

THE ESSENTIAL THING

by

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Editor's note: Most famous for his reformation of the German Army in the early 1920s, General von Seeckt was also a fighting soldier of the first order. Serving as the Chief of Staff for army corps, armies, and groups of armies, he planned a number of Germany's more stunning victories of World War I. These included a series of tactical victories along the Aisne, the spectacular breakthrough at Gorlice-Tarnow, and the multi-national conquest of Serbia. After his retirement in 1926, Seeckt published a little book of essays called Thoughts of a Soldier (Gedanken eines Soldaten.) The following is the most famous of these essays. The following translation, by Gilbert Waterhouse, was originally made for the British edition of the work published in 1930. The translation appears by kind permission of the British publisher, Ernest Benn, Ltd..

The essential thing is action.¹ Action has three stages: the decision born of thought, the order or preparation for execution, and the execution itself. All three stages are governed by the will. The will is rooted in character, and for the man of action character is of more critical importance than intellect. Intellect without will is worthless, will without intellect is dangerous.

I shall endeavor to trace the evolution of action from its components in all three stages. Comparisons between the soldier, whom I select as the type of person whose business is action, and others on whom action is incumbent, will readily present themselves. The soldier, then, as a typical man of action, must be equipped with the knowledge and education necessary for the accomplishment of his task. It is good but not necessary that he should have had time in the course of his professional studies to prepare himself for the great moment of his life—the moment of action. The value of the knowledge acquired by study must not be over-estimated. The soldier faced with the necessity for independent decision must not mentally search the pages of his profes-

sional encyclopedia nor seek to remember how the great generals of history, from Alexander to Ziethen, would have acted in a similar case. Such knowledge as that derived from the study of the history of war is only of living practical value when it has been digested, when the permanent and the important has been extracted from the wealth of detail and has been incorporated with a man's own mental resources and it is not every man who has the gift for this.

There was a certain general, now dead but universally esteemed and respected in his day, who was a veritable fountain of information. Whenever he was asked to express an opinion on some military situation he would always begin by saying, "In such a situation Frederick the Great would say," etc., and then would follow some invariably apposite quotation. But the best quotation, the best parallel present to the mind will not relieve the soldier of the difficulty-of decision.

Military geography was a part of that positive knowledge to which great value was once attached in the army. Thus the senior officers of the Prussian General Staff used to bear the title "Chief of a Theater of War." Many will still remember with horror the so-called "military-geographical" descriptions and the endless industry lavished on the accumulation of details concerning possible theaters of war.² In August, 1914, when we were slowly approaching the frontier, the G.O.C. [General Officer Commanding] assembled us officers of the General Command in his saloon on the first morning in order to prepare us for our allotted task by reading a "military-geographical" description of Belgium. In a short time I, the Chief of Staff, and my faithful senior assistant, Major Wetzell, as he was then, were sunk in deep sleep—very pardonable after the laborious days and sleepless nights of the period of mobilization from which we had just emerged.

Well, we found our way to the very gates of Paris in spite of our ignorance of military geography, nor had I any special preparation for Serbia and Palestine afterwards. This implies no condemnation of geographi-

cal education, for all general education enhances the intellectual value of man and therefore of the man whose profession is action along with the rest.

I have nothing to say against theoretical training, and certainly nothing against practical training. Whoever would become master of his craft must have served as apprentice and journeyman; only a genius can bridge gaps in this sequence of instruction. Every man of action is an artist, and he must know the material with which, in which, and against which he works before he begins his task.

There is a certain resemblance between Leonardo's sketch-book and Frederick the Great's sketches for maneuvers. Both exhibit genius at work. Man is the most difficult, the most recalcitrant and the most grateful, the most faithful and the most treacherous of all materials, and the soldier, like all rulers, works first and foremost with men. A youthful school of military writers recently discovered the term "General Psychologos." Platitudes have their periods of rejuvenation. As though the true arts of statesmanship and war had ever been imaginable without psychology!

Psychology is the first among the arts of government, the most important and perhaps the rarest of the soldier's gifts. Its exercise in appreciation of mass and detail carries all the potentialities of success, but also of the gravest error and disappointment. Psychology must not be judged solely from the point of view of the man who believes himself wrongly used. Judgment on leadership must be based on its effect on the mass, but the mass has no right to such judgment.

Thus equipped, man faces his task. The inner qualities he brings to bear on it escape all regulation and description, although they are the essential factors in action. Genius is character. The man of action fixes his goal in relation to his task, be it self-assigned or dictated by circumstances and higher authority—for what man of action was ever wholly free? He will always fix this goal somewhat beyond the point he feels to be

really attainable. He will also leave a margin for luck, but wise restraint and an artistic sense are necessary to prevent him from fixing his goal too far outside a reasonable sphere of action. Herein lies the delicate distinction between the bold general and the reckless adventurer.

The choice of objective is substantially influenced by the appreciation of all the means and forces at his disposal, also by the estimate of expected resistance, and only from a consideration of these factors can the final decision be taken as to the attainability of the object. Shaped by such reflections—and moods, for who would deny that moods play their part—the decision begins to emerge with increasing clarity. Doubts arise, for so much is still in the dark. Responsibility rears her giant form before the mind in its travail. Then the spirit speaks, the fist strikes the table, the die is cast, and the commander appears in the circle of those who wait to accomplish his will.

Not every act is favored with such happy conception or such easy birth. Meetings, discussion, committees, councils of war, etc., are the enemies of vigorous and prompt decision and their danger increases with their size. They are mostly burdened with doubts and petty responsibilities, and the man who pleads for action ill endures the endless hours of discussion. I remember in my experience of conferences a certain member who used to speak on every subject and always made the same speech. The power of listening or remaining silent or agreeing is a rare gift, far rarer than the gift of oratory, which is most pernicious when it loses the capacity to stop, like the man who learned to ride the bicycle.

The man who is called to action will have subordinates to bring him the material on which to base his decision. In matters of detail he will listen to the advice of experts, and one confidant perhaps will accompany him to the very threshold of decision. The true leader is marked by his ability to hear and use and follow advice without losing the freedom of responsible action.

It is now time to give the order so that the

decision can take a form. At this stage the commander's will finds its strongest expression.

Hitherto, as long as the resistance to be overcome was personal only, the decision has been a personal matter, a part of the man's self, but as soon as it takes a form it meets external resistance and inertia in its further communication in and through other human channels. The will arising out of the decision must therefore express itself all the more sharply and clearly in form. It is not without good reason that in military life we insist on a special phraseology for orders. It must express the commander's will so clearly that no doubt can trouble weaker spirits, while the refractory are forced to comply. The commander must expect to find both these temperaments among the instruments of his will and they may, indeed they always will, create obstacles which he must try to avoid or diminish by the force and clarity of his language.

If he allows others to issue orders in his name he must be certain that they speak his words, for no matter how labor and communication may be lightened by the use of certain customary forms, the order should nevertheless not be lacking in those features of phrase which are essentially characteristic of the commander himself. The higher his rank, the greater the distance between him and the final executive and the greater the danger that the decision will lose in energy and that his will will fail to agitate the remoter fibers of the military body. It is therefore the commander's great task to force his will so vigorously into the chosen channels that its pulsation will be perceptible in their uttermost ramifications. The will of Frederick and Napoleon was a living force in the humblest grenadier.

The commander's subordinates are the indispensable channels for the transmission and execution of his decision. Their selection is difficult and subject to chance, and their worth or worthlessness is often recognized too late. Disappointment in his colleagues is a commander's daily portion, and it is one of his prime tasks to recognize promptly their strength and their weak-

nesses and to apportion the correct measure of confidence accordingly. Those who stand nearest to the commander, the officers of his staff, must be so penetrated by his will, if not by his spirit, that they *execute* it, be it from conviction, obedience or fear. The same demand must be made of the subordinate leaders whose duty it is to take executive action in their own limited sphere. The commander will tell them what he considers necessary for the execution of his will but no more, and he will leave them that freedom in the manner thereof which alone ensures ready co-operation in the spirit of the whole. There will always be details in which a commander must just hope for the best.

No man of action, no commander, has finished when he has taken his decision and embodied it in an order. He remains to the last moment responsible for its execution in the way he intended and for the manifestation of his will in every stage of its accomplishment. The supervision of these matters involves technicalities of control and command too detailed to be described here. One evening before a battle I was taking steps to discover whether our order had reached all the quarters concerned, and I received the brief answer in an honest Berlin accent, "*Ich greife an.*" [*Ich greife an*" I attack.]. He had understood, and that was the essential thing.

Notes: These notes are the result of a comparison of Mr. Waterhouse's translation with a German version of the essay published in Hans von Seeckt, *Gedanken eines Soldaten*, (Leipzig: Koehler & Amerlang, 1936), pp. 159-63.

¹ *Das Wesentliche ist der Tat.* This could also be translated as "The essential thing is the deed."

² The German General Staff had evolved, only a century or so before, from the Prussian Quartermaster-General's Staff, an organization which was largely concerned with the making of maps. Walter Goerlitz, *History of the German General Staff, 1657-1945*, (New York: Praeger, 1956), pp. 9-10.

For more on Hans von Seeckt during World War I, see the many articles of the Hans von Seeckt Special Issue of *Tactical Notebook*, December, 1992.