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JCSP 40

Exercise Solo Flight

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OPERATION DESERT STORM: A MANOEUVRE WARFARE VICTORY?

There is little denying that the United States (US) experienced overwhelming success during the 1990 Gulf War against Iraq. US forces, under the personification of General Norman Schwarzkopf, have been described to have followed some of the major tenets of manoeuvre warfare during Operation Desert Storm, delivering superb examples of deception, pre-emption, dislocation and disruption.¹ Largely a concept of the German Army in the 20th century, manoeuvre warfare refers to an entire style of warfare, characterized not only by moving in relation to the enemy to gain positional advantage, but also, and even more, to moving faster than the enemy, to defeating him through superior tempo.² The US Marine Corps describe manoeuvre warfare as being a warfighting philosophy that seeks to shatter the enemy's cohesion through a variety of rapid, focused and unexpected actions, which create a turbulent and rapidly deteriorating situation with which the enemy cannot cope.³ This apparent *Blitzkrieg* or "lightning strikes" approach adopted by US Forces during Operation Desert Storm generated a renewed interest in manoeuvre warfare, and with the quick and overwhelming success of the operation, it is not surprising that many have attributed the adoption of manoeuvre warfare to the US military's victory in Iraq.⁴ However, there were other several factors that played significant roles in contributing towards operational success during Operation Desert Storm. Most significantly, a massive strategic air campaign had been underway against Iraqi forces weeks prior to the ground offensive phase of the operation. With the devastating impact of the air campaign on the Iraqi military, coupled with the prompt

¹ Hayden, "Warfighting: Maneuver Warfare in the U.S. Marine Corps", pg 29.

² Lind, *The Theory and Practice of Manoeuvre Warfare*, pg 4.

³ Owen, *The Manoeuvre Warfare Fraud*, Small Wars Journal.

⁴ MCDP 1-0, *Marine Corps Operations*, 1-6.

achievement of US air supremacy, it can be argued that the Iraqi military's combat effectiveness had been greatly degraded well before any attempt at manoeuvre warfare by US ground forces. This paper will first analyze the effects of the air campaign on the Iraqi military prior to the ground assault by US forces. It will then review some of the key tenets and prescriptions of manoeuvre warfare and their application (or lack thereof) by US forces during Operation Desert Storm. This paper will demonstrate that while certain manoeuvre warfare principles may have been employed during the ground assault phase of Operation Desert Storm, the overwhelming successes experienced by US ground forces in Iraq and Kuwait were not directly attributable to manoeuvre warfare tactics per se but primarily as a result a highly successful and the resultant impact it had on Iraqi combat effectiveness.

As a multi-phased campaign, Operation Desert Storm began in August 1990 with a strategic air campaign phase. The main intents behind this initial phase were to incapacitate Iraqi leadership, destroy its key military capabilities and centers of gravity. One of these centers of gravity was viewed to be the ability of Saddam Hussein to lead and control his nation. As such, air attacks on telecommunication sites and control centers were implemented to isolate him from the Iraqi people and his armed forces.⁵ Additionally, the role of this phase prevented reinforcement of Iraqi forces in Kuwait and elsewhere within the Iraqi theatre, which was an essential factor for success in the later phases of the campaign. By most accounts, the contribution of Phase I towards the success of Operation Desert Storm was immense. Air supremacy was rapidly gained through air attacks on the Iraqi strategic air defence system, airfields, aircrafts, leadership

⁵ Keaney and Cohen, Gulf War Air Power Survey Summary Report, p 36.

and command and control (C2) and communication facilities.⁶ In particular, the air campaign, through high sortie rates (more than 1000 per day), was able to neutralize Iraqi radar guided Surface to Air Missiles (SAM) not only by destroying them but by intimidating their operators from turning on their radars, rendering them essentially ineffective.⁷ Nuclear, biological and chemical weapons facilities and SCUD missiles and launchers were additional targets which eliminated long-term Iraqi offensive capabilities. The remainder of the targets included the Republican Guard forces, military storage and production sites, ports, railroads, bridges, electricity production and oil refining and distribution facilities, as well as hardened shelters, where the Iraqi forces had taken cover.⁸ Air supremacy during Operation Desert Storm, over both Iraq and Kuwait (Phase II) theatres allowed for sustained prosecution of attacks against other target sets during the initial and subsequent phases of the operation, preventing Iraqi attacks against US forces and Iraqi reconnaissance flights from uncovering the US forces' intents and movements. The latter enabled the maintenance of the principle of surprise for US troops, and ultimately led to successes during the ground assault phase. Therefore, the strategic air campaign played a critical role in enabling "lightning victories" at a small cost during the later phases of Operation Desert Storm, victories which were not necessarily a result of ground manoeuvre warfare tactics in itself. With a disrupted C2 network, the destruction of critical infrastructure and the attainment of air supremacy in both Iraq and Kuwait, the highly favourable conditions for the ground assault against Iraqi forces had already been established, thereby facilitating US success.

⁶ Ibid, p 40.

⁷ Lambeth, "The Role of Air Power Going Into the 21st Century." pg 120.

⁸ Keaney and Cohen, Gulf War Air Power Survey Summary Report, pg 40.

As described above, the Desert Storm air campaign struck hard against Iraqi C2 centers, communications networks and many of its internal control mechanisms. The Iraqi telephone system, a major source of communication in that country, was taken out in the first minutes of the war. Likewise, the national television system was an early casualty, which meant that the regime had lost one of the most effective modern public communications media. Reports following the war indicate that within about three weeks, the regime was unable to communicate effectively with most parts of the country, including its deployed Army in Kuwait.⁹ With such a widespread paralysis of internal C2 and communication mechanisms, it is foreseeable that the air campaign rendered the Iraqi Army essentially helpless well before the ground assault began, beyond simply setting favourable conditions for a decisive victory. One could argue that the air campaign was in itself a demonstration of manoeuvre warfare writ large, whereby the resultant shock and paralysis rendered the enemy ineffective. However, any manoeuvre warfare tactics employed by ground forces during the final phase of the operation likely played a coincidental role in delivering the victory that was achieved as a result of the overwhelming strategic and operational successes of the air campaign phase.

The role of air power further imposed a crushing impact on the overall effectiveness of Iraqi ground forces during Phase III (battlefield preparation) of Operation Desert Storm. This phase aimed to destroy Iraqi armour, artillery and other frontline Iraqi Army divisions. Objectives included dug-in equipment, command posts, supply and ammunition depots and troop concentrations¹⁰. Specifically, the battlefield preparation phase envisioned the attrition of fifty percent of Iraqi tanks, armoured

⁹ Col Warden, *The Future of Air Power in the Aftermath of the Gulf War*, pg 70.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p 51.

personnel carriers and artillery pieces. With the Iraqi Air Force rendered ineffective from the effects of the previous phase, the loss of C2 networks and the Iraqi Army now paralyzed by the destruction of its key equipment, entire ground units were also rendered ineffective. Essentially, the role of air power in disrupting Iraqi Army's lines of communication and service support networks resulted in the almost complete inability for Iraqi ground movements. Operation Desert Storm revealed that the shock and effectiveness of air power precipitated a collapse of the opponent even before the ground campaign began.¹¹ It can thus be argued that air power played a far more significant role in contributing towards the rapid and overwhelming victory experienced by US ground forces than any specific manoeuvre warfare tactic that were employed during the final ground assault phase. The air strikes had disrupted the enemy and denied his freedom of strategy and movement, thereby preventing the Iraqis from conducting counterattacks during the ground assault. The air assaults against Iraqi armour, artillery, communication and service support networks had a severe and direct impact on Iraqi Army's combat capabilities prior to the final ground assault phase of the operation. With the enemy's freedom of strategy and movement having been almost completely denied even prior to the US forces embarking on their ground assault, it is quite conceivable that a rapid victory could be easily realized during the final phase of the operation. Again, Operation Desert Storm's decisive victory can be linked to the successes of the air strikes against key Iraqi targets as opposed to any specific manoeuvre warfare tactic employed during the final ground assault phase of the operation. In fact, the lack of a prolonged ground offensive (only lasting 100 hours) and a significantly low casualty rate for US ground

¹¹ US National Security International Affairs Division, Operation Desert Storm: Evaluation of the Air Campaign, pg 198.

forces can clearly be seen as a testament to the role that the air campaign played during Operation Desert Storm.

Nonetheless, there are aspects of the ground assault phase that do demonstrate the theory and practice of manoeuvre warfare. The coalition ground attack plan for Desert Storm involved the US Marines and the Saudis to commence their attack 200km east of VII Corps, while light forces of XVIII Corps, the 82nd Airborne Division and the 101st Airborne (Air Assault) Division, and the French would attack 100km to the west (Figure 1). Lieutenant-General Fred Franks' VII Corps plan was for the 1st Infantry Division to penetrate one of the Iraqi divisions in a breach mission, while an enveloping force, consisting of 2nd Armoured Cavalry Regiment, the 1st Armoured Division, and the 3rd Armoured Division, would simultaneously sweep around the Iraqi flank and attack towards the Republican Guard.¹² The renowned "left hook", the swift, enveloping tank attacks that were executed by VII Corps which caused massive dislocation within the Iraqi Army, and the implementation of deception, i.e., when General Schwarzkopf instructed XVIII Airborne Corps and VII Corps to maintain their forces in assembly areas near Kuwait to keep Iraqi forces focused on those avenues of approach, were certainly manoeuvre warfare tactics worthy of recognition.¹³ Yet, US Marine Corps doctrine continues to reinforce the notion that there is more to manoeuvre warfare than to be able to execute a carefully planned, centrally directed and methodical manoeuvre. Specifically, synchronization has been described as being pivotal to manoeuvre warfare.¹⁴ The US Marine Corps have described the absence of a total understanding manoeuvre

¹² Clancy and Franks, *Into the Storm*, pg 3.

¹³ Builder et al. *Technology's Child: Schwarzkopf and Operation DESERT STORM*, pg 60

¹⁴ *Warfighting: Maneuver Warfare in the U.S. Marine Corps*, pg 30.

warfare being demonstrated when VII Corps defended its inability to close the Basrah road due to their having to slow down to synchronize their forces.

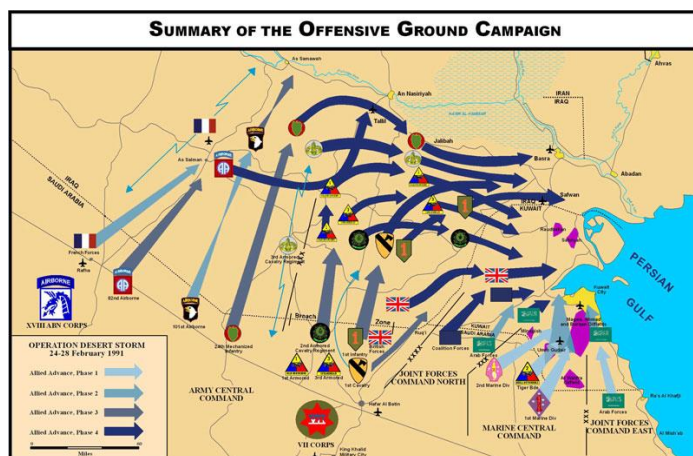


Figure 1

As the timings of the deep attacks conducted by VII Corps proved difficult, if not impossible to synchronize with other forces under such favourable conditions, the outcome could have been much more disastrous for US Forces had they faced a more determined resistance under less favourable conditions. In the end, the lack of proper synchronization resulted in a significant deviation from the plan of destroying the Republican Guard before it retreated north. As such, Operation Desert Storm cannot be completely viewed as a successful instance of the application of AirLand doctrine, and in essence manoeuvre warfare.¹⁵ Regardless of the above synchronization problems, debriefings about the disposition, strength and morale of Iraqi forces following the capture of prisoners and deserters revealed that the Iraqi infantry divisions were brittle and would easily crack at the first hard sustained ground attack. It became evidently clear that they had been nearly decimated by US air, Apache and artillery attacks, and by

¹⁵ Bin et al., Desert Storm: A Forgotten War, Pg 250.

the desertion of some of their own leadership.¹⁶ The conclusion reached by Lieutenant-General Franks and his commanders was that they were only between 50-70 percent strength and that they did not have much fight left in them, especially when pitted against an overwhelming force with superior training, technology, equipment and morale.¹⁷

Next, manoeuvre warfare's central concept of *Auftragstaktik*, or mission tactics, will be examined and its particular application during Operation Desert Storm. Simply put, *Auftragstaktik* involves telling a subordinate what result he needs to obtain, usually defined in terms of an effect on the enemy, then leaving him to determine how best to get it.¹⁸ Since the precise direction of an attack in manoeuvre warfare follows a continuous reconnaissance pull, the decisions of subordinate commanders typically flow upwards, not downwards and those above act to support what has been decided and done by those below.¹⁹ The radical decentralization of authority is therefore an integral component of manoeuvre warfare since speed is essential in achieving successful manoeuvre warfare outcomes. During Operation Desert Storm, General Schwarzkopf had given clear direction to his commanders on the operation end state, which involved the complete destruction of the Republican Guard. Leaving no ambiguity about the Army's mission, he directed that the Republican Guard were not to be routed or be made "combat ineffective", but were to be completely destroyed.²⁰ VII Corps was given the mission of destroying the Republican Guard, but that mission and corresponding operational end state was never achieved. Although Central Command (CENTCOM) had long subscribed to the principles of *Auftragstaktik* at the operational and tactical levels,

¹⁶ Clancy and Franks, *Into the Storm*, pg 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ Lind, *The Theory and Practice of Manoeuvre Warfare*, pg 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, pg 10.

²⁰ *Ibid*, pg 26.

changes to the situation on the ground in Kuwait, specifically the large scale withdrawal of Iraqi forces, prompted interventions at the strategic and political level to initiate a cease-fire order since the strategic aim was met. This paper by no means questions the validity of that strategic decision; in fact, it is admirable that the operational commander did not allow tactical victories to influence his responsibility to the strategic aim. But the strategic intervention on VII Corps in accomplishing their mission does question the application of manoeuvre warfare as a tactic during Operational Desert Storm. Although Lieutenant-General Franks had intended to attack the Republican Guard using his three divisions employed in a synchronized and coordinated manoeuvre warfare approach - seeking to shatter and shock the Iraqis into submission, he never did close in on the Republican Guard to accomplish his mission.²¹ As a result of the heavy influence at the strategic and political level on VII Corps combat actions, *Auftragstaktik* was not practiced in true manoeuvre warfare fashion during Operation Desert Storm, particularly when pertaining to achieving the operational end state of destroying the Republican Guard. Furthermore, manoeuvre warfare strongly urges subordinate initiatives to seize fleeting battlefield opportunities and prompts commanders to win wars at the operational level, free from the intrusion of politics from above or friction from below.²² This was not the case in Operation Desert Storm where the operational end state was subordinated to strategic and political goals. Although the operational commander in this case clearly proved his sound understanding of his role to support the strategic aim, the inability for operational and tactical commanders to truly possess the latitude of freedom to seize

²¹ Matthews, *Defining the Operational End State: Operation Desert Storm*, pg 25.

²² Bolger, *Manoeuvre Warfare Reconsidered*, pg 22.

initiates and conduct exploitation within the battlefield and without intrusion at the political level, demonstrate a deviation from classic manoeuvre warfare prescriptions.

There is one other observation related to the destruction of the Republican Guard that demonstrates a deviation from true manoeuvre warfare. As previously alluded, from the early days of planning for Operational Desert Storm, General Schwarzkopf had stressed the importance of demolishing the Republican Guard. The Republican Guard was Saddam Hussein's elite force and they were described as extraordinary fighters who were deemed well paid, better trained, better fed, better trained and more loyal than the regular troops.²³ Accordingly, the Republican Guard was seen a key strength within the Iraqi military and during Operation Desert Storm, General Schwarzkopf had paid significant attention towards destroying the Republican Guard. However, manoeuvre warfare generally prescribes the avoidance of enemy strengths and calls for fiercely attacking weaknesses.²⁴ The operational design for Operation Desert Storm certainly did not aim towards the avoidance of enemy strengths but instead, directly called for attacks against it, with the Republican Guard identified as a key center of gravity. The lack of any attempts to avoid enemy strengths thus demonstrates nonconformity to one of the major prescriptions of manoeuvre warfare.

In conclusion, the strategic air campaign and battlefield preparation phases of Operation Desert Storm delivered a devastating impact on Iraqi Forces beyond the point of merely setting the conditions for a successful ground assault phase. The crippling of Iraqi leadership, C2 and communication facilities rendered widespread confusion and

²³ Ibid, pg 24.

²⁴ Ibid, pg 22.

inability of the Iraqi military to react effectively against US ground forces. With the neutralization of Iraqi Air Defence systems, airfields and aircrafts, coalition air supremacy contributed immensely to the freedom of movement of friendly forces throughout the battlespace. The immense attrition of Iraqi armour and artillery during the battlefield preparation phase further contributed to Iraqi combat ineffectiveness and extremely limited freedom of movement and strategy for the enemy. While the air component's role can be seen as part of a wider manoeuvre warfare strategy in itself, the ground assault phase did not reveal a compelling argument for the application of manoeuvre warfare tactics directly contributing towards the overall success of the operation. Several deviations from manoeuvre warfare practice and application were observed such as problems with synchronization, lack of decentralized freedom of action, as well as a key center of gravity involving attacking the enemy's strength. Operation Desert Storm nonetheless was an overwhelming success but its successes cannot be adequately attributed to the application of specific manoeuvre warfare tactics executed by US ground forces during the final phase of the operation. Air power, coupled with superior firepower, equipment and training had therefore facilitated US and coalition victory against an enemy who had all but lost its combat effectiveness.

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