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From Sun Tzu to Modern Skies: The NCOs' Art of Movement and Maneuver

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Sergeants Major Academy

In the chaos of modern armed conflict, the ability to move and outmaneuver an adversary can be the decisive factor between victory and defeat. The Joint Force Land Component Commander (JFLCC) plans and executes military operations by strategically moving and maneuvering land forces to gain a positional advantage. Small changes must begin now.

To succeed, the JFLCC must integrate different capabilities, consider unique service limitations, and understand the operational environment (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2019).

Effective movement and maneuver are essential to achieving military operational success, and a deep understanding of these principles is critical for senior leaders.

Sergeants major (SGMs) and command sergeants major (CSMs) serving as senior enlisted advisors, must be well-versed in effective movement and maneuver. This article explores the evolution of movement and maneuver in modern warfare, and how senior enlisted leaders can help adapt to the changing environment.

Principles of Movement and Maneuver

Movement refers to physically relocating military forces within the operational environment to achieve specific goals. This concept includes moving troops, vehicles, and supplies across terrain.

Movement plays a critical role in gaining and maintaining a tactical advantage, enabling commanders to control the battlefield.

Maneuver, on the other hand, is more than just movement. It involves combining fire and movement, as well as strategically positioning forces to exploit weaknesses in the enemy's defense while maximizing friendly capabilities. The principles of movement and maneuver emphasize the need for swift and decisive action.



In modern warfare, technology and intelligence allow forces to move more efficiently, avoid detection, and enhance maneuver capabilities. Successful maneuver requires an understanding of terrain, enemy disposition, and the ability to apply force at the right time and place, often through the element of surprise. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Dylan Bailey)

In the *Art of War*, Sun Tzu (1993) states, “The nature of forces is predominantly swiftness: it takes advantage of the adversary’s delay and follows unexpected routes to attack where they are unaware” (pp. 96-97). He highlights how rapid movement enables forces to outmaneuver and surprise the enemy.

In modern warfare, technology and intelligence augment this principle, allowing forces to move more efficiently, avoid detection, and enhance maneuver capabilities. Successful maneuver requires understanding terrain, enemy disposition, and the ability to apply force at the right time and place, often through the element of surprise.

This capability builds the fundamental principles that guide movement and maneuver in military operations, which stress the need for a combined use of fire and movement.

One principle emphasizes pairing tactical movement with applying firepower effectively, which protects forces while exploiting weaknesses in enemy positions.

The other principal stresses that firepower alone is not enough for success. When forces rely solely on static positions and firepower, they risk losing flexibility which allows the enemy to counter their moves (Department of the Navy, 2020).

Successful military engagements require integrating both movement and firepower, allowing commanders to keep the initiative, control the tempo, and overwhelm the adversary. Integrating movement and firepower was a key factor in successful military campaigns throughout history, as illustrated by notable examples.

Historical Evolution of Movement and Maneuver

The principles of movement and maneuver have been applicable since the start of warfare. One of the most noteworthy historical examples of effective maneuver strategy was in the 13th century by Genghis Khan’s Mongols.

They revolutionized the methods in which nations’ armies conducted land warfare by combining unprecedented speed, surprise, and maneuver with their agile cavalry forces.

Their speed and aggressive maneuvers allowed them to draw the enemy reserves, split their forces, and conceal their main attack (Benfield, 2012).

The Mongols applied tempo and forced the world to adapt to this form of strategic maneuver.

Another major evolution in movement and maneuver was the invention of firearms. There were

important steps in firearm evolution, but nothing was more influential than rifling. Incrementally growing from hand-held weapons, to bow and arrows, and finally to un-rifled muskets and cannons, rifling revolutionized strategic movement.

Up to this point, commanders fought in static formations where the strategic goal was enemy attrition. The force’s sheer mass was often a predictor of success.

During the American Civil War, technological advances introduced rifling, enhancing firearm accuracy and range, and altering battlefield tactics on both sides.

Movement and maneuver shifted from static formations consuming massive amounts of ammunition to applying precision fires on the adversary from a fortified defensive position (Kerr, 2015). As firearms evolved, they transformed the nature of warfare. The next breakthrough introduced another dimension to the battlefield.

World War I and trench-style warfare brought rifling to its logical conclusion. Armies faced each other in heavily defended trench systems, and tried to achieve fire superiority. This led to prolonged stalemates between forces until one side or the other successfully maneuvered and broke the defense.

After World War I, France assumed this style of two-dimensional warfare would continue indefinitely and built the Maginot Line to defend against it. However, with the advent of airplanes, militaries expanded combat power beyond the traditional two-dimensional battlefield.

This third dimension fundamentally changed the nature of movement and maneuver. Armies could now attack farther and were no longer able to defend from a linear perspective.

Historical events, technological advances, and innovative thinkers have collectively shaped the evolution of maneuver strategy.

From Genghis Khan's light, mobile cavalry to airplanes, technological advancements reshaped the battlefield, providing modern military leaders with both new challenges and new opportunities for operational success. As maneuver strategy continues to evolve, modern military leaders must navigate a complex and rapidly changing operational environment.

Modern Movement and Maneuver Challenges and Adaptations

The modern battlefield presents new challenges that require adaptability to counter rapid innovation. Instantaneous worldwide communication and collaboration allow adversaries to distribute improved tactics, techniques, and procedures in real-time.

This was most notable during the Global War on Terrorism when improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were commonly used. These devices became an invaluable tool for insurgents and non-state actors to counter conventional military forces, changing their ability to conduct both movement and maneuver.

Though they affect movement during ground transportation, they also disrupt light infantry maneuvers by luring soldiers into small-arms engagements where they encountered pre-positioned IEDs in concealed locations.

Employing IEDs is a potent tactic for disrupting enemy movement. It allows users an ambush-style attack where

they choose the location, and the adversary unwittingly chooses the time (Department of the Army, 2017).

By analyzing projected helicopter landing zones, a clever adversary can even influence air transportation movements (Wilson, 2007). However, IEDs' imprecision limits their effectiveness, puts civilians at risk, and adversaries can sometimes predict their static location.

While they're highly effective at disrupting movement and maneuver, their crudeness and limited



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mobility have historically been major drawbacks. In response to these limitations, the modern evolution of this tactic appeared, and evolved to address the one-dimensional nature of traditional IEDs, offering a more sophisticated and dynamic approach to asymmetric (irregular) warfare.

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) have revolutionized modern warfare by making combat zones transparent (Bugayova et al., 2024). Capable of delivering high-explosive payloads, UAVs offer advantages over crude IEDs, incorporating their effectiveness into a highly sophisticated three-dimensional platform.

They also serve as advanced reconnaissance assets that feed command and control functions and serve as observers to improve indirect-fire capabilities. UAVs share a similar characteristic with IEDs in that they are extremely difficult to overcome.

Even with significant emphasis on countering adversaries' UAV capabilities, the financial and resource burden of deploying effective countermeasures often



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outweighs the cost of simply replacing a downed UAV. These factors contribute to an ill-defined problem, and the solution for movement and maneuver is not yet clear.

Despite their potential, UAVs face limitations in technology and environmental factors with heavy jamming or extreme weather; in such environments, traditional forms of movement and maneuver, such as infantry and armor, remain crucial (Gao, 2020).

Considering these evolving challenges, it is critical to examine how military leaders responded to these emerging threats. As the nature of combat evolves, leaders must adapt quickly and strike a balance between technological advancements and strategic flexibility.

In the face of IEDs and UAVs, leaders have had to innovate, not only in terms of tactical approaches but also in developing new doctrines, training programs, and countermeasures.

Military leader responses range from technological investments to completely restructuring military organizations. Understanding these responses reveals how the military is keeping pace with rapidly evolving threats.

Senior Enlisted Leaders in Modern Movement and Maneuver

Trust-based As warfare evolves, senior enlisted advisors play a pivotal role in guiding forces through the complexities of modern movement and maneuver. To effectively navigate the challenges of emerging technologies, SGMs and CSMs must understand the principles of movement and maneuver and how to apply them in the context of their leadership responsibilities.

In recent conflicts, SGMs have spearheaded training programs to help leaders adapt to the challenges posed by unmanned systems, ensuring their troops are prepared to respond to evolving threats with flexibility and precision.

However, adversaries continue to probe these programs through increasingly sophisticated UAV technology. The attack on Tower 22 in Jordan, Jan. 28, 2024, dramatically illustrates this point.

The Shahed-136 UAV, used by Iranian-backed militia, killed three U.S. servicemembers and injured dozens more (Weisberger, 2024). The fact that relatively inexpensive and commercially available drones can cost American lives raises serious concerns about current threat assessments and force protection measures.

This attack underscores the need for senior leaders not only to mentor junior leaders on tactical reactions to UAVs, but to advocate for a broader shift in the forces' overall protection. This includes investing in more robust counter-UAV systems, improved intelligence gathering on potential threats, and reevaluating base layouts to minimize vulnerabilities.

However, these steps alone may not be enough to counter sophisticated adversaries. Like major technological evolutions in warfare, this ill-defined problem may seem daunting with a lack of clear countermeasures.

Ultimately, it will require a combination of adaptive leadership, continuous innovation, and a willingness for senior enlisted advisors to challenge established doctrines to ensure their units remain resilient and effective in the face of rapidly evolving threats.



Conclusion

Senior enlisted leaders stand at the forefront, adapting military forces to modern warfare's evolving demands. Understanding movement and maneuver, combined with proactive leadership in integrating new technologies, is essential for maintaining operational effectiveness.

The recent attack on Tower 22 in Jordan highlights the need for sergeants major and command sergeants major not only to mentor their teams in tactical responses to emerging threats, but also to advocate for systemic changes in force protection and threat assessment.

As adversaries continue to exploit technological advancements, senior leaders must foster a culture of adaptability, innovation, and critical evaluation within their ranks.

Ultimately, the ability of enlisted leaders to anticipate, respond to, and shape the future battlefield will determine the resilience and security of their forces in an increasingly complex operational environment. ■

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