

TRAINING FOR THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL

by

L. D. HOLDER

Nearly four years ago the Army adopted operational art as a separate division of military studies, restoring the study of theater-level operations to doctrine after an absence of almost thirty years. By installing the operational level of war between strategy and tactics, the Army acknowledged that the planning and conduct of campaigns and the connecting of political goals to military means constitutes an activity different enough from tactics to merit separate study. So far this change has stimulated some thought and discussion in the service schools and has provoked some additional discussion in the journals. But it has yet to receive regular attention in the force.

In fact, this change is potentially one of the most significant the Army has made in many years. It will have real effect, however, only when we have taught the principles of operational art to our leaders and staff officers and trained the force in its practice. We then will have repaired a long-standing deficiency and made a notable contribution to national security.

Rectifying this deficiency is a major goal within TRADOC today. It will not happen, however, without a deliberate and effective training effort. And while it is important that we succeed in regaining a real operational capability, many difficulties lie before us. For instance, the Army's senior leaders, the men who must train the force, are proven tacticians but are as inexperienced as everyone else in the force at the operational level of war. The middle-grade officers who must perform operational staff duties and grow

into positions of senior leadership have studied and practiced tactical operations for their entire careers, but unless they have done it for themselves, they have not learned the skills associated with operational art.

Over the years we have watched operational levels of command disappear. Commanders, force designers, trainers, and military educators alike have let our joint training programs slip almost out of existence. And, generally, they have belittled the importance of joint staff training or even corps staff training in favor of tactical subjects.

Our schools have not troubled themselves too much with campaign studies until very lately, nor have we made time for or encouraged professional reading in large-unit operations in the officer corps. In sum, we have to recover a lot of ground before we can convert the ideals of doctrine into a real operational capability.

One aid to this effort will be the publication of a second edition of AirLand Battle doctrine. While the 1982 edition of FM 100-5 introduced operational art to American doctrine, it did not develop the subject in much detail. The second edition will do better at describing the nature of operational art and giving commanders and staff officers some general guidance on the subject. It will place operational art in its proper relationship to tactics and provide considerations for defensive and offensive campaign planning. At about the same time FM 100-5 is reissued, the Army also will publish manuals for corps operations and for

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the operations of echelons of command above corps level, which inevitably will have a strong bearing on training at the operational level.

This article is intended to describe in broad terms the training challenge of building an operational capability in a force with little recent experience in large-unit operations. It focuses mainly on the educational and training aspects of the problem, leaving aside the equally significant questions of force design and doctrinal development. Like other articles on the subject of operations in the US Army, this one is far from being comprehensive. We are just beginning to recapture our operational capability and we are a long way from prescriptions or summations. What we need most now are discussion and an accurate assessment of the requirements generated by the recognition of the operational art.

The primary message of this article is that it is not too soon to begin training at the operational level; the Army clearly is behind in the field and must make a concerted effort to expand and to accelerate its current training for the operational level of war. Expanded doctrine certainly will help to guide the Army's efforts, but what really will be necessary to translate concepts into reality is effective training and education. Some of the means of conducting this training are at hand. Others will have to be developed expressly to support operational-level training.

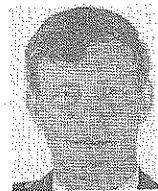
THE TRAINING CHALLENGE

The operational art is not firmly fixed to a specific echelon of command. The joint commander in a theater of war or a theater of operations is responsible for operational planning there and is assisted by service component commanders whose forces will vary with the nature of the operation. In a large, established theater the senior military authority may be a supreme allied commander who controls several army groups and air forces. In smaller contingency operations, the senior military commander may be a field army commander or a fleet commander whose operationally significant land force is a corps.

That being the case, it is necessary to train Army officers for operational responsibilities as members of joint, specified, and unified commands. Likewise, every staff from corps level up should be capable of supporting the operational demands of a higher headquarters and should be prepared to plan and direct campaigns in an independent theater of operations should that be necessary. Divisions and brigades will never have to plan campaigns, but their commanders and senior staffs will have to understand them so that they can act effectively in accord with their superior commanders' intentions. They also will have to be able to plan and execute the long-distance moves and short-notice commitments that constitute operational maneuver.

In more concrete terms, the training challenge is to produce leaders who can advise strategists on feasible, effective military goals and means in a theater and to train large units to carry out the campaigns necessary to achieve those objectives. Officers competent at the operational level of war must understand how large enemy forces can be defeated in a theater most economically, speedily, and effectively. They must be able to coordinate ground, air, and naval campaigns with civilian efforts in the pursuit of operationally worthwhile objectives. They must understand the movement, maneuver, employment, support, and intelligence requirements of large forces. And they must be able to weigh the pros and cons of fighting or not fighting at a particular juncture as well as formulating the operational actions that follow a battle and exploit its results. Lee's

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decision to fight at Gettysburg rather than maneuvering for a better opportunity is an example of the type and importance of the choices operational commanders have to make. Equally, Meade's decision not to pursue his beaten opponent was an operational choice about how the battle's outcome should be used.

Below that admittedly exalted level, there is a host of supporting skills and techniques that units must master. This more ordinary group of skills affects the actual movement, protection, and support of large forces. The first requirement for Leavenworth students at one time was to plan the movement of the Union Army of the Potomac from its positions around Fredericksburg, Virginia, to concentrate near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The supplies, route control, formations, and timing of such a move would challenge most staff officers and unit commands today. And with the addition of air defense, air support, modern logistics, and long-range fires of all types, the problem now would be much more complex.

In other words, the question of "how to fight" applies at the operational level of war just as it does to the tactical level. Unlike tactics, though, operations involves the other interrogatives as well: it concerns *who*, *when*, *where*, and *why* we fight. Those considerations and differences of scale make operations significantly different from tactics and justify special training emphasis. As in tactical training, there is an individual and a collective dimension to the training challenge. At the individual level, operational training centers on middle- and senior-grade officers, but it also requires preparatory education of some younger officers. At the collective level, it involves large-unit staffs and units from brigade up.

Since operational art lies between and to a degree overlaps the other levels of war, middle-grade staff officers and senior commanders who must understand operational art must also understand the nature of strategy and tactics. Officers trained in operational-level skills must be able to understand strategic priorities, requirements, and limitations as well as the nature and limitations of tactics. They also must be

familiar with the unique set of considerations that apply solely to the conduct of campaigns and represent the heart of operational art.

More than anything else, the Army needs to make a deliberate approach to the problem and make a conscious attempt to produce the leaders, staff officers, and units necessary to translate this important part of AirLand Battle doctrine into a real capability. Because of the nature of the subject, preparing officers in the skills necessary will involve both education and training. Because of the constraints on time, facilities, and people, individual and collective training should be done within the existing training structure as far as possible.

The last thing the Army needs today is another school for officers. Unquestionably, though, it needs a body of officers prepared to form, lead, and fight the large units—corps, armies, and army groups—that the nation would need in an extended mid- or high-intensity conflict.

TRAINING TO FIGHT

AirLand Battle doctrine gives us a set of guides for fighting that apply to the operational level as effectively as to the tactical level. By emphasizing synchronization, depth, agility, and above all, exercise of the initiative, the doctrine establishes goals for both levels. But FM 100-5 merely sets the goals; it does not prescribe techniques. It tells us where we want to go without saying how to get there.

That may be appropriate for an army with worldwide responsibilities that fields more than a single type of force, but it creates a complex training situation. Our deployed forces—light in Korea, heavy in Europe—may have to fight sustained defensive campaigns to assist allies in retaining territory or resisting attacks before they take the offensive themselves. In contingency operations, the Army could be called on to fight either offensive or defensive campaigns initially and to shift from one to the other fairly quickly.

The training task, then, varies. Despite a broad range of responsibilities, we have to identify the key tasks and requirements

applicable to any theater or conflict and train our leaders and units accordingly.

Individual Training. Starting at the top, we must provide joint force commanders and theater commanders with Army staff officers who are competent at all the levels of war. These officers must possess an advanced understanding of the highest levels of military art—not only the practical techniques of deploying, supporting, moving, and fighting large ground forces, but also the means of identifying and obtaining theater objectives, the principles of operational maneuver, and the coordination of joint and combined operations at the theater level. We send some good officers to joint operational staffs today, of course, but we cannot claim to have prepared them well or to have attached great prestige to their positions. The Army should begin its reconsideration of the problem by acknowledging that some specialization is required in operational staff officers. Indeed, it is not too much to say that developing the requisite skills is probably the work of a lifetime.

In general, we must improve the preparation of high-level staff officers by selecting them earlier, training and educating them more thoughtfully, and managing their assignments more deliberately. Little additional should be required of the military schools; instead, we should look to careful selection of qualified, capable officers and then groom them over a large part of their careers for specific duties in particular geographic locations.

We must identify officers with demonstrated potential for high-level command and staff positions fairly early in their careers. The first qualification, obviously, should be demonstrated effectiveness in troop assignments. The next, and far less obvious, should be preliminary education in military history and theory of the military profession. This need not be the result of formal training, nor need it be of a high order initially. Aptitude for the subjects and the willingness to study them independently are enough, but they are necessary. Only through mastery of military history and theory can operational specialists gain the wide frame of reference that is necessary in planning and directing cam-

paigns. The individual responsibility for this development will continue throughout the officers' careers. Nowhere is the aphorism "learning is a lifestyle for leaders" more meaningful.

The Command and General Staff College is the place to start finding such self-starters and refining their education and training. Their continued education is a matter of hard work at studying and analyzing major operations until the principles are second nature to the student. Education really is a fairly simple task for the training base once candidate officers have been identified. The second-year program at the School of Advanced Military Studies does some of this now.

Training is a little harder. Periodically large-unit commanders and their staff officers should be put through exercises designed to improve their joint staff skills and their expertise in both the geographic areas of their assignment and in the principles of the operational level of war. And, as little as we need to add to the training base, we need as a minimum some courses in the established field-grade schools to develop high-level staff officers. CGSC and the war colleges have a large responsibility here. Since our doctrine now requires that the schools teach the operational level of war, though, their faculties should be prepared to give special attention to officers who "major" in the subject. In particular, Leavenworth must begin this process for middle-grade officers, and Carlisle must pick up the task with senior officers. CGSC should stress corps and army operations, the tactics-to-operations link, while Carlisle should emphasize army and theater operations to fulfill the goals of strategy.

We also should consider more carefully who is sent to air, naval, and allied war colleges and how we employ the graduates of those institutions. Those officers should be selected with specific joint or combined assignments in mind and should be expected to develop into the Army's specialists in joint and combined operations.

Because operations, unlike tactics, tend to vary strongly from theater to theater, we should repetitively reassign operational

specialists to Asia, Europe, and contingency-oriented commands throughout their active service. Ideally, selected officers with troop experience in each theater would be further trained in the principles of operational art in the schools and employed in staff and command positions of increasing responsibility in that theater. With such a program in effect from the tenth year of service, such officers could be trained at CGSC, the School of Advanced Military Studies, the war colleges, and language schools for one primary area of operations.

They also should train in the operational aspects of a standard military specialty—intelligence, operations, special operations, or logistics. Their field assignments from corps to army to joint headquarters in the same theater would produce in a short time something unusual and valuable to us: experts in large-unit operations valuable anywhere, but especially capable in a particular area.

For equity considerations, our bias toward generalist training, and an entrenched condescending attitude toward staff assignments all would have to be overcome. The fears of elitism and unworldly detachment that come forward whenever such programs have been proposed also would have to be allayed. But the goal is worthwhile. We do similar things for foreign area officers and military intelligence specialists, and the result of improving our operational capability and the quality of our staff support to senior commanders would justify the effort. Far from producing a body of eggheads and theorists, this kind of training would develop the men of proven professional maturity and discipline best suited for leadership at echelons above corps—the Eisenhowers, Pattons, MacArthurs, and Marshalls of this generation.

Collective Training. Unit training and the training of large-unit staffs is a different problem. Here, too, we should look for economies, using existing exercises to train corps and larger staffs concurrently with smaller units. Many of our larger exercises could be modified to train large-unit staffs simultaneously with the training of other

soldiers and units. As an example, the REFORGER series of exercises must be played out in a maneuver box that scarcely challenges divisions. With little change to the field training exercises, however, army-level formations could expand their own activities and derive valuable training from that established set of maneuvers.

They might, for example, conduct command post exercises that would call on them to concentrate, fight, and support much larger forces than the units actually involved in the field training exercise. Such CPXs would precede, parallel, and usually outlast the FTX with which they were associated. Corps staffs that now merely run FTXs or command reinforced divisions would have to do a great deal more under those circumstances.

For instance, they might be required to move real and simulated units on short notice from marshaling areas and ports of debarkation simultaneously while arranging for the support of the entire force, real and imaginary, throughout the theater. To increase the training value of such exercises, an army-level chief umpire would assign missions and task organizations later in the exercise planning cycle than is now the case. He also would intervene periodically to change missions, force lists, enemy situation, and friendly force orientation. In doing all this he would need to work from an exercise situation far more extensive than the actual FTX, which might be left behind in far-ranging exercises elsewhere on the map.

This would pay a double dividend. It would end the unrealistic year-long preparations now made for the movement of relatively small deploying units and European-based player units. More importantly, it would test and strengthen the capabilities of our corps and larger-unit staffs.

On a more ambitious scale, we should recreate the Louisiana and Tennessee maneuvers of the 1940s both here and overseas. That would entail massing forces from all over the theater in question to “fight” campaigns of realistic depth and length. Divisions would play with small cells

and by exception some brigade and regimental staffs would participate to learn the business of conducting sustained operations and long-range moves and to ask the pertinent questions that would arise from the tactical level.

The main thrust of the exercises, however, would be at corps level and at higher echelons of command. Army groups would fight one another over great distances. The questions of campaign planning, air-ground cooperation at the operational level, support of large forces in the field, intelligence collection, and the coordination of large forces could be explored. Great insights to command and control, staff organization and procedures, and operational techniques could be gained in such exercises. Infrequently examined subjects such as port management, control of communications zones, special operations, civil-military and psychological operations, airborne and amphibious operations, and force packaging and deployment all could be explored. The reserve component combat service support operations on which we rely so heavily also could be wrung out in such exercises.

These "maneuvers" could last for months as a combination of in-garrison, duty-hour CPXs run at a controlled pace and full-speed field phases in which large staffs actually displace as necessary to direct the action. Analyses of both phases of these exercises would offer valuable insights to commanders, military educators, force designers, and trainers.

TRADOC could umpire and critique such exercises. Where staffs do not exist to oppose, say, CENTAG or Third Army, temporary headquarters could be formed from schools and existing headquarters. Overseas commands might base such exercises on historic campaigns in their areas to compare and contrast their results with those of experience. Units in the United States could run their exercises almost anywhere over wide areas and in the great variety of terrain our country offers. Since only a small number of trucks, aircraft, and radios would be involved, the exercise would attract little notice and cause few difficulties in the exercise area.

Contingency-type forces could perform the same sort of exercises—indeed, they do some now on a modest scale. For them, though, the aspects of short-notice actions and joint and combined operations should be even more strongly stressed. If any lesson stands out clearly from the operation in Grenada, it is that our joint training occasionally should put ground, air, and naval components together as joint task forces almost overnight and call on them to perform difficult operational tasks.

At lower levels of command the collective training of certain units requires modification that will not fit neatly into the existent training program. Divisions and their brigades must be able to make the moves necessary for successful concentration for battle and for exploitation of a battle's results. These transitional maneuvers are not operational movements per se, but they represent tactical skills of great importance that receive little attention. It would be useful for our deployed corps and instructive to the whole force if instead of crafting a highly structured offensive-defensive problem, we devoted one year's REFORGER to a meeting engagement between opposed reinforced divisions.

Corps and army troops face an even larger training problem. Undermanned and undertrained in many cases, these units tend to train in sedentary, constricted exercises that bear no resemblance to the conditions of active campaigning. Yet these brigade-sized units are vital to coherent large-force operations; their synchronized activities are the glue that holds a corps or army operation together.

Specifically, the motorized division, the armored cavalry regiments, the ADA brigades, the MI brigades, and the high-level engineer, signal, aviation, and combat service support units need to be exercised much more realistically. Maintaining air defenses over a reserve corps that has been committed to exploit an offensive success or to counterattack would strain the capabilities of most ADA brigades at their current level of training. Reconnoitering to the corps front and flanks at high speed would present an equally demanding task to any of our ACRs.

And controlling the routes, collecting the intelligence, providing the logistic support, and maintaining the communications involved in moving 40 kilometers a day from its starting position probably would be beyond the abilities of most corps and army combat service support units today.

The requirement is clearly there, though, and meeting it is not impossible. Training and ARTEPS for those units must be drawn to the scale of their actual operations. This means training outside the training areas and designing evaluations that are more demanding than those we have now. Imaginative commanders will need little assistance in putting such exercises together: TRADOC must, however, produce the supporting doctrine and evaluation guides for them.

CONCLUSION

New weapons of warfare call for the total and radical reorganization of methods of warfare, and he who falls asleep during this process of reorganization may never wake up.

—Mikhail Tukhachevskiy

The Army stands at a critical point in its development. We have made many modifications to the force in the past few years, and a number of doctrinal and organizational changes are still before us. It is vitally important that we accurately gauge the nature of future wars and configure our force to be ready for them when they occur. Nothing now occurring exceeds in importance the need to reclaim our capability at the operational level of war. Without developing a logic that converts strategic ends to military goals and

gives shape to our tactical actions, we cannot assure our future success in war.

The current reconstitution of a few corps-level support units is a tentative step that will give us a few of the tools necessary to convert theory into capability, but much more remains to be done in the areas of doctrine, force design, and training. Operational art has opened a few doors already by its mere appearance in our manuals, but a real understanding of it throughout the force could wholly transform our view of war. It is vital that we all understand the operational level of war and start training now to gain a real capability in its execution. Without such a change we are prone to struggle again through a series of tactical successes in the next war without producing any useful result for the nation.

As we concentrate on the subject of operations and improve our capabilities at that level, one fundamental point must be understood throughout the force. The Army is broadening its approach to warfare, but the new emphasis on the operational art does *not* detract from the importance of tactics. Instead, it calls on us to master another important aspect of our profession—the design and execution of the operational actions that make good tactics pay off.

We must preserve our excellence in tactics while improving our capabilities for large-unit operations and the conduct of campaigns. We must recognize that without an underlying operational logic, even an unbroken string of tactical victories leads nowhere.

