



The Principle of the Thing

THE PRINCIPLES OF WAR
AND THEIR APPLICATION TO WARGAMING
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As a regular soldier who is also a keen wargamer I am frequently asked if I find my military knowledge of help to me in my gaming. My answer is that while no wargame can faithfully reproduce the details of tactical combat — the mechanics of a battalion attack, the calling-together of order groups, the timing and handling of resupply, the actual effects of smoke, darkness and fatigue — nor can it effectually reproduce the fog of war without resort to three-map, umpired games, it is certainly my experience that adherence to the principles of war, to well-tryed tactical gambits and to certain tactical principles, can and does help a player to play a much more coherent and successful game, provided that he bears in mind the limitations and peculiarities of the game system.

Opinion having been recently expressed in 'Phoenix' that more should be done in the way of articles intended to help the novice play a better game, this article on the Principles of War and their application to wargaming has been written in the hope that it may help the beginner to assess the situation, make his plan and then carry it through to a successful conclusion; or, as victory can go to one side only, at least to give his opponent a hard time in a 'damned close run thing'!

The ten Principles of War used in British Army doctrine are, it is stressed, principles, not a selection of gambits: they apply in all ages and in all games from 'Chariot' to 'Starship Trooper' and are as follows:

1. Selection and Maintenance of the Aim
2. Surprise
3. Offensive Action
4. Concentration of Force
5. Economy of Effort
6. Mobility
7. Flexibility
8. Co-operation
9. Administration
10. Maintenance of Morale.

Of these ten, the first seven are as relevant to board wargaming as in real war: the remainder are less applicable to the movement of cardboard counters at the behest of a single mind but still underline certain factors applicable to certain types of game. Some of the principles modify others, as will be seen: for example, No 4 is modified by No 5 while 7 modifies 1. No one principle is supreme nor should one be allowed to exclude another: rather they should be thought of as a package which will be a very useful guide, eventually becoming second nature.

Selection and Maintenance of the Aim

Quite simply, decide what must be achieved, make and execute your plan accordingly and don't let yourself be diverted by irrelevant openings, however attractive they may seem. Your overall aim will be dictated by the game's Victory Conditions and these must be understood before you set up, let alone before you make your first move. There may be variable degrees of victory and you may, for example, decide that Moderate Victory is a more realistic aim than Decisive and make your plan in this light.

Overall aim apart, there will be intermediate objectives along the way, some dictated by the nature of the game and others by the course of play. In 'Mukden', for instance, the Soviet player's initial objective must be to clear and secure a supply route through Mukden by Turn 5 at the latest in order that he can launch his drive south to attain the overall objective; the player who becomes obsessed by the need to clear virtually every hex of the city or every guerilla unit has forgotten Maintenance of the Aim. The Israeli player in 'Chinese Farm' must have as an initial aim the gaining, bridging and crossing of the Canal in order to get his armour off-board into the Egyptian heartland. To fight and win an armoured Armageddon on the East Bank will not in itself bring victory however satisfying the elimination of Egyptian units may be.

An example of the intermediate aim dictated by the course of events is that in some game you may decide that you are losing this particular phase of the battle: the answer appears to be to break off the action and fall back to a strong defensive position along, say, a river-line. Having decided this, go ahead and do it: if your opponent's follow-up results in one or two of his units becoming exposed don't let yourself be tempted into a dog-fight which will delay the operation and possibly prevent you from gaining your new position.

Surprise

As said earlier, the fog of war is absent from most board wargames: one's position in the heavens makes secret concentrations, covered flank marches and concealed withdrawals impossible and with them many opportunities for achieving Surprise which are available to the real-life commander. Nonetheless there remain numerous opportunities to mislead your opponent as to your intentions to catch him on the hop once his forces are committed and to keep him in doubt about the true strengths and dispositions of your forces.

First, try to adopt a course of action which he doesn't expect you will take: in games where he sets up first study his dispositions to see what he seems to be expecting you to do — or, possibly, what he seems to be inviting you to do. Then try something else: remember how the Germans invaded France through the "impossible" terrain of the Ardennes in 1940. If it is you who must set up first try to set a trap or to make it seem that you have overlooked one approach: but whether it is you or he who has the initiative remember that what is obvious to you is likely to be obvious to him.

Secondly, once battle is joined and your opponent's reserves are committed a sudden change of thrust, possibly intended from the start, can be tried: an example is the move to envelope one flank which is suddenly changed to a thrust at the centre as his line stretches to counter you. Where you can bring on reinforcements with some freedom as to their point of entry it offers a good opportunity to arrive from the direction he thought you wouldn't try or where he would least like to see you: the Gaulish reinforcements in "Caesar" ("Alesia" to the classicists) are a particularly good example.

Thirdly, and on a lower level, a measure of uncertainty and consequent surprise can be achieved through judicious stacking: a weak unit can conceal a strong one or conversely a strong one on top of a bag of nails can lend seeming impregnability to a defensive position. In any case stacking can keep your opponent in doubt about what is "on the other side of the hill" and induce horrible imaginings which inhibit bold attacks. (While on this subject, I understand that some players think it permissible to examine enemy stacks to which their own units are not adjacent; my advice is to disallow this practice as it is as unrealistic as it is unfair. Can you imagine Robert E. Lee riding on to Cemetery Hill and courteously enquiring as to Union orders of battle, troop strengths and ammunition states prior to committing his own forces to the assault? No, the seeker after intelligence must be told "Suck it and see".)

The opportunities to achieve Surprise in games which include inverted counters, dummies, hidden units and concealed movement (e.g. "Lee Moves North", "Caesar's Legions") are too obvious to descant on. To end this section, von Moltke is said to have remarked to a group of officers, "Gentlemen, when you consider a military problem you will usually find that

your opponent has some three courses open to him. Of these he will generally adopt the fourth". Go for that "fourth course" whenever you can — and guard against it in your turn.

Offensive Action

This section can be kept short. Be ready to go for your opponent whenever a suitable opportunity offers and do not be content to fight an inert campaign, responding only to his movements. Defence in particular should be conducted aggressively, with a mobile force ready to snap off the heads of careless probes or to hit and run whenever a chink in the armour appears. Attacks should be flexible and full of movement or potential movement, again with a reserve ready to exploit openings. Be a player whom your opponent rates as one with whom no risks are to be taken, whether in attack or defence and regardless of which side is in the ascendant. But don't confuse Offensive Action with Plain Foolhardiness.

Concentration of Force

Perhaps the principle most easily applied on the wargame board and so often not practiced by the novice. At its most basic you attack with sufficient odds to ensure the enemy unit's elimination, retreat or disruption, dependent on the CRT used in the game: usually this means 3-1 or +5 differential. Secondly, where you can surround the unit in question then do so to ensure its destruction. As an extension of this precept, when you make a series of attacks in the same area start with those which will leave other enemy units surrounded prior to being attacked in their turn. Finally, launch your main attacks in areas where retreat or destruction of units is going to imperil the enemy's position and throw his plan out of gear. Go for the vital road-junction, seize the commanding high ground, cut off the over-extended flank. A good analogy is that of David and Goliath: David took the right sort of stone, used his sling to give it impetus and aimed for Goliath's unprotected forehead — and that was that! While Concentration of Force cannot always guarantee such instantaneously satisfying results it will always be found more effectual than simply rushing pell-mell upon the enemy with whatever units are to hand.

Needless to say (I hope) nothing said in this section precludes soak-off attacks at low odds: however those should be made only to divert one's opponent or to achieve the desired odds elsewhere.

Economy of Effort

In your use of the previous principle don't carry it too far and throw a half brick when a pebble will do. In each attack apply the necessary force but no more, thus conserving units which can be used to mount other attacks, stand by to exploit the breakthrough or cover against the counterattack. There is no point using 6-1 odds when 3-1 will do the job.

Mobility

Mobility, properly exploited, is a potent weapon: when applying it you must consider the overall mobility of your force as well as the correct use of your most mobile units. A force in which the best use is made of the mobility of all types of unit will be all the

more ready to exploit openings, to reinforce success, to close gaps in its ranks and to react swiftly to unexpected enemy moves. Units which combine high mobility with strong combat potential (e.g. the units of 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions in "Afrika Korps", the heavy cavalry and Swedish cavalry in "Musket & Pike") are powerful indeed and should be held for such roles as outflanking manoeuvres and as a strong mobile reserve. Conversely they should not be wasted in defensive or holding roles: your slower units, provided that they are strong enough, should be the secure pivot on which your army manoeuvres.

In order that mobility can be used to very best effect remember to make maximum use of road networks and open ground to enhance movement and avoid, whenever possible, committing your main force to areas which will restrict its mobility — don't send Panzer gruppe into the Pripet Marshes!

Flexibility

Despite the need to select and maintain one's aim there is no point in following a set plan rigidly especially when circumstances have changed. As the game proceeds be ever-ready to alter your plans to exploit your opponent's mistakes, provided that you are still moving towards the main aim: for example, you may have started with the intention of turning your opponent's flank and, lo and behold, in reacting to your moves he over-stretches his line thus presenting you with a marvellous opportunity to break through his centre and cut off half his force. In that case change your attack accordingly: your immediate object is the crippling of his force and an unexpected opportunity to speed the process has presented itself.

At other times, it may become apparent that a particular approach is going to come to nothing: if so, admit it to yourself without delay and try a new or an alternative plan — there is no point in reinforcing failure.

A final word — to attain Flexibility you must bear in mind the internal Mobility of your force and you will find a strong, well-placed reserve a near-essential.

Co-operation

We now come to the first of the three Principles of War which have less direct application to board wargames but which still have a role. In most games a single player controls the forces of one side thus doing away with any danger of the sort of failure in co-operation which can bedevil live operations. However what can be forgotten is the need to co-ordinate the moves and attacks of different groups of units so that the success of one can aid another. On a lower level the combination of different types of unit to get the best out of the combat factors available comes under Co-operation; a unit with a poor combat factor but high mobility is ideal for moving round to an enemy unit's rear, cutting off its retreat while slower but more powerful units attack 3-1 frontally. In "Panzergruppe Guderian" the Divisional Integrity rule invokes the principle of Co-operation as does the Combined Arms Attack rule in "Napoleon's Last Battles". "Mech War '77" with its multiplicity of different types of units and weapons makes 'Co-operation' (in the sense of best use of combined forces) a must.

Administration

Non-existent in many games and an abstraction in others in the form of Supply rules: these rules may require no more than the maintenance of a supply route or they may make use of expendable supply counters to support attacks. If you are playing a game in which supply routes apply then always remember that the attainment and security of these lines must form part of your operational plan and that your opponent's plan may well include a move against your supply lines rather than directly against your forces.

When you have the problem of expendable supply counters to deal with ("Afrika Korps"; "Panzer Armee Afrika"; "Seelowe") then their correct deployment and economic use becomes essential to maintaining Offensive Action: always time and position your attacks so that one supply unit can support the maximum number and, if possible, support every attack taking place in one turn. And keep your supplies moving up and to the right places: if you find your carefully planned offensive inoperable simply because you didn't have your supplies where you wanted them you certainly won't be the first gamer to find himself in that fix but that will be no consolation.

Maintenance of Morale

Cardboard counters have no cardboard wives or children, never read letters and don't care whether their supplies are hot or cold!

In some games, though, units may suffer loss of morale or disruption which necessitates their being revived in some way. In these cases always bear in mind the likelihood of demoralisation or disruption and be ready to counter it. If leader counters play a part in restoring morale then ensure that they spread across your front so that no unit is ever too far from succour. If units have to be withdrawn from enemy zones of control in order to recover, then don't omit to do this whenever possible: in particular have reserve units standing by to relieve demoralized ones. In short, ensure that the best conditions for the restoration of lost morale or for undistruption are ever present.

There, then, are the ten Principles of War: if you find them of help in pursuing future games to a more successful conclusion then this article will have succeeded in its object of helping the less-experienced gamer to marshal his thoughts. To sum up:

1. Decide on your objective and go for it.
2. Keep your opponent uncertain as to your likely future moves and over your exact stacking.
3. Play an aggressive game.
4. Hit him hard where it hurts and do maximum damage.
5. But don't use a sledge hammer to crack a nut.
6. Use mobility as sword and shield and use it to best advantage.
7. Be flexible in your plans and in your dispositions; maintain a reserve.
8. Co-ordinate operations and get the best out of your different units' various characteristics.
9. Guard supply lines and get maximum effect out of your supply counters.
10. Be poised to revive disrupted/demoralised units as quickly as possible.