

Genghis Khan and 13th-Century AirLand Battle

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“ There is significant debate over what individual or military organization first developed and used maneuver warfare. This article nominates another candidate and asserts that Genghis Khan and his 13th-century Mongol army were the first successful practitioners of what we know today as AirLand Battle. ”

An Army's Operational Concept is the core of its doctrine. It is the way the Army fights its battles and campaigns, including tactics, procedures, and organizations.... The concept must be

broad enough to describe the operations in all anticipated circumstances. Yet it must allow sufficient freedom for tactical variations in any situation. It must also be uniformly known and understood.¹



The German blitzkrieg of World War II is often noted as the prototype of much of the US Army's current doctrine—AirLand Battle. The German blitzkrieg, though seemingly revolutionary at its outset, was really nothing new. Its maneuver warfare fundamentals had been followed over 700 years earlier by Genghis Khan and his Mongol “hordes.” Genghis Khan and his armies accomplished feats that would be hard, if not impossible, for modern armies to duplicate.

The Mongol armies, like the number of tanks in General Heinz Guderian's World War II panzer divisions, actually were modest compared to the ends achieved and the stories told by their victims. Not only were the Mongol hordes often outnumbered but, man for man, the Mongol soldier's enemy was usually larger and stronger and considered himself better armed. The potential threat of being faced by a numerically superior enemy was one of the principal reasons behind the development of the US Army's AirLand Battle doctrine—a doctrine designed for mobile warfare anywhere in the world.

AirLand Battle doctrine teaches that, at both the tactical and operational level, success on the modern battlefield will depend on four concepts: initiative, depth, agility and synchronization. As a doctrine, AirLand Battle is a guide to action. One objective is to furnish a basis for prompt and harmonious conduct by subordinate commanders according to the

intentions of the senior commander. Doctrine develops from principles. In the case of AirLand Battle doctrine, these principles are the “principles of war” drawn from the work of British Major General J. F. C. Fuller.

Genghis Khan and his immediate successors used all four AirLand Battle operational concepts with phenomenal skill. Unlike most other great captains in history, Genghis Khan did not have a formal education. He was an illiterate man. At the age of 9, he was left fatherless and deserted by all but his immediate family. He never read a book, was never a student of any war lord, was never tutored by scholars. But the operational concepts, developed from experience and military common sense, were applied by Genghis Khan and the Mongol commanders in every campaign. In so doing, they forged an empire which spread from Korea to Persia (Iran). It was later extended into Eastern Europe by his descendants and the Mongol general Subotai using the operational concepts the Great Khan developed.

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“ Every encounter with the enemy, large or small, helped Mongol army commanders to seize and retain freedom of maneuver. Subordinate commanders, supported by higher commanders, were encouraged to take risks. ”

Genghis Khan's use of initiative is legendary. No other commander in history has been more acutely aware of the fundamental importance of seizing and maintaining the initiative of always attacking, even when the strategic mission was defensive.² The Mongols attempted to retain the initiative by constantly keeping their enemies off balance.

Prior to the beginning of an invasion, numerous spies and scouts would be dispatched to the target country. The spies would attempt to sow seeds of dissension, while the scouts watched the enemy. Scouts also screened the movements of the Mongol army. As the time for the invasion, approached, the spies and scouts created a veritable “war of nerves” among the enemy. They appeared as small armed parties of men at different entrances to the country, and within the country, causing consternation and confusion.

At the outset of every invasion, the main Mongol army of normally three to five *toumans* (division-size forces of about 10,000 men each) would rapidly advance behind a screen of light horsemen in several roughly parallel columns on a broad front. Contact was constantly maintained through mounted couriers and a system of signaling. This formation permitted flexibility, particularly if the enemy was stronger than the Mongols or if his exact location was unknown. The column encountering the enemy forces would then either fix the enemy or retire, depending on the situation.

Meanwhile, the remainder of the army would continue to advance, occupying the enemy's flanks or rear areas. This would force the enemy to fall back to protect his lines of communication. The Mongols would then quickly close in to take advantage of any confusion or disorder in the enemy's withdrawal. This was usually rapidly followed up by eventual encirclement, a headlong merciless pursuit and the enemy's utter destruction. The rapidity of the Mongol movements invariably gave them superiority of force at the decisive point—the ultimate aim of mobile warfare. By aggressively seizing the initiative,

the Mongol commanders, rather than their foes, almost always selected the point of decision.

The Mongols ingeniously used the elements of depth—time, space and resources—to make enemy forces needlessly waste combat power. They thus prepared the enemy for defeat prior to the start of the main Mongol attack. The Mongols followed the advice of the great war theorist Sun Tzu:

*In war the successful strategist only seeks battle after the victory has been won, whereas he who is destined to defeat first fights and afterwards looks for victory.*³

It was not a disgrace for a Mongol general to avoid battle. It was a disgrace for a Mongol general to engage in battle that “cost many Mongol lives,” even though the general won, when a similar victory could have been obtained at a lesser cost.⁴

The Mongols were very successful in using depth to avoid costly set-piece battles. Their knowledge of the time required to move forces—both their own and the enemy's—helped them to consistently stay one step ahead of their enemies.

Their use of mobility kept enemy forces in movement, either forward or backward. They knew by experience that a courageous and unbroken civilized army would almost always advance against them, and a broken army would seek safety in flight away from them. Their maneuver prior to general engagement was specifically intended to prevent the decisive battle. This was an interesting goal, to say the least.

Most successful armies in history, such as Napoleon Bonaparte's, maneuvered their forces prior to an engagement to seek the decisive battle. The Mongols used the entire depth of the battlefield to keep enemy forces from gathering in strength to make a stand on favorable ground. Once enemy forces gathered in sufficient strength, the Mongols normally refused to engage them directly. They, in turn, used the deep attack by merely fixing the enemy force with one *touman* and using the bulk of

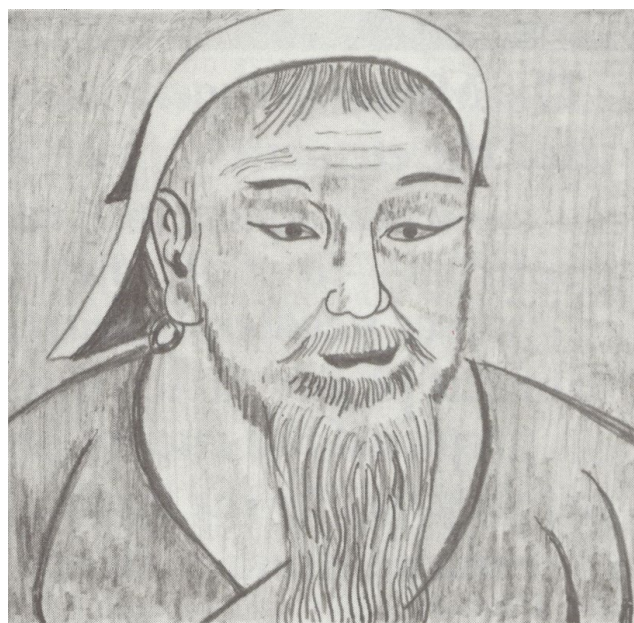
the Mongol army to terrorize the civilian population centers and destroy uncommitted forces and enemy support facilities.

The Mongols also used depth of resources to prevent enemy forces from decisively engaging them. Europeans were, man for man, much larger and better armed for close-in, hand-to-hand combat than the individual Mongol soldier. The Mongols, therefore, used their arrows as long-range weapons which added depth and normally inflicted disastrous casualties upon their enemies.

The Mongols often used great numbers of enemy captives to cover their advances—ruthlessly forcing enemy forces to kill their own countrymen in order to engage the Mongols in hand-to-hand combat. The Mongols added to the confusion by continuing to fire arrows at the enemy behind their reluctant human shields. In addition to their long-range arrows, the Mongols used different weapon systems such as catapults, ballistae, rudimentary artillery and even rockets to destroy or confuse their enemies. In siegecraft, Genghis Khan's engineer corps was at least as efficient as those of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar.⁵ All of these resources combined to provide the Mongol army commander with added depth and increased flexibility.

Agility, which embraces the need to accomplish necessary tasks rapidly and, react quickly to changes in the situation is closely linked to mobility. The Mongols were masters of mobility. They instinctively realized that "force is the product of mass and the square of velocity."⁶ Mongol armies consisted almost entirely of cavalry, and each trooper had one or more spare horses. Thus provided, Genghis Khan's army, in its pursuit of Mohammed Shah in 1221, covered 130 miles in two days. In 1241, Subotai's army traveled 180 miles in three days through deep snow and bitter winter cold to attack the Russian principalities. This extraordinary mobility gave rise to the stories of the Mongols using vast numbers of men.

In actuality, however, the Mongol army was usually much smaller than those of its principal opponents. The largest force Genghis Khan ever assembled was that with which he conquered the Khwarizman Empire (Persia): less than 240,000 men. The Mongol armies which conquered Russia and all of Eastern and Central Europe never exceeded 150,000 men.⁷ Quality,



Genghis Khan

not quantity, and simplicity of organization was a key to the Mongol army's superior agility.

The organization was based on the decimal system. The largest independent unit was the touman. Three toumans normally constituted an army or an army corps commanded by an orlok (Mongol field marshal). The touman, in turn, was composed of 10 regiments of 1,000 men, each commanded by a noyan (Mongol baron). The regiment consisted of 10 squadrons, each comprising 10 troops of 10 men. Forty percent of a typical Mongol army consisted of heavy armored cavalry which was used for shock action. The remaining 60 percent consisted of arrow-carrying light cavalry used for reconnaissance, screening, support to the heavy cavalry, mopping-up operations and pursuit.⁸

Detailed, imaginative planning was an integral part in the Mongols' achievement of superior agility. The Mongols never worked out their plan of operation until they had a clear picture of the enemy's territory, armament, routes of communication and probable place of mobilization. But they managed to keep their own preparations well hidden. The Mongol intelligence network was spread throughout the known world. After careful evaluation of intelligence reports, the Mongols would draw specific objectives along general axes of advance for each of their toumans. Subordinate commanders were given considerable scope in accomplishing their missions. Prior to a general engagement

and within the context of the overall plan, a touman commander was at liberty to maneuver and meet the enemy at his discretion.

When an enemy force was found, it became the objective of all nearby Mongol units. Complete information regarding enemy location, strength and direction of movement was immediately sent to central headquarters. Synchronization of effort occurred rapidly. Once his forces were concentrated, the Mongol army commander would coordinate his various weapon systems in an intensive firepower preparation which, at worse, shook the enemy's nerves and, at best, caused him to scatter without need for an attack. Once the enemy was sufficiently confused, synchronized signals would start the heavy cavalry on its charge. In addition to combining fire and movement, the Mongols achieved synchronization by also emphasizing coordination at all tactical levels and in all phases of combat.

Within the overall context of their operational concepts, the Mongols used sound and innovative tactics. A favorite tactic was the *tulughma*, or standard sweep, in which one flank of an enemy would be turned and the main thrust delivered to his side or rear. Another favorite was the feigned retreat followed, after a suitable time, by a strong counterattack. The enemy pursuing the "retreating" force would find itself confronted on either flank by the other Mongol elements. If the enemy fought well in such a situation, the Mongols would allow him to withdraw. They would then attack the enemy force on the march, easily overcoming and destroying his strung-out forces.

Knowing the desire of their opponents for the acquisition of booty was the impetus behind still another favorite Mongol tactic. The Mongols would sometimes seemingly abandon their baggage trains as bait for the enemy. While the enemy looted the baggage, the Mongols would swoop back and destroy him.

The superior generalship of the Mongols certainly played no small part in their military dominance of the

13th century. The Mongols were blessed with an array of absolutely brilliant leaders. Foremost among them, of course, are Genghis Khan and his great subordinate Subotai. According to British war theorist B. H. Liddell Hart, "the strategical ability of these two leaders is matched in history only by that of Napoleon."⁹ The great field commanders—Makhuli who crushed North China; Batu Khan, conquerer of Russia; Jebe Noyan, conquerer of Kara Khitai; and Bayan who broke the power of the Sung Empire in southern China—were nearly the equals of Genghis Khan and Subotai as strategists.

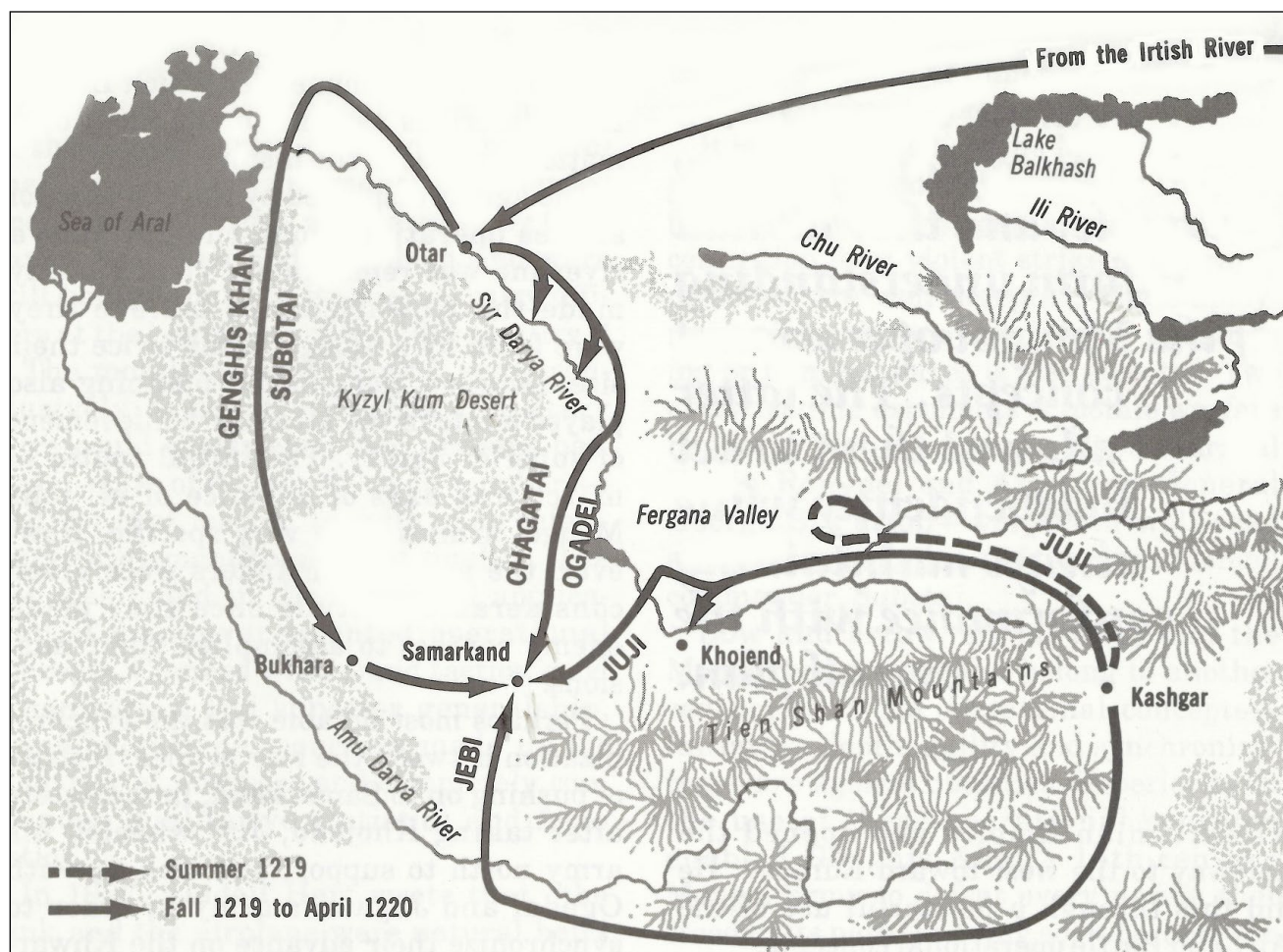
The Great Khan's schools of military leadership were the far-flung battlefields of his armies. Capable subordinate leaders were never lacking in the Mongol ranks. The promotion system was based strictly on merit, and some of the ranking *orloks* were quite young. Subotai and Jebe both reached high rank before their 25th birthdays. Genghis Khan made it a point to amply reward and publicly praise his subordinates when they did well. On the other hand, failure to carry out orders was one of the quickest possible ways for a leader to commit suicide.¹⁰

All Mongol army commanders, nevertheless, had two significant traits in common—they courageously led by example, and they all had a uniform understanding of the Mongol operational concepts. The latter allowed them to act independently while always maintaining conformance with the overall plan.

Though nearly every successful Mongol military operation can be used to show their general adherence to present-day AirLand Battle doctrine, one in particular comes to mind. Genghis Khan's invasion of the Khwarizmian Empire, 1218-24, illustrates the use of AirLand Battle operational concepts at the theater level.

In 1218, following the mistreatment of Mongol ambassadors by Mohammed Shah, ruler of the Khwarizmian Empire, Genghis Khan mobilized his army. The Khwarizmian Empire spread across

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Turkestan, Persia and northern India. Like all Mongol campaigns, the invasion was preceded by a considerable effort on the part of the intelligence network. As he gathered information and made detailed invasion preparations, Genghis Khan concentrated his main forces east of Lake Balkhash on the Irtish River in 1219.

In the summer of 1219, to cover his intentions and preparations, Genghis Khan sent one of his sons, Juji, with a force of three *toumans* across the Chu River between the Ak Kum Desert and the Kara Tau-Ala Tau Mountains toward the lower portions of the Syr Darya River. The plan was to have Juji lay waste to everything in his zone. This he did with ferocious efficiency.

Mohammed Shah responded by sending his son, Jalal-ad-Din, and 200,000 men to repel the assumed invasion. By the time Jalal-ad-Din arrived, Juji had accomplished his mission. The Mongols sent back all the horses and forage they needed and withdrew. Jalal-ad-Din counterattacked, but the Mongols quickly disengaged by setting fire to the grassy plain and

disappearing behind the smoke. No effort was made to pursue them.

For several months, Genghis Khan made no further move. Mohammed Shah, having mustered a force of well over 400,000 hardened Turkish/Muslim troops, felt reasonably assured that he could quickly halt any Mongol invasion. But, like Napoleon's opponents in the 19th century, he adopted the fatal cordon defense system along the line of a wide river, the Syr Darya, facing north. A chain of walled towns strengthened this defensive line. Behind it lay Samarkand and Bukhara, two centers of Khwarizmian power, lying west and south of the headwaters of the Syr Darya River.

In July 1219, Genghis Khan and the main body of the Mongol army left the Irtish River. He divided his force into four separate armies of four or five *toumans* each. Two of these armies, commanded by Juji and Jebe, were sent south to the upper Amu Darya River. The third army, commanded by the Great Khan's two sons Ogadai and Jagatai, was to march

west toward the fortified town of Otrar. The fourth army, led by Genghis Khan himself and Subotai, was to make a wide westward swing and attempt to advance against Bukhara from the west. Genghis Khan hoped to confuse and surprise the Khwarizmians by conducting widespread attacks from four different directions.

In the fall of 1219, while Ogadai and Jagatai attacked Otrar, Genghis Khan and Subotai turned north and disappeared. In the south, Jebe and Juji divided their forces. Jebe led 20,000 men into Khorasan below the Amu Darya River with orders to draw out any major force that might be lying in reserve and advance into Transoxiana from the south. Juji rode west. Juji was ordered to operate along a 400-mile front, along with Ogadai and Jagatai in the north, to destroy major fortifications and keep the rest of the cordon occupied. Genghis Khan and Jebe worked their way around either flank.

As planned, after taking Otrar, Ogadai and Jagatai wheeled south to start clearing the Syr Darya river-line. After seizing Khojend (Leninabad), Juji's army turned north. The two forces worked toward each other, reducing Mohammed Shah's strongpoints along the Syr Darya River. The shah was in Bukhara when he learned that Khojend had fallen and that another army (led by Jebe) was advancing into Transoxiana from the south. Moving to his capital, Samarkand, he assembled his last 50,000 reserves to stop Jebe. Jebe's Mongol army completely routed the larger Khwarizmian army.

Mohammed Shah began to panic. He could not turn to flank and face Jebe's advance since his entire front, the cordon along Syr Darya, was pinned down and crumbling under Juji's superior mobility. The strongholds at either end of it had already fallen. He also could not commit more men without leaving his capital defenseless. His officers were advising him

to evacuate Transoxiana altogether when the news came that Genghis Khan and Subotai had appeared outside the gates of Bukhara nearly 400 miles behind the Khwarizmian lines! Genghis Khan reached Bukhara by crossing the Kyzyl Kum Desert which the Khwarizmians believed to be impenetrable. The surprise was complete. Mohammed Shah's line was turned, and the lines of communication were completely disrupted. He fled, leaving the Bukhara garrison to the Mongols.

On 11 April 1220, the Great Khan took Bukhara and then turned back east toward Samarkand. Meanwhile, the armies of Ogadai and Jagatai converged on Samarkand from the north, Juji from the east and Jebe from the south. Caught in these crushing pincers, Samarkand, Mohammed Shah's last stronghold, was soon taken.

In the brief space of five months, Genghis Khan had wiped out an army of 400,000 men, overthrown the mighty Khwarizmian Empire and opened the gateway to the west toward Europe.¹¹ He did this through a masterful use of the AirLand Battle operational concepts.

Every move had been made in a calculated, orderly sequence toward the achievement of the ultimate objective. Juji's early probe down the Ak Kum trough in the north to the Syr Darya River gained the initiative, forestalled the danger of an early enemy offensive while Genghis Khan was staging, and put Mohammed Shah on the defensive. Genghis Khan retained the initiative by fixing the Khwarizmians with the two Mongol armies on the Syr Darya River, while his army in the north and Jebe's army in the south maneuvered around the Khwarizmian flanks.

The distance covered reveals the use of depth of the entire battlefield to strike Mohammed Shah and prevent the Khwarizmians from concentrating their forces. Genghis Khan's use of the deep attack

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by moving 400 miles behind enemy lines through the Kyzyl Kum Desert enabled him to achieve a maneuver which Liddell Hart describes as “one of the most dramatic surprises in the history of war.”¹²

The agility displayed by the two Mongol armies operating along the Syr Darya riverline was remarkable. Their fluidity made the Khwarizmians believe they were faced by a Mongol army twice their size. Detailed, imaginative planning also played a role in the Mongols’ achievement of superior agility. The initial routes of march and axes of advance of all four Mongol armies were very specific. However, the army “commanders were given considerable latitude once they made enemy contact to accomplish their missions.

Perhaps most notable was the synchronization between the four armies. Instead of pushing on to Samarkand, immediately after taking Khojend, Juji wheeled his army north to support and link up with Ogadai and Jagatai’s army in order to synchronize their advance on the Khwarizmian capital. The convergence of the four armies, which completely overwhelmed Samarkand, is a clear illustration of synchronization at its finest. The Khwarizmian Campaign was the last great campaign of Genghis Khan. The Great Khan died en route to Mongolia in 1227. However, his method of warfare was carried on with extraordinary skill by his successors.

Unfortunately, gaps and distortions mar the rich military history of the 13th-century Mongol army. Most of the pages were recorded by its enemies, and the Mongols’ enemies could hardly be expected to maintain objectivity when describing the devastating wave of fury that washed over them. But enough pages are intact to carry important lessons across the centuries. It was only when the business of war had become a profession and the professional soldier had begun to extract the principles of war from the experiences of history that the campaigns of the Mongol army came to be re-examined. Their tactics and

maneuver-oriented operational concepts were studied by Gustavus Adolphus and Napoleon and were still being taught to Russian cavalry officers at the beginning of the 20th century.” The mobile-minded Mongol army conclusively demonstrated that a military force could consistently win decisive battles in spite of its inferiority in numbers and, for that matter, in spite of an inferiority in element-to-element quality. The key was found in the successful application of maneuver-oriented operational concepts. Coupled with sound tactics, good organization and superior generalship, these operational concepts made up for disparity of numbers and completely confounded qualitative statistics and force ratios.

In 1927, Liddell Hart wrote that “the tank and the airplane were natural heirs and successors to the Mongol horsemen.”¹⁴ With the modern concept of vertical envelopment by airborne or air-transported troops, still another dimension is added to the Mongols’ method of warfare.

It is easy to see how the Mongol method relates to the modern battlefield. The need for mobility, the coordinated, rapid concentration for a violent strike and a rapid dispersal are well accepted. The employment of rapidly moving, deeply penetrating or flanking forces is also accepted. Two of the leading exponents of mobile warfare in World War II—German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel and American General George S. Patton—were both well-read students and admirers of the great Mongol commander, Subotai.

Bow and arrow, signal flags and the Mongol horse and rider belong to another century. But the operational concepts—initiative, depth, agility and synchronization—are ageless qualities. Superiority in the use of these operational concepts enabled Genghis Khan’s 13th-century Mongol army to defeat every nation that stood in its path. In doing so, it became the first successful practitioner of the modern AirLand Battle doctrine. ■

NOTES

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13. Chambers, *op. cit.*, p 66.
14. Liddell Hart, *op. cit.*, p33.