

A Private's Viewpoint on AirLand Battle



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Is the AirLand Battle doctrine sound, and will it work for the US Army? Before looking for answers, you must consider what the doctrine is. AirLand Battle doctrine is a refined form of combined arms operations that is highly flexible and adaptable in most battlefield environments. It normally involves more than one branch of the military service.

That established, the first place to look for answers is in the history of warfare. Although the air component of combined arms operations does not appear

until the 20th century, there are many historical examples to draw upon. The other place to look for answers is in the doctrine itself.

In *On War*, Karl von Clausewitz observed that, if an armed force does not have or is weak in one of its branches, it will be at a disadvantage when the opposing force has all branches strong and available. He also noted that, when opposing forces of comparable size meet in battle, the

force that makes the best use of its combined branches in the offense and defense will be victorious, even if it is the smaller of the two.

The validity of Clausewitz's observations can be traced back to Julius Caesar's campaign in Gaul. Caesar crossed the Rhine River in 55 B.C. to show the northern tribes of Germany they were not immune from the reach of the Roman Empire. With the help of his engineers, Caesar's numerically inferior force built a bridge and repeatedly engaged the Germans. He was caught off guard many times but still emerged the victor. Why? It was because he was able to use all available forces, and all levels of his legions understood his tactics. The Germans had trouble staying organized for extended periods and tended to run for new ground at the slightest setback. Since the Germans did not have a standing professional army, it suffered defections and the loss or weakening of some of their combined arms components.

Moving to the 20th century, a good example of an air-land type of doctrine appears during World War II when German General Heinz Guderian used the blitzkrieg to roll through Poland. This offensive operation showed the devastating effects possible when air and ground forces are combined. Throughout the war, the Germans used this combination to force numerically superior forces out of the areas that were wanted by the Third Reich.

When Guderian was given the task of developing an armored force and its tactics, he knew that he

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would need some type of covering force as mobile as the panzers. The only answer available at the time was the dive bomber. This highly mobile weapons system was able to destroy obstacles out ahead of the panzers with great accuracy. The dive bombers were allotted fighter cover so they could stay on station until their missions were accomplished.

Next, Guderian looked at mobilizing his infantry. He felt that a mobile infantry would afford protection for his panzers and thus formed a motorized infantry to operate with and support the panzer forces. The securing of newly captured territory, guarding of other supporting units and general mopping up were left to the foot infantry.

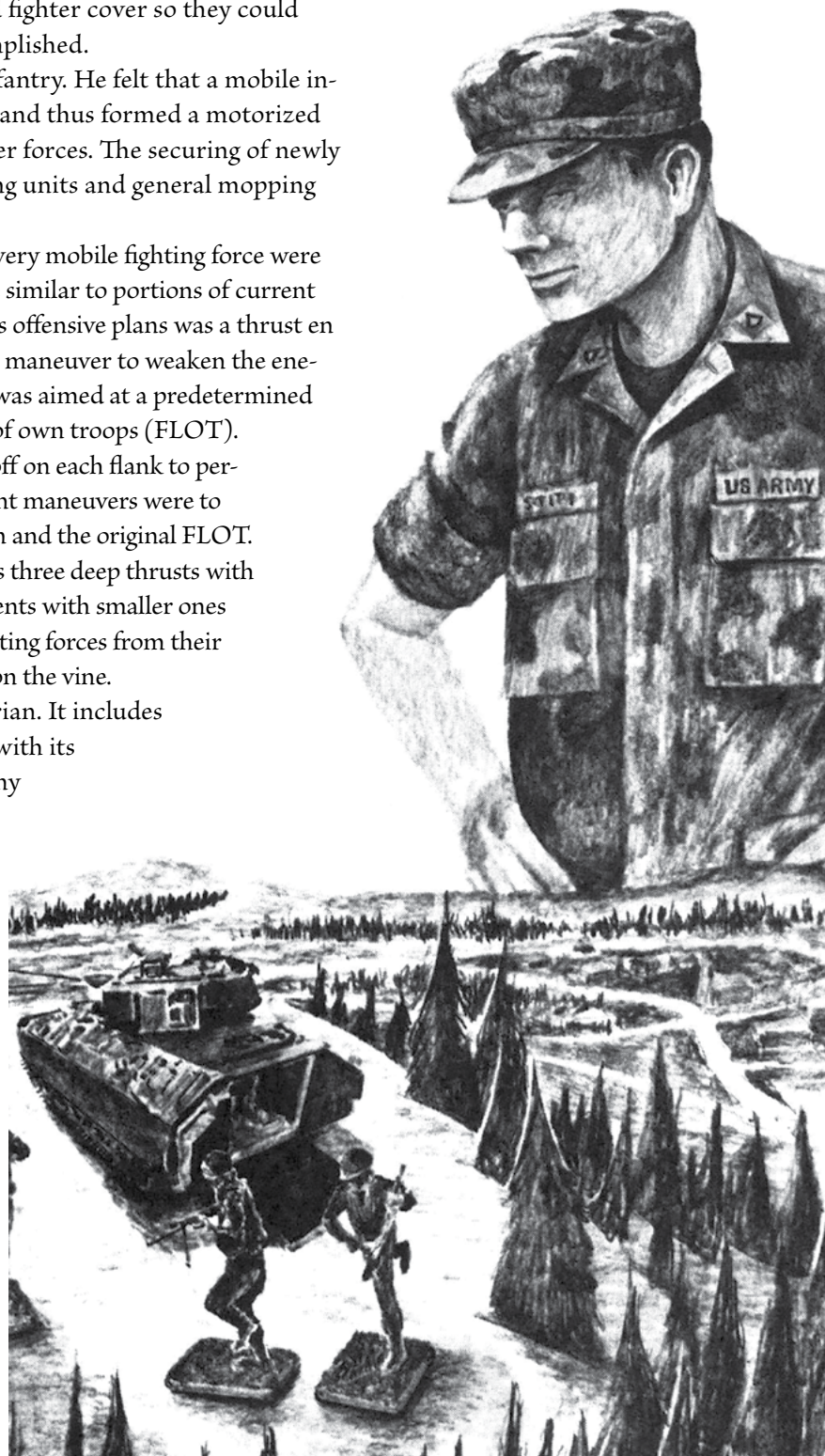
The tactics Guderian developed for his now very mobile fighting force were based on the works of B. H. Liddell Hart and are similar to portions of current AirLand Battle doctrine. The heart of Guderian's offensive plans was a thrust en masse on a narrow front. This usually followed a maneuver to weaken the enemy force at the point of attack. The main effort was aimed at a predetermined objective deep behind the enemy's forward line of own troops (FLOT).

As this drive progressed, forces would break off on each flank to perform encirclement operations. These encirclement maneuvers were to catch enemy forces between the deep penetration and the original FLOT. Guderian enhanced his plans by using as many as three deep thrusts with the same objective, thus forming large encirclements with smaller ones inside. This isolated the main body of enemy fighting forces from their supporting units and resulted in the force dying on the vine.

AirLand Battle doctrine goes beyond Guderian. It includes a very comprehensive defense plan that ties in with its offensive plan of engagement. Guderian, as many before him, failed to consider a defensive plan that would work in conjunction with the offensive plan.

This oversight proved to be very serious in some cases. Many times, it was because planners were so confident their plan of attack could not fail, they made no contingency plans for a failure. They may even have let another completely separate staff prepare the defensive plans. This situation can only lead to plans that will have problems during a transition.

AirLand Battle doctrine has its weak points as well as its strong ones. The strongest point, and the one setting it off from



that of the Warsaw Pact, is in command and control (C²). The battlefield C² set forth in Field Manual (FM) 100-5, *Operations*, allows commanders from the highest to the lowest levels flexibility in executing their assigned missions. This is not a privilege extended to all levels of Warsaw Pact commanders.

US commanders have the flexibility to move their troops where needed to accomplish their mission in their sphere of influence. For a movement of troops deviating from predetermined plans, Warsaw Pact tactical commanders must seek permission from higher authority. Time used by a commander this way is wasteful and may result in the loss of any advantage they may have had.

AirLand Battle doctrine has addressed this problem by encouraging commanders to use initiative, rely on subordinate leaders and employ all available assets to defeat the enemy. Such a doctrine allows the commander to wrest the momentum away from the enemy and add to any advantage friendly forces may have.

The next strength apparent from reading FM 100-5 is how a commander can smoothly transfer from a defensive mode to an offensive one and vice versa. This transition is dependent upon commanders at all levels and their ability to have all available resources functioning. Logistical support, fire support, air support and combat intelligence must be timely and adequate if the transition is to be made with minimum cost in people and materiel.

A problem endangering any critical transition is the ability of junior leaders to execute the next command level's orders. If the subordinate cannot implement his orders in a timely manner, it could have a costly effect on the success of the transition and the overall battle. AirLand Battle doctrine has some built-in allowances to help compensate for subordinate weaknesses.

Weaknesses found in AirLand Battle doctrine may be different for each reader of FM 100-5. Some may debate whether other services will accept the doctrine; whether the doctrine is compatible with that of some North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies; or whether



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all levels of the US Army, even down to the private level, can understand all facets of the doctrine and make it work. Such weaknesses can only be remedied by the chain of command. If commanders fail to rec-

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ognize a weakness and do what is necessary to alleviate it, then AirLand Battle doctrine will be impossible to use as it was intended. This is an inherent problem with any battle plan. History has shown this, and the future will confirm it.

Much has been written about AirLand Battle doctrine since its introduction. The views presented range from high praise to severe criticism. If history is used to judge the validity of combined arms doctrines, the Alexanders, Caesars, Wellingtons, Lees, and so forth have shown it works many times over.

Thus, the continued use and refinement of AirLand Battle as the US Army's main combat doctrine make extremely good sense.

All examples of successful combined arms doctrine and subsequent operations have some common threads:

- ◆ Leaders and planners had confidence in the doctrine, and operations planned using it, to work as intended.
- ◆ All of those involved in the various branches understood the doctrine.
- ◆ All required personnel and service branches were available and ready to execute the operation at the time specified by battle orders.

AirLand Battle doctrine works in defensive and offensive situations and covers most types of engagements in which the US Army may find itself. The NATO allies' battle doctrine can work in conjunction with it. However, with all of the strongpoints of the doctrine, the most important element is the human element. All soldiers at all levels of the US Army must understand AirLand Battle doctrine and make it work when the need arises.

I believe the answer to the question, "Is the Air Land Battle doctrine sound, and will it work for the US Army?" is *yes*. With AirLand Battle doctrine, the US Army will be ready for future battles. ~~Me~~

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