

Is Information Superiority All It's Cracked Up to Be?

by Major General B. B. Bell, Commanding General, U.S. Army Armor Center



In the past few Commander's Hatch articles, I've focused on the materiel aspects of the Mechanized Force Modernization Plan and the Objective Force. In this article, I'd like to address the current and future revolution in maneuver warfare, driven by information superiority and operationalized by the dimension of leadership. It's important that we all understand the theoretical underpinnings that will impact combat operations in the near future if we are to dominate combat operations in this changing environment.

Simply put, we know that combat victory goes to the commander who has the most accurate answers to the following three questions:

- Where am I?
- Where are my buddies?
- Where is the enemy?

All land warfare doctrine — strategic, operational, and tactical — is really driven by these three questions. At its most basic level, "Where am I?" addresses geographic location: "Do I have an accurate grid?" As the scope of this question expands up from the tactical through operational to strategic level, it encompasses a myriad of other factors. Morale, logistics, and the combat power status of the forces under the commander's immediate control are but a few examples.

"Where are my buddies?" addresses the condition of those friendly forces that can aid victory. At the tactical level, for example: "Where is my wingman? Does he have line of sight to the enemy formation advancing on our flank?" At the strategic level, it can

even encompass an accurate understanding of a coalition partner's political will to adequately support combined military operations.

"Where is the enemy?" encompasses our understanding of every facet of the enemy situation, from location, to logistics, to morale, to combat power. In essence, it means "Do I understand the enemy situation accurately enough to act decisively and win, or do I still need more information?" It is by far the hardest question to answer. Indeed, commanders have been willing, actually forced, throughout history to trade casualties for information about the enemy in a largely attritional approach to war.

With the enemy situation the great unknown, *sequential* operations have been the most common, secure, and effective courses of action to take. At the strategic and operational level, it's been a five-step process:

- Secure a lodgment
- Expand the lodgment
- Build-up the force
- Shape the conditions for decisive operations
- Conduct decisive operations

At the tactical level, the sequence is even simpler, and expressed in all our doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures:

- Make lethal contact with the smallest force possible (in order to maintain freedom of action)
- Develop the situation in lethal contact

- Conduct decisive maneuver (almost always including the reserve) to achieve positional advantage and then destroy the enemy in close combat with volume fire.

Unfortunately, this predictable sequential approach takes an inordinate amount of time, gives the enemy a chance to discern our capabilities and intentions, and often yields high friendly casualties. The Allied assault on the Gustav Line in Italy during the Second World War and American operations in the Ia Drang Valley during the Vietnam War provide two historical examples.

In Italy, we knew where the enemy was: well fortified in positions such as Monte Cassino on the Gustav Line. High casualties still resulted, however, because of the necessary Allied sequential approach to the war in Europe. Landing in North Africa and capturing Tunisia telegraphed our next move, the invasion of Sicily. The next obvious step in the sequence? Cross the Straits of Messina to the Italian Peninsula and advance north. Between January and June 1944, the Allies conducted four distinct operations in an attempt to breach the German defenses in central Italy. The landings further up the coast at Anzio did little to expand our options because the strategic die had already been cast. Eventually, the Allies won the Italian Campaign by breaking through the line, linking up with troops at Anzio, and capturing Rome. The Germans also won a tactical victory of sorts, by delaying the Allied advance for five months and inflicting over 115,000 casualties.

Continued on Page 42

COMMANDER'S HATCH from Page 5

In Vietnam, a sequential approach at the strategic level was not necessarily the cause of casualties. Not knowing the enemy situation was. The Ia Drang Campaign was the first major employment of the airmobile 1st Cavalry Division against three regiments of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars well prepared on the Chu Pong Massif. While the U.S. earned a tactical victory based on 3,000 NVA KIAs and an estimated 1,000 WIAs, the likely strategic victory belonged to the Communists. Although the cost would be great, they learned they could hold their own against the Americans and our new vertical battlefield mobility. Eventually, strategic victory was theirs. History tells us that American casualties occurred largely for three reasons. First, the enemy expertly concealed his positions and movements. Consequently, he knew more about us than we did about him. Second, he was a master at jungle warfare. Last, we never fully appreciated the enemy's dogged willingness to accept horrendous casualties and keep fighting no matter what the cost. We were willing to operate in lethal contact in order to gain information about the enemy in hopes of developing the situation and then conducting decisive operations.

The attrition approach to war illustrated in these two examples placed a premium on the four traditional elements of combat power: maneuver, firepower, protection, and leadership. Even perfect synchronization of these four factors was not enough to gain prompt victory because they were applied in environments where the com-

mander lacked true situational awareness and understanding (SA/SU). Simply put, commanders need accurate information (especially about the enemy) to escape the attrition that accompanies sequential operations. Thus, information *becomes* the fifth element of combat power, not simply the *goal* of its application. With the true situational understanding that comes with information as a controllable element of combat power, leaders no longer have to accept high casualties and sequential operations in order to gain information about the enemy. The key to truly revolutionizing warfare, to escaping the tyranny of sequential operational attrition, is to leverage information as a full element of combat power, one the commander has enough control over to synchronize his operations. For the first time in history, we are beginning to see that digitization can make accurate friendly and enemy information a powerful element of combat power, instead of an elusive ghost that ultimately exacts high casualties. Our developing Force XXI formations in III Corps and the upcoming division capstone exercises involving the 4th ID (M) will continue to nurture this transformation.

Emerging 21st century warfighting concepts take advantage of information as a key element of combat power. Light, highly deployable, tactically mobile, lethal, and survivable platforms like the Future Combat System (FCS) and the Future Transport Rotor Craft (FTRC) are now recognized as materiel keys to future combat success. While *protection* is still vital, it will no longer be the single preeminent factor it was

in the forced attrition style of fighting. With SA and SU on our side, maneuver — especially out of contact — with its attendant flexibility and unpredictability, will dominate 21st century operations. Information superiority (IS) will empower us to mass fires and effects, not units and weapons platforms. We will execute focused, high volume fires from distributed locations. Thus, our doctrine can now begin to transition from a sequential force build-up scenario to simultaneous entry at multiple operational and tactical locations and immediate execution of decisive operations.

This simultaneous, rather than sequential, approach to combat operations will now be possible because IS will yield true SA/SU. Internetted units will be able to distribute formations for protection while being able to quickly concentrate fires for maximum effect. At the strategic level, force build-up will be rapid with the simultaneous multiple entry points afforded by FCS/FTRC. In sum, our doctrine will emphasize overwhelmingly simultaneous operations. (Figure 1) instead of the predictably linear and sequential operations of the past. (Figure 2)

Tactically, we will be able to develop the situation and maneuver the force *out of contact*, drastically reducing casualties and saving combat power for decisive operations. Initial contact will be lethal with decisive fires at the time and place of the commander's choosing. The commander's assessment of the best way to achieve victory will determine what course of action to take,

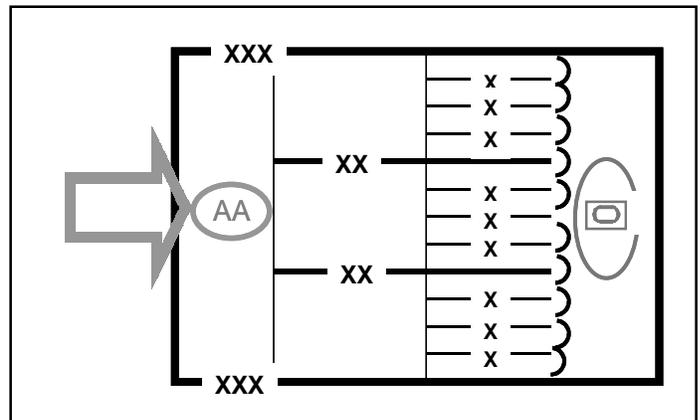
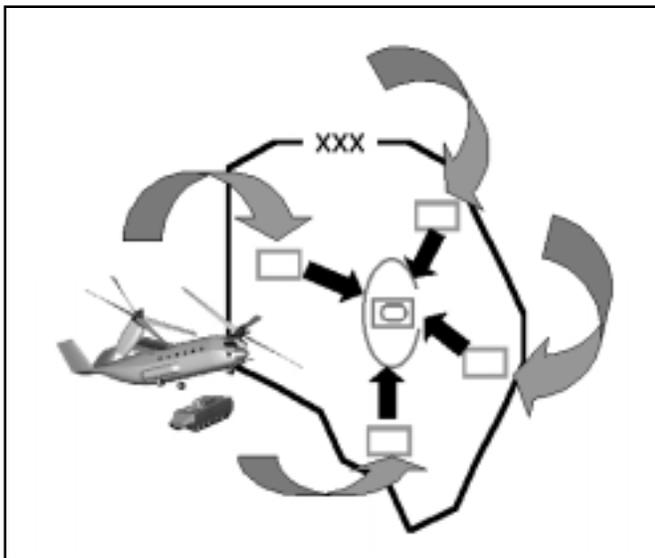


Figure 1. New Simultaneous Approach

Figure 2. Old Sequential Approach

not the need to gain costly information about the enemy.

Like the wide swath cut by a broad axe, the commander will be empowered to attack simultaneously and decisively in a myriad of ways that the enemy cannot predict. This is a decided improvement over the old approach, which invariably directed all efforts to one sequential, and thus predictable, option — the tip of a very long spear. And let there be no doubt that while all five elements of combat power will be crucial in this new environment, *leadership* will remain the centerpiece and be more important than ever.

For our leader warriors, four leadership characteristics will be critical. *First, our future leaders must be historically grounded.* As information superiority provides greater and greater situational awareness and understanding, we will experience a quantum leap in combat effectiveness against opponents still laboring under the old constraints. Simultaneous operations will demand an intellectual agility best developed by studying military history. It will provide a knowledge base for the profession of arms. Camaraderie and trust are most effectively developed when all understand the common heritage they share. Leaders will also have a true appreciation of the high costs and inflexible options dictated by the old sequential operations. Only by understanding where we've come from can future leaders completely appreciate the increase in combat effectiveness afforded by an army operating simultaneously rather than sequentially. Most importantly, the study of history hones analytical skills to a sharp edge. Future leaders probably won't remember that Lt. Col. Robert B. Tully commanded the 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry on 16 November 1965, when they landed at Landing Zone Victor in the Ia Drang Valley. They will remember, however, the critical thinking skills they developed while writing a research paper or presenting a battle analysis on the Ia Drang operation.

Despite our best automation and filtering efforts, information and intelligence will bombard leaders on the simultaneous battlefield. Only those well grounded in the study of the history of the profession of arms will have the intellect necessary to separate the essential intelligence from the supporting information.

Second, leaders will be innovative and adaptive, two further keys to success

on the simultaneous battlefield. Choices will never be black and white. Despite our best efforts, friction will still be rampant. Information will not be perfect. Only creatively innovative and adaptive leaders will overcome the confusion and be successful.

Third, our future leaders must subscribe to the Army values of loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage. Simply put, only those who live by a values-based system will have credibility with their subordinates. Information superiority means our *soldiers* will likely know much of what their *leaders* know. They will have to trust the leader's decision in a knowledge-based environment. How does a leader motivate someone to assault a position when everyone knows, in real time, more or less how strong the enemy position is? Among other things such as tactical competence, I believe it will be by the credibility a leader builds by living his life within a values-based system.

Finally, the future leader must be decisive — now more than ever. Simultaneous warfare promises to be just as violent and chaotic as sequential warfare — perhaps more so. A leader who wavers and loses confidence in his decisions will quickly be overcome by the rapid tempo of simultaneous warfare. Even worse, his subordinates will sense his timidity even more quickly in the IS environment. General Stonewall Jackson's sage advice to "never take counsel of your fears" will be even more critical.

Information superiority promises a true revolution in maneuver warfare. It is a key hedge in our continued quest to ensure our overmatch of potential enemies. Today's lieutenants and captains will lead our Army into this environment. We're at the brink of escaping the tyranny of attrition warfare and the catastrophic risk and suffering it entails. With information superiority in our grasp, a bold shift to simultaneous doctrine coupled with key materiel advances, and applied by adaptive, values-based, leader warriors ensures the future mounted force will continue to be the cutting edge of the Army's ability to prosecute decisive warfare. Information superiority is indeed everything it's cracked up to be — and then some!

FORGE THE THUNDERBOLT
AND STRIKE FIRST!