

TACTICS OF THE

A STUDY OF PRINCIPLES



“Now if the balloon goes up tomorrow . . .” How many times have we heard this introductory statement in both staff briefings and just plain bull sessions? The number must be countless, I’m sure, because that statement has become one of the more familiar military clichés. However, we seldom analyze the remarks which follow to see just how they relate to this opening gambit. If we did I’m convinced we’d see that most propositions which are based upon war occurring in the immediate future (the balloon going up tomorrow) actually are said to be dependent upon *present day equipment and tactics*. Now, of course, we have to use present day equipment — no one has yet discovered how to use equipment which is still on the drawing board; but we must not be misled into thinking we also have to use the conventional tactics which we normally associate with that equipment.

There is a tendency, then, to feel that in any war starting in the near future we must use yesterday’s conventional tactics. The reasoning goes: our present helicopters won’t carry much; we probably can’t get enough of them to mount a main effort; therefore we can’t execute this concept of the future we keep reading about; so it follows we must use the same old tactics we’ve always used if “the balloon goes up tomorrow.” Our hypothetical theorist then drops the subject of tactics for a war of today as being old hat and plunges into the “distant” or “foreseeable” (and glamorous) future—a world of guided missiles, huge helicopters and push buttons.

This is a potentially disastrous way of thinking—the whole purpose of this discussion is to emphasize that the *atomic age battlefield is here now!* Adherence to old tactics can mean failure to accomplish a

ATOMIC AGE

By Col R. E. Cushman

mission, and at terrific cost.

In the opinion of some there will be a stalemate—no one will dare use *the* weapon. This may well be true, but what we must all realize is that the *threat* of its use will still be with us—and that the *tactics* used must be basically the same whether the use of atomic weapons is an actuality or only a threat. Who can tell when threat would become actuality? What commander would dare take the awful risk of conventional concentrations on the mere gamble that the other side would not break the stalemate by a surprise atomic attack? To do so would be the grossest violation imaginable of the old rule that we never try to guess the enemy's intentions—we always operate with respect to his capabilities. And in this field the enemy is full of capabilities for surprise attack whether we are in direct conflict with him or his satellites or in a peripheral war affecting his interests where he can make use of "volunteers" or "arms trades."

This being the case, then, we must act *now* to devise the tactics which are applicable, and we must not only develop them, we must practice them. We cannot assume that these tactics will wait upon the development or production of new equipment. We dare not delay until we have completely in hand all the means required to execute concepts of the more distant future. These things may be years away. The need for *new tactics* is *now*.

The next question relates to procedure—how do we go about developing these tactics? In just one way: first forecast the nature of this conflict if the "balloon goes up tomorrow," and second, from this develop the characteristics of the battlefield. This battlefield will have many differences and some similarities to battlefields we have known in the past.

I don't believe enough thought has been given to this "character of the battlefield" topic because many diverse views have been given. Yet we must correctly visualize this battlefield because otherwise it is impossible to develop sound tactics for the combat of this atomic age, which is with us now.

Lack of space and security considerations prevent detailed tactical discussion—but we can and will go into the principles of tactical operations. First, though, we must look at the overall frame of reference.

The Nature of the Conflict

BEFORE we can talk about battlefield tactics we first have to be sure that there will *be* a battlefield and then determine its place in the overall concept of the war.

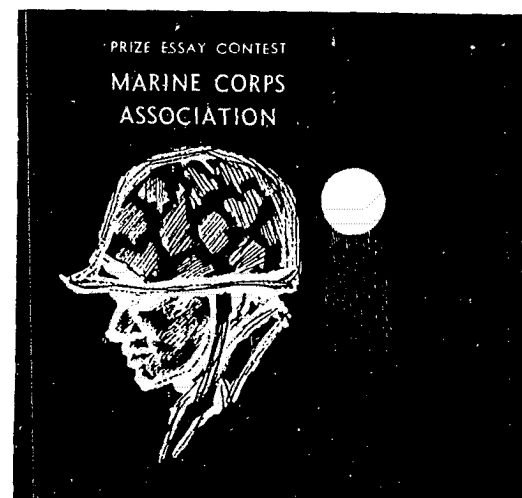
This may surprise some Marines, but it is seriously argued by some sincere men that there will be no amphibious operations or ground battlefields in the atomic age. Some will modify this extreme view to the point where they concede that there may be such operations but that the enemy will have to be destroyed and nothing will remain to be done except restore order with MPs. Thus it is quite pertinent to look at the nature of the conflict which might start at any time, and assure ourselves that the extreme views given above are incorrect.

First, if atomic weapons are not used at the start of a war, I think we can say that there will be amphibious operations and ground fighting, since in this case it is obvious no decision could be reached without them. Note, however, that the threat of atomic attack will be present and the tactical principles used will have to be the same as those under conditions of actual atomic employment. These principles may be modified to some extent,

of course, but *not all the way!* That is to say, in a peripheral war we may take somewhat greater risks than in an all out war with the principal antagonist—but we still should not go all the way and take the risks inherent in retaining the tactics of WW II and Korea.

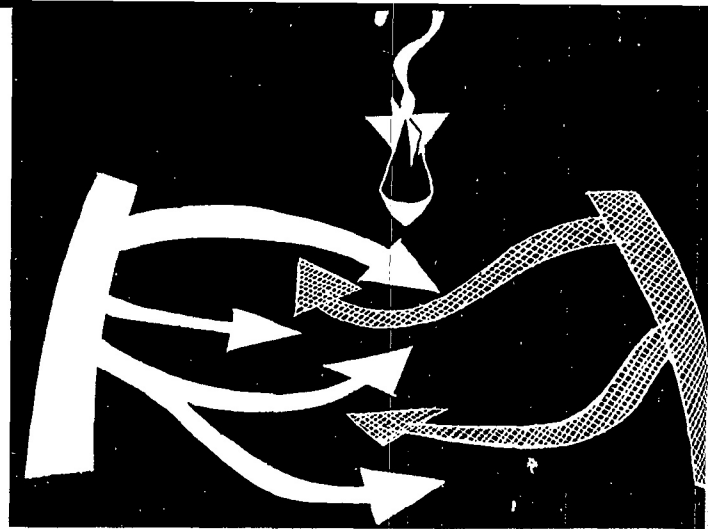
This all sounds good, you say, but how does one determine just what degree of risk to take when actually in the field and responsible for men's lives, and not sitting at home writing egghead essays for GAZETTE consumption? The answer is that the *enemy* determines the risks we can take. It is a common mistake (particularly among essay writers!) to forget that the battlefield contains an enemy and that he disciplines that battlefield. If we take risks beyond those he takes—look out!

To return to the case in which war starts without atomic weapons being used, just one more point need be made. It relates to the effect the enemy situation has upon the risks involved in any particular course of action we may take, and can be stated thusly: atomic stalemate becomes more precarious as one side starts to lose. Whereas at the start each side believes he can achieve





After mutual blasting — deployment of conventional forces



Atomic battlefield — mutual attraction of opposing forces

victory without atomic attack; later, a desperate loser may not hesitate to use these weapons as a last resort, hoping by their surprise employment to tip the scales at a critical point in the struggle. This reinforces the contention that we can *never* relapse into old-style tactics, particularly in victory!

Having first discussed the case involving only the threat of atomic use, let's now look at the case where atomic weapons are employed.

My position on the strategy to be used is that our US goal should be the achievement of political aims and not obliteration. Where destruction would not serve these political aims in addition to purely military ones, it should not be permitted. I imagine there'd be plenty of targets left that would satisfy both requirements — for example, enemy atomic capability, air force, missile launching sites, lines of communication, and so on.

However, since my views bear no resemblance to those of any responsible strategist, the start of such a war might look entirely different! In any event it seems clear that massive blows would be exchanged. The question is—would that be enough? Some claim that this short period of a few days' or weeks' violent air action would alone end the war. My answer to that is: we'll probably get a pretty bad blasting ourselves in this exchange—but do we plan to give up before a single enemy soldier has set foot on our soil? I should hope not! Why then should we assume that the enemy will feel or act any differently?

I prefer the more logical approach that this period will be of over-

riding importance in its decision-making *potential*, but that it will *not* of itself make the decision. Furthermore, this decision-making potential will be transitory and will have to be quickly followed up by striking forces which can seize and hold strategic ground and can destroy hostile troops. The enemy, even as we, will be quick to pick himself up off the ground and start recovering. We will have to act rapidly and decisively to keep the pressure on and change the decision potential into an actuality. Fortunately we have mobile Marine forces-in-readiness to enforce the effects of successes by other forces. Therefore, I am convinced that amphibious operations and concomitant ground fighting will still be an absolute requirement for victory and will be a primary, not just a subsidiary means.

As a corollary to this, it is pertinent to note that while some troops will be caught in the holocaust directed primarily against other targets, not all will be casualties. There is every reason to believe that powerful troop formations will still be left to the enemy. Their supplies may be curtailed, their movements hampered, but they will still be a force to reckon with. Therefore, while a massive exchange may make our job quite a bit easier (and those who remember Iwo and Tarawa will hope so) it will not make it unnecessary nor will it obviate plenty of hard fighting.

Some may contend that this massive exchange will exhaust the supply. Well, that may be, but who's to know? We cannot expect the enemy to admit that he's fresh out. So we will have to operate as though he

has some and is about to use them any minute. Which brings us right back again to threat of use, which is where we came in—because we are agreed that our tactical principles must be substantially the same under either condition.

To sum up—the nature of any conflict starting today will be such that hard fought amphibious operations, against organized combat-ready opposition, will be necessary and will take place. Under some conditions atomic weapons may be used with fair frequency; in others only the threat of their use will hang constantly over the opposing forces. In either case the tactics adopted must be substantially the same, although in some cases the degree of risk may be modified. Finally, it is important to accept the fact that tactics must not be the old tactics found in the FMs—the old 2 up and one back of fond memory.

Now we can take a closer look at the battlefield itself under the conditions discussed above and develop those principles upon which tactics must be based.

The Battlefield

✿ FIRST and foremost the battlefield will have an enemy on it. This enemy is the catalyst or the disciplinarian of the battlefield. It is easy to evolve theory in a vacuum, to come up with isolated new tactics and bold designs and to draw arrows on the map, when the enemy is only some red marks on that map. What upsets these fine theories is to find them opposed by a real live enemy with plans, tactics and arrows on the map of his own! We must never forget that a battlefield is an arena where

two opponents meet, and the conflict which ensues is the composite result of the impact of their two mutually exclusive plans, the collision of their two diametrically opposed wills, the interplay of two types of tactics and the relative status of certain intangibles such as esprit. To develop tactics outside of this context is dangerous since lives and victory will be at stake.

The second characteristic is one which I have not heard discussed and which may have been overlooked. I think that on the atomic battlefield there will exist an irresistible attraction between large opposing units. These formations will have an attracting force between them which I call "atomic attraction." This force will be entirely attributable to the fact that in close combat between major units will lie the principal assurance of safety from hostile use of atomic weapons. These weapons are so lethal that both forces would necessarily be destroyed by a blast directed at either one, if the forces are closely engaged. Therefore, the moment enemy forces are located we will be forced to order a rapid and almost total concentration of all forces within reach of the hostile formation. This is needed to accomplish a mission of destruction of the enemy and to achieve security from enemy atomic employment. Both objectives can be achieved by the very same action—2 birds with one stone.

Stemming from this is the third characteristic; that when units are *not* in contact they must be widely separated. This concept of unit separation has been much discussed; I will not belabor it but only point out that we are generally agreed that combat groups of appropriate size should be separated by a sufficient distance so that only one will be destroyed by one atomic weapon and such destruction would not result in rendering the Air-Ground Task Force ineffective. The point to remember is that this characteristic is valid only when forces are *not* in contact. Once contact is gained, then concentration will be required for victory.

A fourth characteristic of this battlefield will be an overall fluidity derived from the frequent moves of the various individual separation

units not in contact. This stems from the fact that we will now be exposed to the delivery of a terrific amount of firepower by a single enemy plane, gun or missile. Therefore, just separating units is not enough when we are out of contact. In addition, our units must not disclose their location. Since this is extremely difficult with a large unit in a static position, the only alternative is to make frequent concealed moves under cover of reduced visibility.

As a sidelight, these two characteristics just discussed—unit separation and fluidity—both indicate that this atomic age battlefield must have a large area for the necessary elbow room. It follows that most of the maneuver when not in contact with the enemy will be on an area, not a linear basis and will require provision for all round security and combat readiness. However, it should be noted that the combat itself will partake of many of the characteristics of the meeting engagement, with the speed of reinforcement on each side given added urgency by the principle of "atomic attraction." The reinforcing elements will race to reach the scene of combat and get closely engaged before they can be subjected to atomic attack. It can be seen that after the early phases of this type of combat are completed, the scene of action may settle down to a linear formation or to a "hedgehog" type with separated groups of opposing troops engaged in fighting. This fact that the battlefield may easily become linear or at least more concentrated at the point of contact has not been considered at length by many of us; yet it is important because it means that we must be *able to mass conventional weapons* just as we have always done—once contact is established.

A fifth characteristic of this battlefield will be the extreme importance of air superiority and the extreme difficulty of gaining it in sufficient degree. If atomic weapons are used from the start, objective areas can be turned into atomized cinder beds at the wish of either opponent if both are still roughly equal and still contesting air superiority overhead.

In this situation I do not believe we would dare introduce troops into the area of such hazard to seize ter-

rain or physical objectives requiring operations for any length of time out of contact with the enemy. In fact, even if we immediately became closely engaged with the enemy and then won the battle, how could we prevent the destruction of the objective by atomic weapons when the security of having enemy formations in close proximity was no longer with us? No, I think that it is clear we will have to wait for the air battle to be decided and a requisite degree of air superiority to be gained.

Even after this happy event we will have trouble because if atomic weapons are being used we must be able to guard against the small-scale sneak attack rather than the large raids of the past. Can we stop 4 or 5 high performance aircraft coming in at tree-top level from different directions knowing that any one, or all, may have an atomic weapon aboard? I imagine we would have a hard time preventing delivery although perhaps we can make it costly and difficult. This still has an effect on our choice of objectives—we cannot select the solitary airfield, the single port. I don't think that would be realistic. Penetration by a single sneak plane or missile could destroy the objective. This indicates to me that there are a lot of fundamental questions which must be answered by my colleagues in aviation. Typical are these: Can we ever have sufficiently numerous combat air patrols to keep out sneak fighter aircraft and present day missiles? If not, should we then concentrate on a counter air battle at greater distances from the objective area? How much CAP would we need? Might not our major requirement be all-weather suppression and destruction of all enemy air and missile launching facilities within 1,000 to 1,500 miles of the objective area? While we need a maximum of close air support for the ground forces, should we perhaps shift our emphasis from air attack capability to greatly increased air reconnaissance and transport capability? What will be the "separation unit" for the air element of the Air-Ground Task Force? What would be the role of naval aircraft—should they not provide a major share of the combat air patrols since they must have fighter aircraft aboard anyhow to protect

the Task Force? Would good tactics permit us to supplant Navy fighters aboard carriers with our attack aircraft if we thought we needed them? How will the answers to these questions affect the composition of the Air-Ground Task Force? Will the answers hold for both atomic war and war where the threat only exists? And finally, may not this picture change radically in the future as guided missiles enter operational status in fields now dominated by fighter and attack aircraft? For a complete picture of the battlefield of this age and for a refinement of the tactics to be used, we must have answers to these questions.

Next, let's look at a sixth characteristic of the battlefield. This is the great difficulty of maintaining any fixed installation in the face of atomic attack. As a consequence we

are going to face great problems in the fields of logistics and aircraft operation and maintenance. The highest degree of ingenuity will be required to make these facilities mobile, dispersed or hidden in an effort to decrease their vulnerability. They may be safer in close proximity to the fighting than they used to be when way behind the lines.

To sum up, these are the principal characteristics of the battlefield:

- 1) The enemy will greatly influence our actions, plans and tactics.
- 2) "Atomic attraction" will be irresistible for major opposing forces.
- 3) Unit separation when out of contact is mandatory.
- 4) Frequent movement of separation units when out of contact is also mandatory.
- 5) Air superiority will be of over-

riding importance and will be very difficult to achieve.

- 6) There will be a minimum of fixed installations.

Tactical Principles

✿ FIRST, when not in contact with the enemy we must have separated units capable of independent action and this requires that they be task groups tailored for mobile warfare. The separation unit thus becomes the basic tactical unit (and on occasion may also become the basic unit of combined arms) during such combat as may occur before concentration is forced by the principle of atomic attraction. The detailed organization and employment of these units must be further developed; however, the results would probably be classified. We'll stick to the unclassified principles.

Regardless of the deployment on the ground, air cover is vital . . .



. . . over concealed, separated units

. . . or when the units are massed for the engagement

Second, since we visualize that decisive combat will result in the immediate concentration of all fighting units within reach, we must have the capability of massing our separated units for this decisive phase. This includes the ability to mass conventional fires once contact is gained. Remember that the first principle above required just the opposite, namely, an ability for each separation unit to have its own fire support organic to and moving with it. These two apparently mutually exclusive objectives can be attained by providing the artillery element of each separation unit with a fire direction capability. The unit will then have an independent fire-support capability and in addition can mass fires when several such separation units finally are brought together for decisive combat. Superior artillery headquarters should also be able to take over the FDC function when appropriate; i.e., when many separation units are concentrated.

Third, mobility is a key principle if we are to achieve relative security from atomic attack when not in contact, be able to mass quickly for the decisive engagement, and then move rapidly from the immediate area once the enemy is beaten. To achieve this end we must use every means at our disposal: trucks, air transport of all types, landing craft and vehicles, and rapid foot marching. Some units must be able to move through the air, some over the ground. Their task organization would be varied appropriately. Furthermore, I would advocate a move each night under cover of darkness of at least 3 miles by each separation unit. Close planning and co-ordination would be required. But the end result would be worth it—the enemy would never find a unit in the morning in the same place it was at sundown.

A fourth principle is to gain and maintain contact at all costs from the earliest possible moment until the enemy is defeated—then move quickly to a different area. This will require a major effort in reconnaissance by all ground and air means available, the use of "flash" communications and an extremely rapid intelligence production process. Much of this effort, furthermore, will have to be decentralized to separation units. All commanders

must have, very quickly, the fundamental information on size and location of the enemy. They can do without the refinements of the EEI, enemy capabilities, indications, etc., until after the troops are on the move!

A fifth principle requires that command must be streamlined. Command posts of higher echelons must move with, and as a part of, subordinate mobile task groups. It will be more similar to the naval "Flag Command"—functioning within but independent of a flagship—than anything we now practice. Command groups above the separation unit level must be split in two with each half traveling with one subordinate separation unit. Each half of the senior headquarters will have to fall back on the supporting "flagship" headquarters for help with communications and staff work in fire support and some other fields. Finally and above all, it is evident that the commander must be flexible and "stay loose." Flexibility is primarily a state of mind that refuses to become rigid in outlook, be surprised or "get shook." The modern battlefield as I have visualized it presents an elusive and shifting pattern; only the flexible commander can survive and win.

The sixth principle relates to the objective. No longer can we select the single airfield, the solitary port, the pin-point terrain feature such as a hill, ridge, village or communication center. We must pick out a very large area containing within it the physical features we desire and designate as the primary objective the destruction of the enemy in that wide area. Subsequently we will control the area by the constant movement within it of our separation units and their massing against any attacking enemy once contact is gained with him. We cannot settle any unit upon a fixed point, indeed we cannot even make use of a fixed installation captured from the enemy, as long as the enemy has the capability of getting through our defenses with moderate effort and expense and delivering an atomic weapon. If atomic weapons have not yet been used in the war and only the threat of their use exists, then we are presented with a command decision as to the degree of

risk we can take. Under these circumstances we might decide to go ahead and use the airfield or the communications center and accept the risks involved. But in a war where atomic weapons are already in use, I don't see how we can utilize pin-point objectives until a combination of ground and air action has pushed the enemy a long way from the objective area and made it very costly and difficult for him to deliver an atomic weapon. In that way the risks can be made acceptable.

In conclusion, I believe that it is vital to prepare ourselves *now* for the atomic age battlefield, which is the battlefield we have to fight on if the "balloon goes up tomorrow." It can be done with the troops, equipment and organizational principles available *now*. To wait for more favorable developments in these fields before we do anything would be disastrous. The tactical principles which we should employ are:

- 1) The basic tactical grouping will be the separation unit, which is a task group tailored for mobile, independent action. Although based upon a nucleus composed of T/O units, it is reinforced on the "Task Force" principle.

- 2) Separation units must be concentrated for decisive combat; therefore they must be able to mass conventional weapons.

- 3) The reinforcing units are so chosen that they give maximum mobility by ground, water and air vehicles for the concentration of the separation unit for decisive combat and for its frequent and rapid movement when not in contact.

- 4) Contact must be swiftly gained and maintained at all costs through mobility combined with an expanded decentralized and speeded up intelligence production process.

- 5) The command function must be streamlined, fast and flexible.

- 6) Pin-point objectives are out—destruction of the enemy forces is the primary aim followed by occupation and control of a large area which includes tactically significant localities.

If we adhere to these principles and begin their detailed development and practice *now*, I am convinced we can truly say that the atomic age finds the Marines combat-ready!

US & MC