

THE
COMMAND AND GENERAL STAFF SCHOOL
MILITARY REVIEW



June, 1939, Quarterly Review of Military Literature
VOL. XIX, No. 73



Academic Notes

Current School Material, Which Affects Instructional Procedure or Tactical Doctrines

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Doctrines of the Defensive

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There exists frequently among the uninformed an impression that generalship is a gift, that the successful general knows by intuition just what steps to take to meet any situation. Your experience and study, I am sure, have brought home to you that this impression is wrong. You

realize that the profession of arms involves the logical application of acquired knowledge. There is no place in the military machine for the commander who plays hunches, for the man who makes psychic bids. Such departures from reasoned conclusions cost the lives of men and can never be

justified. There must be logic back of our every action; there must be reason for the doctrines which we teach at this school. I ask you, therefore, to give particular attention to my line of reasoning this morning. You may not agree with me throughout but you will at least determine where and why you disagree with me and that will be of primary importance to you.

We take up this morning the subject of defensive action. I wish to emphasize that this discussion is general and applies to all forms of defensive action, the defense in one position, the delaying action, the withdrawal. Your schedule prescribed certain parts of texts for study and reading in preparation for this conference. They are all general in their nature because I wish to present the broad picture of defensive operations. You will have ample opportunity to study the various operations in detail as the course progresses.

What I have to say may be found in the texts covering defensive operations. It is, therefore, the doctrine of this school. You will not, however, find it in the texts in the exact form in which it will be presented. I have tried to bring together the important basic doctrines of defensive action and shall try to present them to you through a process of reasoning rather than by a mere enumeration of a number of tenets. A mimeograph outlining this conference has been distributed.

Do not look upon these doctrines as fixed rules of action, all of which must be applied with equal rigidity to every situation. They are flexible in that their importance may vary within wide limits in different situations. They are inflexible to the extent that you may not violate them without a compensating gain. They are guides to your process of reasoning in your estimates. They are question marks in testing the soundness of your conclusions.

For convenience I propose to discuss the doctrines under three headings:

- 1st—The decision to adopt defensive action.
- 2d—The selection of the defensive area.
- 3d—The organization for and conduct of the defensive action.

War is the process used by one adversary in imposing his will upon his opponent by the use of force. It would be necessary to enter the realm of national as well as military strategy in order to indicate how this force may be applied. Such an investigation is without the province of this school. We are concerned here solely with considering how best to conduct the military operations which are considered a necessary part of the application of our force. We are concerned with the tactical phases of operations, with carrying out certain missions assigned to us by our military superiors. The assumption must be that if each commander accomplishes his mission successfully the entire military effort will be successful and the war will be won.

It is obvious that the question of decision as to whether or not defensive action should be adopted does not enter the problem when we are carrying out an operation whose nature has been specified by higher authority. If, in a certain situation, we have been directed to make an attack, to defend a certain area, to hold a certain key point in spite of losses, or to conduct a specified operation of any kind, there is no

decision on our part except as to how we will carry out the task assigned.

The more difficult case arises when we have a mission which permits us freedom of choice in the basic type of action which we propose to employ; when we are on our own, so to speak, knowing only the results which our superior commander desires and for which he will hold us responsible.

Certain basic characteristics of defensive operations become apparent if we delve deeply enough. The commander of a large force desiring to conduct offensive operations decides where he will apply his greatest strength. In order to insure the availability of the force where he expects to make his blow felt he may have to reduce the strength elsewhere to such an extent that offensive action in the area of reduced forces is impracticable. In that area, therefore, he may resort to defensive action since it requires less force; in that area offensive action may be abandoned until the enemy is weakened or until additional forces can be brought in.

The commander of a force conducting defensive operations must, unless his force is greatly superior to that of the enemy, husband his strength. He must hold available the forces he considers necessary to meet the enemy wherever he may strike. Thus again we find that a part of the battle front must be weakened in order that strength may be available for use where it is most needed. In all parts of the area, therefore, the defending forces must conduct their defensive operations until they can be reinforced.

Defensive operations imply the possibility of retrograde movement or, at best, a holding in place. No advance is contemplated. On the contrary it may be possible for the defending force even to yield ground and still accomplish its mission. But it will be obvious that there must be a limit on the amount of retrograde movement permitted. If a force conducting defensive operations is free to retire indefinitely there can be no conceivable reason for its presence except possibly for deception.

I believe that the preceding discussion brings out the following characteristics of defensive action:

It is designed to economize on force.

In offensive warfare it is resorted to in order to facilitate some other operation or until some anticipated condition eventuates.

In offensive warfare and sometimes in defensive warfare it is limited in the time of its duration. It is always limited in the extent of retrograde movement permitted.

We may say, therefore, that the tactical defensive operation whether it be the defense of a position, a withdrawal, or a delay in one or several positions, should be viewed in its entirety as an operation which is to be conducted in a certain area for a certain period of time. The rear limit of the area and the time limit on the duration of the operation are stated in or are deducible from the mission. The fact that there are time and space limits to the defensive operation has an important bearing upon the decision to adopt defensive action as well as upon other decisions incident to such action.

The commander of an independent force may be required to decide between offensive and defensive action under many different conditions. His force may be engaged with an enemy who is proving too strong and he may feel

that he must disengage his force if it is to escape destruction. He may encounter an enemy force which he could defeat but which is capable of being reinforced before he could insure that defeat. He may be confronted by a superior force but know that his own force will be increased in the near future to such an extent as to insure successful offensive action. The commander must decide what form his action will take in each case. Not only must he decide between offensive and defensive action but, if his action is to be defensive, he must as a corollary to the decision select the class of defensive action to be employed.

This decision can be reached only by a careful estimate of the situation and there is no short cut. It appears possible, however, to deduce certain doctrines which may serve as guides in making the estimate. Bear in mind that we are discussing the case where the commander has a mission to perform and the class of action to be adopted has not been prescribed by higher authority. The commander considers what general plans of action give promise of enabling him to accomplish that mission. We have already seen that there are time and space limits to defensive action and that these may be deduced from the mission. The mission must be carefully examined and these limits determined. The commander must then study the situation to determine whether or not a plan to adopt defensive action will permit him to remain within those limits. If his study indicates that he cannot remain within those limits, defensive action obviously will not enable him to accomplish his mission and must be discarded as a practicable plan of action. If, however, his study leads him to believe that some form of defensive action will enable him to comply with those limits he is free to give further consideration to that plan as a possibility. We may state the doctrine thus:

The decision to adopt defensive action must insure compliance with the limits in time and space on retrograde movements as prescribed by the mission.

Compliance with this doctrine is mandatory if the commander is to accomplish his mission by defensive action. But this does not eliminate the alternative of offensive action. Assuming that he can comply with the first doctrine by defensive action does this invariably indicate that he will adopt the defensive? I believe not. There are certain disadvantages to the defensive which should not be accepted without good and sufficient reason. No more should a commander resort to offensive action simply because he thinks he can defeat his opponent. Some one always gets hurt in a battle and a command will suffer losses in an attack even though it be successful.

There is little doubt what the commander should do if offensive action is manifestly impracticable and combat cannot be avoided. If he is confronted with a force which he cannot hope to attack successfully he must use defensive action. But even if the opposing force were such that he had a chance of defeating it he would still have to consider the probable cost and then decide whether it was too great under the conditions existing at the time.

The decision to defend, therefore,

Will be justified when the mission demands combat and the situation indicates that offensive action is impracticable or so costly as to be prohibitive under the circumstances. Note: This does not apply in those

cases where the mission is such that offensive action must be carried out irrespective of possible difficulties or losses.

We recognize a special case of the decision to adopt defensive operations as a preliminary step to an offensive. Occasions may arise when a commander finds himself in a situation in which, for the time being, the offensive is impracticable but he can foresee a change which will permit him to take the offensive. Pending that change he finds it necessary to adopt defensive action. We have at this school used the term active defense to designate such an operation. The defensive phase of the operation may be forced upon the commander by temporary inferiority or it may be deliberately adopted as a method of creating a situation which will facilitate the proposed offensive. The defensive operation may be any one of the several types, the defense of a position, a withdrawal, delay in one or more positions. Regardless of the nature of the defensive operation the commander plans from the outset to turn to the offensive at a later stage. This is the principal difference between the active defense and the defensive operation which is purely defensive for in the latter operation the counteroffensive may be undertaken should an opportunity present itself but is secondary to the defensive. This use of the defensive operation as a preliminary to the offensive will be covered in later conferences and map exercises.

Let us recapitulate these doctrines.

The decision to adopt defensive action:

a. Must insure compliance with the time and space limits on retrograde movement as prescribed in or deduced from the mission.

b. Is justified when the mission demands combat and the situation indicates that offensive action is impracticable or so costly as to be prohibitive in the circumstances, provided of course that his mission is not such that offensive action is mandatory.

Note: The active defense may be employed as a ruse to facilitate offensive action.

Do not think for an instant that you now possess the answer as to when to attack and when to defend. Far from it. Your judgment will be given ample exercise in determining whether or not it is impracticable or too costly to use offensive action. It is not easy to satisfy yourself that defensive action on the available terrain will permit you to remain within the prescribed limits of retrograde movement. You will often be faced with the necessity for deciding whether to adopt defensive action on terrain which you can get without fighting or to attack to get better terrain on which to fight the defensive action.

The choice of the class of defensive action to be employed is made by the commander after considering the limits imposed upon him by his mission and the possibilities of the various classes of defense in the terrain available under the conditions existing at the moment.

We will assume that the commander has decided to adopt defensive action. He has determined the length of time that action must continue and the rear limit of the area within which it is to be conducted. He knows how far he can advance without having to resort to offensive action. Within the area fixed by those limits he must choose that

portion of the terrain on which he will conduct the action. He must evaluate the possibilities of the terrain in the different classes of defensive action which may be possible in the situation. He must determine which combination of defensive action and available terrain will give greatest promise of permitting him to maintain himself within the prescribed limits for the necessary length of time. The doctrine may be stated thus:

The area selected for the defensive operation will insure compliance with the time and space limits on retrograde movement.

The defensive action is designed to keep the enemy from carrying out any action which would defeat the mission of the defender. The defender must therefore so choose the defensive area that failure on the part of the enemy to attack the area will permit or at least facilitate the accomplishment of the defender's mission. In some situations this may be accomplished by compelling the enemy to attack in order to use the only available routes of advance. In other situations it may be necessary to defend a terrain feature the retention of which is necessary to the defender. The essential point is that the defensive area be of such importance that the enemy must take cognizance of the fact that it is in the defender's possession or automatically permit the defender to accomplish his mission. The defender is concerned only with accomplishing his own mission. He does not act with a view to defeating the enemy's mission unless it happens to conflict with his.

The doctrine may be stated thus:

The area selected for the defensive operation will be such as to force the enemy to take action to eject or neutralize the defender if he is to keep the defender from accomplishing his mission.

Since the defensive is of limited duration and is to be followed by some other action, the desirability of being prepared for the future action is apparent. If the nature of the future action can be foreseen in its details it may exercise an important effect upon the selection of the area for the defense. This must not, however, be permitted to exercise a controlling influence if by so doing it may jeopardize the success of the defensive action itself. The doctrine may be stated thus:

The area will facilitate future action if this can be done without jeopardizing the current operation.

The defender, weaker in combat power, looks to the terrain to give him the strength needed to withstand attack. He bases his hopes for success upon the occupation of strong terrain features in front of and within which he can place artillery and small-arms fire. He chooses terrain which offers the greatest possible handicaps to the enemy in his attack. To minimize the danger of local enemy successes he defends in depth including reserves so disposed as to be available for use whenever needed. The basic elements of the defense are resistance, depth, and mobility of the reserves. The relative importance of these three varies with the class of defensive action. Manifestly, for example, the necessity for resistance is not as great in delaying action on successive positions as it is in the case of a prolonged de-

fense in place. These differences and their effect upon the nature of the defensive area to be selected for the different classes of defensive action will be covered in later conferences and map exercises. The doctrine involved is:

The terrain of the area will facilitate the class of defensive action contemplated.

The defensive operation is to be carried out by the available troops. These forces can cover only a certain amount of terrain in frontage as well as depth. Both frontage and depth may vary with the terrain and the nature of the defensive action. To attempt to use too great an area may result in weakening the entire defensive force. To use too small an area needlessly restricts the freedom of action of the defender.

The doctrine is:

The area selected will be of suitable size in frontage and in depth for the force available in the action contemplated.

We may summarize the doctrines:

The area selected for the defensive operation:

1. Will insure compliance with the limits in time and space on retrograde movement as prescribed by the mission.
2. Will be such as to force the enemy to take action to eject or neutralize the defender if he is to prevent the defender from accomplishing his mission.
3. Will facilitate future action if this can be done without jeopardizing the current operation.
4. Will be on terrain which will facilitate the class of defensive action contemplated.
5. Will be of suitable size, frontage and depth, for the force available in the class of defensive action contemplated.

We consider next the organization for and the conduct of the defensive action. It is impracticable to make any extensive analysis of the various classes of defense this morning. It is possible, however, to state certain doctrines which will be found to apply in varying degree to all classes of defensive action. These are the threads which run through the entire fabric of defensive operations. Upon these basic threads the varying patterns of the different classes of defensive action are woven.

We must bear in mind that there are certain advantages which a commander hopes to capitalize when he assumes the defensive. The text enumerates those advantages.

Q.—What are they?

- A. 1. Opportunity to choose ground which will permit full development of the fire power of weapons.
2. Ability to increase the defensive strength by preparation on the ground.
3. Possibility of using concealment and cover to decrease vulnerability and facilitate surprise.

What can the commander do to capitalize the advantages of the defensive? In the final analysis the advantages derive from the fact that the defender can use the terrain to decrease his own vulnerability and increase the vulnerability of the enemy.

The defender hopes to be able to carry his action to a successful conclusion by fire power alone. He must be pre-

pared to use movement if necessary but his first reliance is the coordinated fire power of all his weapons. To this end he seeks to insure that his entire front will be covered by fire to as great a distance toward the enemy as conditions will permit. To make the fire more effective automatic weapons are sited for flanking fire. Obstacles are placed where they will delay the enemy while he is under effective fire. Supporting weapons are prepared to place fires on areas which cannot be covered effectively by the fire of small arms. All this the defender does to make the enemy's advance so costly that his will to win will be broken before he can reach the defender's line.

This then is the first doctrine in the organization for and the conduct of the defense:

Cover the front with fire.

I have already indicated that defensive action is based upon the desire to economize on force. The commander of a defending force must save manpower whenever he can. He must therefore spread the units of his command over wider frontages than would be permitted in purely offensive action. If he were to distribute his forces evenly over the entire front the lines would be so thin that the resistance would be relatively weak everywhere. To avoid this he concentrates his forces in groups on the strong key points where the terrain makes them more difficult to dislodge. These key points are strengthened for determined resistance. The intervals between these strong localities are covered by fire. They must be close enough to each other to insure effective fire in the intervals between them. As long as these strongly held localities are intact the attacker can have but limited success if he breaks through the intervals. It is not unlike the defense which the line presents in a football game. As long as the guards and tackles, the strong points, hold, the opponents may gain a little but they are stopped quickly by the secondary defense which corresponds to our supports and reserves.

Our second tenet then may be stated:

Occupy the strong key points in the terrain.

Proper siting of weapons is essential to successful defensive action but it must be supplemented by effective observation if the full value of the fire power is to be realized. This observation is essential for artillery weapons and under certain circumstances, for some of the machine guns and other infantry weapons. Observation over all the terrain toward the enemy to the limit of range of the various weapons would be the ideal but, like most ideals, is almost never attainable. Observation over the terrain within the defensive area is also important, particularly where the defensive action is carried out in one position. The nature of the observation required varies in different classes of defense but it is always needed.

Conversely the defender should try to insure that the enemy does not have observation over the defended area. This happy state of affairs is not always easy to assure.

The defender should make as certain as possible that he can retain the observation as long as it is essential to his action. The defensive front, if it is to be held resolutely, should be far enough in advance of the essential observation to make certain that minor successes by the enemy will not jeopardize its retention.

Our third tenet can be stated:

Insure retention of essential observation.

We have already seen that the defender seeks to extend his fires as far toward the enemy as his weapons will permit. From the time the enemy enters this zone of fire until the action is concluded the defender tries to keep the attacker under fire. As the attacker approaches the defender's line more and more fire power is concentrated upon him. These fires must be continued even if the attacker succeeds in penetrating the line of strong points. In that event he should be brought under concentrated fire from elements farther to the rear. These fires interfere with attempts by the attacker to outflank the strong points of the front line. Fires from all types of weapons are needed here just as they are on the defender's front. To accomplish this some weapons must be so sited that they can deliver these fires. There is, therefore, a necessity for depth in the defensive dispositions, depth in the strong terrain to be occupied, depth in the disposition of artillery, all to insure depth in the defender's fires. This depth is of greater importance in some classes of defensive action than in others but its necessity must always be considered and it can be sacrificed only when justified.

We may say therefore that the defender will:

Occupy the defensive area in depth.

The elements of the defense thus far considered have had for their object the increase in the vulnerability of the enemy. What can the defender do to decrease his own vulnerability?

The defender has chosen ground such that he can put his weapons in position and deliver his fires without any necessity for moving them. The men on the ground can use their weapons without having to move about and expose themselves. This fact enables the defender to dig himself in at the spot where he will fight. He can prepare material cover which will protect the individual as well as the weapons. If time permits the ground can be so completely organized that movement can be made possible without undue losses. Not only can material cover be provided but camouflage and other forms of concealment can be availed of to make the defender a less conspicuous target.

This organization of the ground will also include the clearing of the fields of fire, the installation of obstacles and other steps which make the enemy more vulnerable.

To capitalize the advantages of the ground the defender should:

Organize the ground.

We have seen how the defender can capitalize the advantages of defensive action. The commander hopes also to be able to overcome or at least minimize the importance of the disadvantages of defensive action.

Q. What are these disadvantages?

- A. 1. Freedom of action is partially abandoned.
2. Enemy can choose time and place for attack.

What can he do to overcome or minimize the disadvantages? These disadvantages arise from the fact that, by committing himself to the ground, the defender has yielded

the initiative to the enemy and has curtailed his own freedom of action.

If the defender could gain complete information of the enemy's movements and dispositions and could then be prepared to move to meet any action of the attacker the disadvantages would be overcome entirely. Manifestly this is impossible of accomplishment. The defender does commit a part of his command to the ground and that part at least is not available for ready movement. The greater the part of his command which can be prepared to move readily and quickly to meet the enemy whenever or wherever he attacks the less will be the disadvantage to the defender. That portion of the defender's force available for movement to any part of the defensive area constitutes the reserve. Its size will vary with the class of defensive action and the conditions surrounding the action but a mobile reserve will always be needed.

We may say therefore:

Insure availability of mobile reserves.

The strength of the defense with modern weapons is fully recognized. The attacker will not willingly accept the losses which will attend a frontal attack against an organized defense. He will resort to maneuver, if that is permissible under the existing conditions, and will seek to make a flank attack. In any form of defensive action the security of his flanks will therefore be of primary concern to the defender. The fact that one or both flanks are weak must not be permitted, however, to cause the defender to lose sight of the fact that the attacker may deliver his attack elsewhere. The only safe course for the defender is to keep a running estimate of the enemy's capabilities of attack and be prepared at all times to meet them. To the extent practicable the defender should try to limit those capabilities by the use of reconnaissance detachments and covering forces. By the use of cavalry and aviation he will seek information of enemy movements and dispositions in order to determine with more accuracy the enemy's capabilities. By these actions he minimizes the effect of the attacker's advantage in possessing the initiative.

This doctrine may be stated:

Determine enemy capabilities and limit them to the utmost.

Let us now recapitulate these doctrines of the organization for and conduct of the defense:

1. Cover the front with fire.
2. Occupy key points in the terrain.
3. Insure retention of essential observation.
4. Occupy the defensive area in depth.
5. Organize the ground.
6. Insure availability of mobile reserves.
7. Determine and limit enemy capabilities.

I believe that you will readily recognize that all these doctrines state what is to be done. I have tried to bring out the reasons why they are important. In map exercises to come during the course you will have opportunities to apply

these doctrines. You will see different methods used in applying the same doctrine to different situations. You are likely to lose sight of the fact that the method is a means to an end rather than the end itself. Too frequently the student is more interested in the method than in the reason for the adoption of that particular method in the given situation. Later when he is confronted with a new situation he tries to use the same method whether it fits the new conditions or not.

Bear in mind the doctrine you are trying to apply. Use a method which will enable you to make the doctrine effective under the given conditions. You may find that you have not used the same method as that used in the school solution but that is no indication that your method is wrong. Above all be perfectly honest with yourselves and be certain that you have sound reasons for the methods you adopt.

There are certain features of defensive action which I believe may well be brought to your attention at this time. I have indicated the importance to the commander of the defending force of determining the enemy capabilities. This involves a very high standard of operation on the part of the information gathering agencies and a keen sense of the importance of information on the part of the intelligence officers. Negative as well as positive information will be of great value. In one command post exercise the G-2 of a defensive force received two items of information which should have been a definite indication that the attack was coming from a certain flank. His failure to grasp the significance of those scraps of information was fatal.

No matter how gifted G-2 may be or how nearly perfect he may be in sensing the opponent's moves his work may be entirely wasted unless the commander has the courage to make decisions which may seem like a gamble and unless the G-3 can insure that the commander's plans are executed expeditiously.

In practically all forms of defensive action and in the case of the defense in one position, particularly, the commander is, in effect, wagering that he will be able to determine the enemy's movements in ample time to enable him to move his reserves where they are needed. It is hardly necessary to point out that this may be extremely difficult and in any event will require staff work of a very high order. Communications must not fail if the defense is to be successful.

I wish to conclude this conference with a general summing up of what I have tried to bring out during the discussion.

The defensive operation arises from the necessity to economize force. It is limited in its duration and in the area within which it may be conducted. The class of defensive action to be conducted will be chosen to fit the terrain, the force available, and to comply with the time and space limits prescribed for the operation. The defensive action is characterized by resistance, depth and mobility of reserves. More than most military operations it demands perfect functioning of the G-2, G-3, commander team from its inception until the enemy has been defeated. Regardless of the skill of the commander and staff the defense will stand or fall with the spirit, the endurance, and the determination to hold possessed by the troops.