

### Erwin Rommel's "Lost Book" and the Purpose of Tactical Education

The only thing that is predictable about armed conflicts is that they are unpredictable. In peacetime, we can try to keep up with changes in military technology and potential trouble spots. In wartime, however, keeping abreast of developments is nearly impossible. Weapons that were the mainstay of a nation's arsenal can become obsolete in a matter of weeks - witness the fate of both the anti-tank rifle and the light tank in the Second World War.

Cherished ideas about how to fight are equally fragile. Tactical maneuvers that succeeded in one battle may fail in the next. This is especially true if the last battle in which a tactical scheme was tested was during the last war. The horse cavalry formations that saved Poland from the Red Army in the Russo-Polish War of 1920-1921 failed to repeat their success in 1939. The French army of 1940 was well suited to fight the battles of 1918 but unable to cope with the demands of contemporary reality.

The problem with the fragility of military tactics, techniques, and technology is that it makes military training far more difficult than any other sort of training. In sports, a good coach knows the rules of the game - both those that are in the rule book and those that are inherent in the equipment, playing field, etc.. He trains his team to push as hard as they can within the constraints of those rules, so that they get the maximum points without landing in either the penalty box or the hospital. The commander intent on training his troops for war, however, does not have such an advantage. Beyond some elementary principles of human behavior, the rules under which a war will be fought are only disclosed during the course of battle.

It was with this in mind that Erwin Rommel, the famous "Desert Fox" of the Second World War, wrote *Missions for Platoon and Company (Aufgaben für Zug und Kompanie)*, a small book containing a series of tactical exercises for small unit leaders. This book was very popular. First published in 1935, it went through at least six printings. It was still being sold when, in May of 1945, Germany collapsed.

Unlike Rommel's other book, *Infantry Attacks*, *Missions for Platoon and Company* is not well known to readers of English

language military history. Even Rommel's biographers fail to make mention of it. Indeed, to the English speaking public, this work can accurately be described as Rommel's "lost book."

As readers of *Infantry Attacks*, are well aware, Rommel was an infantry leader for most of his career. *Missions for Platoon and Company* reflects this infantry orientation - all the imaginary units which the student is called upon to command consist entirely of forces drawn from a German Army infantry regiment of the time. Even though the book was first published in 1935, well after the German had begun to experiment with tanks, there is no discussion of friendly armored forces. Only the enemy is assumed to have tanks!

What is notable about the exercises, which begin with a movement to contact conducted by a single rifle platoon and end with a company sized assault supported by artillery and all of the heavy weapons organic to an infantry regiment, is the lack of a "correct" solution. Instead, each portion of an exercise is followed by a "possible solution" that serves primarily to lead the student on to the next stage of the problem. Neither is there any means of "grading" a student on his answer. That is considered to be a subjective process and is left entirely to the discretion of the instructor.

The lack of "school solutions" and grades in *Missions for Platoon and Company* does not mean that Rommel had anything in common with today's educational relativists who are afraid to damage a student's "fragile psyche" by telling him when he is right and when he is wrong. On the contrary, the lack of prefabricated answers at the back of the book make Rommel's exercises far more demanding. The Rommel's student was not only required to come up with a solution on his own, but he was also required to explain the reasoning behind his decision. (In German this was known as the "*Entscheidung mit eine Begründung*" - decision with a basis.)

The value of this sort of education can be seen in Rommel's own career. In the winter of 1939-1940, after almost thirty years as an infantryman, he took command of a half-trained *Panzer* division. Six months later, Rommel led this division into battle against the French with great success that foreshadowed his later victories as the "Desert Fox". That he was able to both whip

his division into shape and teach himself how to use tanks in battle in less than half a year indicates that the in depth knowledge of warfare that Rommel had gained in the course of his infantry career was applicable to his "second career" as an armor leader.

This is not to say that the "rules" of armored warfare in 1940 were the same as the rules of infantry combat at the same time. Rommel was able to move smoothly between the two forms of fighting, however, because his professional education, consisting mostly of exercises like the ones in *Missions for Platoon and Company* and, of course, combat experience in the First World War, had taught him to think not in terms of rules. He needed no acronyms to remind him of the "principles of war". Instead, he saw combat in terms of pictures and relationships. In other words, Rommel had formulated a "general theory of combat" that was far more sophisticated than his ability to express it words.

In a sense, such a "general theory" is like a complex algebraic equation. While there are a few constants (e.g. human behavior and the effect of weather on visibility, for example) there are many variables (e.g. the relative values of fire and maneuver or the relative strengths of the offense and the defense). The key to applying such an equation to tactical decision making lies in determining the values to be plugged in in place of the variables.

Rommel's ability to do this can be illustrated by his reaction to a "crisis" during the battle for Arras in May of 1940. While moving through an area thought to be free of enemy troops, the forward elements of Rommel's division ran into a counter-attacking force of British "Matilda" tanks. Better armored than the German tanks of the time, the Matildas cut a swath through the *Panzers* that Rommel sent against them and were soon dangerously close to the German division's rear areas. In desperation, Rommel sent his anti-aircraft battalion into combat against the British tanks. The 88mm anti-aircraft guns with which this battalion was equipped proved to be more effective than anyone had imagined and the British attack, which had threatened to throw the entire German offensive off-track, was stopped within a few minutes.

The use of 88mm anti-aircraft guns was to become one of Rommel's hallmarks in the desert fighting that gave him such a prominent place in the military history of

this century. It is interesting to note that his British opponents were also equipped with a similar weapon - the 3.7 inch anti-aircraft gun. Unlike Rommel, however, most British officers of the time had been trained to see war in terms of copy-book maxims and carefully phrased definitions. The idea of using of an anti-aircraft gun for anything other than shooting at aircraft, if it occurred to them at all, would have struck them as ridiculous.

The fact that the designers of the German 88mm guns had had the foresight to provide them with optics suitable for ground targets does not deprive Rommel of the credit for thinking quickly in an unexpected tactical situation. Likewise, the fact that Commonwealth forces (led by the Australians) eventually made use of their 3.7 inch gun in the anti-tank role should not detract from their failure to make use of it when they needed it most - in the desert campaigns of 1941 and 1942. Weapons often have unexploited features and, given enough time, most armies will learn from mistakes made in combat. The trick is having sufficient flexibility of mind to make the most of the available weapons from the very start of a campaign.

We cannot afford to make similar mistakes in the next war. The introduction of a new weapon or new ways of using old weapons may make our current doctrine, SOPs, and

battle drills obsolete in a matter of hours. Only if leaders have received a sound tactical education can they survive the loss of old assumptions about how a given set of weapons interact, develop new assumptions that reflect the reality, and press on to victory. Providing such an education will not be easy; it is far easier to make a student memorize current procedures than it is to provide him with the means of developing his own.

This can be seen by looking at the first problem in Rommel's book - one that places the student in command of the third platoon of an infantry company serving as the advance guard for a regiment. The company is reinforced by a half-platoon of two tripod mounted Maxim guns and a single anti-tank gun, and is marching towards the east. The action begins as the platoon approaches the eastern edge of the very thick "B"-Woods (marked on the map by a thin grey line.)

The infantry point (the first platoon) is 600 meters in front of the company. The company commander (played by the instructor) receives the report of a cavalryman from the cavalry point. In the distance, towards the east, some shots are heard.

The company commander calls the student to his side and explains that "A cavalry patrol has determined that there is a weak enemy in

H-Village (5 kilometers eastwards of here)."

The company commander then gives the following order:

"The company deploys itself as follows. Second Platoon and company troops to the right. Third platoon to the left of the road. The heavy machine gun section follows the company on the road at a distance of 300 meters. I will ride with the Second Platoon."

At this point, the student must give the orders appropriate to the situation.

The "author's solution" provided by Rommel would have the platoon commander order, by means of signals, "March direction left of the road. Platoon in wedge formation. Interval widened to 150 meters."

After this deployment, Rommel would have the platoon commander inform the squad leaders about the enemy and friendly situation and send out security. It is important to note, however, as Rommel did in the introduction to his little book, that this was not the only solution to the problem.

