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**The Tactical Application  
of  
Manoeuvre Warfare Theory**

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There are several principles that define and shape manoeuvre warfare. Historical evidence indicates that the application of these principles at a tactical level will allow a commander to achieve success. The principles of manoeuvre warfare include a decision making cycle that is shorter than the enemy's. Such a cycle allows a commander to evaluate and determine action more quickly than the enemy. As a result the enemy is making decisions based on circumstances that have changed. This can be achieved by decision making that occurs at a lower level that is in line with the commander's intent which is itself based on sound planning. Further, a main effort should be determined and while the point of main effort may change, the current main effort should be the focus of all troops. This main effort should be focussed on an enemy weakness and is supported by the use of firepower to achieve the desired outcome.

An overriding principle to manoeuvre warfare is that of speed or tempo. This is not just speed of movement but speed of decision making. This speed of decision making has been developed into theories such as the OODA Loop or the "Boyd Cycle"<sup>1</sup>. Here a commander aims to observe, orientate, make decisions and then act in a shorter time frame than his opponent. By doing so he places his opponent at a disadvantage. His opponent is then making decisions based on information that has been replaced by new developments. Therefore by reducing the time to make decisions, or increasing the tempo, a commander is able to gain advantage over an enemy. Trent Corbett argues that the number of OODA loops available to tactical level commander may be limited<sup>2</sup>. However, examples exist in recent military history where despite the number of decision cycles being limited tactical level advantages can be achieved. In the Falklands War the British moved slowly due to the constraints imposed by logistical transport, terrain and weather. However, they still moved more quickly and made decisions more rapidly than their enemy. The Argentineans, having adopted a defensive position, did not generally

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<sup>1</sup> Lind, William S, *Manoeuvre Warfare Handbook*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1985, pg 5

<sup>2</sup> Corbett Trent, *Manoeuvre Warfare Theory and the Tactical Level of War*, Massey University, 2001, pg 133.

redeploy.<sup>3</sup> For example, Mount Kent, due to its commanding position, was critical to an advance on Stanley. The British determined to capture it before the Argentineans became aware of its importance and garrisoned it. A hastily improvised helicopter lift moved elements of 42 Commando some 40 miles ahead of the main British advance to seize Mount Kent<sup>4</sup>. Likewise the move of elements of 2 Para forward by helicopter from Goose Green to seize Bluff Cove<sup>5</sup> illustrates the increased tempo exhibited by the British. In both examples Argentinean positions were compromised by the seizure of key positions, or landing points. This reduced potential Argentinean options due to a sudden situational change.

For tempo to increase and be sustained, the decision making process must be decentralised and reserves must be available at all levels for use. Without this decision-making is maintained at higher levels of command and becomes inherently slower. Higher-level command must be advised of progress from multiple sources, consider these against known enemy dispositions and actions and then coordinate activities. With decentralisation, commanders at lower levels are encouraged and expected to make decisions. As this is inherently different from the military culture in many countries this level of decision-making must be both learned and encouraged. However, this lower level decision-making cannot be based on a blank canvas. Rather it should be based on what is can be called mission-type orders<sup>6</sup>.

In mission-type orders the junior commanders are briefed on the senior commander's intent. Within the scope of the intent the junior commander has the ability to make decisions that will achieve the intent. For this decentralisation to be effective it must be practiced. It relies on the senior commander to articulate his intent and the subordinate to have the intelligence and confidence to make use of this freedom and trust<sup>7</sup>. Trust must be developed between the levels of command. The New Zealand Defence

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<sup>3</sup> US Marine Corps, *MCDP 1-3 Tactics*, Washington DC: Department of the Navy, 1997, pg 66.

<sup>4</sup> Hastings Max, *The Battle for the Falklands*, London: Pan Books, 1983, pg 300-303.

<sup>5</sup> Hastings Max, pg 309-311.

<sup>6</sup> Lind, William S, pg 13

<sup>7</sup> Davidson, S (Captain), 'Manoeuvre', *Australian Defence Force Journal*, No. 152, January/February 2002, pg 47.

force defines decentralisation, trust and mutual understanding between the levels of command as key elements of mission command<sup>8</sup>.

An example of this trust between commanders can be found in the Golan Heights in 1973 when Syrian forces were overwhelming the Israeli defences. General Eitan was made aware of a breakthrough by a tank battalion from the Syrian 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. Eitan, with no significant reserves, ordered Colonel Ben Gal of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade to take responsibility for the sector. Ben Gal ordered Major Kauli to use his reserve under Captain Zamir to cover the gap and stop the advance. Zamir, on his own initiative, deployed his nine tanks in an ambush which destroyed the advancing Syrian tank battalion<sup>9</sup>. The commanding officer did not attempt to define the operation, only the intent. Zamir, aware of his superior's intent used his forces to achieve this intent using his own initiative.

With decision making being decentralised there is a risk that individual formations will act as unsupported individuals. Therefore an additional concept of manoeuvre warfare is critical. This is a point of main effort and is often referred to, in German doctrine, as the *Schwerpunkt*. The principle is that all forces must support this main effort. Their support can be direct, or indirect such as pinning operations, follow through, or even supply. The main effort is not however a geographical point, rather it is a formation<sup>10</sup>. To support the *Schwerpunkt*, German training prior to the Second World War had established, within formal doctrine, that some sectors would need to be weakened so that those troops that were to be the main effort could be adequately reinforced<sup>11</sup>. The concept however was not limited to Army or Corps level operations, rather it filtered down to commanders at all levels who were required to select, where appropriate, their own weight of effort<sup>12</sup>. This

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<sup>8</sup> Headquarters, *New Zealand Defence force, Foundations of New Zealand Military Doctrine [NZDDP-D]*, Wellington, New Zealand Defence Force, 2004, pg 6-22.

<sup>9</sup> Asher, Jerry, *Dual for the Golan*, New York, William Morrow and Company, 1987, pg 106-108.

<sup>10</sup> Lind, William, pg 17.

<sup>11</sup> Vego, Milan, *Clausewitz's Schwerpunkt Mistranstaledt from German – Misunderstood in English*, *Military Review*, January-February 2007, pg 102-103.

<sup>12</sup> Vego, Milan, pg 103.

can be illustrated by looking at examples of the Schwerpunkt in historical operations.

In the 1940 invasion of France the German main effort would be Army Group A deployed along a 175km frontage. The main effort of this formation was XIX Panzer Corps with a frontage of 80km. XIX Panzer Corps own main effort was 1<sup>st</sup> Panzer division, the Schwerpunkt, of the corps having a frontage of only 3km<sup>13</sup>. While the battalion commander and above should be focussed on the tactics and operational art rather than managing the individual elements of his command<sup>14</sup> there is also room within the Schwerpunkt for a higher level commander to step down. This may allow the senior commander to observe or increase the tempo at a decisive point which will be his main effort. This was often the practice with German commanders during World War II who would accompany the advancing elements. Examples include the actions of Guderian during the breakout from the Meuse crossing in 1940<sup>15</sup> where he was often at, or near, the point of his main effort.

The decision on where the main effort is to take place is defined within modern warfare terminology as surfaces and gaps. A surface is, in it's simplest form, an enemy line while a gap is a hole in the line. For a small unit commander a gap could be a simple uncovered position<sup>16</sup>. It can however, at an operational level, also be applied to a general weakening of the line. This weakness could be where less troops are placed for reasons of terrain or unlikely avenues of attack as in the German invasion of France in 1940<sup>17</sup>. Here the main operational effort was applied to a gap rather than the surface of the Maginot line or indeed the surface of the French and British forces covering Belgium. It could also be a gap between enemy formations as was the case with the Israeli crossing of the Seuz Canal in 1973. Here a gap existed between the Egyptian 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Armies with an approach that

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<sup>13</sup> Vego, Milan, pg 104-105.

<sup>14</sup> Lind William, pg 28-29.

<sup>15</sup> Guderian, Heinz, *Panzer Leader*, London, Penguin, 2000, pg 98-113.

<sup>16</sup> Lind, William, pg 18.

<sup>17</sup> Vego, Milan, pg 106.

Herzog describes as a back door<sup>18</sup>. This gap was then exploited, a crossing achieved and an envelopment of the Egyptian 3<sup>rd</sup> Army resulted.

The location of these potential gaps is important and cannot be achieved by only centralised reconnaissance. Rather, it is achieved by each low-level formation allocating resource to reconnaissance activities. This results in a reconnaissance pull where reconnaissance elements, at every level, locate gaps. It is possible however that a perceived gap could become an ambush. A defence that is made up of seemingly separate parts separated by areas that are not defended can illustrate this. Here these gaps lead to areas where the defender has constructed interlocking killing zones<sup>19</sup>.

Firepower also has its place in manoeuvre warfare. Lind provides an interesting example in his handbook on manoeuvre warfare where he defines the difference between supporting arms and combined arms<sup>20</sup>. Lind argues that supporting arms create a problem for the enemy while combined arms create a dilemma. Combined arms ensures that if the enemy attempt to counter one weapon system they are in turn faced with another. This second weapon therefore creates a dilemma that places the enemy at a disadvantage. The second weapon could be a different weapon system such as mechanised infantry operating in cooperation with tanks each protecting the other from potential threats. This was demonstrated during the later stages of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War in the Sinai where fire support from Israeli mechanised infantry reduced the threat posed by Egyptian anti tank weapons to Israeli tanks<sup>21</sup>. Equally, fire can be used to suppress an enemy while a manoeuvre group approaches a defensive position from the flank. An example of this is the classic infantry battle at Goose Green in the Falklands War. Here 2 Para's D Company attacked the flank of an already engaged and suppressed Argentinean defence line with considerable force and support<sup>22</sup>. These examples both illustrate the use of fire in support of manoeuvre warfare

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<sup>18</sup> Herzog, Chaim, *The War of Atonement*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975, pg 212.

<sup>19</sup> Lind, William, pg 78-79.

<sup>20</sup> Lind, William, pg 20.

<sup>21</sup> Adan, Avraham, *On the Banks of the Suez*, London, Arms and Armour Press, 1980, pg 221

<sup>22</sup> Hastings, Max, pg 281-282.

and are in contrast to attrition warfare that centres on simply inflicting enemy casualties by weight of fire alone. Alternately, it may involve assets drawn from a Battlefield Operating Systems other than manoeuvre elements. Examples include electronic warfare assets, which disrupt the enemy at key times within an operation.

The application of manoeuvre warfare theory has been shown historically to be successful at a tactical level. The principles of manoeuvre warfare start with increasing the tempo of operations by making decisions more quickly than the enemy. This results in the enemy making decisions based on a situation that has changed. To achieve this increased tempo decision-making must be made at lower levels of command. For this to be effective the decision-making must be aligned with the senior commander's intent. In this environment junior commander must be given flexibility and have developed confidence and trust between higher and lower levels of command. Commanders should aim to exploit an enemy weakness. This weakness is likely to be gaps that can be found by commanders at all levels allocating troops to reconnaissance. This reconnaissance pull environment, if successful, can then be exploited by the increased tempo. These enemy weaknesses are then exploited by determining a main effort where all troops support the exploitation of the main effort. Firepower remains critical and is used to support the main effort by creating a combined arms dilemma or to provide suppression of the enemy and thereby allow manoeuvre to take place. Examples of the application of these principles at the tactical and operational level can be found in German operations in during World War II. More recently British forces in the Falklands War and the Israeli army, during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, have successfully applied these principles.

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