

Canadian  
Forces  
College

Collège  
des  
Forces  
Canadiennes



## FIFTH LEVEL OF WARFARE: MORE THAN A NAME

LCdr S.A. Kelemen

**JCSP 42**

***Exercise Solo Flight***

### **Disclaimer**

Opinions expressed remain those of the author and do not represent Department of National Defence or Canadian Forces policy. This paper may not be used without written permission.

© Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, as represented by the Minister of National Defence, 2016.

**PCEMI 42**

***Exercice Solo Flight***

### **Avertissement**

Les opinions exprimées n'engagent que leurs auteurs et ne reflètent aucunement des politiques du Ministère de la Défense nationale ou des Forces canadiennes. Ce papier ne peut être reproduit sans autorisation écrite.

© Sa Majesté la Reine du Chef du Canada, représentée par le ministre de la Défense nationale, 2016.

CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES  
JCSP 42 – PCEMI 42  
2015 – 2016

EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

**FIFTH LEVEL OF WARFARE: MORE THAN A NAME**

LCdr S.A. Kelemen

*“This paper was written by a student attending the Canadian Forces College in fulfilment 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.”*

Word Count: 3669

*“La présente étude a été rédigée par un 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 donc 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.”*

Compte de mots: 3669

## **Introduction**

Complexity is not the enemy of efficiency. Indeed, a lack of clarity can lead to a lack of efficiency and effectiveness. Conversely, simplicity does not imply clarity, in spite of long-standing adages especially common in military service. Such an argument might be valid in an active battlespace, where tight communication free of ambiguity might be the difference between victory and confused defeat. However, distilling down complicated ideas to achieve this same simplicity during discussions on doctrine, especially those related to the operational and strategic levels of warfare, filters out the nuances that could dispel some of the uncertainty and confusion that the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) has when applying or justifying the levels of warfare. One of the most notable, widespread examples of this confusion is the ongoing debate regarding the operational level of warfare. Arguments range from those who believe it doesn't exist, to the idea that it is such an artistic expression that defies explanation and must exist in an existential, nebulous state. Strangely, amongst all the debate, there is mention of a concept which is studiously ignored: call it the "theatre-strategic", "low-strategic", "global operational", or "high operational" level; the implications is the same. There are arguments that a Fifth (as Canadian Doctrine accounts them) Level of Conflict that must be addressed.

The CAF must change in order to deal with this ambiguity, and moreover must open itself to the idea of additional complexity in order to clarify what is, in reality, both explainable and highly useful so long as it can be properly understood by all involved. This will be achieved not by pruning away at our levels of conflict, but by dividing them further to incorporate a new individual element which can, does, and should function on its own. The arguments for this are not new; this more complicated structure has existed before in history. Canada has already conducted a similar separation within the previously bloated strategic level when creating the National Strategic level. Indeed, the CAF already operates with this additional complexity as part

of its organizational structure in operations, and causes confusion by pretending it does not exist. Each of these factors will be addressed below as well as the benefits that would be seen by embracing these complexities instead of ignoring them or trying to streamline them out of existence.

### **Not Three, Not Four, But Five**

To begin, it is important to note that there is a precedent for separating what other militaries continue to think of as a single element. Specifically, the strategic level of conflict is identified in Canadian doctrine as two independent entities: the National Strategic:

“where the nature and quantity of a country’s resources dedicated to achieving national policy objectives are determined by the political leadership. It is at this level that the coordination of all instruments of national power occurs and military-political aims are established”<sup>1</sup>

and the Military Strategic:

“where military strategic goals consistent with the desired national policy end state of a conflict are determined. At this level, military strategies are formulated, resources allocated, and political constraints established. Military actions at the strategic level are frequently joint.”<sup>2</sup>

These were individually identified and defined not because of geographical boundaries or a critical minimum number of personnel involved, but rather for the specific nature of the conflict which the level is expected to handle. Commanders at each of these levels are expected to possess specific skills sets which vary from the other, and generate success for different natures of objectives. The CAF can use this former success to encourage future change.

---

<sup>1</sup> Canada. Department of National Defence. “*Canadian Forces Joint Publication 1.0: Canadian Military Doctrine.*” Ottawa, ON: Chief of the Defence Staff (2009); Page 2-11 to 2-12

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Directing attention to a recent Chief of Defence Staff (CDS)'s intention for the future of CAF, one of the key elements of his direction was the need for greater integration, not only jointly within an operation, but with coalition partners as well as Other Governmental Departments (OGDs). In his words:

“Our strengths remain the capabilities generated by the Royal Canadian Navy, the Canadian Army, the Royal Canadian Air Force, and the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command. At the same time, we must continually improve our ability to integrate the essential joint enablers that allow us to function as a unified force when needed. We will continue to enhance our ability to command our forces, to deploy and sustain them anywhere around the world, to operate jointly, and to participate in combined operations with our closest allies when needed. The formation in October 2012 of the new Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC) allows us to be well positioned to help achieve these demanding goals.”<sup>3</sup>

Few would argue against any of these points in today's environment, and yet if this is to be CJOC's mission, at what level of conflict is CJOC operating? The discussion and arguments on this have become fierce, at least in part because it seems to occupy a space between the defined Military Strategic level as indicated above and the Operational Level of conflict, which CFJP 1.0 defines as:

“the level that links the military strategic and tactical levels. At the operational level, major operations are planned, conducted, and sustained, to accomplish military strategic goals. Tactical events are coordinated in sequence by operational staffs and resources allocated in order to achieve operational objectives.”<sup>4</sup>

The CDS's direction for CJOC implies a certain level of global planning coherency beyond any specific theatre, yet without direct influence on policy formulation or direct interface with the political level that are hallmarks of the Military Strategic level.

According to Captain(N) Gordon Peskett writing as part of the Canadian Defence Academy in “Operational Art”, the “boundaries between levels are not sharp or clearly defined

<sup>3</sup> Canada. Department of National Defence. “*Guidance to the Canadian Armed Forces.*” Ottawa, ON: Chief of the Defence Staff (June, 2013): Page 7

<sup>4</sup> Canada. Department of National Defence. “*CFJP 1.0...*”: Page 2-12

[with]... a number of modern factors...compressing and blurring the levels.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, this blurring implies that the space between Military Strategic and Operational levels does not require a separate skill set and style of Commander. This implies that the Commander caught in this role should be merely transitioning between his ability to build operational designs within a theatre to the complex policy decisions of the Military Strategic level. Yet this is not born out by historical perspectives, especially during the last global war of World War II.

There were indeed Five Levels of warfare at play during World War II. The Political Level is obvious, even if not officially defined by all of the Allies. From the next, John English in Mckercher et al’s “The Operational Art” who well states that “western allies (in WWII) excelled to a greater degree in the area of higher strategy, which witnessed the establishment of a matchless Combined Chiefs of Staff system.”<sup>6</sup> If the Combined Chiefs of Staff can be considered the Military Strategic level, then where should the Supreme Commanders of the two theatres reside? Was Eisenhower an operational level commander? He operated jointly and as part of a coalition, yet was not setting policy or forging new alliances, which implies he was not at the Military Strategy level. To further complicate the issue, the subordinate commanders to Eisenhower such as Patton, Bradley and Dempsey were said to have “made a historic contribution to American Operational art”<sup>7</sup>, which deflates any consideration of them as merely tactical level commanders. Yet, they were not operating at Eisenhower’s theatre level. The question must be asked, then, if Eisenhower was merely occupying a nebulous space between

---

<sup>5</sup> Gordon Peskett, Capt(N). “Levels of War: A New Canadian Model to Begin the 21st Century” In *Operational Art: Canadian Perspectives – Context and Concepts* edited by English, Allan; Gosselin, Daniel; Coombs, Howard; and Hickey, Laurence M. Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy (2005): Page 105

<sup>6</sup> John English. “The Operational Art: Developments in the Theories of War” In *The Operational Art: Developments in the Theories of War* by McKercher, B.J.C and Hennessy, Michael A. Westport, Connecticut: Praegar (1996): Page 15-16

<sup>7</sup> Antulio J. Echevarria. “American Operational Art 1917-2008” in *The Evolution of Operational Art* edited by Olsen, John Andreas and Van Creveld, Martin. Oxford New York: Oxford University Press (2011): Page 149

these operational commanders and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, or was his style of leadership and the effects he brought to the fight fundamentally different.

For a different perspective and a possible answer, we can look to the United States Navy (USN) in the Pacific theatre. The chain is equally clear: Admiral J. King was “Commander in Chief (COMINCH)... and Chief of Navy Operations (CNO)” and “had a well-deserved reputation for brilliance as a strategic thinker.”<sup>8</sup> Under him was Admiral Nimitz, qualified often as an operational level commander, and yet his style of command did not suit what doctrine would demand of an operational commander. He would “usually state the objective of what he would like to have accomplished [with]... certain timelines and a broad idea of what the operation would consist [but]... would not say how to do something... [and] generally left the fleet commanders at sea full freedom of action.”<sup>9</sup> This implies his mindset was on a broader management of strategic objectives and resource management, allowing detailed campaign designs to be carried out by subordinate commanders. Yet, if the next step down was the tactical level, where directions are expected to be explicit, this would seem like a lapse. His subordinate commanders were those like Admiral Spruance, Commander Fifth Fleet, who was “a brilliant operational artist” with “planning so thorough and so well thought out that the unexpected seldom happened in his operations.”<sup>10</sup> The lesson to be taken here is that without considering the Political or Tactical level, there are three different levels of conflict represented here, each with a unique flavor to it.

Vego offers the further point that if “a commander performs admirably at the operational or theatre-strategic level of command does not mean that he will perform as well in commanding

---

<sup>8</sup> Milan Vego. *Operational Warfare at Sea: Theory and Practice.* New York, NY: Routledge (2009): Page 215

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

an operational-tactical or major tactical force.” He goes on to discuss Admiral Halsey who, as a fleet commander, “was essentially a tactician” and couldn’t grasp the wider operational design, yet went on to become what Nimitz and King both recognized as “an excellent operational thinker during his time as Commander South Pacific (COMSOPAC)”<sup>11</sup> They name him a failure at one ‘lower’ operation level, and yet a success at a ‘higher’ level which is yet undefined. Not only do we see a difference of skill sets required in this supposed nebulous in-between region, but a commander who excelled within it despite their weaknesses at the operational level as understood in doctrine.

Having discussed the commander, one must also consider the mission. At every level of conflict, this is of primary importance. One of the fundamental elements to mission success is a clear understanding of what role your command should play, and what outputs and what benefits are expected to be delivered to the next level down. As Newell so aptly puts it, “the mission assigned to any size of military force, from any perspective of war or level of command, must be a clear, concise statement of the task to be accomplished.”<sup>12</sup> The CAF or any military cannot afford to leave so important an interface languishing in a state of grey. This murkiness gives no freedom to operational commanders who most often want to focus on their regional responsibilities without worrying about global operations and how their mission connects with others around the world. It gives no comfort to Military Strategic commanders who want to focus on future concerns such as procurement, policy, and connecting with political authorities unbothered with the minutia of tactical level concerns. What is more, a functional and coherent alternative already exists, has been clearly defined by other military thinkers, and is arguably

---

<sup>11</sup> Milan Vego. “*Operational Warfare at Sea...*”: Page 216

<sup>12</sup> Clayton R. Newell, LCol. “*The Framework of Operational Warfare.*” New York, NY: Routledge (2009): Page 58



already in practice in the CAF today. It just lacks coherent definitions and doctrine that permits CAF commanders take advantage of it. This is the crux of the matter.

Canada and other international militaries have been manoeuvring around this idea for years. With Canada, it was the creation of the 'dot coms' and eventually CJOC. For the Americans, the size of their forces demanded a more dispersed establishment, split regionally instead of globally in the form of the Combatant Command (COCOM) structure wherein each COCOM the commander is:

“responsible for the accomplishment of missions assigned to them as well as all aspects of joint training, logistics, and military operations. COCOM commanders are also responsible for establishing command relationships with subordinate commands as well as organizing subordinate units as deemed necessary.”<sup>13</sup>

To take the United Kingdom (UK) model, they established the Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ) as a “remedy the problems of disruption, duplication and the somewhat 'ad hoc' way in which previous operations had been organised.”<sup>14</sup> Each military has clearly recognized the need for headquarters who function at this new level of conflict with its unique role.

The name given to it during this discussion is not important. Whether it is a further splitting of the strategic level or the initial split of the currently misunderstood operational level is not the key issue. The key issue is that this level is indeed distinct. For now, the name selected for this work will be the Theatre Strategic level, as this was supported by both Vego and Matheny in their own works, where they offer thoughts and definitions which might be useful. The layout of the additional layer of conflict and where it fits in among the rest is clearly

---

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Feickert. “*The Unified Command Plan and Combatant Commands: Background and Issues for Congress.*”

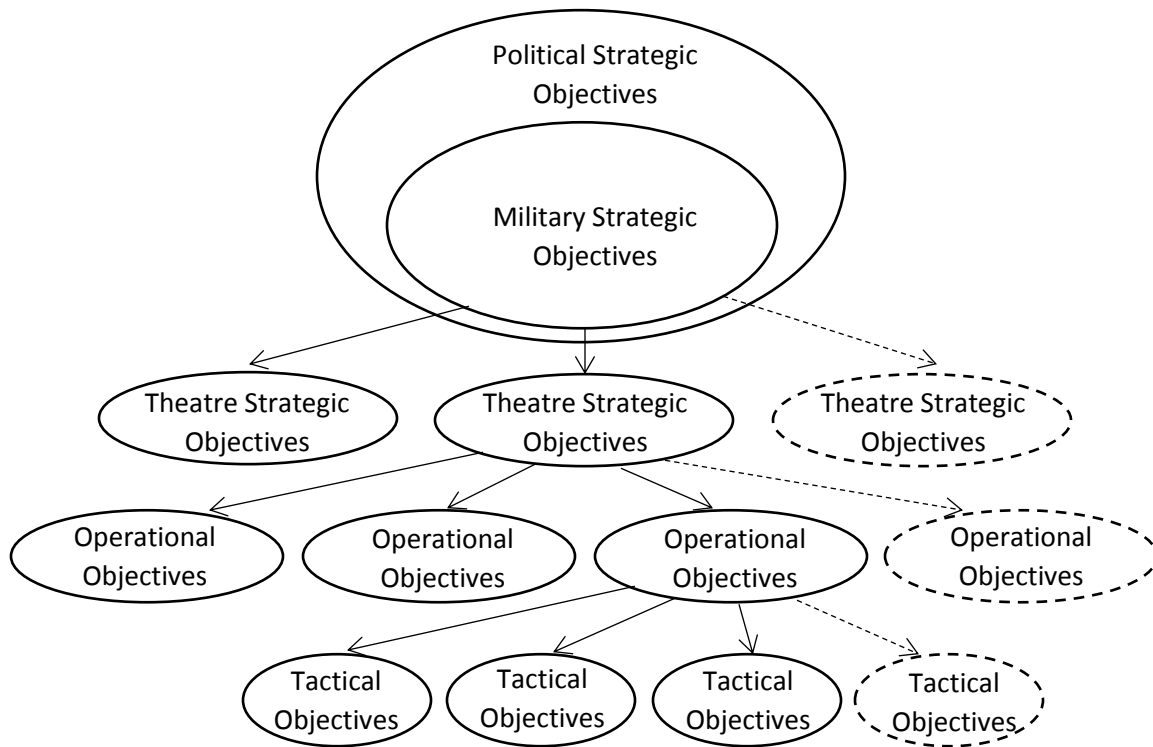
www.crs.gov: Congressional Research Service (January 3, 2013): Page 11

<sup>14</sup> UK Armed Forces Defence Information Website. “*The Management of Defence: Permanent Joint Headquarters.*”

<http://www.armedforces.co.uk/mod/listings/10006.html>

established in Vego's model from his "Joint Operational Warfare", represented here as he outlines the need for separate, unique objectives at five different levels:

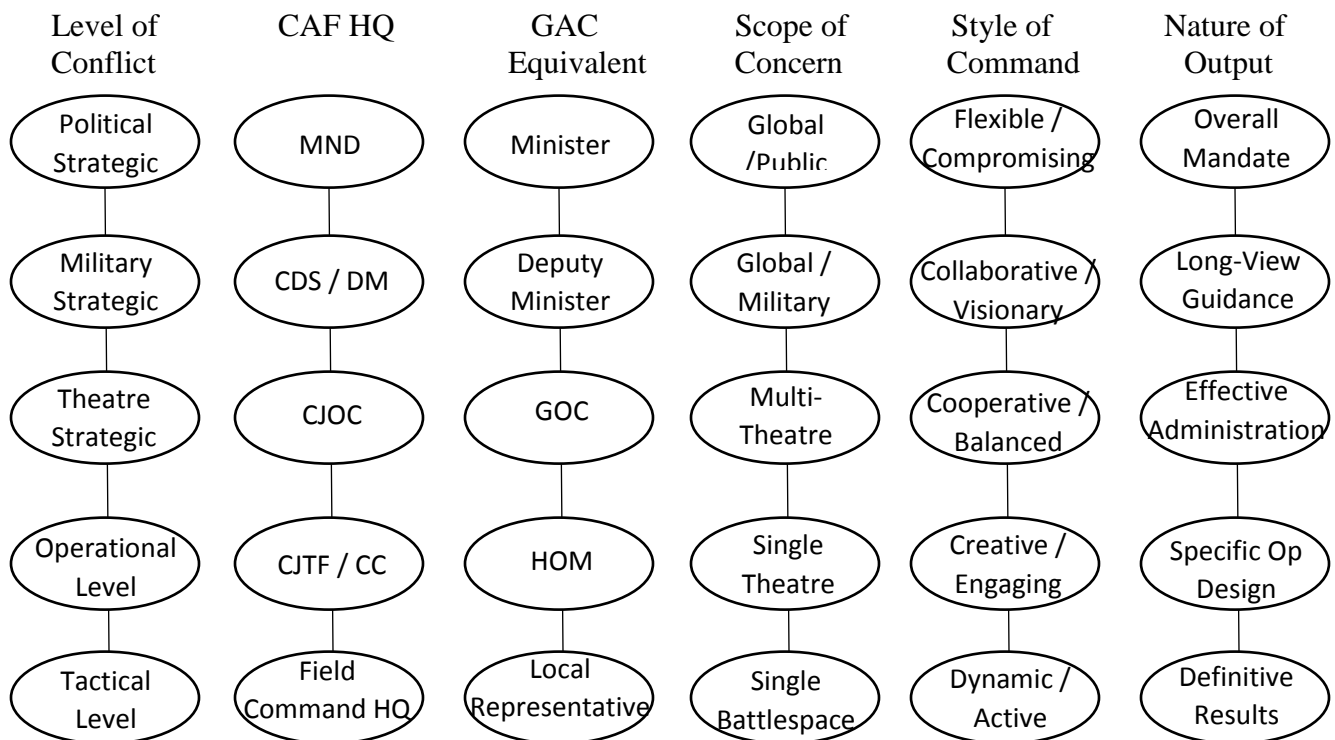
Figure 1: Hierarchy of Military Objectives<sup>15</sup>



If these are accepted as unique levels, where the objectives are not merely re-statements of those above, then several spill-off considerations must be taken. Each of these objectives would be best served by a certain style of commander, under a certain type of constraints, with certain expectations of what will feed their capabilities and what outcomes should be their products. Taking a moment to consider these factors, we can create a parallel figure which highlights the nature of these levels, and how they are actually unique from each other:

<sup>15</sup> Milan Vego. "Joint Operational Warfare." Newport, Rhode Island: United States Naval War College (September, 2007): Page II-4

Figure 2: Analysis of Defined Levels of Objectives



Taking this for consideration, one can begin to quantify what this Theatre Strategic level might be, and what nature of commanders would be required. Matheny's work entitled "The Fourth Level of War" articulates it by saying "Theater commanders [will] conduct business in the complex environment of national, international, coalition, and alliance policy. The theater is where policy meets the joint force."<sup>16</sup> Global coordination will be the purview of this level; where the long-term Military Strategic goals are considered, more specific objectives are defined based on higher level direction, and then individual missions and operations are laid out, prioritized, and given direction which is coherent and cooperative across all national missions so that they all fulfill national policy. At this level, national caveats are set as part of other coalition efforts, and effective communication is maintained with other theatre level commands such as

<sup>16</sup> Michael R. Matheny, Dr. "The Fourth Level of Warfare." Joint Force Quarterly 80 (1st Quarter, 2016): Page 63

SACEUR and NATO. These functions are inherently different from the foresight-minded Military Strategic function and well above the operational commander whose focus is rightfully on the immediate region in which he is campaigning.

The realization must immediately follow that Theatre Strategic headquarters already exist within CAF. This five-tier structure is being utilized in the ongoing Canadian mission, Operation IMPACT as part of the unified effort against the Islamic State (ISIS). Under CJOC's command is the regional CJTF, while beneath them is the ATF plugged into the coalition CAOC. Each of these levels claims to be an operational headquarters. The frustration caused by this confusing overlap is evidenced by most who served in theatre. Is this all caused by an incorrect definition? Because we don't understand where the 'operational' level of conflict begins and ends, neither can we clarify what the output from that level should be. The result is three organizations who at times reported to each other, developing products without consulting the last, and duplicating effort in many cases. Each of them consider themselves as the 'true campaigning headquarters' leading the effort forward. They clearly need boundaries to their expectations and activities. Having the vocabulary to discuss these issues instead of the classic 'oh, it can't be understood because it is operational art' can lead to functional, streamlined answers to our organizational chart nightmares.

One of the inescapable arguments in CAF discussion regarding the Operational Level of Conflict is the size of the force involved. This is only made more difficult when US doctrine is considered, and as our major partner in most coalition efforts, their doctrine simply cannot be ignored. Simply put, Canada has too small a force to operate consistently at a level which many definitions would call operational. As the current CDS and then Colonel Vance put it in "The Operational Art", "Canada has almost no chance of exercising purely operational level action

outside of its borders” in a sense of large scale campaigns and “CF mission success is defined by its tactical presence in a theatre of operations” within a coalition.<sup>17</sup> This, then, gives immediate rise to arguments against any new Level of Conflict, especially in a CAF perspective. If we cannot even engage at an Operational level, then why bother clarifying yet another, especially within what some would consider the wide boundaries of that level? Yet now General Vance also provides us with insight toward an answer to that very question by asking “why there is no alternative or supplementary national doctrine that accounts for Canada’s position as a force contributor”<sup>18</sup> and in stating that “[Canada] modifies classic doctrinal statements to allow for the operational level of war to exist in the Canadian sense, even where there is little chance of true operational level influence in the conduct of major campaigns and where there is more likely a direct strategic-to-tactical interface to preserve strategic interests.”<sup>19</sup> He implies that a small mission in a given country, a peacekeeping force, or a contribution to a coalition effort all have the ability to impact Canada’s national interests and be representatives of Canada on the world stage. They need to be governed effectively at a higher level, and yet are indeed tactical engagements on which a traditional operational level headquarters would be wasted. But just as certainly, the policy and future-focused leadership at the highest Military Strategic level should not be called upon to organization and orchestrate global resource management surrounding these disparate cells of activity. These arguments do not negate the need for the new level being discussed, but rather demand it. By defining the Theatre Strategic level as separate from the operational, this would allow us to use doctrine instead of evading it, and know when the

---

<sup>17</sup> J.H. Vance, Col. “Tactics without Strategy or Why the Canadian Forces Do Not Campaign” In *Operational Art: Canadian Perspectives – Context and Concepts* edited by English, Allan; Gosselin, Daniel; Coombs, Howard; and Hickey, Laurence M. Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy (2005): Page 273

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> J.H. Vance, Col. “*Tactics without Strategy...*”: Page 282-283

operational level in its pure, campaigning form can be cut from the chain of command while the Theatre strategic would remain in place to guide those missions to national ends.

Another argument is the ability to balance all missions with national objectives and their relative importance which might not match their numerical size. If Canada was called upon to commit significant resources to a region, how easy it would be to let the CAF's focus become drawn into that mission to the detriment of all others, especially if the responsible headquarters for that mission is also responsible for the rest. Matheny puts it well when he says:

“In cases where only one theater of operations is engaged in combat operations, there will be almost complete congruence between national, theater, and theater of operations objectives. Theater of operations planning and operations will dominate national attention. Theater of operations objectives and national objectives will be virtually synonymous, and theater strategy will be cast largely in a supporting role. This relationship and the role and function of theater strategy may well change, however, when the theater has multiple theaters of operations conducting military operations.”<sup>20</sup>

So, if CJOC is planning Op IMPACT, and the J-Codes have become embroiled in that event at its opening stages, the temptation would be for the smaller operations to lose their voice. They are tactical level concerns, even though they might have incredibly important impacts on strategic aims, and thus fail to have the same level of representation due to their size alone.

## **Conclusion**

Objectives can and should change at each level of conflict. The political level must balance national interest, foreign policy, and public opinion. The Military Strategic must consider the present with the future, all while safe-guarding the good opinion of the political authorities as to the military's capability. Tactical level objectives must be concise, clear, pivotal, and generally on an abbreviated timeline. Between lies too much ground to bridge with a single

---

<sup>20</sup> Michael R. Matheny, Dr. “*The Fourth Level of Warfare...*”: Page 63

operational structure. As it stands, the resulting objectives are either too vague to be directly translated down to the tactical level, or so specific that they ignore wider issues such as international connections, global resource allocation, or interface with humanitarian agencies. The effort of inserting a new level of conflict is not merely a matter of adding a definition that will further complicate an already confusing system. Rather, this would be the identification of a concept that already exists. This would be the clarification of a level of conflict that demands specific capabilities from its commanders. This would permit the CAF and other militaries to select and train officers for these positions who have those specific qualities and potential to look beyond single theatres of war and immediate campaign problems to focus on global spanning issues. This would stop the endless debate about how the operational level of conflict can mean so much, and yet also mean so many different things to so many different people. It would bring CAF's operational definition into line with many of its most important NATO allies, and in the same breath allow us to accept that, as a military, CAF does not function in that space for reasons that go beyond just the force levels employed without needing to surrender the idea that we continue to need a higher level headquarters responsible for global coordination. Seeking simplicity is fine, but it is folly to blindly reduce the number of a thing in order to achieve that aim. Trying to count to ten under a base-ten set without using all ten digits only results in disorder. That is not a complication, merely an identification and acceptance of all the factors which are in place and need to be accounted for. The solution needed to lift away confusion surrounding the operational level of conflict and use it as a source of power instead of frustration is the Fifth Level of conflict as Canadians would define it, whatever the name we pin to it.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Echevarria, Antulio J. “American Operational Art 1917-2008” in *The Evolution of Operational Art* edited by Olsen, John Andreas and Van Creveld, Martin. Oxford New York: Oxford University Press (2011): 29 p.

Newell, Clayton R., LCol. “*The Framework of Operational Warfare.*” New York, NY: Routledge (2009): 173 p.

Matheny, Michael R. “*Carrying the War to the Enemy: American Operational Art to 1945.*” Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press (2011): 317 p.

Peskett, Gordon R. Capt(N). “Levels of War: A New Canadian Model to Begin the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” In *Operational Art: Canadian Perspectives – Context and Concepts* edited by English, Allan; Gosselin, Daniel; Coombs, Howard; and Hickey, Laurence M. Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy (2005): 32 p.

Vance, J.H., Col. “Tactics without Strategy or Why the Canadian Forces Do Not Campaign” In *Operational Art: Canadian Perspectives – Context and Concepts* edited by English, Allan; Gosselin, Daniel; Coombs, Howard; and Hickey, Laurence M. Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy (2005): 22 p.

English, John. “The Operational Art: Developments in the Theories of War” In *The Operational Art: Developments in the Theories of War* by McKercher, B.J.C and Hennessy, Michael A. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger (1996): 22 p.

Vego, Milan. “*Operational Warfare at Sea; Theory and Practice.*” New York, NY: Routledge (2009): 259 p.

Vego, Milan. “*Joint Operational Warfare.*” Newport, Rhode Island: United States Naval War College (September, 2007): 1492 p.

Matheny, Dr. Michael R. “The Fourth Level of Warfare.” *Joint Force Quarterly* 80 (1<sup>st</sup> Quarter, 2016): p. 62-66.

UK Armed Forces Defence Information Website. “*The Management of Defence: Permanent Joint Headquarters.*” <http://www.armedforces.co.uk/mod/listings/10006.html>.

Feickert, Andrew. “*The Unified Command Plan and Combatant Commands: Background and Issues for Congress.*” www.crs.gov: Congressional Research Service (January 3, 2013): 65 p.

Canada. Department of National Defence. “*Canadian Forces Joint Publication 1.0: Canadian Military Doctrine.*” Ottawa, ON: Chief of the Defence Staff (2009): 86 p.

Canada. Department of National Defence. “*Guidance to the Canadian Armed Forces.*” Ottawa, ON: Chief of the Defence Staff (June, 2013): 21 p.