



WILLING SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF? A Critique of Operational Art

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1. Operational Art: win without winning and loose without losing

Sitting somewhere between the strategic and the tactical, the operational level is a somewhat abstract, intangible concept. Indeed, one commentator has dismissed it as a “mere pretension and an artificial creation imposed between tactics and strategy that had no content or merit”¹. Others have argued that stressing the idea of the operation has come to overwhelm that of strategy.²

To begin with let's think about the problem of determining if the operational level really does exist. Is strategy more than the sum of tactics? Or is a successful military campaign really just the aggregation of winning battles to ensure victory?

Two historical examples shine some light on these questions. One the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714) and the other from the US Civil War (1860-1865).

In a continuous series of campaigns, conducted over the summer months from 1704 to 1711, The Duke of Marlborough, led a coalition of forces from Britain, the Netherlands and various German states against the French and their allies. Starting with the Battle of Blenheim in 1704, Marlborough achieved tactical success at Ramillies (1706), Oudenarde (1708) and Malplaquet (1709). In the years where Marlborough did not manage to bring the French to battle, he conducted a number of successful sieges of Flanders towns such as Huy (1705) and Douai (1710), which set the conditions for successful actions the following campaigning season.

Marlborough's tactical brilliance in the handling of his troops, was not sufficient to gain strategic defeat over the French, who continued to return to the fight every year. Ultimately, Britain and her allies were unable to break France's will and capability to continue the war. Flanders became the scene for first strategic stalemate and, following Marlborough's removal from the theatre, France's recovery³.

So, if even a general of Marlborough's genius could fail to translate continual tactical success into strategic victory, is the reverse possible?

By June 1862, US General George McClellan's Army of the Potomac had reached the outskirts of the Confederate capital, Richmond, defended by General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia.⁴ On

¹ Walter Jacobs, *Tukhachevsky Rediscovered*, Military Review 44, no. 8 August 1964, 67

² Justin Kelly and Mike Brennan, *Alien: How Operational Art Devoured Strategy*, US Department of Defence, Strategic Studies Institute, September 2009.

³ See David G. Chandler, *Marlborough as a Military Commander*, Penguin, London 2000, for a review of Marlborough's campaigns and his military achievements.

⁴ In March 1862, McClellan began what became known as the *Peninsular Campaign*, took advantage of US control of the eastern seaboard to land the bulk of his army at Fort Monroe to threaten Richmond from the southeast. By May McClellan had reached the outskirts of Richmond to find himself subjected to a surprise attack from Confederate forces commanded by General Johnston in the *Battle of Seven Pines* on 31 May. During the battle Johnston was wounded and replaced by Lee as commander of the Army of Northern Virginia.

assuming command on 1st June, Lee prepared extensive defensive positions around Richmond, in the process earning himself the not entirely affectionate nickname *the King of Spades* from his soldiers. Meanwhile, McClellan ordered a tactical pause in his operations, consolidating his forces and waiting for an improvement in the weather.

Aware that his forces were numerically inferior to McClellan's⁵, Lee embarked on a strategy of rapid manoeuvre to concentrate locally superior numbers against specific points in the US line. Lee's army fought seven consecutive battles over the seven days from 25th June to 1st July, which became known as the *Seven Days Battle*.

With the possible exception of Gaine's Mill (27th June), Lee suffered a tactical defeat in every single action. Overall, the Confederate losses were greater than McClellan's⁶ and Lee's army retired back to Richmond to reorganise and rehabilitate.

However, Lee's bold action fatally undermined the confidence of the US army. McClellan believed that he was facing a much larger Confederate force than he actually was and demanded that the US War Office provide him with immediate reinforcements. Unable to generate the force sizes that they fought were required, McClellan was ordered to withdraw his force from the peninsula. This removed the threat to Richmond and allowed Lee to gain the initiative and invade Maryland.

These two examples show that it is possible to win without winning and lose without losing. Tactical success does not necessarily translate into strategic victory, nor vice versa. The fact that winning every battle does not guarantee success; nor does losing every battle guarantee failure suggests that something important does indeed occur between the strategic and the tactical levels.

Having established, at least superficially, the existence of the operational level let's consider:

- What the operational level is;
- What makes the operational level difficult to understand;
- How it evolved as a concept in military thought;
- Current thinking and the practice of operational art in recent operations.

The aim is not to develop a single definition of the operational level nor a fool proof way to become a skilled operational artist, instead it is to review how thinking of the operational level has evolved and critically engage with current thinking about what it is and its practice.

2. What is the Operational Level?

To begin to understand the landscape between tactics and strategy, we first need to describe what the tactical and strategic domains are.

2.1. Tactical

The tactical domain is the one that we feel most comfortable with, intuitively it is what we think of when we think of soldiering. However, it is important to remember that the tactical covers an enormous range of military activity, from a section attack to a corps level wide wet cap crossing.

⁵ McClellan's Army of the Potomac numbered approximately 115,000 during the campaign, while Lee's forces were around 92,000 after the Battle of Seven Pines, giving the Confederates an inferior force ratio of 0.8:1 against the US. While, arguably, Lee had sufficient forces to successfully defend an attack on Richmond, keeping his army in defensive positions would have fixed them in Richmond and allowed the US to occupy other parts of the Confederacy, and build up sufficient combat power to take the capital.

⁶ The Army of Northern Virginia suffered approximately 20,000 casualties (killed, missing and wounded), ~ 22% of their initial force. In comparison, the Army of the Potomac's losses were around 16,000. ~ 14% of their initial force.

In terms of the span of command, the tactical covers everything from a fire team led by a lance corporal to a corps commanded by a lieutenant general. It could be quite depressing to think that your entire military career could be spent within the tactical space, even if you ascend to the dizzy heights of three star command.

One of the biggest difficulties in determining where the operational level begins, and the tactical level ends, lies in identifying who is responsible for the battle after the one you are currently fighting. If we think about doctrinal time scales for combat, a battle group expects to fight for about 8 hours, a brigade for 12 to 24 hours, a division 24 to 48 hours and a corps for 96 to 120 hours. Over the last 50 years, the shortest time deployed for a UK division is around six months, which far exceeds the operational and planning time scales of the divisional headquarters. Who then is responsible for making sure that a tactical formation, such as the divisional headquarters, achieves the strategic goals that it is being deployed for?

The thing to take away from this is that the top end of the tactical domain is poorly defined and that the average time scales for deployment greatly exceed the planning horizons of tactical headquarters. If the tactical, the area we think we understand the best, has its problems, what then of the strategic level?

2.2. Strategic

2.2.1. Grand Strategic

At the political level, consider strategy to be the allocation of national resources (e.g. military power, industry, finance, intelligence assets, science and technology, and cultural) – the *means*; to different levers of power (Diplomatic, Information, Military and Economic) – the *ways*; to achieve the government's policy goals (set against a backdrop of both national and international imperatives) – the *ends*.

This concept of strategy as being equal to the ways, means and ends was first introduced by Lykke in the 1980s⁷. Lykke's work was clearly an inflation of Liddell-Hart's definition of pure strategy as the art of the general is the calculation and co-ordination of the end and the means⁸. Whether strategy consists of ends and means or ways, means and ends, both Liddell-Hart and Lykke's approach to strategy suffers from the fact their view of strategy is essentially static and does not allow for the evolution of the constituents over time. In practice a dynamic view of strategy, where outcomes and the resources and options to achieve them change over time may represent a more realistic view to as how strategy operates in practice.⁹

Lawrence Freedman considers that strategic policy is essentially the choice of whether to co-operate or compete with a state to achieve a favourable outcome¹⁰. These outcomes, current UK doctrine calls them the *international imperatives*¹¹, but they are often referred to as national interests cover a wide range: from the abstract, such as the maintenance of the rules based order, to the definite, such as the sovereignty of Belgium. Some of these national interests are enduring, others are more fleeting.

Lord Palmerstone's often quoted remark - "we have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow."¹² – suggests that as far

⁷ Lykke, A. F., *Defining Military Strategy*, Military Review 69, No. 5, 3 (1989))

⁸ Basil Liddell-Hart, *When Britain Goes to War*, Faber & Faber, London, 1935, p83.

⁹ For a historical comparison of static versus dynamic decision making, see Stephen Coulson, *Static and Dynamic Strategy Making: Egypt, Singapore, Dill and Brooke*, British Journal for Military History, 7.3 (2021), pp. 81-100.

¹⁰ Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy, a History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013

¹¹ The term "international imperatives" is borrowed from the UK's current doctrinal definition of the strategic level as: "the level at which national resources are allocated to achieve the government's policy goals (set against a backdrop of both national and international imperatives). Achieving these goals usually requires a combination of military force, diplomacy and economic measures, as well as collaboration with other nations' governments and armed forces and other international organisations and agencies. Strategic success requires foresight, patience, endurance, tenacity and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances." UK Ministry of Defence, Joint Doctrine Publication 0-01 (JDP 0-01) (5th Edition), November 2014.

¹² Hansard, House of Commons, 1 March 1848

policy is concerned, the practical always trumps the ideological. This is known as a *realist* approach to international relations, as opposed to an *idealist* approach. However, most current thinkers on international relations recognise that even the most extreme realist approach operates within a framework of ideals and ethics so that all policy should be considered a mix of the realist and idealist schools.

Despite the considerable academic effort, there is little agreement as to what strategy actually is, and how it is bounded. In particular, definitions of strategy suffer from a vagueness as to what the objectives of strategy are. The converse problem, overprescribing ends often constrains strategy to achieving a single outcome. In turn this risks treating events as a series of discrete events that are addressed independently. This *project management*¹³ approach to strategy is unsuitable for continuous competition between states, and other long running issues, such as international terrorism, where the West's reaction has often been described a *whack-a-mole* rather than coherent response.

Let's leave the abstract world of international relations and foreign policy and step down a level to examine military strategy.

2.2.2. Military Strategic

Disappointingly, most formal definitions of military strategy consist of simply appending the word military in front of their definition of strategy. Current UK doctrine describes military strategy as a subset of defence strategy (which is described as subset of national strategy) and assigns the responsibility of military strategy to the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS).¹⁴

A more practically useful definition of military strategy is the understanding the different theatres of military activity and how these are related to, and dependent upon, each other.

Although he did not define it in these terms, this concept of military strategy - the interdependence of different theatres - would immediately be recognisable to Field Marshall Sir John Dill, Chief of the Imperial General Staff (IGS) (May 1940 – Dec 1941) and arguably one of the best strategic thinkers of the Second World War.¹⁵

Dill's genius lay not only in understanding how different theatres were connected to each other, but also in communicating that to a generation of generals and staff officers, both during his time as commandant of the staff college and as CGIS. He understood how to explain the complicated as the complicated and not to oversimplify.

When describing the relationships between theatres Dill would start with the complicated, explaining where the difficulties lay. Probably one of the biggest mistakes we make at the moment is to try to oversimplify relationships at the at the beginning of trying to understand the problem, rather than taking in the problem with all its complexity and then simplifying later.¹⁶ We will return to this idea of complexity we discuss what exactly is operational art.

Armed with Dill's approach to understanding military strategy, we are ready to look at the operational level.

¹³ Within the discipline of project management projects are defined as temporary, with a definite start and end that create a single outcome (The Project Management Institute, *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge*, Third Edition, 2004, pp5-6).

¹⁴ UK Ministry of Defence, Joint Doctrine Publication 0-01 (JDP 0-01) (5th Edition), November 2014.

¹⁵ Dill was regarded by his peers as one of the leading strategic thinkers in the military. Following his appointment as IGS, Dill quickly established himself as the font of strategy among his fellow Chiefs of Staff, his 'authority derived from a study and experience of the central direction of war unmatched at that juncture by any other serving officer.' (see Coulson, *Static and Dynamic Strategy Making*).

¹⁶ An example of Dill's ability to describe the military strategic picture can be seen in the notes of a lecture he presented when Commandant of the Staff College in 1927, *The Imperial Armies in Relation to the Military Situation*, John Dill papers, King's College Archives, DILL 2/3.

2.3. Operational

2.3.1. Operational Level

Current UK doctrine defines, the operational level of warfare as “the level at which operations are planned, conducted and sustained, to contribute to achieving national strategic aims, as well as synchronising action, within theatres or areas of operation. The operational level provides the bridge between the strategic and tactical levels.”¹⁷

Other than confirming that the operational lies somewhere between the tactical and strategical, this definition is not very helpful in fleshing out what the operational level actually is and how to practice it.

In fact, UK doctrine further limits discussion of the operational level by prescribing its responsibility to the Joint Commander, acting with the theatre-level Joint Force Commander (JFC). In a multinational setting, the UK national contingent commander will be responsible for integrating the national contribution into the overall force. In practice, the delivery of strategic responsibilities has fixed the JFC, leaving a vacuum between the tactical and JFC levels, where no one is responsible for the continuity of the operational plan.

2.3.2. Operational Art

In allied doctrine, from 2006, operational art is defined as “the employment of forces to attain strategic and/or operational objectives through the design, organization, integration and conduct of strategies, campaigns, major operations and battles.”¹⁸

This was extended in 2017 to make explicit that operational art includes the transition to and the end of crisis management, i.e. moves up and down the spectrum of conflict.¹⁹ Historically, the transition from war to peace has often caused the greatest misalignment between tactical and strategic aims.

Both of these definitions are essentially tautological provide little guidance on what operational art actually is. The 2017 edition of NATO doctrine AJP-01 suggests that the essence of operational art includes: an ability to understand complex situations; maintain situational awareness through continuous assessment; and, a mixture of process and intuitive based thinking. This is not terribly helpful, all of the described features of decision-making at the operational level occur at the strategic and the tactical.

So, doctrine is not terribly illuminating when trying to understand the operational level or operational art. Instead, looking at how the idea of the operational level evolved in military thinking, sheds some light onto what it is. Before we do it is worth looking at how previous studies into the operational level have obscured what it actually is and makes understanding it difficult.

3. Why is thinking about the operational level difficult?

Two significant limitations to understanding the Operational Level and Operational Art are the **conflation** of the operational space with levels or regions of command, and **reductionism** of operational art to a prescribed approach.

3.1. Conflation

¹⁷ UK Ministry of Defence, Joint Doctrine Publication 0-01 (JDP 0-01) (5th Edition), November 2014.

¹⁸ NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions, AAP-6 / 2009.

¹⁹ “Employing forces, in concert with other agencies, to achieve strategic and operational objectives through the design, organization, integration and conduct of strategies, campaigns, major operations and battles. This includes transitioning and terminating NATO’s crisis management role.” (NATO AJP-01, Allied Joint Doctrine, 2017)

The conflation of the operational level with the campaign has led to the view that the operational level does not exist for small campaigns. That is to be able to work, the operational level needs mass. One US view is that it only becomes possible to have an operational level when military units (i.e. corps sized and above) are capable of conducting operations independently. Certainly, both the UK and Canada have tended to neglect the operational level in recent operations such as JOINT GUARDIAN (Kosovo) and HERRICK (Afghanistan) suffered in their effectiveness from a lack of operational planning and co-ordination.

3.2. Reductionism

We shall see as we review the development of operational thinking that a reoccurring problem is that once practitioners developed a good, workable definition of operational art, they almost immediately become overly prescriptive as to how it should be practiced. The operational art is reduced to a single concept of operations or set of tactics.²⁰ This limits the full application of operational art and reduces the chances of the operational influencing either tactical or strategic outcomes.

So much for the extant doctrinal definitions, how did we get into this position in the first place, what was the evolution of the concept of the operational level and operational art?

4. Evolution of Operational Art

4.1. Soviet Roots

Experience of defeat by the Germans in the 1917, and the Russian Civil war (1917 – 1923) led to a revision of military doctrine by the fledgling Soviet Army. Soviet theorists, led by future Marshal of the Soviet Union Mikhail Tukhachevsky, rejected the emphasis placed on obtaining victory through a single decisive battle of annihilation. They considered that strategic objectives could only be obtained through the cumulative operational success of successive operations. This focused the Soviet theorists on the intersection of strategy and tactics and led to the creation of a new area of military science *operativnoe iskusstvo*, or operational art.²¹ This was directly contrary to Clausewitz's idea of a decisive battle to defeat the enemy's *Schwerpunkt*.

Tukhachevsky continued to expand upon the idea of deep battle to create one uninterrupted deep operation through the merger of several successive operations. The campaign and the operation merged into a single entity through the linking of the initial and subsequent operations into a single unbroken operation that was extended both spatially and temporally so that it coincided with the campaign²².

This merging of the operational level with the campaign, can be considered as an early example of conflation. As the Soviet experience of the operational moved from the theoretical to brutally practical in the Second World War, understanding of operational art tended to become synonymous with the penetration of the enemy's front, followed by rapid manoeuvre to exploit and occupy the rear areas. This reductionism of operational art to solely focus on the deep battle endured for the remainder of the duration of the Soviet Union.

4.2. The UK Experience

Prior to Soviet thinking about the Deep Battle, a level between the tactical and strategic had been identified by Baron Henri Antoine Jomini in the 1830s, which he called *grand tactis*. These ideas were

²⁰ The generals in earlier historical examples both evolved their own distinct tactic or concept of operations. Marlborough sought to engage his enemy in battle (a departure from contemporary military practice which relied on manoeuvre rather than direct combat) and rely on the superior rate of fire of his infantry in attack to ensure success. In the Battle of Seven Days, Lee developed

²¹ Lt. Col. Wilson C. Blythe Jr., *A History of Operational Art*, Military Review, November – December 2018 37 – 49.

²² Lt. Col. Wilson C. Blythe Jr., *A History of Operational Art*, Military Review, November – December 2018 37 – 49.

adopted by British military writers, such as E.B. Hamley, who made use of them at the Staff College where he was Commandant in the 1870s.

The military historian, Colonel G. F. R. Henderson, who developed his own ideas of 'grand tactics' which he defined as 'the higher art' of generalship, 'those stratagems, manoeuvres and devices by which victories are won'. Following the First World War, J. F. C. Fuller also made use of the phrase grand tactics, in his 1926 book, *The Foundations of the Science of War*.²³

Most commentators suggest that Britain's experience in the First and Second World Wars did little to encourage the development of operational art. Except perhaps through the failings identified by Fuller, Liddall-Hart and others, writing after the First World War. This is probably not correct, during both 1914-1918 and 1939-1945, the Army did evolve methods that could be considered to be operational level, they were just not called that at the time.

By August 1918, the British Army had achieved the successful combination of sequenced, all-arms, shallow attacks (1-3 km in depth) along the entire length of the line, that was maintained throughout the Hundred Days offensive, until the defeat of the German Army in November 1918. This combination of sophisticated tactics, with theatre-wide synchronisation and allocation of resources can be considered a successful example of the operational art.

The Second World War provides several different examples of the development of operational art. The approach used by Field Marshall Slim during the Burma Campaign has been previously described²⁴, other less well known examples include, the Battle of France May 1940 and Operation Compass December 1940.

While not usually considered successful, the retreat of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) from Belgium to Dunkirk during the Battle of France is a good example of the practice of operational art during one of the most challenging types of military operation: a withdrawal in contact. The official report into military operations in Flanders 1940, the Bartholomew Report, concluded that there was a lack of operational planning during the campaign; however, the report did note that ad hoc planning and decision-making was largely successful and that the BEF withdrew due to defeat of allied formations on its flanks rather than owing to direct defeat in combat.²⁵ Although criticised for being overly reliant on the use of linear terrain such as wet gap crossings, the BEF did successfully synchronise the manoeuvre of three corps by falling back on successive defence lines along the rivers and canals of Flanders. In this way the BEF avoided being outflanked or penetrated by the German blitzkrieg and was able to evacuate the bulk of its manpower, if not equipment from Dunkirk.

On 9th December 1940, Lieutenant General Sir Richard O'Connor's Western Desert Force broke through the Italian front in Egypt and attacked Sidi Barrani from behind. The town and the Italian fortifications were captured within two days taking over 200,000 Italian prisoners. This marked the opening of Operation Compass, General Wavell's plan to drive the Italian 10th Army from Egypt and Libya, removing the Axis threat to the Suez Canal and the Persian oilfields. Originally planned as a five day operation, Compass was extended as repeated successes against the Italians led to the capture of Tobruk in January 1941 and Benghazi the following month. A pincer movement between the 6th Australian division moving along the coastline and 7th Armoured division manoeuvring inland of the Jebel Akhdar led to the Italians being cut off at Beda Fomm on 7th February.

²³ Lieutenant General Sir John Kiszely (2005) *Thinking about the Operational Level*, The RUSI Journal, 150:6, 38-43. Fuller considered that the co-ordinated application of control, pressure and resistance to be the essence of grand tactics.

²⁴ Lyman, R. (2003). *The Art of Manoeuvre at the Operational Level of War: Lieutenant-General W.J. Slim and Fourteenth Army, 1944-45*. In: Sheffield, G., Till, G. (eds) *The Challenges of High Command*. Cormorant Security Studies. Palgrave Macmillan, London.

²⁵ The National Archives (TNA) CAB 106/220

Operation Compass can be considered to represent the culmination of British interwar doctrinal development.²⁶ This was the first time during the Second World War, that a force comprising of a majority of trained, regular soldiers fought an operation using contemporary doctrine, laid down in Field Service Regulations (FSR).²⁷ Collegiate, operational planning was conducted prior to and during Compass, down to brigade level, and mission command was exercised throughout, with O'Connor providing the linkage between the corps and army level.

While Compass was a vindication of the mission-command led, manoeuvre based pre-war British concept of operations, the levels of training and preparation required meant that it proved impossible to replicate, when further operations were conducted but using less experienced troops and planning staffs. Being able to adapt one's concept of operations - doctrine, and tactics - to resources available, such as equipment and quality of personnel, led to Montgomery moving away from pre-war doctrine, to develop his own concept of operations, the *teed-up battle*.

Montgomery's idea of a teed-up battle has often been dismissed as a throw-back to the linear battles of 1915-1917; however, there were sound operational reasons why Montgomery adopted this approach, echoes of which can be seen in Russian operations in the Donbas (April – June 2022). So, it is worth examining in detail what exactly the teed-up battle consisted of.

Central to Montgomery's thinking was the concept of tidiness – ensuring that an attack was *teed off* [sic] correctly; that is with forces deployed correctly and allocated appropriate supporting resources.²⁸ Second was the delivery of *Colossal Cracks* (hitting the Germans a large crack in their front) through attritional, set-piece battles, supported and preceded by overwhelming joint fires²⁹.

The aims of the teed-up battle were to avoid heavy casualties among Montgomery's own, mainly conscript troops, and to maintain their morale. Achieving this in practice required, the concentration of force, typically one brigade up during a divisional attack. This echeloning of forces implies that many Forward Passages of Lines (FPOLs) were required. This approach needed air supremacy to protect forces concentrated in rear areas. Fundamental to all of this was an overall master plan which includes operational, sub-operational and operation levels of planning.³⁰

4.3. Operational Art During the Cold War

British doctrine continued to view the operational level through the lens of Montgomery's concept of operations during the first half of the Cold War. Although this continuation has been criticised as lack of development of operational art³¹, the fact that British forces relied on mainly conscript forces, and later reservists, to provide much of the mass in the British Army of the Rhine (BOAR), suggests there were at least some reasons for its retention.

The twin problems of the degree of dispersal required on a battlefield dominated by tactical nuclear weapons; and a Soviet revival of the concept of the deep battle, in particular the deployment of

²⁶ Fennell, J. (2019). *Fighting the People's War: The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War* (Armies of the Second World War). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p 112.

²⁷ The majority of troops participating in Norwegian Campaign and in the Battle of France were reservist or conscript forces, augmenting a much smaller cadre of regulars. As described above, much the operational planning for the Battle of France was conducted on an ad hoc basis, rather than following doctrinal processes. Similarly, “the greatest weakness of the Norwegian campaign was the link [or lack of] between policy and plans” (John Kiszely, *Anatomy of a Campaign: The British Fiasco in Norway, 1940*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, p277).

²⁸ Stephen. A. Hart. *Colossal Cracks: Montgomery's 21st Army Group in North West Europe, 1944-45*. p. 80. See also Fennell, Johnny, *Fighting the People's War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019.

²⁹ Joint Fires refers to indirect fire delivered by artillery, naval gun support or close air support.

³⁰ Stephen. A. Hart. *Colossal Cracks: Montgomery's 21st Army Group in North West Europe, 1944-45*. pp.70 -75.

³¹ Lieutenant General Sir John Kiszely (2005) *Thinking about the Operational Level*, The RUSI Journal, 150:6, 38-43.

independent tank brigades to exploit breaches in NATO's front and larger, Operational Manoeuvre Groups (OMGs)³², led to the US and British to review their thinking of the operational level.

By 1976, the US and NATO developed the *Active Defence Doctrine*. Active Defence tried to bring conventional initiative back to the battlefield, replacing the reliance on a static defence posture combined with tactical nuclear weapons to resist a Soviet attack into Western Europe. The doctrine of Active Defence was criticised for not enabling the timely deployment of tactical and strategic reserves.

To overcome these criticisms, Active Defence was replaced by the concept of the *Air-Land Battle*. US *Air-Land Battle* doctrine, which was first endorsed in 1982 and entered the US main doctrinal war fighting publication FM 100-5, Operations in June 1986. The Air-Land Battle stressed the concept of operational level³³ manoeuvre, enabled by the use of (then novel) air-delivered precision guided weapons.³⁴

Under the Air-Land doctrine, the corps became the focus for the operational level, since the co-ordination of Army and Air Force assets now occurred at the corps. Instead of being concerned with tactical engagements, corps commanders had to plan and direct operations that furthered strategic objectives. The Air-Land Battle referred to these operations as *campaigns*. Since commanders at the operational level were concerned with achieving strategic goals, their decisions about where, when, how, and even if to fight the enemy became of greater importance.³⁵

The update of FM 100-5 with Air-Land doctrine also introduced the concept of the Deep Close and Rear. This took advantage of the potential increase in accuracy and lethality of long-range air fires to develop the idea of concurrently fighting three separate battles: a Deep Battle against the enemy's reserves, and capabilities; a Close Battle against the enemy forces in contact; and, a Rear Battle against Soviet OMGs.

Conceptually, this is similar (& probably unconsciously influenced) the US term *Three Block War*, used to describe the tactical transition from warfighting to nation building at the end of combat phase of the Second Gulf War (Operation TELIC 1) in May 2003. The utility of the model is that it allows the three separate tactical battles to be fought by a different commander but under the operational plan of the operational commander.

The reforms to the British Army, initiated by Field Marshal Sir Nigel Bagnall, in response to concerns of the risk of a surprise, conventional Soviet attack on NATO forces, did much to stimulate thinking about the operation level in the UK.

The Bagnall reforms were complimentary, but not identical, the US Air-Land Battle doctrine. At their heart they consisted of the development of a new operational concept, at the army group level (i.e. one above the corps). This operational concept embraced joint land/air mobile warfare, which exploited manoeuvre principles.³⁶

Bagnall's thinking on the operational level was inspired by his studying German defensive battles against the Soviets in 1944 and 1945, along with the writings of Richard Simpkin³⁷. Bagnall's reforms included not only the reorganisation of the UK-led Northern Army Group (NORTHAG) but also changes to

³² Soviet Operational Manoeuvre Groups (OMGs) were corps sized formations capable of penetrating deep into NATO's rear areas either through air insertion or using very fast vehicles for ground manoeuvre.

³³ Within Air-Land Doctrine, the Operational level was considered to be at the corps level. This differed from Active Defence which focused on the level above, i.e. the Army Group.

³⁴ See Robert. A Gessert (1984) *The AirLand battle and NATO's new doctrinal debate*, The RUSI Journal, 129:2, 52-60, for a review of the AirLand Battle concept.

³⁵ Lt. Col. Wilson C. Blythe Jr., *A History of Operational Art*, Military Review, November – December 2018 37 – 49.

³⁶ Sangho Lee, *Deterrence and the Defence of Central Europe: the British role from the early 1980s to the end of the Gulf War*, PhD Thesis, King's College, London 1994.

³⁷ Richard Simpkin, *Race to the Swift: Thoughts on Warfare in the Twenty-First Century*, London: Brassey's 1985.

military education and training to stress the operational level. This included the establishment of the Higher Command Staff Course (HCSC) and campaign planning at the joint level.

Bagnall's stress of the operational level appeared to be validated by the success of UK land forces during the First Gulf War (Operation GRANBY); however, mixed successes in British operations during the Balkans and in Afghanistan have led to further developments in the nature of operational art.

5. Current Thinking and Practice of Operational Art

Most recent views of operational art focus on fighting the enemy's cognitive ability as much as his physical capabilities. Two examples of this are fighting the enemy's system and fighting in the information domain. We will compare the theory with how operational art has been practised (or not) during Afghanistan and the Ukraine.

5.1. *Fighting the System*

This is an extension of the manoeuvrist approach, which considers fighting only when it is necessary for achievement of strategic goals. The system approach views the operational level sees the enemy's forces as but one part of his 'system', searching for the most cost-effective means of defeating that system, which may or may not involve the destruction of his forces. As well as physical manoeuvre and, this approach also considers the use of mental (or psychological) manoeuvre to defeat an opponent.

Proponents of this system level approach, suggest that successful manoeuvre is predicated upon a command system, which is not based on command by detailed orders, but on one that allows opportunities to be exploited faster than the enemy can react.³⁸

Understanding exactly what the enemy's system consists of and its boundaries may be very to achieve in practice. To help understand this concept further, let us consider the system to refer to how the competing demands of tactical formations affect the balance of forces across a front or within a theatre. That is how the actions of the enemy's tactical formations are related in time and space and how they interact with and affect each other (e.g. competition for resources, reserves, etc). Note that this definition is similar to Dill's definition of military strategy, described above, but operating within a theatre.

To further complicate the problem of understanding the enemy's system, it is important to remember that the competing demands of friendly forces in theatre, and strategically, also compose of a system. The system of friendly forces also interacts with and changes the enemy's system. This means that we need to consider the interaction of enemy and friendly force systems, at the system of systems level.

We may also be tempted to add in the physical environment or the actions of non-combatant elements into this analysis of the system of systems level. For now it is sufficient to realise that fighting at the system level requires a good understanding not just of the enemy's system but the context that it evolves in. In general, the more entities in a system, the greater its complexity. To draw a mathematical analogy, even a simple system of planets orbiting each other under gravity becomes insoluble, if there are more than two objects in the system. Fighting at the system level requires considerable investment in understanding and continuous assessment of how each system changes over time.

Within the system approach, the role of an operational commander is to provide his subordinates with general direction and guidance and a, complete as possible, intelligence picture of the enemy's system. While also synchronising the system of friendly forces to enable rapid exploitation. While, this approach may be quick at identifying and acting fleeting opportunities it may also be wasteful of resources, the operational art then becomes the art of balancing benefits against resource.

Although it may be complicated to understand and involves considerable investment to achieve, developing a systems level understanding of a problem can pay considerable dividends when conducting

³⁸ Lieutenant General Sir John Kiszely (2005) *Thinking about the Operational Level*, The RUSI Journal, 150:6, 38-43.

military planning. As an example from the strategic level, Dill's successor CIGS, Field Marshall Alan Brooke, used this approach to realise the connections between the Italian and Normandy theatres in 1944 affected the rate at which Germany could reinforce threatened areas compared with the speed with which the Allies could build up strength. Brooke's realisation that in Italy north-south movement for the Germans took longer than transferring forces east-west between Russia and France, enable the Allies to synchronise operations in Italy to have a positive effect on those in Normandy.³⁹

5.2. Fighting in the Information Domain

While a systems approach to operational art allows for the use of mental (or psychological) manoeuvre, it is not considered essential. Conversely, recent developments following experience of deploying with Latvian forces, has led Canada to consider that understanding human terrain and achieving effects within the information domain are key to the practice of operational art.⁴⁰

This approach is similar, but not identical to, UK and US' concepts of Multi Domain Operations (MDO) or Multi Domain Strike (MDS), which seek to co-ordinate effects from special forces, cyber and information operations with joint fires and ground manoeuvre to achieve a specific objective at a given time. In many ways such ambitions represent a continuation of operational and strategic influence or deception operations conducted by the Allies during the Second World War and earlier. Examples include Operation FORTITUDE, the deception plan for D-Day and Meinertzhagen's haversack ruse during the Third Battle of Gaza (1917).

However, just as trying to understand the workings of an opponent's military system is complicated, so too is the level of knowledge of an enemy's preconceptions and intelligence gathering capability, required to attack in the information domain. In general it is very hard to successfully deceive an enemy, many examples of successful deception during the Second world War, turn out to have been the result of autonomous German decisions⁴¹.

Historical analysis suggests that it is not common to be able to surprise an enemy, occurring in about 10% of case studies when an attacker surprised a defender and 1% of cases where a defender surprised and attacker.⁴²

The same analysis indicates that success in the information domain, to achieve superior situational awareness over an opponent, acts as a force multiplier of around 50% or greater and protects against being surprised.⁴³

Fighting an enemy's system or in the information domain may offer some real advantages in the practice of operational art; however, they are likely to require considerable effort and resources.

Moving from the realm of the theoretical to the practical, how is the operational art being practiced in operations in Afghanistan and Ukraine?

5.3. The Operational Art in Practice: Strategic Corporals and Tactical Generals

³⁹ Coulson, *ibid*

⁴⁰ Operational Art Conference, held at Pembroke College, University of Oxford, 9th September 2021.

⁴¹ Michael I. Handel (1987) *Introduction: Strategic and operational deception in historical perspective*, Intelligence and National Security, 2:3, 1-91, p 66.

⁴² Lawrence, Christopher A., *War by Numbers: Understanding Conventional Combat*, Potomac Books, 2017. p. 140.

⁴³ Lawrence, Christopher A., *War by Numbers: Understanding Conventional Combat*, Potomac Books, 2017. p.145.

UK military operations in Afghanistan (Operation HERRICK) raised interest in the concept of the strategic corporal, that is how the actions of soldiers or junior NCOs on the ground can have far reaching strategic effects⁴⁴.

Taken to its extremes this concept leads to the phenomena of inverse mission command where the lowest level tactical activity directed resources and ultimately strategy. This is a complete reversal of the operational art of aligning tactical actions to achieve strategic outcomes. As such the existence of the strategic corporal is sign of failure of operational level command.

An operational plan that can fail through the actions at the lowest level is a plan where the theatre level ways, means and ends are disastrously out of line with each other. Conversely, it is recognised by practitioners that although individual tactical actions may have the potential to lose a campaign, they do not have the capability to win it⁴⁵. Any plan therefore that is dependent upon the actions of isolated tactical actions is unlikely to lead to overall success.

It is worth remembering that despite widespread interest in the strategic corporal, he may not actually exist. No historical analysis or case studies beyond anecdote have been produced demonstrating the influence of a strategic corporal in a campaign, even cases such as the Abu Ghraib prison torture in Iraq did not alter the strategic outcome.⁴⁶

If the strategic corporal is actually a mythical beast, what then of his inverse, the *tactical general*?

Probably the greatest surprise in the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was the complete departure of Russian forces from their own doctrine regarding operational level combat. There was no clear attempt to conduct an all arms battle, with ground manoeuvre being used to enable fires to defeat the enemy. Nor to concentrate force at a single point to break through the Ukrainian front and exploit.

Instead, initial Russian advances into Ukraine consisted of individual Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs) being fed piecemeal into combat. Attacks were unsupported by fires and combat service and combat service support appeared to be uncoordinated with manoeuvre operations. The adoption of this *flat hierarchy* concept of operations has seen significant numbers of Russian generals killed in action while trying to organise low level tactical activities.

It is as yet too early for a comprehensive study to determine if the deaths of Russian senior commanders are excessive compared to overall Russian loses, or what the exact circumstances of their deaths were. However, the loss of so many generals in frontline locations suggests a lack of leadership further down the hierarchy with the ability to organise and execute the tactical actions required for strategic success.

Following Russia's decision to break off its advance towards Kyiv and its occupation of the north of Ukraine, appears to correspond with a change in the Russian concept of operations. From April 2022 Russia has concentrated its military effort in the Donbas region, here operations are reported to have taken on a very different character from earlier activity. The concentration of forces to achieve superior combat power⁴⁷, supported by massed fires to achieve limited objectives have been observed.

This form of operational art is reminiscent of Montgomery's Colossal Cracks. Russia's reasons for this change in operational art may be similar to Montgomery's, to reduce casualties and maintain the morale of their own forces. If true, this may be an example of Michael Howard's dictum that while history does not repeat itself, it does occasionally rhyme.

⁴⁴ The phrase strategic corporal was first introduced by the US General Charles Krulak, *The Strategic Corporal Leadership in the Three Block War*, Marines Magazine, 1999

⁴⁵ Private communication from a NATO corps commander, November 2000.

⁴⁶ Feltey, T. M., *Debunking the Myth of the Strategic Corporal*, MA Thesis, Joint Forces Staff College, 2015.

⁴⁷ Force ratios of greater than 7:1 (Russian to Ukrainian) have been reported, compared with 1-2:1 in February 2022.

6. Conclusion

From this short review of operational art it looks like that there is indeed something that acts between the strategic and tactical levels. What that something is depends on the political, environmental and military context of the operation.

When thinking about the operational level there is a danger of conflating what it is with either a level of command (e.g. corps or Joint Force Command) or a geographical region (e.g. theatre or front). Others have reduced the operational art to a prescribed concept of operations or tactics.

The challenge of the operational art is to identify where, both geographically and conceptually (level of command), the operational art should be practiced. Again, context is everything; although there is a trend to emphasise the information space in current thinking, observations from the Ukraine suggest that previous approaches to operational art may occasionally be relevant.

To understanding the context that the operational sits in requires us to think about systems and the systems and the system of systems level. This means wallowing in the complex and then systematically simplifying to focus on what is important, rather than trying to begin with a simple paradigm and adding to it as you go on.

Understanding the system involves understanding how it evolves over time, this can be particularly hard in the context of multi-domain operations, where there may be a considerable delay between actions, effects and observable feedback. In order to plan and synchronise effects at the operational, the doctrinal approach for planning horizons may need revising.

Experience from Operation PITTING, and other recent operations, suggests that in many cases, the operational level will have to be planned with little strategic level guidance. While, there are no easy solutions to this problem, ensuring that planning is consistent with *international imperatives*, especially those moral imperatives may be a useful start. The British Army's current emphasis on an ethical approach to leadership may offer a sound foundation for operational planning in the absence of higher direction.

Finally, the test that the operational level is properly planned and considered is that it should allow you to identify which battles you must fight, and those that you do not need to fight.