

PROFESSIONAL FORUM



Auftragstaktik Thoughts of a German Officer

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The article "*Auftragstaktik*," by Lieutenant Colonel J. L. Silva, in *INFANTRY* (September-October 1989, pages 6-9), which I read in March 1990, is educational and worthwhile.

Colonel Silva persuasively and correctly describes *Auftragstaktik* (mission-oriented command and control), its causes and effects, and its advantages over *Befehlstaktik* (order-oriented command and control). Unfortunately, this useful, intellectual argument is too seldom heard in the Bundeswehr.

I would like to offer a few additional thoughts from the German perspective.

The main manual for leadership in the Bundeswehr, which is comparable to the U.S. Army's Field Manual 100-5, is HDv 100/100. Chapter 6 of that manual states that "Command and control of armed forces is an art, a creative activity based on character, ability, and mental power." That chapter goes on to say: "Mission-oriented command and control is the first and foremost command and control principle in the army, of relevance in war even more than in peace. It affords the subordinate leader freedom of action in the execution of his mission, the extent depending on the type of mission to be accomplished."

This principle creates, for leaders at all levels, the freedom of maneuver for

independent action. The most senior military leader passes on the objectives, provides the resources, and coordinates the combined arms cooperation. He never determines, however, *how* the mission is supposed to be accomplished.

This "mind set" is best related to free, mature, morally obligated men who act responsibly, who want to act freely and independently within the structure of the mission and the commander's intent. The delegation of authority to lower levels allows reaction to situational changes and the friction of battle in an orderly manner without great delay, because creativity and innovation can be brought to bear with full knowledge of the actual situation.

As Colonel Silva demonstrates, this thought process was introduced into the Prussian Army by General Gerd von Scharnhorst. He had already taught this principle as an instructor in the "School of Military Science for Young Infantry and Cavalry Officers" in Berlin, which was founded in 1801 and was a predecessor to the later officer schools as well as the War Academy.

Early in his career, von Scharnhorst had demanded "thinking officers" who understood taking action according to the "special circumstances" and taking extraordinary measures to control or

guide the future. He fought passionately against "mechanical thinking," "small minds," and "pedantism" as well as "limiting tradition."

This trend toward *Auftragstaktik* was brought about by the French Revolution and Napoleon's method of waging war, which swept away the traditional armies with their linear tactics, iron discipline, blind obedience, and intolerance of independent action.

On the other hand, the roots of *Auftragstaktik* lay in the Prussian concept of the spirit of the rugged, self-confident officer of the nobility who refused to act against honor and conscience, even for his ruler. One example of this can be seen in the battle of Zorndorf in 1758 during the Seven Years War. It was in that battle that General Friederich von Seydlitz said to the King, Frederick the Great, "I need my head until after the battle, then it belongs to the king." (The poet, Heinrich von Kleist, in the play "The Prince of Homburg," dramatically formulated this independence of action, not in a historical context but taking in the spirit of the times.)

It was thanks to Scharnhorst that the ability to lead units independently of time and place according to the commanding officer's intent was translated into educational efforts for troop leaders. The

principle became the central theme of leadership thinking in the Prussian-German Army. Gradually, Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke the Elder expanded the principle to all levels down to company commander, largely as a result of the further development of firepower, technical progress, and better communication.

Von Moltke realized that there were inherent dangers in the independent actions of subordinates and that entire battle plans could be destroyed. He made known, however, in a conversation on freedom of decision with the historian Heinrich Friedjung, "Obedience is the principle, but man stands above the principle." And then came his decisive statement, "Who is right in battle is decided in most cases by success."

Thus, success or failure are, in the end, the guidelines for making a decision. Each decision and each action in the uncertainty of battle poses a challenge that offers both advantages and burdens. The double-edged nature of *Auftrags-taktik* therefore becomes clear—in the context of direction and independence, of free maneuver room or not, of responsibility and obedience.

As a guideline in the dilemma between freedom and constraint in decision making, a moral category was expressed early by General Wilhelm von Blume, a military theoretician, at the end of the 19th Century: "For independent action in war a moral courage is needed in order to execute decisively and energetically correct and necessary knowns, without allowing oneself to err through fear of responsibility." General Ludwig Beck (Chief of the General Staff from 1935 to 1938) noted in his own copy of von Blume's book at this particular place: "Also through danger of a wrong action."

This was and is the decisive foundation of *Auftragstaktik*. It guarantees the leader on the spot the trust of his superior. This principle, which originated from the combat leadership of von Moltke, has influenced current field service manuals. As von Blume said: "Everyone from the highest leader to the lowest soldier must constantly be aware that to refrain from doing something (failure to act) will have

a greater negative impact than a mistake in the selection of resources."

General Otto von Moser mentioned the concept *Auftragstaktik* for the first time when he wrote in 1912, "*Auftragstaktik* is what I would like to call the leadership action which we saw for the first time in full action in our Exercise Rule 88 and also emphasized for lower leadership in Exercise Rule 06 in the same sense, by which the higher leader does not give his subordinate a binding order, but more an excerpt from his own thought process, through which he demands from [the subordinate] the intellectual cooperation for the accomplishment of the combat mission."

DECISIVE ACTION

The current German manual refines these thoughts: "Decisive action is the highest dictate in combat. . . leaders who wait for orders cannot utilize the momentary favorable opportunity. All leaders must constantly keep in mind that indecisiveness and omission can be just as bad a combination as acting on a bad decision. Success is mostly on the side of those who rapidly, courageously, and thoughtfully decide on sweeping action."

With this, we again have the dilemma that success is often only the last means we have for measuring *Auftragstaktik*. In German military history, there are numerous examples that define the limits between freedom of decision and constraint in the weighing of a mission.

On the positive side, for example, is the behavior of General Yorck von Wartenburg at Tauroggen in 1812. He withdrew from Marshal Jacques MacDonald's 10th French Corps against the order of the Prussian king and decided to accept the Russian offer of neutrality and thus retained the mass of the Prussian troops for the king. He reported to Berlin, "The step which I have taken happened without the order of your Majesty." His decision was later glorified.

On the negative side, fate went against General Graf Sponeck in the Crimea at the end of 1941 when he also acted against an order. As commanding general

of the 42d Army Corps, he was subordinate to the 11th Army under General of the Infantry von Lewinski, better known as von Manstein, and had the mission to defend the Kerch peninsula. On 26 December 1941, the Russian counter-attack began and the Russian 51st Army succeeded in establishing bridgeheads in the rear of the 42d Army Corps near Feodosia. General Sponeck decided that the situation was critical and requested that the corps be withdrawn. This request was denied, although a Russian breakthrough to the north threatened the rear of the corps. General Sponeck ordered the clearing of the peninsula and an attack into the rear of the enemy force. At this point, communication was lost temporarily. Von Manstein forbade the movement but, since the corps was already five hours in retreat, he also ordered the attack on Feodosia, relieved Graf von Sponeck two hours later, and placed him before a military tribunal. Von Sponeck was sentenced to death, but this sentence was reduced to six years imprisonment by Hitler on 20 February 1942. (The subsequent murder of von Sponeck by SS henchmen of Heinrich Himmler in Gernersheim in 1944 had no connection with his actions at the end of 1941.)

Here it is again clear that *Auftragstaktik* is closely tied to the undivided responsibility and hard obligation each leader assumes in fulfilling his mission. At the same time, it is also clear that in the context of this responsibility each leader is a free man. That is the spirit that also demands a free, democratic thought process.

In my opinion, *Auftragstaktik* is the key to personally responsible and creative action and to success in peace as well as in war. Thus, it is also an essential foundation for the career satisfaction of a soldier.

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