

Battle of the bulge

War



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Since the time that war, military and military men have existed, there has also existed a parallel class of strategist, philosophers, military, practitioners, philosophers and historians who have invested their lifetime of effort comprehending the complexities of warfare.

These efforts have produced both long, complicated documents that have looked in entire social and economic aspects associated with warfare, and also condensed records and quick lessons into strategy of war that practitioners of the military art could use to guide the conduct of warfare (Johnsen et al.

1995). The efforts to chronicle war details and related documents is also taken in earnest effort by every nation, in order to create a perspective on war and establish a set of workable principles that can be followed in the course of any armed struggle. However, mere compilation and study of principles would certainly account as a very limited effort in evolving a contemporary and updated approach towards warfare.

While the principles may have been thoroughly scrutinized at the tactical and operational levels of warfare, their applicability and suitability at the practical level of implementation may be less than exhaustive. For examples, the principle and lessons of war from Napoleonic warfare, although revealing from the strategic point of view, may have little operational significance from the standpoint of 20th century techniques and necessities (Reid, 1993).

It is important therefore for these principles to apply at the strategic level of war under the conditions of rapid technological change, and remain in accordance of military needs of the time. Contrary to ocular perception that

associates war as purely a military enterprise, one that is conducted entirely on battlefields, the reality is that war is an intellectual accomplishment and creative exercise, and hence many of its finer details are perfected at the strategic board and discussion rooms.

The intellectual framework required to accomplish this complex procedure requires a theoretical structure that is provided by Principle of war (Johnsen et al. 1995). Meanwhile, theories and principles are just one of the side of a full-fledged war, as they have their own limits and it's the balanced of combination of principles along with ability to transform them in practice that ensures victories in armed engagements.

It is also important to remember that war strategies and principles applied in a particular battle essentially bear the stamp of their time. Although they may appear out of place, or seem overtly simple from vantage point of time, they reflect the best wisdom and experience of the age (Murdock, 2002). It is from this understanding and insight that this paper looks into the important Battle of Bulge, fought between German and US forces towards end of the Second World War and that is universally recognized as the bloodiest battle faced by US in the War.

Modern Principles of War The two world events that have profoundly affected war strategies and principles have been the First and Second World War. The scale and range of military strategy and operations seen in each of the war had been hitherto unprecedented, and with introduction of motorized units, battletanks and aircrafts, the very core of military strategy changed for forever (Johnsen et al. 1995).

The lead military thinkers and strategists of the day were forced to undergo a total revision of their approach towards conducting battles that no longer comprised of charging cavalymen and open field combat, and brought in their consideration the role of bombers and fighter aircrafts- such modern tools of warfare that had never been used by any army through the course of human history (Reid, 1993).

However, though acutely aware of the fact that pre-World War I operational strategies and principles of battles no longer hold any applicability or relevance for modern context, the strategists included some cardinal ethics in revising and preparing the new principles of war. Some of the outstanding principles of war, as promulgated from time to time by lead military thinkers and strategists have been Originality, Economy of Force, Strategy of Indirect Approach, Objective, Offensive, Military Security, Concentration, and Co-Operation (Reid, 1993; Murdock, 2002).

The first among these was Originality. By its very definition, originality does not conform to any specified set of rules, procedures or antecedent governing conduct of war. It is always a fresh take on situation, borne purely out of context of the battle. Military strategists attributes following characteristics to originality (Reid, 1993): 1. Originality is the product of an original mind. 2 An original idea or plan, by its definition, presents novel insights and its not an obvious one; further it can not be known in advance to originator themselves.

Original ideas are likely to be unconventional and they happen to be product of an unorthodox approach. 3 Original approach and ideas generated will posses varying degree of originality and situation specific approach that may

come with built in elements of context based improvisation and ideas. However, the ability to conceive original ideas does not translate to ability of selecting the most appropriate course of action. 4 Originality comes from active imagination. 5. Every one participating in an action is capable of coming out with original ideas.

There are several noted contributions of originality in military field that are historically famous and have been marked as legend. The use of elephants by Hannibal, the retreat plot deployed by Normans at the battle of Hastings, and the spectacular success achieved by German Blitzkrieg are all too famous and taught across all the military schools in world (Reid, 1993). Surprise, as it can be noted, formed the crux of the originality and with further maturation of military doctrine, surprise and initial advance emerged as separate principles of war that were followed to the hilt by many military leaders.

The remarkable successes of Germany in the initial period of the Second World War and in the Operation Barbarossa against Russia and the deadly Japanese strike at Pearl Harbor were all result of a military strategy strictly woven around the cardinal principle of surprise and initial advance(Reid, 1993). Despite the obvious advantage of originality and the elements of surprise, flexibility and initiative introduced by it, the stress on originality alone do not form the full crux of war principles.

Economy of Force: Economy of Force, as a military principle was a central theme of British Military Doctrine post World War I. Economy of Force is traditionally defined as a commander's ability to identify the area to concentrate the main thrust of the force for decisive result corollary of

concentration of force (Murdock, 2002). It is well recognized that it is impossible to be strong everywhere and if decisive victory is to be achieved then it is imperative that strength is directed at the critical time and place, while ensuring that reduce the wasteful expenditure of effort.

It also involves a commander's ability to take calculated risk, planning for balanced development and providential deployment of available resources (Murdock, 2002). Strategy of Indirect Approach: Strategy of Indirect Approach is aimed at minimizing blood loss at battlefronts, both in friendly and enemy's camp. Developed as opposite to war of attrition, it is a purely philosophical approach that aims to strike strategically at enemy's point of weakness instead of the main force. The areas identified for this purpose are lines of supply, lines of communication, factory and industrial installations and power centers (Murdock, 2002).

Strategic bombing against these vulnerable but highly sensitive channels is likely to effectively cripple enemy's ability to conduct warfare, leading to capitulation by its main body with minimum of blood loss. Battle of Bulge The Battle of Bulge, known in Army circles as Battle of Ardennes, resulted from German offensive in the last phase of the World War II and it took place from 16 December 1944 to 25 January 1945. After the Normandy Landing of 6th June, 1944, Allied forces had liberated almost whole of the Europe from Nazi occupation and cornered German forces to their own territories (Astor, 1999).

Allied Forces had taken the strategic position in the rough terrains of Ardennes, that occupied areas of Belgium and France. Although the forests and hills of the region made it an apparently impregnable region, the history

defied this notion as the region constituted the main path taken by German forces in both 1st and 2nd World War to mount surprise attack on Belgium and France (Astor, 1999). The region had already seen a major confrontation in the beginning of Second World War when German forces launched their blitzkrieg on France using the same path.

Now, with tides of battle turned, Allied forces had parked themselves in the same region, preparing to use it against launching their major offensive against German mainland. The emotions in Allied Armies ran high at this juncture. They had successfully liberated almost all of the Western Europe from Nazi occupation and at the beginning of December, 1944 they were standing at the threshold of the door of Nazi regime, the cause of momentous suffering and unparalleled loss of life for millions of people.

The heavy Nazi defeat in USSR, resulting in almost total decimation of over half a million Nazi force had further created a positive mood of victory. It was not surprising that many of the army men and military officers were looking forward to end of War by 1st January, 1945. However, hopes of a quick victory took a setback as US intelligence gathered rumors mentioning a massive German counter attack. Prisoners captured and deserters from German army mentioned of large scale congregation of German military machine and personnel.

By 9th December, there were unconfirmed reports in Allied camps of an impending German maneuver, but there was hardly any decisive or concrete information available on which to base the response. For a short time the Army generals believed the military amassment to be of defensive in nature, aimed at protecting German borders (Astor, 1999). Meanwhile, around 12th

of December, in several cases of interrogation of bordering civilians, Allied soldiers learned of heavy movement of military equipments as well as arrival of hardcore Nazi troops –Wafen SS from Italy (Astor, 1999).

The reports created a scene of impending offensive assault. However, the report took more than a day in making its way to Army headquarters. As a matter of fact, riding on their feats of victory over Nazi Army in recent battles, American army had dangerously dropped its guard and slumbered in a zone of complacency. German spies reported that American guards manned their post for an hour after dark and then returned to base to emerge at the dawn.

This was in total disregard to the alert and caution required at the time of ongoing war situation. As confirmed by American commander of 106 division, before bulge, they were a nine to five army in Ardennes. The Nazi Ardennes offensive was prepared by Hitler himself and it was based on standard German strategy of achieving maximum damage through surprise. Towards this purpose, German forces maintained total radio silence, putting Allied forces completely in dark on the movements and intentions of their enemies.

While Allied armies rested through first half of December, German panzer divisions, supported by large number of infantry troops were stealthily filtering through forests of Ardennes to catch Americans unprepared and off guard (Astor, 1999). Germany had indeed the plan well laid out for they had deliberately selected the most vulnerable section of American division for the first salvo. German batteries opened fire on the early morning of 16th December, 1945. The sixth panzer division showered 99th division with

heavy mortars and shells, severely destroying Allied communication lines (Astor, 1999).

The Fifth Panzer division, supported by Seventh Army, tore into Allied forces, virtually annihilating the opposition out of way. The attack was so intense that it literally cut down large number of trees surrounding the Allied camps, and falling tree trunks became another mortal hazard for the soldiers scrambling for cover and their life. Allied forces soon galvanized their response and within an hour of initiating attack, the 277th division found itself facing a barrage of shots and ammunition from Allied forces, and especially American soldiers.

In fact at many places German forces suffered heavy casualty. However, German preparations were fairly elaborate and troops stationed near Sauer River and Sauer town witnessed the amazing scene of searchlights reflected through low hanging clouds, illuminating long stretches of path for German forces while providing little guidance to Allied troops of the location or position of their formidable adversaries (Astor, 1999). The adversaries indeed proved too formidable and they incessantly and mercilessly poured down heavy shells, bombs and fire on a force caught completely off balance.

The impact of the German affront forced American divisions to move back; they hoped to assemble at a safe place and then mount an effective counter strike. But the rapidly advancing tanks units of German Army stripped the retreating American troops of any assemblage point inflicting waves after waves of massive casualty. To support the army motorized units, approximately thousand planes of Luftwaffe hovered over the scene,

dropping paratroopers, reconnaissance and when the opportunity presented, strike the visible American targets.

The swift German attack had also been successful in creating wedge between First and Third Army, and separated British forces from American units. The German armies continued their rampant attack for three full days, causing heavy casualties on Allied forces. Meanwhile, the Allied generals, under leadership of General Eisenhower and command of General Patton were already planning counteroffensive against German divisions. Eisenhower and the Allied command well understood the fact that German were counting on their success upon same speed and thrust that had achieved in the initial years of wars (Astor, 1999).

However, Ardennes presented a different topography that was too rough and too uneven for quick, breezy movements. Further, the time of year being December, the entire area was covered with snow and it considerably slowed down German Operations. The principle aim of advancing German army was to cross the Meuse River, using the cover of surprise and stealth for their infantry to cut through Allied lines. Behind them Panzer divisions would coast easily, mowing down remaining resistance and cross the River.

Once across the river, they would turn and head for the crucial port of Antwerp that they aimed to capture in order to cut off Allied supplies and force them to capitulation. However, German forces, in all their haste to advance, could not discount the natural adversities of fog, snow, inclement weather and hostile terrain. The Allied armies used these natural disadvantages well against advancing German battalions to halt them in their track and in the process cause severe damage to their resources. The

Allied high command also sent quick reinforcement to flanks under pressure of heavy enemy fire thereby negating the German success.

The resolute stand by Allied armies and their refusal to submit to overwhelming German armor virtually stalled the German advances (Astor, 1999). By December 18, from the strategy point of view the German High Command had known that their operation was destined towards failure. If they continued to pursue it, it was done with the hope to inflict heavy damage on allied force and seize the initiative from them. The German fought desperately more because they knew that Antwerp presented them their only chance of survival, however slim it may be. In defense lay their total ruin (Astor, 1999; Smith, 1995)).

However, as US generals later estimated, Germany faced total ruin in either of the situation. It was essentially stripped of the substance to reverse balance of power in Europe. With Allied forces pressing it from the West, and Russian forces blowing it from East, the German defeat had become a certainty that even most optimistic of Nazi generals knew. If anything, the battle of Bulge brought their ruin sooner than later. By 20th of December, Allied generals had taken complete stock of the situation and prepared their counter plan with the aim to completely neutralize the Nazi striking potential (Smith, 1995; Cooper, 1998).

By 22nd of December, Allied airplanes, comprising of bombers and fighters, started to wreck havoc on German armored units. Although Luftwaffe tried to counter the Allied airplanes, but it was outnumbered and beaten out of contest. By December 24, Allied bombing of German rail movements, their communication line, their armored divisions and their supply lines created a

condition of virtual siege for German army, that starved in absence of supplies, ammunition and fuel (Smith, 1995). Nazi units were severely short of fuel, that had, for all the practical purpose, rendered them cripple and worthless from battle point of view (Smith, 1995).

From Christmas of 1944, the definitive allied ground counterstrike began against defeated and retreating German armies. German encirclement of town of Bastogne was broken down by January 3 and by January 10 the two division of advancing Allied forces from two directions were at a distance of mere 10 km from each other, allowing the Nazi forces a very narrow corridor to ensure their escape (Smith, 1995). It had taken exactly a month to turn German position into a hopeless one, from where almost no escape was possible. By January 16 the combined allied forces were rapidly closing down on them.

The severe damages suffered by Nazi forces that included 1, 20, 000 casualties (wounded and dead), loss of 600 tanks, 1600 planes, complete disruption of their communication lines and exhaustion of their fuel supply, had irrevocably broke their back. The offensive came to an end by January 25, resulting in an another major and decisive allied victory (Smith, 1995).
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