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Auftragstaktik in the United States’ AirLand Battle Doctrine



ABSTRACT

The AirLand Battle doctrine is often seen as an epoch-making new concept that changed how the United States approached war and warfare. The doctrine is also referred to as the adaptation of the principles of Auftragstaktik into the American military theory.

The Auftragstaktik is the product of the great military theorists of the German school of military science in the 19th Century – Scharnhorst, Clausewitz, and Moltke. This idea created the highest level of decentralized mission command. But the Auftragstaktik is more than a tactical theory, it is an institutional culture.

In contrast, the AirLand Battle doctrine uses a more conservative concept of command and control. Although it gives officers more freedom than before, it seeks to standardize the execution of missions and tasks.

KEYWORDS

Auftragstaktik, AirLand Battle, command and control

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FROM JOMINI TO MOLTKE

The „mainstream” vision of troop leadership generally considered direct control and rigorous command to run along the chain of command. Modern military science, like most social sciences, evolved during the Enlightenment, so its most important basic works were created in the first half of the 1800s. One of the most respected military thinkers of the era was Antoine-Henri Jomini,¹ who laid the scientific foundations for military science. At the same time, however, he treated the war as a phenomenon that could be fully scientifically investigated, subtracting from it factors over which there is no control.²

Jomini’s contemporary, Carl von Clausewitz,³ probably the most cited military theorist, alongside Sun Tzu,⁴ went against his views. The Prussian thinker thought war is more unpredictable and variable, and its principles are based on the fact that it can be in this unpredictable, ever-changing environment, which he calls the ‘*fog of war*’. His ideas can be more paralleled with Sun Tzu’s philosophical ideas — but rather in a modern version of that, which relies on German philosophy.

Clausewitz learned largely from his mentor what he professed about leadership. The Military Academy, led by Gerhard von Scharnhorst,⁵ placed great emphasis on training young officers. The school he led abolished officer appointments based on social status and encouraged young officers to make independent decisions. The goal of Scharnhorst was the officers of the Military Academy to transform the Prussian General Staff and create a more decentralized and efficient military command structure.⁶

From the point of view of the subject, the most important result of Clausewitz’s main work, *On War*, is that since it treats war as a non-exact, measurable concept, it is also more relaxed about command. Clausewitz defines a good commander as a ‘*genius of war*’, which he believes

¹ 6 March 1779 – 24 March 1869; He was a French-Swiss military officer, a contemporary of Clausewitz. From 1805 he served as a colonel in the staff of Marshal Ney, but he also made many enemies among Napoleon’s senior officers, so in 1813 he left France and entered Russian service. He wrote several works about military science and art of warfare. He influenced Clausewitz. Jomini’s principles mainly deal with war geometry and cartography, and he is considered the theoretical creator of modern logistics. (See more: SHY 1986. 143–185.)

² JOMINI 2008.

³ Carl Philipp Gottfried von Clausewitz (1st June 1780. – 16th November 1831.). Prussian general and military theorist. During the Napoleonic Wars he served in the Russian Army. His most notable work, *On War (Vom Krieg)* is one of the most cited work on military theory. (See more: PARET 1986. 186–213.)

⁴ Ancient Chinese general, and military thinker. His most famous work is *The Art of War*. The work was published in Japan in 760 C.E., where it became popular with military leaders, but in the Western world only became known in the 20th century. Basically, it explains the principles of war in the style of ancient Chinese philosophy. (BRADFORD 2001. 134–135.)

⁵ Gerhard Johann David von Scharnhorst (12 November 1775 – 28 June 1813). He was a German-Prussian military officer, the founder of the Prussian Military Academy, one of the pioneers of modern military education. (See more: Gerhard Johann David von Scharnhorst. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gerhard-Johann-David-von-Scharnhorst>)

⁶ See more: WHITE 1989. and GÖRLITZ 2010.

is a kind of sense, a talent because a complex understanding of the art of warfare cannot be taught. It is not enough for a good commander to be brave, it must bear the spiritual burdens of the responsibilities entrusted to it. Clausewitz also states that “*A major gulf exists between a commander-in-chief [...] and the senior generals immediately subordinate to him ...*”,⁷ however, it stresses that it is also very important that the subordinated positions – including battalion and company commanders – have officers with sufficient abilities: „*Appropriate talent is needed at all levels if distinguished service is to be performed.*”⁸

While it may seem at first that Scharnhorst’s dedication to young officers runs counter to Clausewitz’s principles, it is far from the case! Clausewitz followed Scharnhorst’s principles, and their education continued at the officer’s academy under his leadership. Helmuth von Moltke also studied at the Military Academy in Berlin.⁹ He was the theorist who created the Auftragstaktik.

The essence of Auftragstaktik is to decentralize mission execution, giving greater autonomy as you go down the chain of command, all the way to the level of companies or even platoons.¹⁰ This may sound simple, but in reality, it requires a very high level of trust on the part of the Commander-in-Chief and higher unit commanders, as well as the wide sharing of information with lower-ranking and senior officers, and in many cases with petty officers. It is also important that subordinate officers and petty officers, who will lead the troops in combat at the tactical level, have a full and global understanding of the war plan and are aware of their role within it.

Moltke based his principles on a simple and seemingly clear observation: the changes in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, mainly due to the increase in the number of troops in the armies, the dimensions of the battlefields have been widened, and became practically impossible for a commander to see the entire front, thus it became necessary to share the responsibility of command. The other problem he observed is that if commanders-in-chief rigidly stick to their ideas, regardless of the situation or the possibilities, it can lead to disaster. Moltke sums up this problem with his often-paraphrased sentence: “*No plan of operations survives the first collision with the main body of the enemy.*”¹¹

As above mentioned, Auftragstaktik is not a strategy, tactic, or easy-to-transpose method, but an institutional culture.¹² It was this institutional culture that defined German warfare approximately for the next century. One of the most important documents from this period is the *Truppenführung*, that is, the handbook for officers of the *Wehrmacht*,¹³ compiled for officers.

⁷ CLAUSEWITZ 2007. 58.

⁸ CLAUSEWITZ 2007. 59.

⁹ Helmut Karl Bernhard von Moltke (26 October 1800 – 24 April 1891) was a German military officer, military theorist and commander-in-chief of the Prussian armed forces during the Prussian-Austrian War of 1866 and the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871. (See more: HOLBORN 1986.)

¹⁰ The principles of the theory were laid down by Moltke in his instructions entitled ‘*Aus den Verordnungen für die höheren Truppenführer vom 24. Juni 1869*’ after the Prussian-Austrian war (in English translation: HUGHES 2009. 171–224.). It is the first German military manual specifically designed for troop leading officers.

¹¹ HUGHES 2009. 45.

¹² CZEGLÉDI 2018. 224–225.

¹³ The success of the *Wehrmacht* between 1939 and 1942 also greatly depended on the spirit in which they trained their officers and the institutional culture prevailed. The more Adolf Hitler began to take control of the fighting, the more the performance of the troops decreased. (Of course, I do not wish to trace the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II back to only one factor, I merely make an interesting observation. The finiteness of supply and human resources undoubtedly plays a significant role in the decline and failure.)

Kampfgruppen,¹⁴ or *ad hoc* task forces, also played a significant role in the success of the *Wehrmacht*. They also derive from decentralized Command and Control (C2),¹⁵ as commanders on the front had the opportunity and the power to create a combat group capable of performing separate tasks from the subordinate units, assembled for some purpose. It is worth noting that in part these *ad hoc* combat groups later served as a model for task forces often used by the United States.¹⁶

The armed forces of the United States have a much more conservative view¹⁷ of C2 and individual leadership. In his book, called *Team of Teams*, Stanley McChrystal traces the operation of armies back to the reductionist organizational thinking of Taylorism,¹⁸ also known as scientific management theory.

This does not mean that the German armies have not historically relied on the same basic structure. Throughout modern history, armed forces around the world have been built around a similar system. At the same time, it is important to see that the decentralized system of the Germans did not make the continuity of the chain of command from the lowest to the top essential, since it also gave subordinate officers the opportunity to make decisions. In contrast, the American or other contemporary armed forces operate according to short, concise yet rigorous instructions that go from top to bottom, also try to reduce the chaos of war and the number of potential variables by reducing the decision-making power of each officer assigned to the lower levels to almost zero.

¹⁴ Its roots appeared in the First World War. Erwin Rommel, among others, has led *ad hoc* task forces several times, for example in Romania, or during the joint breakthrough of the Austro-Hungarian and German troops at Caporetto. (For more information about events, see ROMMEL 1979.) The tactics and fighting style they developed also provided the basis for the *Sturmtruppen*, with which the Germans tried to force a decisive breakthrough on the Western Front in 1918.

¹⁵ The exercise of authority and direction by a properly designated commander over assigned and attached forces in the accomplishment of the mission. (*DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* 2021. 40.)

¹⁶ In both cases, the concepts *Kampfgruppe* and Task Force have a common feature being created from subunits of several formations to accomplish a specific goal. They are also similar in size, usually battalions or regiments. A significant difference, however, is that in the United States, these combat groups are created at the behest of the Secretary of Defense or even the President, going through the chain of command, while in the case of the *Wehrmacht*, commanders at the tactical level were also given the opportunity to create independent combat groups.

¹⁷ It is worth noting that the Western Allies tried a similar approach to the *Auftragstaktik* during World War II. Before the Normandy landings, the involvement of subordinate officers in the planning – at the level of the company and the stage – played a significant role in the preparation of the paratroopers, the sharing of the necessary target information, and the practice of independent, small group task execution. This is also due to the fact that the fully dispersed paratroopers who mostly missed the target area successfully carried out their tasks. (See: AMBROSE 1992. and AMBROSE 1994.)

¹⁸ Fredrick Winslow Taylor (March 20, 1856 – March 21, 1915) was the creator of scientific management theory. The essence of the concept named after him (Taylorism) is that all organizational units can be rationalized, their operation can be made effective in such a way that the tasks are broken down into smaller parts, and the performers perform tasks provided only with the information and knowledge necessary. Basically, the (bureaucratic) structure of corporations and state bodies, as well as the chain of command of armies, is based on this principle. (Frederick W. Taylor. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Frederick-W-Taylor>)

THE AIRLAND BATTLE CONCEPT

The Cold War arms race overshadowed the possibility of war with conventional weapons, and defense policy think tanks and military planners saw the future more – again – in the dominance of the Air Force and the deterrent and destructive capability of nuclear weapons. This created an „*institutional culture*” based on firepower and maneuvering that was unable to cope with the overwhelming firepower of the Korean War and then failed¹⁹ during the guerrilla warfare in Vietnam.

The U.S. political and military leadership, in the wake of the Vietnam fiasco and subsequent military interventions, revised its previous position and set new directions for the armed forces in the mid-1980s. On the political front, this was mainly embodied in the formal Weinberger Doctrine of 1984, which sought to set out clear directions for policymakers on when it was „worth” and when military intervention in a conflict was not worth it. In the military field, the changes were motivated by a potential war against the Soviet Union superiority of strength and numbers in conventional armaments. In this certain point of view Europe was considered the potential battleground. By the early 1980s, a new doctrine, AirLand Battle, was born to counter the Soviet threat.

All-armed operations are considered the most important foundation of the AirLand Battle. Chapter 7 - Conduct of Operations states: “*Victory on the battlefield will hinge on fully synchronizing combat forces.*” It is interesting to note, however, that the doctrine did not count on the Army special operation forces – it refers to them as unconventional forces in other places – and lacks Air Force units.²⁰

Nevertheless, the section on airspace coordination stresses the importance of exchanging and transferring information in order to avoid conflicts, but it is also because of this section that serious questions arise as to how much AirLand Battle is considered as combined arms? At this stage, the doctrine indicates that each unite is free to operate in the combat zone and relates to its own chain of command to the appropriate military command.²¹ However, this is a clear obstacle to real cooperation.

Special forces are envisioned as part of the larger strategy, with their primary task being to carry out diversion, psychological warfare and intelligence operations in the enemy hinterland, which can be considered „classic”. Rangers would play a more significant role, responsible for carrying out time-sensitive missions with air subdivisions dedicated only to the operation. The doctrine stresses the need for rangers to immediately pass on up-to-date information in the execution of missions.²² It is worth noting here that in this case, ranger subunits play the role of quick reaction force (QRF) and may even perform Personnel Recovery/Combat Search and Rescue²³ tasks²⁴ – although this is not specifically covered by the doctrine.

¹⁹ In the case of the Vietnam War, although the defeat did not take place in a military sense, the rigid system established by previous doctrines and operating principles made it impossible to adapt to the new battlefield and enemy – the U.S. armed forces continually tried to use overwhelming firepower against the Viet-Cong and also tried to force the enemy troops into an unfavorable position by maneuvering; unsuccessfully.

²⁰ FM 100-5 1982. 7-1 – 7-7.

²¹ FM 100-5 1982. 7-21.

²² FM 100-5 1982. 7-23 – 7-24.

²³ About CSAR and PR see: LENGYEL 2020. 381–387.

²⁴ The FM 7-85 Ranger Unit Operations (1987) mentions that rangers do not have the technical and training skills necessary to evacuate the wounded, although at the same time operations commanders deployed rangers more times than QRFs when rescue operations had to be carried out.

C2 IN THE AIRLAND BATTLE

The AirLand Battle doctrine breaks with the traditional concept. Considering the growing threat posed by electronic warfare, the authors highlighted that “*Small units will often have to fight without sure knowledge about their force as a whole.*” Accordingly, it is necessary to conduct “*effective, independent operations*”.²⁵

The doctrine in Chapter 2, titled *Combat Fundamentals*, covers the issue of leaders, leadership and advises commanders over six pages. According to the authors of the doctrine, the crucial element of combat power is proper leadership. The task of commanders is to prepare their forces for combat and to clearly lay down their goals. Like Moltke’s principles, AirLand Battle aims to create routines²⁶ that can standardize task execution.²⁷

The doctrine stated that “*Commanders who are flexible rather than mechanical will win decisive victories*”.²⁸ however, it incorporates „brakes” or limiting factors into driving. Subordinates must act in accordance with the commander’s instructions and limit their individual choice, for in the case of a changed environment if the previous orders are not considered correct, they must first notify their commander, and only with his permission and authority can they change the previous plan. If the subordinate is unable to reach his commander, he may make an independent decision – however, he must follow the course of his commander’s thought as best as possible and report as soon as possible. They also make it a „privilege” for the commander to collect and summarize information and then to issue the appropriate commander – even if he encourages it to be short.²⁹

²⁵ FM 100-5 1982. 1-3.

²⁶ The doctrine identifies seven *imperatives of combat*, these are the followings:

- Insure unity of effort.
- Direct friendly strengths against enemy weaknesses.
- Designate and sustain the main effort.
- Sustain the fight.
- Move fast, strike hard, and finish rapidly.
- Use terrain and weather.
- Protect the force.

²⁷ FM 100-5 1982. 2-5 – 2-7.

²⁸ It is interesting to see how the ‘*decisive battle*’ concept of victory come back at the dawn of the 21st century, even though the First and Second World Wars, and even the Vietnam War, proved that it was impossible to win a great, decisive victory over the enemy, and the war became much more of a long series of battles, at the end of which the exhaustion of one side leads to victory. A counterexample may be the Gulf War, although it should not be forgotten that coalition forces there carried out a limited-purpose operation against Iraqi troops, preceded and established by a thoroughly prepared air campaign, and the aim was not to completely destroy the enemy’s operational capabilities. The AirLand Battle doctrine was written in preparation for a clash against the Soviet Union, against which a grand final battle is unthinkable.

²⁹ FM 100-5 1982. 2-4 – 2-8.

AUFTRAGSTAKTIK AND AIRLAND BATTLE

It can be seen from the above, the AirLand Battle concept, although it contains innovative and modernizing ideas, is not the resurgence of the Auftragstaktik.

John T. Nelsen II notes in his 1987 article on Auftragstaktik and the benefits of decentralized combat control that the AirLand Battle concept is wrongly linked to this principle of German military culture. It also points out that even though the term is used in several places, such as the Bundeswehr,³⁰ it is not used in its original sense, whereas combined with the possibilities of modern technology, it would be a highly efficient combat control system.³¹

The concept was a great step forward to use the fundamentals and principles of Moltke in the dawn of the 21st Century. However, the experiences of the Gulf War marked a different direction to the American military theory. The think tanks and theorists moved toward – once again – maneuver theory and the concept of ‘Shock and Awe’.³²

Although the modern combat environments, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, or most recently Ukraine, justify the need for a new approach. In low-intensity conflicts and against guerilla-like-enemies the decentralized combat forces are more effective than the rigid structures. In Iraq, between 2004 and 2008, when commanded the Joint Special Operations Command, Stanley McChrystal established a similar operating environment to the Auftragstaktik.³³

This example proves that the Auftragstaktik can have a place in modern warfare, and if not its full implementation, but the transfer of some of its elements can benefit the armed forces, so it would be important to incorporate the principles into military education.

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³⁰ Name of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Germany (Bundesrepublik Deutschland).

³¹ NELSEN II 1987. 21–33.

³² ULLMAN 1996. 38.

³³ MCCRYSTAL et. al. 2015. 87–134.

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