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Can a Battle be Lost in the Mind of the Commander?

Colonel Theodore L. Gatchel, US Marine Corps

One of the current fashions among military writers is to disparage the “can do” spirit of certain military organizations. Such a spirit can undoubtedly cause problems if carried to the extreme of “We can do anything with whatever resources we are given, no matter how inadequate they may be.” Even that exaggerated point of view is less dangerous, however, than the increasingly popular one that seems to say, “We would be overwhelmed by the Soviets in any war against them regardless of what percent of our national treasure we devote to defense.” The danger of such a negative view lies in the fact that the outcome of a battle depends on the perceptions of the opposing commanders as well as the actual conditions on the battlefield.

The day when a commander could literally see the entire battle unfold before him and base his decisions on first-hand information has been replaced by a time when commanders at all levels, save the lowest, must base their decisions on second-hand, frequently inaccurate, information that may be outdated by the time it reaches the man who needs it. These shortcomings, combined with the speed with which forces can be moved today, have considerably thickened Clausewitz’s well-known “fog of war.” After visiting the Bulgarian Army in Thrace during the Balkan War of 1912, a British staff officer wrote with no small amount of prescience: “In fact, in large-scale modern battles there must often be a period when the confusion is so great that none of the actors really know which side is winning or which side has lost—nobody knows the *total* score along a line 25, 50 or 100 miles long. If that is so, then there must often be a period when the result hangs in the balance, when those who can be made to *think* that they are winning will win; and those that think that they are losing will be lost—whatever be the real state of affairs as a whole.”¹

A small scale but instructive example of a battle being won or lost in the minds of the opposing commanders is the struggle for the control of Hill 107, that occurred during the German invasion of Crete in 1940. By May of that year the Germans had successfully completed their hastily conceived and executed conquest of Greece. Greek and British Commonwealth forces that

had escaped the German net had been evacuated to Crete where they waited for the situation to develop. Although suffering from the psychological impact of their recent defeat, the Allied forces were adequate in both size and combat readiness to place the outcome of any German assault on the island in doubt.

General Kurt Student, Commander of the *Luftwaffe's* XI Air Corps and the German officer responsible for the invasion of Crete, fully understood the risks he was taking. Student's plan called for the rapid seizure of at least one of Crete's three airfields (Maleme, Retimo, Heraklion) by elements of the 7th Parachute Division. Once an airfield had been secured, the bulk of the invading force would be flown in by transport aircraft. The German plan was a bold one, particularly in light of the fact that the preparations in Greece for such an operation precluded secrecy. The Allied commanders also appreciated the importance of the airfields but, at the same time, mistakenly believed that the Germans might try to crash-land transports on open areas throughout the island. In general, however, the Allied forces were well deployed to meet the German assault.

When the assault came at 0715 on 20 May 1941, the Germans found themselves literally jumping into a maelstrom. The division commander was killed on the way to Crete when his glider came apart in mid-air. The commander of the 1st Assault Regiment, which landed at Maleme, was severely wounded within minutes of landing. Many of his men met the same fate. Within an hour, all of the officers of the 3d Parachute Battalion were either dead or seriously wounded. In the ensuing battle, 400 of that unit's 600 men, including the battalion commander, were killed in action. As other airborne assaults have done since, the battle for Maleme airfield rapidly deteriorated into savage fighting between small groups of men who were frequently isolated from their parent commands.

Because of Allied success in containing the German air drops at Retimo and Heraklion, the focus of the battle for Crete soon shifted to Maleme. Control of this vital airfield, in turn, required possession of Hill 107, a rise of ground that dominated the airfield itself. Hill 107, along with the airfield, was defended by the 22d Battalion of the 5th New Zealand Brigade. The battalion commander, Lt. Col. L.W. Andrew, had deployed his battalion around the airfield in a series of company positions. Lt. Col. Andrew located himself with the company that was dug in on Hill 107. In addition to his own 644 men, Andrew could call on reinforcements from two of the 5th Brigade's other battalions that were located immediately east of Maleme airfield. Because of the extreme importance of Hill 107, Lt. Col. Andrew had been ordered to hold it "at all costs."²

From the very start, Hill 107 proved to be a tough nut for the Germans to crack. The glider assault group initially ordered to take the hill met with disaster. Smashed gliders and withering fire from the New Zealanders on the

hill reduced the attacking force to a small group of survivors pinned to the lower slopes, unable to move forward. The remnants of the ill-fated 3d Parachute Battalion fared no better on the other side of Hill 107. After a relatively successful drop west of Maleme, yet another battalion, the 4th, had fought its way east to the base of Hill 107 but had suffered heavily in the process. That night the battalion commander, Capt. Walter Gericke, received an order to seize the hill "at all cost."³ By that time Captain Gericke was facing a host of problems. He had no contact with, or reliable information about, the other German forces scattered around the base of Hill 107. The men who remained under his command were exhausted from a day of fighting in intense heat with little water and uniforms that were much too heavy. To add to his troubles, he was running out of ammunition and had little information about the enemy he faced. That enemy, it turns out, was in much better shape than might have been expected. The companies of the 22d Battalion were generally intact, still in good defensive positions and more than willing to fight. Unfortunately, Lt. Col. Andrew did not realize his good fortune. Lacking radios, Andrew relied on telephones and runners for contact with his companies. Once the battle started, phone lines were soon cut, and German fighter aircraft prevented the New Zealanders from moving around the battlefield by day. Even visual contact was reduced by thick clouds of dust. By nightfall Andrew had lost contact with his subordinates. This isolation, combined with the other uncertainties that existed in Andrew's mind, apparently produced in him a state of mental paralysis. One factor contributing to his discomfiture was the perception shared by many Allied commanders about the capability of the German airborne arm. One part of this image was fully justified by the performance of the parachutists and glider troops in Norway, the Low Countries and in Greece itself. The second part, on the other hand, was based on rumors, fears, exaggerated news reports and Nazi propaganda. In hindsight, the capabilities attributed to the airborne forces by these latter sources appear almost comical.* At the time, however, it made the German *fallschirmjaeger* appear to be a sinister, omnipotent enemy, a picture remarkably similar to the view many US naval officers seem to have formed about the Soviet Backfire bomber. In any case, Andrew convinced himself that his lack of contact with his companies meant that his command had been destroyed. Accordingly, while Captain Gericke mustered his forces at the base of the hill for yet another attack, Lt. Col. Andrew began a withdrawal from the crest. The reaction of the first Germans to reach the empty trenches on top of the hill was that of utter disbelief. Even after having gained a clearer picture of the state of his battalion, Andrew remained pessimistic enough to reject the idea of an immediate counter-attack. The situation could still have been reversed. In the words of one

*Large numbers of parachutists landing disguised as nuns and priests were reported during the invasion of Holland, for example.

of the German officers that had reached the top of Hill 107 that night, "Fortunately for us the New Zealanders did not counterattack. We were so short of ammunition that, had they done so, we should have had to fight them off with stones and sheath-knives."⁴ Daylight brought with it the return of the *Luftwaffe*, both fighters for support and transports filled with infantry reinforcements. The tide of battle was shifting. Although Andrew was absolved of any blame, most observers agree that his withdrawal from Hill 107 was the turning point in the battle for Crete.

Why did Lt. Col. Andrew abandon such a strong position under the circumstances he faced? Why, on the other hand, did Captain Gericke persevere in the face of such overwhelming odds? The answer cannot be found in terms of personal bravery, at least not in the commonly accepted sense of the term. In that respect, both men were remarkably similar. Lt. Col. Andrew had received the Victoria Cross in WWI for heroism under fire. Captain Gericke received the German equivalent of the V.C., the Knight's Cross, for his actions on Crete. If there is an answer, it lies in understanding how the two commanders dealt with the many uncertainties that faced them on that critical night in Crete. Captain Gericke perceived that he could win. Lt. Col. Andrew perceived that he had already lost. In effect, the issue was decided in the minds of the two commanders and not on the battlefield.

Regardless of what might have caused the differing perceptions of these two opponents, the results of those perceptions suggest at least two actions for us today. First, we must somehow develop in our own commanders' minds the perception that we can fight the Soviets and win. In other words, our commanders must learn to think more like Captain Gericke than Lieutenant Colonel Andrew. Second, we must induce the opposite perception into the thinking of our potential enemies. Such a view would not only contribute to deterrence but, if called upon, would pay dividends on today's battlefield as great as those that were afforded the Germans on Hill 107 in 1941.

Notes

1. Howell, *The Campaign in Thrace, 1912* (London: Hugh Rees, 1913), pp. 137-138.
2. I. McD. G. Stewart, *The Struggle for Crete 20 May-1 June 1941* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 236.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 259.
4. Cajus Bekker, *The Luftwaffe War Diaries* (London: Macdonald, 1966), p. 194.



Taking Sides, Again

Sir,

I am writing in regard to the review of *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel*, published in the July-August 1984 issue. Your reviewer, like the author of the book, apparently lacks a firm background in the murky details of the Arab-Israeli conflict. As a result, he did not recognize that what might appear to be a "sober but convincing case" is, in reality a poorly disguised anti-Israeli polemic. All the material presented in the volume was based on a carefully and purposefully chosen set of U.S. government documents. Many are "raw" intelligence reports of dubious reliability, merely entered into files without comment. Had the author, (or reviewer) bothered to check, he would have found contradictory documents in every instance. The very fanciful theories are not based on the cold evaluation of the available evidence, but on the author's propagandistic objectives.

The case of the U.S.S. *Liberty* presents a particularly important example of the techniques employed in the book. As Goodman and Schiff demonstrate conclusively in their exhaustive analysis of the incident, (see *The Atlantic*, September 1984), this tragic incident was the result of a combination of US and Israeli intelligence errors during the "fog of battle." The very partial evidence presented in this book is designed not to enlighten, but to create an historically inaccurate version of events which turn Israel into the villain.

In a general sense, Stephen Green, the author of *Taking Sides*, is a member of the "anything is plausible" school of evidence. In the place of facts, this school believes in a coarse mixture of a few facts, a clear villain, and a bit of imagination. (The now-popular theory that the US arranged to have KAL flight 007 shot-down by the USSR, presents a similar combination of polemic and plausibility.) This case demonstrates again that a little knowledge, particularly in the form of "raw" declassified documents, is a dangerous thing.

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Nato Credibility

Sir,

This letter is written in concerned response to Karl Kaiser's article "Nato Strategy Toward the End of the Century," published in the January-February 1984 issue. I was somewhat troubled by this article after my initial reading, and was even more disturbed after a recent second reading.

While I agree with many of Kaiser's thoughts, his thesis regarding the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence in Europe requires careful, critical analysis. Kaiser argues that NATO's option of early nuclear response, currently embodied in the "flexible response strategy" with the open option of first use of tactical nuclear weapons, has preserved the peace in Western Europe since World War II. He acknowledges that no "final evidence" of this thesis can be provided, but describes it as "in the realm of a relatively convincing probability." He then proceeds to use the premise that nuclear deterrence has prevented European war to argue against endorsing a no-first-use agreement regarding nuclear weapons. He also sees a no-first-use pact as a severe dilution of United States commitment to Western European security.

These arguments appear to rest on the rather fundamental proposition that, were it not for NATO nuclear deterrence, the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies would have long ago invaded Western Europe. Furthermore, the flexible response strategy is seen as the key to this deterrence, and Kaiser argues for the strengthening of this strategy. Interestingly, Western Europe was markedly *uncomfortable* with flexible response during its implementation by President Kennedy and Secretary of Defense McNamara in the early 1960's. Henry Kissinger, in his 1965 book *The Troubled Partnership*, described in detail the Western European objections to instituting the flexible response strategy in place of the prior Eisenhower-Dulles strategy of massive retaliation. It was predicted at that time that the U.S.S.R. would see flexible response as an opportunity to invade or blackmail Western Europe with much less risk, and flexible response was seen in many European capitals as a severe decrease in American commitment to the security of its NATO allies! Thus, the arguments which Kaiser uses in support of flexible response were once used against it by his predecessors!

Secondly, it should not be uncritically assumed that nuclear deterrence, in whatever form, is the only thing which has effectively blocked Warsaw Pact expansion into Western Europe. It is clear that worldwide expansion of communism remains a goal of the Kremlin. It is much less clear that such an expansion *by force* would have been attempted in Western Europe were it not for NATO nuclear power. Indeed, cogent arguments to the contrary have been presented. George Kennan, in *The Nuclear Delusion*, argues that the U.S.S.R. has not invaded Western Europe, and is unlikely to do so in the future, at least partly because of a recognition by the Soviet leaders that they could not then effectively control the Western European people. Kennan's argument deserves careful consideration. The Soviet Union has had frequent problems keeping its Eastern Europe satellites "in line," even though these countries came under Soviet domination immediately after a world war which had devastating effects on their economies, populations, and nationalistic fervor. In 1984, the Western European countries are in far better condition. Economically, Western European countries are relatively healthy, with a standard of

living far exceeding that typical in Eastern Europe. While political dissension does exist, the national pride and unity in Western European nations is strong, certainly strong enough to have resulted in important intramural disputes within the NATO alliance! Clearly, even if it succeeded in overrunning Western Europe, the Soviet Union would have very severe problems in controlling these countries, infinitely greater than those they have faced in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Afghanistan. The Soviet military commitment which would be required to maintain any semblance of control in Western Europe would be a severe economic drain, and could be so great as to leave the Soviets vulnerable in other areas, such as their border with China. Such an economic drain and/or military vulnerability would not serve the Soviets' vital interests.

In summary, those who are concerned about the security of Western Europe should remain aware of all arguments and theories regarding that security. Kaiser is correct: there is a one hundred percent correlation between NATO nuclear power and Western European peace since World War II. However, a correlation only means that two things have occurred together. It does *not* prove that one has caused the other! Other factors, such as those noted by Kennan, may also have contributed greatly to Soviet caution. The Soviets do have vital interests in addition to avoiding nuclear annihilation over Europe, perhaps including avoiding overextending themselves economically, militarily, and politically in Europe. It would behoove NATO to do all it can to remind the Soviets that this is true. Further increasing the nationalism and political unity of the Western European people would do much to remind the Soviets of the severe burden they would incur by invasion or nuclear blackmail. A decrease in NATO reliance on nuclear strategy could, as noted by Kaiser, do much to increase the political cohesiveness of Western Europe's citizens, and this increased cohesiveness could well offset any decreased military risk to the U.S.S.R. Furthermore, it would also decrease the risk of expansion of communism to Western Europe through internal political upheaval as opposed to outside invasion. NATO would do well to recognize and maximize *all* factors which contribute to its own security.

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British View of Falklands Air War

Sir,

As the CO of 801 Royal Navy Sea Harrier squadron which operated from HMS *Invincible* during the Falklands War, I feel I must respond to some of the issues raised by Commander Colombo in his account of his squadron's part in the campaign. I do so not simply to correct some of the misapprehensions which I believe are reflected in the article, but more especially to give balance to his conclusions and lessons learnt, which could be misleading.

The first point I should make is that notwithstanding the spirited performance of his squadron which I acknowledge, the fact is that they failed in a first principle—the

maintenance and achievement of the Aim. Their aim was doubtless to deprive the task force of its already limited air power by sinking or totally disabling at least one or preferably both of the British aircraft carriers in the Force, HMS *Invincible* and HMS *Hermes*. As one who was there throughout the campaign, I can assure readers that neither ship was hit by any form of ordnance, Exocet or iron bomb, at any time. The implied claim of an Exocet hit on HMS *Invincible* on 30 May 1982, to quote, “. . . the other two (aircraft) indicated that they followed the missile's trajectory and arrived at the objective (HMS *Invincible*) which was wrapped in a dense smoke which was a consequence of missile impact only an instant beforehand” reflects either—a not uncommon feature under stress—that people believe what they want to believe rather than the hard evidence before them, or that their observation was poor and totally inadequate; or perhaps it was pure propaganda. In any event they were quite wrong, and neither carrier was hit!

Had either carrier been disabled or sunk, this would undoubtedly have affected the course of the air war. Sea Harrier might not have been able to dominate the airspace over the islands to the degree that it did. (The aircraft could of course have operated from a disabled platform, such is the joy of VSTOL!) At the end of the day, therefore, the Etendard effort failed to have the impact on events which they desired and trained for. In the event all their training and planning resulted in the sinking of one escort and one merchantman: a far cry from *Invincible*, and a great deal less than they hoped and planned for.

Several other points arise from the author's narrative.

Training. The delivery of a stand-off air-to-surface guided weapon is not as demanding as the author would have the reader believe. That it should require “hundreds” of practice launches before the event may be interpreted in one of two ways: either the statement is an exaggeration, or the pilots concerned were at a lower level of training than my own team. Whatever the reason, the task is hardly high-work load or “very complicated,” particularly by day. Tactically, the training left something to be desired: why else did the pilots attack the wrong ships?

Pre-war preparations. The huge effort that reportedly went into preparing for attacks on British warships before the declaration of hostilities puts the sinking of the *Belgrano* into perspective. The Argentines apparently had every intention of sinking our capital ships but were unable to do so.

Operational launch of the first air-to-air surface missile. Although the author's enthusiasm on this matter is understandable, he is nevertheless mistaken in his claims. The first operational success with an air-to-surface missile in fact took place off South Georgia when a Royal Navy helicopter successfully attacked the surfaced Argentine submarine *Santa Cruz* with an AS12 missile.

There are, I suggest, flaws in the conclusions and lessons which Commander Colombo chooses to draw from his squadron's part in the war stemming from the fact: in the final analysis the Argentine air forces failed to achieve either their strategic aim of preventing the deployment of maritime power—including its organic air power—to retake the Falkland Islands, and his squadron failed to achieve the tactical aim of sinking or wholly disabling one or both aircraft carriers. He ignores the major deficiency of the task force in the lack of AEW, a deficiency that might have been remedied. He disregards the importance of target identification and

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post strike reconnaissance and intelligence, factors which (unless the reports are propaganda fabrications) led Argentine commanders to conclude that a carrier had been disabled or sunk—a conclusion that could have been disastrous for them had the Argentine Navy been more adventurous, notwithstanding their deep rooted fears following the *Belgrano* sinking. In short, I suggest that the real lessons of the air war in the wider context are:

- Fighter Ground Attack aircraft carrying stand-off air-to-surface missiles constitute a threat to Naval Forces which can affect tactical deployment.
- Accurate target identification is essential if strikes by such aircraft are to be effective and achieve their aim.
- Accurate and timely post strike intelligence is important in the appreciation of force capabilities following an attack.
- AEW is vital.
- Organic maritime air power equipped with rugged, capable, versatile aircraft, and with highly trained, bigly motivated crews, operating from well exercised platforms, can take on and defeat air forces—even at a numerical disadvantage of some 8 to 1, to the extent of effectively destroying the main part of those air forces.

In no way do I wish to depreciate the spirit and courage displayed by many Argentine aircrew—Naval and Air Force—but I believe the real results as well as the experiences of my own squadron, cast doubts on the lessons they claim from their activities, and on their training and preparedness. The outcome of the air war in the South Atlantic, in the end, speaks for itself.

Commander N.D. Ward, DSC, AFC
Royal Navy

