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THE USE OF THE MANEUVER BOARD

AND

SOME CONTROLLING PRINCIPLES IN NAVAL COMBAT.

By

Commander C. T. Vogelgesang, U. S. N.

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The Use of the Maneuver Board
And
Some Controlling Principles in Naval Combat.

"The most powerful force in war is victory in decisive battle. Victory alone breaks the will of the enemy and compels him to submit himself to our will. Neither the occupation of a stretch of territory nor the capture of a fortified place, but only the destruction of his armed force is as a rule decisive. This therefore is the most important objective in war * * * * *

"We can limit the free exercise of his (the enemy's) will if we are ready for and are resolved to take the offensive, but we can conquer his will only through the use of tactics, by means of battle."

The end in view of tactics is then victory in battle.

The means to attain the end in view constitute the factors that comprise the science of tactics.

Practice in the employment of the means develops skill in the art of tactics.

The maneuver board provides us with a medium through which we may study the means by which tactical victories may be achieved, and on which we may by practice develop skill in the handling of those means.

As a laboratory of tactical research it stands alone and has no rival. As a practical and useful drill ground it is second only to the drill ground of the fleet itself.

The maneuver board has, however, severe limitations that must be recognized and properly estimated, else its

teachings and our deductions therefrom may be very misleading.

We cannot, for example, on the maneuver board differentiate between the moral factors of opposing forces, nor can we discriminate between them in respect to the efficiency of training in the individual units. The rate of fire delivery, the accuracy of fire, the efficiency of fire control, the ability to maneuver of like types must be accepted as equal at the start between two combatants on the board. Now these things will never be equal in actuality we know, but one can easily see that if our quest is one in search of fundamental principles there must be equality of conditions assumed at the start in respect to such things as those mentioned.

This equality at the beginning is, however, soon disturbed, and inequalities begin to manifest themselves very soon and very legitimately due to an established permanent or temporary superiority of one force over the other, owing to natural inequalities in fortune or inequalities in ability of the individuals opposed to each other.

The maneuvers as you all know are governed by certain rules or conventions. These are of course essential to the conduct of the maneuvers.

It must be remembered that these rules and conventions though drawn up at the War College are based upon the latest

and best established practices of the fleet.

There has been during the last five years an almost continuous and material change going on in the rules and conventions of the maneuver board caused by the development within the fleet itself of gun fire efficiency, torpedo efficiency and maneuvering power.

The hitting power of great guns, the efficiency of torpedo fire, the increased range of torpedoes, and increased mobility of the units of the fleet are all factors that will cause rules to be changed in order to conform to fleet performance.

That the rules are open to the charge of lagging behind fleet performance at times is admitted; but conservatism is an essential factor where effect upon principles is involved. It will usually be found, however, that there are two opinions in the fleet itself upon matters of vital tactical importance growing out of fleet performance.

One opinion will contend that a certain maneuver demonstrated beyond question the efficacy of certain tactics, in which the group of that opinion usually plays the leading role; and the other opinion voiced by the opposing side will be quite the reverse.

This is a very healthy condition for the fleet to be in, for it suggests a strife that will be productive of many tests, which will finally arrive at a reasonably just conclusion acceptable to all.

Those are the conditions that we must await before modification in the rules and conventions of the maneuver board would be justified, and in the meantime the War College accepts as gracefully as possible the indictment of lagging behind the fleet.

In many respects also the practices on the maneuver board are indictable as being too far in advance of the fleet performance.

We coordinate on the board with too great facility the movement of forces in contact, and sometimes even coordinate the movements of surface and subsurface craft in a tactical encounter. We send and receive signals in an action, we move on the board with perfect precision and accuracy in obedience to signal, our destroyers and scouts never fail to reach the positions assigned them on the chart or on the board when outside of gun fire. Can all such things be done in practice? We know that many of them are not done, but may it not be hoped that after much practice and experience in actual maneuvers this plane of perfection may be more closely approximated than now.

Moreover, if, on the board, such precision and accuracy were not assumed, upon what basis of performance should we establish our search for principles and our practice for the development of skill?

We always adhere strictly to the established and accepted data of type performance in respect to speed, fuel endurance, armament and armor. Those are all more or less

fixed and determinable factors. But in respect to whether signals, radio or other, may be transmitted, whether movements may be coordinated, whether precision in movement is attainable, and many like questions have no definite answer. But in tactical research and experiment we must establish a norm from which to make a departure in our investigation, and there is no other safe point of departure than the one which assumes equally favorable conditions on both sides, even though those conditions approach the ideal and are not yet in harmony with actual practice afloat.

Properly to evaluate the maneuver board, we must look upon it solely as a help to us. It is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end. Our lives are dedicated, in the last analysis, to the attainment of victory in battle. How shall we learn to do those things, the ability to do which promises so much in battle?

We can have no better teacher than the maneuver board. On that simulated small area of the sea any one of us may at choice be in command of a division or a squadron of destroyers; a division, squadron or fleet commander, and when we shall have passed through thirty or forty years of service that may in future be or at present is required before we reach the actual positions we assume for ourselves in this miniature warfare, think of the wealth of experience we may take to our higher duty, think how much more we shall by our study and experience deserve victory in the battle

that may be the glorious culmination of a life consecrated to success in war.

I should like to counsel with you a little further in regard to the practical application of tactical conceptions.

There is no greater force in tactics than that which embodies the spirit of the offensive. As I read the history of warfare, it unfailingly supports that view.

Battle is where the contest of two opposing wills comes to the point of decision. In every case it is our will in conflict with the enemy's will, and upon the decision may hang, and often does hang, the fate of a nation. Every element therefore that can contribute towards a favorable decision for us is of tremendous value.

We know that we can limit the free exercise of the enemy's will if we are ready for and are resolved to take the offensive. He may be equally so resolved, in which case the issue will depend upon other considerations; but if he be not so resolved, our battle is already partly won because we have forced his will into partial submission to our own.

In the spirit of the offensive all the lofty attributes of military character find their fullest freedom; resolution, initiative, resourcefulness, dash and intrepidity combined with loyalty on the part of every subordinate reach their highest expression, get their fullest play and are in themselves inspirations to victory.

Therefore I should say in any tactical problem that may

be given you for solution, whether real or fictitious, whether on the sea or on the maneuver board, let your impulse be offensive. Inculcate in yourselves and in those with whom you may be associated the spirit of the offensive first of all, never lose sight of its predominant force in tactics, and then study and study hard the means by which you may give full effect to that spirit.

The greatest and perhaps the all-embodying principle in tactics is comprised in the one word concentration.

Concentration has a very concrete meaning, but in military writings it is frequently loosely used. It is necessary therefore to define just what we mean by concentration as a controlling principle in tactics.

It means as here used this: A superior force brought to bear with full effect and with dispatch upon a portion of the enemy force which is unable for the time being to be effectively supported by the remainder of his force.

The principle is simple enough, but in its execution lies the difficulty. Its successful execution involves close and constant coordination of effort and purpose of every unit involved. Effective coordination is difficult even on the maneuver board where all forces are in plain sight, where ranges can be accurately and promptly measured and where the confusion and excitement of battle are wanting. How much more difficult it will be in a real engagement. How necessary therefore by practice to grow skilful in tactical coordination.

The tactical signal book which is in all essential respects a drill book is a recognition of the necessity for training in coordination of effort. It provides for combined evolutions just as the barrack-yard drill book provides for evolutions of the company, the battalion, the brigade and the regiment. All of that, however, most essential as it unquestionably is, is only rudimentary. It is often mistaken for the end in tactics when it is really only a very small beginning.

There is a much wider field of tactics that we must explore and become familiar with,- the fleet maneuver field, wherein forces operating against each other should give full opportunity for the practice of tactics in its fullest and truest sense.

In normal times the periods set aside for fleet tactical maneuvers are unfortunately too restricted. In the past the efforts during such periods of drill have been too much of the nature of exercise in the school of the ship and too little of the school of the fleet.

Happily now we are giving more recognition to the necessity for fleet maneuvers. But even so, the periods assigned for fleet maneuvers are short and occupy but a small part of the cycle of fleet activities during a year. We should not satisfy ourselves with those meager opportunities to develop our ideas when we have at hand such ready means as are provided by the maneuver board for supplementing our training.

A necessary corollary to coordination is indoctrination. Indoctrination is the mutual acceptance of well digested tactical ideas founded upon sound tactical principles. It implies a trained judgment founded upon a knowledge of tactics.

It presupposes not only a knowledge of the capabilities of types and their best tactical employment, as for instance, the capabilities and best tactical use to be made in action of destroyers, of submarines, of scouts, of fast wings, of battleships, but a knowledge of the use of the various types in combination with each other.

Such mutual understanding diffused throughout any command makes for loyal and effective cooperation, insures effective coordination, reduces what is called the friction of war and is a forecast of victory in battle.

We have then in the field of naval grand tactics three mutually dependent elements which rightly understood and rightly applied go far towards insuring success in battle.

Indoctrination makes effective coordination possible.

Effective coordination makes concentration possible.

Effective concentration, combined with the spirit of the offensive, makes victory probable.

Nothing is certain in war or in battle, chance plays an important part. But we will have reduced the opportunity for that chance, which is commonly known as Fate, to operate against us in our struggle for victory, if we have secured in our favor those other elements that constitute in the aggregate the most powerful force in tactics.

C. J. Taylor

(C.T.V., 2-10-16.)