



TACTICAL

C O N C E P T S

By Sid Heal

MANEUVERING IN TIME

Tactical operations always unfold in at least four dimensions. The first three, length, width and height, make up the realm of space. In fact, the older term “battlefield” has been replaced in modern military discourse by the more accurate “battlespace.” The maneuver elements in space are physical. They can be seen and felt. Examples include personnel, vehicles, supplies, and so forth. The fourth dimension is time. Time is a “nonspace continuum” where events occur in an irreversible succession from the past through the present to the future. While the maneuver elements involving time are just as intrinsic, they are intangible. They exist only as a mental image. Examples include actions, events, circumstances and opportunities. Nevertheless, they are just as real as those in the physical realm and just as critical in achieving a satisfactory resolution.

While nearly everyone recognizes how maneuver applies in space, the more astute will also recognize the critical aspect of time. Every tactical operation is the result of a unique and temporary set of circumstances. Unique, because each circumstance is dependent only upon those factors that are present at a particular time and place. Temporary, because an outcome, of any kind, affects the next set of circumstances in an irreversible succession.

Because tactical operations unfold in time as well as space, it becomes clear that they are in a constant and never-ending state of change. This dynamic nature makes them inherently time sensitive because they are easily altered by actions. The actions may be intentional, such as those deliberate attempts at achieving a favorable outcome, or they may be unintentional, such as accidents or

misfortune. The dynamic nature of these situations is why a decision or action delayed may be rendered ineffective because the circumstances will have changed. While all tactical operations are dynamic, the problem is especially acute when suspects are involved because they provide a competing interest that is actively attempting to exploit the circumstances for their own benefit. When tactical operations involve suspects, they are not only time sensitive, they are time competitive, because an opponent who can most quickly exploit the circumstances to his or her benefit gains an advantage. Time or opportunity neglected by one adversary is exploited by the other.

MANEUVER: PRINCIPLE OF WAR

Maneuver is one of the nine principles of war (“The Nine Principles of War,” *The Tactical Edge*, Summer 2001) and is defined as the movement of troops and equipment to gain an advantage. While this definition is easily understood when applied in space, it is also applicable in time. Remember the Old West movies when the cavalry would come to the rescue of the wagon train besieged by Indians? Sometimes they’d arrive and save the day. At other times all they found were the burning wagons. Doing the right thing at the wrong time is just as pointless as doing the wrong thing at any time because when is just as important as where and how.

When maneuvering in space the early identification and control of key terrain (“Terrain Analysis,” *The Tactical Edge*, Summer 2000) takes on critical importance. In the same manner, when maneuvering in time, an ability to recognize and exploit

opportunities is paramount. In fact, opportunities are actually “windows” in time because they are simply brief intervals which favor success. But, opportunities in tactical situations tend to be elusive, sporadic and fleeting. They are elusive in that they are seldom clear and unequivocal but instead difficult to define, describe or anticipate. They are sporadic in the sense that they occur at irregular intervals without any pattern or order and are often isolated from predictable precursors. They are fleeting because they pass quickly. Consequently, time may provide for opportunities, but ignoring an opportunity usually requires that it be abandoned forever. The importance of being able to recognize and exploit one when it occurs can hardly be overestimated.

Maneuver in space is measured in distance, while maneuver in time is measured in speed. In tactical operations and competitive games, this is often referred to as “tempo.” Tempo (“Tempo and Initiative,” *The Tactical Edge*, Summer 1996) refers to the speed, rhythm or rate of movement of something. In a tactical operation it describes the speed at which events are unfolding. The impact that tempo has on tactical operations can be easily illustrated by recalling the advantage of the “fast break” in basketball or the “break away” in hockey. The team that moves the fastest gains a considerable advantage. However, tempo is relative. A rapid tempo is only useful when compared with how fast an opponent can react because sheer speed is not the critical factor. It is only relevant in that whatever you do, you are doing it faster than your adversary.

DENSITY

Another important maneuver factor is density. When maneuvering in space, density refers to the number of personnel, citizens, vehicles and the like, per unit of space. When maneuvering in time, density refers to the quantity of activities per unit of time. Like space, time can be congested and cumbersome in which to operate. This results in a condition called “overwhelmed by events,” often identified by the abbreviation “OBE” (“OBE Condition,” *The Tactical Edge*, Winter 1998). Like traffic congestion in space, the OBE condition ensues because the human mind is incapable of endlessly processing an infinite amount of information. A large number of events requiring decisions

occurring in close succession means there is less time to analyze the situations and alternatives and more anxiety over the most appropriate course of action. When maneuvering through a congested time period, it may be necessary to "clear the landscape" by removing distractions, demanding standard formats, insisting on recommendations by trusted subordinates, or delaying nonessential decisions.

The importance of maneuvering in time can scarcely be exaggerated and has long been recognized by military strategists. In the words of Field Marshal August Graf von Gneisenau (1761-1831), "Strategy is the science of making use of space and time. I am more jealous of the latter than of the former. We can always recover lost ground, but never lost time."

Likewise, the significance should not be lost on commanders of law enforcement tactical operations. ■

Author's note: For more information on density, the author highly recommends the book, "Heavy Matter, Urban Operations' Density of Challenges," by Russell W. Glenn, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, 2000 (310-451-6915 or order@rand.org)



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