



## **An Assessment of People’s Liberation Army Rocket Force Survivability Training**

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In the Science of Military Strategy (SMS) 2020<sup>i</sup> chapter dedicated to the People’s Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) one of the core capability requirements<sup>ii</sup> identified is to improve “survival protection ability” [生存防护能力]. SMS defines survival protection ability as, “the ability to guide troops to perform combat missions even after being attacked by the enemy”.<sup>1</sup> Important elements include defensive capabilities of the position, the degree of concealment and the maneuverability of the troops. As the PLA still claims no first use of nuclear weapons, the focus is on a credible counterattack. The authors write, “In a war, whether a nuclear counterattack can be carried out even after being hit by an enemy’s nuclear attack, the survival and protection capability of nuclear forces is paramount.”<sup>2</sup>

In the PLARF’s most recent training exercises, the focus has been on surviving after an attack and still being able to launch successfully. Importance has been placed on enhancing a soldier’s ability to take on multiple roles, so that if one dies others can take over their duties. In each of the exercises there is a major confrontation in which the enemy conducts a surprise attack. Xi Jinping has repeatedly emphasized the need for the entire People’s Liberation Army to increase and strengthen confrontational training. The idea is to train against both a strong and intelligent adversary. By doing so the military can address weaknesses and shortcomings now before entering an actual conflict. The end goal is to achieve a PLARF capable of overcoming extreme adversity even if some or even all of the unit is destroyed. As the PLARF continues to train in this way, along with continuing to enhance its technical capabilities, it will grow stronger and pose a greater threat to the United States and its allies in the future.

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<sup>i</sup> Science of Military Strategy 2020 is a capstone document on PRC’s current military strategy. The text was prepared by China’s Academy of Military Sciences faculty with a very high-level review. To read the translated text of SMS: <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2913216/in-their-own-words-2020-science-of-military-strategy/#:~:text=The%202020%20Science%20of%20Military,%2C%202001%2C%20and%202013%20publication>

<sup>ii</sup> The other core capabilities requirements are more offensive focused and include: quick response, system penetration, long range and comprehensive damage.

## Multi-Skill Training

Multi-skill training for members of PLARF units is not new, but is growing in importance as the PLARF works on implementing a high standard of competency in which sergeants are expected to effectively handle multiple roles. In a PLA Daily article titled, “Rocket Force Taps into the Potential of Existing Forces” they delve into the idea of “role switch” [角色转换] in their training.<sup>3</sup> Each day of training, NCOs are expected to take on both their main role as well as a different role they can switch to if needed. Examples given include a driver that also knows how to launch; a measurement and control specialist who can also command; or a launcher who also has expertise in geodesy.<sup>iii</sup> The authors write that maximizing the potential of existing forces has become an urgent issue before the party committee of the ministry.

The article describes a training exercise in which a “launch team was attacked and reduced by nearly 60%”.<sup>4</sup> In this scenario, with heavy attrition, the measurement and control specialist, normally working behind the scenes, took on the position of launcher. The result was a successful launch and destruction of the target.

Moving forward, the goal is to continue to train NCOs in multiple roles in order to transform units from a “single-skilled professional type to a comprehensive type”<sup>5</sup>. At present, the article states that more than half the PLARF sergeants are qualified for more than two professional positions. The growth of the multi role sergeant will enable each unit to have the ability to reorganize even with extremely high levels of attrition.



*PLARF soldier tending to wounded in training exercise*

## Surviving Surprise Attacks

In the past few months the PLARF have conducted multiple training exercises in which there is a surprise attack where some of the unit was either killed or incapacitated. In one scenario described in the article “Rocket Force's Starry Night Training to Sharpen the Sword” the main person in charge of launching was killed and another person had to quickly take on the role.<sup>6</sup> In this instance the unit was unable to adapt quickly enough and missed the launch window. In another training exercise, the unit was actually making its way back to camp from a different training exercise when they were informed they were under attack by the enemy.<sup>7</sup> Some were injured and the soldiers had to react quickly, some taking on secondary roles. In the end the unit managed a successful launch after taking damage to both personnel and equipment.

Finally, in the most recent launch drill, a unit was suddenly attacked by enemy chemical weapons.<sup>8</sup> The protective cover of the transport vehicle equipped with the support force was damaged, and the supplies were chemically contaminated. After the emergency medical services arrived, some officers and soldiers re-entered the battle and “barely completed the exercise

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<sup>iii</sup> Geodesy is the science that accurately measures and understands our planet's geometric shape, its orientation in space, and its field of gravity

task”<sup>9</sup>. In the assessment after the exercise it was concluded that more attention on the role of the supporting force as well as battlefield awareness were needed. Supporting units knew there was an issue with the protective covering, but failed to communicate the issue to the combat unit in the field. It was concluded that in the future support units would be embedded into each combat unit in order to achieve better combat effectiveness and survivability.

### **What happens when survival is not possible?**

In a training exercise of a PLARF brigade a scenario was constructed in which survivability was not possible.<sup>10</sup> In the exercise they state, “In five minutes, the area where your department is located will be precisely hit by the enemy.”<sup>11</sup> In normal protocol, as outlined by the “Survival Protection Ability” section of “Science of Military Strategy”, the officers and soldiers of the launch battalion should be evacuated quickly. In the training scenario, battalion Commander Wang Yue and his staff “hotly debated” what the best course of action was and decided they did not have enough time to attempt escape and concealment would not be possible. Wang Yue explained the decision stating, “It is better to fight to the death rather than wait to die. The best solution is a counterattack.”<sup>12</sup> Wang Yue noted that the terrain met sufficient conditions for an immediate launch. Wang Yue also explained the critical nature of their mission stating, “Our first task is to complete the launch, even if there are sacrifices, you will still hit the enemy's vitals.”<sup>13</sup>

After the exercise was over the leaders of the brigade discussed the decision to launch in this circumstance. They noted that while the goal should be to pursue victory at the least cost, in the face of danger and desperation, such as a scenario where survival is not possible, one must, “use blood and courage to win the greatest victory”.<sup>14</sup> The commander of the launch battalion faced both a dangerous and complex situation requiring a quick decision. Instead of choosing conventional risk avoidance, as the article states, “he assessed the situation correctly in the views of the brigade leaders and should be commended”<sup>15</sup>. The authors write Wang Yue was both strategically sound in his decision making process, but also represented a patriotic heroism of sacrifice in the face of certain death. The article concluded by writing:

In order to achieve this goal of victory, it is necessary to set the "enemy" situation on the training ground to be harsher, the training environment to be more dangerous and difficult, and the "enemy" to be expected to be more cunning. Only in this way can we strengthen the will and quality of officers and soldiers and forge a division who dares to fight and win.<sup>16</sup>

The focus of training should be on instilling a strong will to fight, even in the event survival is not possible, and making training both realistic (a strong goal of Xi Jinping) and one in which victory is not assured. Even if you are killed, you can still achieve victory.

### **Conclusion**

Long gone are the days in which the PLA trained in a planned out and scripted manner in which Red Team (i.e. the PLA themselves) would always come out victorious. As these PLARF survivability training exercises demonstrate, the military is willing to learn from failure and are preparing for a powerful enemy capable of destroying an entire unit. In a recent article written by Yang Wei [杨卫] (a PLA Army soldier) in the PLA Daily titled, “More Hard-Hitting, High-

Intensity Confrontation” the author remarks, “War is cruel, and the enemy is cruel. If the usual confrontation drills are easy and comfortable, and everyone is happy, the result may seem to be a win-win situation, but it is actually like losing twice.”<sup>17</sup> The PLARF (and the rest of the PLA) understand the more brutal and capable an adversary they train against the better prepared they will be in actual combat. Yang concludes his article writing, “A sharp blade is forged by a hard stone; an excellent capability is forged by a powerful opponent.”<sup>18</sup> The PLARF are preparing for a war against a powerful adversary; the United States and its allies must recognize this rapidly rising capability and deter future aggression.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Science of Military Strategy 2020. <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2913216/in-their-own-words-2020-science-of-military-strategy/#:~:text=The%202020%20Science%20of%20Military,%2C%202001%2C%20and%202013%20publication> s.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>“杨绍通 [Yang Shaotong]. “火箭军某部：跨界换岗淬炼军士多能本领” [Rocket Force Taps into the Potential of Existing Forces] *PLA Daily*. Accessed May 18, 2022. [http://www.81.cn/hjj/2022-05/18/content\\_10155949.htm](http://www.81.cn/hjj/2022-05/18/content_10155949.htm).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>王兴来 [Wang Xinglai]. “火箭军某部星夜练兵淬剑锋” [Rocket Force's Starry Night Training to Sharpen the Sword]. *PLA Daily*. Accessed May 16, 2022. [http://www.81.cn/hjj/2022-05/16/content\\_10155484.htm](http://www.81.cn/hjj/2022-05/16/content_10155484.htm).

<sup>7</sup> “这一仗，不按预定方案打” [This Battle Was Not Fought According to the Predetermined Plan]. *PLA Daily*. Accessed June 6, 2022. [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-06/06/content\\_317068.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-06/06/content_317068.htm).

<sup>8</sup>黄武星 [Huang Wuxing]. “A Brigade of the Rocket Army Guides Officers and Men: The Elements of Combat - No One Can Be Less.” *PLA Daily*. Accessed June 28, 2022. [http://www.81.cn/hjj/2022-06/28/content\\_10166932.htm](http://www.81.cn/hjj/2022-06/28/content_10166932.htm).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>陆正辉 [Lu Zhenghui]. “导弹成功发射，人员却“全体阵亡”，究竟算不算胜利” [If the Missile Was Successfully Launched, but the Personnel Were All Killed, Is It a Victory?]. *PLA Daily*. Accessed June 8, 2022. [http://www.81.cn/hjj/2021-12/07/content\\_10113210.htm](http://www.81.cn/hjj/2021-12/07/content_10113210.htm).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>“杨卫 [Yang Wei]. “多一些硬碰硬的高强度对抗” [More Hard-Hitting High-Intensity Confrontation]. *PLA Daily*. Accessed July 6, 2022. [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-07/06/content\\_319189.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-07/06/content_319189.htm).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.