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TITLE

AGGRESSIVE, HARD-HITTING LEADERSHIP IS THE ONE
MAJOR FACTOR IN OVERCOMING THE LOSS OF THE
ELEMENT OF SURPRISE IN BATTLE

HISTORICAL EXAMPLES

- (1) F Company, 18th Infantry (1st Infantry Division)
at Verlautenheide, Germany - 8 October 1944
- (2) F Company, 18th Infantry (1st Infantry Division)
at Langerwehe, Germany - 26 November 1944
- (3) F Company, 18th Infantry (1st Infantry Division)
at Ramscheid, Germany - 2 February 1945
- (4) Antitank Platoon, 2d Battalion, 18th Infantry
(1st Infantry Division) at St. Cloud, Algeria,
North Africa - 8 November 1942

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Bibliography.....2
Introduction.....3
Historical Example (1).....4
Discussion (1).....7
Historical Example (2).....8
Discussion (2).....10
Historical Example (3).....11
Discussion (3).....16
Historical Example (4).....17
Discussion (4).....19
Conclusion.....20
Map 1 - The Battle of Verlautenheide, Germany
Map 2 - The Battle for Langerwehe, Germany
Map 3 - The Battle of Ramscheid, Germany
Map 4 - The Battle of St. Cloud, Algeria, North Africa

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LESSON

AGGRESSIVE, HARD-HITTING LEADERSHIP IS THE ONE MAJOR FACTOR IN OVERCOMING THE LOSS OF THE ELEMENT OF SURPRISE IN BATTLE

(Personal Experiences of a Small-Unit
Commander)

INTRODUCTION

The element of surprise is an extremely important ingredient of a successful battle. Its value can not be measured in terms of so many men or so much artillery fire or so much time.

Although a preponderance of force is also highly desirable, history is replete with examples of the victory of surprise over the preponderance of force. These examples are not mere accidents, but rather they are the inevitable result of certain human limitations and failings. No defense can be built that is immune to surprise by a determined attacker. A good measure of surprise is always possible, whereas a preponderance of force can be stalemated and overcome by a surprise. The enemy will plan for our attack. He will make every effort to deny our will. But he can not prevent a surprise attack at all hours and in all places at one time..

The shock action of infantry in a surprise attack can not be overemphasized. It is equivalent in its time and space factors to that of armor or air power..

Surprise itself exists in various degrees, which may be represented on a scale ranging from mild to overwhelming. In a similar manner, the effect of surprise

may wear off either quickly in the case of individuals or slowly in confused situations and/or the presence of larger forces. In overcoming surprise, time alone or space alone is not decisive. The two, of necessity, work together.

Surprise may be manifested in a number of ways, such as time, space, forces, speed, or a combination of some or all of these.

In the matter of overcoming the loss of surprise, several factors should be considered: a preponderance of force, fifth-column activities, encirclement, deception, or another surprise elsewhere, to name a few.

One thing is certain. Hard-hitting, aggressive leadership is the one major factor in slowing down and overcoming the loss of the element of surprise, and it may even be responsible for recapturing the surprise. The loss of surprise is inevitable. The speed with which it is lost will vary according to the degree of aggressiveness of the attacker, and, therefore, a high value must be placed on hard-hitting, aggressive leadership at the decisive moment.

EXAMPLE I

On 1 October 1944 Company F, 18th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division was in the line south of Aachen.

The following day F Company, with others, was pulled out of the line to prepare for an attack on the north

in an effort to complete the encirclement of Aachen.

The plan called for a frontal attack along the dominating ridge and the capture of Verlautenheide, a town situated in the Siegfried Line and protected by concrete and steel pillboxes. This was to be a surprise maneuver in an effort to drive the enemy from the important city of Aachen.

After six days of preparation in an assembly area F Company was ready. On 8 October at 0100 hours F Company closed into a forward assembly area in the vicinity of Eilendorf.

At 0400 hours, after an hour of artillery preparation by eleven light, medium, and heavy battalions and diversionary attacks by other units, F Company attacked Verlautenheide. In an effort to take advantage of as much surprise as possible, the Company Commander had ordered all men to follow as closely as possible behind the artillery barrage. Some shells even fell behind the assault echelons.

The enemy, however, was not to be caught napping. He was awakened by the artillery preparation, and his accurate small-arms and mortar fire disorganized the company in the darkness. What surprise had existed was now dwindling away.

The Company Command Group, as it crossed the clearing before Verlautenheide, was fired on by an enemy machine gun at 300 yards from the right flank. In an effort to escape the fire, the group was cut into three parts and separated by the darkness.

The Company Commander, without a radio, had no means of communication with his platoons or battalion. Knowing where his platoons had been ordered to go, he made his way toward the left forward platoon area, directing and organizing stray men on the way. When he arrived there alone he was surprised to find none of the platoon there. Hearing voices, he turned to discover that they were the hushed voices of enemy troops entering the town. (All surprise was now completely gone? In fact, the situation was now in danger of being reversed. Something had to be done at once.

Taking up a position at a vantage point, the Company Commander surprised and repulsed one group with rapid fire. Then, running to another position, he repulsed another group. This action gave him valuable time, during which he was able to gather together some men who had been busy cleaning up the town by street fighting. By 0630 hours he had some men ready to repulse the inevitable counterattacks. One local counterattack was turned back by the company, and the enemy retaliated with one of the heaviest artillery barrages experienced up to that time. The mopping up continued, and by 1000 hours the town was cleared and an enemy battalion had been completely overrun. Heavy artillery, machine-gun, and direct tank fire continued all day, but the real counterattack was yet to come.

Shortly after midnight the enemy, having recovered from the surprise attack and preceded by a mortar and

artillery barrage, counterattacked heavily from the direction of Quinx. The right front platoon was slowly worn down and overrun, and the enemy surrounded the Company Command Post on three sides.

The situation was critical. The vital Verlautenheide ridge had to be held. The Company Commander, using all the Command Post personnel to plug the line and mortar men to back it up, succeeded in holding off the enemy until early morning light. As soon as it was possible to see, the Company Commander ordered his men to counterattack, supported by two tank destroyers. This move was successful, the enemy thrown out, and the line restored.

The vital Verlautenheide town and ridge had been seized and held, and the capture of Aachen could continue.

DISCUSSION

In a large battle it may take many hours or even several days for a tactical surprise to wear off. This is due to the time and space factors, where it takes a certain length of time for the enemy to bring adequate troops to bear on the situation. Thus, in an attack, if the initial enemy counterattack can be repulsed by hard-hitting, aggressive action, the surprise will be maintained longer and valuable time gained.

In a battle of this type the leader has two jobs: first, to seize the objective, and second, to defend it.

In the attack, this Company Commander had to act aggressively. This he did, by personally repelling enemy troops. All leaders must be willing to personally enter into the fighting if by so doing they can best accomplish the mission of the unit as a whole.

In the defense of a newly-won objective, the original surprise is not lost until the enemy is able to bring effective forces to bear upon the situation. In this battle aggressive leadership on the part of the Company Commander, by employing all available personnel in the defense and then counterattacking as soon as it was at all possible, prevented the enemy from exploiting his local success.

Had the Company Commander hesitated in this case, the battle for the vital Verlautenheide ridge could have been lost at two different times.

EXAMPLE II

On 26 November 1944 F Company, 18th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division was at Schonthal in the Hurtgen Forest. The company was very badly depleted after the bitter attacks of the preceding days. One platoon had only one non-commissioned officer as its only leadership.

On the morning of the 27th the company was ordered to attack, in a final effort to clear the forest. In order to achieve a maximum of surprise, no artillery or mortar preparations were to be used.

At 1030 hours the company crossed the line of departure and advanced through the dense forest toward the enemy. Suddenly, much sooner than had been expected, the leading elements were in a fire fight. It was a meeting engagement. The force was part of the enemy 9th Parachute Regiment, fresh troops that had just arrived on the battlefield the night before. They were attacking us at the same time that we were attacking them. All the original surprise was suddenly lost and a stalemate ensued.

Making a hasty estimate of the situation, the Company Commander decided to attack. This was instantly carried out and pressed with the utmost vigor. Observers on the left flank reported that over three platoons of the enemy were seen fleeing out of the forest away from the onslaught.

After a short while, however, several enemy machine guns were placed into position and succeeded in stopping the assault echelon. After a brief halt for reorganization, the Company Commander ordered the attack to continue with two platoons abreast and keeping contact.

In the dense forest, however, the two platoons did lose contact, a fact which was unknown to the Company Commander. Subsequently the Company Command Group walked boldly across a small clearing toward troops presumed to be F Company men. When within twenty-five feet they

were discovered to be four enemy with a light machine gun, part of the attacking enemy force that had held up F Company's original attack. Giving no evidence of recognition, the Company Commander stopped, turned slowly, and, after attracting the attention of his group, suddenly shouted, "Go!! Go!! Follow me!!" The group, with four radios, scattered like birds across the clearing in the direction from which they had come. Two men with radios were captured by the enemy. These had to be recovered at once. The Company Commander quickly got on a 536 radio and ordered the right leading platoon to close in and recapture the radios. This was done, the four enemy were killed, and the two important radios were recovered.

Having wrested the initiative from the enemy, the Company Commander was determined to hold it until the company was out of the forest. He ordered the men to proceed at full speed. When a momentary slowdown developed, the Company Commander swung the support platoon around to the right until they reached the edge of the forest.

The subsequent entry into Langerwehe completed the company's mission.

DISCUSSION

In this example the enemy had larger forces and an

element of surprise. F Company also had an element of surprise. Here certainly was a case where fast and aggressive action was needed to achieve success, and it paid off.

When two forces oppose each other in a meeting engagement, a premium is placed upon the more aggressive action. Here the Company Commander realized that the force striking first would gain the initiative, and he was determined that he was going to get the upper hand. This he did by striking quickly, even though his troops were not completely prepared to continue the attack. By this action, he again built up momentum and was able to drive ahead to another victory.

Had the Company Commander not been aggressive or had the enemy commander been more so, the battle would have been lost and the enemy would have broken through our line. As it was, the enemy lost many men and our forces forged ahead.

EXAMPLE III

On 1 February 1945 the 2d Battalion, 18th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division moved from its positions in Hunningen, Belgium to a forward assembly area, from which it began its attack, in a column of companies with F Company leading, to secure the ridge line along the highway running southward from Hollerath. By early evening the battalion had overcome the light enemy resistance

and was consolidating its objective.

At 1900 hours F Company had no definite plans and no orders. It had as a general objective the same direction of attack as the past few days: due east. The situation had developed so rapidly that the company did not quite realize that it was again approaching the Siegfried Line.

At about 2100 hours all Company Commanders were called to the Battalion Command Post. The trip had to be accomplished by means of the only weazel available, as the snow was too deep for jeeps. There the Company Commanders received the information that on the next morning they were to attack the Siegfried Line for the second time. The attack would be at 0400 hours — just seven hours away — after having attacked continually for over two weeks without a break and with only a few hours respite. At 2105 hours a patrol reported that it could not reach its objective. It had encountered intense small-arms and mortar fire. The enemy was determined to hold his position.

The battalion plan was to attack with G Company on the left and F Company on the right. If positions were too strongly held and the assault companies could not break through, they were to pull back and everybody would hit at one time later. F Company had no information about the units in front of them. They had no TNT, no

satchel charges, and no beehives; all the flame throwers were in need of repair; and there was, of course, no time to obtain these things.

F Company's mission was to capture Ramscheid. In order to do this the company had to cross a long clearing, two rows of dragon's teeth, and barbed wire entanglements and capture an undetermined number of pillboxes. Lack of time made advance reconnaissance impossible.

At 0330 hours F Company moved out and at 0400 hours turned right and crossed the line of departure. The company's only hope was to achieve surprise; consequently no artillery preparation was laid on. There was a deep new snow on the ground and an almost full moon. Visibility for the enemy was excellent and each man stood out as in daylight.

At 0420 hours enemy tanks were reported on the road the company had used as the line of departure. At 0430 hours the leading elements of the company had halted and the Company Commander, anxious not to have his company standing out in the open, went forward to investigate.

There the reason was apparent and a good one: an antipersonnel mine field, too long to go around and too wide to jump over. At this point the company was directly under the nose of the enemy and still had the element of surprise, though for how long was a matter of conjecture. It was apparent, however, that this situation could not

last much more than a few minutes. The only way out was forward, through the antipersonnel mine field. Quickly the Company Commander lined up the leading men into single file and ordered them forward. The Company Commander was fourth in line. The first man hit a mine and fell by the side. The second man stepped forward. He too hit a mine and fell by the side. The third man stepped forward. He too hit a mine and fell by the side. The Company Commander stepped forward and got through safely.

By this time surprise had been lost and the enemy, alerted by the explosions in his mine field, opened fire with machine guns from the pillboxes and small arms from the trenching around the pillboxes.

Prompt action was imperative to overcome this loss of surprise, and F Company was moving fast. The safest place around a pillbox is up next to the box itself. Within five minutes after the first antipersonnel mine went off, the entire company was through the mine field and on the way to investing the many pillboxes. First the riflemen took the pillboxes under fire by directing very accurate fire into the embrasures, forcing the pillboxes to button up. Then the other men quickly disposed of the individual enemy around the hill in the trenches.

Heavy mortar and artillery fire was falling by this time. Worse yet, it was slowly becoming daylight. The

company was on a bald hill and, being the only company through the line at that time, was bearing the full brunt of the machine-gun fire from pillboxes in front of neighboring units.

One platoon was sent forward to Scheitert and one was given the job of cleaning out the pillboxes and protecting the company from the south. The other platoon was to clean out the remaining pillboxes and protect the north flank of the company area. The Weapons Platoon (-) protected the rear.

At this time the Company Commander of G Company requested permission to come through the gap in the line made by F Company. Permission was happily granted, and G Company advanced, thereby giving F Company some protection from the north and permitting F Company to push farther forward toward Ramscheid.

The job of cleaning out the pillboxes was next on the agenda. Smoke was requested on the company's left in front of the adjacent unit to blind enemy observation and machine gun fires. This was approved. The smoke was received at 0945 hours and was successful in blinding the fires of the pillboxes to the north, permitting the company to continue.

The only tools available to finish the job were small arms and a big bluff. Since the enemy was buttoned up in his pillboxes, he could not see the bluff and had to rely on what he heard. In each case the enemy was

given fifteen minutes to surrender with the alternative that the pillbox would be blown up. In the meantime much banging was done against the side of the pillbox, imitating the placing of dynamite. Fourteen minutes later the first pillbox surrendered its occupants. The same method was used against the central pillbox, a Command Post with six portholes, a periscope, and a 4-inch thick steel revolving turret. This one surrendered thirty-four enemy.

By 1030 hours a total of nine pillboxes were reduced and more attention could be given to preparation for the further attack on Ramscheid.

The actual advance into Ramscheid was anticlimactic, as were the three counterattacks repulsed there. Late in the evening engineers dynamited the dragon's teeth and friendly tanks reinforced the company. The mission was accomplished. Ninety-nine enemy had been captured, nine manned pillboxes seized, and Ramscheid occupied.

DISCUSSION

This attack is an excellent example of the application of the principle stated. In this example, minutes counted heavily. The Company Commander's action in applying hard-hitting, aggressive leadership won that battle.

Here the action had to be to hit hard and keep driving until the completion of the battle. It would

not have been enough to make one aggressive decision. . . Rather it was necessary to make many such decisions in order to maintain the momentum of the attack and to hold to the last every precious moment of the surprise. In order to do this, the leader had to be in the midst of the action personally.

Had the Company Commander not applied the principle of aggressive leadership the attack would have been a failure, many of our troops would have been killed, and the job would have had to be done again the following day with a lesser degree of surprise, greater effort, and greater casualties.

EXAMPLE IV

Early in the morning of 8 November 1942 the 18th Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division invaded North Africa at Arzew and, after battling French Infantry, Naval personnel, and armored cars, found itself, at 1500 hours, stopped before the town of St. Cloud. The terrain was bare of cover: there were no trees, bushes, or heavy vegetation behind which troops might seek cover or protection. The French had unrestricted fields of fire in all directions extending at least 1000 yards.

The town was strongly organized and resisted our every effort. At 1100 hours the next day the Combat Team Commander ordered all troops to be withdrawn to permit a thirty-minute artillery demolition to take

place. The plan was to attack after the artillery at 1400 hours. It was subsequently decided by the Commanding General not to fire the artillery for fear of killing too many civilians. We still wanted the French to be our allies.

The antitank officer of the 2d Battalion, with four 37-mm. antitank guns towed by jeeps, was active. There being no tanks to fire at, his crew took enemy personnel and machine guns under fire, knocking out one machine gun at over 1000 yards that had gone into position on the high ground along the highway west of St. Cloud to prevent encirclement.

At 1400 hours one battalion was left in position to contain the enemy, and all others withdrew to regain their mobility. This was to be a surprise maneuver to avoid the enemy's intention to prevent us from moving on to Oran, the obvious objective.

When the 2d Battalion flanked the town on the left, the Antitank Platoon also advanced, by leaps and bounds, to protect the battalion. As these troops were climbing a rise of ground on the southwest side of the town, they were subjected to observed enemy artillery fire from St. Cloud, and the troops began to scatter in an effort to avoid being hit. The Antitank Platoon leader, with one section of two guns limbered up, was caught in this barrage.

The enemy had seen through the maneuver and was now endeavoring to break it up. The Antitank Officer looked around and, to his surprise, could see the guns, a battery of three, firing from the rear of St. Cloud — direct observed fire. Making a hasty estimate of the situation, he decided to counter battery. In the middle of this barrage he ordered, "Action" and designated the enemy artillery, "Range 2000 yards, HE." The section moved extremely rapidly and the first round landed within three yards of the target. The section continued firing and soon succeeded in dispersing the enemy artillery men and breaking up this artillery attack.

This action permitted the troops to continue the advance, and at 1000 hours the following morning the 2d Battalion was the first to overlook and enter Oran.

DISCUSSION

Here was an excellent opportunity for a small-unit commander to apply hard-hitting, aggressive leadership principles to forestall the loss of the tactical surprise of a regiment.

This leader was not responsible for counterbattery against enemy artillery. His mission was the antitank defense of his battalion. It would have been quite simple for him to continue with his vehicles and guns until they were out of the barrage area. This, however, would not have been in the best interest of the surprise maneuver

of the battalion.

By his aggressiveness this platoon leader forestalled the loss of the tactical surprise of his battalion and permitted its uninterrupted advance. Small-unit leaders will often be in a position where their aggressive leadership will facilitate and advance the mission of their parent unit. This opportunity should be exploited whenever possible.

Had it not been done by this leader, American lives would have been lost, disorganization would have taken place, and valuable time would have been lost.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing examples illustrate the application of the principle that hard-hitting, aggressive leadership is the one major factor in overcoming the loss of the element of surprise in combat.

Most leaders recognize the need for aggressive leadership in battle. However, many fail to apply it at the critical moment. When time is plentiful, much of it should be given to planning every move, thus assuring a greater chance of success. This habit of slow, deliberate planning has prevented many leaders from having to act upon a moment's notice when the fate of a battle is in the balance. This balance can sometimes be influenced greatly with very little effort applied at the correct moment.

The fact that all desired information is not available also causes leaders to hesitate. This must not be so. A calculated risk must be employed if the desired end is to be accomplished. When the enemy has just been surprised he is in a disadvantageous position, and therefore a calculated risk is justified.

Many times leaders may look back and realize that had they applied aggressive tactics at the crucial moment of a battle the outcome would have been different. Leaders must learn to recognize when they are losing the surprise element and then strike most aggressively to overcome this loss, to the end that the mission will be sooner accomplished, many American lives saved, and valuable time gained for more profitable employment at another time.