

Forest or Trees, Principles or Process?

by Major General Edward Bautz, USA, Ret.

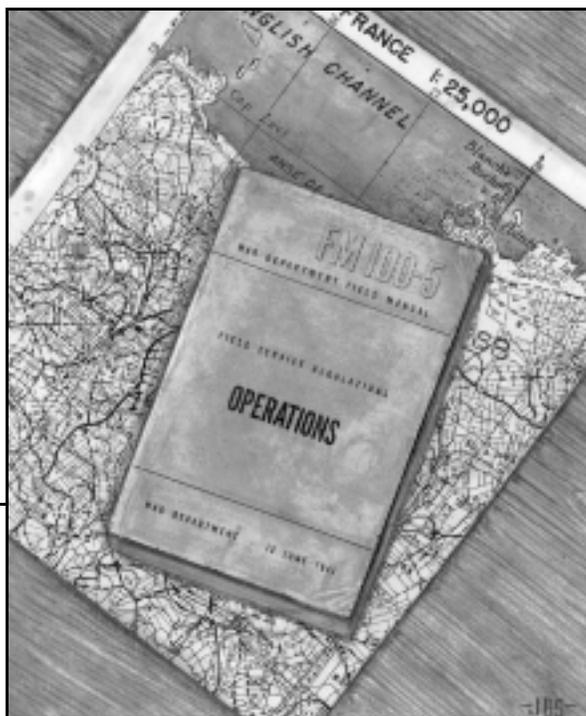
This article is based on the thesis that tactical doctrine becomes exponentially more academic each year after termination of active combat, resulting in concentration on individual trees while missing the impact of a forest. This certainly was the basis for publication of a compendium of small unit actions in 1939 entitled "Infantry in Battle," which had the following introduction written by then Colonel of Infantry George C. Marshall:

There is much evidence to show that officers who have received the best peacetime training available find themselves surprised and confused by the difference between conditions as pictured in map problems and those they encounter in campaign. This is largely because our peacetime training in tactics tends to become increasingly theoretical. In our schools we generally assume that organizations are well-trained and at full strength, that subordinates are competent, that supply arrangements function, that communications work, that orders are carried out. In war, many or all of these conditions may be absent. The veteran knows that this is normal and his mental processes are not paralyzed by it. He knows he must carry on in spite of seemingly insurmountable difficulties and regardless of the fact that the tools with which he has to work may be imperfect and worn. Moreover, he knows how to go about it. This volume is designed to give the peace-trained officer something of the viewpoint of the veteran.

In 1982, the Armor School published a similar book of Armor actions, quoting the Marshall introduction as the Foreword. Obviously those at the school felt that the problem persisted.

My motivation for writing stems from reading many articles on training and tactical performance published in *ARMOR*, *Infantry*, and *Army* magazines and other military media, and from listening to formal and informal comments about performance at the National Training Center. Many of these articles seek perfection by measuring the degree to which every individual and unit is "trained to standard" in all tasks. Others seek the same goal of perfection but view the end result — mission accomplishment — as more significant, allowing more flexibility in the process of getting there. My view is that there is room for both: common sense should rule, and common sense should be governed by a small set of basic principles.

Many readers will recognize the term Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTP). Most of the functions involved in the last two are repetitive and, as such, readily subject to checklist evaluation. However, tactics is decision-making — evaluating the situation in light of the knowledge available and determining the best way to proceed. In military parlance this is (1) making an estimate of the situation, (2) analyzing courses



of action, (3) selecting a course of action, and (4) issuing an implementing order. There are standard formats and procedures for all four actions. However, the primary reason for the format is to develop a standard thought process that will lead quickly to the appropriate conclusion and implementation in combat.

Therefore, we should emphasize the process in its rigid detail where it applies, but when it comes to tactics a "top-down" orientation based on fundamental principles is appropriate. We have a set of Principles of War, and they can be found in the current edition of FM 100-5. The exact wording of these principles has varied over the years, but from Sun Tzu in 500 BC through Clausewitz to current-day principles, they have consistently focused on the same basic ideas.

From an early age we are enjoined to learn sets of principles such as the Ten Commandments and the Bill of Rights. Why not the Principles of War? Every soldier should know and be guided by them although I find them missing in such manuals as FM 7-11B1, *Soldiers Manual, 11B Infantryman*; FM 7-7, *The Mechanized Infantry Platoon and Squad (APC)*; FM 7-75, *The Mechanized Infantry Platoon and Squad (Bradley)*; FM 71-1, *Tank and Mechanized Infantry Company Team*; FM 7-2, *The Tank and Mechanized Infantry Battalion Task Force*; and FM 71-3, *Armored and Mechanized Infantry Brigade*. Shelved together these 8½ x 11 inch manuals require 5½ inches of shelf space, but they neither list nor specifically refer to the principles of war.

I don't propose to solve this problem nor to preach to the Army on how to train. Rather, I will lead the reader through quotations from some older field manuals, starting with those published in the mid- to late 1940s. These manuals represented recent combat experience of the time, and readers can draw their own conclusions from studying the different presentations.

The first quote is from the 1944 edition of FM 100-5, an impressive work that is broad in coverage yet brief and precise in presentation. The manual measures 4½ x 6½ inches, has no illustrations, and the table of contents and index make locating a subject easy. Incidentally, practically all field manuals of that time had the same dimensions and were designed to fit field gear.

CHAPTER 5. THE EXERCISE OF COMMAND

Doctrines of Combat

112. The ultimate objective of all military operations is the destruction of the enemy's armed forces in battle. The ability to select objectives whose attainment contributes most decisively and quickly to the defeat of the hostile armed forces is an essential attribute of an able commander.

113. Simple and direct plans promptly and thoroughly executed are usually decisive.

114. *Unity of command* obtains that unity of effort which is essential to the decisive application of the full combat power of the available forces. Unity of effort is furthered by full cooperation between elements of the command. Command of a force of combined arms is vested in the senior officer present eligible to exercise command.

115. Through offensive action a commander exercises his initiative, preserves his freedom of action, and imposes his will on the enemy. A defensive attitude may be deliberately adopted, however, as a temporary expedient while awaiting an opportunity for counter-offensive action, or for the purpose of economizing forces on a front where a decision is not sought. The selection by the commander of the right time and place for offensive action is a decisive factor in the success of the operation.

116. Numerical inferiority does not necessarily commit a command to a defensive attitude. Superior hostile numbers may be overcome through greater mobility, better armament and equipment, more effective fire, higher morale, and better leadership. Superior leadership often enables a numerically inferior force to be stronger at the point of decisive action.

117. A *strategically defensive mission* is frequently most effectively executed through offensive action. It is often necessary for an inferior force well disposed for combat to strike poorly disposed hostile forces early before changes in the enemy disposition can be made.

118. Concentration of superior forces, both on the ground and in the air, at the decisive place and time and their employment in a decisive direction, creates the conditions essential to victory. Such concentration requires strict economy in the strength of forces assigned to secondary missions. Detachments during combat are justifiable only when the execution of tasks assigned them contributes directly to success in the main battle.

119. *Surprise* must be sought throughout the action by every means and by every echelon of command. It may be obtained by fire as well as by movement. Surprise is produced through measures which either deny information to the enemy or positively deceive him as to our dispositions, movements, and plans. Terrain which appears to impose great difficulties on operations may often be utilized to gain surprise. Surprise is furthered by variation in the means and methods employed in combat and by rapidity of execution. Surprise often compensates for numerical inferiority of force.

120. To guard against surprise requires a correct estimate of enemy capabilities, adequate security measures, effective reconnaissance, and readiness for action of all units. Every unit takes the necessary measures for its own local ground and air security. Provision for the security of flanks and rear is of special importance. (pp. 32-33)

The next excerpts are from FM 17-33, *Tank Battalion*, September 1949. In general they implement the principles enunciated in FM 100-5 above, focusing on implementation at this level. It is a 500-page document covering light, medium, and heavy tank battalions in the armored, infantry, and airborne divisions and the cavalry group. It includes sample orders, training programs, etceteras, and is well indexed and easy to use. Written in straightforward, concise prose, the manual was useful to every soldier in a tank battalion, not just the battalion leadership.

Section III. PRINCIPLES OF EMPLOYMENT, MEDIUM TANK BATTALION

36. **SURPRISE.** Surprise is attained by striking the enemy at an unexpected time, at an unexpected place, from an unexpected direction, in sufficient numbers and with sufficient support to gain the objective. Rapidity of concentration, speed of movement, the use of covered approaches, and the intensity of the attack assist in gaining surprise.

37. **FIRE AND MANEUVER.** The reinforced tank battalion normally advances by fire and maneuver, the maneuvering force always being covered by a supporting force or base of fire. The enemy's fire is neutralized by the weapons in the base of fire, while the mobile maneuvering force closes to destroy him. The base of fire usually consists of artillery, assault guns, and infantry mortars, if available; however, it may contain tanks, armored infantry, and other forces. The maneuvering force consists primarily of tanks and armored infantry, and sometimes includes a small detachment of armored engineers.

38. **CONCENTRATION OF EFFORT.** The power of the battalion must be concentrated on critical areas. Dispersion results in weak effort at all points and is resorted to only against a weak or demoralized enemy. Even then, the battalion must be able to concentrate rapidly. The tank is not an individual fighting weapon. Tanks are employed in mass as part of a combined arms team.

39. **RETENTION OF THE INITIATIVE.** The initiative must be retained; for once lost, it is difficult and costly to regain. The initiative is retained by the continuous application of force against those portions of the enemy defense least capable of withstanding attack. Retention of the initiative is furthered by a rapid succession of attacks against vulnerable points, denying the enemy an opportunity to adequately organize his forces to oppose them. It is essential to have alternate plans prepared for immediate execution should the initial thrust fail. The enemy must not be permitted to withdraw, or to prepare for an attack, without measures being taken to divert him from his plans.

40. **SECURITY.** The reinforced tank battalion always secures itself from surprise by the enemy. It obtains this security by continuous reconnaissance, by the formation it assumes, and by its position with respect to other troops and to natural and artificial obstacles. When a measure of security is provided by an adjacent unit, the battalion establishes liaison with this unit.

41. **COOPERATION.** Armored combat troops normally consist of tanks, infantry, engineers, and artillery. Cooperation is achieved when this team of combined arms works together for the accomplishment of a common mission – when it has good teamwork. Before cooperation can be attained, everyone must understand his instructions and must execute them in accordance with the spirit and intent of the

authority issuing them. Between independent commanders, cooperation is attained by each working for the common good. Planning is essential, *and rehearsals are desirable when time, location, and terrain permit them.* (Italics added)

42. COORDINATION. Coordination is the timing, the mutual action, and the control which enable a team of combined arms to strike the enemy and destroy him. Within the reinforced tank battalion there are many tools available to the commander for his use in the accomplishment of his mission. These include tanks, armored infantry, engineers, artillery, reconnaissance units, signal facilities, and such supporting weapons as assault guns and mortars. Service elements – such as medical, ordnance, and quartermaster – are also available for support of the combat elements. The capabilities and functions of each are considered when organizing combat teams, in order to provide forces capable of coordinated action against the enemy. This coordination is attained through thorough planning, adequate communication and liaison, the wholehearted cooperation of each member of the team. (pp. 28-30)

In addition to the principles quoted in FM 17-33 above, I have selected a few additional passages that suggest ways to implement the principles with common sense. Italics have been added to emphasize phrases that are pertinent to the theme of this article and to current practices.

43. INFORMATION OF THE ENEMY. a. All possible information of the enemy is obtained prior to commitment of the reinforced tank battalion. The primary sources of enemy information include aerial photos, reports from tactical air pilots, reports from liaison plane pilots, reports obtained through liaison with adjacent units, and general intelligence reports passed down through intelligence channels.

b. The battalion itself can obtain much valuable information. The reconnaissance platoon and the armored infantry get information from patrols. The commander and members of his staff may use a liaison plane to obtain information. Combat patrols, or reconnaissance in force, may be used to determine the disposition and composition of the enemy force.

c. Based on this information, the higher commander can decide whether or not to employ the reinforced tank battalion in this particular zone of operation. The battalion commander, once the decision has been made to employ the battalion, can utilize this information in designing the plan to best cope with the known enemy dispositions.

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47. SIGNAL COMMUNICATION, GENERAL. It is essential that the commander train himself and his staff to properly utilize the means of communication available within his unit. There are four principal means of communication available to the tank battalion; radio, wire, messenger, and visual. *No one means should be considered for use to the exclusion of all the others.* Radio is the primary means used within the battalion, but it is supplemented by all other means whenever possible. The communication plan must ensure that the failure of any one means will not necessarily result in loss of communication.

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149. ISSUANCE OF ATTACK ORDERS. The battalion commander personally should issue the attack order to his

subordinate commanders. Initial orders for an operation should be as complete and detailed as possible; orders must be brief as clarity will permit, but clarity is not sacrificed for brevity. *Oral orders, fragmentary orders, and warning orders should be considered as standard.* These orders must be issued soon enough to permit dissemination by company commanders to the platoon. When time permits, it is desirable to supplement oral orders with attack orders of the overlay type, which should be as detailed as the situation requires. Reproduction equipment is provided in the battalion headquarters for this purpose. Once the attack is under way, however, orders will of necessity be oral and fragmentary, and will be transmitted by voice radio. The initial order must specify the general plan of attack; this will ensure that, in the absence of orders or in situations requiring immediate decisions, subordinate commanders will be able to take action that will conform to the over-all decision and plan of the battalion commander.

152. COMMAND AND CONTROL. a. General. Control is essential to coordinated and effective action. The battalion commander must be able to direct the maneuver of his companies, and to concentrate the maximum fire power as he desires. Control, once lost, is difficult to regain. Control is based on thorough planning and effective orders. During the attack itself, control is usually decentralized; but centralized control is regained during the reorganization.

b. Battalion commander. The battalion commander places himself where he can best observe and control the action of the battalion. Normally he should be immediately in rear of the assault companies. He must at all times be well forward. He directs his companies by personal orders or by the use of his staff; radio is his primary means of communication. As the attack develops, *he must be prepared to make rapid decisions and to take advantage of any opportunities offered him to speed or further the attack. He must be prepared to shift the fires of supporting weapons, and to vary the employment of his troops, to meet any situation that arises.* A liaison plane is an excellent medium from which to control the operations of the battalion. However, the commander can, from a position well forward on the ground, both influence the action of his troops and, by his presence, add to their morale.

c. Staff officers. *Staff officers, as representatives of the battalion commander, assist in the control and coordination of the battalion's units and attached troops.* They procure and furnish information, prepare plans and action reports, transmit orders to lower units, and supervise the execution of these orders. Staff officers must exercise sound judgment to ensure that they do not restrict the initiative of company commanders.

d. Flexibility. As the attack progresses, *unforeseen circumstances frequently make it necessary for the battalion commander to change his plan of action.* He avoids drastic changes as much as possible; however, he must exploit favorable developments without hesitation and must overcome new obstacles as quickly as possible. As a rule, the most effective way to meet changing situations is to utilize any uncommitted portion of the battalion; this enables the commander to meet the situation without halting his attack.

From FM 100-5 there are two additional pertinent excerpts:

126. In spite of the most careful planning and anticipation, *unexpected obstacles, frictions, and mistakes are common occurrences in battles.* A commander must school himself to

regard these events as commonplace and not permit them to frustrate him in the accomplishment of this mission.

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154. Orders must be clear and explicit and as brief as is consistent with clarity. Short sentences are easily understood, *Clarity is more important than technique*. The more urgent the situation, the greater is the need for conciseness in the order.

Today we find the principles of war listed in the 1993 version of FM 100-5. They extend to more than double the space of the 1944 version, primarily due to more detailed explanation. However, each principle is defined in one sentence as follows:

Objective — Direct every military operation toward a clearly defined, decisive, and attainable objective.

Offensive — Seize, retain, and exploit the initiative.

Mass — Mass the effects of overwhelming combat power at the decisive place and time.

Economy of Force — Employ all combat power available in the most effective way possible; allocate minimum essential combat power to secondary efforts.

Maneuver — Place the enemy in a position of disadvantage through the flexible application of combat power.

Unity of Command — For every objective, seek unity of command and unity of effort.

Security — Never permit the enemy to acquire unexpected advantage.

Surprise — Strike the enemy at a time or place or in a manner for which he is unprepared.

Simplicity — Prepare clear, uncomplicated plans and concise orders to ensure thorough understanding.

The reader at this point probably will readily agree that there is a great deal of similarity among the various versions of the basic principles. If so, where is the problem? The principles and the selected passages all point to the need for simplicity, conciseness, and flexibility. Yet without the pressures and constraints of combat to discipline doctrine development, simplicity has been replaced by complexity, conciseness by verbosity, and flexibility by rigidity. Inadequate field training opportunities and excessive personnel turnover only exacerbate this unfortunate situation.

As an example, I examined the 1958 version of FM 17-33. The very first entry is as follows:

1. Purpose and Scope

a. This manual covers specific doctrine, tactics, techniques, procedures, and organization of all tanks units, platoon through battalion.

b. The procedures described herein are intended as guides only and are not to be considered inflexible.

c. This manual must be used in conjunction with FM 17-1.

Despite the words in 1.a. the word “procedures” in 1.b. better describes the contents. The manual also references five other manuals. It does not include any discussion of principles of war or employment. FM 17-1, *Armor Operations, Small Units*, August 1957, states under purpose, “It provides the basic doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures common to

two or more types of small armor units. Other publications provide the *specific* doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures for specific units.” It does cover the principles of war, providing expanded explanations over those cited earlier. In this author’s view, the changes tend to confuse rather than clarify — the concern of the “atomic age” is apparent. The size of both manuals increased to 6 x 9 inches and the relative page count increased by one-third. Increasing the physical dimensions of the manuals may seem trivial — but it reveals the trend toward classroom rather than field use.

The authors who contributed to the 1947 FM 17-33 were required to develop Army training tests, including the checklists used in evaluating tactical performance. By the late 1950s, battalion and battle group test scores were calculated to two decimal points. Testers and tested alike were so critical of the procedure that a new Seventh Army commander decentralized all testing to the division and corps commanders.

In the mid-1970s, centralized development of tactical performance evaluations returned with The Army Training and Evaluation Program. The tasks have the grace of using a “go/no go” basis. However, the number of tasks is very large and detailed. These evaluations have their place, provided they are used in a common-sense way.

By “common sense” I mean that every leader and commander needs to establish priorities — one of the most important being the use of his and his unit’s time. Priorities are established based on the objective(s) sought. In training evaluations, checklists serve some useful purposes, but they are a means to an end — not the end in itself. As an example, the tendency to insist on “rehearsals,” so obvious in literature and evaluations, can be counterproductive. Referring back to the extract from paragraph 41 of FM-17-33 “—*rehearsals are desirable when time, location, and terrain permit them.*” I suggest the words “rehearsals are desirable” present a fact. The remaining words present common-sense guidance.

We stand today with the most educated Army ever. It has been a half century since World War II, for which the Army School System had been restructured to meet immediate wartime needs. The wars and actions involving combat or potential combat since then involved directly only a portion of the Army at any given time. Those not directly involved have been engaged in peacetime activities, a major part of which is training and schooling. The basic structure of career development, downsizing, and funding constraints reduce opportunities for field operations. It is a cycle that has been repeated numerous times throughout this century.

The issue, then, is how to avoid becoming a “checklist” Army. My suggestion is that every soldier, and especially every leader, should know the Principles of War, what they mean, and how to apply them. Further, these principles should be the primary evaluation criteria for all tactical training and operations. The principles are short; they are simple; they provide a structure for the thought process; and they do not become obsolete.

This century has seen the Army move from horses to helicopters, from foot infantry to mobile armored formations, from simple cannons to guided missiles, from field wire to satellite communications, and from message pads to computers. Technology changes the way we do things, but not the human thought process. Success in battle will accrue to the commander and the unit that can orchestrate all the detailed

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activities into a cohesive operation. The key to doing so is to have a firm understanding of the objective. It is often said that "Some cannot see the forest for the trees." Those who value process over principle have this difficulty.

This article could not have been written had not a group of dedicated historians established The Army Military History Institute, appropriately co-located with the Army War College at Carlisle Barracks. Nor could I have done so without its dedicated, cooperative, and helpful staff. The history of battles provide helpful tactical lessons, but so do collections of doctrinal literature, not the least of which is to guide doctrinal development and assist in establishing materiel acquisition priorities. It can save precious resources and time by avoiding "reinventing the wheel."

MG Edward Bautz, a 1941 graduate of Rutgers University, began a brilliant career serving in the 4th AD during WWII, including Normandy and the relief of Bastogne, advancing from platoon leader to battalion commander. He later commanded the 25th ID in Vietnam and on a later tour was MACV secretary to the general staff. In addition to combat, his long service also includes assignments in combat development, Army training, and personnel management. He served with the constabulary forces that policed postwar Germany, where he later returned as DCG, VII Corps. A graduate of C&GSC and the Army War College, he has also served on the DA staff, and was an early leader of the then-new Combat Developments Command. He also served as vice director for operations of the Joint Staff, JCS.