
Chapter 7

Exploiting Success and Finishing

“Do not delay in the attack. When the foe has been split off and cut down, pursue him immediately and give him no time to assemble or form up . . . spare nothing. Without regard for difficulties, pursue the enemy day and night until he has been annihilated.”¹

—Field Marshal Prince Aleksandr V. Suvorov

“Pursue the last man to the Adda and throw the remains into the river.”²

—Field Marshal Prince Aleksandr V. Suvorov

“When we have incurred the risk of a battle, we should know how to profit by the victory, and not merely content ourselves, according to custom, with possession of the field.”³

—Maurice de Saxe

It is not enough merely to gain advantage. The enemy will not surrender simply because he is placed at a disadvantage. The successful leader exploits any advantage aggressively and ruthlessly not once but repeatedly until the opportunity arises for a finishing stroke. We must always be on the lookout for such opportunities—whether we create them ourselves or they arise in the flow of action—and when we perceive an opportunity to be decisive, we must seize it.

The application of Marine Corps tactics does not mean that we expect to win effortlessly or bloodlessly or that we expect the enemy to collapse just because we outmaneuver him. It means we look for and make the most of every advantage and apply the decisive stroke when the opportunity presents itself.

BUILDING ON ADVANTAGE

Once we have gained an advantage, we exploit it. We use it to create new opportunities. We then exploit those opportunities to create others, shaping the flow of action to our advantage. The advantages do not necessarily have to be large; even small favoring circumstances exploited repeatedly and aggressively can quickly multiply into decisive advantages. Like the chess grandmaster, we must think ahead to our next move and the one beyond it: *How am I going to use this advantage to create another one?* For example, in an attack by penetration, once

we have created one advantage by punching through the enemy's position and getting into his rear, we create another by pouring forces through the gap, generating the "expanding torrent" that Liddell Hart wrote about.⁴

Rommel recounts how exploiting each advantage in the battle for Kuk in the Carpathian mountains during World War I led to another opportunity. As his detachment exploited each situation and moved farther behind the enemy lines, it generated more surprise and advantage. During this action, Rommel's detachment captured thousands of enemy soldiers with very little fighting, due largely to his unwillingness to lose momentum. One success led directly to another opportunity, which he immediately seized.⁵

After the battle for Tarawa in November 1943, Major Henry Crowe, Commanding Officer of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, was asked why he thought the Japanese had been defeated so quickly once the Marines were established ashore. He remarked that it was due to the constant pressure of naval gunfire, bombs, and mortars. The Marines used their advantage in supporting arms to create opportunities for success.⁶

CONSOLIDATION, EXPLOITATION, AND PURSUIT

Once we have created leverage, how do we take advantage of it? A decisive result or victory rarely stems from the initial

action, no matter how successful. More often, victories are the result of aggressively exploiting some relative advantage until one becomes decisive and the action turns into a rout. Casualty rates historically tend to remain relatively constant and often fairly even until one side or the other tries to flee. Only then do significantly asymmetrical casualty rates commonly occur. This exploitation of the enemy's bad situation can yield surprisingly great results.

We can take several specific types of actions to exploit opportunities we have created or discovered. The first way we can exploit success is by *consolidation*—as when we consolidate our forces after seizing a position we intend to hold against the enemy.⁷ Here our aims are limited to protecting what we have already gained. We must realize that by consolidating, rather than continuing to force the issue, we may be surrendering the initiative. There may be any number of reasons for choosing this course. Perhaps we lack the strength to continue to advance. Our new gain may be of critical importance, and the risk of losing it outweighs the advantages of any further gains. Perhaps the new gain by itself grants a significant advantage. For instance, a position that provides excellent fires or threatens the enemy's lines of communications may put the enemy in an untenable position. Perhaps the new gain compels the enemy to meet us on our terms—for example, we seize a critical piece of terrain with strong defensive qualities, forcing the enemy to attack on unfavorable terms.

The second way to pursue an advantage is through *exploitation*, an offensive tactic that is designed to disorganize the

enemy in depth.⁸ Exploitation usually follows a successful attack that has created or exposed some enemy vulnerability. For example, an attack that has torn a gap in enemy defenses allows us to attack vital enemy rear areas. The object of exploitation is not to destroy the combat forces directly opposing us, even though they may be weakened. Instead, the object is to disrupt the entire enemy system by attacking important activities and functions.

For example, during Operation Desert Storm in 1991, the Army's Tiger Brigade was employed by the 2d Marine Division as an exploitation force during the division's final attack. The brigade had the advantage over the Iraqis in speed, firepower, and night combat capabilities. With these advantages the Tiger Brigade sliced deep into the rear of the Iraqi III Corps and sealed off the vital highway intersections north of Al Jahra. The result was a total disruption of the Iraqi organized defense.⁹

The third way to exploit advantage is through *pursuit*. A pursuit is an offensive tactic designed to catch or cut off a hostile force that has lost cohesion and is attempting to escape in order to destroy it.¹⁰ If the intent is to bring about the final destruction or capture of the enemy's forces, then pursuit should be pushed with the utmost vigor. It is here that operations turn into routs, and overwhelming victories often occur.

General Grant's pursuit of General Lee's Confederate Army of Northern Virginia from Petersburg to Appomattox in April

1865 is a classic example of a pursuit. Here Grant pushed his forces to their limits in order to prevent Lee's escape. This ultimately led to the capture and surrender of Lee's forces.¹¹

The Confederate Army's Lieutenant General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson summed up pursuit when he said, "Strike the enemy and overcome him, never give up the pursuit as long as your men have strength to follow; for an enemy routed, if hotly pursued, becomes panic-stricken, and can be destroyed by half their number."¹²

FINISHING THE ENEMY

Ultimately, we want to cultivate opportunities into a decisive advantage. Once we do, we make the most of it. Marine Corps tactics calls for leaders who are "strong finishers." We must have a strong desire to "go for the jugular." We must be constantly trying to find or to create the opportunity to deliver the decisive blow. At the same time, we must not be premature in our actions. We must not make the decisive move before the conditions are right.

This ability to finish the enemy once and for all derives first from possessing an aggressive mentality. Second, it stems from an understanding of the commander's intent. Third, it stems from a keen situational awareness that helps us recognize

opportunities when they present themselves and understand when the conditions are right for action.

USE OF THE RESERVE IN COMBAT

The reserve is an important tool for exploiting success. The reserve is a part of the commander's combat power initially withheld from action in order to influence future action.¹³ The reason to create and maintain a reserve is to provide flexibility to deal with the uncertainty, chance, and disorder of war. The reserve is thus a valuable tool for maintaining adaptability. In general, the more uncertain the situation, the larger should be the reserve. Napoleon once said that "War is composed of nothing but accidents, and . . . a general should never lose sight of everything to enable him to profit from [those] accidents."¹⁴ These accidents take the form of opportunities and crises. The reserve is a key tactical tool for dealing with both.

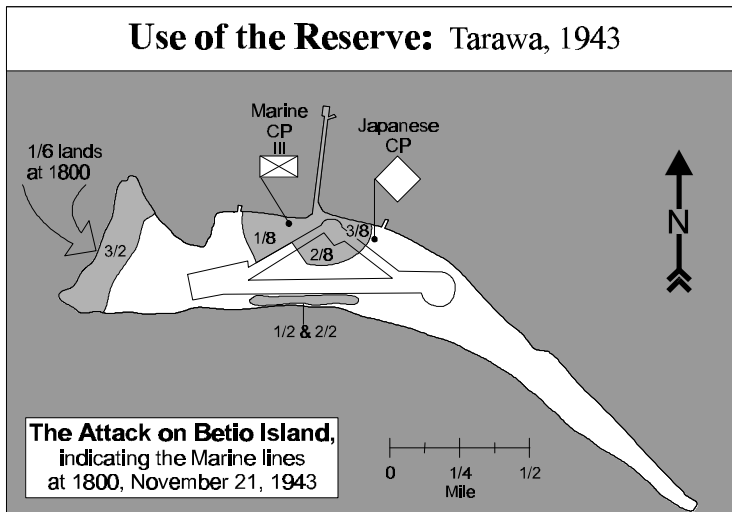
The commander should have a purpose in mind for the reserve's employment and design it to fulfill that purpose. To truly exploit success may warrant assignment of the commander's best subordinate unit or a preponderance of combat power or mobility assets to the reserve. Those commanders who properly organize, task, and equip their reserves are usually the ones with the capability to finish the enemy when the opportunity arises.

Winston Churchill recognized the value of a reserve when he wrote: “It is in the use and withholding of their reserves that the great Commanders have generally excelled. After all, when once the last reserve has been thrown in, the Commander’s part is played The event must be left to pluck and to the fighting troops.”¹⁵

A strong reserve is also a way to retain the initiative. If an advance slows, the reserve can increase the momentum. If an advance picks up speed, the commitment of the reserve can create a rout. We may use the reserve to expand or exploit gaps or penetrations. We may commit the reserve to attack in a different direction, thus exploiting opportunities for success instead of reinforcing failure. Without a strong reserve, even the most promising opportunities can be lost.

A classic example of the use of the reserve is the battle for Tarawa. With the 2d and 8th Marine Regiments held up on the assault beaches, General Julian Smith decided to land the 6th Marine Regiment, the division reserve, to break the stalemate. The 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, which was task-organized as part of the division reserve, landed on the western end of the island, passed through 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, and from the flank conducted a swift and violent assault of the Japanese fortifications across the island. Within 48 hours, the Japanese forces were annihilated and the island secured. General Smith’s use of his reserve to exploit success and finish the enemy was the key to victory at Tarawa.¹⁶ (See figure.)

Sometimes we must employ the reserve to deal with some crisis, rendering it temporarily unavailable for commitment elsewhere. In such instances, a reserve should be reconstituted as rapidly as possible. We should look for the opportunity to employ the reserve to reinforce success. However we may employ the reserve, we should always think of it as the tool for clinching the victory. In this respect, Marshal Foch wrote that “the reserve is a *club*, prepared, organized, reserved, carefully maintained with a view to carrying out the one act of battle



from which a result is expected—the decisive attack.”¹⁷ It is generally through offensive action, even in the defense, that we achieve decisive results. Since the reserve represents our bid to achieve a favorable decision or to prevent an unfavorable one, it often becomes the main effort once committed and should be supported by all the other elements of the force.

Along with the tangible assets used as a reserve, the prudent commander must also be aware of, and plan for, the intangible factors that impact on combat power and its sustainment. Intangible factors include fatigue, leadership quality, proficiency, morale, teamwork, and equipment maintenance. We build reserves also by reserving aviation sortie rates or numbers, withholding unique or low-density munitions, or holding critical supplies such as fuel or petroleum, oils, and lubricants for a specific goal. We consider these intangible factors when creating and tasking the reserve, as we do in all assignments of tasks.

These concepts apply not only to units initially designated as the reserve but also to any unit, since any unit can be shifted or recommitted as the reserve. Thus a commander must always be mentally prepared to redesignate roles of units and to create and use reserves as the situation requires.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

Most decisive victories do not result from the initial action, but from quickly and aggressively exploiting the opportunities created by that action. We may find any number of ways to exploit tactical opportunity, but they all have the same object—to increase leverage until we have the final opportunity to decide the issue once and for all in our favor. A goal in Marine Corps tactics is not merely to gain advantage but to boldly and ruthlessly exploit that advantage to achieve final victory.