

# Methodical Battle

Didn't Work Then . . .

. . . Won't Work Now



HEAVY NAZI TANKS, 1940 (UPI/BETTMANN)



M1 ABRAMS TANKS DURING DESERT STORM (U.S. AIR FORCE/SGT. CORKRAM)

By Commander Gerard Roncolato, U.S. Navy

**The French Army developed methodical battle from the lessons of World War I, then paid for its rigidity during World War II, when the swift, focused German campaign through the Ardennes overran French forces before they could react. Today, U.S. tacticians again are adopting methodical battle, based on the unique lessons of Desert Storm—and may be setting themselves up for future defeat at the hands of an equally uncooperative enemy.**

**O**peration Desert Storm taught the U.S. military an important lesson: centralized planning, coordination, and execution of military action across a theater of operations can bring victory quickly and with minimal cost. Extensive and complex command-and-control structures, together with a massive communication web, can help orchestrate the application of military power in a way that maximizes efficiency as never before. In short: methodical battle is now possible, and it is the answer to our future military challenges.

What has been heard only faintly in the rush to adopt methodical battle (using increasingly sophisticated technologies and organizational structures to exercise centralized control of operations) is the uniqueness of Desert Storm:

- ▶ The enemy sat for six months, allowing an unchallenged Coalition buildup.
- ▶ Our allies presented us with empty airfields to receive our deploying air forces.
- ▶ The enemy was isolated and had no outside support.
- ▶ There was virtually no naval threat to allied shipping.
- ▶ The air threat disappeared at the outset.
- ▶ The terrain was ideal for overhead sensors.
- ▶ The enemy did not maneuver once the war began.

▶ The enemy did not use weapons of mass destruction. Applying the lessons from this war without considering the broader history of warfare allows us to ignore some very unpleasant issues, including an enemy's ability to adapt. In effect, by drawing lessons from war against such a passive opponent, we hardly consider the enemy at all. But what if our future enemy doesn't play by our rules? What if he learns different lessons from Desert Storm? Will our system of methodical battle work then?

A look to history is instructive. In May 1940, the German Army overran French, British, and Belgian forces in a swift campaign of movement and destruction. The French Army, victors in the Great War of 1914-1918, crumbled under the onslaught. Was the sudden defeat the result of superior German equipment? Superior German numbers? Superior German manliness? It was none of these. France's rapid collapse in 1940 in large part can be attributed to the French Army's doctrine of methodical battle.

Methodical battle was the French Army's answer to the slaughter in the Western Front trenches of World War I. Firepower was to be the conqueror, but only firepower applied methodically from the lofty vantage points of the army commanders. Infantry and armor forces would ad-



vance under cover of a steel shield provided by artillery. When they reached the limits of this shield, they would stop while the artillery repositioned—taking up to 12 hours in some cases. What the enemy did in response was largely irrelevant. This form of attack required rigid obedience to timetables, phasing, and sequencing. Initiative was discouraged because the higher commanders had to control the pace and tempo of every battle.

This system looked very attractive on paper—logical, scientific, and methodical—but it didn't work. It tried to force war into a mold alien to its nature. War is the realm of uncertainty, chaos, and violence. Victory requires an appreciation of time, speed, and tempo. Technology in the form of instant and massive communications can help, but greater responsiveness comes from decentralization, together with initiative and boldness among subordinates. The Germans captured this idea—not because they were smarter than the French, but because they were forced into it by having to fight at a numerical and material disadvantage. To win, they had to move faster and more decisively than their opponents.

In the 1930s, while developing their concept of future war, the French ignored the possibility that their opponent might not behave according to plan. Instead, they assumed that German forces would play the same part they played in 1916 at Verdun. Time and tempo, while important, were not seen as critical and were assumed to be basically unchanged from 1916. In short, the French developed their doctrine by focusing on the processes within the French Army (and on domestic constraints) instead of the most likely enemy—or *any* enemy, for that matter.

When the German attack came in May 1940, the French set about executing their methodical battle, but the Germans did not follow the script. The French had anticipated some limited German penetration through the Ardennes, but the attack did not come in the same way as expected. Moving quickly along a narrow front, German armored columns penetrated deeply through the French lines before the rigid and overextended French war machine could react. Caught in a spiral of increasing chaos and uncertainty for which their system had not prepared them, French commanders could not respond effectively. The result was a rapid psychological collapse, followed predictably by the physical collapse of the French Army.

In the ongoing debate about our national strategy and the growing jointness of the U.S. military, a general concept of operations seems to be emerging—one that ensures very close and well-orchestrated control of combat power. Given emerging communications technology, detailed and real-time control of the battlefield is seen not only as possible but also as the principal means by which to ensure swift victory and preclude high casualties. In this case, Desert Storm may be teaching us the wrong lessons.

In the Gulf War, superior technology and training, applied through highly sophisticated and centralized command-and-control arrangements, produced a stunning success. We must take care, however, not to overgeneralize from one campaign. What Desert Storm showed us is not proof that war has changed and that technology promises clean, low-cost, and antiseptic wars in the future. In any human activity such as war, the other side

continuously learns and adapts; technology provides but fleeting advantages; work-arounds can be found. We may find in our next conflict that our opponent, whoever that might be, has learned a lot from Desert Storm and that our top-down, centralized style of warfare has become too brittle.

Current and developing U.S. doctrine, including the Navy's, seeks to control the tempo and nature of a battle, to limit blue-on-blue engagements and to maximize the efficiency of applying combat power. As with the French doctrine in 1940, this looks good on paper and in exercises, but it may be curtailing the innovation, initiative, and flexibility that have been the hallmarks of U.S. military operations, particularly naval operations. Attempting to impose order on an inherently chaotic process, rigid centralized doctrine flies in the face of war's realities. Like the French effort, it is the result of misreading history, and it may paralyze the U.S. military in combat against all but the most passive and docile of foes.

Maneuver warfare suggests a different method of dealing with uncertainty. This doctrine, based on historical evidence, assumes that uncertainty always is present and that it cannot be eliminated. Instead, forces are designed, organized, and trained to operate within it, to exploit it to their advantage. In other words, by adapting to uncertainty, we are able to act more confidently and more swiftly than our enemy in the ever-shifting environment of combat.

To do this requires extraordinary training at every level in the chain of command. Soldiers, sailors, and airmen must learn to respond instantly to ambiguous indicators, and to exploit opportunities at the lowest levels. This is how an entire force is able to react more rapidly than a more hierarchical opponent—even with modern communications—and to do so in a seamless combat environment devoid of artificial boundaries and borders.

Blue-on-blue encounters are avoided not through rigid control from above but through familiarity with, and adherence to, doctrine. Self-discipline and competence will grow at every level when troops have thorough training and a system that encourages a willingness to act without guidance from above. This concept entails risks, but it acknowledges the true nature of war and does not force it into an artificial framework.

Doctrines that impose boundaries limit the flexible application of combat power. They fail to exploit modern C4I, and in many ways they compromise the capabilities promised by such technologies by imposing barriers to horizontal communications in the theater of operations.

A methodical battle doctrine—which we are rapidly adopting—is not the only way to fight wars, and it may not be the best way. In an era of uncertainty, the ability to adapt rapidly to unforeseen circumstances will be critical to success. Will our joint system measure up to these standards? Will our system work, even if the enemy surprises us and does not play by our rules? If we cannot answer these questions in the affirmative, we must seek alternatives. Those alternatives may lie in the realm of decentralization and simplicity, the cornerstones of resilience and adaptability.

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Commander Roncolato, a 1994 graduate of the National War College, is commanding officer of *The Sullivans* (DDG-68).