

PROFESSIONAL FORUM



Infantry Combat

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is a slightly edited version of a talk General William E. DePuy presented to Infantry Officer Advanced Course students at the Infantry School in October 1989. General DePuy is a former commander of the Army's Training and Doctrine Command. Commissioned from ROTC in 1941, he served in Europe during World War II. After the war, he held a variety of other command, staff, and attache assignments.

On the premise that it is easier to work your way into the future if you know where you've been in the past, I'm going to talk about infantry combat as it has developed in the 20th century. Obviously, I'm a voice out of the past and whether what I have to say to you today has any relevance to the world in which you live, and to your jobs as you see them, you'll have to decide.

Before I talk about infantry tactics and their evolution, I want to put my remarks in an operational context, because I think that if you just do a bottoms up look at it there's always something missing. I'm going to start with a proposition that will run through my comments. It's a little above your present rank level, but it's going to affect your lives and I want you to grasp its significance.

That proposition is this: that the pur-

pose of offensive operations—tactical offensive operations—is to achieve freedom of operational maneuver toward strategically important operational objectives. That's a big mouthful. What it means, though, is that just attacking isn't the objective of the exercise. The object of the attack is to break through the defense or go around it so you can move to important objectives. Conversely, then, and obviously, the purpose of the defense is to prevent the enemy from doing that to you—to prevent him from breaking or circumventing your defense, achieving operational freedom of maneuver, and moving toward the objectives you don't want him to have. (In NATO, that is not too difficult to visualize.) All else is secondary. Raids, special operations, and so on, are all important, but they're all secondary.

EXAMPLES

Now let me further explain this—still in an operational context—with some examples from this century. Then I'll go back to the nuts and bolts of the infantry business.

In World War I—none of us in this room were alive then—the German Army outflanked the French Army by going through Belgium, which was neutral. The

Germans were going around the flank to get behind the French Army and destroy it and, incidentally, to get Paris, which was the hub of France.

For a little over a month at the beginning of the war, the Germans achieved freedom of operational maneuver. But they ran out of steam in the First Battle of the Marne when their infantry was exhausted and the French mounted a counterthrust. Then both the British and the French on the one hand and the Germans on the other tried to outflank one another in what was later called a race for the sea, and they extended their northern flanks all the way to the English Channel. When they arrived at the Channel, linear warfare descended on the military scene for the first time in history. And we have much of it with us today, although we are now in a transition back toward non-linearity, the mode familiar to Napoleon, Wellington, and Lee.

After these opening moves and the race to the sea, and after there were no more open flanks, the French and the British were unable to expel the German Army, which went on a strategic defensive in the west while it tried to finish the Russians off on the east. So for four years, the western Allies tried, but failed, to break through and chase the Germans out, and they lost a generation of young men trying. For example, the British lost 60,000

in the first day of the Battle of Somme in 1916.

In 1917 the Russians were defeated and had a revolution. The Germans then re-deployed their army from the east back into France—they wanted to finish the war before the U.S. Army arrived in strength. To just give you a feel for that, in July 1918 alone (one month) 600,000 American soldiers arrived in France. So the Germans were in a hurry.

They had a general named Oskar von Hutier, who at Riga in September 1917 had successfully infiltrated his army deep into the rear of the Russians. General Erich Ludendorff, who was fascinated by Hutier tactics, re-organized and re-trained the whole German Army in a period of about three or four months to use those tactics against the British and the French.

In March 1918 the Germans attacked the British 5th Army under General Hubert Gough and destroyed it. They actually advanced 50 miles, which was unheard of in the era of trench warfare, and nearly got to Amiens, a road hub that would have split the British from the French. But they had no operational mobility. Everything was horse drawn. And that was the way the war ended—mutual exhaustion.

From that experience, the Germans learned that they needed operational as well as tactical mobility, and they went to tracked vehicles. Twenty years later, the system they developed was called Blitzkrieg.

In 1940 the Germans attacked through the Ardennes. In this case there was no open flank, but the Ardennes at that time was a weak spot. They gained freedom of operational maneuver as soon as they crossed the Meuse River, and they split the French from the British just as they had tried to do in 1918. The British were evacuated at Dunkirk, and the Germans turned south and rolled up the French Army. Thus, in 1940 they did precisely what they had failed to do in 1918. In 1940, they had the mobility and knew how to use it.

In 1944 the Germans threw a linear defense around the Allied beachhead in Normandy, and the Allies' efforts to break out of that defense failed during



In 1944, as a result of German defensive efforts, the Allied armies had to undergo seven weeks of attrition warfare in Normandy.

seven weeks of attrition warfare. Then, at the end of July, with the help of well over 1,000 heavy bombers, the American forces broke out at St. Lo, moved into Brittany, shrugged off a counter-attack at Mortain, trapped remnants of the German Army at Falaise, and moved on into Holland, Belgium, the Rhineland, and Lorraine. For a month and a half, the Allied forces had freedom of operational maneuver, but they ran out of gas (literally), the Germans rallied, and the war returned to the attrition mode.

I want to make a point here. People talk a lot about attrition versus maneuver. This is not an intellectual choice. The same generals who so brilliantly dashed across France were suddenly forced back into conducting attrition warfare. Nobody doubts that General George Patton preferred maneuver, but maneuver warfare is not a doctrinal choice; it is an earned benefit.

The efforts to break through and obtain operational maneuver in the Fall of 1944 at Arnhem, with the great air-ground operation called Market Garden, failed; the attacks through Huertgen and Aachen were bloody and indecisive, and the attack by the Third Army across the Saar bogged down. In a last operational effort in the middle of December—three months later—the German Army once more sought freedom of maneuver

through the Ardennes.

The Germans enjoyed another tactical success. They penetrated about 75 miles to the west, but they never could turn north toward Liege and Antwerp, which were their operational objectives. They were stopped by the flexibility and mobility of the U.S. Army. That, by the way, was the first and only time in the history of the U.S. Army that it faced a breakthrough armored attack of the kind we have been preparing for in NATO for many years.

If the Germans had had a couple of second-echelon armies then like the Russians have today, the Battle of the Bulge might have turned out quite differently.

After that battle, the Allies gnawed their way through the remnants of the German Army, went to the Rhine and the Elbe, to Czechoslovakia, and to the end of the war. For the last two months of the war, they again had freedom of maneuver. That means they had a total of three and one-half months of freedom of operational maneuver out of 11 months of combat. They wanted it 100 percent of the time; they were able to achieve it less than 33 percent of the time.

After Stalingrad, the Russians developed the breakthrough operation into a brutal art. They broke through at Stalingrad, on the Don, the Donets, the Dneiper, the Vistula, the Oder, and each

time surged forward 100 miles or more.

The two Soviet army fronts, which we would call army groups, that were involved in the breakthrough on the Vistula were commanded by Georgi Zhukov and Ivan Koniev, the Ukrainian and Belorussian fronts. Those two fronts alone comprised 2,200,000 men, 7,000 tanks, and 46,000 artillery pieces, which in the breakthrough area amounted to 460 artillery tubes per kilometer of front. They broke through in a week, went on to the Oder at about 35 kilometers a day, and were stopped there on the last German defensive position in front of Berlin.

Korea was a linear war. The North Koreans started out with freedom of operational maneuver, which culminated at Pusan where the South Koreans and the United Nations troops, mostly Americans, threw up a linear defense around the city. At Inchon the Allies gained freedom of operational maneuver. Some of their elements got all the way to the Yalu, but then the Chinese in turn pushed the UN forces back south of Seoul. The war then deteriorated into a battle of attrition, which President Eisenhower ended with a nuclear threat.

In Vietnam, we, the United States, never decided firmly and collectively on operational objectives. And without operational objectives we went on and fought hundreds of successful tactical operations. We inflicted 800,000 KIA on the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong and wounded a million, to no good end. We never achieved freedom of operational maneuver simply because we never decided which objectives we needed to take, and many of them were in North Vietnam.

Grenada was a non-linear war like the Falklands campaign of the British. The operational objectives were all within reach of the tactical forces from the first day.

Now, you can say, what does all this mean to you, the commanders at the tactical level? Well, it means in the first place that you are going to be executing tactical missions that are part of an operational commander's concept—operational commanders, army group joint commanders, and the like.

If the commander's mission is strate-

gic defense as in NATO and his purpose is to deny freedom of maneuver to the Russians, then of course there are certain defensive and counteroffensive operations you may be asked to undertake. The NATO commander has to maintain the forward defense and break the enemy attack. According to AirLand Battle doctrine, you could have the mission of blocking, delaying, counterattacking, spoiling by deep maneuver, or attacking deep with the fires of rockets, missiles, or TACAIR. Or you could be part of a deep operational counterstroke.

Now, which of these missions you receive depends on the whole set of concepts, all the way from the joint commander at the top, down through the corps, divisions, brigades, battalions, and down to you. Make no mistake about this—in all cases, you're going to be told what to do as the company commander. In most cases, you will be permitted and required to decide how to do it.

INFANTRY EVOLUTION

With that in mind, I want to go back to the infantry evolution over this same period. Now we're in the meat and potatoes part.

World War I was an infantry-artillery war. The standard offensive tactic was to fire an incredible amount of ammunition over a very long period of time, followed by an assault of long lines of infantry, supported by other long lines of infantry, trying to follow close behind the grinding, slow moving artillery barrages.

The German defenses were deep and elastic, layered, dug in; machinegun crews came out of deep bunkers when the artillery lifted. The machineguns were generally devastating against the long lines of exposed infantry trying to move through wire, shell holes, mud, and churned terrain. After the machineguns did their deadly work, the remnants of the attacking force, which by then had fallen behind the rolling barrages, were almost automatically counterattacked by division-sized elements. And the defending artillery, of course, fired very effectively on pre-registered concentrations and barrages.

Indirect fire suppression turned out to be inadequate during that entire four years, during which time one generation of Frenchmen, one generation of Britons, and one generation of Germans all went down.

The direct fire that came from the lines of skirmishers turned out also to be inadequate; moving skirmishers could not develop enough rifle fire to suppress the enemy machineguns. And by virtue of their linearity they masked their own machineguns. So, all in all, World War I was an operational and tactical failure, except that at the very end the Germany Army—the German nation—was simply worn out. The French were also staggering at the time, as indeed were the British. The fresh American Army was coming on strong. But the American Army also failed to solve the problem of the trenches and the machineguns and operational mobility. So it ended almost with a whimper instead of a shout.

When World War II came along, we found we hadn't learned much, while the Germans had. Our infantry went into World War II just about the way it had come out of World War I. Suppression was done primarily by artillery. And although the troops were told in all the manuals published here at Fort Benning between the wars that open warfare by skirmishers was the way to go and that fire suppression had to be achieved by the infantry itself, it was rarely tried and more rarely accomplished.

In Normandy in 1944, it was standard practice to fire mortars at the first hedgerow, where the first layer of German defenders were, 105mm howitzers at the second hedgerow, 155mm howitzers at the third, and then (you guessed it) to line up the infantry and assault straight forward into the killing zone.

In its six weeks in Normandy, the division to which I was assigned lost 48 percent of its rifle platoon leaders each week. That means the on-the-job time for a lieutenant was two weeks plus a day or two and the losses were 300 percent in six weeks. The end effect, of course, was that few were seasoned and few were around long enough to learn how to fight.

In the face of these kinds of problems, some units resorted to marching fire to

fill the gap between the lifting of the indirect fire and the arrival of the assault line at the enemy position. In marching fire the soldiers simply fired a round every few steps, aimed or from the hip, to try to retain fire superiority while moving. The anomaly was, of course, that when they needed fire superiority most, they rose from their positions behind the hedgerow and lost most of it. And generally they were masking their own machineguns. This, incidentally is a problem you have today.

LONG HISTORY

There's a long history with respect to direct fire suppression, and not all of it in the U.S. Army. I know you have solved a lot of these problems, but I doubt that you have solved all of them.

I suppose most of you have read General Erwin Rommel's book *Infantry Attacks*, and you may remember that he had the same problem with the Italians and the Rumanians, in the Carpathians and the Alps. He was in that unusual battalion that had three, four, five machinegun companies and a lot of rifle companies, and he personally positioned all the machineguns and gave them targets. After shutting down all enemy fire, he then penetrated on about a one-squad front—brought his reserves through personally and operated in the enemy's rear. That is probably the most difficult task—tactical technique or task—that one could devise. But it's just about the only way you can get through a linear defense frontally with acceptable casualties (acceptable means very low).

I know you practice that some of the time. That means that instead of two up and one back, you've got one up and five back, or one up and three back. In other words, the bulk of the force is shooting. The greatest part of the force is involved in firepower and the smallest part is involved in maneuver in that particular technique. I know that is counter-intuitive in an Army that favors *maneuver*—but think about it.

The Israelis solve the problem by dropping into a base of fire position any element that initially receives fire from an

enemy trench line or a bunker or an airfield defense, and bringing armored vehicles up to augment the base of fire. Then they go around the flank and work down the trench line with rifles and hand grenades.

About halfway through World War II, the U.S. Army began to learn how to do that. The first signs of wisdom are enshrined in a statement that became popular: "Pin 'em down and go around 'em." That is good sound tactics.

Armored combat commanders, much like you have in your mech and tank task forces, from the very beginning learned how to suppress with all the firepower of the armored task force. The first time I ever saw that happen I was awestruck. I saw a tank-infantry task force of the 4th Armored Division going by the edge of a forest. On the way by, they turned every gun they had toward the woods. They called it reconnaissance by fire in those days, but what it was was suppression. They put so much fire on the woodline no one ever knew if there was anything in the woods.

Mechanized infantry today has the same opportunity. Ninety percent of the firepower of the mechanized platoon is in its armored vehicles and others of the task force, and only a small amount with the dismounted infantry. Obviously, you're not going to put the 15 to 20 men in the rifle platoon in a killing zone unsupported. So you're going to have to shut the enemy down.

That is a short story of the evolution of infantry tactics. It connects what you're doing with what people learned the hard way a long time ago.

I want to talk to you now about another dimension of these problems that I call the baleful influence of boundaries. In World War I, such great men as George Marshall, who was then G-3 of the 1st Division and then G-3 of an army, became famous for moving masses of troops around and squeezing them into very narrow zones of attack. For example, in the Meuse-Argonne some of the American division sectors or zones were only three kilometers wide, and these were divisions of 27,000 men. Now that, gentlemen, is why the whole idea of two up and one back became in-

grained—embedded in the doctrine and the consciousness of western armies. It was the way to crowd a lot of troops into a very small area. But, obviously, the effect of that was that they all attacked straight ahead.

Unfortunately, the two up and one back technique—which was invented for control purposes, a way to squeeze a lot of people into a small area—was adopted by our World War II amateur army (that was what it was) as a concept of operations. I would say that half of our battalion commanders in World War II thought that two up and one back was a concept of operation instead of just a formation. The very first attack I participated in in Normandy as a battalion S-3, we did exactly that—two up and one back right into the killing zone. It accounted for the kinds of casualties we suffered.

It has also been devastating at the operational level. When you look back and wonder why, for example, the U.S. Army ever attacked in the Huertgen Forest, the answer is obvious. The forest was straight in front of the VII Corps of the First Army—and everybody just went straight ahead.

Now, in most cases, it's not just a formation, but two up and one back is, of course, the worst possible thing to do. I know none of you would do that, but there are plenty of people who still do it. If you know where the enemy is, then you certainly won't put two of your three combat elements in his killing zone. And if you *don't* know where the enemy is, you aren't going to put two of your elements forward where they might stumble into his killing zone.

LEADERSHIP COP-OUT

Anyhow, using formations instead of concepts of operation is simply a leadership cop-out. The Russians call them corridor commanders—commanders who simply take their mission, divide it up among their subordinates, and sit back and wait for the bad news.

In my discussions earlier this morning with some of you, and in the read-ahead material I was sent earlier, I found and we discussed some questions about de-



centralized versus centralized control, and we talked about attrition versus maneuver. I want to say to you that none of these theological debates get you very far. The fact of the matter is that when you get in your companies and battalions you're going to be executing concepts of operation cooked up by your next higher commander, and it will inhibit you to some extent. His concept—his order—will tell you exactly what to do, where to do it, and when to do it. You can look on that as being restrictive and counter-productive, but let me tell you that if your superior commanders do not have a concept of operation and if that concept is not dominating the battle you are in, your side is losing. You may have all the freedom you want, but you're also going to have the freedom to lose. You need to put yourself in that context.

What is left for you to do, and how do you do it? There's often a discussion of whether synchronization is incompatible with maneuver, but that's a dumb way to look at it. Synchronization is not just a complicated word. Synchronization is combining the arms within some kind of operational concept in a particular engagement or battle. You should be horrified, each of you, if your battalion staff, brigade staff, and division and corps staffs are not synchronizing all the combat support they can get their hands on in behalf of their concept and your lesser included role within it.

Synchronization is not a bad word. The name of the game, the formula to be

followed, is that you should get all the synchronization that time and good judgement will allow.

I want to end up by saying that although we don't like rules, we do like principles. But it seems to me that there's a rule we learned in World War I, in World War II, in Korea, and in Vietnam that really ought to be elevated to the status of a principle. That rule or principle is "Never fight a battle—any battle, in the offense or defense—the way the other guy wants you to fight it." He wants you in his killing zones. He wants you to get mousetrapped, and then destroyed by a counterattack. He wants you to be two up and one back.

So the name of the game is never to do that, but to use your head to figure out some way to handle the other guy in a way he doesn't want, doesn't like, doesn't expect, and can't handle.

I'll just give you a few of the things we discovered along the way, some of which are applicable to you and some of which may be chiefly of historical interest. The repertoire of alternatives to ploughing into the enemy's killing zones arise out of the conviction that almost anything is better than that.

The easiest solution, and the one that armored divisions in World War II used, was encapsulated in that somewhat rude statement—"Bypass, haul ass, and call for the frigging infantry." That is, just leave the problem behind. One problem is that we now have armored forces, but no infantry divisions following along to

do the dishes. So just bypassing the enemy and leaving him there is not always permissible. But when you get to exploitation and operational maneuver, it's exactly the thing to do. Just let him stay back there hopelessly and uselessly behind.

The second best solution, we thought, was to find a gap and slip through it with a battalion (usually a whole battalion) often single file, often at night, and sit down on a piece of terrain behind the enemy that he couldn't afford to let us have—a piece of terrain that once we were on it he had to come after us or abandon the entire position.

Then the enemy has to attack you and you're down and waiting and he's up and moving and, gentlemen, no matter how romantic you may be about the attack being the preferred method, my preferred method is staying alive while killing the enemy. The aim is to get him up and moving while you're down and waiting. That doesn't mean you don't go on the offense. But if you can sit down on a piece of terrain right behind his front, in the middle of his airfield or whatever, and he has to come to you, that's what you constantly seek once you become a seasoned soldier.

If you can't find a flank or a gap, the third solution that we learned to prefer was simply to infiltrate through him, at night, using very small units (squads, maybe platoons) right to the final objective.

That is not the way the enemy wants to fight the war. He doesn't want somebody infiltrating through him. He wants them to come in by platoons and companies and issue orders and talk on the radio and call artillery and to keep trying it again and again. All of this, of course, he wants to take place on the terrain he has selected. Infiltration, then, is a superior solution.

The fourth is to pin him down with very heavy suppression and go around him and attack him on the flank or the rear. That is, I would say, sort of the classic solution, right? That's a sort of drill that we go through, and the drill the Israelis go through all the time.

And the fifth solution, the toughest of all, is to do a Rommel. You ought to be

able to do a Rommel in your light infantry company or your battalion, but you won't be able to do one unless you practice it a lot.

I would say that if you become professional at your job, whether you're in a mechanized company or in a Ranger company, whether you're going on a raid, whether you're fighting in Europe or in a light battalion in Central America, you're going to come up against all of the problems I've been discussing. They are eternal infantry problems.

In other words, you will find yourself having to attack an enemy position to accomplish a mission. Wherever it may be, you're going to find out that the defender has a lot of advantages that you will have to avoid or overcome. The time to think about all those things is now.

When I commanded the 1st Infantry Division in Vietnam, we received hundreds of lieutenants from Fort Benning and OCS, and I have to tell you that almost without exception—this was in

1966 or 1967—these platoon leaders would, if not otherwise instructed, almost automatically proceed in a column and deploy into a line when the first shots were fired and assault into the enemy position as a sort of puberty rite, a test of manhood.

Instead, a platoon leader should always think of the leading element as being on a reconnaissance mission for the company commander and the battalion commander so he's out there to find out where the enemy is, try to figure out the enemy strength so that the company and battalion commanders can make decisions. That's the professional way to fight a war.

It just so happens that the Viet Cong very often did it right. Our companies or battalions would be probed a few times by their reconnaissance elements and then sometimes nothing more would happen. We had to conclude that they took a look at us and decided it was a bad show and they would wait until another day. The

U.S. Army seldom does that. There's some kind of an automatic exhilaration that takes place when the first rounds are fired. We have a very strong tendency then to charge.

I know that the lessons I have been talking about were primarily learned in World War I, learned again in World War II and Korea, and learned again the hard way in Vietnam, in Grenada, and probably in Panama. They have not gone away. They are classic infantry problems that you, too, will face. The thing to do now is to think them out ahead of time and practice ways to avoid repeating the U.S. Army's bloody initiation rites during almost all of its wars.

Good luck!



The Lancers Heroes Past and Present

CAPTAIN DAVID L. SONNIER

EDITOR'S NOTE: The opinions expressed in this article are the author's and do not represent those of the Department of the Defense or any element of it.

On 25 July 1819, Simon Bolivar's Liberation Army, while fighting the royalist Spaniards, was flanked at a site known as the *Pantano de Vargas* in what is now Boyaca, Colombia. Faced with a grim tactical situation, Bolivar did the right thing: He sent a Colonel Rondon with 14 Lancers—soldiers on horseback and armed with long spears (or lances)—

to halt the enemy's flanking attack. With his parting words of "Colonel, save the country," Bolivar unleashed the fury of the small band of Lancers on the advancing enemy columns.

The Lancers, through the audacity and aggressiveness of their attack, created panic among the enemy troops and foiled their flanking attack, thus saving the Liberation Army from destruction. This display of courage by Colonel Rondon and his Lancers turned the tide of the battle, disheartened the enemy, and led to the Spaniards' defeat and eventual withdrawal. A monument stands today at

the *Pantano de Vargas* in honor of the heroic Lancers.

Today, Colombia's Lancero School stands on a hot, arid plateau at the military base of Tolemaida. The school, which is similar to the U.S. Army Ranger School, was formed in 1955 for the purpose of training dedicated and capable leaders in counterinsurgency operations to fight the subversion in that country. It is no surprise that the school, and those who pass through it, bear the name of Simon Bolivar's heroic Lancers. (See also "Lancero," by Captain Ralph Puckett, Jr., and Lieutenant John R.