
CHAPTER THREE THE FUNDAMENTALS OF TACTICS

I. Introduction

What are the fundamentals of tactics? Most Marines equate them with such things as definitions, control measures, and operation order formats. They would argue that a student of tactics must know some basic definitions before he can solve tactical problems in the classroom or in the field--that, for example, he must know the difference between the line of departure and the final coordination line if he is to plan and organize a deliberate attack.

But while important, definitions and control measures are not what is fundamental to tactics. The fundamentals are the guiding concepts that shape a commander's ability to create a successful tactical solution or make a sound tactical decision. They help a commander decide when to attack or when to defend. They guide him in developing a plan that deals with the uncertainty of the battlefield. In essence, they are fundamental to *what will work to defeat the enemy*.

Again you could ask, "What are the fundamentals?" Remember from the course introduction that tactics is a creative process. It is what we mean when we talk about the art of the commander. This chapter is a good place to start, but don't try to turn tactics into a check list. Tactics cannot be done by checklists or formulas. Rather, these are some guiding concepts on modern combat. You need to understand the concepts presented here and how to apply them in making decisions both on the sand table and in the field.

II. Tempo

Remember from chapter one that the goal in maneuver warfare is to collapse the enemy by shattering his forces and disrupting his cohesion. Operating at a higher tempo than the enemy is central to your ability to do this.

The importance of tempo in warfare is not new. Many American commanders, including Generals Stonewall Jackson and George S. Patton, understood the need to maintain a high tempo of operations. Only recently however, has the concept surfaced in Marine Corps doctrinal manuals. Tempo is fundamental to your success in maneuver warfare.

One way to understand the concept of tempo is through the Boyd Cycle. While studying the history of ground combat, Col. John Boyd, USAF (Ret.), noted a similarity in many battles and campaigns to a theory that he had developed in his study of air-to-air combat. He saw that in many battles, one side had presented the other with a series of unexpected and threatening situations that the other had not been able to keep pace with. The slower side eventually was defeated, even though in many cases it had the larger force. In the *Maneuver Warfare Handbook*, Bill Lind explains Col. Boyd's theory of why this happened:

According to Boyd's theory, conflict can be seen as time-competitive observation-orientation-decision-action (OODA) cycles. Each party to a conflict begins by observing. He observes himself, his physical surroundings and his enemy. On the basis of his observation, he orients, that is to say, he makes a mental image or snapshot of his situation. On the basis of this orientation, he makes a decision. He puts the decision into effect, that is, he acts. Then, because he assumes his action has changed the situation, he

observes again, and starts the process anew. His actions follow this cycle, sometimes called the Boyd Cycle or OODA Loop.

If one side in a conflict can consistently go through the Boyd Cycle faster than the other, it gains a tremendous advantage. By the time the slower side acts, the faster side is doing something different from what the slower force observed and their action is inappropriate. With each cycle, the slower party's action is inappropriate by a larger time margin. Even though the slower party desperately strives to do something that will work, each action is less useful than the preceding action, and he falls farther and farther behind. Often, when he realizes this is happening, he panics or surrenders.¹

In maneuver warfare, a Marine commander tries to *out-cycle* his opponent. If he succeeds, he stands a good chance of defeating him even if he is outnumbered. Being faster than the enemy is the key to out-cycling him. It is why we say that a good plan executed now is better than a perfect plan executed later.

Another helpful way to view tempo is to relate it to the game of basketball. Some teams like to play an *up tempo* style of play. They hurry the ball up court to try to catch the other team transitioning from offense to defense. If the attacking team is successful, it creates a 3 on 2 or 4 on 3 advantage that can be exploited into an easy basket. The opposite of this is a deliberate or half court style of play. Teams using this style seldom fast break, and are content to let the defense set up before attacking the basket. They rely on superior skill and physical ability to score baskets.

If Marines are to take on larger forces, they must rely on an up tempo style of warfare. In slow moving, deliberate combat, the larger, more powerful force usually wins.

Tempo is closely related to the concept of initiative. You must understand initiative in its broadest context if you are to maintain a high tempo in combat. Initiative is usually spoken of in two contexts. The first is familiar in the phrase *Marines must show initiative*. This means that Marines should act without orders or instructions when the situation dictates. Often in combat you will face a situation that demands immediate action, and you won't have time to seek guidance from your superior. You must *show initiative* and act as you believe your superior would want you to. Acting on your own without orders is what Marines mean when they speak of showing initiative.

You also understand initiative in another context, which is familiar in the phrase *retain the initiative*. In this context, initiative is competitive. You try to impose your will on the enemy; he tries to do the same to you. You want to force him to react to you. If you can surprise him, knock him off balance, and keep him off balance, then it's most likely that you have *the initiative*. If so, the enemy finds himself reacting to your threats while you maintain the freedom to act as you choose.

One important point needs to be made here. Having the initiative does not imply that you have to be attacking. Offensive action is not the only decisive form of combat, and often the distinction between the offense and the defense is vague. There have been many forces who retained the initiative while in the defense. A well-

planned defense sucks the enemy into a vulnerable position and then counterattacks with a decisive blow at the proper place and time. The defense then not only repels the enemy's assault; it also becomes another means of destroying the enemy.²

Tempo is measured in relative terms. You need not constantly operate at a high tempo; only at a tempo **faster** than the enemy's. In the Falklands campaign in 1982, the British, by modern standards, operated at a very low tempo. They established a beachhead, built up combat power ashore, and reduced the Argentine defenses in deliberate style. However, the British tempo was faster than that of the Argentines. After the Argentines invaded the Falklands in April, they surrendered the initiative to the British. The Argentines established static defensive positions around Port Stanley and Goose Green and remained in these positions throughout the battle (see figure 3-1). From that point on, the British held the initiative. Their tempo, although low, was higher than the Argentines.



Fig 3-1. Argentine defenses in the Falklands.

How do you operate at a tempo faster than the enemy's?

First, you must focus on the enemy³, on what he's doing and how you can get at him. Many commanders do not focus on the enemy but on their own internal command and control. They try to reduce the friction of battle by closely controlling subordinates in order to make combat more orderly. You may succeed in reducing friction but you will kill initiative and high tempo. Focusing internally, on reducing internal friction, slows you down.

When you focus on the enemy, you are less concerned with internal friction. In combat, friction is always present. Naturally, you want to try to reduce your friction while increasing the enemy's. Focusing on the enemy allows you to do this while maintaining a high tempo of your own.

Second, use mission orders.⁴ Mission orders allow you to decentralize decision making. This results in subordinates acting appropriately in a timely manner. Using mission orders demands trust. Commanders must trust subordinates to report when something significant happens. This is difficult, especially when a subordinate makes contact with the enemy. As a commander, you instinctively want to know the situation as soon as possible. You must allow your subordinate to fight his battle, however, and trust him to report when he can. If you demand that he reports immediately upon contact, then you are probably interfering with his ability to fight the battle. The subordinate must also trust the senior. He must believe that the senior will support him when he exploits an opportunity. You cannot control subordinate units closely and expect them to seize the initiative when an opportunity surfaces. The two are mutually exclusive. The emphasis must always be external: to find the enemy weaknesses and exploit them decisively.

Third, you must use soft spot tactics.⁵ Soft spot tactics means pitting your strength against enemy weakness. If you attack his strength with your strength, then your tempo will slow down. Attacking his weaknesses allows you to keep the tempo high and forces him to react to you.

Fourth, you must lead your unit with an active, aggressive spirit. Highly active units keep the enemy off balance and guessing. They contribute to the overall tempo by providing frequent, unexpected threats to the enemy. This is one of the most significant changes that most Marine units face today. Most Marines are used to the practice of seizing an objective and waiting for further orders. This just isn't good enough in maneuver warfare. To maintain a high tempo, you must actively seek to exploit opportunities without waiting for explicit guidance.

There are several tradeoffs to operating at a high tempo. *First, subordinate commanders may make more mistakes* since they must decide and act on less intelligence than they might have in a more deliberate style of warfare. However, the advantages of high tempo overcome the disadvantages of more mistakes. In basketball, a fast-breaking, up tempo team usually commits more turnovers than an opponent with a more deliberate style. But it succeeds when its high tempo gains more points than it loses through turnovers. The principle is the same in combat.

The second tradeoff is that high tempo units lose some physical security. If your unit is operating at a high tempo, it will be fast and active. Often, you won't be able to physically protect your flanks because flank security would slow you down. But if your tempo is higher than the enemy's, you will gain security through speed. You are very active; you have the initiative. He is reacting to you, and it's likely that his actions are becoming less effective as he tries to deal with more threats than he can handle. Usually, he can't hit your flanks unless you halt and give him the initiative. Safety lies in retaining the initiative.

You may wonder if tempo is important at the platoon level, or only matters for battalions and regiments. Noted military historian General S.L.A. Marshall once observed that the success or failure of a battle often hinged upon the actions of a few men. The actions of the platoon influence the success or failure of the battalion. The platoon contributes significantly to both the company and battalion's tempo.

As commander of a battalion-size detachment in Italy in World War I, Lieutenant Erwin Rommel often used only one or two squads as his assault elements. The squad leaders had to make decisions on the spot that were consistent with Rommel's intent. They contributed to the high tempo which kept the enemy at a disadvantage.

Marine General H.M. "Howlin Mad" Smith once wrote, "Since I first joined the Marines, I have advocated aggressiveness in the field and constant offensive action. Hit quickly, hit hard and keep right on hitting. Give the enemy no rest, no opportunity to consolidate his forces and hit you back. This is the shortest road to victory."⁶ General Smith was advocating a high tempo style of warfare.

III. Mission Order Tactics

The mission order is fundamental to maneuver warfare tactics. It is the primary means by which you guide subordinate actions while decentralizing decision making. In the fog, friction, and high tempo of modern combat, you **must** decentralize decision making. Often, your subordinates will find themselves in difficult situations that demand immediate action. They may be isolated and unable to communicate with you. Through mission orders, you give them enough guidance to act properly in your absence.

Suppose that you, as the commander of A Company, have just received the following mission order from your battalion commander:

Enemy forces are defending to our north. My intent is to attack rapidly to encircle the enemy and cut his line of withdrawal. B Company attacks north along Route 7 and is the main effort. Your mission is to attack West to draw the enemy's attention away from B Company's attack.

What order will you give to your 1st Platoon Commander?

The Commander's Intent

Your first task in preparing your order is determining your intent. Your commanders intent is *your concept of what you need to do to succeed*. It is your goal-- what you are trying to achieve. For guidance, you rely on both your senior's intent

and the mission he assigned you. In the example above, your battalion commander's intent is to attack rapidly to encircle and cut off the enemy's retreat. He chose B Company to lead the attack as the main effort. Although you will study the main effort in more detail in the next section, you should recall from chapter one that it's your duty to support the main effort. This is clear from the mission your battalion commander assigned you: attack West and draw the enemy's attention away from B Company's attack. Let's assume that you have studied your situation and decide that by attacking the enemy in his left flank, you will draw his reserve away from B Company. That would give your senior the result he wants. This also becomes your intent: *to attack the enemy in his left flank to draw his reserves away from the battalion's main effort.* There may be other ways to draw the enemy's attention away from B Company. For example, you might attack the enemy in his right flank or seize a piece of key terrain and force him to attack you. All situations are unique, and what constitutes success in one case may not be successful in another.

Although there are no rigid guidelines to follow in determining your intent, you might ask yourself, "Am I telling my subordinates what they need to know to confidently take the initiative in situations I can't foresee?" It takes practice through map and sand table exercises, terrain walks, and field exercises to become skilled at developing and communicating your intent.

Subordinate Missions

Once you determine your intent, you need to develop a scheme of maneuver and assign subordinate missions that support both your's and your battalion commander's intent. In the example above, you might choose 1st Platoon to lead the attack into the enemy's left flank and designate it as the main effort. Furthermore, you might task 2d Platoon with screening your right flank while both 3rd Platoon and Weapons Platoon support 1st Platoon's attack. Now you have enough information to issue your 1st Platoon Commander a mission order:

My intent is to attack the enemy in his left flank to draw his reserves away from B Company's attack. You will attack the enemy's left flank and are the main effort.

A useful way to view the mission order is as a contractual agreement between you and your subordinates. The mission which you assign him is a short term contract. It is usually expressed relative to the enemy, not to terrain, as was common with the old operation order format. Your intent is a long term contract. It tells him your long term goal. Sometimes, he will have to depart from the short term mission because the situation changes. The long term intent provides him with guidance on what to do. It takes precedence over his mission. He will often act on his own initiative without waiting for directions in order to keep his efforts focused on the intent.⁷

In the old style of issuing combat orders, you expressed your mission according to the 5 w's: who, what, when, where, and sometimes why. An example might have been:

C Company will attack and seize Hill 450 at 1600.