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AND WAR TIMES

“Auftragstaktik” is a Key Element for Success in Peace and War Times

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Content

Thesis Statement: “Auftragstaktik” has proven its worth in the past and is still an essential, modern leadership principle of today’s German Army. “Auftragstaktik” is a key element for success in peace and war times.

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Abstract

The paper will provide you with information about “Auftragstaktik” and it will explain with some examples how “Auftragstaktik” has proven its worth in history. “Auftragstaktik” is a command and control principle that emerged during the last 2 Centuries. For almost 100 years, “Auftragstaktik” is a part of German Army’s leadership philosophy. The development of “Auftragstaktik” was during war times but it has proved its worth in battle. “Auftragstaktik” is not a procedure of giving instructions but a form of leadership that is connected to a certain image of men and women as Soldiers.

Introduction

A Canadian Captain describes “Auftragstaktik” in one sentence: “An obscure German word related to an approach to warfare, nearly untranslatable into English, difficult to explain, probably even more difficult to comprehend” (O’Leary, 2004).

What is “Auftragstaktik?”

The German field manual, Command and Control in Battle (the bible of the German Army) describes “Auftragstaktik” very tersely: “Auftragstaktik is the pre-eminent command and control principle in the Army. It is based on mutual trust and requires each Soldier’s unwavering commitment to perform his duty. The military leader informs his intention, sets clear achievable objectives, and provides the required forces and resources. He will only order details regarding execution if measures, which serve the same objective, have to be harmonized, if political or military constraints require it. He gives latitude to subordinate leaders in the execution of their missions” (Widder, 2002).

Good tasting “Auftragstaktik” needs more ingredients than giving orders to a Soldier and allowing him freedom of action to execute it. The superior must provide all available resources necessary to execute the mission. He also has to detail the goal and the frame within which the subordinates have to achieve the mission. On the other hand, this means it becomes the Soldiers responsibility how to carry out the mission. The crucial factor for “Auftragstaktik” is the training during peace times. The training must focus on teaching Soldiers to think independently, to use their whole intelligence and personality, and to carry out the commander’s intent.

A German author wrote the following words in 1906: “We (the German Army), have no use for Soldiers without a will of their own and who will obey their leaders unconditionally. We

need self-confident men and women who use their whole intelligence and personality on behalf of the commander’s intent” (Widder, 2002).

The origins of “Auftragstaktik”

Field Marshal Helmut von Moltke, Chief of the General Staff of the Prussian Army from 1857 to 1888 is considered the founder of operational-level command and control and the spiritual father of operational principles. He also played a decisive role in the development of “Auftragstaktik.” Moltke promoted the introduction of “Auftragstaktik” in his writings, his publications but particularly in his everyday life as a leader. His main concern was to foster independent thinking and acting among his subordinates: “Diverse are the situations under which an officer has to act on the basis of his own view of the situation. It would be wrong if he had to wait for orders at times when no orders can be given. But most productive are his actions when he acts within the framework of his senior commander’s intent.” By saying this, Moltke stated a key principle of “Auftragstaktik:” the subordinate is to act within the guidelines of his superior’s intent. Knowing his superior’s intent, the subordinate thus works toward achieving it (Widder, 2002).

Helmuth von Moltke, also known among his colleagues as “the Golden Man,” had brilliant military leadership skills, talent as a writer, and a reputation for honesty and decency. Today historians regard him as the greatest military strategist of the late 1800s (Moltke, 2008).

Significant examples for “Auftragstaktik” in history

The German history is full of examples how “Auftragstaktik” has proven its worth. The following actions are perfect examples for “Auftragstaktik” during World War II.

The action at Eben Emael in 1940

One of the toughest and most modern fortifications in West Europe in 1939 was the Belgian fortress of Eben Emael just north of Liege. It was built on a 60-meter high, almost inapproachable steep hill protected by a watercourse. The fortress hosted 24 officers, 102 NCOs and 1059 Soldiers and was of vital importance for the Belgians in case of a German attack. It was supposed to block the deep-notched Albert-Canal and to secure the border until British and French troops arrive to support the Belgians. The German plan was to take the tough fortress with a surprise aerial attack. The seizure was very important to the successful completion of the French campaign by the Germans. First Lieutenant Rudolf Witzig and his paratrooper platoon received the order to conduct this special operation. The platoon was training and preparing the seizure for weeks under top-secret conditions. The execution of the mission was up to 1Lt Witzig, 2 Sergeant First Class, 22 Sergeants, and 57 Soldiers.

May 10, at 0430 11 tow planes were rolling down the runway and taking off towing the huge glider aircrafts. Each glider carried a troop of six to seven Soldiers. The start of this operation was star-crossed. The towrope of the glider aircraft of the assault force leader, 1LT Rudolf Witzig, ripped off and he had to make an emergency landing in an area near Cologne, which was approximately 100 kilometers from the desired objective. Troop Two did an emergency landing a few minutes later. Without a leading officer, the other troops continued the mission. At 0525, the tow planes released the glider aircrafts and they slid soundless toward the ground. Almost at the same time, each glider reached its desired destination. Under heavy machine gun fire, Sergeant Arent urged his men to the north corner of the fortress. They placed the first 12.5-kilogram demolition charge and busted a big hole in the casemate. They captured casemate 12 and its 3 75 millimeter canons after a short gun battle. Two troops landed so far

north that they were not involved in the attack. Because of the emergency landings of the two other troops, there were only seven troops fighting. It took the 55 men only ten minutes to eliminate the whole artillery of the fortress.

Troop Two, which had to force-land at the same time approximately 60 kilometers from its objective, took decisive action under the lead of Staff Sergeant Meier. He captured two cars and made his way through enemy forces. He decided to attack the Belgian forces in the environment of the fortress. He was wounded in action but imprisoned 121 Belgian Soldiers.

In the meantime, First Lieutenant Witzig summoned another tow plane and started his glider. A single glider landed in the fortress and the 1LT immediately assumed command of his assault force at 0830. The Belgians realized the hopeless situation and started to hit the surface of the fortress with their own Field Artillery. The intent was to banish the Germans and save their own troops in the inside of the fortress. The paratroopers took cover and busted their way in the inside. Heavy detonations in the depth of the fortress demoralized the moral of the Belgian troops and broke their resistance. The Germans controlled the whole fortress at 1400. The successful completion of this mission was the corner stone to ensure the German's advance across the Meuse River, and it was essential to the conclusion of the French campaign. The battle command skills and initiative of an officer and a noncommissioned officer were essential for the success. Both received the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross.

Counterattack by Staff Sergeant Schmitt in 1944

October 26, 1944, is going to be a decisive day for the infantrymen of Regiment 992. It is just after midnight and pitch dark when the enemy throws the combat patrol at the bridge. The demolition of the small bridge planned and prepared to be executed in case of an enemy attack cannot be triggered in time, and therefore the attacking English forces can penetrate the

regimental defense area. Battalion-size enemy forces are attacking the sector of the second and third Company. The defenders immediately launch a counterstroke during which their company commanders, the Lieutenants Boettcher and Janzik die. The weak forces cannot repel the enemy. The English attack can only be contained and brought to a stop temporarily. However, with the enemy's reserves located just south of the Ronco and pinned down by own heavy weapons for the time being, the situation remained critical. Should the enemy succeed in maintaining the bridgehead and even expand it during the next few hours, the regiment's entire front line – and even that of the division – are in danger.

The Regiment Commander appears at the battalion command post to be briefed about the situation. He orders to counterattack in the morning with the objective to push the enemy out of the defense sector and to re-establish the previous main combat line at the Ronco. The counterattack is scheduled for 0800. According to the operation plan, the three available tanks using the dirt roads along the Ronco are to attack the enemy's flank. Initially, the second and third companies are to stay in the positions they reached during the night, and later the reserves, the engineer and bicycle platoons should thrust forward through those positions. Finally, the battalion should reach their previous positions at the Ronco.

The attack is launched on time at 0800. The weather is unpleasantly cool and wet, the skies are cloudy, and the Apennine Mountains cannot be seen. There was heavy rainfall during the night, and the river stage is high. The “Tiger” tanks that are to lead the attack move forward, two on each side of a dirt road towards the Ronco, the third one initially remains on the road, then turns right and moves towards the main combat line in order to complete the outflanking maneuver. To the rear, in the ditches along the road, the engineer and bicycle platoons are waiting for their signal to attack. They are going to wait for quite a while, because this is the

moment of Feldwebel Anton Schmitt, a platoon leader of the second Company close to the enemy. He sees the Tigers moving and opening fire at the enemy's positions. All of a sudden, the staff sergeant understands what is happening. He feels that there is an opportunity to dislodge the enemy, an opportunity that is there for him right now, perhaps the only one, which most likely might be over by the time when the reserve platoons would come out of their ditches. It is imperative to exploit the surprise and confusion caused by the attacking tanks, and that can be done only now, at this very moment.

Without waiting for an order, the sergeant gathers the few men of the second Company around him that can be released and launches an attack. If the attack by the three tanks was a surprise for the English soldiers in the bridgehead, this raid by the second Company obviously throws them over completely. They had not expected the defenders in the Ronco positions to have that much energy left. The moving Germans are breaking into the first enemy positions, while the tanks are firing from the left and right. Hesitatingly at first, but then faster and faster the enemies leave the positions they had gained during the previous night. Staff Sergeant Schmitt and his men remain close on their heels. The enemy is repelled over the Ronco. The small bridge has long been battered down, and the river's floodwaters cut off any escape routes. The English are cramped together, and only a few of them can escape across the river. The opposite riverbank, however, is under fire by the first and fourth Battalion of Artillery Regiment 276.

Most of the English capitulate and are captivated. Four officers, including a field-grade officer and 122 Soldiers surrender to SSGT Schmitt and his men. The dangerous bridgehead has been eliminated, the previous main combat line at the Ronco re-established, and the enemy considerably weakened. The Bicycle and the Engineer Platoons, however, are still in their ditches along the road; they did not see any action during this operation at all. With only minor

own losses, SSGT Schmitt gained an important victory. The decisive factor was that he recognized the enemy’s weakness at the right moment, and based on this perception immediately made his decision without waiting for another order. Knowing his own assets and exploiting the enemy’s surprise, the sergeant achieved this success. The enemy, the fourth English Division, did not launch any other attacks in the section of Regiment 992. Inspired by the success of 1/992, the adjacent Infantry Regiment 994 achieved a similar victory against the first Battalion of the King’s Royal Rifles.

On November 25, 1944, SSGT Anton Schmitt was awarded the Knight’s Cross of the Iron Cross for “his brave and vigilant behavior” during that attack. On October 27, 1944, the Wehrmacht report stated matter-of-factly, “In the Adriatic Sea coast sector, north of Meldola, an enemy bridgehead across the Ronco was destroyed, and several hundred prisoners were taken.”

Gun Commander Sergeant Maurischat in 1939

During the campaign in Poland in 1939, the I. Battalion of the Flak (Air Defense Gun) Regiment moved from Ostrowiec, east of the Lysa Gora, towards Radom. The Flak battalion was subordinated to the Task Force (TF) “von Dietfurth” (reinforced Mounted Infantry Regiment 9). Up to the burning Sienno the advance was as planned, but then it became more and more stagnant. The leading elements of the TF made contact with the enemy. Soon it became clear that strong Polish forces had dug in around Ilza and offered strong resistance. Everything came to a halt. While the mounted infantrymen and other elements of the TF were engaged in increasingly intense combat east of Ilza, initially the light fifth Battery of the Flak Battalion was moved forward. It was to protect the flank against a long stretch of forest south of Ilza, where additional enemy units were assumed to hide. Around 1430, the battery moved into positions in the hilly terrain south of Pilatka with their two cm guns pointing to the south and west.

At 1800, the Polish, supported by artillery, tanks, and flamethrowers, launched their first counterattack south of Ilza, which, faltered. However, the situation became more and more dangerous, after the enemy, coming from Ilza, succeeded to push through to Pilatka.

Nearly at the same time weak friendly forces were still positioned in front of and on Elevation 246, only about 800 meters away from the “Old Entrenchment” occupied by enemy elements. Those mounted infantrymen being suppressed by enemy fire reported newly staged Polish forces. With the current firing positions, these fresh enemy forces were beyond the range of the fifth Battery, and the two heavy Flak batteries could not engage them by direct fire. Therefore, the Commander fifth Battery ordered the second gun to move forward and eliminate the newly reported enemy at the Old Entrenchment. First, the gun commander, Sergeant Maurischat, had his two cm gun with tractor vehicle move forward, exploiting every possible cover under heavy enemy artillery fire, up to a deep terrain gap to unlimber there. From there, the gun was moved up to a hillcrest just east of Elevation 246. Since the field of fire was not good enough yet, Sgt Maurischat decided to move into position directly on the adjacent Elevation 246. With the gun weighing 1760 pounds, the crew ran downhill in order to exploit the momentum for getting the piece up on the other side. They were stuck midway. However, since they had no choice but to go up there, Maurischat called out for assistance. Several infantrymen and officers of a forward observer position ran to help, and together they pushed the piece up until just below the summit of Elevation 246. The two cm gun was prepared for firing, the first magazine with 20 rounds shipped, and gunner Kniehase occupied his seat. Then Maurischat crawled up to the hillcrest and checked the situation. After having identified a nearby Polish heavy machine gun to be the most dangerous threat, he ordered his men to come forward.

Mobilizing all their energy the crew that was ready for action and waiting pushed the two cm gun – with the gunner on his seat - the last few yards from the reverse slope up to the crest. Within seconds, the gun was on the top of the hill, completely in the open and without any cover, only a short distance away from the Polish position. Maurischat identified the target to the gunner, who immediately acquired it and started firing. After a minor correction by the gun commander, the fire was right on the target. Before the Polish could open fire again, the gun flashed back to take cover on the reverse slope. Just in time – a second later concentrated enemy fire lashed over Elevation 246. SGT Maurischat stayed where he had been, and in cold blood, he spotted the next target and again ordered the gun to be moved up. This “forward and retreat” action was repeated eight times, and each time another machine gun or antitank gun could be silenced, or the sheaf of fire hit enemy infantry. Eventually hundreds of Polish soldiers were observed hastily retreating from their staging area and moving back westwards. At the end, gunner Kniehase attacked a high watchtower projecting above the Old Entrenchment. From there several heavy machine guns had excellent firing sectors. Four fire bursts from the two cm gun were enough to neutralize them.

Around Elevation 246, a single two cm air defense gun under SGT Maurischats leadership silenced the enemy’s weapons, interrupted the enemy’s offensive preparations, and took some pressure off his comrades.

The achievement of Sergeant Maurischat and his crew was not a single action. In the following night the German TF and the First Flak Regiment 22 was engaged in very intense combat, during which officers, NCOs and Soldiers had to give all they could. For the first time the Flak artillery assets with their light two cm guns and heavy 8.8 cm pieces proved their effectiveness in ground combat during this “Day of Ilza.” They had provided direct fire coverage

for infantrymen, repelled numerous enemy thrusts and attacks during night combat, and contributed essentially to the successful prevention of the planned Polish breakthrough to the Weichsel River.

Conclusion

The described actions are particular good examples of “Auftragstaktik.” The successful completion of the operations bases on the initiative and battle command skills of young officers and NCOs. “Auftragstaktik” will allow the German Army to master the increasingly complex challenges of the 21st century. “Auftragstaktik” is the key element for success in today’s difficult environment of peace missions and in the presence of new forms of modern warfare, such as terrorism. To make “Auftragstaktik” work, it takes the trust and confidence of superiors and the bravery and zest of actions of subordinates.

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