

# Audacity in Warfare: A Perspective

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## Introduction

**M**ilitary operations to be successful cannot be divorced from risk; in fact, the quantum of success is exponentially proportional to the level of risk. The level of risk is abstract in nature and depends upon myriad factors. It has been repeatedly postulated that risks should be 'calculated' and they should not go into the domain of fool-hardiness or recklessness. It is also a perceived notion that 'Audacious' operations yield better results. Patton was one the greatest exponents of Audacity as is exemplified by his words "*L'audace, l'audace, toujours l'audace!*" "Remember that, gentlemen, from here on out, until we win or die in the attempt, we will always be audacious."<sup>1</sup> What then is Audacity? And how does it factor into military operations? In this paper an attempt has been made to examine the dynamics of audacity in military operations at all levels of warfare.

## Risk Matrix

**Calculated Risk.** Common military knowledge suggests that all operations should be undertaken with 'calculated risk'. A mission may be said to be undertaken with calculated risk when as per the perpetrator's perception and current doctrines there is an element of risk, that is, there is a chance of failure of the operation. However, the failure, if it occurs, should not result in major imbalance in terms of dispositions and casualties. In spite of the setback the commander should be able to accomplish his mission, though it may be in a larger time frame and possibly with additional resources. However, the risk taken should provide for disproportionate success compared to that with conventional themes and chances of success should be greater than failure. Obviously, this is a matter of fine judgement and at best a challenging decision. Most military commanders should normally be operating in the realm of

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calculated risk. However, a step higher in the ambit of risk ladder is 'audacity' which is what would lead to far greater success.

**Audacity.** Audacity could be defined as a form of daring and boldness which does not correspond with the prevalent norms in warfare. Audacity is thus the next higher level of risk after calculated risk. However, audacity should be divorced from recklessness and foolhardiness which may lead to disaster. Audacity thus overlaps with calculated risk on one side and recklessness on the other with higher chances of success in operations. It will normally imbibe aggressiveness, unconventional themes and imagination as the prime ingredients. The figure below illustrates the correlation between risk and success and the various terms argued above. Audacity may be practised in various domains : doctrines, strategy, operational art, tactics, technology or even bluff. The relationship between risk and audacity is shown in a graph at Figure 1.

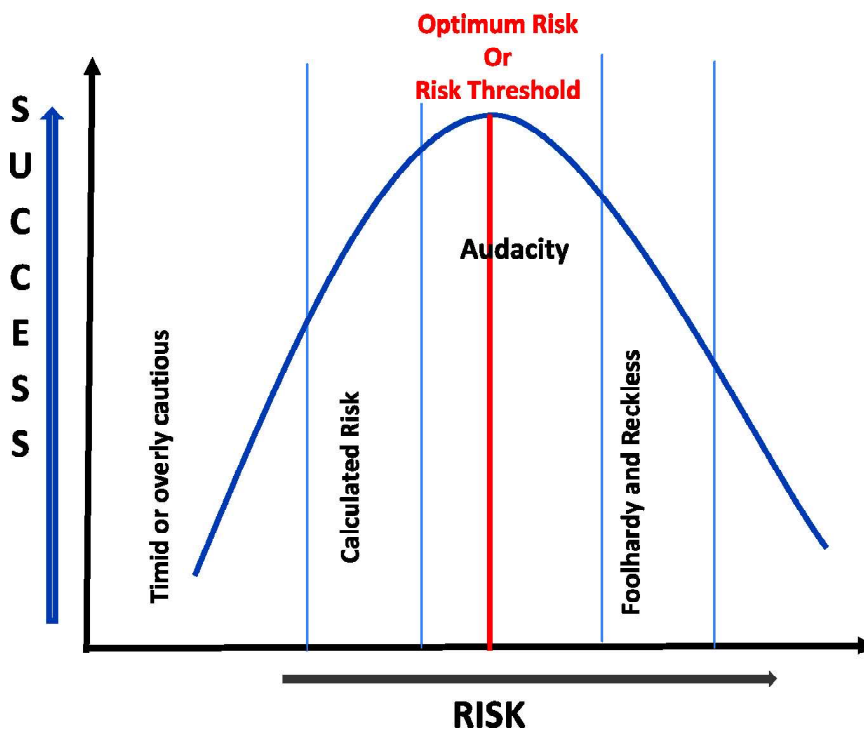


Figure 1 : Relation between Risk and Success

### **Appreciation of Adversary's Risk Threshold**

An analyst of a military situation tends to assume that the enemy will try to reduce risks in decision-making, and generally rules out an audacious approach by the adversary. However, this assumption may be erroneous, since the quantum of risk is a matter of personal preference. As such, the adversary may not consider reduction in risk to be a preferable strategy;<sup>2</sup> moreover, enemy's willingness to take risks relates to specific situations. Thus even a good understanding of the enemy's conceptual framework does not ensure a correct estimation of his behaviour in any given situation. Moreover, the adversary may not see his venture as a very risky one. The misjudgement of the risk taking profile of the adversary is, therefore, one factor, which may be calamitous. The invasion of South Korea and Cuban Missile crisis are examples of such ventures wherein strong reaction from the adversaries was unexpected.

**Adversary's Capability.** If it is estimated that adversary's capability is insufficient for undertaking an audacious action, the victim may rule out such a possibility. An audacious venture in such a situation is likely to fetch results. Thus Israeli intelligence assumed that the Arabs in 1973 would not risk an attack that they thought would be suicidal and similarly, Macarthur estimated that with America's supremacy in the air, and given American nuclear potential, the Chinese would not hazard the commitment of large forces on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>3</sup>

**Risky and Audacious Ventures in Desperation.** If the perpetrator overestimates his chances for success or that the stakes are so high and no other options are available that he must take a chance despite probable failure, deterrence from the defender's perspective may fail. Thus, in 1941 the Japanese leaders believed that they had no choice but to attack the United States since the war was inevitable, and they had better chance to win at that time than in the future. This was emphasised by the Japanese Naval Minister in November 1941 before the attack on Pearl Harbour. "... if we decide to continue diplomatic negotiations and later fail to bring them to a successful conclusion, we will be forced to open hostilities at a great operational disadvantage caused by the delay. Consequently, although there is a great risk in beginning the war now, we must realise that there is also great risk in depending

upon negotiations unless we can be certain of the final outcome".<sup>4</sup> At times the inability to fully appreciate the impediments to victory may lead to audacious operational plans. Audacity can thus also manifest in planning due to inadequate intelligence. During the German offensive in Russia in 1941, Germans grossly underestimated the USSR's actual potential. Hitler later said that had he known how large the Soviet Union forces were, he would never have invaded Russia.<sup>5</sup>

**Risk Taking Ability in Groups.** Groups tend to be more willing than individuals to accept risk. Wallach and Kogan defined this assumption, "If members of a group engage in a discussion and reach a consensus regarding the degree of risk to accept in the decisions which they make, their conclusion is to pursue a course of action riskier than that represented by the average of the prior decisions of each individual considered separately".<sup>6</sup> This is possibly because in a group the responsibility for the decision is shared by all group members. From this it can be inferred that risky and audacious decisions are more likely to emerge from a group than a single decision maker.

### **The Interacting Forces**

Primarily there are three interacting factors which influence the risk outcomes of an operation. These are the personal attributes of the commander, the organisational environment and the situation. The way these factors interplay is explained graphically in Figure 2. It is evident that audacity is product of personal, organisation and situation attributes. The audacity cuboid can thus increase or decrease by variation in any of these factors as illustrated at **Figure 2**.

Amongst the personal attributes, courage (moral and physical) is the primary attribute of an audacious commander. Rommel, who may be regarded as one of the great advocates of audacity at tactical and operational levels, possessed a high degree of physical courage. He led from the front where he could best appreciate the constantly fluctuating battle, unlike Ritchie (Rommel's British opponent) at Gambut and his chief even further away in Cairo.<sup>7</sup> Also related to courage, particularly moral courage, is boldness. As aptly worded by Wood, "boldness governed by superior intellect is the mark of a genius".<sup>8</sup> Way back in 1944, referring to boldness at the higher levels, Wavell remarked, "the soft modern maxim of

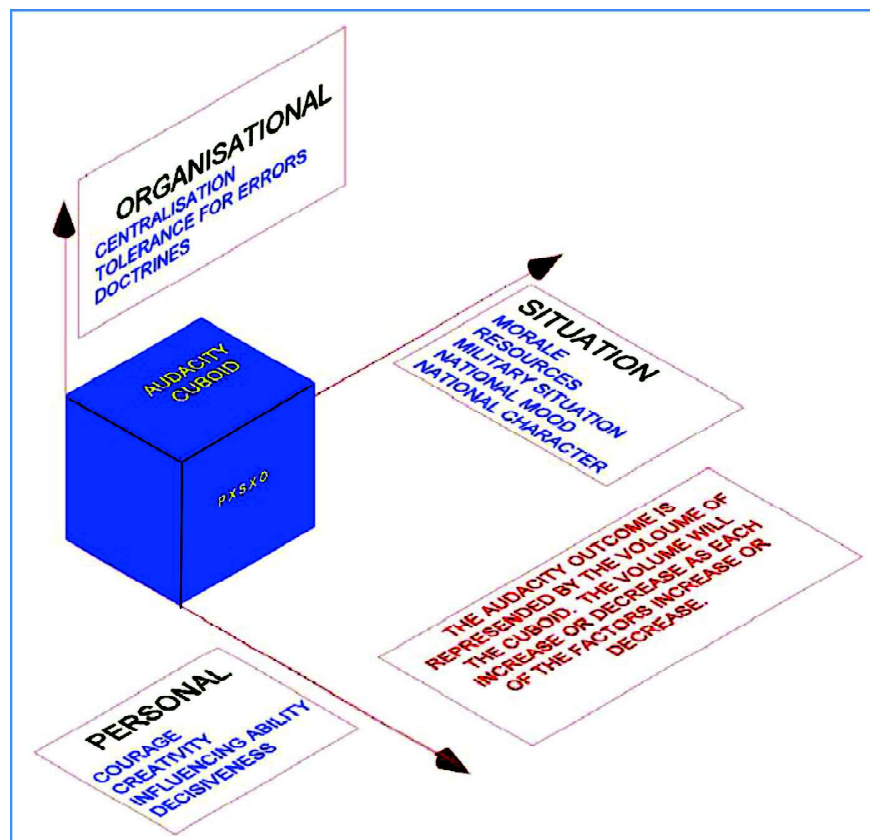
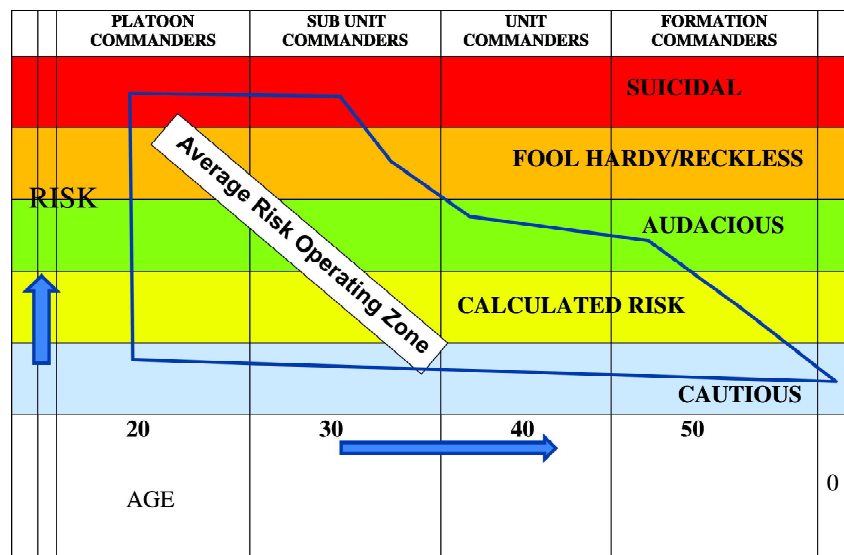


Figure 2 (Audacity Cuboid)

safety first, which so often marks the decline of business, of governments, of armies, of nations, found no place in Allenby's creed'.<sup>9</sup> A bold plan always appears to be attractive and has an appeal with a higher probability for success.

**Boldness and Age.** In an interesting study of senior commanders, boldness was shown to be an important component in determining success. A statistical analysis conducted on the basis of 326 land battles substantiated the above fact.<sup>10</sup> It was also concluded that older generals tend to be more cautious or conservative than their younger opponents. This finding is consistent with another finding that risk taking is inversely related to age.<sup>11</sup> The finding corroborates earlier research which identified initiative and aggressiveness as personality traits of leaders.<sup>12</sup> Many generals known to be indecisive and vacillating were known for boldness

and initiative as junior officers. Thus in spite of experience, boldness inevitably dilutes with age. However, the greater the extent to which it is retained the greater is the range of genius. Figure 3 below is indicative of the above arguments. A platoon commander is capable of undertaking operations with a higher degree of risk than the formation commanders. Possibly, the increased sense of responsibility breeds caution.



**Figure 3 : Risk Taking Profile vs  
Age of Military Commanders**

Professional honesty or ethics in decision making is also an important facet of an audacious commander. An audacious decision should be based on military prudence and not for any other considerations such as personal fame etc. Flexibility and creativity is another requirement of an audacious commander since audacity invariably involves deviation from laid down norms and doctrines. However, an audacious decision without intelligent analysis is likely to lead to disaster.

**Ability to Influence or Convince.** An audacious commander should be able to influence his subordinates and superiors about the viability of his venture. An apt example being, the decision to carry out landings at Inchon by MacArthur during the Korean War much against the 'wisdom' of others in the system. Germany's opening run of victories in the Second World War was only possible

due to the panzer forces that Guderian had created, trained and by his audacious leadership, in disregard to Hitler's fears and caution.<sup>13</sup> Each idea had to be argued vehemently with its rivals; however, Germany was lucky to have forward looking organisation which ensured that the idea flourished. These arguments underscore the importance of personality to get others to fall in line with offbeat and audacious plans.

### **Organisational Attributes**

A hierarchical environment often leads to dilution in application of audacity. Hierarchy and discipline conflict with intellectual independence, objectivity and audacity except in evolved organisations. An outfit functioning on directive style of command is more conducive to audacious operations than a centralised one. Audacity cannot be exercised in environments where the tolerance to errors is limited. A liberal establishment offering space to its subordinates is more likely to breed audacious operations.

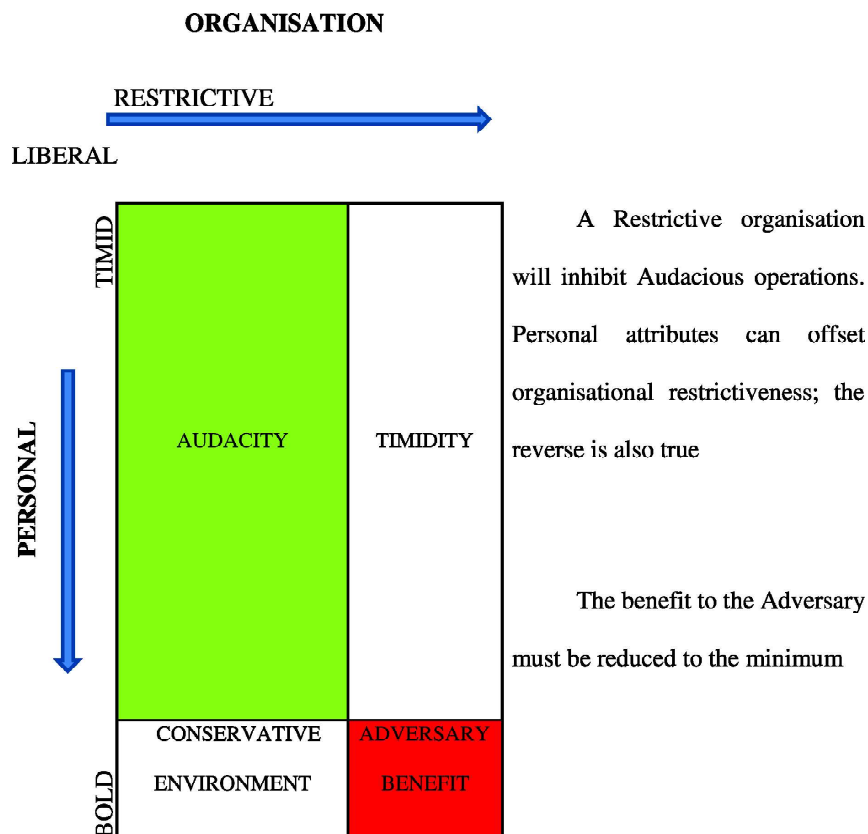
**Rigidity in Doctrines.** Rigid adherence to the prevalent military doctrines, especially if they are conservative, does not lead to audacious operations. The military doctrines of the British during the World War 1 did not encourage audacious planning at the strategic levels, though there was no dearth of courage and bravery at lower levels. The very foundation of the Israeli Army, on the other hand is based on boldness and audacity.

### **Situational Attributes**

A favourable military situation including morale of troops is conducive for audacious operations. Japanese could launch audacious attacks in the jungles of Burma; amongst other reasons this was possible due very high levels of motivation. At the national and strategic levels, the mood of the people is another major factor. The high risk German venture into Russia during the World War II could not have been undertaken without the positive national mood, which was that of euphoria due to spectacular preceding successes. Availability of adequate resources also encourages such operations. Montgomery could afford to launch audacious airborne operations against Arnhem because he had no dearth of resources, and even the massive failure, which occurred, did not turn the tables against him. When a commander is aware of certain weakness of the enemy he can exploit the situation by being

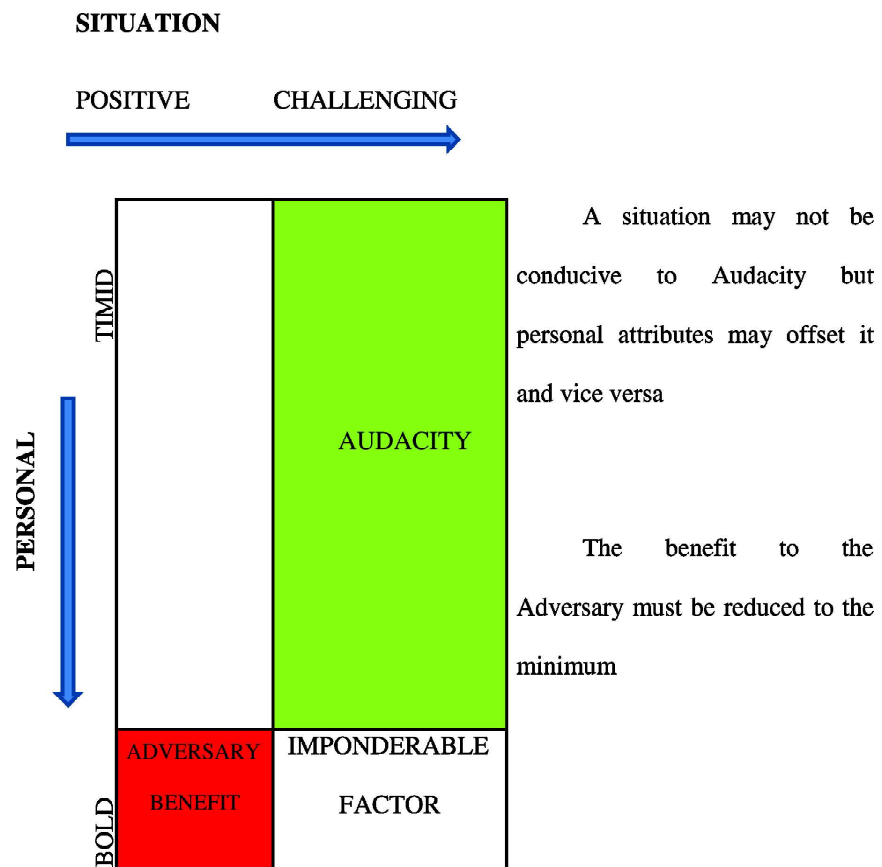
audacious. Slim was able to move the 4 Corps (crossing of Irrawaddy during World War II) boldly in a different direction and dislocate the Japanese primarily, because he was aware of the weakness of the Japanese Air Force, and thereby their limited capability of surveillance.

The interaction individually between the personal, organisational and situational parameters is evident from the following figures (4, 5 and 6). The audacity outcome is the green rectangle and the benefit to enemy (due to lack of audacity) is depicted by the red rectangle. In the first case (Figure 4), a liberal organisation and a bold commander is likely to yield maximum audacity. In the second case (Figure 5), a positive situation and bold commander yields more audacity. In the third illustration (Figure 6) a liberal organisation and positive situation yields maximum audacity.

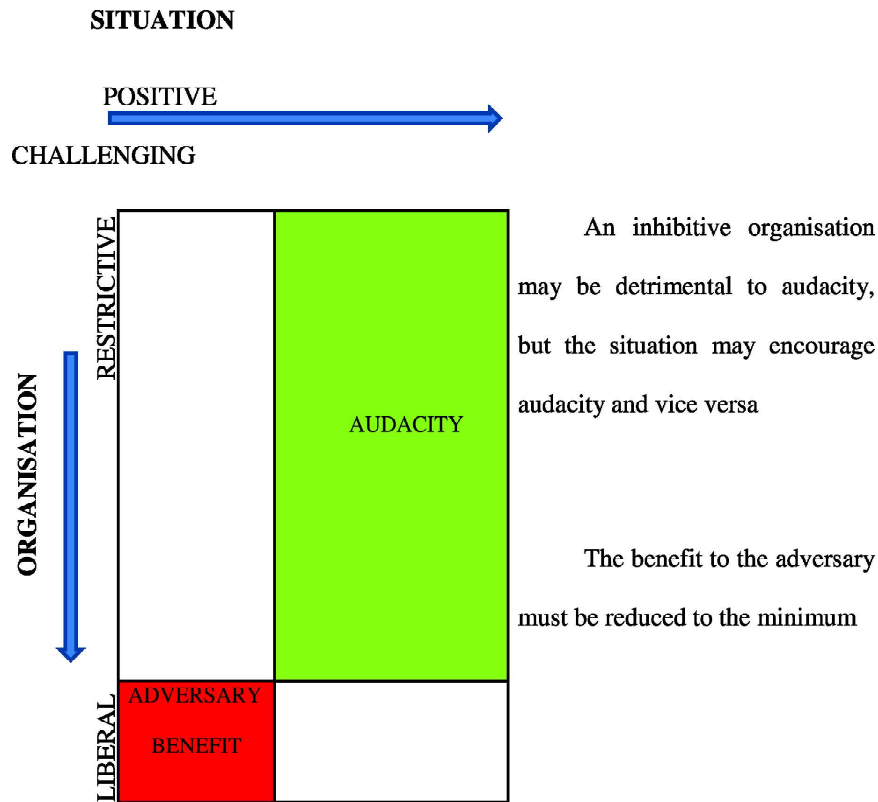


**Figure 4 : Interaction of Personal and Organisational Attributes**





**Figure 5 : Personal and Situational Attributes**



**Figure 6 : Interaction between Organisational and Situational Attributes**

### Conclusion

In this paper an attempt has been made to analyse various nuances of audacity and various interconnected factors which affect its manifestation. Undoubtedly, Audacity is an essential ingredient of military operations. Conservative and cautious operations are unlikely to yield requisite results. The quantum of success increases exponentially with the risk quotient. However, the judgement between Audacity and recklessness/foolhardiness is where the acumen of a military commander comes into play. *Boldness or Audacity governed by intellect is the mark of a genius.* The personal attributes, organisational climate and the situation are the primary factors which have a bearing on the successful outcome of an operation. It will be seldom that the scale of all these factors will

be in abundance; however, one can offset the deficit in any of these by careful analysis and, audacity in planning and execution.

Military operations laced with undue caution will inevitably lead to prolonged, slow and grinding operations. Moreover, they would also require overwhelming superiority of men and material. Audacity in operations at all levels is likely to yield overwhelming success and should be incorporated into our doctrines so that it becomes second nature. Above all, it is important to create a working environment in which military commanders can imbibe and practise the essentials of operational art, especially the virtue of 'audacity'.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Farago Ladislas. (2005). Patton: Ordeal and Triumph. Westholme Publishing. USA. p 253.

<sup>2</sup> Dror Yehezkel. (1971). Crazy States. Lexington Mass, DC Heath 1971. p 17.

<sup>3</sup> Willoughby Charles and John Chamberlain. (1954). MacArthur 1941-51. Mc Graw Hill, 1954. pp 361-362.

<sup>4</sup> Betts K Richard. (1982). "Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defence Planning". Brookings Institution, 1982, p. 137.

<sup>5</sup> Betts. Op.cit. p 128.

<sup>6</sup> Wallach and Kogan. (1964). "The Roles of Information, Discussion and Consensus in Group Risk Taking". October 1964. Education Testing Service, Princeton New Jersey. p 1.

<sup>7</sup> Mrazek James. (1968). Art of Winning Wars, Walker and Company, New York 1968. p.109.

<sup>8</sup> Wood WJ. (2009). Leaders and Battles: The Art of Military Leadership. Presido Press. New York. p 89.

<sup>9</sup> Wavell Viscount. (1944). Allenby: A Study in Greatness, Allenby in Egypt. George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd. London. p 12.

<sup>10</sup> Simonton, Dean K. (1980). "Land battles, generals, and armies: Individual and situational determinants of victory and casualties". Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol 38(1), Jan 1980, pp 112-116.

<sup>11</sup> Vroom, Victor H. (1971). "Relationship between age and risk taking among managers". Journal of Applied Psychology, Vol 55(5), Oct 1971. pp 399-405.

<sup>12</sup> Stogdill, RM. (1948). "Personality factors associated with leadership: A Survey of literature", Journal of Psychology, p. 351

<sup>13</sup> Guderian Hienz. (1952). Panzer Leader. Hollen Street Press, Slough, England. p. 11 (in foreword by Liddle Hart)