Chapter 2

Achieving a Decision

"It follows, then, that the leader who would become a competent tactician must first close his mind to the alluring formulae that well-meaning people offer in the name of victory. To master his difficult art he must learn to cut to the heart of a situation, recognize its decisive elements and base his course of action on these."[1]

—Infantry in Battle

"We must be ruthlessly opportunistic, actively seeking out signs of weakness, against which we will direct all available combat power. And when the decisive *opportunity arrives, we must exploit it fully and aggressively, committing every ounce of combat power we can muster and pushing ourselves to the limits of exhaustion."*[2]

—FMFM 1, *Warfighting*

Tactics is the employment of units in combat. The objective of tactics is to achieve military success through a decision in battle. Using tactical actions to achieve a decision is central to Marine Corps tactics.

In the past, military forces have often won only incremental gains when they sought victory—taking a hill here or a town there, pushing the front forward a few kilometers, or adding to the body count. Sometimes these incremental gains were the result of a competent enemy or the chaotic nature of war. Many times, however, commanders sought incremental gains as a means to achieve victory. This incrementalist view sees war as a slow, cumulative process and is best exemplified by the grinding attrition tactics seen on the Western Front in World War I. There the opponents were more or less evenly matched, and their tactics resulted in indecisive action. In Vietnam, where the opposing forces were quite dissimilar in their military capabilities, the incremental approach led to the U.S.'s overreliance on firepower and body counts. This, in turn, led to the conduct of military operations that were often irrelevant to the outcome of the war, even though a comparison of casualty ratios appeared favorable.

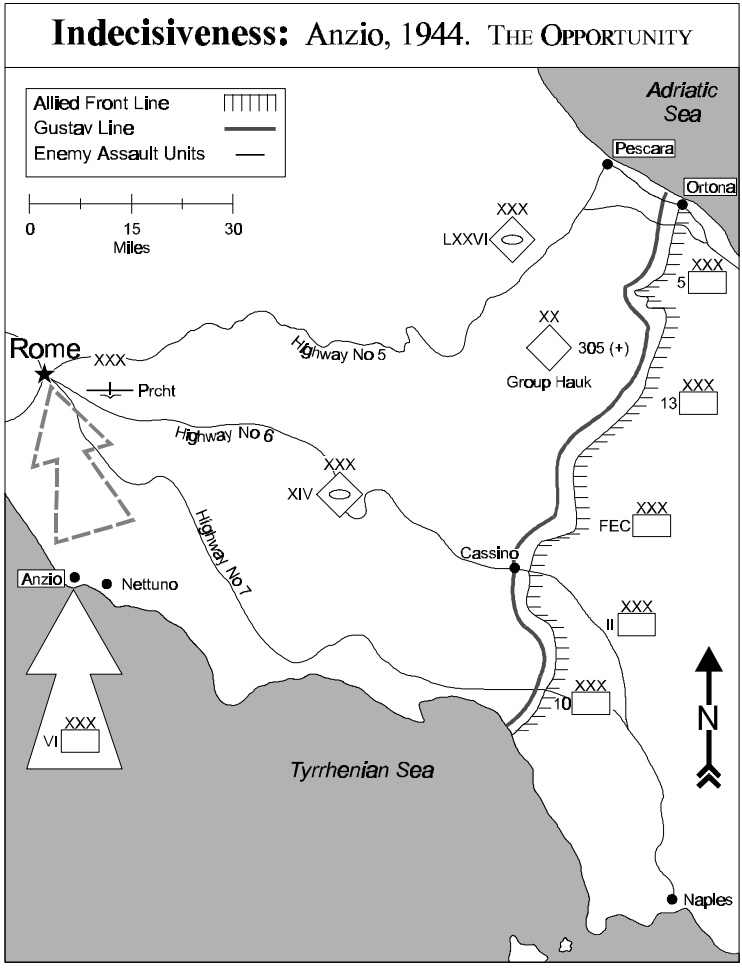
Therefore, the Marine Corps has embraced a more flexible, imaginative, and effective way to wage war: maneuver warfare. Marine success with this approach has been demonstrated in places like Grenada and the Persian Gulf. In contrast to tactics based on incremental attrition, tactics in maneuver warfare always aims at decisive action.

This does not mean, however, that combat should be viewed as a bloodless ballet of movement. Combat, especially at the tactical level of war, will be characterized by tough, brutal, and desperate engagements. We must remember that war is a violent clash of two opposing wills in which each side is trying to wrest advantage from the other. Our future enemies may not allow us to gain, maintain, or employ technological or numerical superiority. The future battle may be bloody and tough, and that makes it vitally important that Marine leaders strive to develop tactical proficiency.

What do we mean by achieving a decision? Take a moment to compare these two historical examples.

ANZIO: A MODEL OF TACTICAL INDECISIVENESS

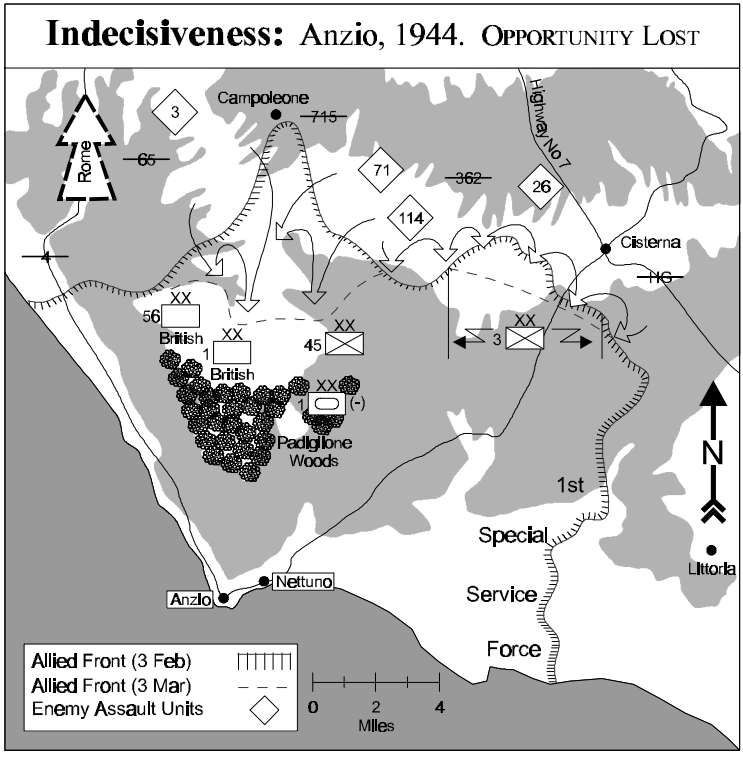
In late 1943, the Allies were searching for a way to alleviate the stalemate in Italy. The campaign had stalled around the Cassino front and resembled the trench warfare of World War I. In order to keep the pressure on the Germans, bypass the stubborn German defenses at Cassino, and capture Rome, a bold operation was envisioned. The U.S. Army's 3d Division and the British Army's 1st Division would make an amphibious landing at Anzio, about 35 miles south of Rome. (See figure.)


Indecisiveness: Anzio, 1944. THE OPPORTUNITY
Allied Front Line
Gustav Line
Enemy Assault Units
0
15
30
Miles
Adriatic Sea
Pescara
Ortona
XXX
LXXVI
XXX
5
XX
305 (+)
Group Hauk
XXX
13
Rome
XXX
Prcht
Highway No 5
Highway No 6
XXX
XIV
XXX
FEC
Cassino
Highway No 7
Anzio
Nettuno
XXX
II
XXX
10
XXX
VI
N
Tyrrhenian Sea
Naples

The Allies achieved complete surprise by landing at Anzio on January 22, 1944. Under the command of the U.S. Army's Major General Lucas, the Americans and British quickly established a beachhead and rapidly advanced 3 miles inland by midmorning against light German resistance. With the majority of their forces concentrated farther south around Cassino, the Germans could not possibly reinforce the Anzio beachhead until January 23d or 24th. If the Allies pressed their advantage, the road to Rome lay virtually undefended. The seizure of Rome would have had the effect of isolating the German defenders in the south and firmly establishing Allied control over Italy.

Yet General Lucas delayed. Concerned about being overextended and wanting to build up his logistics ashore, Lucas failed to press his initial advantage of surprise and allowed the Germans to reinforce the Anzio area. Not until January 29th did Lucas feel strong enough to make an offensive bid, but by that time it was too late. The Germans had arrived in force and had seized the dominating high ground in the beachhead area. Not only was the Allied offensive at Anzio stalled, but the Germans had seized the initiative and quickly threatened to drive the Americans and British back into the sea (see figure).

As a result, the Allies did not complete the reduction of the German defenses in southern Italy and capture Rome until



several months later. General Lucas lost a tremendous opportunity to exploit an initial success and gain a decisive result.[3]

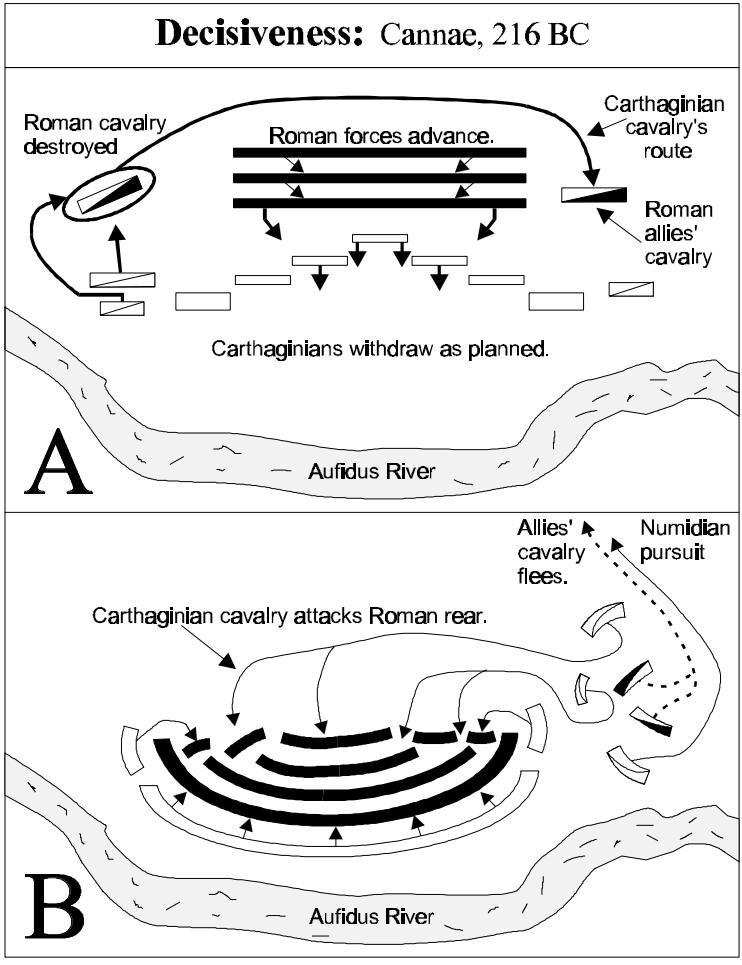
CANNAE: A CLEAR TACTICAL DECISION ACHIEVED

On August 2, 216 B.C., the Carthaginian general Hannibal fought the Roman army under the command of Terentius Varro near the city of Cannae in southern Italy. Hannibal based his tactics on the specific characteristics of both forces and on the aggressive personality of the Roman commander.

As dawn broke, Hannibal drew up his force of 50,000 veterans with his left flank anchored on the Aufidus river, secured from envelopment by the more numerous Romans. His center contained only a thin line of infantry. His main force was concentrated on the flanks. His left and right wings each contained deep phalanxes of heavy infantry. Eight thousand cavalry tied the left of his line to the river. Two thousand cavalry protected his open right flank. Eight thousand men guarded his camp in the rear.

Varro and more than 80,000 Romans accepted the challenge. Seeing the well-protected Carthaginian flanks, Varro dismissed any attempt to envelop. He decided to crush his opponent by sheer weight of numbers. He placed 65,000 men in his center; 2,400 cavalry on his right; and 4,800 cavalry on his left and sent 11,000 men to attack the Carthaginian camp.

Following preliminary skirmishes, Hannibal moved his light center line forward into a salient against the Roman center. (See A in figure.) Then, his heavy cavalry on the left crushed


Decisiveness: Cannae, 216 BC
Roman cavalry destroyed
Roman forces advance.
Carthaginian cavalry's route
Roman allies' cavalry
Carthaginians withdraw as planned.
A
Aufidus River
Allies' cavalry flees.
Numidian pursuit
Carthaginian cavalry attacks Roman rear.
B
Aufidus River

the opposing Roman cavalry and swung completely around the Roman rear to attack the Roman cavalry on the other flank. The Roman cavalry fled the field.

The Carthaginian heavy cavalry then turned back to assault the rear of the dense Roman infantry who had pressed back Hannibal's thin center line. At the same time, Hannibal wheeled his right and left wings into the flanks of the Roman center. The Romans were boxed in, unable to maneuver or use their weapons effectively. (See B in figure on page 21.) Between 50,000 and 60,000 Romans died that day as Varro's army was destroyed.

UNDERSTANDING DECISIVENESS

What do these examples tell us about achieving a decision?

First, achieving a decision is *important*. An indecisive battle wastes the lives of those who fight and die in it. It wastes the efforts of those who survive as well. All the costs—the deaths, the wounds, the sweat and effort, the equipment destroyed or used up, the supplies expended—are suffered for little gain. Such battles have no meaning except for the comparative losses and perhaps an incremental gain for one side or the other.

Second, achieving a decision is *not easy*. History is litter- ed with indecisive battles. Sometimes it was enemy skill and determination that prevented even a victorious commander from achieving the decision he sought. In other cases, commanders fought a battle without envisioning a larger result for their actions. Sometimes, even with a vision of making the battle decisive, they could not achieve their goals due to the chaos and friction that is the nature of war and makes decisive victory so difficult.

That leads to the third lesson our examples point out. To be decisive, a battle or an engagement *must lead to a result beyond itself*. Within a battle, an action that is decisive must lead directly to winning in the campaign or war as a whole. *For the battle to be decisive, it must lead directly to a larger success in the war as a whole*.

On the other hand, we must not seek decisiveness for its own sake. We do not, after all, seek a decision if it is likely to be against us. We seek to ensure—insofar as this is possible, given the inherent uncertainties of war—that the battle will go our way. We have stacked the deck in our favor before the cards are laid on the table. Otherwise, to seek decisive battle is an irresponsible gamble.

When we seek battle, we must seek victory: accomplishment of the assigned mission that leads to further significant gains for the force as a whole. At Anzio, the Allied aim was to break the stalemate in the south, opening up a southern front

that would force Germany to move additional forces from the defense of Normandy. This weakening of the Normandy defenses would support our planned invasion of France later that same year. At Cannae, Carthage won one round in its long contention with Rome for the domination of the Mediterranean. These tactical battles were planned for their overall operational and strategic effect. The consequences of a tactical engagement should lead to achieving operational and strategic goals.

MILITARY JUDGMENT

Once we understand what is meant by the term decisive and why it is important to seek a decision, a question naturally arises: How do we do it?

There is no easy answer to that question; each battle will have its own unique answers. As with so much in warfare, it depends on the situation. No formula, process, acronym, or buzzword can provide the answer. Rather, the answer is in military judgment, in the ability of the commander to understand the battlefield and act decisively. Military judgment is a developed skill that is honed by the wisdom gained through experience. Combined with situational awareness, military judgment allows us to identify emerging patterns, discern critical vulnerabilities, and concentrate combat power.

Understanding the Situation

The first requirement of a commander is to understand the situation. The successful tactician studies the situation to develop in his mind a clear picture of what is happening, how it got that way, and how it might further develop. Consid- ering the factors of mission, enemy, terrain and weather, troops and support available-time available (METT-T), the commander must think through all actions, determine the desired result, and ascertain the means to achieve that result. Part of the commander's thinking should also include assuming the role of the enemy, considering what the enemy's best course of action may be, and deciding how to defeat it. Thinking through these elements helps the commander develop increased situational awareness.

Based on this understanding of the situation, the commander can begin to form a mental image of how the battle might be fought. Central to the commander's thinking must be the question, "In this situation, what efforts will be decisive?" The commander asks this question not just once, but repeatedly as the battle progresses. The commander must also address possible outcomes and the new situations that will result from those possibilities. As the situation changes, so will the solution and the actions that derive from it.

For every situation, the leader must decide which of the countless and often confusing pieces of information are important and reliable. The leader must determine what the enemy is trying to do and how to counter his efforts. The leader's skill is

essentially one of *pattern recognition*, the ability, after seeing only a few pieces of the puzzle, to fill in the rest of the picture correctly. Pattern recognition is the ability to understand the true significance and dynamics of a situation with limited information. Pattern recognition is a key skill for success on the battlefield.

Tactics requires leaders to make decisions. A leader must make decisions in a constantly changing environment of friction, uncertainty, and danger. Making effective decisions and acting on those decisions faster than the enemy is a crucial element of Marine Corps tactics.

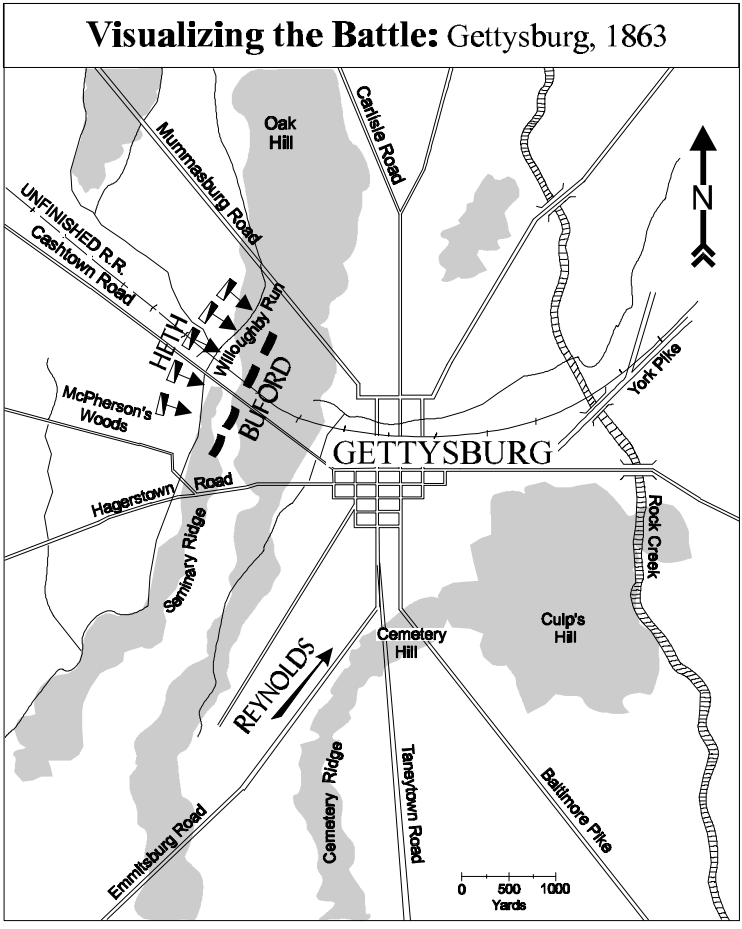
Sometimes there may be time to analyze situations deliberately and to consider multiple options. Comparing several options and selecting the best one is known as analytical decisionmaking. When time allows a commander to apply analytical decisionmaking—usually before an engagement or battle begins—the commander should make the most of it.

Once engaged, however, the commander finds time is short and the need for speed paramount. In some cases, speeding up the analytical decisionmaking process may be sufficient; however, in most cases intuitive decisionmaking is needed to generate and maintain tempo. Intuitive decisionmaking relies on a commander's intuitive ability to recognize the key elements of a particular problem and arrive at the proper decision without having to compare multiple options. Intuition is not some

mysterious quality. Rather, it is a developed skill, firmly grounded in experience, and one that can be further developed through education and practice. It is not without some risk, however, and leaders should use the decisionmaking style that works for them.

Leaders with strong situational awareness and broad experience can act quickly because they have an intuitive understanding of the situation, know what needs to be done, and know what can be done. This insight has often been called *coup d'oeil* (pronounced koo dwee), a French term meaning literally "stroke of the eye." It has also been called "tactical sense."

Union Army Brigadier General John Buford's approach to the battle of Gettysburg offers a good example of understanding the battle so that it leads to a decision. Arriving at Gettysburg with a division of cavalry on the morning of June 30, 1863, Buford saw Confederate forces approaching from the northwest. With the bulk of the Union forces still some miles away, Buford was able to conceptualize the coming battle in his mind. From his position on a hill outside town, he could see that early seizure of the high ground west of Gettysburg was critical to giving the Army of the Potomac time to mass its forces. Occupation of this high ground would also preserve the tactical advantage of the high ground to Buford's rear for the Union Army once they arrived on the battlefield. Buford also knew that if the Confederates were allowed to mass their forces


Visualizing the Battle: Gettysburg, 1863
Oak Hill
Carlisle Road
Mummasburg Road
UNFINISHED R.R.
Cashtown Road
HETH
Willoughby Run
BUFORD
McPherson's Woods
GETTYSBURG
York Pike
N
Hagerstown Road
Seminary Ridge
Rock Creek
Culp's Hill
Cemetery Hill
REYNOLDS
Cemetery Ridge
Taneytown Road
Baltimore Pike
Emmitsburg Road
0 500 1000
Yards

first around the high ground to the south and west, Lee would have the advantage over the arriving Union forces. (See figure.)

Quickly spreading out one brigade west of town along McPherson Ridge, General Buford settled in to defend Gettysburg until the arrival of Union reinforcements. On July 1st, the following day, he held his ground against a division of Confederate infantry supported by artillery until General John Reynolds' Second Corps came up and reinforced the line. General Buford's ability to foresee the coming battle, take quick action in the disposition of his forces, and hold the high ground until reinforced was one of the decisive actions that defeated the Army of Northern Virginia at the battle of Get- tysburg.[4] Buford's actions at Gettysburg demonstrated an exceptional ability to grasp the essence of a tactical situation through the skills of pattern recognition and intuitive deci- sionmaking.

Acting Decisively

Our ability to understand the situation is useless if we are not prepared to act decisively. When the opportunity arrives, we must exploit it fully and aggressively, committing every ounce of combat power we can muster and pushing ourselves to the limits of exhaustion. The keys to this effort are identifying enemy critical vulnerabilities, shaping the operating area to our advantage, designating a main effort to focus our combat power, and acting in a bold and ruthless manner.

Critical Vulnerabilities. For battlefield success, it is not enough to generate superior combat power. We must focus that combat power. We must concentrate our efforts on a *critical vulnerability*, that is, a vulnerability which permits us to destroy some capability without which the enemy cannot function effectively.

Seeking the enemy's vulnerabilities means striking with our strength against his weakness (rather than his strength) and at a time when the enemy is not prepared. This is where we can often cause the greatest damage at the lowest cost to ourselves. In practical terms, this often means avoiding his front, where his attention is focused, and striking his flanks and rear, where he does not expect us.

Just because a target is vulnerable does not, however, mean that it is worth attacking. We must direct our resources and strike at those capabilities that are *critical* to the enemy's ability to function—to defend, attack, or sustain himself, or to command his forces. We must focus our efforts on those critical vulnerabilities that will bend the enemy to our will most quickly.

At the lower tactical level, this may mean using fire and maneuver to take out a machine gun position that is the backbone of an enemy defense. It may mean using a gap in the enemy's fields of fire that allows us to get into the rear of his position. It may mean exploiting the enemy's lack of air defenses by calling in close air support. It may mean taking advantage of an

enemy's lack of mobility by rapidly overrun- ning a key position faster than he can respond. It may mean interdicting enemy resupply routes when his supplies are running short. It may mean exploiting a lack of long-range weapons by employing standoff tactics. Whatever we determine the enemy's critical vulnerability to be, we must be prepared to rapidly take advantage of it.

There is no formula for determining critical vulnerabilities. Each situation is different. Critical vulnerabilities will rarely be obvious. This is one of the things that make mastery of tactics so difficult and one reason that so few actions achieve a decisive outcome. Identifying critical vulnerabilities is an important prerequisite to achieving a decision.

Shaping the Operating Area. Once we have developed an understanding of the situation and have determined enemy critical vulnerabilities to attack, we try to shape the operating area to our advantage. Shaping includes both lethal and nonlethal activities such as planning fires to fix the enemy, using an axis of advance to facilitate movement, designating objectives to focus our combat power, or using deceptive measures to reinforce enemy expectations. Shaping activities can make the enemy vulnerable to attack, impede or divert his attempts to maneuver, facilitate the maneuver of friendly forces, and otherwise dictate the time and place for decisive battle. Shaping forces the enemy to adopt courses of action favorable to us. We attempt to shape events in a way that allows us several options, so that by the time the moment for decisive action arrives, we

have not restricted ourselves to only one course of action. Through shaping we gain the initiative, preserve momentum, and control the tempo of combat.

Main Effort. The main effort is a central maneuver warfare concept: concentrating efforts on achieving objectives that lead to victory. Of all the actions going on within our command, we recognize one as the most critical to success at that moment. The unit assigned responsibility for accomplishing this key mission is designated as the main effort—the focal point upon which converges the combat power of the force.

The main effort receives priority for support of any kind. It must be clear to all other units in the command that they must support that unit in the accomplishment of its mission. The main effort becomes a harmonizing force for a subordinate's initiative. Faced with a decision, we ask ourselves: *How can I best support the main effort?*

Some actions may support the main effort indirectly. For example, a commander may use other forces to deceive the enemy as to the location of the main effort. Marine forces used this concept extensively in conducting a series of combined arms raids prior to the ground offensive in Operation Desert Storm. The raids were to confuse the Iraqis as to the true position and intention of Allied forces. "The raid force appeared in the middle of the night and fired from positions the enemy had every right to believe were unoccupied."[5]

Use of a main effort implies the use of *economy of force.* This term does *not* mean that we use as little force as we think we can get away with. Rather, it means that we must not fail to make effective use of all of the assets available to us. Forces not in a position to directly support the main effort should be used to indirectly support it. Such forces might be used to distract the enemy or to tie down enemy forces that might otherwise reinforce the threatened point. Uncommitted forces can be used in this effort by maneuvering them in feints and demonstrations that keep the enemy off balance.

While a commander always designates a main effort, it may shift during the course of a battle as events unfold. Because events and the enemy are unpredictable, few battles flow exactly as the commander has planned. As a result, the commander must make adjustments. One way is by redesignating the main effort. For example, if Company A is desig- nated as the main effort but runs into heavy enemy resistance while the adjacent Company B makes a breakthrough that exploits a critical vulnerability, the battalion commander may designate Company B as the main effort. This new designation of Company B as the main effort must not, however, be merely nominal. It means that the combat power which was supporting Company A now shifts to support Company B.

Identifying the main effort is the principal and most important answer to the question, “How do we achieve a decision?”

Boldness and Ruthlessness. Forcing a successful decision requires the commander to be bold and ruthless. Boldness refers to daring and aggressiveness in behavior. It is one of the basic requirements for achieving clear-cut outcomes: In order to try for victory, we must *dare* to try for victory. We must have a desire to "win big," even if we realize that in many situations the conditions for victory may not yet be present. Ruthlessness refers to pursuing the established goal mercilessly and single-mindedly. This is doubly important once we gain an advantage. Once we have an advantage, we should exploit it to the fullest. We should not ease up, but instead increase the pressure. Victory in combat is rarely the product of the initial plan, but rather of ruthlessly exploiting any advantage, no matter how small, until it succeeds.

Boldness and ruthlessness must be accompanied by strong leadership and tempered by sound judgment. Without these qualities, boldness can become recklessness, and ruthlessness can be distorted into cruelty.

CONCLUSION

As Marine leaders, whether of fire teams or of a Marine expeditionary force, we are responsible for achieving success. In combat, the success we seek is victory—not merely a partial or

marginal outcome that forestalls the final reckoning, but a victory that settles the issue in our favor.

To be victorious, we must work ceaselessly in peacetime to develop in ourselves a talent for military judgment—the ability to understand a situation and act decisively. Military judgment results from the wisdom gained from experience. It allows us to identify patterns of activity and to concentrate our efforts against a critical vulnerability that will bend the enemy to our will. We must sharpen our ability to make decisions intuitively based on our understanding of the situation.