

Press the Attack:

A 5-Step Technique For Offensive Planning

by Lieutenant Colonel Douglas Slater

Your outfit fought a successful defense against a determined enemy. With his offense stalled, the enemy force has fallen back into a defensive posture. You are still assessing the damage from this recent battle when a warning order comes in from your headquarters — prepare to attack. You immediately set to work getting your unit moving toward accomplishing this new mission, faithfully following the steps of the troop-leading procedures, as you have been trained. You complete your estimate of the situation, properly considering all the pertinent points. Now you are ready to develop friendly courses of action, a few different concepts of operation to press home this attack, which you will then compare and analyze before selecting the best. Now is when the problem occurs. You know this is not Duffer's Drift and you will only have one chance to get it right. Where can you turn for assistance in quickly framing your plan of attack?

There is a time-consuming disconnect here because, while the troop leading procedures are an excellent tool for arranging your thoughts and activities, they are only a means to an end. They cannot help you make that intuitive leap between developing the situation and developing courses of action, conceptually assigning tasks toward what FM 71-2 terms "the visualization of how the enemy is to be defeated and of the battlefield after the mission is accomplished." There is surprisingly little literature available to illustrate how courses of action for offensive operations are conceived. The intellectual underpinnings for this effort are clearly laid out in BG (Ret.) Wass de Czege's *Five Essential Elements of a Plan of Action*, but this lacks the level of detail necessary when dealing specifically with offensive actions. My quick survey has found that, except for a helpful section on the offense in FM 7-8, *Infantry Rifle*

Platoon and Squad, most are either inconclusive checklists on the back of things such as the Infantry Leader's Reference Card, GTA 7-1-31, or the Tanker's Beale Wheel, GTA 17-7-1, or must be deduced from the subtasks of offensive ARTEP Mission Training Plans (MTPs). This is often because it is felt that either planning an attack is an obvious affair, or from the desire not to stifle or suppress innovative and creative thinking. My argument, however, is that any aid which helps get the offensive planner started with developing courses of action will save precious time and is thereby welcome.

For the defense, there are several handy guides to help visualize the battlefield and prepare courses of action. Most notably is the 5-Step Technique to Build the Defense, a straightforward, one-page, visual aid to the defensive planner. This is generally attributed to then-LTC Dave Gross and is found in several publications (Ft. Leavenworth's TCDC and Ft. Knox's AOAC Battle Books for example) and was recently updated by LTC Ben Santos in his article appearing in the March-April 1997 edition of *ARMOR Magazine*.

Five Essential Elements of a Plan of Action

**BG Huba Wass de Czege
ADC(M) - Big Red One**

- Find and track the enemy (before he finds you throughout the battle).
 - Prevent the enemy from finding and tracking you (until too late to influence the action).
 - Fix the enemy in depth with supporting efforts (with minimum required to prevent repositioning or maneuver against your main effort).
 - Maneuver so the main effort engages the enemy from a position of relative advantage (with overwhelming power at the point of decision).
 - Follow through (to the next action).
-

These simple, yet thorough, checklists clearly help the commander with his five decisions (mission analysis, task organization, combat support and combat service support priorities, and battlefield ge-

ometry). There are, conversely, no generic 'how-to's for offensive planning.

I would be the first to admit that no two situations are exactly alike. Moreover, we should not suppress initiative by directing a prescriptive, cookie-cutter approach to the development of offensive courses of action. I propose, nonetheless, that there is a certain utility in having a simple methodology to fall back on to assist leaders at all levels and types of organizations wrestling with the problem of how to "hit the other fellow as quick as you can, and as hard as you can, where it hurts him the most, when he ain't looking." The many 'playbooks' in use among tank and infantry units, usually originating from Combat Training Center experiences, do not always meet this need, as they tend to be too tied to a particular CTC situation. What follows then are the five steps you should consider, the five questions you must answer, as you develop your course of action to press the attack.

To start with, you must determine the defender's vulnerabilities. You must be able to answer the question — where is the enemy weak point? I could quote

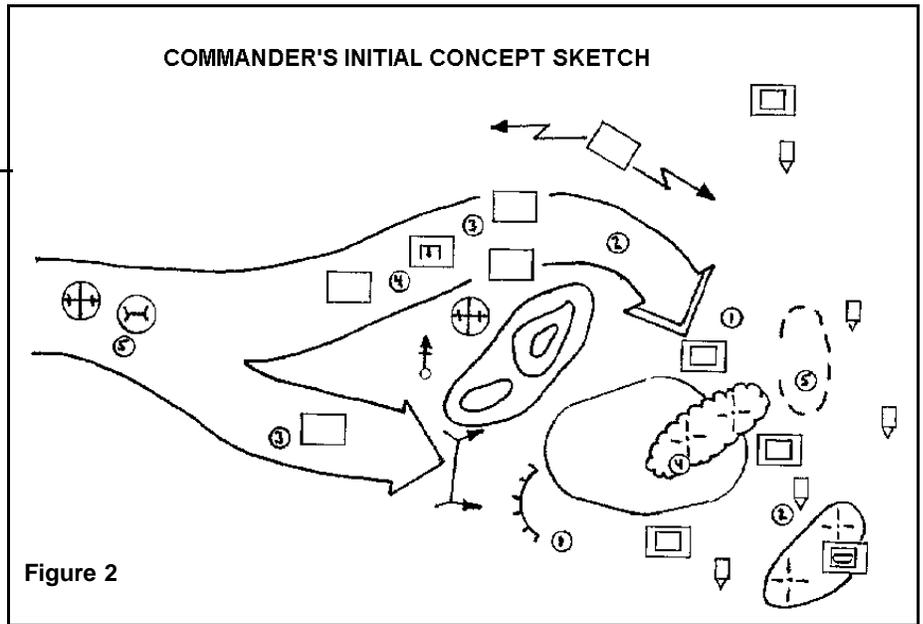
Sun Tzu here, but it seems pretty obvious that you do not want to attack into the defender's strength. Finding this weak point is naturally the hard part and will require some homework. It involves thorough and extensive offensive intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB), integrated with reconnaissance and surveillance (R&S) activities and related measures, passive and active, to secure your force. You should look

to identify flank or isolated positions and, if possible, deduce a trace of the approximate geographical extent of the defender's kill sack or engagement area (EA) and the obstacles emplaced to support it, so as to know where not to go.

Seek to locate the defender's own R&S forces positioned to secure his force, finding them before they find you. You may even go so far as to audit the defender's key direct-fire weapons, especially those assets most dangerous to you (tank reserves, machine gun platoons, antitank systems, etc.), factoring in ranges to determine where you are least exposed to the effects of mutually supported, interlocking fire or timely reinforcement. In effect, this may require you to perform the battlefield calculus in reverse.

Once the enemy picture is clear, or working with whatever you have at this point, you must find a way to sneak in on the defender. As you develop each course of action you should ask, "What is one way to attack it?" You should array your forces along this axis backwards from the enemy's weak point, through the line of departure, to the assembly area or hide positions from where the action will commence. This axis should follow covered and concealed routes which avoid the defender's strength, i.e., the EA he is planning to invite you into.

Your aim here is to select an axis which allows you to maneuver your force, mounted or dismounted, to mass



at the weak point you decided upon in answering the first question. By mass you can forget all this three-to-one stuff. As a generally accepted rule of thumb, an attacker should have a three-to-one advantage over a defender. It is also a generally accepted rule of thumb that a defender can contend with being outnumbered three to one. The logical consequence of the three-to-one attacker meeting the one-to-three defender, all other things being equal, is that all battles will be a draw or a stalemate — which is as good as a win for the defender. Your course of action must up

the ante on the defender in order to ensure success. You are trying for at least a six to one advantage at the point of impact — two platoons against a squad, two companies against a platoon, two battalions against a company, etc. To control this much force, you should start putting pen to paper (or to acetate). Your course of action will literally start to take shape as you add objectives, basic graphics, and offensive fire control measures. Additionally, you should spend some time examining how the friendly force will move along the axis with an eye to both preventing fratricide and avoiding piecemeal commitment.

For the next step you will want to consider how to gang up on the defender; that is, address how to task-organize a force to overwhelm the weak point? The aim here is to assign the correct task to each of your subordinates. Often, their specific requirements will fairly well mandate their composition. You could start with the reconnaissance forces who will find the enemy, simultaneously confirming your template. They should then move to a position to provide security and early warning to the force if this was not implicit with step one. Secondly, you may need to nominate support forces that will move to a position to overwatch and suppress the defender. Their purpose is to fix the enemy. They may also be involved in a deception effort. Finally, you must decide which part of your force will conduct the main attack. This force, moving along the axis chosen above, will likely be required to breach the defender's tactical or hasty protective obstacles, plus assault through those objectives resulting from step two. Reserve and follow-on forces may also be allocated in concert with this main attack.

PRESS THE ATTACK: A 5-STEP TECHNIQUE FOR OFFENSIVE PLANNING

1. **Where is the enemy weak point?**
 - Thorough offensive IPB integrated with R&S activities; security
 - ID flank or isolated positions; CSOPs and armored reserves
 - Extent of enemy EA and obstacles; audit enemy AT systems
2. **What is one way to attack it? (Array backward from OBJ to LD/AA)**
 - Utilize covered routes, mounted or dismounted; avoid enemy EA
 - Maneuver to mass at the weak point, seek 6:1(+) force ratio
 - Objectives and fire control measures to prevent fratricide
3. **Task organize a correct force to overwhelm that weak point.**
 - Reconnaissance forces find the enemy, confirm template; protect
 - Support forces fix enemy; suppress, overwatch, and deceive
 - Main attack finishes enemy; breach, assault, and reserves
4. **Integrate combat support arms with priority to the main effort.**
 - Multiply combat power; AD, AV, CAS, EN, EW, FA, MP, etc.
 - Isolate the weak point; suppressive and obscuration fires
 - Survivability, observation, displacement plan; FIST, key assets
5. **Plan for sustained operations against an uncooperative enemy.**
 - Sectors for consolidation; branch plan to continue attack
 - Establish reorganization criteria, priority; rearm, refuel, refit
 - Casualty evacuation; EPW and NBC contaminated personnel

Figure 1

BUILD THE DEFENSE: STEPS

1. **Where do you think the enemy is going?**
 - From IPB
 - Commander's Estimate
2. **Where do you want to kill him?**
 - Engagement Areas (EA)
 - Physical recon is best
3. **Position forces to kill him with direct fire.**
 - Walk engagement area with element leaders
 - Point out battle positions to commanders
 - Best killing ground (EA) should be main effort
4. **Position obstacles to support killing him there.**
 - Force enemy into your killing ground
 - Engineers must understand that's what you want to happen
5. **Plan indirect fires to support killing him there.**
 - Mass at the critical plan (EA) at the right time
 - Maintain control by establishing priorities

COMMANDER'S INITIAL CONCEPT SKETCH

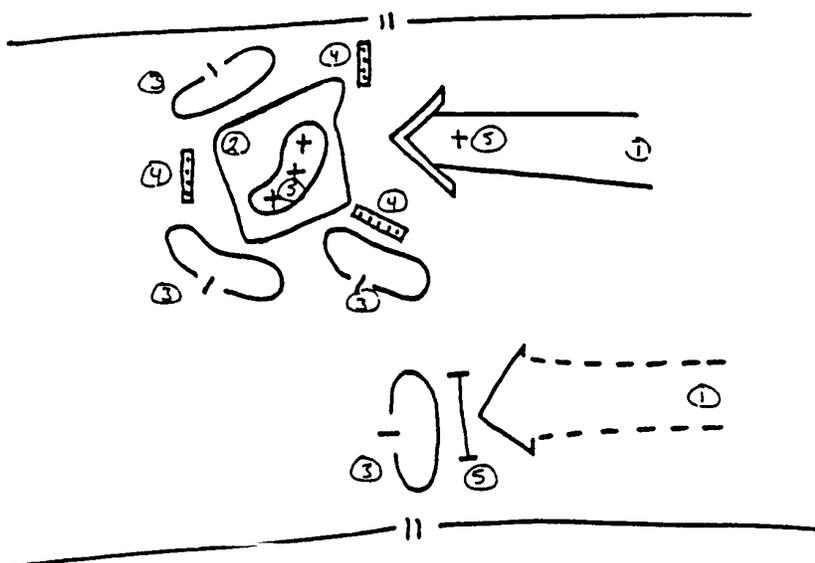


Figure 3

Remember that at this point you are still developing courses of action, dealing largely with concepts and major muscle movements. Do not get side-tracked with the details of specific events, such as clearing the objective. This type of precision work, critically important to a successful outcome, should wait until after you have settled on a scheme of maneuver for the attack.

Having gotten through steps two and three, you should now look for ways to crush the defender. Can you further multiply combat power against the weak point? Step four entails the integration of combat supporting arms, with priority to the main effort. You are seeking to isolate that weak point with suppressive

and obscurative fires, either electronic or high explosive, targeting at a minimum known enemy locations to allow for concurrent activities by the fire support coordinators.

Your course of action should also account for observation and displacement plans for these key assets to ensure their participation and survivability for the duration of the mission. Once the weak point is identified, it should serve as a central focus for all other functions, whether it's MPs doing battlefield circulation control or engineers working on route development. To really crush the defender, everyone in the force must have a task and purpose toward that goal, from beginning to end.

You know your opponent to be a determined foe. Your course of action must, therefore, follow through the attack. Have you planned for sustained operations against an uncooperative enemy? At the very least, you should assign sectors for consolidation or a general axis or orientation for a branch plan to continue the attack. Anticipating at a minimum the need to reorganize on the objective, you may have criteria and assets for rearming or refueling, etc., and for the handling of EPWs. Anticipating worst case, you may need to superimpose a redundant casualty evacuation scheme and provide for chemical decontamination. It is the follow through which will posture you at the desired end state of your attack, where you visualized your course of action would take you.

The goal of this 5-step approach to press the attack, compiled at Figure 1, is to capture the elements inherent with offensive planning. Those that find a picture a useful medium to communicate the planning and development of courses of action will see that Figure 2 also contains all these elements. In tandem, they are a handy aid, with a snappy title, to carry around in your kit bag and turn to when you do not know where to start. This technique is just as relevant for hasty as for deliberate attacks, and for all echelons. For a truly hasty attack, where time is of the essence, this technique is all you will need to organize your thoughts. It can certainly give you a good framework with which to build upon — a template, if you like, to generate the appropriate instructions in order to get your outfit moving. Steps two to five can also be adjusted to accommodate changes to your answer to step one, as either the defender's picture is clarified or options against different enemy courses of action are weighed. Offensive operations are very complex, but at their heart almost all have addressed or answered these five basic questions.

LTC Doug Slater is a 1979 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy. He currently commands 2d Squadron, 16th Cavalry at Ft. Knox, Ky. Previous Armor assignments include S3, 4-66 Armor, 3d ID, Aschaffenburg, FRG; S3 and XO, 3-37 Armor, and as a G3 (Plans) Officer, 1st ID, Ft. Riley, Kan. He also served as an Exchange Officer with the Royal Armour Corps, Warminster, England.