Strategy: What is it Good For?

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Aug. 29, 2017

Staff Sgt. Orval Emery, 75th Training Command, and Sgt. Andrew Crane, Army Reserve Legal Command, discuss strategies while preparing for the squad tactics lane at the 2016 U.S. Army Reserve Best Warrior Competition at Fort Bragg, N.C., May 5. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Darryl L. Montgomery)

Use the word "strategy" in a sentence and most soldiers' eyes will immediately glaze over, which is strange, since we use "strategy" every day. For military purposes, JP 3-0 defines "strategy" as, "A prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, or multinational objectives." On a more personal level, Merriam-Websters reduces "strategy" to "a careful plan or method."1. Simply put, strategy is the way we plan our actions and use our resources to meet a particular

goal. Every time we decide which road to take, what bills to pay, or what orders to give as noncommissioned officers, we use "strategy."

There are, of course, various ways of using strategy effectively. Here are a few to consider:

Understand the Goal

An hour after midnight on D-Day, June 6th, 1944, paratroopers from the 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions jumped from their planes into the darkness above western France. Four hours earlier, pathfinders from the IXth Troop Carrier Command had landed ahead of the paratroopers to lay out beacons to guide the aircraft to the correct drop zone. Unfortunately, only one beacon was placed correctly and the paratroopers found themselves spread out over a 25 mile-long area. Sixty percent of their equipment was lost as a result and ". . . of the 6,600 men of the 101st Division who had dropped that morning, 3,500 were missing as D-Day ended."2

1Paratroopers of the 101st Airborne Division gather before their planned jump on D-Day. Source: http://imgarcade.com/1/101st-airborne-ww2-d-day

Even under such disastrous circumstances, the paratroopers rallied to meet their multiple goals of blocking enemy approaches, securing causeways and establishing river crossings for the advancing troops. They accomplished this by changing their strategy from one of organized, open engagement to one of small unit disruption conducted to exacerbate the enemy's confusion.

An excellent example of how this improvised strategy worked is Sgt. Snyder of the 4th Infantry Division. While out on patrol with a mixed group of soldiers separated from their units, Snyder decided to attack a German barracks installation. When he kicked through the door of the first building and called for the men to follow him in, no one obeyed. Instead, they dived into a road ditch as the Germans began firing. Once inside the barracks, Snyder shot four of the enemy with his Thompson submachine gun and forced the rest out the back door. Lt. Brandenberger of Company C of the 4th Infantry Division, who had only just arrived, then ran with Snyder towards the next barracks. On the way, a grenade exploded near Brandenberger, shattering his arm and knocking him down. Synder continued the assault by kicking in the door and killing another six Germans. When he went back outside, he saw that the G.I.s were still in the ditch.

After making sure Brandenberger was safe, a captain from the 82nd Airborne Division approached Snyder and the two of them headed towards the next barracks. As they approached the door, the captain was shot through the heart. Snyder didn't stop. He kicked in the door and shot six more Germans.

With the help of Pvt. John Camien, who decided to leave the ditch to help him, Snyder continued to shoot his way through five more barracks. Together, they ended up killing another 30 German soldiers.

Snyder and Camien then headed for the mess hall where, after breaking in the door, they surprised 15 more Germans sitting down to breakfast. They shot all of them as well.

This must have encouraged the men still hiding in the ditch, since they left their hiding place and helped Snyder and Camien clear the last barracks, a two-story stone structure. With bazooka and heavy weapons support, Snyder and his patrol engaged another 50 German soldiers running out of the barracks.3

Noncommissioned officers should understand that they could be called upon to adjust pre-planned strategies to meet military goals. This will most often occur during life-or-death situations or when there is no available officer direction. Therefore, it is imperative that the mission goal be clear in their minds. Only when the end state of a mission is understood, can an NCO prepare an effective strategy that minimizes the losses necessary to reach it.

Use Your Resources

There are two sources of information you can always draw on for advice when planning for mission goals. Priority should be given to personal experience. Who doesn't use past experiences to decide how to move forward with new challenges? But what if you don't have the experience or the right information necessary to make an informed decision? An NCO should then use the experience and/or ideas of others. As military historian Martin Blumenson remarked, "I suppose that an educated man knows the limits of his comprehension, whereas the ignoramus believes he knows everything." When appropriate and possible, NCOs should consider discussing orders with their subordinates in order to draw on subordinates' expertise.

This practice also allows Soldiers more clearly understand their roles when executing the mission. Consider the example of U.S. Marine Corps General James N. Mattis as he prepared his Marines of Task Force 58 to seize Forward Operating Base Rhino in Afghanistan:

> General Mattis believed that in order to generate speed, achieve depth in operations, and prepare for the uncertainty of battle, it was crucial that every member of the division understood explicitly the mission and the overarching commander's intent. He accomplished this through a process he called imaging. He wanted every Marine and Sailor in the division to be able to visualize everything from embarkation, planning, and deployment, to the first five days of combat. In order to accomplish this he personally briefed every member of the division on their mission and his commander's intent.5

It is clear Mattis felt it important to explain his plan and overall goal to his Marines in order for the operation to be a success. By preparing them with strategic information, he

provided a way for them to consider and prepare for the various contingencies that could arise during the mission.

An added benefit to this approach is a boost to morale and the confidence that comes in being well prepared before going into battle. This type of morale and confidence was evident on D-Day, as reported by the BBC, "Some of them shout farewells, some of them sing. Some are silent. Some of them laugh, some smile, some look thoughtful, some look, grim. One thing is common to all of them – an unmistakable air of purpose and resolve."6

Strategy, as defined by Merriam-Websters, is not a difficult concept. It is a common process Soldiers use every day. However, NCOs have the particular responsibility to understand the strategy at play in the missions they are assigned. Only then will they be able to determine, when unexpected events occur, how to successfully position their Soldiers to accomplish the mission.

Notes

1. *Merriam-Websters Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (2008), s.v. "strategy."

2. Crookenden, Napier, *Dropzone Normandy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), 110.

3. Warren Tute, John Costello and Terry Hughes*, DDay* (New York: MacMillan, 1974), 156-157.

4. Blumenson, Martin, Heroes Never Die: Warriors and Warfare in WWII (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001)
107.

5. Valenti, Michael L., *Art of War Papers: The Mattis Way of War: An Examination of Operational Art in Task Force 58 and 1st Marine Division* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College Press, 2014) 29.

6. Warren Tute, John Costello and Terry Hughes*, DDay* (New York: MacMillan, 1974), 110.