

The Quintessential Ones: Lessons of Warfare

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General

Man has been fighting wars since time immemorial, ever since there was a failure to resolve amicably, any difference of opinion between two or more persons. Wars have been fought for myriad reasons – land, power, ego, money, women, oil – even football! At the end of each war, certain lessons have emerged for the discerning soldier. From the aftermath of any battle, these lessons are the ones which should be grasped, to preclude any future defeat. Therefore, the lessons of any war are also to be won, not the war alone.

Even though these lessons of warfare have emerged, a posteriori, over aeons of warfare, no detailed treatises on them have been authored by students or practitioners of warfare. As a result, these lessons have been forgotten time and again between the halcyon years of peace between wars, only to be relearned again in the next war, often by paying in blood. For war planning, these lessons of warfare are undoubtedly more important than principles of war.

Military History - The Fountainhead for Lessons of Warfare

On studying military history, a cautious student of warfare can definitely codify certain lessons which have remained as relevant since the earliest times of Epaminondas and Alexander (4th Century BC) or Hannibal (3rd Century BC); through the ages and the intervening eras of Mongols, Napoleon, Prussia, World Wars, as they are today. On an in-depth analysis of various military campaigns, certain immutable lessons of warfare emerge, based on the distillation of historical military wisdom. It is de rigueur that these lessons of warfare be studied, absorbed and judiciously applied during making of operational plans.

In this article, some of the critically important quintessential lessons of warfare, are enunciated, which epitomise the wisdom of warfare gained over millennia of warfare.

The Lessons of Warfare - At National Level

At the National level, important lessons to be kept in mind for any war are enunciated in the succeeding paragraphs.

Political Aim Commensurate with Military Resources. Assuming that the tenet of Clausewitz that war is a continuation of policy by other means to be true even today, the political aim of a nation must, therefore, be commensurate with its military resources. A nation should not pursue a policy based on a goal, which, if unattainable through politics and diplomacy, is beyond its military means too. Should this be so, future war portends only disaster. If the military resources cannot achieve what the politics want, then war should not be waged. Either time should be taken to build-up the military resources in the pursuance of the political aim, or, political aim should be judiciously reviewed, or, other means – like diplomacy – should be used to achieve that political aim. For example, to achieve Hitler's policy of Lebensraum, the Germans aimed for the collapse of Russia in the Second World War (WW II).¹ Consequently, they declared the military aim (in the war plans for Operation Barbarossa in 1941 in Directive No 21) was conquest of areas up to the line Archangel to Astrakhan – a straight line running east of Moscow from north to south.² This was beyond Wehrmacht's military capability. Had Hitler secured peace through diplomacy after the fall of France in June 1940, then history indeed would have been different. In the case, however, oblivion of the Third Reich was the outcome.

Correct Visualisation of The End State. Any nation which accepts war as an instrument for achieving a stated goal, must enunciate the desired end state which will signal the end of hostilities. It is futile to fight a war that has lost its relevance vis-à-vis the aim for which it is being fought. If 'selection and maintenance of aim' is the first tenet of war, then 'correct visualisation of the desired end state' should be the final one, to complete the loop.

Favourable Public Opinion and Peoples' Will. Interlinked with the political aim is the public opinion and the people's will, especially in a democracy. There has to be strong public support to fight a war. In case the public support wanes, then it has a cascading effect on the waning of the political will of the government and consequently the military operations. Public opinion has the power to take a nation to war or to prevent the nation from fighting a war successfully. In the 21st century, media and internet are two most important means to muster and shape the public opinion for/against a war; hence this factor assumes significant proportions. The ongoing revolutions in the Arab world in North Africa and Middle East are the latest examples of this immutable verity.

The Lessons of Warfare - In Military Planning and Execution

For the military planners and soldiers on the battlefield, the important lessons to be kept mind for any war are enunciated in succeeding paragraphs.

Sound Strategy, Doctrine, Operational Art, Tactics, Training and Organisational Framework. Whenever the armed forces of a nation go to war, they must have a sound military strategy of conducting the war. Military strategy – which itself is a derivative of the national strategy and dependent on the military resources – is the fountainhead of the military doctrine. The military doctrine in turn should take into cognisance the resources, training and organisational framework of its armed forces. Thereafter, suitable tactics, techniques and procedures should be evolved, and operational art be developed and practised during training. Material alone does not guarantee victory. For example, French Army had more material (read tanks, 3,000 to Germany's 2,700)³ vis-à-vis the Germans in May 1940, yet they lost to the Germans in WW 2. This was due to following important factors: wrong strategy (reliance on positional warfare and defensive mindset); lack of sound doctrine (Germans practiced auftragstaktik i.e. outflanking tactics); professional acumen in operational art (cultivated over decades of training in the War Academy and symbolised by Germany's Generalstab or General Staff); organisational framework (Germans had Panzer Divisions, which were combined arms divisions based on tanks) and the famous Blitzkrieg tactics (Blitzkrieg, literally means 'lightening

war').⁴ The result – Paris fell to Wehrmacht in about 6 weeks in May-June 1940.

Unified Command and Decentralised Control. It is an operational imperative that there is a unified command, for incisive decision making and optimum utilisation of all available military resources in furtherance of the operations being undertaken. The overall military commander can then nominate subordinate military commanders and allocate military resources to them for specified durations, as per the overall plan. This single overall military commander is then responsible to the political authority for all the military operations being undertaken, while the subordinate commander(s) can practise warfare within the intent of the higher commander(s). For example, in WW II, there existed a dichotomy in the command of the Wehrmacht wherein both the OKH (Ober Kommando de Heer i.e. Army High Command) and OKW (Ober Kommando de Wehrmacht i.e. Armed Forces High Command) reported to Hitler, thereby leading to dichotomies in the war plans and military aims.⁵ This led to eventual defeat of Germany.

Joint Operations. The recent history of warfare makes it crystal clear that joint operations are the capstone of any present day military operation with reasonable chances of success. The 'jointness' has to be in terms of aim, marshalling and utilisation of resources, complementing each other's strengths and nullifying the weaknesses, intelligence sharing, integrated operations, and implying 'combined services' approach. The joint operations have been in existence since millennia – right from the times of Hannibal when he used cavalry and infantry of different nationalities together, till the present day wars wherein land, air and sea components conduct joint operations. These must, therefore, be meshed during operational planning.

Judicious Selection and Training of Higher Commanders. It is an oft overstated cliché - armed forces of a nation must be well trained. But the more critically important truth is this – the armed forces must be well led. The selection and training of commanders who lead troops into battle must be done with utmost care. Incompetent commanders can lead to disastrous consequences, even if they have well trained troops under their command. For example, the pitiable initial Russian response to Wehrmacht in 1941- 42 in WW II was – apart from other factors - due to their inefficient and inept senior commanders, who were not capable of handling forces at their disposal. This was mainly due to the fact that military genie like Tukhachevsky and other military brains of the Red army had been executed in the purges of 1936-38 on Stalin's orders.⁶ With no capable commanders at the top levels, the initial losses were but inevitable, despite the obstinate Russian defence and raw courage.

Balance Courage and Intellect. Physical courage in battles is undoubtedly the haute couture of all qualities in a commander. However, it is the intellect that spells the doom for the enemy. A well made operational plan will preclude the need for over-the-top-bravado on the battlefield, leading to victory. Pyrrhic victories are the stuff good short tales for children are made up of, not the dream of a military planner. Hence, in a trade- off between intellect and physical courage, the former should be the preferred in senior commanders (i.e. at the operational and strategic levels) and the latter in junior leaders (i.e. at the tactical level). As regards moral courage, there is no ambiguity: it is the foundation of any commander's character and is hence indispensable. France 1940 in WW II accentuates the importance of intellect over courage while conceiving operational plans and the physical courage to execute it. This brilliant plan - conceived by Manstein - envisaged breakthrough at Sedan and then westwards towards the English Channel, not southwards towards Paris. This ingenious plan required a bold commander to approve it. Hitler did so. The cascading effect of its astounding success was the brittle nerves of all commanders at all hierarchical levels – especially the senior ones of the old school. The plan required extraordinary battlefield courage to be fully executed, as conceived. It was left to Guderian, to show that Herculean mental and moral courage, and character are essential to execute it.⁷ The result – collapse of France in just six weeks.

Strategy Trumps Tactics. Ideally, both strategy and tactics should form a formidable mesh to trap and destroy the enemy. However, if given a choice, it is better to have correct strategy vis-à-vis tactics. With the correct national and military strategy in place, sooner or later, victory will be at your feet, even if the tactics employed ab initio on the battlefield are unable to deliver decisive victories. But if strategy itself is wrong, then perhaps redemption on the battlefield is but a mere illusion. In the military rivalry between Rome and Carthage in 3rd Century BC, despite the tactical virtuosity of Hannibal in his battles like Cannae in 216 BC, Carthage ultimately lost the war to the Fabian Strategy of Rome - avoiding battle and pursuing slow attrition.⁸

Prefer Indirect over Direct. If only one lesson of warfare were to be passed onto the next generation, it should be this: indirect is better than direct. Indirect application of forces will pay rich dividends in the long term and will result in less bloodshed of own forces. The genre of manoeuvre warfare along with its ingredients of surprise, pre-emption, dislocation (physical, functional and psychological) and finally disruption belongs to the indirect approach. At the operational level, the manoeuvres of envelopment and turning movement, requiring a high level of virtuosity in senior commanders, fall into this category of warfare. At the tactical level, 'indirect' translates into 'flank' i.e. flank attack should be preferred to a frontal attack. Frontal attack must be the last resort, always.

Multiple Objectives. It is always preferable to have multiple objectives leading to a singular aim. This forces the enemy to ride on the horns of a dilemma, delays his decision making and increases his Observe-Orient-Decide-Act (OODA) Loop. Threatening of two or more enemy objectives simultaneously thus leads to achieving success. An operational plan which threatens multiple objectives will lead to the achievement of the war aim, for even if one or more of its thrusts are parried by the enemy, the other thrust(s) will succeed.

Conduct Warfare Based On Surprise and Intelligence. Surprise is the sine qua non of operational planning. The combination of the duo is the most potent combination during any operation. It is essential to have battlefield intelligence before a nation's military goes to war. Wrong intelligence will lead to erroneous planning and thence, complete annihilation of own forces involved. Therefore, intelligence picture must be absolutely clear before any war is undertaken.

Resolute Preparation. As the adage goes – if you have 24 hours to chop a tree, use 23 in sharpening the axe. Therefore, do not give battle to the enemy if you are unprepared. Take adequate time to prepare all facets of the impending war. Select the time, place and manner, after due preparation, in which to give battle to the enemy - the aim

being to win. It is well known that Field Marshal Manekshaw refused war with Pakistan in April 1971, stating to the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi that the army was not yet ready and preparation time was required.⁹ Over the next few months, the Indian Army prepared for the impending war and achieved a decisive victory in the eastern sector in just 13 days and a new nation - Bangladesh - was created.

Innovative Plans. Whenever there is a major military hurdle which seems insurmountable, then innovative planning and new techniques will invariably succeed. There are numerous instances of this axiom, the most famous one being the Trojan Horse, in which the apparently insurmountable obstacle - the fortress city of Troy - was overcome by the eponymous idea. Another innovative plan was executed by Epaminondas at the Battle of Leuctra in 371 BC. Epaminondas, even though vastly outnumbered, created his left wing stronger and then attacked the Spartan right wing, thereby concentrating his forces at the point of decision, thus achieving victory by adopting innovative planning and tactics.

Conclusion

These are the quintessential lessons of warfare that have (not?) been learnt over the ages. These are not all the lessons and there are many more which have not been discussed here. However, those listed here are the quintessential ones and bear testimony to the lost battles, and decisive victories encased in blood and guts spread over millennia of wars. Perhaps these quintessential lessons will aid a soldier in unravelling the mystery of the crucible of war. If these are imbibed, better operational plans are likely to emerge and executed at a lesser cost of human lives. If that happens, we can say that we, as true soldiers, have learnt the lessons of warfare well and have done our duty to the nation.

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