently devastating, is far less effective than it seems. Although impressively noisy, it is highly inaccurate. On November 10, 2004, during the Second Battle of Fallujah, Staff Sergeant David Bellavia, of the 2nd Battalion, 2nd Infantry, attempted to clear a house in the Jolan District on his own. On entering a downstairs room, Bellavia’s weapon, a light belt-fed machine gun, went “cyclical”; in all, he fired some 500 rounds into the room in which at least one insurgent was taking cover behind an improvised barricade.²⁵ Despite the extreme close range and the number of rounds fired, Bellavia did not hit anyone. Although perhaps comforting to the firer and seemingly effective, sprayed fire has been often proved to be ineffective in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the 1970s, as the Special Operations Forces developed their counterterrorist techniques, various tactical requirements became clear for success in the urban environment, a principal one of which was accurate shooting. The Special Operations Forces prioritized precision marksmanship on hostage rescue operations because they had to minimize civilian casualties. Accuracy remains central to CQB today; “Precision is the key. You have to be accurate. You will be kicked out of your unit if you miss twice. It happens in the fog of war but with surgical shooting, you just can’t afford to have a mistake.”²⁶ Improved marksmanship has, in turn, required a major reformation of military pedagogy. Indeed, special forcification is particularly pronounced in these new training methods. In his description of his training for Vietnam in the US Marines Corp, Eisenhardt provides a disturbing picture of abuse, harassment, and bullying and, while he served in a mass conscripted force,²⁷ military training in professional forces even to the present day often remains similarly rough. This has often produced tough troops capable of conducting simple conventional infantry tactics. However, this approach is now seen as inadequate to the instruction of CQB and especially the precision marksmanship which is central to it. Accordingly, many soldiers and marines now draw a distinction between traditional military training and professionalized CQB instruction: “When I was training, the coaching [for shooting] was terrible. Basically, it was remedial phys [physical instruction]. If you shot badly, you were made

to run.”²⁸ Poor shooting was seen as some sort of moral or disciplinary weakness, best remedied by physical punishment. Yet, it is now recognized that precision shooting is an acquired skill which demands an entirely different approach to training. The new pedagogy is defined by two features, then: careful attention to posture and tactical positioning through progressive repetition.

In his analysis of Special Operations Forces, Rune Henriksen has prioritized the inherent warrior qualities of these soldiers: “The SOF approach to warrior selection implies that warriors are revealed and that they cannot be made.”²⁹ For him, special forcification is an individualized process and, certainly, some CQB skills, like marksmanship, are individual. Yet, even when considering individual marksmanship, it would be difficult to describe the training as individualized or to presume that it was merely uncovering already existing talents. Demonstrating the new pedagogy, instructors inculcated standardized and established shooting techniques onto all their students precisely because these methods have been proven to be the most effective. They were not trying to reveal hidden qualities but to impose proven and standardized methods. Instructors sought to deduce specific errors in compartment, breathing, and concentration by observing the fall of shots on the target: “If the individual is not hitting the mark, you must turn around and watch the individual from the side and back. You try and analyse what he is doing wrong? You are watching for the way he was holding the weapon, watching for the body reaction when he fires? Was he breathing? You can deduce errors from where the shots fall. You see the mistakes very clearly.”³⁰ There are standard mistakes which will cause shots to fall high, low, or wide which instructors, like sports coaches, become adept at identifying. In this way, CQB instructors aimed to eliminate poor individual habits by examining the microtechniques of students and enforcing optimal posture on them. They effectively inscribed collective and institutionalized techniques on the individual.

The special forcification of military pedagogy was particularly obvious with pistol shooting, a weapon with which most soldiers are typically less familiar and which is more difficult to shoot accurately because of its short barrel. Consequently, on CQB courses, substantial time is dedicated to developing the appropriate levels of skill with a pistol. During one Royal Marines course, for instance, an experienced corporal failed on his pistol shoot, recording scores well below the required standard. Unused to pistol shooting (although he had served in Iraq and Helmand where he had been involved in numerous firefights), he held the weapon incorrectly.³¹ Specifically, his thumbs pointed apart from each other and up in the air when he fired. The thumbs should, in fact, be aligned along the side of the pistol, with the right thumb overlaying the knuckle of the left thumb, with both nails pointing upward. By pointing his thumbs upward, the instructors noted that the corporal loosened his grip on the pistol just as it fired, causing his shots to go high, as the weapon recoiled in his hand. This fault was corrected in a private one-on-one training session. A US Special Operations Forces soldier recorded a similar experience; although he had always been a reasonable shot, it became clear during advanced training that his thumbs were not aligned properly along the side of the pistol. Like the Royal Marine

corporal, once his instructor had noted the fault, his shooting improved immediately without any additional effort.³² On ranges across NATO, a new pedagogy is observable in which soldiers are no longer punished for shooting badly but their micro-errors of posture and comportment are subjected to analysis and remedial training. In each case, a highly refined but standardized institutional ideal has been imposed on students.

CQB has required a pedagogical innovation, but it has also involved a significant refinement about how the urban environment itself is understood. In order to be able to engage a target accurately, soldiers need to adopt advantageous tactical positions from which to shoot. Soldiers might be brilliant shots but if they have no awareness of how to protect themselves as they clear buildings, they will be killed or wounded before their skills can be utilized. Soldiers are typically adept at finding cover in the natural environment, but the use of cover is not nearly so obvious inside buildings. There, it is a refined skill where small and apparently irrelevant differences make a huge difference to the outcome. To this end, significant investment was made by instructors to develop soldiers' comprehension of the urban environment. Specifically, they repeatedly described to their students that CQB inside buildings and structures was predominantly about "angles." From a tactical perspective, buildings consist of a series of corners which are decisive in any fighting that takes place within them and differentiates urban from open warfare. Corners provide cover around which shots can be fired in relative safety but they are also extremely dangerous because, in order to shoot around a corner, it is necessary to expose oneself; opponents could already have their weapons trained on that point. Accordingly, success in the urban environment involves perfecting the art of exploiting corners: maximizing the cover they provide while minimizing the dangers of looking around them. It is here that "angles" become important. By adjusting the angle at which a soldier stands back from the corner, it is possible to increase the arc of vision around a corner in a manner that puts an opponent at a consistent disadvantage. The exploitation of angles is an arcane but crucial skill for urban soldiers today.

The use of arcs and angles is central to success in the urban environment and has been evident on actual military operations, perhaps most obviously during the assassination of Bin Laden by Seal Team 6. On that assault in Abbottabad, six individuals were killed by the Seal Team, all were shot by soldiers utilizing the angle of corners or door posts. This was most obvious in the case of Bin Laden himself. He was shot from the cover provided by the stairwell which led to the third floor, as he exposed himself in the doorway: "We were less than five steps from getting to the top when I heard suppressed shots. Bop. Bop. The point man had seen a man [OBL] peeking out of the door on the right side of the hallway about ten feet in front of him."³³ Even then, the team was cautious, exploiting corners to protect themselves: "The point man reached the landing first and slowly moved toward the door. Unlike in the movies, we didn't bound up the final few steps and rush into the room with guns blazing. We took our time... We waited at the threshold and peered inside."³⁴ Conventional forces have also sought to utilize the principle of angles and arcs on operations. In the summer of 2010, 40 Commando Royal Marines were stationed

in Sangin, northern Helmand. The alleys around their patrol bases were extremely dangerous as they were favored locations for improvised explosive devices (IEDs) or insurgent ambushes especially since they comprised many hidden junctions and corners. One of the sergeants in the 40 Commando, a qualified CQB instructor, suggested that his troops employ CQB techniques in these alley ways instead of hugging the walls of the alleys especially when looking around corners; he sensitized them to the question of angles and arcs. If marines stepped back from the corner, they would actually be able to see further around them: "I spent a lot of time with my lads explaining, it's all about angles and arcs."³⁵ The armed forces have deepened their understanding of the urban environment and its tactical exigencies.

Therefore, CQB relies upon two central individual skills, namely, precise marksmanship and refined tactical positioning (the use of angles and arcs). Both have involved the development of a progressive training regime which in itself represents a form of special forcification. Interestingly, and against Henriksen's account, although these are individual skills, they are developed through collective training processes when institutionally approved practices are imposed on students to optimize their performance. As a result, CQB-trained troops transnationally adopt precisely the same body posture and use the same weapon manipulation techniques. A standardized set of refined individual practices has been inscribed on soldiers across NATO so that precisely the same actions can be seen on ranges in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The dissemination of CQB across Western forces in the last ten years demonstrates the process of special forcification identified by Ben-Ari et al.; urban combat methods have been refined and improved and, in order to inculcate this expertise, a progressive pedagogy has been developed.

Collective Drills

So far, only individual CQB skills have been discussed. These individual skills are critical to combat performance in the urban environment but not only is their development dependent upon collective institutional processes but urban tactics relies above all else on teamwork. Specifically, it is useful to comprehend urban combat as a collective action problem of a classical sociological type³⁶: that is, a problem that can be resolved only through coordinated social practice (i.e., by a group cooperating rather than by an individual acting alone). Once this approach is adapted, the process of special forcification of Western forces becomes particularly obvious. Clearly, warfare generally involves collective action; armies have to unite their troops and commit them to common ends if they are to succeed. Yet, urban warfare represents a radically accentuated example of the collective action problem which can be recognized most clearly by comparing CQB with its nearest equivalent: conventional small unit tactics. In open warfare, an infantry platoon is typically tasked with eliminating a small enemy position usually consisting of a bunker or a trench. The platoon addresses one threat. Since the terrain is normally open and the squads can maintain their assault formations, the coordination of the platoon is relatively straightforward. Of course, in the

confusion of combat, even this relatively simple problem of coordination becomes very difficult. Nevertheless, the fundamentals of a platoon attack in open warfare are simple. The platoon commander has the choice of mounting a frontal or a left- or right-flanking attack, typically using one squad to provide fire support, one to assault, and one in reserve. In conventional combat, there is a single threat (a position) or a few closely contiguous ones (two or three positions), which are neutralized by the selection of one of three options by the platoon commander.³⁷

The urban environment poses a quite different challenge which is fully recognized in contemporary doctrine: "Urban areas present an extraordinary blend of horizontal, vertical, interior, exterior, and subterranean forms superimposed on the natural relief, drainage, and vegetation."³⁸ Urban combat involves two central problems. First, buildings necessarily channel assault teams down corridors or stairwells, separating them as squads and fire-teams clear rooms individually. Unlike rural warfare, the sections and fire-teams can quickly become separated and dispersed, unable to see or hear one another. The urban environment breaks up regular combat formations, therefore, and generates role turbulence among the assaulting force: each individual may find themselves at any position in the assault squad performing a suite of tasks. Furthermore, open warfare demands dispersion of troops in order to mitigate the effects of firepower. By contrast, in urban combat, troops are necessarily forced to operate in confined space in close proximity with each other, increasing the chances of physically interfering with each other (bumping into or knocking each other over) or injuring each other with rifles, pistols, or grenades. It is exceptionally easy for assault troops to point or fire weapons at each other, as they move around the constricted urban space with patently serious implications.

Second, threats are multiplied at every point. There are numerous rooms which may contain enemies, booby-traps, or civilians; the corridors and rooms lead off in multiple unseen directions all representing additional dangers. It is possible to be enfiladed from adjacent rooms or buildings. Stairwells, cellars, attics, and furniture can all conceal dangers. An assault team is presented with a vexatious collective action problem, then. In each building and in each room, soldiers have to identify all the many threats, prioritize them in terms of their relative danger, and assign team members to their neutralization in each room or corridor. As a result, trained CQB operators have explicitly developed the concept of "breaking down" rooms. By this, they mean that rooms have to be classified so that threats in it are identified, prioritized, and then assigned to team members.³⁹ CQB consequently demands high levels of coordination within the teams so that all the necessary actions to neutralize threats are completed quickly, often simultaneously and without the need for excessive discussion. The emergence of heightened forms of collective expertise (teamwork) constitutes a central part of the process of contemporary professionalization.

In order to resolve the collective action problem which urban combat presents, soldiers always operate as part of a squad or a "stack." A stack refers to the formation which an assault team makes as it enters a building. Typically, the assault team, of about four soldiers, will form a line outside a door or in a corridor before its

assault; it will literally stack up behind the first soldier. The members of a stack remain in close physical proximity with each other so that each individual supports and covers the others. In effect, the ideal is that the stack operates as a unified team or even a single weapon system, but this is only possible if the actions of the stack members are closely coordinated. Established drills are a central means of achieving this coordination; they are central to the process of special forcification. Drills resolve the collective action problem by establishing a predictable choreography of maneuvers that an assault team and its members conduct in the face of specific threats. Precisely because troops respond with set procedures, there is no need for deliberation and agreement; the process of coordination is expedited. This is essential in the adversarial urban environment when the tempo of response determines success and even survival. At the same time, in the constricted urban space, established maneuvers are essential so that the team members are able to adopt the optimal tactical formation without tripping over each other or shooting one another.

One of the most important collective CQB drills is the entry drill. In urban combat, it is inevitable that at some point, the assault team will have to enter a building or a room through a doorway. As the US Marines noted in Fallujah: "In traditional MOUT [Military Operations in Urban Terrain] training, making non-standard entry points, such as walls and windows, is taught. Unfortunately, Marines were responsible for clearing 50 to 60 structures a day. There simply was not enough time or explosive to breach the walls or barred windows. Almost all the entry points were existing doors."⁴⁰ This is one of the most dangerous moments for the assault team because the entry point channels the assaulters into a killing zone, known as the "fatal funnel." Not only do hostiles within the room know that their opponents must cross this area to enter the room (and can therefore aim their fire toward it preemptively) but typically the doorway casts a shaft of light into the room in which the entering soldier is silhouetted.

Accordingly, the most basic and important collective drill is the entry method; the so-called five-step entry. The five-step entry involves a number of interlocking elements which are intended to minimize the risks of entry and to eliminate coordination problems. There are a number of variations of the basic assault maneuver, with team members assuming different positions in the room. However, each variation includes five basic requirements; "a. Clear the doorway. b. Clear the immediate area. c. Clear your corner. d. Sweep your arc of fire. e. Establish a dominant position."⁴¹ In a well-executed five-step entry, the stack advances smoothly through the door to clear the corners and then establishes itself in the "dominant position."⁴² The actions of each member of the stack are standardized: No. 1 enters, clearing the blind corner, No. 2 follows to clear the opposite open corner, No. 3 and 4 follow engaging threats directly ahead (see Figure 2). All move quickly away from the fatal funnel, until they have occupied the dominant position, an imaginary line about a meter or two in front of the entry wall.⁴³ On confronting a door, the assault team simply goes through this entry drill on the command signal, until the team is stood in the dominant position in the room.



Figure 2. The five-step entry sequence. No. 1 and 2 have cleared the near blind and open corners by the door and moving into the dominant position. No. 3 enters and clears in depth.

Indeed, illustrating the point, the five-step entry method is learnt very quickly. After a couple of hours of practicing in teams, soldiers are able to execute the drill and to enter rooms quickly and effectively. The simplicity of this drill was demonstrated during a Royal Marine CQB course. When confronted with simple rooms which contained little furniture and were of a regular square or oblong shape with no hidden areas, the students quickly demonstrated a facility with clearance drills. In these cases, the collective action problem was very simple. There were few threats with which to deal and the order of threats was relatively obvious. The five-step entry drill could be followed automatically. The team burst into the room, cleared the corners, and were then presented with empty room everything in which they could see. Effectively, the standard entry drill alone was, in and of itself, sufficient to clear this room.⁴⁴ Although simple, the method has been used frequently on operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, as this description from an action in Afghanistan in 2006 demonstrates: “After the explosion the team once again paused just in case the insurgent had survived, however there was to be no repeat and the four-man team gave the pre-rehearsed nod of the weapons to move into the room and carry out the five step entry drill by covering all aspects of the room. Once inside the insurgent was discovered injured but alive, he was treated and returned to base.”⁴⁵

Entry techniques are important but they are inadequate in themselves because rooms normally contain numerous threats, which cannot be neutralized by the five-step entry method alone. The assault team has to conduct a series of further

maneuvers to check unseen corners, hidden spaces, or furniture in and behind which insurgents might be hiding; the room needs, in short, to be “broken down.” The team needs to identify all the threats, prioritize them, and assign soldiers to their clearance. Throughout this process, the stack needs to operate as a team in order to protect itself and defend against the risk of assault or IED strike. At this point, numerous other drills are required to facilitate efficient room clearance.

The requirement for a repertoire of drills was illustrated very clearly during a Royal Marine training exercise and specifically, the clearance of a single large room in the compound (see Figure 1). Initially, the instructors had organized it as a simple square room containing a large sofa, chair, and television which the students found straightforward to clear. The standard five-step entry was adequate to the minimal threats which the room presented. However, later in the day, the directing staff reorganized the room so that there was an open doorway to an adjacent room on the right wall, opposite which, on the left wall, was another door into a small recess. The furniture also remained. Having entered the room easily before the reconfiguration, the student teams now faltered badly. They were disoriented by the open doorway into the next room to their right which represented the major threat, since an enemy was most likely to hide in that space and shoot from it. They could not work out how to cover this space and to clear the room they were in. This was compounded by the fact that opposite the open doorway on the right was a closed door into a small alcove on the left, beyond which was a hidden corner which also had to be cleared. Teams were at a loss of how to assign the task of covering three simultaneous and opposing threats—the open door on the right, the closed door on the left, and the corner beyond—while clearing the room before them. They visibly hesitated on entering the room and became uncertain about how to continue and were then incapable of coordinating their actions properly. They were unable to prioritize threats and to assign team members to those threats in order so that they could clear the room simultaneously. Typically, the teams forgot to cover the open doorway (even though it was the greatest threat). Students advanced into the room, crossing the “fatal funnel” created by the doorway on the right and exposing themselves to fire. In some cases, they turned their backs to the open door entirely, as they dealt with the closed door to the alcove. The directing staff had to position the students in the room physically, pushing and pulling them by the body armor so that each individual was addressing all the threats.⁴⁶ This failure to “break a room down” (to identify, prioritize, and assign threats) and the inevitable collapse of group coordination which ensued were, in fact, extremely common in training.⁴⁷

The problem of tactical discoordination has been mainly overcome by the development of a repertoire of drills. Once teams have expanded their repertoire of collective responses, so that they have established procedures for a diversity of situations, squads become far more effective in identifying and assigning threats; their drills function as pre-programmed algorithms which can be called upon to address the situation at hand. For instance, in the case of the complex room in the Royal Marines compound, the student’s incompetence was resolved later that day. Following from their failures, the students were reminded of the “body armor to

body armor” drill.⁴⁸ This involved two assaulters moving forward together and simultaneously turning away from each other, their backs touching, each addressing a threat to their front and in that way protecting their teammate’s back. This simple but unnatural technique, especially for those trained in open warfare where troops would never stand together, solved the problem of how to confront two simultaneous and opposite threats without exposing the back of any team member to a threat. The students practiced the body armor to body armor drill and became proficient not only at the drill but also when to use it. Accordingly, the room which had proved so difficult to clear, when they were ignorant of this drill, became straightforward.

This episode is important in understanding the role of drills in CQB. There are established drills for room and building clearance which soldiers or marines are taught to follow together and which can be adapted for a variety of contingencies. Consequently, the most professional CQB troops, and above all the Special Operations Forces, have refined their drills to such a point that in the face of almost any structure, assault squads resort to a set drill which they have already conducted in training. Ultimately, the best assault teams will develop a comprehensive repertoire of collective drills, which acts as an encyclopedia or a program, for stairwells, corridors, T-junctions, left and right junctions, square, oblong, and L-shaped rooms for each of which they will implement a specific drill; “CQB is like basketball or soccer. The ball is constantly moving. You don’t have time to call for play number 10 as you do in American football. You know from practice, from experience which way to go. That comes from training. If you put the best players from the NBA together into a basketball team, they would only be a moderate team, not the best. They don’t know their place. You need to train together. But when you put guys together, when they train continuously, they will get very good.”⁴⁹ At this point, drills become so ingrained that every member of the assault team can perform any of the functions of the stack: “Baseline knowledge of the techniques and fundamentals is common to all.”⁵⁰ Precisely because every soldier operates to the same pattern, individuals can initiate a drill on seeing a threat, knowing that their teammates will respond automatically.⁵¹ This collective flexibility—based on ingrained procedures—is regarded as essential for success. As a result, when these highly trained teams encounter an unusual structure or threat on operations they will be best positioned to respond to it; they simply apply or adapt the appropriate algorithm. One team member will initiate a drill, to which others react in predetermined ways. Ironically, the tactical flexibility of the assault team relies on collective drills inculcated through detailed and repetitious forms of training.

These collective drills are not only important in themselves but, of course, they provide the tactical context in which individual skills and above all precision marksmanship can be utilized. Highly trained assault teams use the five-step entry and a whole suite of other drills in order to put their members in a position where they can shoot accurately to incapacitate or kill their opponents. By extension, the successful execution of collective drills also requires highly trained individuals who move in predictable and regulated ways and are sufficiently skills to execute drills and to shoot accurately.

Status

CQB does seem to represent an objective improvement in performance. As the Royal Marine example showed, as soldiers learn CQB techniques they are able to clear rooms effectively, which once defeated them. Indeed, soldiers, trained in urban combat techniques, have observed the improvement in performance and have widely understood the introduction of CQB as an advance. For instance, when 40 Commando Royal Marines assaulted Al Faw as part of the Iraq invasion in 2003, there were two incidents in which grenades caused friendly casualties because they were thrown carelessly.⁵² For many practitioners, the dissemination of CQB represents not just an adaptation but an obvious improvement in military effectiveness. The fact that CQB spread so rapidly across Western militaries seems to provide further evidence that these techniques represent an improvement on existing urban combat tactics. In this way, CQB seems to constitute a good example of contemporary special forcification.

Yet, it would be wrong to presume that this special forcification is purely a matter of objective progress or that there was an immediate correlation between improved performance at the micro level and greater operational or institutional effectiveness. Such an ameliorist account, though utilized by the armed forces themselves, cannot be accepted as self-evidently true. As Jeremy Black has noted the RMA and, by extension, the “urban turn” should not be seen so much as a rational response but as “symptomatic of a set of cultural and political assumptions that tell us more about modern western society than they do about any objective assessment of military options.”⁵³ Despite its apparent adaptiveness, there are many disadvantages to CQB tactics; it is expensive and time consuming and, since urban combat is by no means certain in the future, it is unclear whether the investment is worthwhile for regular infantry who may not use the method or who might be taught cruder forms of urban tactics (which are cheaper to teach and easier to sustain on current training cycles). Moreover, the development of these arcane skills in CQB is almost certain to involve a loss of other more traditional—but equally professional—skills. For every skill acquired, another is lost; yet, the eroded expertise may very well be the one which might be crucial in any future campaign. The experience of the US Marines Force Reconnaissance Companies illustrates the problem. Investing intensively in CQB techniques in the late 1980s, they found that their traditional reconnaissance skills began to erode. Since reconnaissance was their prime mission, they were forced to re-prioritize insertion and reconnaissance skills, relegating and, in some cases, abandoning CQB training altogether.⁵⁴

Indeed, even in Afghanistan where soldiers were operating constantly in and around compounds, regular troops found CQB to be only intermittently useful. Only in a tiny minority of cases were compound clearances opposed and only in a small number of even these dynamic cases did regular troops utilize complete CQB procedures.⁵⁵ Soldiers and marines typically reported that they used specific skills, such as the use of angle and arcs, as 40 Commando did in Sangin

in 2010. In the light of the difficulties and expense of training CQB and the uncertainty about its future utility, the acquisition of CQB is minimally underdetermined. It is very unclear that the investment in it can be completely justified on a strictly utilitarian calculation. Yet, despite this underdetermination, the armed forces have actively embraced it. It is perhaps worth investigating their un-evidenced alacrity for CQB. Notwithstanding the operational utility of CQB, there may be important status elements at work in its rapid dissemination. Indeed, CQB may be a practice which is particularly useful in status terms.

All social practices are invested with cultural and symbolic significance. Yet, CQB seems to carry some particularly dense and unignorable connotations. Specifically, CQB is a Special Operations Forces tactic. It is therefore a combat method closely associated and indeed synonymous with troops who enjoy the highest status in the armed forces today. As a result, CQB techniques have an allure for the public, politicians, and military commanders—and indeed for soldiers themselves—that normal infantry tactics (and, certainly, traditional “spraying and praying” methods) do not. Illustrating the prestige of these specialist techniques, a well-known memoir written by a British SAS soldier in the 1990s was called *CQB* precisely because this title would appeal to the public’s fascination with the Special Operations Forces.⁵⁶ Whatever the actual military value of this expensive capability, the performance of these highly trained assault teams has deep cultural resonances which are reflected in public imagery, films, and video games. While an operational requirement may have been identified for the dissemination of urban combat methods to regular infantry, the mystique surrounding CQB does not seem to be irrelevant to the rapid dissemination of urban tactics along transnational networks. Precisely because it is a high status practice, associated with the Special Operations Forces, regular infantry seem to have been motivated to adopt urban combat not just because it is definitively the most operationally useful method but because it also signifies military expertise most efficiently. By developing CQB competences, Western armed forces are able to demonstrate their status and to signal to each other that they are worthy and competent partners on military operations. The French Army constructed CENZUB partly so that it could establish itself as the NATO leader on urban combat as it sought to reintegrate into NATO military structures. The French Army seems to have recognized the political advantages of investing in a high status activity upon which other allies might become dependent.

The status dimension seems to be significant in terms of domestic defense politics as well. Specifically, precisely because of its symbolic connotations, CQB seems to be a method by which regular infantry might be able to defend themselves from reductions in a highly competitive budgetary environment. CQB represents not only an extension of the capability of the army but also, crucially, it allows the infantry to enjoy some of the prestige of the Special Operations Forces by appropriating some of the latter’s traditional skills. In this way, armies may accord with Max Weber’s famous and perceptive comments about status groups in *Economy and Society*. There he noted that status groups seek to monopolize “ideal and material goods

or opportunities”⁵⁷ often by reference to real or putative skills. For Weber, professionalism involves not only a set of skills but also a monopoly. More recently, Randall Collins⁵⁸ and Andrew Abbott⁵⁹ have shown how professional status groups compete with each other, each seeking to defend its own jurisdictions while promoting themselves over others. Professionalization has typically arisen as occupational status groups have monopolized certain opportunities in industrial society. The naked and self-interested politics of this process is evident.⁶⁰

Given the high status of CQB skills, it is possible that the armed forces and, specifically, particular combat arms and regiments may be utilizing the acquisition of urban combat skills as a means of monopolizing or defending “ideal and material” opportunities and especially their budgets, in the way Weber described. It is noticeable, for instance, that the construction of new urban training areas has been extremely costly and the forces involved have been awarded budgets which might have otherwise gone to other branches or services. It seems likely that the aspiration to generate a specialism in CQB attracts financing. For instance, there is some evidence that forces use their CQB skills to advantage themselves over their rivals. The Royal Marines have a number of unique capabilities including amphibious assault, but they have recurrently promoted their CQB competences so that dignitaries especially from the Ministry of Defence visiting their Commando Training Centre are given elaborate displays in their urban training compound.⁶¹ Significantly, the British Army has been worried by these developments. Indeed, a senior Army officer reportedly complained that the Royal Marines were two years ahead of the Army in urban combat with the potentially serious implications for the Army’s reputation and funding, which followed from the Marines’ lead.⁶² Indeed, in the United Kingdom, the SAS have expressed disquiet at the dissemination of specialist techniques which they once monopolized to regular, if elite, troops like the Royal Marines. Royal Marine instructors have been dismissively told by members of the SAS that if they want to learn CQB, then they should learn to do “four k[ilometers] an hour”; this is a reference to the speed which SAS candidates are required to march during selection, implying that only badged SAS troopers have the right to earn this skill.⁶³ The SAS are well aware of the importance of their monopoly on CQB which they guard jealously.⁶⁴ They are loathe to share these skills.

Primarily because the US forces have a larger number of Special Operations Forces units than other Western powers, the dissemination of CQB from SOF to regular infantry has often been assumed a more complex and multiple path than in the United Kingdom, for instance. Nevertheless, a status element is detectable even in the United States. Thus, confirming the central argument of this article, one SOF officer attributed the dissemination of CQB skills to recent operational requirements: “I think the biggest cause of the proliferation of these skills to conventional forces (army or marine) was the need to execute some form of them daily in Iraq and to a lesser extent in Afghanistan.”⁶⁵ However, at the same time, he drew a distinction between this official promulgation of CQB tactics to non-SOF forces and their actual ability to conduct these tactics effectively: “Precise marksmanship comes

from the willingness to afford resources specifically in time and money in bullets at the range. Therefore, even units that say they have a basic capability do not really unless they can get the bullets and the time to train and then are willing to assume the risk to train with live ammunition in close quarters.” His point of course was that while regular infantry might claim to have attained this skills now (especially since the Special Operations Forces CQB sight could now be attached to their regulation rifles), in many cases, they still lacked the crucial aptitude in marksmanship to be able to perform CQB effectively and safely. For him, CQB remained the rightful preserve of the Special Operations Forces in much the same way as it does for the SAS in the United Kingdom. Yet, he fully recognized that regular infantry wanted to claim they had these skills because it was institutionally advantageous for them to associate themselves with the Special Operations Forces.

The dynamics of special forcification is clearly complex and differentiated nationally. However, the evidence from the United Kingdom, America, and France is that Western infantries may be acquiring CQB skills not just because these tactics may be the best adapted to future conflict but because these skills, signifying the highest levels of professionalism, are also most likely to affirm their legitimacy, protect their “monopolies,” and defend their budgets, in a Weberian sense. There is some irony to this. Although CQB was initially developed in response to a new strategic threat, generated by globalization—terrorism and insurgency—it may now be primarily directed against an economic threat. CQB may be a way by which regular Western infantries can protect themselves from cuts by reference to an apparently indispensable form of expertise. Clearly, when considering arbitrary status elements, it is important not to overstate the case. Just because status elements may have informed the dissemination of a new practice like CQB does not mean that the expertise is itself nugatory and illusory. The point is rather the opposite. Even the most manifestly adaptive skills involve a status element. Indeed, perhaps those skills which are the most important, most useful and, above all, most difficult to master that are subsequently ascribed high status. Precisely because CQB has proven to be effective at the small unit level, its possession is highly desirable for regular infantry.

Conclusion

CQB is just one of the many adaptations which Western forces have made in the light of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, precisely because it has tended to be ignored by the scholarship on urban warfare, it is empirically useful to explore this military practice in detail. Moreover, because it is a small and definable skill, it is particularly useful as a means of understanding the wider dynamics of special forcification. Special forcification has been substantially impelled by operational requirements. The military are confronted with new threats which they have to address, if they are to avoid defeat, failure, and professional delegitimation. Accordingly, the armed forces have developed new collective skills which allow them to

adapt. The development and dissemination of CQB illustrates the way in which small milieus of professional soldiers have understood and responded to the urban problem and how new techniques have subsequently been disseminated along transnational networks. However, professionalization is not simply about improvement as some accounts of contemporary military transformation have sometimes suggested⁶⁶; it involves monopolization. One of the critical reasons why the armed forces and the individual services want to avoid defeat is not only because of the self-evident strategic consequences but also because of the damage failure inflicts on their reputation, legitimacy, and ultimately their monopoly on state violence. Various commentators have suggested that urban conflict is increasingly likely in the future as more and more people live in cities. That is possible.

Yet, just because more people live in cities, it does not mean that the next conflict involving Western forces will take place in one. Conflicts over resources in the arctic, jungle, or desert are also possible. CQB would be irrelevant in any future war in these areas. However, this does not mean that its development is pointless. On the contrary, as a tangible and refined skill, CQB serves an important institutional function whatever its operational utility. It represents a high status skill which justifies and sustains the land forces. Moreover, even if CQB is not used, the accentuated professionalization of which it is part, is likely to generate higher levels of performance among Western forces whatever mission they have to conduct and wherever they conduct it. Despite extensive investment in urban combat and the construction of CENZUB, the French army in Mali did not require CQB skills to succeed. However, the army's professionalism, which the French have been developing since the late 1990s, allowed them to project a force to the interior of Africa on a highly risky and impressive operation.

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