

The Criticality of Time in Combat

By General James H. Polk, Ret.

The French theologian Louis Bourdaloue said, "There is nothing more precious than time, for it is the price of eternity."

It is curious that so few thoughts or philosophical writings are devoted to the advantages that a step ahead in time gives to the attacker in modern ground warfare. Examples abound, and there are a number of very successful generals in modern history who instinctively understood this value of time, i.e., when your antagonist is reacting to your moves rather than you to his, when you dictate maneuvers in time and tempo and he attempts to counter them too late and to no avail, when you get this advantage then you have him by the throat. The advantages of time and space accrue in geometric rather than arithmetic proportion, so that twice ahead in time is about four times ahead as a force multiplier. Raw numbers of units or firepower aggregates don't count, while time and space advantages — your tempo and not his — dominate and dictate.

A look into recent history shows that Napoleon understood time and accompanying space or maneuver to an extraordinary degree and at a very early age. In his classic Italian Campaign of 1796-97, his first major command at age 27, he fought three major battles in ten days and won them all, totally defeating three different Austrian columns while heavily outnumbered but, importantly, never at the point of attack. While he repeated his favorite tactic over and over again in the ensuing years, by dividing or, more often, separating and conquering while outnum-

bered or, as Nathan Bedford Forrest said, "Get there fustest with the mostest," he never could fully explain his tactical genius.

Napoleon's so-called "maxims" are often irrelevant, or at least not persuasive, in attempting to discover the secret of his military successes. His well-known principles of the *directive, offensive, simplicity, control*, etc., are so generalized as to be almost meaningless. Perhaps the closest they come to his tactical methods is in *surprise*, which he believes is important for the commander of a force that does not have combat superiority. This is achieved by *speed, secrecy, deception* and moving through seemingly impossible terrain. What he really said is that one must seek an advantage of time and position over superior forces if one is to prevail.

Other generals understood these methods of time and tempo of the all-out assault against superior but uncoordinated forces, and the American classic is, of course, Jackson's Valley Campaign of 1862.

There, he defeated three different Union forces in about ten days and moved over to the Battle of Second Bull Run where his flanking attack turned the tide. As far as known, General Jackson left no serious military writings on his successes. It is unfortunate that he was killed, because he was a professor of both history and mathematics at the Virginia Military Institute and could

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have left a marvelous heritage of military thought.

WWI produced no great commanders worthy of special note, while in WWII, Rommel and Patton immediately come to mind. Montgomery doesn't qualify because he relied on a careful build up, a cautious attack with considerable superiority of numbers. And with all of that, he was beaten twice, at Caen and at Arnhem. Eisenhower did not exercise generalship but, rather, was the coordinator and dispenser of resources and was best at resolving disagreements among the Allies.

Liddel Hart says in his introduction to *The Rommel Papers* that Rommel had the power to create surprise, to produce the unexpected move, reinforced by an acute time-sense and by the capacity to develop the highest possible degree of mobility. Probably the greatest modern insight of the value of a time advantage can be derived from Rommel's account of his attack, breakthrough, and exploitation from the Ardennes to the sea in mid-May of 1940, as described in the first two chapters of *The Rommel Papers*.

Here one sees the ultimate in audacious attack, in which Guderian's armored corps, most aggressively handled, overpowered and totally disorganized a much superior enemy force, even without total surprise. As its leading element, Rommel moved with such speed and daring that he surprised French units not once but often, primarily because he arrived ahead of time. He set the tempo of attack and hit before the time the French expected him.

Unquestionably, Patton, Rommel, Guderian, and von Manstein understood the values accruing from advantages in time and space, but none really explained it adequately, and all seem to have been guided more by instinct than by a carefully reasoned process. Patton on many occasions drove his command to exhaustion when he sensed a time advantage and never permitted his enemy to have the hours or days to mount a coordinated counterattack or prepare a solid defensive position. His most graphic expression of his philosophy was "hold him by his nose and kick him in the butt," but he also said that an ounce of sweat was worth a gallon of blood, meaning "drive your combat units hard when you sense an advantage and save casualties."

But to return to Guderian, Rommel, and Liddel Hart, Hart had this to say about time and tempo in the German 1940 drive to the Channel in *Strategy*: "The issue turned on the time-factor at stage after stage. French counter-movements were repeatedly thrown out of gear because their timing was too slow to catch up with the changing situations, and that was due to the fact that the German van kept on moving faster than the French (or for that matter, the German higher command) had contemplated. The

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French, trained in the slow-motion methods of WWI, were mentally unfitted to cope with the new tempo and it caused a spreading paralysis among them. The vital weakness of the French lay, not in quantity or quality of equipment, but in their theory."

Hart also had this to say in speaking of the ratio of troops to space: "The offense potentially carries one unique advantage, that if the attack is made unexpectedly and with sustained speed of follow-through, it may split a slow-responding defense so deeply and disintegratingly as to paralyze resistance, annulling the comparative balance of numerical strength. The basic advantage of defense can only be ensured if it has adequate flexibility and mobility, the primary condition being that the defender has a clear understanding of the attacker's technique and tempo. The time factor is of crucial importance in relation to the ratio of force-to-space."

The U.S. Army Field Manual 100-5, Operations, modestly says of itself, "The fundamental mission of the Army is to deter war." Should conflict occur, FM 100-5 is the

Army's keystone "How to Fight" manual. It explains how the Army must conduct campaigns and battles in order to win. It describes U.S. Army operational doctrine involving maneuver, firepower and movement, etc. All other field manuals stem from this key one, down to the ultimate FM 7-8, *The Infantry Platoon*, for guidance and doctrine.

FM 100-5 uses such phrases as "Move fast, strike hard, and finish rapidly;" "Carry the battle deep in the enemy's rear;" "Speed is absolutely essential for success;" "A bold exploitation should always follow a successful attack;" "Move aggressively and boldly." All these concepts are good when applied to appropriate situations, but they are more in the form of exhortations or admonitions than theory or policy. To be specific, FM 100-5 does not tell the commander how to recognize situations where speed and boldness really pay off. In effect, what are your advantages when you begin to get ahead of the enemy in time and tempo, what are the signs and what do they tell you, and how should you, as the commander, react to them?

A battalion or brigade CO must be well forward and should have taught his subordinates what to search for, what signs to look for, how to instinctively smell the beginnings of disorganization or panic in the enemy ranks. Some battle leaders have an eye for this, as noted earlier, and some must be taught, but there is often positive evidence if one knows what to look for.

More often than not, the first evidence of bad morale on the other side is the defection of lower-ranking soldiers, or an evident desire to surrender after an almost token

resistance to modest combat pressure.

The list of evidence is long; abandoned equipment, gaps in minefields not fused and armed, road barriers not in place, campfires still burning, rations still being cooked, vehicles or couriers blundering into your lines, abandoned wounded or operational aid stations left behind, stacks of ammunition or other stores, excess artillery ammunition remaining at empty gun positions, and more. One of the earliest indications that you are getting ahead of your enemy is the shelling of your last position after you have left it and are attacking your next objective. When the

Enemy Disintegration: Some Indicators

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- Excess artillery ammunition at empty gun positions
- Shelling of your last position after you have left it

enemy is dropping his shells behind you, it is a sure sign that his coordination is breaking down and that he doesn't quite know where you are. These signs, if recognized, let you, the commander, know that your opponent is not reacting to your current moves but, rather, to your last moves and that you have a distinct time advantage over him.

The importance of advantage in the tempo of the attack is that the harder you press him, the greater becomes your advantage and, as noted earlier, it increases in geometric proportions rather than arithmetic. Numbers and firepower don't count. A tank company behind your enemy's brigade is equal to a battalion on his flank or two brigades attacking frontally. No modern army is trained to handle a relatively small but effective force in and among its rear area support, communication, and supply echelon. Nor are these logistic troops capable of any decent resistance. Quite the opposite, they most certainly will be thrown into a complete panic and either surrender or flee. "Devil take the hindmost" is generally the watchword of these troops when thrust suddenly into a confrontation with aggressive and unexpected combat formations.

In reviewing FM 100-5 *Operations*, one can find almost no mention of the importance of time, except in the discussion of surprise (page 96). "To reap the benefits of surprise, therefore, the attacking commander must exploit its initial shock ruthlessly, allowing the enemy no TIME to regain his equilibrium." It continues: "...even when achieved, it rarely lasts," which is dead wrong and shows a serious lack of understanding.

Surprise, when achieved, should be built on, and the cumulative ef-

fect of a time advantage increases as the tempo accelerates. Interestingly enough, there is no mention of time in the very comprehensive index to the field manual.

Again, in discussing surprise as a principle of war, FM 100-5 states, (page 177), "It is not essential that the enemy be taken unaware, but only that he become aware too late to react effectively." In other words, the attacker has an advantage in time, that time is working for him. There is a rather good discussion (page 121) titled "Time Available," which quotes Clausewitz and Patton on the importance of time in the attack and concludes with the statement, "Time is, therefore, vital to the attacker; he must prolong the enemy's surprise, confusion and disorganization for as long as possible." Unfortunately, this section is all too brief and is buried under some twelve pages devoted to The Tactical Offense, much of which is obvious and trite.

We have been led astray by computerized war games and map exercises because the primary determinant of victory in these exercises is a preponderance of firepower with slight input on maneuver and on terrain and weather as it relates to firepower. It is almost impossible to determine the values of artillery fires or close air support and totally hopeless to gauge the intangibles such as generalship, training, fatigue and the like. Some very sophisticated games attempt to feed in some of the above, but this is of very questionable value. The value of a time advantage, to my knowledge at least, is not attempted or even understood. The net result is that the side with the most firepower wins by attrition and this in turn relates directly to numbers.

The media gives much prominence to the numbers game. And so does

our civilian and military hierarchy. As an example, a recent issue of *Newsweek* displayed a table of comparative numbers of tanks, artillery, fighter aircraft, and others, which showed that the Warsaw Pact outnumbered NATO by a factor of about 2-to-1, and the gloomy conclusion was, by implication at least, that NATO will be quickly defeated in a conventional war. *This is pure nonsense.*

In fact, an attack by the Warsaw Pact is very scenario-dependent. If the Pact was able to mount a full-scale attack on a Sunday morning without prior detection, NATO would have a dreadful time with or without atomic weapons. But such an attack represents a dreadful risk by the Soviet leadership because of the chance of detection and of the battle becoming a one-on-one attack. On the other hand, if we had five days warning and mobilized so that NATO divisions were in position and ready, we would surely achieve a standoff or stalemate and possibly a victory. Again, time is not critical; it is priceless.

Furthermore, with a time advantage, numbers don't count. It is the most exciting, exhilarating experience a soldier may enjoy. It begets boldness and daring and, as stated earlier, increases the relative superiority as the events accelerate and only ends when support is out-distanced. My own 3rd Armored Cavalry reached the Moselle River with one troop out ahead and actually captured intact the bridge at Thionville. The troop had to be recalled as no reinforcements could join it, and the 7th Armored Division was running out of gas, tank by tank, behind us. And significantly enough, the planning for

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Overlord and beyond envisioned a progressive widening of the Normandy bridgehead in successive "all-hold-hands" advances. Unfortunately, the planners did not foresee the painfully slow progress in the hedgerows. But worse than that, they had no concept of the wild breakouts and confusion that followed. Third Army advances depended almost totally on availability of gasoline, whereas the German Army could do almost nothing to delay our speed of advance. Had we had the gasoline, Third Army could have breached the Siegfried Line easily, because it was almost unmanned. We had the time advantage, but lost it because we had outrun our support. In a war of maneuver, fuel is critical, while in a battle of attrition, ammunition is the decisive factor. We had the firepower but lacked the POL and thereby lost our "time" advantage. It certainly cost the Allies six months of active warfare and unconscionable casualties. We fell into a war of attrition in October of 1944 and never achieved any real success until the breakout in the spring of 1945; when we once again got moving and had "time" on our side.

We must avoid battles of attrition – Caen, Anzio, Tet, Porkchop Hill, Verdun, Passchendaele – the names are endless, and the results are meaningless and horrendous. We must seek the war of maneuver, we must break through, seek the priceless time advantage so that we are ahead of our adversary, he is reacting to our last move, our time advantage overcomes his numbers, we get one step ahead, then two steps ahead, then we have him by the throat, when boldness counts, and numbers don't matter, and we know and he knows that it is almost over. We the leaders, once this precious time advantage is gained, must drive our attacking units to the limit of endurance and beyond, because our adversaries are not only exhausted, but badly frightened and they are ours to harvest. The American soldier is not stupid, and when he collectively smells victory, he is incredibly brave and ruthless, and numbers don't count.

This is victory!

General James H. Polk was born in 1911 in the Philippines, where his father was an Army officer. He was commissioned in cavalry from West Point in 1933. During WWII, he commanded Third Army cavalry units and was decorated three times for gallantry. From 1955 to 1957 he was chief of staff, then assistant commander, of the 3rd Armored Division and served two years with NATO's land forces in Central Europe. He was commander-in-chief USAREUR and Seventh Army when he retired in 1971.