

Archived Content

Information identified as archived on the Web is for reference, research or record-keeping purposes. It has not been altered or updated after the date of archiving. Web pages that are archived on the Web are not subject to the Government of Canada Web Standards.

As per the [Communications Policy of the Government of Canada](#), you can request alternate formats on the "[Contact Us](#)" page.

Information archivée dans le Web

Information archivée dans le Web à des fins de consultation, de recherche ou de tenue de documents. Cette dernière n'a aucunement été modifiée ni mise à jour depuis sa date de mise en archive. Les pages archivées dans le Web ne sont pas assujetties aux normes qui s'appliquent aux sites Web du gouvernement du Canada.

Conformément à la [Politique de communication du gouvernement du Canada](#), vous pouvez demander de recevoir cette information dans tout autre format de rechange à la page « [Contactez-nous](#) ».

***TOWARDS CREATING OPERATIONAL COMMANDERS IN
THE CANADIAN FORCES***

Is Auftragstaktik the model?

By Lieutenant Colonel Clive Caton

This paper was written by a student attending the Canadian Forces College in fulfillment of one of the requirements of the Course of Studies. The paper is a scholastic document, and thus contains facts and opinions which the author alone considered appropriate and correct for the subject. It does not necessarily reflect the policy or the opinion of any agency, including the Government of Canada and the Canadian Department of National Defence. This paper may not be released, quoted or copied except with the express permission of the Canadian Department of National Defence.

La présente étude a été rédigée par une stagiaire du Collège des Forces canadiennes pour satisfaire à l'une des exigences du cours. L'étude est un document qui se rapporte au cours et contient des faits et des opinions que seul l'auteur considère appropriés et convenables au sujet. Elle ne reflète pas nécessairement la politique ou l'opinion d'un organisme quelconque, y compris le gouvernement du Canada et le ministère de la Défense nationale du Canada. Il est défendu de diffuser, de citer ou de reproduire cette étude sans la permission expresse du ministère de la Défense nationale.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the development of a German command philosophy labelled *Auftragstaktik* and argues that incorporating *Auftragstaktik* into the CF could help produce a joint force that is nimble, flexible, superbly trained and led by commanders with operational vision. *Auftragstaktik*, or “mission-orders”, is a philosophy of command and control wherein subordinate commanders, down to the lowest possible level, are encouraged to act independently and with initiative to achieve the commander’s intent. The Prussian-German Army and later the *Wehrmacht* developed and applied this philosophy with great success, most notably in the tactics known as *Blitzkrieg*. Where the Germans failed however, was at the strategic level, both in the First and the Second World Wars. Notwithstanding Germany’s strategic defeats in both those wars, the Prussian-German army and the *Wehrmacht*, both imbued with the spirit of *Auftragstaktik*, often succeeded brilliantly on the battlefield and at the operational level.

Canadians have rarely, if ever, commanded at the operational level and consequently the CF does not have a culture of operational leadership. Canadian generals have often lacked operational vision, which has led to a dearth of original thought at the operational level. In what the author feels is an abrogation of a fundamental duty, CF senior officers have tended to dismiss the concept of an independent defence as an impossible goal. The paper argues for the end of this attitude - a lack of fiscal resources should not stifle innovative thinking and planning. It suggests that the actions of General von Seeckt, the architect of the post-First War I German army, could serve as a guide to the CF today. Constrained to an army that was too small for Germany’s defence, he concentrated his efforts on educating, training and developing the officers and men of the *Reichswehr*. He taught them to think for themselves, to understand and trust each other so that in battle they would act independently, but coherently; he instilled the spirit of *Auftragstaktik*.

The Canadian Forces have gone through a decade of introspection and have determined that officer training and education must change. To that end “Officership 2020” sets out broad direction. However, merely educating officers at military and civilian institutions will not be enough. Rather a change is required in the CF’s organizational culture. Inculcating the philosophy of *Auftragstaktik* could produce an armed force that is flexible, agile and potent – a force akin to the German army built by von Seeckt in the 1920s. However, because *Auftragstaktik* is built on trust it cannot be instituted by decree. The spirit of *Auftragstaktik* must infuse the entire force, and that can only be realised over time and through a significant change in culture at all rank levels.

INTRODUCTION

The Canadian Forces (CF) has spent the past decade trying to find itself. The end of the Cold War, an enormous rise in peace keeping and peace support missions and an apparent decay in the senior leadership¹ have led to this period of intense self-study. This decay has both ethical and intellectual dimensions and improved officer education is seen as an important part of the solution. Over the past few years there have been numerous studies into officer professional military education and professional development, studies that have been synthesised into “Officership 2020,” a document that provides broad direction on how the Canadian Forces should educate officers.

Will improved officer education be enough? Perhaps it is time to examine how we educate, train and indoctrinate the entire force with the view to changing the organizational culture² of the CF. Indeed, the Chief of Review Services (CRS) report into the effects of the MCCRT (Management command and control review team) argued that “there may be value in developing a DND/CF model for cultural change and more clearly defining the desired organizational culture.”³ Possibly we could learn from the German experience following World War I.

The German Army, following World War I and the Versailles Treaty, was reduced to a skeleton of its former size – cut to a force of 100,000 men from one of many millions. General Hans von Seeckt, the first post-war commander of the General Staff, or *Truppenamt* (Troops Office) and second army chief of the *Reichswehr*, used this as an opportunity “to do what few military men have ever done: create an army from scratch, fashioning its organisation and doctrine after his own theories.”⁴ In the succeeding years

he concentrated his efforts on educating and training the *Reichswehr*. In the process he forged an officer and non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps that would astonish the world with their brilliance. Tragically that brilliance would also be wedded to an evil strategy that resulted in World War II, a cataclysmic event that shook the foundations of western civilisation.

My purpose is not, however, to investigate the Nazi regime's bankrupt strategy. Rather, I will examine the command philosophy labelled *Auftragstaktik*⁵ and trace its historical development in the German Army. I will then argue that inculcating *Auftragstaktik* into the CF could help produce a joint force that is nimble, flexible, potent and led by commanders with operational vision.

AUFTRAGSTAKTIK

Auftragstaktik is simple in its explanation but difficult in its execution because, to succeed, it requires a military steeped in its philosophy. Simply put, *Auftragstaktik* requires the commander to provide his intent - the mission objectives - and then to 'step out of the way' leaving his subordinates to decide how to achieve those objectives. According to Karl Hoffman,⁶ a member of the German Corps of Engineers, it is a philosophy of command and control. David M. Keithly and Stephen P. Ferris quote the current German army definition as follows:

[*Auftragstaktik* is] a command and control procedure within which the subordinate is given extensive latitude, within the framework of the intention of the individual giving the order, in carrying out his mission. The missions are to include only those restraints which are indispensable for being able to interact with others...Mission-oriented command and control requires uniformity in the way of thinking, sound judgement and initiative, as well as responsible actions at all levels.⁷

Auftragstaktik is, in some respects, the absence of direct command and control and in that sense it is opposite to *Befehlstaktik*⁸, where an operation is planned in detail from above, and specific orders, issued to the troops, control all their actions. Unfortunately, in the most sclerotic version of *Befehlstaktik*, as the situation changes the troops will not react until they receive amended direction. Even with today's impressive communications that direction can take time and may, because of the senior commander's physical removal from the battle, be flawed. Consequently, a more nimble foe can take the initiative, then act boldly and definitively before a decision has even been made⁹—defeat often results. *Auftragstaktik*, on the other hand, enables initiative at the lowest levels since subordinate commanders, understanding the mission objectives, can adapt appropriately to changing situations on the battlefield without the need for orders from above.

AUFTRAGSTAKTIK IN THE PRUSSIAN-GERMAN ARMY

Numerous historians, among them Col T. N. Dupuy and Martin van Creveld, have stated that from 1807 to 1945 the Prussian – German armies were consistently superior to their opponents.¹⁰ That superiority was, in great part, due to the quality and dedication of the officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs).¹¹ However, there was another significant factor and that was how the German Army commanded and controlled itself. At the heart of the Prussian-German command and control doctrine was the philosophy of *Auftragstaktik*, a philosophy that Helmuth von Moltke the Elder introduced in the latter half of the nineteenth century.¹²

In earlier times Frederick the Great had been the mind of the Prussian Army, an army that had been in many respects “his personal possession.”¹³ It was rigid in its character and relied on iron discipline for its power. That army had failed in the face of Napoleon’s greater flexibility, most dramatically at the Battle of Jena. Following these defeats Prussian military leaders, most notably Scharnhorst, Gneisenau and von Clausewitz, studied Napoleon and interpreted his methods; indeed, the roots of *Auftragstaktik* can be found in Napoleon’s Army. The Prussian Army that grew out of the ruins of Jena and these subsequent studies traded its rigid character for one of brilliant flexibility.

War and the battlefield were often chaotic and victory came to those who could survive and win in that chaos. The Prussians of the nineteenth century determined that it was not the role of leadership to order that chaos but rather to exploit it - to do that, however, required the delegation of command and control to very low levels.¹⁴ The Prussian-Germans created an army that fostered initiative and trust at, and between, all levels. This was in contrast to their future opponents who, in general, tried to impose order on the battlefield and insisted on rigidly controlling their troops. A “command climate”¹⁵ was created in the Prussian army where soldiers were expected to act as the situation dictated. Within the chaos of battle that philosophy “gave all soldiers the freedom of action necessary to make decisions based upon their local circumstances guided by only their own judgement and their commander’s intent.”¹⁶ Prince Friederich Karl wrote:

All in all, the Prussian officer corps, unlike any other forces seem...to have developed an unusual longing for independence from superiors and a willingness to assume responsibility...This attitude also had an

undisputable impact on our battle tactics. Prussian officers do not tolerate any restrictions by regulations and schemes... We give ... free rein to the ingenuity of the individual soldier, perform our arts more easily and support any successful action independently, even when this may be contrary to the intentions of a military leader.¹⁷

In order for this loosely controlled army to work the officers and men, certainly down to the NCO level, had to be superbly trained and imbued with a strong and common ethos. Throughout the century leading up to World War I the Prussian-Germans developed a superior training and education system, a system that prepared General Staff and line officers, NCOs and soldiers alike.¹⁸ Officers and non-commissioned officers were educated and trained to think independently. The Prussians created the “best NCO corps in the world” and they pioneered the use of large peacetime manoeuvres at the divisional and corps level.¹⁹ The end result was that “the Germans entered World War I with the best-trained army in Europe and managed to keep its training advantage throughout the war.”²⁰

WORLD WAR I

World War I is generally regarded as the antithesis of fluid, manoeuvre warfare; however, on the Western front it began and ended on the move. The Schlieffen Plan,²¹ designed to envelop the French Army, swept the German armies through Belgium and northern France in 1914 until it ground to a halt along the River Marne. Four years later, in 1918 it was the combined arms offensives of the Allies that finally resulted in Allied victory. Prior to those Allied offensives, however, the Germans had attacked in force earlier that year; the German offensive that had driven sections of the Allied lines

dangerously close to Paris. That success was largely based on the tactics of the *Sturmabteilung*.²²

The *Sturmabteilung*, or storm troops, were initially small squads consisting of a 7-man rifle (manoeuvre) section and a 4-man light machine gun (fire) section, designed to break the stalemate of the trenches. They were arguably the “greatest tactical achievement”²³ of World War I and were officially endorsed by General Ludendorf. *Sturmabteilung* “dropped the old rigid, linear attack formations and developed squad tactics emphasising infiltration, rapid advance, disregard for flanks, and bypassing of enemy strong points by the first wave of assault troops.”²⁴ The storm troops restored surprise and mobility to the Western Front. By March of 1918 these small squads had grown enormously to the point that storm troop divisions were employed on the first day of the German offensive. In the end, however, the Germany Army was defeated, not so much on the battlefield, but strategically.²⁵

THE GERMAN ARMY 1919 – 1945

Following the Peace Conference of Versailles General Hans von Seeckt, the General Staff representative there, was appointed to the Peacetime Army Organisation directed to reorganize the German Army in accordance with the Versailles Treaty provisions.²⁶ In 1919, by order of the Allied powers, he dissolved the General Staff and took charge of its successor, the *Truppenamt*.²⁷ In an attempt to ensure the German phoenix would not rise again, the Versailles Treaty limited the post-war German Army to a strength of 100,000. As Corum points out von Seeckt had earlier broken with the idea, espoused by von Moltke and von Schlieffen, of mass armies and had proposed the

formation of a “small, elite professional army based on voluntary recruiting rather than conscription.”²⁸ However, the “small” army von Seeckt had advocated was “an army of twenty-four divisions with a minimum of 200,000 men,”²⁹ double the size of the one imposed on Germany. Well aware that an army of 100,000, even an expert one, was incapable of defending the country, he set about creating a small, highly professional force that could form the core for a much larger one, if and when required.

Hans von Seeckt, General Staff chief from 1919 to 1920 and army commander from 1920 to 1926,³⁰ focused his efforts on building this small force³¹ of consummate professionalism, imbued with the spirit of *Auftragstaktik*. It would be an army that used good pay and benefits to lure high quality recruits who would then be equipped with the best available weapons and provided superb training.³²

The backbone of an army is its non-commissioned officers – the Prussian and German armies had always realised this fact. The Versailles Treaty did not limit the number of non-commissioned officers in the *Reichswehr* and Von Seeckt used this loophole to increase the NCO percentage far beyond that in other armies. The Prussian-German Army had enjoyed a strong NCO cadre before, now under von Seeckt this cadre grew in size and also in capability. As Martin van Creveld wrote, “Whereas the intelligent, thinking NCO had been an exception in 1914, he became the rule twenty-five years later.”³³ Standards were very high and many of these NCOs were put in positions normally reserved for officers. As NCOs were trained to act as junior officers, so were privates schooled to perform as NCOs and junior officers to think as senior leaders.³⁴ The result was that morale was maintained, the army was prepared for rapid expansion and, perhaps more significantly, lower ranks were taught to think like their seniors. The

army that von Seeckt established grew some of the best tactical leaders of the Second World War, such impresarios as Guderian, Rommel and Manstein.

Blitzkrieg

The opening years of World War II confirmed the superiority of the German Army, both on the eastern and western fronts. Poland and, eight months later, France were crushed by the tactics that have come to be known as *Blitzkrieg*.³⁵ Simply put *Blitzkrieg* aimed at breaking through the enemy's linear defences and thrusting deeply beyond. It opened with air attacks to gain air superiority. On the ground panzer divisions stormed the enemy's weak points, creating breaches through which motorized and light divisions followed. Conventional infantry divisions widened the penetration and the whole process continued, exploiting surprise, speed and shock. Flanks were virtually ignored, although aircraft provided some protection in the form of close air support. Commanders, leading from the front, carried the battle far behind the enemy's lines and the resulting confusion and chaos prevented the defence from finding or destroying the attacking forces.³⁶ As Guderian wrote in 1935:

The armoured divisions will no longer stop when the first objectives have been reached ... utilising their speed and radius of action to the full they will do their utmost to complete the breakthrough into enemy lines of communication. Blow after blow will be launched ceaselessly in order to roll up the enemy front and carry the attack as far as possible into enemy territory. The air force will attack the enemy reserves and prevent their intervention.³⁷

Against the static defences of the French Maginot Line *Blitzkrieg* worked brilliantly even though, as James Corum writes, the Germans did not enjoy numerical superiority. Rather, "Given the approximate parity of both sides in 1940 with regard to

troops, armoured divisions, and equipment, the explanation for the dramatic German victory in 1940 can be found in two factors: superior tactics and superior training.”³⁸ It was German troop quality that defeated the Allies, a quality reinforced and nurtured by the army’s philosophy of *Auftragstaktik*. In the invasion of France and the Benelux countries, *Blitzkrieg* succeeded because well-trained lower formations were granted an independence not enjoyed by Allied units. *Blitzkrieg* exploited speed, surprise and the effects of combined arms (to include tactical aircraft) – and it relished initiative, initiative that flourished in the atmosphere that *Auftragstaktik* created.

***AUFTRAGSTAKTIK* AND THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL OF WAR**

The operational level of war is generally defined as that level where campaigns are fought and, as such, it lies between the strategic and the tactical levels.³⁹ Above, at the strategic level exists political and military grand strategy, while below at the tactical level battles and engagements are fought. The US Army 1982 version of *FM-100-5* defined operational level campaigns as, “sustained operations designed to defeat an enemy force in a specified space and time with simultaneous and sequential battles.”⁴⁰ At the operational level a nation’s strategic-political objectives (or those of an alliance) are translated into military actions, military actions that will, in part or in total, achieve those strategic objectives. The operational level links political aims to tactical battles and engagements. Finally, although operational level campaigns usually involve large forces, and are normally joint, and often combined,⁴¹ the size alone does not determine whether a campaign is at the tactical or operational level.⁴²

Operational art is, first and foremost, the art of translating national/alliance objectives, into achievable military goals. All the tactical brilliance in the world will not win a campaign, or a war, if the operational, or strategic objectives, are unattainable or flawed. Once battle begins operational art includes the skills of mustering and sustaining forces and of correctly acting and reacting during the campaign to achieve final victory. As William McAndrew points out, while campaign planning is “a systematic, analytical process of getting from here to there, along the lines of an engineer’s critical path to build a bridge”, operational art is “more of a way of intuitive thinking, a facility to discern patterns in diversity, a continuing process rather than a finite end.” He further points out that: “Besides Napoleon, examples of operational art have been detected in Alexander’s maneuvers, Genghis Khan’s sweeps, and Marlborough’s marches, as well as in Clausewitz’s mind ... operational art is a way of thinking about war in universal terms.”⁴³

How do *Auftragstaktik* and operational command relate? How does delegation, initiative and trust relate to the qualities required of high command? Indeed, if *Auftragstaktik* is fundamentally so transforming why did the Germans loose the Russian, North Western European and North African campaigns, and ultimately the war? Shimon Naveh believes it was because the *Wehrmacht*’s brilliant tactical leaders, like Guderian and Rommel, lacked operational vision and political maturity.⁴⁴ Grand strategy, and to a great degree, operational direction was firmly in the hands of Hitler and the enormous strategic and operational errors made were, in most instances, his alone. Hitler’s *Wehrmacht*, failed because, early on, its senior officers accepted only the offence as a tactic and, more significantly, they abrogated their duty to develop a rational military strategy: “The surrender of strategic planning and operational conduct to Hitler

gradually became the price the officer corps paid for repressing their aversion to Nazi ideology, whereas rational strategy in the form of operational defensive was interpreted under the growing wave of German chauvinism as pure defeatism.”⁴⁵

Auftragstaktik was the foundation of tactical success in the German Army; however, it was not enough alone to win at the operational levels. Furthermore it could not correct a morally and intellectually bankrupt strategy. It did not have to be so. If Hitler and the majority of the senior *Wehrmacht* officers - officers who Shimon Naveh termed “opportunistic technocrats”⁴⁶ - had not overruled General Ludwig von Beck⁴⁷ then *Auftragstaktik* could have served as the foundation for an army of tactical and operational brilliance. Von Beck was responsible for producing *Truppenfuehrung HD-300*, the German operational command manual, which, according to Shimon Naveh was intended to provide the “universal formula to serve as a cognitive basis for the training and education of the German officer corps and the preparation of the entire armed forces for any type of future conflict.”⁴⁸ Naveh goes on to say that Beck and his school developed:

Moltke’s embryonic command concept, based on the principles of *Auftrag* and *Weisung*, ... into the most advanced operational theory ever created. ... It emphasised initiative out of mutual trust among all echelons of command, and advocated freedom of action to field commanders at every level...Unlike its successor Blitzkrieg, which adhered exclusively to the offensive, the manual reflected a balanced approach to offensive and defensive, seeing both as essential and complimentary forms of operational manoeuvre.⁴⁹

Auftragstaktik then, if carried to its operational conclusion, as Beck intended, would infuse an army with a philosophy and a spirit that encouraged independent action and thought, but independent thought aimed at achieving a common overarching purpose.

It was a philosophy for command at all levels, from NCO to general: “Equipped with these cognitive agents the leader of troops was expected to judge every particular combat event specifically and thus produce the appropriate solution, be it a matter of tactical command, operational conduct, or strategic management.⁵⁰ In other words the subordinate commander, using his initiative, would act independently but in consonance with the commander’s intent and with the operational picture in mind.

CANADA AT THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL

With few exceptions Canadians have never commanded at the operational level. Major General Sir Fred Middleton possibly came the closest as commander of the force that put down the Northwest Rebellion in the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁵¹ Although he was British the campaign was Canadian. In every other war, however, Canada has ‘plugged in’ to alliances and coalitions as a player, never as a leader. Although Canadian soldiers, sailors and airmen have fought bravely and Canadian commanders have often led brilliantly, rarely have generals, admirals or air marshals commanded higher than the tactical level.⁵² The Canadian Forces have not, therefore, developed a culture of high command or of operational level thought.⁵³

Arguably early Canadian defence policy had a more strategic and operational view than it has today, since in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Canadian defence was principally focused on defending the homeland from American invasion. However, when that threat disappeared⁵⁴ military strategists stopped planning to defend Canada and concentrated solely on developing plans to raise an expeditionary force that would fight as part of the British Army. The Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and the

Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) followed the same pattern and, thus, when war broke out in 1939, the three services, lacking any coherent joint plan, went their separate ways and joined with their much larger British counterparts.⁵⁵ In addition, Canadian doctrine was British doctrine and it was the antithesis of German *Auftragstaktik*:

In theory Canadian doctrine encouraged initiative and flexibility; however, ... actual practice was the opposite. Instead of a common, unbroken thread connecting all levels of command, several staff layers intervened between planners and implementers. Rather than being delegated, responsibility was centralized, and the execution of operations was made highly dependent on rigid orders and detailed plans delivered from above. Bureaucratic order and managerial competence prevailed over creative imagination. Instead of synchronizing tactics with operational insight, doctrine – the way of war – got in the way.⁵⁶

The situation at the beginning of the twenty-first century bears more than a superficial resemblance to the period between the two world wars.⁵⁷ Notwithstanding that the 1994 Canadian Defence White Paper sets the defence of Canada as the CF's priority mission, history, character and the current geo-strategic and fiscal realities have resulted in forces designed almost solely to operate in a coalition or alliance. From that perspective, the difference today is that whereas in the 1920s and 1930s Canadian doctrine was British doctrine - today it is largely of US origin. That is because the two alliances that have underpinned Canadian defence policy since the Second World War are NATO and NORAD, both American dominated. In addition, the two 'wars' that Canada engaged in during the last decade were American led coalitions. Today, Canadian generals and admirals, as did their predecessors, raise forces and, if called, lead at the tactical level while Canadian staff officers are trained to 'plug in' at alliance or coalition operational level headquarters. What McAndrew says about Canadian planning in the inter-war years resonates today: "Canadian independent planning ... was comparably

skewed between national defense needs and military predilections for participating in an expeditionary force overseas. In that milieu, Canadian military commanders had little practical need to think about operational art, even if they had been so inclined.”⁵⁸

DEVELOPING A CANADIAN OPERATIONAL LEVEL PERSPECTIVE

Since 1990 Canada has taken a somewhat more independent path that, not surprisingly, has shown up serious deficiencies in operational level thought. In a number of UN missions during the early nineties Canadian troops deployed independent of American or alliance support, “in highly unstable, dangerous situations where many of the functions previously left to others could no longer be relinquished by Canadian national authorities.”⁵⁹ Moreover, the recent terrorist attacks of September 11th will undoubtedly force Canadians to confront primal security and defence issues. For perhaps the first in over 100 years Canada may face a very real physical threat, one that will require a strong and coherent defence to counter. A more independent, and truly operational perspective on defence is suddenly required, an operational perspective long absent even during World War II when Canada raised an army, navy and air force totalling some one million personnel. Then and now that absence “of coherent national command and control can be viewed as either absurd or scandalous.”⁶⁰

Canadian senior military staffs have, for too long, constrained themselves to alliance and coalition thinking. For the better part of the past century they have failed to articulate an operational level plan to protect Canada, answering instead that there will never be sufficient manpower, material and money to properly defend the nation. That

attitude has and, if it continues, will ensure that “operational control of Canadians ... will also lie elsewhere.”⁶¹

Canadian defence policy has lacked operational vision. Although for the past thirty years the CF has been a unified force⁶² it has never really developed into a joint one. Rather, the army, navy and air force, after unification, kept on doing what they had always done – operate largely independently of each other, and when required append themselves to their respective British or US counterparts.⁶³ The CF did not take advantage of the opportunity to create a force commanded, trained and equipped to jointly defend Canada, a small elite force that was nimble, well equipped and mobile. Replacing “army” with “armed forces,” what von Seeckt wrote some seventy years ago is perhaps even more applicable today to the CF: “The whole future of warfare appears to me to lie in the employment of mobile armies, relatively small but of high quality ... the smaller the army, the easier it will be to equip it with modern weapons.”⁶⁴ Now thirty years after unification, in the aftermath of September 11th, there is an opportunity to shift from tactical to operational level thinking and to build a CF focused on the defence of Canada, truly joint, of extremely high quality and imbued with the spirit of *Auftragstaktik*.

CHANGING THE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE OF THE CF

Unless the CF abandons any pretext of national sovereignty and distinct military autonomy, and are content to be absorbed as a few brigades, squadrons, and vessels into grand coalitions. A serious search for first principles is overdue. Otherwise there can be little apparent justification for an expensive military establishment.”⁶⁵

In the search for what McAndrew calls “first principles,” it might be wise to re-examine what German General Hans von Seeckt and the *Reichswehr* did in the decade immediately following the First World War. The *Reichswehr* faced, in the Versailles restrictions, apparently insurmountable obstacles designed to emasculate it and prevent it ever attaining its former strength. However, von Seeckt used the opportunity to forge an army of élan and professionalism that would grow into the army that ten years later almost subjugated Europe. He clearly demonstrated that severe resources shortages need not stifle original thought or innovative planning.

The Canadian Forces of 2001 resemble in some ways General von Seeckt’s *Reichswehr* of the 1920s: it is too small to truly defend the nation, but it is professional and its people, both junior officers and non-commissioned personnel are uniformly of a high quality. While Canada does not face an enemy in the same way that Germany worried about Poland or France, Canada does face serious threats; they are just less clear – they are the threats of terrorism, world instability and affronts to national sovereignty.

Lieutenant Colonel Roman J. Jarymowycz argues that we should not slavishly adopt foreign doctrine, pointing out in his article that the victors of World War II had “sycophantically adopted both *Auftragstaktik* and manoeuvre warfare in the rash conclusion that, despite total victory in two world wars, the Germans knew more about fighting than we did.”⁶⁶ Although it is true that Germany certainly lost the war, it was strategic failure combined with overwhelming odds rather than failure of *Auftragstaktik* that caused her defeat. At the tactical and the operational levels the German Armies, at least prior to 1942, achieved success after success. The victories in Poland, France, Scandinavia, and initially in the USSR, happened because the German Army operated at

a pace that confounded and continuously overwhelmed their enemies, enemies that often had the theoretical strength to defeat German attack.

The Germans saw the value of developing a spirit of independence within its ranks, but an independence infused with a common will and ethos - personnel must understand and share common goals. In war those goals are tangible but in peacetime they will probably be more ephemeral. In war the objectives may be bridges, a hill, domination of an area or theatre or complete annihilation of the enemy. In peace the goals may be excellence in training or in military thought and education. Whatever the objectives, they have to be understood and embraced by the entire force. Only then is *Auftragstaktik* possible.

Auftragstaktik also indirectly created German Army officers and men with a very strong sense of self-reliance and self esteem. Indeed self-esteem is one of the four elements of *Auftragstaktik* and it grows in subordinates when they are well trained and are allowed to exercise initiative without fear of retribution for honest mistakes.⁶⁷ Arguably, the German *Wehrmacht* had far too much esteem, but equally so one could argue that Canada and the Canadian Forces lack that vital characteristic. *Auftragstaktik* cannot help but foster a strong confidence in one's abilities: "On an individual level, such a command and control approach induces initiative and innovative leadership. On a higher level, directive control causes commanders and their staffs to ask fundamental questions associated with the principles of war."⁶⁸ Within a military imbued with the philosophy of *Auftragstaktik* an officer's self esteem will grow, with rank, to esteem in his unit and, finally, as a general or flag officer, to an irrefutable confidence in the capabilities of the Service as a whole. That confidence has, for the most part, been

lacking at the Canadian senior level and, perhaps is part of the reason that Canada has never produced a truly independent defence policy, or an operational level commander.

LEADERSHIP AND TRUST

The victories that the German Army enjoyed in the opening years of the Second World War resulted from the marrying of initiative, trust and superb training. Officers at the senior level trusted their subordinates to accomplish the objectives without continuous supervision while subordinate officers and NCOs trusted their senior officers to support them even when they erred. Inaction was to be avoided, most everything else was acceptable. “Officership 2020” extols a vision of CF officers who are “dedicated to their subordinates and inspire loyalty and mutual trust.”⁶⁹ The key word here is “trust” because trust is what enables initiative at all levels. Subordinates will be unlikely to take the initiative unless they are ‘reared’ in an environment of trust, and in the same vein superiors will not encourage initiative if they do not trust their subordinates to ‘do the right thing’. Trust helped make the Prussian-German Army, later the *Reichswehr* and then the *Wehrmacht*, possibly the finest armies that the world had ever seen.

Mutual trust allows that independence of action, which is the essence of *Auftragstaktik*; the commander can issue mission guidance (intent) that eschews burdensome detail confident in the knowledge that subordinate commanders will react to events, use their initiative, and act independently, within the boundaries of the mission intent, to attain those objectives. General von Seeckt, in the order he wrote, as the 11th Army’s chief of staff, for the Gorlice offensive of May, 1915 perhaps best captured that sense of trust, which is at the heart of *Auftragstaktik*:

The attack ... must be pushed forward at a rapid pace ... Thus the Army cannot assign the attacking corps and divisions definite objectives for each day ... Any portion of the attacking troops which is successful in pushing on will expose itself to the danger of envelopment.... Consideration of this possibility makes it necessary for the Army to fix certain lines, which should be reached by the force as a whole, and if possible simultaneously. Any progress beyond these lines will be thankfully welcomed by the Army and made use of.⁷⁰

INSTILLING *AUFTRAGSTAKTIK*

“The best system of command ... is always to have a genius in charge, first in general then at the decisive point.”⁷¹ How does one create operational level brilliance, or even competence? The plethora of papers and studies that address that question speak of cognitive and intellectual powers, of vision, of courage, physical stamina, will, presence and the intangible ‘generalship.’⁷² Those characteristics are learned or they are inherited, or a combination of both. Although it is clear that no one really knows how to identify the potentially successful operational level commander there are ways to help ensure that a military fosters their growth. However, a force that truly believes in itself, where trust binds it together and where all are infused with a common ethos working towards a common end will almost surely breed competent and, occasionally, brilliant operational commanders. That certainly was the experience of successive German armies. Equally important is the need to grow a force that can follow and achieve the goals of that ‘brilliant’ operational commander. All the intellectual brilliance in the world will not lead a commander to victory if the force he commands is poorly trained and poorly motivated. From private to general the ‘army’ must be imbued with élan, with courage

and with fortitude. It must trust itself, and that spirit imbued from ‘military birth’ must be continuously reinforced throughout a career. Education and training are key.

If the CF is to adopt *Auftragstaktik* then senior leaders will have to wholeheartedly embrace the philosophy and, through example, force its introduction. That may be problematic. The current generation of leaders will likely have some difficulty relinquishing the ‘controls’ but they will have to show by example that they do truly trust subordinates to act independently. That will require a major shift from the managerial, top-down control often exercised by Canadian senior officers. Exacerbating the difficulty of changing to an organization that encourages independent action and initiative are command and control systems that, more and more, make it possible to micro-manage personnel. The temptation to reach down to the tactical level by operational commanders will have to be strongly resisted.

Creating a CF imbued with an innovative spirit, with *Auftragstaktik* will likely take at least a generation – it took the Prussian-German army half a century. Although the words initiative and trust are used extensively in DND documents, experience shows that they are not universally applied. Education and training in ethics, leadership and military skills for officers and NCOs will have to be of the highest calibre. Independent action, to be effective, allowed and encouraged, has to be underpinned by knowledge, skill and a common ethical base. It is independence, but independence bounded by obedience and proficiency.

CONCLUSION

Auftragstaktik is a philosophy of command and control wherein subordinate commanders, down to the lowest possible level, act independently to achieve the commander's intent. *Auftragstaktik* can create a force of tremendous flexibility and agility. Subordinate commanders can react to, or initiate actions, based on the actual tactical situation they face rather than waiting for higher direction, as long as they stay within the bounds of mission intent. The enemy can thus be out manoeuvred. The Prussian-German Army and later the *Wehrmacht* developed and applied this philosophy with great success, most notably in the tactics known as *Blitzkrieg*. Where the Germans failed, however, was at the strategic level, both in the First and the Second World Wars. In World War II Hitler's failure, and the German General Staff's failure to fully appreciate the operational implications of Hitler's strategy, resulted in Germany's utter defeat. Notwithstanding Germany's strategic defeats in both world wars, the Prussian-German army and the *Wehrmacht*, both imbued with the spirit of *Auftragstaktik*, often succeeded brilliantly on the battlefield.

Canadians have rarely, if ever, commanded at the operational level and consequently the CF does not have a culture of operational leadership. Rather the CF, and before it, the RCN, RCAF and the Canadian Army, have raised forces and then contributed those forces to coalitions or alliances. Canadian generals have, consequently, often lacked operational vision, which has led to a paucity of original thought focused on developing an independent defence policy. Opportunities have been missed, the most notable perhaps being the chance to build a truly joint force after unification.

Furthermore, CF senior officers have tended to dismiss the concept of independent defence as an impossible goal because of a lack of resources. That type of thought must end because it is an abrogation of the military's fundamental obligation, which first and foremost, is the defence of the nation. A lack of fiscal resources should not stifle innovative thinking and planning. Certainly General von Seeckt, the architect of the post World War I German army, was not daunted in the 1920s by the imposition of the Versailles Treaty provisions. His actions at that time could serve as a guide to the CF today – he concentrated on educating, training and developing the officers and men of the *Reichswehr* to understand and trust each other, to think for themselves so that in battle they would act independently, but coherently; he instilled the spirit of *Auftragstaktik*. He created a highly motivated, highly educated and well-trained small army, which grew into one of innovation and brilliance that would unleash *Blitzkrieg* against Poland, France, Great Britain and Russia with stunning success. It was an army that almost brought Europe to its knees.

The Canadian Forces have gone through a decade of introspection and have determined that officer training and education must change. To that end “Officership 2020” sets out broad direction. However, merely educating officers at military and civilian institutions will not be enough. Rather a change is required in the way we grow and nurture the entire force. Inculcating the philosophy of *Auftragstaktik* could produce an armed force that is flexible, agile and potent – a force akin to the German army built by von Seeckt in the 1920s. However, because *Auftragstaktik* is built on trust, trust up and down the command chain, it cannot be instituted by decree. The spirit of *Auftragstaktik* must infuse the entire force, and that can only be realised over time and

through a significant change in organizational culture. That organizational change is long over due and must be instituted from the top, by senior officers who refuse to micro-manage, who reward initiative and who allow honest mistakes. To change the culture of the CF will likely take a generation but it will be worth it. A CF imbued with the spirit of *Auftragstaktik* will be one of tactical virtuosity, filled with a justified self-esteem that will assuredly produce high quality commanders with an operational view of Canada's defence.

ENDNOTES

¹ Allan English PhD and BGen (retired) G.E. Sharpe, “Principles for Change in the Post-Cold War Command and Control of the Canadian Forces,” unpublished paper, copy available from author, 39.

² The Merriam-Webster OnLine dictionary defines culture as the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes a company or corporation [or a military force].

³ As cited by English and Sharpe, “Principles for Change in the Post-Cold War Command and Control of the Canadian Forces,” 19.

⁴ James S. Corum, The Roots of Blitzkrieg (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 25.

⁵ The term is usually translated as “mission-type orders” or “mission – command.”

⁶ Karl Hoffman, “Auftragstaktik: Mission – Based Leadership”, Engineer, , Vol 23, Issue 4 (December, 1994): [journal online], accessed 21 September 2001. Available from EBSCOhost, <http://ehostvgw19...>

⁷ David M. Keithly and Stephen P. Ferris, “*Auftragstaktik*, or Directive Control, in Joint and Combined Operations,” Parameters (Autumn 1999): 118-33 [journal online], accessed 21 September 2001. Available at <http://carlisle-www.army.mil/usawc/Parameters/99autumn/keithly.htm>.

⁸ The English translation of *Befehlstaktik* is “orders tactics”.

⁹ Inside the OODA (observe, orient, decide and act) loop – a phrase and concept coined by the late LtCol John Boyd, USAF.

¹⁰ Hoffman, “*Auftragstaktik*: Mission-Based leadership.”

¹¹ Corum, The Roots of Blitzkrieg, 11.

¹² Gunther E. Rothenberg, “Moltke, Schlieffen, and the Doctrine of Strategic Envelopment,” Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age, edited by Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986), 296.

¹³ LCol Chuck Oliviero, “Auftragstaktik and Disorder in Battle”, The Army Doctrine and Training Manual, Vol 4, No 2, Summer 2001.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ As cited by Hoffman, “*Auftragstaktik*: Mission-Based leadership.”

¹⁸ Corum, The Roots of Blitzkrieg, 10-11.

¹⁹ Ibid., 11

²⁰ Ibid., 12-13.

²¹ Ibid., 2. The plan by Count von Schlieffen, the chief of the German General Staff until 1906, came, as Corum points out, “...within a hairbreadth of actually deciding the war for Germany within two months.”

²² Charles Messenger, The Art of Blitzkrieg (Shepperton: Ian Allen Ltd., 1991); 23.

²³ Corum, The Roots of Blitzkrieg, 8.

²⁴ Ibid., 9

²⁵ Ibid., 1. Corum writes, “By any normal application of the principles of economics, international politics, and military history, the German Empire never stood a chance of winning World War I. . . . Despite the odds, Germany nearly won on the battlefield. As late as June 1918 the German Army was on the offensive, pushing back the Allied armies in France.”

²⁶ Ibid., 29.

²⁷ Walter Goerlitz translated by Brian Battershaw, History of the German General Staff, (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1953), 218. Goerlitz writes there that the *Truppenamt* (translated as “Troop Office”) “was to carry on what had hitherto been the work of the General Staff.”

²⁸ Corum, The Roots of Blitzkrieg, 29

²⁹ Ibid., 29

³⁰ Ibid., xii

³¹ Ibid., 25.

³² Ibid., 29.

³³ Van Creveld as cited by Corum, The Roots of Blitzkrieg, 48.

³⁴ Charles Messenger, The Art of Blitzkrieg, 58. This was the birth of the *Fuehrerarmee*, or ‘an army of leaders.’

³⁵ Shimon Navir, in his book, In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1997), 106-107, writes, “Regarding the linguistic derivation of the term, Kenneth Macksey, Guderian’s biographer, attributes its invention to Hitler in 1936. L.H. Addington . . . claims that the term was coined by the *London Times* in its 25th September 1939 issue, while B.H. Liddell Hart credited himself with both the creation of the idea as well as the term, and credited the

Germans merely with the translation of the term ‘lightning war’ into German. Historians fare no better. The majority ascribe the *Blitzkrieg* idea to the British school, consisting of B.H. Liddell Hart and J.F.C. Fuller; others claim that Guderian was its originator; and a few point in other directions such as Schlieffen or even Ludwig Beck who was Guderian’s most bitter antagonist.”

³⁶ Charles Messenger, The Art of Blitzkrieg; 76-84.

³⁷ General Guderian as cited by Charles Messenger, The Art of Blitzkrieg 81.

³⁸ Corum, The Roots of Blitzkrieg, P. 203. Corum further states “At the start of the German offensive on May, 1940, the opposing sides were almost equal in the number and quality of their weaponry. The Germans had 136 divisions opposing 94 French divisions, 10 British divisions, 22 Belgian divisions, and 10 Dutch divisions – a total of 136 Allied divisions – on the northeastern front.” In addition, he points out that the armies enjoyed parity in armoured and mechanized divisions; in fact, the Allies had a greater number of tanks. The only clear German advantage was in the terms of flak weaponry – the Germans had 2600 excellent 88-mm guns and 6700 light flak guns as compared to the French 1500 guns of all types.

³⁹ Canada, Department of National Defence. B-GG-005-004/AF-000 *Canadian Forces Operations* (Ottawa: DND Canada, 1995), 1-5.

⁴⁰ 1982 FM-100-5 as cited by Bruce W. Menning in his article *Operational Art and its Origins*, extracted from Military Review, Vol 77, No 5 (September-October 1997).

⁴¹ Joint involves forces from at least two services while ‘combined’ joins the armed forces of two or more nations.

⁴² This is more of a Canadian interpretation than one ascribed to by the US where the size and complexity of forces does play in the definition of an operational level campaign.

⁴³ William McAndrew, “Operational Art and the Canadian Army’s Way of War,” The Operational Art: Development in the Theories of War edited by B.J.C. McKercher and Michael A. Hennessey (Wesport: Praeger Publishers, 1996), 88.

⁴⁴ Shimon Navir, “In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory,” 116.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 115.

⁴⁶ Exemplified by generals such as Rommel and Guderian.

⁴⁷ The Chief of the German General Staff until 1938.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 116.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 116-117.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 116.

⁵¹ William McAndrew, “Operational Art and the Canadian Army’s Way of War,” 86.

⁵² Some argue that Rear Admiral L. Murray, Canadian Commander of the Northwest Atlantic Approaches during WW II, commanded at the operational level.

⁵³ William McAndrew, “Operational Art and the Canadian Army’s Way of War,” 89.

⁵⁴ “By 1930 the United States had long since been abandoned as a potential enemy.” Steve Harris as cited by McAndrew, “Operational Art and the Canadian Army’s Way of War,” 89.

⁵⁵ Ibid.,89.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 96-97.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 89.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 89.

⁵⁹ Canada, Department of National Defence, “The Debrief the Leaders Project (Officers),” Ottawa: DND Canada, 2001, 9.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 89.

⁶¹ Ibid., 98.

⁶² The Canadian Forces was born February 1968. At the same time the RCN, RCAF and the Canadian Army ceased to exist.

⁶³ English and Sharpe, “Principles for Change in the Post-Cold War Command and Control of the Canadian Forces,” 63-64.

⁶⁴ General von Seeckt, as cited by Corum in The Roots of Blitzkrieg, 30.

⁶⁵ William McAndrew, “Operational Art and the Canadian Army’s Way of War,” 98.

⁶⁶ Lieutenant Colonel Roman Jarynowycz, “Seduction by Foreign Dogma: Coming to Terms With Who We Are,” Doctrine and Canada’s Army, Vol 2 No 3 (August 1999) 48.

⁶⁷ Captain Ronald J. Bashita, “*Auftragstaktik*: It’s More Than Just a Word,” Armor, November-December 1994, 19. The other three elements he lists are: obedience (adherence to the intent of the higher commander), proficiency (technical and tactical competence), and independence of action (the “heart” of *Auftragstaktik*).

⁶⁸ David M. Keithly and Stephen P. Ferris, “*Auftragstaktik*, or Directive Control, in Joint and Combined Operations.” Keithly and Ferris use “directive control” synonymously for *Auftragstaktik*.

⁶⁹ Canada, Department of National Defence, “Officership 2020” (Ottawa: DND, 2001).

⁷⁰ As cited by Corum in The Roots of Blitzkrieg, 6-7.

⁷¹ Martin van Creveld, as cited by Colonel M. Hache in his paper, “The Nature of the Operational Level Environment and the requirement to Focus on Operational Leadership Development,” DND, Canadian Forces College, AMSC 1 Paper, November 1998.

⁷² UK Army Doctrine Publication, Vol 2, HQDT/18/34/51, Army Code No 71564, “The Role of the Commander,” (London MOD, 1995). The UK Army Doctrine Publication introduces the term Generalship, under Leadership, as the “highest form of leadership.”