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PAMPHLET FILE

Class of June, 1919

Thesis

Copy No. 1

TACTICS

Submitted by

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(January 13, 1920.)

Naval War College  
Newport, R. I.  
15 January 1920

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## TACTICS.

The definition of tactics given by Clausewitz - The theory of the employment of armed forces in battle - has hardly been improved upon since his time. As applied to Naval matters Tactics is concerned with the management of armed forces after hostile contact has been established. The object is twofold (a) To so handle our forces as to be able to do the maximum of damage to the enemy (b) while keeping them in such position and formation as to receive the least damage ourselves. Of these two parts of the objective, the first is the governing consideration, and the second is, while important, entirely secondary. No battle was ever won by attempting to avoid punishment.

The art of Naval Tactics has been of slow development until comparatively recent times.

The first intelligent and serious effort to develop a system of such tactics seems to have been made by Clerk of Eldin, in the latter part of the eighteenth century. He was not a seaman, but a man of considerable attainments with a vivid interest in nautical affairs. He addressed himself to the discovery of the reason why the French were able to avoid decisive defeat in their actions with the English fleet between 1743 and 1780, and decided that it was due to the superior knowledge of tactics possessed by them, or to the poor system of the English. Up to that time the accepted formation had been a more or less regular line for the approach to within gun range, followed by a melee as soon as the fighting became warm in which each ship took on one or more of the enemy and fought it out. Up to the

point where all order was lost, however, the line was the main consideration and its maintainance was rigidly enforced. The point of the system elaborated by Clerk was the abandonment of the rigid line, ~~and~~ the formation of the fleet in a compound formation, and an attack directed at the rear of the enemies formation, as the point against which it would be most easy to bring an overwhelming force, and at which the enemy would have the most difficulty in bringing the rest of his force into action to the support of the part attacked. This seems to have been the first appreciation of the principle of concentration, which is now well understood to be the surest means of securing success. This principle of concentration, that is of securing the preponderance of force at the point of contact, is the object sought by tactics, and modern developpement is not in the line of changing or improving the principles, but in improving the methods by which the object sought may be secured.

This preponderance may be secured in various ways such as by providing more powerful ships; by providing a larger number of ships of standard type; or by bringing the whole of the smaller force into action with a part of the larger one. Of these, the first two concern policy, the last is tactics.

A study of the battles of sailing ship time will help us in our study of tactics, for while the methods by which advantages were to be secured were different in those times, it is the methods which have changed with the change in weapons and the ships that carry them and not the character of the advantages themselves.

It is manifestly a very different matter to bring the whole weight of a modern fleet comprising capital ships, light cruisers, destroyers and submarines into effective concerted action than it was to get the best out of a fleet of the ships of the time of Nelson. While the modern fleet is to a large extent independant of the effect of wind and weather, so also is the enemy, and instead of going into action at pistol shot range, the action may even be decided while the force of the enemy is still barely visable above the horizon. At the same time, the principles to be followed are the same whether the range is five hundred yards or twenty thousand - whether the projectiles are twenty four pound solid shot or shell weighing two thousand pounds and filled with high explosive.

There is tracable through the writings of many authors the thought that tactics is the sole means through which victory is to be gained - that through skill in maneuver or by means of some crafty formation the enemy is to be defeated without the necessity of taking, as well as giving, hard knocks. This is the tendancy of the French school of the eighteenth century, and the fallacy of the ides could not be better shown than by their lack of success at sea during that period. Suffren was one of the greatest masters of tactics of his time, and in his campaigns against Hughes his handling of his ships up to the point where close action began was practically uniformly the better of the two, but his captains lacked the will to fight to the limit, which their opponents possessed to a marked degree, and the result was defeat or indecisive action where they should have been able to secure victory.

This same fact - that skill in maneuver must be backed up by a willingness to take as well as to give punishment in order to command success - is most evident all through the times of the sailing ship actions. At the battle of the Nile, Nelsons most complete victory, the inspiration of the whole

and the plan to attack the van of the French fleet, leaving the rear to be attended to later, was Nelsons; but once the fleet had cleared the end of the shoals off Aboukir point and headed down for their stations, tactics were at an end, and the outcome was in the hands of the individual ship captains and depended on the sheer hard fighting that they could be depended on to do. Even the decisive maneuver of doubling under the bows of the Guerrier and anchoring on the inshore side seems to have been initiated by Captain Foley of the Goliath - in accordance it is true with the general plan of the Commander in Chief to overwhelm the end of the enemy formation, but a rank modification of the prescribed plan for carrying the plan out. But even when this had been done, and the ten ships that were in the company of the Commander in Chief had concentrated on the seven French ships in the van, the battle was still far from won. It required downright hard give and take fighting to complete the victory, and had the five lee French ships promptly come into action the result would doubtless have been very different.

Even as it was, the arrival about eight o'clock of the Alexander and Swiftsure bringing eleven British ships against seven French, was a most welcome addition. Up to that time, some three hours after the beginning of the battle, the damage seems not to have been overwhelmingly against the French although only eight ships out of their total force of thirteen had been engaged. If at any time up to ten o'clock when the Orient blew up the five fresh ships of the French lee end of the line could have been brought into action it seems fair to say that the total result might have been very different.

At any rate it is plain that the British success was

not won simply by superior tactics. They were aided by an almost total lack of preparation on the part of the enemy who was in a very inferior position and at anchor and who passively awaited attack when and where they chose to deliver it and who permitted himself to be beaten up in detail. Even so, and with all the inertness of the French, it was by no means a cheap or an easily won victory. Some of the French ships fought with the utmost determination and skill and at the end of the engagement there was only one of the English that could make sail in chase of the escaping enemy. In other words the battle was won by superior tactics plus the hardest kind of give and take fighting plus the misconduct of a considerable fraction of the enemy's force.

It may be objected that owing to the fact that one combatant was at anchor during this battle there was not the usual opportunity for tactics to demonstrate their influence.

This cannot be urged against the battle of Trafalgar, which is a classical example of a decisive battle for that period.

On that occasion an English fleet of twenty seven sail of the line attacked and defeated a combined French and Spanish fleet of thirty three of the line.

Nelsons "Memorandum" issued about two weeks before the battle, and the similar one issued during the preceding summer, sufficiently clearly indicate the method of attack that he intended to employ, which was, briefly, to overwhelm one end of the enemy formation with a part of his fleet while a smaller detachment contained the remainder of the enemy. The "Memorandum" assumed a fleet of forty British against forty six Allies. His forty ships were to be divided into two bodies of sixteen each one under his own command and the other under the second in command, and a light squadron of eight of the fastest ships, which might be directed to re-enforce either

of the main divisions, or attend to the head of the enemy formation.

It was contemplated that each division should approach the enemy to long gun shot on about a parallel ( or opposite ) course and then bear up together, so bringing all ships under fire at about the same time and get<sup>ting</sup> them to close range as quickly as possible - which is very close to the modern idea of keeping the bearing of the enemy at right angles to the line of bearing.

As the battle was actually fought, this feature was not even approached. At daylight the two fleets were about ten miles apart, each in line ahead, the British steering north and the Allies heading south. The wind was very light from W N W, with a heavy westerly swell. The weather did not allow the execution of the plan as made without so much delay as to give the Allies time to escape to Cadiz, about twenty miles away to the N E. Nelson therefore altered his plan and attacked in two columns, or more probably two elongated groups; one of fourteen ships under Collingwood breaking through the Allied line about fifteen ships from the rear and Nelson with twelve ships, going in about seven ships further ahead. The Allies meantime had started to wear as soon as the intention of the British was made out, and when the attack was delivered were in a very irregular crescent shaped formation heading to the northward and concave towards the approaching British. This crescent effect was probably unintentional, and due to the light breeze and heavy swell, together with lack of skill on the part of the ships companies. The movement, though begun shortly after seven in the morning, was not completed much before ten in the forenoon, and the formation probably could not have been corrected in any case before the battle began about twelve thirty.

The British attack brought their twenty seven ships against the rear twenty one of the Allies, and left the twelve leading ships unengaged. It also exposed the heads



of the approaching columns for a long time to the concentrated fire of the enemy ships without giving them any chance to return it, Nelsons flagship for instance was under fire for forty minutes before she broke through the line and could begin to inflict damage in her turn. Against a skillful enemy the case would have been even worse but the Allies were not well drilled and their ships were in very irregular order, sometimes two or three abreast thus losing much fire during the approach, and owing to lack of gun practice their fire was not very effective except at the shortest range. Even so the Victory lost fifty men before she could fire a gun in reply, and the four leading ships of the two columns lost slightly more than one third of the casualties in the whole fleet of twenty seven ships.

At just one o'clock, just an hour after the first gun had been fired, the Victory broke through the enemy line, and from that point the battle became a melee, the British as they arrived each picking out an opponent and getting to close work as quickly as possible. The twelve Allied ships ahead of the point of attack made no apparent effort to come into action till it was too late to restore the fortune of the day, and without doubt Nelson had counted on just that lack of skill, or of desire to fight. Nevertheless if those twelve fresh ships had gone about promptly when the attack developed on the center they would have been in action at least as quickly as the rear ships of the British columns, which did not arrive till about half past two.

By this time the Allied van had come about and were approaching the scene of action, but the rear had been crushed and the Flagship been forced to surrender, and instead of attempting to regain the day they made sail to escape. Of the Allied fleet eighteen ships were captured, four escaped to sea, and eleven got into Cadiz. The victory was crushing, and again it was won, not by superior tactics, but by superior tactics, plus downright hard fighting plus misconduct on the part of a

considerable part of the beaten force.

It is to be particularly noted that in both the cases that we have examined, the victorious force went into action with a single hearted and enthusiastic intention of beating the enemy - regardless of the possible loss to themselves; and that the defeated side, on the contrary, were intent upon "ulterior objects" - were primarily concerned with something that they were going to accomplish at some other time and place, preferably without meeting the enemy fleet in battle, and only fought because the fight was forced upon them. That the victory fell to those who made the effort to beat the enemy their sole object, and were backed in their effort by superior tactics and superior skill in the management of their ships and guns.

From this point of view the "Battle of August 10" between the Russians and Japanese is illuminating.

Without going into the general military situation, which should have made the Russians eager to inflict damage on the enemy fleet, even at the expense of their own destruction, the Russian fleet of six battle ships, one armored cruiser, and four cruisers left Port Arthur on that morning with the intention of going to Vladivostock - if possible without a meeting with the Japanese fleet. On leaving the roadstead they sighted a division of the enemy fleet consisting of four battleships and two armored cruisers to port. Later in the forenoon one more armored cruiser, one very old battleship and several lighter cruisers of no very great fighting force appeared to starboard. In material strength the two forces were nearly enough equal to make the result very uncertain and the Japanese divisions were for several hours widely separated. During the whole of the forenoon the Russians proceeded on their course towards Vladivostock, with the separated Japanese divisions drawing ahead from opposite sides on converging courses.

About noon the Russians turned nearly at right angles to the left to a course about N E, apparently on account of a force of enemy destroyers ahead, and about 2 P.M. resumed course for Vladivostock, about E S E. Meantime the widely separated Japanese divisions had concentrated on the starboard hand of the Russian formation and opened fire at long range. The action continued on this course at long range till about 6.10 P.M. the Russians inclining to the eastward, opening the range, and the Japanese making no special effort to close in, though they had the advantage of superior speed. In the course of this stage of the action the damage seems to have been fairly equal, with the Japanese getting, if any thing, the worst of it.

At this time however the *Cesarevich*, the Russian flagship, was hit by a twelve inch shell on the slits of the conning tower, which killed the Commander in Chief and put the ship for the time out of control. She sheered out of formation and in the direction of the enemy, throwing both forces into confusion.

From this point the Russians seem to have lost all hope of accomplishing anything whatever. The Senior Officer Present, the Admiral having been killed in the conning tower of the flagship, abandoned the *Cserevitch* to her fate and began a retreat in disorder to Port Arthur with the remaining five battleships.

The cruisers and destroyers scattered and made the best of their way to various neutral ports, and the *Cesarevich*, though only able to steam about five knots, made her way successfully to Kian Chou. As this occurred about sunset, the Japanese heavy ships attempted nothing more, but Admiral Togo contented himself with sending his destroyers in pursuit of the beaten and disorganized enemy. In this, they accomplished exactly and precisely nothing, though there was never a better chance for the torpedo fleet to make a brilliant clean up. On the whole, the Russians displayed their usual lack of initiative and determination and their success was in

the exact measure of what they deserved. Up to the time that the flagship was disabled they had pounded all desire for further action out of the enemy, as was shown by his failure to follow them up, and the results of the night actions that followed leave small room for doubt that they could have gone on to Vladivostock with little further opposition. They however gave up at the moment of success and scattered to be interned or to sink at their anchors.

On the other hand the Japanese displayed little of the energy and enterprise that they showed on many other occasions. Instead of pressing on to complete victory, which was within their grasp, they contented themselves with turning the enemy back from his objective, Vladivostock, and allowed his ships to escape them.

The forces were approximately equal - there was little display of tactics on either side further than to follow the leader in column - skill was fairly equal, and the damage sustained was not widely different - but the difference between a moderate success on the one hand and complete failure on the other may be found in the fact that the Japanese sought a fight, even though they did not seek it with their accustomed eagerness, and that the Russians sought only to escape without fighting.

Similar characteristics and even more decisive results followed at the battle off TSUSHIMA with the difference that the Japanese on this occasion had all the advantage of skill, of superior tactics, and of determination, and completely destroyed a nearly equal fleet without the loss of a vessel. The victors attacked with ardor and determination, and the defeated side merely doggedly attempted to press on to their destination, without apparently any idea that their first object should be to beat the enemy that stood in the way.

The battle of Jutland offers some very interesting light on this point of view. On May 31, 1916 the British fleet of twenty eight dreadnaughts, nine battle cruisers, twenty five light cruisers and seventy eight destroyers was making one of its "periodical sweeps" in the North Sea. At the same time the German High Sea Fleet of sixteen dreadnaughts, six pre-dreadnaughts, five battle cruisers, and about fifteen light cruisers and seventy five destroyers was out. The object of the Germans is not clear; it is not likely that they were looking for contact with the Grand Fleet. It seems more likely that they were out for exercise and to raise the morale both of the fleet and of the people at home, and perhaps with the hope of cutting off some of the detached forces of the enemy. The weather was streaky, with visibility from two to sixteen thousand yards.

At two P.M. the main forces were about one hundred and fifty miles apart bearing about N N W and S S E with the British to the north. Each was steaming in the general direction of the other. The battle cruisers were, roughly, midway between the two battle fleets, and about two thirty their light craft made contact. The resulting action divides naturally into three parts, neglecting the incidental cruiser and destroyer fighting. FIRST: The battle cruiser engagement, up to the time that the High Sea Fleet came on the scene. SECOND: Concentration on the Grand Fleet and its entrance into action. THIRD: The night operations.

As has been said, contact was made by the light forces attached to the two battle cruiser fleets about two thirty.

Both battle cruiser forces proceeded to investigate, and Beatty with six of this class, supported at extreme range by four fast dreadnaughts, promptly attacked the five battle cruisers under <sup>Hipper</sup> Hipper. The latter promptly retreated at full speed to the supporting battle ships with Beatty in pursuit. This running fight lasted about an hour, from three thirty to

four forty two,

During this time two of Beatty's ships were destroyed by gun fire and sank, but this seems to have had no effect in slowing up his attack, though he was left with four ships to five, and his fast battleships were not fast enough to get into effective range. At four forty two, having sighted the High Seas Fleet a little on the port bow Beatty countermarched to the right and shaped a course to lead the enemy to the Grand Fleet, and his movement was followed by <sup>Hipper</sup>~~Hipper~~. The fast battleships followed the battle cruisers, firing at very long range both at the German battle cruisers and the leading German battleships, and the action continued to the northward till the Grand Fleet was met about six P.M., the British pushing the Germans to the right till they were heading nearly east by the time that the Grand Fleet was sighted. Meantime Admiral Jellicoe had been bringing the main body down in cruising formation at twenty knots waiting for information on which to base his deployment. Owing to poor visibility and discrepancies in reported positions, he could not determine where the enemy would be met, but just before six P.M. they were made out on the starboard bow at not much over twelve thousand yards from the right flank of the formation. He then deployed on the left division and fell in astern of Beatty, who, still pushing the enemy around to the right, was steering about E.S.E. by the time the deployment was completed. At this point the Grand Fleet seems to have had all the best of the position, with the entire force in action on the head of the German column, but the visibility had become so poor that only a few ships could be seen from any point of the formation, and the full advantage of the position could not be taken. The Germans seem to have had no notion of fighting the whole of the British force if it could be avoided, and kept bearing off to the right and opening the range under cover of destroyer attacks and smoke screens laid by the destroyers. This phase lasted from six to about seven thirty, the Germans steaming on an interior arc and the British on an exterior one of about

twelve thousand yards greater radius. By this time the courses had come around to about S S W, the weather was getting thicker and night was coming on. At this point the German destroyers made a determined attack and Jellicoe turned the whole fleet two points away to avoid it, the Germans at the same time turning about eight points to the right and getting completely out of touch.

After the torpedoes had passed - some twenty are reported to have been seen, and one hit was made on the Marlborough - the course was altered back to S W, and some of the German ships were seen for a few minutes by some of the British, but in each case they turned away and got out of touch, and the battle was ended so far as the heavy ships were concerned. Shortly after, Admiral Jellicoe changed course to South for the night and placed his destroyers to the North to keep the enemy light craft clear for the night.

During the night the destroyers seem to have been operating on their own, and with considerable success; sinking the Pommern and reporting several other hits on unidentified ships, It seems however that a well organized and well directed attack might have done more.

Admiral Jellicoe's problem as he came down to the scene of battle, uncertain when or where or in what formation he would find the enemy, and with the chance that they might bob out of the mist at any moment seems to have been the most trying that has ever been put up to a Commander in Chief, and the consequences to the result of the war if he should make a serious error might have been disastrous in the extreme, but it is impossible to avoid the thought that he was more concerned for the safety of his own ships than for the chance to do damage to the enemy. Especially at seven thirty, when he turned away from a flight of torpedoes and lost touch with the heavy ships, if he had taken the chances of a turn in the other direction he might have lost some ships, though as the torpedoes crossed his formation anyhow the danger would not seem to have been very much greater; but he would have probably been able to keep

the enemy heavy ships in range, and to have completed a decisive victory instead of letting them off with what was at best a drawn battle. It is easy to be wise after the event, and it is much simpler to sit in a comfortable chair and say from the compiled and digested reports what should have been done, than to make the same decision on the bridge of the flagship in the heat of battle with limited vision and only occasional fragments of information as to what is happening a few thousand yards away. Nevertheless one cannot help wondering, as the action from three thirty to six is compared with that from six to seven thirty, what would have happened if there had been another Beatty in command of the Grand Fleet.

I do not mean to carry the idea that dash, courage, the most desperate determination to win, can ever take the place of skill and training in leading to victory. The Chesapeake and Shannon, the Strongbow and Mary Rose, the Battle off Coronel, to mention only a few cases, too thoroughly disprove that. What I do mean is that to insure success we must, in addition to the best material, the best possible training, and the best knowledge of tactics, have the "fighting edge" the "will to win". That we must go into battle with the idea of beating the enemy, not of getting off as lightly as possible ourselves. No fleet ever won a decisive victory by attempting to avoid defeat.

(G.C.D. 1/14/20)

HLM