DETENTION OPERATIONS IN LARGE-SCALE COMBAT OPERATIONS AGAINST NEAR-PEER THREATS

By Captain Timothy E. Newton

Large-scale combat operations (LSCO) against near-peer adversaries pose challenges vastly different from those faced during counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns of the past two decades. Central among these is the requirement to manage massive numbers of enemy prisoners of war (EPWs) while maintaining operational tempo. Traditional doctrine, particularly FM 3-63,[1] outlines a deliberate nine-station detainee in-processing model that is effective in stability and COIN contexts but proves unsustainable in LSCO. Against near-peer threats such as Russia, China, or North Korea, mass surrenders and rapid tempo demand an adapted detention model emphasizing speed, risk acceptance, and essential legal compliance. This article explores how detention operations must be restructured for LSCO. Using FM 3-0,[2] ADP 3-0,[3] FM 3-39,[4] and FM 3-63[5] as doctrinal anchors, it argues that detainee operations must transition from deliberate to expeditionary, reducing in-processing requirements while still adhering to the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC). The analysis highlights the operational, legal, and organizational implications of compressing the detainee process and provides recommendations for future doctrine.

Doctrinal Foundations

ADP 3-0[6] and FM 3-0[7] establish that LSCO against peer threats requires multidomain operations characterized by high intensity, rapid tempo, and acceptance of risk to consolidate gains. They emphasize

A humvee belonging to the 11th Military Police Brigade sits parked on top of a hill at sunrise during a Combat Support Training Exercise (CSTX) at Fort Hunter Liggett, California, July 21, 2018. During the exercise scenario, military police are responsible for a Theater Detention Facility to processes and secure up to 4,000 enemy prisoners of war and also manage a Detention Holding Area to house displaced civilians. Military police have a wide range of responsibilities during combat operations which also includes combat support and area security. This rotation of CSTX runs through the month of July.
(U.S. Army Reserve photo by Master Sgt. Michel Sauret)

U.S. Army Reserve Soldiers from the 348th Military Police Company scan an "enemy prisoner of war" roleplayer's thumb print during in-processing through their Theater Detention Facility at a Combat Support Training Exercise (CSTX) at Fort Hunter Liggett, California, July 21, 2018. During the exercise scenario, military police are responsible for a Theater Detention Facility to processes and secure up to 4,000 enemy prisoners of war and also manage a Detention Holding Area to house displaced civilians. Military police have a wide range of responsibilities during combat operations which also includes combat support and area security. ***(U.S. Army Reserve photo by Master Sgt. Michel Sauret)***

that commanders must prioritize tempo and momentum over exhaustive administrative processes. This directly impacts detention operations, as traditional COIN-era procedures consume significant time and resources. FM 3-63[8] remains the authoritative manual for detainee operations. It provides detailed processes for detainee in-processing, accountability, property management, and biometrics. However, its framework was shaped by COIN environments such as Iraq and Afghanistan, where detainee throughput was manageable, and intelligence exploitation was prioritized over speed. FM 3-39[9] situates detainee operations within the broader military police disciplines of police operations, security and mobility support, and detention operations. It stresses that military police are a dual-purpose force, simultaneously responsible for maneuver support and detention in LSCO. Military police are therefore at risk of overextension when faced with mass detainee influxes. Taken together, these manuals illustrate the doctrinal tension between deliberate, resource-intensive detainee processes [10] and the tempo-focused requirements of LSCO.[11]

The LSCO Context

Mass Captures and Tempo

Peer adversaries' field large, conventional formations. Historical precedent—from World War II to the Gulf War—demonstrates that large-scale maneuver campaigns generate thousands of EPWs within days. For example, during the early stages of Operation Barbarossa, the German Wehrmacht captured hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers within weeks, overwhelming available facilities and support structures. [12] FM 3-63 cautions against underestimating the number of detainees or under-resourcing detention operations.[13] In LSCO, brigades and divisions may be forced to process EPWs at rates far beyond doctrinal expectations. Moreover, LSCO demands continuous maneuver and rapid consolidation of gains.[14] Commanders cannot afford to slow operations to accommodate lengthy detainee processing. Therefore, the detainee system must adapt to function at scale, preserving combat power while meeting minimum legal obligations.

Traditional Detainee Processing Model

FM 3-63 describes the nine-station model of detainee in-processing: search, personal hygiene, personal items, administrative accountability, biometrics, property and evidence inventory, records review, movement to living area, and medical evaluation.[15] While effective in COIN, this process assumes limited detainee flow, time, and adequate military police resourcing. It also places significant emphasis on intelligence exploitation, requiring detailed property inventories, fingerprints, and comprehensive documentation. In LSCO, such an exhaustive model creates friction. The process consumes valuable manpower and time, creating bottlenecks that undermine operational momentum.

A U.S. Marine Corps Military Working Dog, Mo, gets loaded into a military police car to travel to a new location to conduct bomb detection sweeps during II Marine Expeditionary Force Exercise 21.1, Fort A.P. Hill, VA, Nov. 2, 2020. MEFEX 21.1 will hone II MEF's ability to plan, fight and win against peer adversaries. ***(U.S. Marine Corps photo by Lance Cpl. Cheyenne Stillion***

Required Adaptations for LSCO

To meet LSCO demands, the nine-station process must be compressed. Searches should remain rapid but prioritize only immediate threats rather than exhaustive contraband inventories. Personal hygiene and detailed property inventories may be deferred

unless operationally feasible. Property should be bagged, tagged, and deferred for later review instead of doing detailed inventories at the point of capture. Administrative accountability should focus on assigning an Internment Serial Number (ISN) and capturing only essential data. Biometrics should be limited to photographs and iris scans, skipping fingerprinting to accelerate throughput. Medical evaluations must remain in place but should be streamlined to immediate triage-level assessments, deferring noncritical issues. Movement to the living area should be expedited to prevent detainee accumulation at processing points. These adaptations prioritize speed, throughput, and operational momentum while accepting risk in intelligence exploitation and evidentiary control.

Legal and Ethical Obligations

Despite compression, commanders remain bound by the Geneva Conventions and LOAC. This entails humane treatment of all detainees, accurate accountability through ISNs, immediate medical care for wounded or sick detainees, and the prohibition of inhumane practices, neglect, or unlawful reprisals. While certain administrative steps may be deferred, minimum standards cannot be compromised without legal and strategic risk.[16] Commanders and staffs must ensure that adjustments to doctrine still maintain compliance with international law and oversight organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Command, Control, and Mission Command

The role of mission command in LSCO detainee operations cannot be overstated. Mission command emphasizes disciplined initiative and risk acceptance within the commander's intent.[17] Combatant commanders must be willing to assume risk in certain aspects of detainee operations, such as delaying property inventories or full biometric collection, while ensuring that core legal and ethical standards are not compromised. This approach enables subordinate leaders to adjust detainee operations to the realities of tempo, available resources, and operational conditions. By applying mission command, commanders retain flexibility and preserve momentum while safeguarding compliance with the Geneva Conventions and international oversight bodies such as the ICRC.[18]

Sustainment and Movement Considerations

FM 3-63 emphasizes that detention is resource intensive.[19] LSCO magnifies this challenge. Sustainment considerations include transportation assets dedicated to moving detainees rearward, lifesupport resources for thousands of EPWs, and secure holding facilities for temporary, largescale confinement. Without proactive

U.S. Army National Guard soldiers assigned to the 340th Military Police company don crowd control gear to simulate the in-processing of a detainee as part of a simulated exercise on Joint Base McGuire-Dix Lakehurst, N.J., July 30, 2022. Soldiers from the 333rd MP Brigade, 340th MP Battalion gathered here for Gotham Justice, a four-week exercise that trained, challenged and improved Soldiers' primary skill sets and core MP competencies required in detention operations and security and mobility support operations.

sustainment planning, detainee operations risk collapse, undermining legitimacy and force protection.

Historical Case Studies

During World War II, the U.S. Army processed millions of German and Japanese prisoners. Expedient field-collection points focused on accountability and humane treatment, with detailed records deferred until detainees reached the continental United States.[20] This model prioritized speed and throughput while ensuring compliance with international law. In Desert Storm (1991), coalition forces captured nearly 87,000 Iraqi prisoners in just one hundred hours of ground combat. Commanders quickly realized that doctrinal procedures were inadequate for mass captures, leading to improvised processing at division and corps level. Property inventories were often deferred, echoing the adaptations needed for future LSCO.[21] Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003) initially involved conventional combat but later transformed into COIN. The Army underestimated detainee requirements during the early stages, resulting in overcrowded facilities such as Camp Bucca.[22] This highlighted FM 3-63's caution that detention is resource-intensive and can overwhelm logistical support if underestimated.

Additional historical examples reinforce the need for adaptability. In the Korean War, United Nations forces struggled to manage thousands of North Korean and Chinese prisoners. The Koje-do prisoner uprising of 1952 demonstrated the consequences of inadequate facilities and control measures, leading to violence and international criticism.[23] Similarly, during the Vietnam War, detainee operations were complicated by the blurring of combatants and civilians, revealing the challenges of applying conventional detention doctrine in unconventional settings.[24] These cases show that detention operations must remain flexible, scalable, and legally compliant regardless of the conflict type.

Doctrinal Comparisons

COIN vs LSCO

In COIN environments, detainee operations emphasized intelligence exploitation, deliberate processing, and comprehensive records. Every detainee represented potential intelligence on insurgent networks.[25] In LSCO, however, detainee operations must emphasize throughput and speed. The primary objective is rapid removal of EPWs from the battlefield to maintain maneuver tempo. Mass-capture management and risk acceptance become critical factors. Intelligence and evidentiary exploitation remain valuable but must be prioritized selectively, focusing on high-value detainees. This comparison demonstrates why FM 3-63's COIN-shaped doctrine must be adapted for LSCO realities.

Future Recommendations

Looking forward, doctrine and modernization must address LSCO detention challenges. Technology integration should employ AI-assisted biometric systems to rapidly assign ISNs and record detainee data at scale. Unmanned or semiautomated biometric

8th Military Police Brigade Soldiers conducted detainee operations training during exercise Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center 23 (JPMRC-23) on East Range, 5 8th Military Police Brigade Soldiers conducted detainee operations training during exercise Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center 23 (JPMRC-23) on East Range, Schofield Barracks, Hawaii Nov. 8, 2022. . As part of Operation Pathways, JPMRC training rotations allow leaders to rehearse strategic maneuvers while integrating with various allies and partners in the Pacific.

kiosks could relieve military police manpower burdens. Coalition detention integration should be pursued, coordinating with NATO and regional partners for shared responsibilities. Preplanned surge capacity must be developed, including modular detention facilities deployable within days and capable of housing thousands. Finally, FM 3-63 should be updated to explicitly address LSCO adaptations, risk acceptance, and abbreviated procedures.

Risks and Mitigations

The compression of detainee processing creates risks. Reduced property inventories and biometrics may forfeit intelligence opportunities. To mitigate this, high-value detainees should be prioritized for full processing while mass detainees receive abbreviated procedures. Simplified records may create confusion in repatriation or war-crime prosecutions. To mitigate this, ISN assignment must be enforced rigorously. Rapid processing may overlook contraband, but disciplined search protocols can reduce this risk. Commanders must balance operational tempo against these risks, accepting manageable gaps to preserve momentum.

Conclusion

Detention operations in LSCO must evolve beyond FM 3-63's COIN-era model. Against near-peer adversaries, mass EPWs and rapid tempo require a compressed process focused on speed, essential accountability, and humane treatment. By accepting risk in intelligence exploitation and property management, commanders can preserve operational momentum while adhering to legal obligations. Future doctrine must explicitly acknowledge this shift. LSCO demands expeditionary detention operations that function at scale, integrating sustainment planning, military police augmentation, and coalition support. Just as combined arms and multidomain operations require adaptation to new threats, so too must detention operations adapt to the realities of modern warfare.

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