Chapter 3

Gaining Advantage

"In war the power to use two fists is an inestimable asset. To feint with one fist and strike with the other yields an advantage, but a still greater advantage lies in being able to interchange them—to convert the feint into the real blow if the opponent uncovers himself."[1]

—B. H. Liddell Hart

"The challenge is to identify and adopt a concept of warfighting consistent with our understanding of the nature and theory of war and the realities of the modern battlefield. What exactly does this require? It requires a concept of warfighting that will function effectively in an uncertain, chaotic, and fluid environment—in fact, one that will exploit these conditions to advantage."[2]

—FMFM 1, *Warfighting*

A basic principle of martial arts is to use the opponent's strength and momentum against him to gain more leverage than one's own muscles alone can generate, thereby gaining an advantage. The same concept applies to tactics. We strive to gain an advantage over our adversary by exploiting every aspect of a situation to help us to achieve victory, not by overpowering him with our own strength. This chapter will discuss several different ways of generating leverage to gain advantage over the enemy.

Consider the American Indian ambush technique. A small number of warriors would draw a superior force of pursuing cavalry into a canyon or similar close terrain. There a larger force of warriors, lying in wait, would quickly surround and ambush the soldiers, who thought they had been pursuing a retreating enemy. By exploiting the cavalry's initial advantages of strength and momentum, the American Indians were able to seize the initiative and gain the advantage through the use of this classic ambush method.

COMBINED ARMS

The use of combined arms is a key means of gaining advantage. It is based on the idea of presenting the enemy not merely with a problem, but with a *dilemma*—a no-win sit-uation. We combine supporting arms, organic fires, and maneuver in such

a way that any action the enemy takes to avoid one threat makes him more vulnerable to another.[3] For example, an entrenched enemy should discover that if he stays hunkered down in fighting holes, Marine artillery and air will blast him out. If he comes out to attack, Marine infantry will cut him down. If he tries to retreat, Marine armor and airpower will pursue him to his destruction. *That* is combined arms.

A good example of the use of combined arms at the squad level would be the squad leader positioning squad automatic weapons and grenade launchers to provide support by fire while infantrymen with rifles assault the position. The firepower from the automatic weapons keeps the enemy in their fighting holes while grenades make those holes untenable. These supporting fires keep the enemy from reacting effectively to our maneuvering infantry force. The enemy forces are placed in a no-win situation.

Modern tactics is combined arms tactics. That is, it combines the effects of various arms—infantry, armor, artillery, and aviation—to achieve the greatest possible effect against the enemy. Artillery and infantry, for example, are normally employed together because of their mutually reinforcing capabilities—the infantry provides close support to the artillery, protecting them from dismounted threats, while the artillery provides the infantry with timely, close, accurate, and continuous fire support. The strengths of the arms complement and reinforce each other. At the same time, the weaknesses and

vulnerabilities of each arm are protected or offset by the capabilities of the other.

While a division commander in 1941, General Patton had the following comments regarding combined arms:

> There is still a tendency in each separate unit . . . to be a one-handed puncher. By that I mean that the rifleman wants to shoot, the tanker to charge, the artilleryman to fire . . . . That is not the way to win battles. If the band played a piece first with the piccolo, then with the brass horn, then with the clarinet, and then with the trumpet, there would be a hell of a lot of noise but no music. To get harmony in music each instrument must support the others. To get harmony in battle, each weap- on must support the other. Team play wins.[4]

The Marine air-ground task force is a perfect example of a balanced combined arms team. Combined arms tactics is standard practice and second nature for all Marines.

MANEUVER

Maneuver provides us a means to gain an advantage over the enemy. In too many battles, one or both sides have sought to gain advantage in combat through firepower and attrition. In World War I, one side would rush across no-man's-land under murderous fire and attempt to push an opponent off desired

terrain. If the attack succeeded—and few did—the evicted forces counterattacked in the same manner, usually reoccupying the same terrain they had before. These battles were firepower and attrition contests, and the advantage lay with the side that had the most personnel and equipment to expend. The cost in casualties and equipment was high and often produced no decisive results. We want to avoid this type of engagement.

Traditionally, maneuver has meant moving in a way that gains positional advantage. For example, we may maneuver by enveloping an exposed enemy flank or by denying the enemy terrain critical to his goals. We may maneuver by threatening the enemy's lines of communications and forcing him to withdraw. We may maneuver by seizing a position which allows us to bring effective fire to bear against the enemy but which protects us against enemy fires. We may maneuver in other dimensions as well. For instance, we may also maneuver in time by increasing relative speed and operating at a faster tempo than the enemy. Normally we maneuver both in time and space to gain advantage and, ultimately, victory at the least possible cost.

EXPLOITING THE ENVIRONMENT

The use of the environment offers tremendous opportunities to gain advantage over the enemy. We must understand the characteristics of any environment where we may have to operate:

jungle, desert, mountain, arctic, riverine, or urban. More importantly, we must understand how the effects of terrain, weather, and periods of darkness or reduced visibility impact on our own and our adversary's ability to fight.

Terrain

Our objective is to employ tactics that makes terrain an advantage to us and a disadvantage to our opponent. Terrain impacts on our maneuver and influences our tactical disposi- tions. We must understand terrain and comprehend its effects, as it may limit our movement, reduce our visibility, or restrict our fires. We must understand what effects it has on the enemy and on his abilities to detect or engage us. We must be aware that the enemy also seeks advantage from terrain. We must understand that terrain shapes the enemy's maneuver and dispositions as well as our own.

Lieutenant Harrol Kiser of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, knew how to use terrain to gain an advantage. In November 1950, his company was ordered to seize a key piece of terrain at Toktong Pass during the march out of the Chosin Reservoir area. Lieutenant Kiser had only 20 Marines left in his platoon, and the pass was heavily defended by the Chinese. Using a flanking ridgeline to conceal his approach, Lieutenant Kiser skillfully enveloped the enemy from the rear and quickly routed the Chinese out of their well-entrenched position.[5] Today, as in Korea, the intelligent use of terrain has become a standard practice for Marines.

Weather

Adverse weather—cold, heat, rain—impedes combat operations. The military unit that is best prepared to operate in these conditions will gain an advantage over its opponent. During the breakout from Chosin Reservoir in November 1950, Marines demonstrated time and time again the ability to use harsh weather to their advantage over a determined enemy. The assault of Able Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, on Hill 1081 in a blinding snowstorm is such an example. Despite visibility of only 25 yards, the company was able to coordinate a combined arms attack and envelop this key piece of terrain that blocked the breakout of the 1st Marine Regiment. Using a snowstorm to mask its movement, Able Company surprised and annihilated the Chinese defenders, thereby opening a route for the rest of the division.[6]

If we are to use weather to our advantage, we must train and prepare rigorously to operate in all climatic conditions. We must be able to operate our equipment and employ our weapons effectively in hot, cold, or wet environments—literally in every clime and place.

Periods of Darkness or Reduced Visibility

Units that can operate effectively during hours of darkness or periods of reduced visibility often gain significant advantage over their opponent. Reduced visibility can make the simplest of tasks difficult to accomplish. This obvious disadvantage can be turned on its head and used to our advantage by a

commander whose forces are trained, equipped, able, and willing to operate at night. Night operations can produce great gains against a force that cannot or will not operate at night. Operating during periods of reduced visibility creates tempo by adding another 10 to 12 hours to the day for fighting. The psychological impact of night fighting is also great and can produce significant rewards.

A good example of the tactical impact of night attacks is found in the battle for Okinawa during World War II. Marine forces were essentially stalemated by the presence of a strong Japanese defensive line in the coral ridges of southern Okinawa. After days of ineffective attacks by the 7th Marine Regiment, the regimental commander elected to attack under cover of darkness. At 0330 on 12 June 1945, the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 7th Marines advanced, using a road that intersected the ridge as a guide. Colonel Edward W. Snedecker, Commanding Officer of the 7th Marines at the time, noted:

> . . . two companies, one from each [of] the 1st and 2d Battalions, got across the valley during the night into position [on the ridge]. Early in the morning when the Japanese came out to cook breakfast, they found a little bit of a surprise . . . [for] them.[7]

The Japanese defenders were not used to U.S. forces attacking at night. The use of darkness allowed Marines to occupy positions along the crest of Kunishi Ridge literally without firing a shot. From these positions, the Marines dislodged the

enemy from their entrenched positions and moved onward until the Japanese defenders were annihilated.[8]

COMPLEMENTARY FORCES

Complementary forces—the idea of fix-and-flank—are an important way of gaining advantage. The idea behind complementary forces is to use our forces as a nutcracker. We seek to crush the enemy between two or more actions. Consider the case of an enemy rifleman firing from behind a tree. If one Marine fires from the front, the enemy rifleman is protected by the tree. If the Marine maneuvers and attempts to fire from behind, the enemy rifleman merely moves to the other side of the tree to maintain his protection. However, two Marines can place our opponent in a dilemma. One can fire from the front while the other sneaks around and fires at the enemy from the flank or rear. The opponent is now vulnerable to one or the other of the two Marines. He cannot use the tree for protection against both.

The same idea applies in air-to-air tactics. Upon detecting enemy aircraft, a flight of fighters splits into two or more elements beyond air-to-air missile range. They approach the enemy aircraft from multiple directions and varying altitudes. No matter how the enemy aircraft moves—dives, climbs, turns, or twists—it is exposed.

Sun Tzu described this concept as the *cheng* and the *ch'i*.[9] The *cheng* is the more direct, obvious action. It fixes the enemy. The *ch'i* is the unexpected or extraordinary action. It is the bid for a decision, or, as we call it today, the main effort. These two actions work together against the enemy. The two actions are inseparable and can be interchangeable in battle; the *cheng* may become the *ch'i*. The concept is basic, but it can be implemented in a variety of combinations limited only by our imagination.

SURPRISE

Achieving surprise can greatly increase leverage. In fact, surprise can often prove decisive. We try to achieve surprise through deception, stealth, and ambiguity.

"War is based on deception,"[10] stated Sun Tzu. We use deception to mislead our opponents with regard to our real intentions and capabilities. By employing deception, we try to cause our opponents to act in ways that will eventually prove prejudicial for them. We may use deception to mislead the enemy as to the time and location of our pending attack. We may use deception to create the impression that our forces are larger than they really are. We hope the enemy will realize this deception only when it is too late for them to react.

Marines have often relied on deception to mislead the enemy in regard to the location of amphibious landings. Marines used deception to create the illusion of force where there was none in Operation Desert Storm. Lieutenant General Boomer stated the situation which necessitated an extensive deception operation: "We're taking on 11 Iraqi divisions with two Marine divisions. Our force ratios are horrible. We don't want him to know that. . . ."[11] The Marines created Task Force Troy: 460 Marines imitated the activities of a 16,000-man division using loudspeakers, dummy tanks and artillery, and helicopters conducting simulated resupply.

Surprise can be generated through stealth. Stealth is used to advantage when maneuvering against an enemy. It provides less chance of detection by the enemy, leaving him vulnerable to surprise action for which he may be unprepared. Marines may also employ stealth by lying in wait for an approaching enemy—an ambush. The ambush is perhaps the most effective means of surprising opponents, especially at the lower tactical level where surprise through stealth is easiest to achieve.

We can also achieve surprise through ambiguity. It is usually difficult to conceal all our movements from the enemy, but we can sometimes confuse him as to the meaning of what he sees. Sun Tzu said:

> The enemy must not know where I intend to give battle. For if he does not know where I intend to give battle he must prepare in a great many places. And when he prepares in a great

> many places, those I have to fight in any one place will be few.[12]

Ambiguity was central to the tactics of the World War II German *blitzkrieg*. An attack in *blitzkrieg* involved multiple thrusts with reinforcements following whichever thrusts were most successful. The multitude of thrusts created paralyzing uncertainty because the opponent could not determine which constituted the real attack. There was nothing secret about the German attack, but it was ambiguous on a massive scale.

TRAPPING THE ENEMY

Modern tactics is based not on pushing the enemy, but on trapping him—another excellent way of gaining advantage. Trapping is the desired result of the application of combined arms, fire and maneuver, or complementary forces tactics.

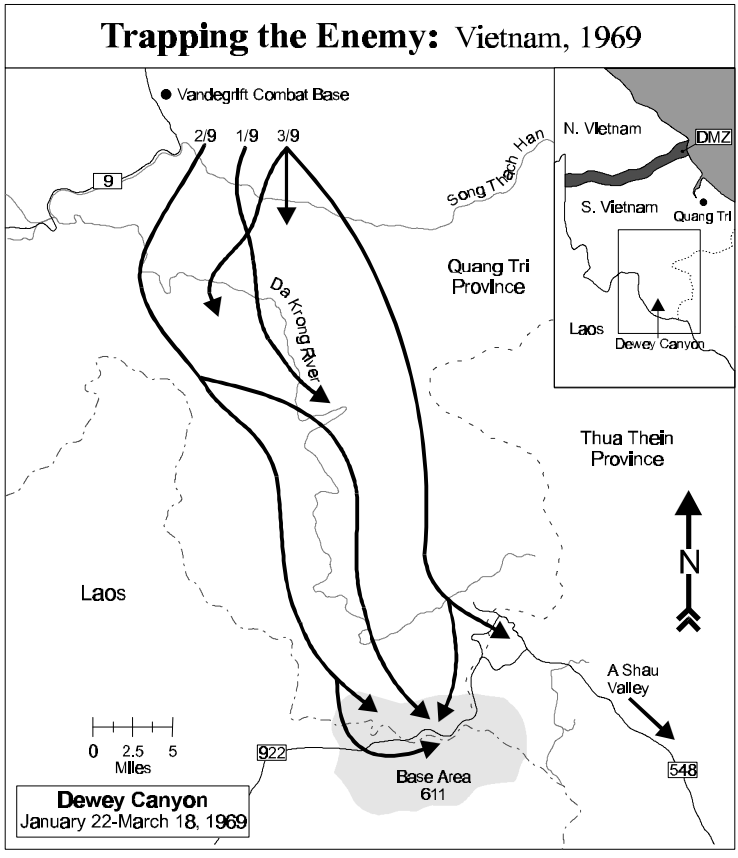
Why do we want to trap the enemy instead of just push him? A pushing contest is seldom decisive. The side that is pushed out comes back the next day still full of fight. We have to fight him again and again. Unfortunately, in Vietnam, many of our battles were pushing battles. We were always able to push the enemy off the ground he held and to inflict casualties on him. He just withdrew, regrouped, replaced his losses, and came

back to fight us again. The result was a series of indecisive actions and a seemingly endless war.

However, if we can trap our enemy, we have a better opportunity to win decisively. Many of history's decisive battles have been trapping actions. Recall how the Roman legions were trapped at Cannae or the German divisions at Stalingrad? Trapping gains advantage by disrupting the enemy's mental process while he attempts to think through the dilemma we have placed him in. Trapping allows us to gain and maintain the initiative as the enemy is forced to react to our actions. It can also temporarily undermine the enemy's will to resist when he is at his weakest—while we continue to press the attack and our initiative.

A good example of trapping from the Vietnam conflict occurred during Operation Dewey Canyon. (See figure.) North Vietnamese activity along the Laotian-South Vietnamese border increased dramatically in early January 1969. Large enemy convoys, including armored vehicles, regularly traveled from Laos into South Vietnam, threatening friendly units. Colonel Robert H. Barrow and his 9th Marines responded with Operation Dewey Canyon.

The three battalions of the 9th Regiment crossed the Da Krong River on February 11th and 12th. The Third and First Battalions moved south-southeast through the mountainous terrain toward Laos. Second Battalion, to the west, swung south-southwest, turning east astride the south Vietnam-Laos



border. The North Vietnamese forces moving along Route 922 from Laos into the A Shau Valley were trapped between the three battalions. The North Vietnamese were mauled as a

result. Their equipment losses were staggering. More importantly, Operation Dewey Canyon destroyed a North Vietnamese base area and so disrupted their logistics that it forced them to abandon their planned spring offensive in I Corps' area.[13]

DEVELOPING AN AMBUSH MENTALITY

Perhaps the most common tactical tool for gaining advantage is the ambush. All Marines are familiar with an ambush as a type of combat patrol.[14] In maneuver warfare, ambush takes on a much broader meaning, and the *development of the ambush mentality* is integral to maneuver warfare tactics.

The ambush mentality is probably not new to most of us. We may have employed the ambush mentality in sports. In football, the trap block is an ambush. A player pulls an offensive lineman off the line, leaving a hole. When a defender comes through the hole, another lineman suddenly blocks him from the side, usually knocking him down. The players have blind-sided him. That is the ambush mentality.

In basketball, setting up a pick is an ambush. As one teammate drives to the basket, another steps into the defender's path from behind, blocks the path, stops the defense, and

momentarily clears the lane to the basket for the other teammate. Again, that is the ambush mentality.

In combat, we move our reinforced squad into position along a well-traveled trail. We position flank security to protect ourselves and give identification and warning of enemy movements down the trail. We position our weapons so as to concentrate our fires into a "kill zone" and to seal off exits, forcing the enemy to remain subject to our fires. The squad waits in position until signaled when they immediately respond with concentrated, sustained fires on enemy forces trapped in the kill zone. The enemy, surprised into inaction, unsure of what to do or where to move, is annihilated. Fires are maintained until all the enemy are killed or until signaled to stop. That is the ambush mentality.

The ambush mentality tries to turn every situation into an ambush. In this broader context, an ambush has several distinct features.

First, in an ambush we try to *surprise the enemy*. Think of a patrol that we ambush. Our enemies are walking through the woods when suddenly, out of nowhere, they are under fire from multiple directions. They are taking heavy casualties. The psychological impact of surprise may paralyze their thoughts and actions, leaving them incapable of reacting effectively. To have an ambush mentality means we always try to surprise the enemy, to do the unexpected. Surprise is the rule rather than the exception.

Second, we want to *draw our enemy unknowingly into a trap*. This will often involve deceiving him. We make one course of action appear inviting. When he takes that course of action, we are waiting for him.

Third, an ambush is *invisible*. If the ambush is not invisible, it ceases to be an ambush and instead becomes a target for the enemy. Whether we are defending or attacking, the enemy must not detect us until it is too late for him to react. Surprise often depends upon invisibility. That invisibility may be provided through stealth in movement or in focusing the enemy's attention elsewhere to allow our forces to maneuver without detection.

The reverse slope defense is an example of using invisibility to spring an ambush. The enemy does not know we are there until he comes over the crest of a hill and is hit by our fires. His vehicles are hit on their soft underbellies. His troops are fully exposed to our weapons. Because he could not see us until the last moment, he could not call in artillery fire on our position. The reverse slope not only protects us from his direct fire; it protects us from his observation and thus his indirect fire. That is part of the ambush mentality: *Do not let yourself be seen*.

Fourth, in an ambush we want to *shock the enemy*. Instead of taking him under fire gradually with a few weapons at long range, we wait until he is within easy range of every weapon. We then open up suddenly, all at once, with everything we

have. He is paralyzed by the shock. He cannot react. Everything was going fine, and suddenly he is in a firestorm with people falling all around him. Often he will panic, making his problem worse as he reacts rather than acts.

Combined arms may be used to ambush the enemy. Artillery raids that reach deeper into his vital areas than expected can produce that same desired shock effect as a ground-based ambush. We place him in a dilemma as he attempts to move from the effects of artillery and goes right into an attack by air.

Finally, in the ambush mentality, we *always focus on the enemy*. The purpose of an ambush is not to hold a piece of terrain. It is to destroy the enemy. We use terrain to effect the ambush, but terrain itself is not what we are fighting for.

ASYMMETRY

Fighting asymmetrically means gaining advantage through imbalance, applying strength against an enemy weakness. Fighting asymmetrically means using dissimilar techniques and capabilities to maximize our own strengths while exploiting enemy weaknesses. Fighting asymmetrically means fighting the enemy on our terms rather than on his. By fighting asymmetrically, we do not have to be numerically superior to defeat the enemy. We only have to be able to exploit his vulnerabilities.

For example, using tanks to fight enemy tanks, infantry to fight enemy infantry, and air to fight enemy air is symmetrical. Using attack helicopters to fight enemy tanks and close air support against enemy infantry are examples of fighting asymmetrically. In these examples, we gain the advantage of the greater speed and mobility of the aircraft relative to the enemy. Ambushing tanks with attack helicopters in terrain which hampers tank maneuver provides even more effect and generates even more advantage.

CONCLUSION

Combat is a test of wills where the object is to win. One way to win is to gain and exploit every possible advantage. This means using maneuver and surprise whenever possible. It means employing complementary forces and combined arms. It means exploiting the terrain, weather, and times of darkness to our advantage. It means trapping our enemy by ambush or by some other means. It means fighting asym- metrically to gain added advantage. This is what Sun Tzu meant when he wrote: "Therefore a skilled commander seeks victory from the situation and does not demand it of his subordinates."[15]