

Tactics in Maneuver Warfare

by William S. Lind

When preparing for battle a formula is harmful. Every situation is unique and must be treated accordingly.



Interest in maneuver warfare has been spreading rapidly in the Marine Corps. Almost every issue of the GAZETTE now includes some reference to it. The Commandant has expressed support for it in testimony to Congress.

However, when we come to the subject of tactics, we run into some confusion. Many Marines are asking, "What does maneuver warfare mean in terms of tactics? Do we need to change our basic tactics and if so, how?"

In some cases, these legitimate questions are receiving a dangerously wrong answer:

Maneuver warfare is just a different tactical formula. Instead of attacking frontally, we will attack into the enemy's flank and rear. Instead of defending a rigid line, we will allow the enemy to penetrate, then counterattack and encircle him. That's all maneuver warfare means to the tactician.

Flank attacks and elastic defenses are techniques likely to be employed in maneuver warfare. But they are not formulas for maneuver tactics, since maneuver warfare is not a new formula, but a *replacement for formulas*. In

maneuver warfare, the object is to shatter the enemy's organizational and mental cohesion by creating unexpected and dangerous situations more rapidly than he can deal with them. If our tactics are formulistic, our actions will be predictable. If we are predictable, we will seldom be able to create situations unexpected by the enemy. †

Thus, all formulas are wrong. How then do we come to understand tactics in maneuver warfare? Are they just a "gut reaction" on the part of the commander? If we cannot follow a tactical recipe book, what do we do?

Perhaps a definition of tactics in maneuver warfare will help. This definition may seem somewhat abstract until we think it through, but since we cannot offer a formula, a certain degree of abstraction is necessary. Let us define maneuver tactics as:

A process of combining two elements, techniques and education, through three mental

† *For an interesting commentary on Marine predictability and the ease with which predictable units can be countered, see letter from LtCol K. D. Jordan in Jan81 GAZETTE.*



“filters” or reference points—mission-type orders, the search for enemy surfaces and gaps, and the focus of our own main effort—with the object of producing a *unique* approach for the specific enemy, time, and place.

Again, this sounds abstract. But as we look at it bit-by-bit, the pieces quickly fall into place:

► **Techniques.** Marines are familiar with these. They range from how to fire a weapon, give an order, or make sure the troops are fed up through how to organize an attack, set up a defense, or reconstitute a reserve.

Specific types of offenses or defenses, including the flank attacks and elastic defense mentioned earlier, are not tactics but techniques. Tactics is the process of selecting from among techniques to produce that unique approach for the specific enemy, time, and place.

Some Marines accuse spokesmen for maneuver warfare of incorrectly deemphasizing the importance of techniques. Any such deemphasis would indeed be incorrect. Excellence in techniques is highly important in *any* style of warfare. What maneuver advocates

have correctly condemned is seeing tactics as *nothing more than* techniques. When we do this, we become formulaistic.

Maneuver warfare demands excellence in techniques, but it demands more: creativity and originality in selecting from among and combining techniques. The other elements in our definition—education and the three mental “filters”—are the tools which help us to be creative and imaginative in making our selections and combinations.

► **Education.** The officer must be able to see the opportunities in the combat situation facing him. To do so, he must be educated in the art of war. He must have sufficient understanding of military history to be able to put his specific situation into context, to see how the situation looks through his opponents’ eyes, to have some idea about the enemy commander’s thought process. He must understand how to think through his own situation.

This is perhaps the hardest part of our definition to explain clearly, because our goal is not a commander with a mental “checklist,” but one with what the Germans call “a feeling in the tips of his fingers” for his situation and the opportunities in it. Seeing these opportunities is a thought process rooted in a *Gestalt*—in seeing something as an entity—not in checklist-type analysis.

Study of military history must not be a search for precise analogies, for there are none. Its focus must be not the actions, but the thought process of commanders. The goal is not knowledge, but understanding; not *what* to think, but *how* to think. As Gen Hermann Balck has said:

Therefore, one of the first principles has to be: There can be no fixed schemes. Every scheme, every pattern is wrong. No two situations are identical. That is why the study of military history can be extremely dangerous . . . No one thinks of becoming a great painter simply by imitating Michaelangelo. Similarly, you can’t become a great military leader just by imitating so-and-so . . .

► **The three “filters.”** These are mental reference points, not rules. They are concepts the commander keeps in the forefront of his mind as he attempts to fashion a unique combination of techniques for his specific situation.

— *Mission-type orders.* The commander does not expect or attempt to control every action of his subordinates. Nor does he attempt to foresee and plan for every event which will take place. Rather, he determines his *intent*—what

he wants to have happen to the enemy. He makes certain this intent is consistent with the intent of his superiors, and he communicates it clearly to his subordinates.

As the action develops, he supports and expands the local successes of his subordinates, committing his reserve where he perceives the enemy weakest and the chance for success greatest. At times, he will issue detailed orders in order to do this. But in general, he will trust his subordinates' abilities to make the best decisions as to how to achieve his intent—what techniques to select for their particular unit—within the framework of his guidance and support.

This definition of mission-type orders is somewhat different from the way the term is often used in the Marine Corps. To many Marines, a mission-type order is, "Captain, I want your company to take Hill 432." This order does not really give the company commander an understanding of the battalion and brigade commanders' intent—what they want to have happen to the enemy. Nor does it leave the captain much latitude for initiative, especially if intelligence proves wrong or the situation changes.

Marines will need to rethink what they mean by mission-type orders. In fact, they might want to use a different term, such as "intent orders," to make it clear that this is something new.

— *The search for enemy surfaces and gaps.*
Maneuver warfare seeks to avoid enemy

strengths—surfaces—and throw maximum strength against enemy weaknesses—gaps. This can result in something very much like the so-called "von Hutier" tactics of the German 1918 offensive, which were in turn very like German armored warfare tactics in World War II.

But there is a danger here. Von Hutier tactics were appropriate in positional warfare in World War I. Their development into blitzkrieg was appropriate against Poland in 1939, France in 1940, and Russia in 1941. They will be appropriate against some opponents in the future, in some times and places.

But they cannot be allowed to become formulas. The starting point of the thought process which is tactics cannot be these German techniques. Our starting point must always be the *specific* strengths and weaknesses of our *specific* opponent in the time and place in which we face him.

An illustration may be helpful. In the 1950s, the Israelis developed effective tactics against Arab fortified positions. They attacked frontally, got into the trench-works, and engaged the enemy in hand-to-hand combat. This may not sound like maneuver warfare, but it was. The Israelis had identified a specific weakness of their opponent. The Arabs' lack of social cohesion outside the family made it very difficult for the Arab soldier to show initiative. He had no reason to expect support from those around him. When faced with a melee in the trenches, the Arabs' cohesion came apart as

Israeli forces make a frontal assault on Arab positions after identifying a specific weakness in their opponent.



each soldier looked out only for himself. The Israeli *techniques* were very different from those of German von Hutier tactics, but the *process* of tactics was the same.

Thus, we must understand surfaces and gaps on a macro, not just a micro level. The micro level is technique—useful technique—but unless it is relevant to the specific opponent, it is a formula. The techniques which take advantage of the weaknesses of one opponent will run head-on into a different opponent's strengths. In maneuver warfare, techniques must be formed into tactics in relation to the specific opponent.

— *Focus of effort*. This is the German concept of *Schwerpunkt*. It is usually translated as “point of main effort,” but this leads to misunderstanding. It is not a point on a map. The focus of effort is a unit, not a geographic point or a direction. There is always a focus of effort, but there is never more than one at a time. The *Schwerpunkt* is a conceptual focus of effort which each subordinate commander uses to link his actions, through the intent of his superior, to the actions of those around him. It is the “glue” which permits mission orders to allow initiative without losing cohesion.

Again, an illustration may help. You are the commanding officer of a regiment. You are advancing with two battalions forward, one in reserve. On the basis of our reconnaissance, you believe the enemy is weak in front of the 1st battalion, stronger in front of the 2nd battalion. You designate 1st battalion as the focus of effort. *All* supporting arms are given to 1st battalion, and the reserve is echeloned behind it. The commander of 2nd battalion asks himself the question, what can I do to help the advance of 1st battalion? *All* his actions are devoted to that end. So are all the actions of everyone else in the regiment—not following detailed orders from the regimental commander, but on their own initiative.

The focus of effort may shift during the attack. 1st battalion runs into an ambush. But 2nd battalion has launched a supporting attack, intended as a feint, which takes the enemy by surprise and breaks through. Immediately, the regimental commander gives an order, “Focus of effort now with 2nd battalion.” The supporting arms switch their fires to 2nd battalion, the reserves move laterally to echelon behind 2nd battalion, and the axis of advance shifts. Everyone now asks himself, how can I assist the effort of 2nd battalion?

Can we now understand more clearly our definition of tactics? Let us return to our regimental commander. The attack we have

just described is successful. He collapses the enemy line of resistance, pocketing one enemy battalion, sending a second plus the enemy reserve fleeing in disorder. He passes the encircled enemy battalion off to a division reserve unit to contain or reduce. He advances until he meets the enemy's second defense line.

Now he must again think, “What are my tactics here?” He looks at the new situation and asks himself, “What techniques can I employ?” That is, given the factors of METT, the availability of supporting arms, etc., what is the full range of options open to him? He puts his situation in an educated context—how have successful commanders thought through situations like this in the past? He considers his three “filters”: What are the specific strengths and weaknesses of this enemy in this place? What intent does my superior have, and what intent do I communicate to my subordinates? Which unit do I designate as my initial focus of effort?

The answers to these questions are a set of actions, a combination of techniques. But *tactics* includes the whole thought process, not just the actions. Unless we see tactics as the whole process, we are likely to be reduced to formulas, to techniques applied by the book.

Understanding tactics as a process rather than just a set of actions on the battlefield requires a major mental “shift of gears.” But if we want to do maneuver warfare, it is a necessary shift.

In turn, if we expect Marines to think in a new way, we must change some of the ways the Corps as an institution does business. We must give officers time to read, think, and reflect. We must devote our schools to educating officers in the art of war, not just to more training in techniques. And we must rewrite our FMFMs so they *cannot* be read as recipe books (a deficiency in the new ECP 9-5, *Marine Amphibious Brigade Mechanized and Countermechanized Operations*).

Maneuver warfare is not a way of moving but a way of thinking. Its essence is well illustrated by the remarks of two generals. The first, Gen Henri Nivelles of the French Army, was the author of the disastrous French offensive of 1917. To garner support for his planned attack, he told the Allied leaders “I have the formula.” In contrast, his opponent, Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, said in his memoirs, “There is no panacea. A formula is harmful. Everything must be applied according to the situation.”

Prince Rupprecht's approach is the one we want to follow.

USMC