

Classic TAC NEWS

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COUNTERATTACK

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Counterattack was the seminal essence of German World War II defensive doctrine. According to the manual, German soldiers in defensive battle were to pick their opportunities and, regardless of odds, counterattack.

“If a bridgehead is forming, or an advanced position is being established by the Russians, [counter]attack, [counter]attack at once, [counter]attack strongly. Hesitation will always be fatal. A delay of an hour may mean frustration, a delay of a few hours will mean frustration, a delay of a day may mean a major catastrophe. Even if there is no more than one infantry platoon and one single tank available, [counter]attack!”

- *Panzer Battles* by Gen. F.W. von Mellethin

Aggressive use of squad and platoon-sized battle groups was military theorem dating back to World War I; it was not a fanatical banzai charge spurred by national socialist zeal. Its methodology was coolly calculated and its targets carefully picked. And, it worked. In desperate defensive actions the Wehrmacht repeatedly prevailed in the face of “impossible” odds against foes possessing vast numeric and material superiority.

Origins of Small-Unit Doctrine

Small-unit tactics, the basis for 20th century infantry doctrine, coalesced during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902. Boers were rugged frontiersmen and

fiercely independent. They were adept scouts and crack spots. Making full use of the favorable undulating terrain of the African veldt, the Boers waged a successful hit and run campaign against the British army.

Boers attacked and defended using squad-sized groups of mounted infantry called commandos. Lacking the staying power of a conventional force, commandos relied on the traditional guerrilla tactics of guile and mobility to survive. But, for short periods of time, commandos were capable of dishing out a tremendous volume of firepower. The reason was technological. The magazine-fed, bolt-action rifle represented a quantum leap in the art of musketry. Its range, accuracy, and sustained rapid-fire capabilities exponentially increased the lethal properties of individual soldiers. Effective rifle fire no longer required massed volleys. Indeed, densely packed infantry formations were plumb targets for groups of dispersed Mauser-armed marksmen. Densely packed bayonet charges were thus rendered obsolete long before the universal adoption of Mr. Maxim’s machine gun.

German military observers keenly noted each Boer victory. Their reports caused a stir back home because German tactics closely resembled those of the British.

Small-Unit Doctrine in Elastic Defense and Defense in Depth

“The great cavalry charge near Abon Dam that same Thursday, 15 February, had swept across the veld [sic] like a torpedo across the sea. It wa brilliant; the German military attachés, who later wrote the German official history of the war hailed it as a master-stroke. But was it not almost too brilliant? To explode, a torpedo must actually hit something; otherwise it expends itself in vain.”

- *The Boer War* by Thomas Pakenham

Boer theorem became the topic of discussion amongst various German military cliques and developed a cult status. The fad culminated during the 1902 Imperial Maneuver when German infantry “attacked” in widely dispersed skirmish lines. The exercise proved a failure. An 80-man platoon stretched over a 300-meter front, or a 960-man battalion extended along a 3,000 meter front proved impossible to command *from above*. An inherent difficulty prompting most, but not all, German regiments to abandon Boer tactics and revert to the traditional formations used with such disastrous effect by the British. The decision was costly. Attacking German infantry advancing in densely packed “column of platoons” were methodically annihilated at the First Battle of Ypres (November 1914), by British marksmen armed with magazine-fed, bolt action Lee-Enfields.

This frightful slaughter was not evenly shared by all German Army units. One such example was the 43rd Infantry Briagde’s attack against a Russian hasty defense on September 8, 1914. Fifteen of the brigade’s 16 companies attacked in open order using reduced 40-man platoons and suffered 25 dead out of a brigade muster if 2,225. The brigade’s one company whose commander disobeyed orders and attacked in dense formation lost half its men.

After-action reports such as this proved the worth of small-unit doctrine. Three Jäger units were thus ordered reorganized and retrained into assault battalions (Sturmbataillons). Jäger battalions were used because they traditionally mustered hunters and woodsmen, lifestyles akin to Boer frontiersmen. Sturmbataillon base units were stosstrupps, autonomous squad-sized units resembling commandos. Stosstrupps were commanded but NCOs or junior officers trained to act in the absence of orders.

“The position of the NCO leaders as group leader, thus became more important. Tactics become more and more individualized.”

- General E.T.W. von Ludendorff

Sturmbataillon organization and tactics proved a battlefield success, but, for various reasons, it wasn’t until 1917 that small-unit doctrine was universally adopted by the German Army.

As the western front manifested itself during 1914 there was virtually no effort on the operational level to shorten the line or make use of favorable terrain. Every square inch of territory won was retained; it was a matter of honor. To defeat the enemy at the edge of no-man’s land, defenders were deployed forward into densely packed trench systems. With regards to Pakenham’s analogy, there was no attempt to avoid the torpedo, the ship’s hull was simply hardened enough to maintain its integrity after being struck. In human terms, the cost was horrific.

For the next three years in the western front, the one notable exception being that of Verdun, Germany remained on the strategic defensive. This period saw a fundamental restructuring of German tactical and operational defensive doctrine. So confident were the germans of this new doctrine, they virtually denuded the western front in 1917 and shifted their army east to knock out Russia.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-R29825 / CC-BY-SA

The theory of “defense in depth” changed the look of trench warfare. Razor-sharp defined trenchlines dissolved into a series of defensive zones laced with mutually supportive strongpoints. Strongpoints were

positioned to make full use of favorable terrain. Natural defensive attributes, such as the grade of a slope, or the breadth of a gully, were further enhanced by pick and shovel. Depth of defense became paramount over density. Forward zones were just lightly studded by listening posts and platoon-sized strongpoints. Deeper into the second zone these strongpoints gradually coalesced into company and battalion-sized fortifications. Beyond lay division and corps-sized units.

Small-unit tactics neatly dovetailed into the new theorem of “elastic defense.” rather than absorbing an offensive’s full shock at the edge of no-man’s land, as was done in the past, German soldiers were trained to roll with the punch. Enemy inertia was now to be gradually bled by extending the distance of his advance and hitting him with a series of localized counterattacks. Even under the laboratory conditions of a training exercise, open order advances sorely test command cohesion. In battle, it was simply a matter of time before an attacking unit’s command cohesion, stressed by the natural dynamics of combat, would falter. Fired into a defensive network that was both deep and flexible, Pakenham’s torpedo would exhaust its propellant before hitting home.

German Small-Unit Tactics in Defensive Battle

The yeoman work of elastic defense fell on the NCO, or junior officer, commanding the squad at the point of attack. He was expected to act in the absence of orders with clear-headed aggressiveness. His training emphasized initiative and snap judgements based in the battle at hand, not in set piece textbook solutions. The manual was a mere guideline; extemporization was not just encouraged, it was demanded.

Small-unit defensive battle followed two phases. Each phase had its own guidelines.

Small-Unit Defensive Battle: Phase One

1. During enemy preparatory bombardments, forward defenses are manned principally by listening posts tasked to sound the alarm and pinpoint enemy tanks and infantry.

2. Squads at the point of attack freely roam designated territories making full use of favorable terrain and prepared positions.

3. In fluid combat conditions a small-unit’s principal support is the fog of battle.

4. For effective harassment of company and battalion-sized units, squads and heavy weapons teams should coordinate within a loose platoon structure.

5. Well chosen and tenaciously held squad-sized strongpoints are capable of deflecting large numbers of attackers into preregistered machine gun and artillery killing zones.

6. Gaps in attacking formations provide paths into the enemy’s rear echelon and should be exploited by a counterattack.

7. Each small-unit action is cumulative. This cumulative pressure, if relentlessly applied, saps momentum until the assault founders.

Should an enemy attack carry its objective it is at this moment, the instant of success, the enemy is at its weakest. Once an objective is taken offensive shock evaporates as the enemy shifts from attack to consolidation. At this moment German doctrine dictated immediate counterattack (it is interesting to note the Germans defined immediate as “within minutes,” the British considered any counterattack launched within 24 hours as “immediate”). If this failed, the Germans called in conventionally organized forces.

Small-Unit Defensive Battle: Phase Two

“The greatest care must be taken to differentiate between counterattacks which are undertaken immediately after the loss of a length of trench, or of any other section of ground, with reserves which are on the spot, and those which are ordered by a Higher Commander and for which the reserves of a higher formation must be brought up.

... A counterattack must either follow immediately and the decision to counterattack must come from the front line and the forces for it must be ready at hand before the enemy’s attack is entirely finished, or the counterattack must be methodically and thoroughly prepared by the artillery and carried out with reserves who have been instructed as to the tactical situation and the nature of the ground.”

- *Experience of the IV German Corps in the Battle of the Somme during July, 1916*, General Sixt von Armin’s After-Action Report

Should the enemy defeat the small-unit efforts, a fresh reserve force, heretofore removed from battle was now

committed. This action was initiated from above. The Germans felt that a counterattack ordered by a headquarters removed from battle was a conventional action requiring methodical preparation. These preparations were necessary because delays inherent with the communications of orders and the movement of troops allowed the enemy sufficient time to consolidate his strength. Once this occurs, the responsibility of the small-unit commander was to brief the reserve force commanders to the lay of the land and the enemy's disposition.

Seminal Points of Defense and Elastic Defense

A. Immediate responsibilities rested on NCOs, or junior officers, at the point of attack. these men were required to rapidly assess tactical problems and lead with clear-headed aggressiveness.

B. Because individual infantry sections had limited shock potential, counterattacks were quick jabs launched at short range. To this aim, defensive positions were carefully and prepared taking full advantage of natural terrain attributes. Counterattacking units remained concealed until the very last instant. After the attack, favorable terrain was used to elude superior enemy firepower as the squad moved along a predetermined path to a secondary position.

C. Timely localized counterattacks were not to, in and of themselves, recover lost ground or break an assault. The objective was to erode enemy command cohesion.

D. Initial counterattacks were preparatory work for a decisive counterattack launched by a conventionally organized and fresh reserve. Each strongpoint, from platoon level on up, made some provision for such a reserve force.



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The doctrine of defense in depth and elastic defense proved so successful that it survived virtually intact into the blitzkrieg era and beyond. Imperial Army infantry doctrine of 1918 was, for all intents and purposes, 1939–45 Wehrmacht infantry doctrine.

To be concluded in the Nov-Dec Tac News

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