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**CHAPTER ONE**  
**SELECTING OBJECTIVES**

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### SELECTING OBJECTIVES

You should recall from *Tactical Fundamentals* that the ultimate objective is to defeat the enemy. Usually, this objective applies not only at the strategic level--winning the war--but at the operational and tactical levels as well. For example, at the tactical level, a Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) might win a battle by surrounding and destroying a key enemy unit. If this victory allows theater-level forces to capture a key port and cut the supply line of an enemy field army, forcing it to surrender (an operational victory), then that army's surrender might compel the nation we are at war with to stop fighting and sue for peace--our ultimate goal. Defeating enemy units at each level contributes to the ultimate goal of winning the war.

Often, this principle also applies at the company level. For example, a rifle squad, as the advance guard of a rifle company in the attack, encounters a small enemy outpost on its avenue of approach. Let's assume that the squad must clear this outpost to keep the company moving forward. Destroying the outpost becomes the squad's objective. Then, the lead platoon encounters an enemy screening force which, in this situation, the platoon must destroy to keep the attack moving. Destroying the screening force becomes the platoon's objective. In this example, both the squad and platoon objectives contribute to the company objective of defeating enemy forces in its zone

of action. However, in many situations, lower level objectives may be something entirely different. For the example above, let's suppose that the company's objective remains the same, but the situation changes. Instead of destroying the enemy outpost, the squad now only needs to suppress it to keep the company moving forward. Similarly, let's assume that instead of destroying the enemy screening force, the platoon needs only to draw its attention away from the main effort. In this situation, both the squad and platoon objectives become something much different than those in the previous example.

Subordinate objectives must contribute to the overall objective of defeating the enemy. But this does not mean that subordinate units at each level can always choose *to destroy the enemy* as their objective. Therefore, the problem becomes how to choose and assign objectives that contribute to the overall objective.

#### *Critical weaknesses*

In combat, you constantly search for enemy weaknesses that can be exploited. You want to attack enemy weaknesses with the bulk of your combat power. This is the concept of soft-spot tactics. You want to pit your strength against enemy weakness.

**Critical weaknesses** are those that, when attacked successfully, lead quickly to the enemy's defeat. Some examples are the following:

- Large, vulnerable logistics trains.
- Weak units.
- Exposed, unguarded flanks.
- Forces in an overextended disposition.
- Boundaries between enemy units.

These are only a few of many possible weaknesses. Sometimes, critical weaknesses are difficult to identify. In such cases, you may have to act initially on little information and feel the enemy out.

It is dangerous to try to list ways to exploit critical weaknesses because there are as many means for *exploiting weaknesses* as there are weaknesses. Still, there are a few combat-tested guiding principles that apply frequently. They are:



**1. Get into the enemy's rear or attack his exposed flanks.** In conventional warfare, you want to get around or behind the enemy's combat forces and attack vulnerable targets in his rear areas, like logistics sites, command and control, fire support, and aviation facilities. These targets are usually vulnerable to ground attack. By destroying them, you reduce his combat power and induce chaos and panic in his rear areas. Historically, this often resulted in the enemy's resistance collapsing relatively quickly. However, you must be careful as you race through a gap that looks promising. A capable and cunning enemy will try to deceive you into thinking that you have found a gap when, instead, you are entering a trap, for example, a fire sack. Aggressive reconnaissance

and sound judgment are your best protection in such cases.

**2. Use surprise.** Historically, surprise causes shock and paralysis. Try to surprise the enemy at every opportunity. When you succeed, you force him to react to you. This means you retain the initiative. You will hasten his defeat when you present him with multiple, surprise threats. As he tries to keep up with changing events, he falls further behind until his reactions have no effect. When this happens, you outcycle him and defeat him.

**3. Use deception.** When you deceive the enemy, you may get him to do something advantageous to you. For example, if you set a trap and draw him into it, then you have used deception to your advantage.

**4. Win the support of the local people.** In unconventional warfare, the moral aspects of war become much more prominent than the physical. You do not defeat an insurgency by simply going out and killing guerrillas. More importantly, you must reduce any support for the guerrillas among the local population by gaining their confidence and cooperation. Do this by protecting the people from guerrilla sabotage and terrorism, while working to make their lives healthier and more prosperous. You must understand the local culture and seek to emphasize your advantages while highlighting the guerrillas' disadvantages. For example, in the 3rd Tank Battalion's pacification program during 1966-67 in the Phong Bac Hamlet in Vietnam, the Marines found that they could not win support from the local population based solely on ideology. But they did have one advantage--capitalism--that the guerrillas could not counter. Marine civic action teams helped the local peasants by installing a free market



system and by teaching them how to make money. The peasants discovered the economic advantages of capitalism over socialism and prospered greatly from their relationship with the Marines. This countered the guerilla advantage in ideology and resulted in success in pacifying the village, since the peasants began informing on the guerrillas to protect their economic gains. To successfully counter an insurgency, you must look for critical weaknesses in the enemy and exploit them.

You must remember that critical weaknesses are **always** situational. There's no guarantee that what worked against one force will work against another. Similarly, the same force has different weaknesses in different situations. You must consider each situation as unique. Act according to each situation, not on some rule or formula.

#### *Selecting objectives*

Ideally, objectives are critical enemy weaknesses. If you find and choose a critical weakness as your objective, and attack it successfully, then you stand a good chance of winning. However, against a competent enemy, this process is seldom easy. Often, the enemy is aware of what his critical weaknesses are and hides or protects them. For example, let's assume that, in one situation, your enemy's supply dump appears to be a critical weakness. You believe that if you can destroy the dump, you will quickly defeat the enemy because he will soon run out of food and ammunition. But if the enemy knows this, he will take measures to protect the dump. He will try to hide the dump, making it difficult to find, and also protect it with both anti-air defenses and ground combat forces. Now, if you try to attack the dump, you are attacking a hard spot--a surface.

To defeat the enemy in this situation, you may have to attack something else, or trick him into thinking you are attacking something else before you can attack the supply dump.

When you choose an objective, assign subordinate missions that contribute to your plan to achieve your objective. For example, let's assume that your company is attacking to destroy an enemy force in your zone. You see an opportunity to infiltrate this enemy force and attack his command post. By eliminating his command and control, you fracture his forces and then defeat him piecemeal. His command post becomes your objective. In developing your scheme of maneuver, you task one platoon with finding a gap in the enemy defense. This becomes the platoon's objective--to find a gap. You might task another platoon with suppressing any enemy defenses near the gap. Its mission also becomes its objective. Finally, you task your third platoon with exploiting through the gap and attacking the enemy's command post. You may assign each platoon an aiming point, or the platoon leaders may choose their own. Note how each of the subordinate objectives contribute to the overall objective--defeating the enemy.

Remember, the ultimate objective is moral--to compel the enemy to quit fighting. To do this, you may have to attack physical and psychological objectives first. In the previous example, you first attacked his command post--a physical objective. Most likely, the loss of the command post induced feelings of fear and isolation--psychological effects--in subordinate enemy units. This may be enough to compel the enemy to surrender, or you may have to attack additional objectives. Remember, all situations are unique and require a unique solution.



*Summary*

The process of identifying critical weaknesses and selecting objectives to accomplish his goals is one of the commander's greatest challenges. There is no checklist or procedure that guarantees success. You learn what works through training and experience, historical study

of battles, particularly the study of why forces lose, and through knowing the strengths and weaknesses of your enemy. Figuring out how to defeat the enemy is the primary responsibility of the commander. To him, nothing else in battle is more important.


## PROBLEM 1

### SITUATION

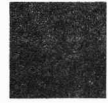
You are the commander of L Company, BLT 3/9. Two days ago, your BLT landed on an undefended beach and moved inland rapidly. The enemy, caught by surprise, was unprepared for your assault on his right flank. Consequently, to protect that flank, he deployed only a small screening force which is falling back rapidly in the face of your relentless advance.

One hour ago, your battalion commander issued to you the following mission order:

*Our mission is to attack north to prevent enemy reinforcements from linking up*

*with the enemy screening force holding San Miguel. My intent is to attack rapidly through the Rosario Valley to seize the Bolivar Bridge and block enemy reinforcements from reaching San Miguel. Focus of effort is K Company's attack up the valley. I want you to screen K Company's left flank during their advance. (See figure 1-1 on page 15.)*

The time is now 1300, and you are advancing as indicated in figure 1-1. Two patrols that you sent out earlier to check out Hills 110 and 95 report no enemy sightings to the west or north.



## **REQUIREMENT #1**

Identify any potential critical enemy weaknesses and explain how you might exploit them.  
Identify the battalion commander's objective.



## SOLUTION TO REQUIREMENT #1

You know that you are in pursuit of a disorganized, retreating force that is probably on the verge of collapse. Time is critical because if you allow him to reorganize and link up with reinforcements, he may organize a successful defense and prevent your force from exploiting the opportunity to get deep into the enemy's rear. In this situation, the enemy's **lack of cohesion** is probably his critical weakness. By pressing the attack and preventing him from linking up with reinforcements, you may destroy him completely and open up his flank to exploitation. Preventing the link up by seizing and controlling the Bolivar Bridge becomes your battalion commander's objective.

As the situation develops, the enemy may have other weaknesses that appear. For example, as you advance, you may locate his logistics trains or a command post that is unguarded. The cohesion of many Third World army units depends heavily on their command and control. Therefore, if you capture his headquarters, you stand a good chance

of collapsing the resistance of his entire force. Or, by just getting in his rear areas and threatening his lines of communication and rear area facilities, you may destroy his resistance because panic and chaos often start in the rear and spread forward. However, since all situations are unique, the specific weaknesses which you identify and the actions that you take **must** be applied to a specific enemy, time, and place.

To exploit the enemy's disorganization, keep the pressure on him and deny him time to reorganize. As noted above, you also want to get into his rear areas and attack targets which are critical to his keeping his forces organized and fighting. You may deceive him into thinking that you are attacking in one place when you place your focus of effort somewhere else. Or, if you spot a gap or exposed flank, you probably want to exploit it and get behind him, as your battalion commander plans to do with K Company's attack up the Rosario Valley.





## REQUIREMENT #2

Suddenly, you hear heavy fire to your northeast. A patrol that you sent to scout Hill 225 reports that K Company is heavily engaged with an estimated company-size enemy force in the Rosario Valley. Five minutes later, your battalion commander calls you on the radio and orders: "*Focus of effort shifts...*"

His transmission is cut off before he finishes the message. You try to raise him again, but fail. You know that I Company is in reserve, but you don't know where they are and you can't raise them or anyone else on the radio.

You decide to issue a fragmentary (Frag) order to your subordinate leaders. Write the mission order you would issue them. (You have three rifle platoons, a weapons platoon, and one section of .50 caliber machineguns, all foot mobile except the .50 caliber machineguns which are jeep mobile.)

## SOLUTION TO REQUIREMENT #2

There are several courses of action which you must consider. Because of the report from your patrol on Hill 225, you should probably assume that K Company's attack has been or soon will be ambushed. K Company has run into a surface and will probably have trouble advancing if the force opposing it is determined and well-positioned. You might also assume that the battalion commander was shifting the focus of effort to your advance before his radio transmission was cut off. Apparently, you have found a gap since there is no enemy in your path along Route 4 or to your west. So, what do you do? Do you circle north around Hill 225 and hit the flank of the enemy engaging K Company? Do you bypass that force and attack the enemy in San Miguel? Perhaps, you should seize the intersection of Routes 4 and 15 to get behind the enemy force in the Rosario Valley and threaten the enemy in San Miguel. Or, do you seize the Bolivar Bridge?

Based on the situation, you should probably seize the Bolivar Bridge, or at least advance toward it until the situation becomes clearer. Remember the battalion commander's mission and intent: to prevent enemy reinforcements from linking up with enemy forces in San Miguel by seizing the Bolivar Bridge. The Bolivar Bridge is key terrain. By controlling it, you prevent enemy reinforcements from using it to effect a linkup. To control the bridge, you may establish positions either north or south of the bridge, but not necessarily on it. How you choose to control it depends largely on


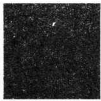
your estimate of the situation when you arrive there.

If you choose any other course of action, you are disregarding your battalion commander's mission and intent. You may help K Company by encircling the enemy force engaging it, but this is less important than seizing control of the bridge and preventing the linkup. You may gain much by destroying the enemy in San Miguel but it is usually better to bypass enemy forces entrenched in built up areas. In this situation, it is probably better to bypass the forces in San Miguel and cut their line of communication with reinforcements.

Assuming that the focus of effort shifts to your advance, and you decide to advance on the Bolivar Bridge as rapidly as possible, you might issue the following mission order to your subordinate leaders:

*K Company has been ambushed by enemy forces in the Rosario Valley. The battalion's focus of effort shifts to our advance. I intend to advance as rapidly as possible to control the Bolivar Bridge. Focus of effort is the attack to seize the bridge.*

*(To 1st Platoon.) Attack north as rapidly as possible to seize the Bolivar Bridge and prevent enemy reinforcements from linking up with enemy forces in San Miguel.*



(To 2d Platoon.) *Screen 1st Platoon's right flank as it advances on the Bolivar Bridge.*

(To 3d Platoon.) *Screen 1st Platoon's left flank during its advance on Bolivar Bridge. Be prepared to cross the bridge and recon enemy forces to the North once we seize control of the bridge.*

(To Weapons Platoon.) *Attach the machinegun and assault sections to 1st Platoon for its advance on the bridge. Keep the mortar section in general support of the company.*

(To .50 Caliber Machinegun Section.) *You are attached to 1st Platoon for its attack on the bridge.*

This is only one of many solutions. You might choose to keep some or most of your force in reserve. You might also attach a rifle squad to the .50 Caliber Machinegun Section and send it to the bridge as quickly as possible to secure it from any enemy advance forces that are moving toward it. But whatever your tactical solution, you must remember your battalion's objective: **Prevent enemy reinforcements from linking up with enemy forces in San Miguel.**

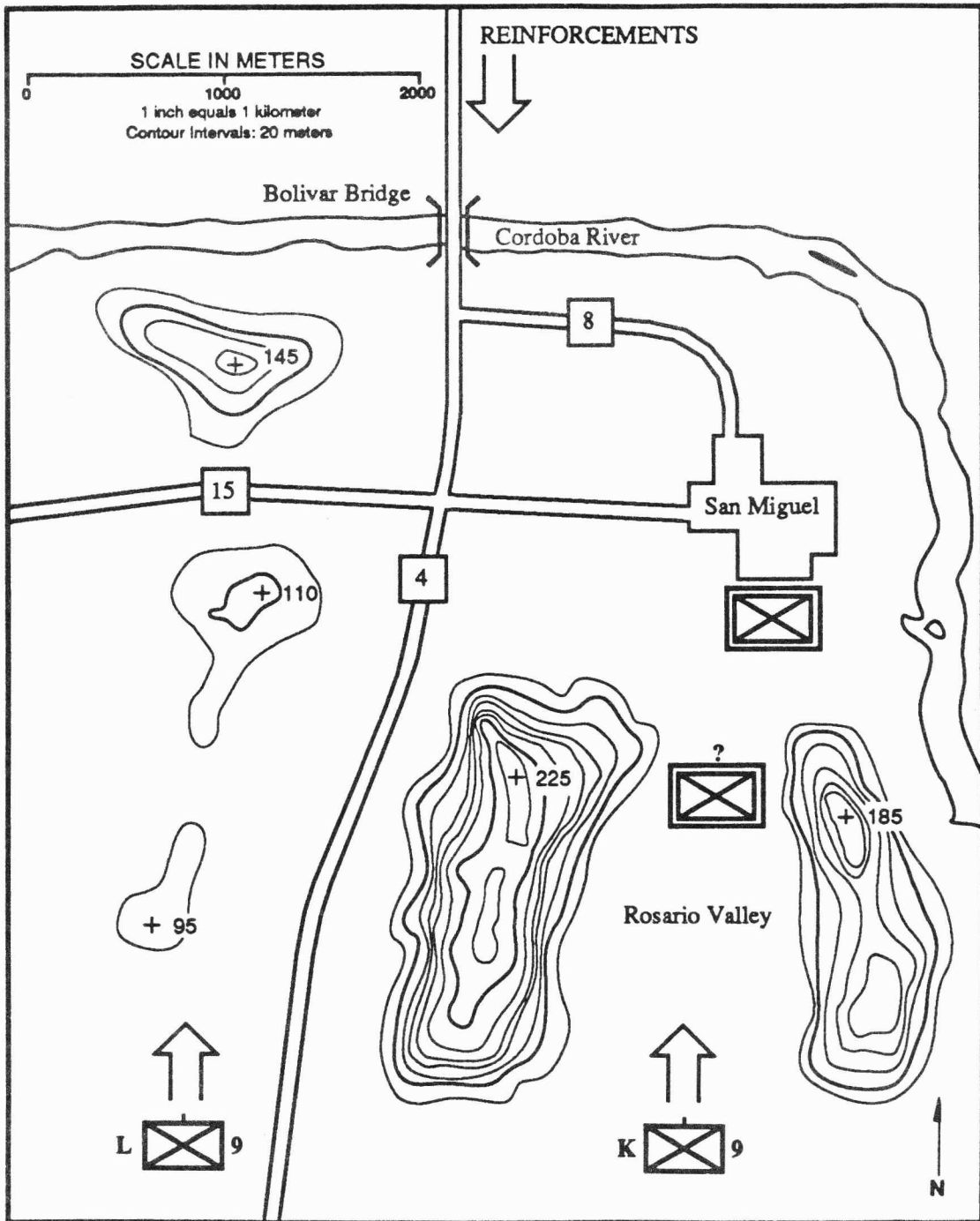


Fig. 1-1. Rosario Valley.