

Role of Intuition in Military Command

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Introduction

Historically, the use of intuition by commanders to anticipate events in battle to exploit fleeting opportunities has remained obscure. One likely reason is that it has not been a fashionable subject for the great military commanders to talk about, being outside the realm of a logical thought process. Recently researchers have begun to unravel the aura of mystery and give scientific explanations to intuition.

John Adair¹ defines intuition as a power or faculty of immediately apprehending that something is the case, without a reasoning process. There is no deductive or inductive step-by-step reasoning and no conscious analysis of the situation. The object of intuition, also called the sixth sense, is truth in some form or other.² The mind simply discerns the truth about a situation or a person quickly without a long deliberate effort.

The conduct of war will increasingly involve concepts of multi-directional and multi-dimensional, less linear and less dense, and simultaneous operations. Speed will be the essence in the conduct of operations. The mobility of the forces and the fluidity of the battle will further increase the degree of uncertainty, making the job of commanders at all levels more difficult. Commanders will require the vision to anticipate the course of events and the determination to act quickly to influence the outcome. Intuitive skills could provide a commander with rapid insight into

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problems, speeding up his decision making and better equipping him to handle the pace of modern operations.³ Therefore, it is imperative that efforts should continue to understand intuition better in order to provide an institutionalized framework for its use in the conduct of military operations. This paper examines the role of intuition in modern command philosophies and recommends measures to develop intuition in commanders.

Thoughts of Military Thinkers

Clausewitz analyzed that a commander cannot grapple with the chaos on the battlefield unless he depends on his “coup d'oeil”.⁴ He defined it as the quick recognition of a truth that the mind would ordinarily miss or perceive only after long study and reflection. Clausewitz recognized that circumstances vary so enormously in war, and are so indefinable, that the man responsible for evaluating them has to use intuition to perceive the truth at every point. The problem is further accentuated due to uncertainty created by the lack of accurate and timely intelligence.

Jomini and Sun Tzu also identified intuition as one of the paramount qualities of a general. Sun Tzu pointed out that not every good soldier can be equally successful as a commander. This implies that education and experience alone are not enough and that special qualities like intuition and genius are required for effective command. However, Jomini adds one caveat on the role of the military genius in modern war by suggesting that his intuition may have become somewhat less important in the age of mass mobilization.⁵ He cites the example of Napoleon, whose failure to recognize this trend may have ultimately contributed to his downfall. This anomaly probably resulted from Jomini's faulty characterization of command in the chess player mode.

It is evident that intuition was recognized as a necessary quality for a

commander throughout history. However, it remained inexplicable and the great military thinkers inadvertently linked it with a “military genius” who was a creative, imaginative and experienced leader. The intuition of the “military genius” was not irrational behavior but reflected a different mode of rationality in which his intuitive decisions could be explained *ex post facto*.⁶ It was accepted that commanders are rarely in control over events on the battlefield and the successful commander is not the one who carefully implements his original plan, but rather the one who intuitively “reads” the chaos on the battlefield to take advantage of passing opportunities. However, modern commanders having trained staff and information gathering/processing technology at their disposal appear to be better placed to command their force effectively. This could result in unrealistic expectations and an illusion that a commander is fully informed of what is going on.

Historical Case Study of Use of Intuition

To place intuition in proper perspective, it is worthwhile to examine a contemporary battle where intuition was successfully exercised. While many Indian military leaders have given detailed first hand accounts of conduct of operations during the 1971 Indo – Pakistan war, none of them has included an instance where a decision was arrived at based on just a hunch, rather than a detailed appreciation of the obtaining situation. On the other hand, Lt. Gen. (Retd.) FS Lodi, Pakistan Army cited a vivid and relevant example of successful use of intuition in the 1971 war against India during his lecture at the Command and Staff College at Quetta.⁷ During the war he was commanding an infantry brigade on the Lahore front and had captured about 20 square miles of Indian Territory, including many villages. The Indian Army put in a night attack by 14 RAJPUT supported by a squadron of tanks and recaptured a village, China Bedi Chand, defended by a company of the Baloch Regiment. The situation was not too clear. The Baloch Co. reported that his whole company had been

wiped out, which was confirmed by another forward company commander who reported “the enemy pouring in across his left flank.” Despite corroborated reports of an adverse situation, the Brigade Commander did not believe them but was somehow certain that only the village had been lost. He felt that the situation was adequately stable to launch a counter attack. He studied the map for a few minutes doing a quick mental appreciation in the process and decided to counter attack as the occupation of the village by the Indian troops would outflank his forward defences, which could later be unhinged. He had already moved his reserves consisting of two rifle companies and a squadron of old Sherman tanks less two troops, in the general direction of the village the day before. The village was retaken by a quick counter attack, and 34 Indian POWs were captured. He found to his surprise that the Baloch Co. had pulled back with few casualties and no enemy troops were pouring in as reported.

Conclusions of Scientific Research

Psychologists and scientists have been studying decision making for quite sometime and have put forth a number of theories to explain intuition. Gary A Klein, a psychologist sponsored by the US Army Research Institute, concluded after extensive survey that decisions are made either analytically or they are recognition based.⁸ In the first case, persons arrived at a decision after a deliberate process of weighing the pros and cons of the alternatives available. This is analogous to the military appreciation process used by us. In the latter category, persons did not deliberate over the options when under pressure. It appeared that they were not attempting to find the best possible solution but arrived at a “workable”, “timely” and “cost effective” solution quickly. These decisions appeared to come from a “feeling” which apparently is intuition.

Scientists have identified that intuitive people share one characteristic - they are experts in a particular field of knowledge. Hence, intuition or

battlefield vision becomes possible due to war fighting expertise or mastering war fighting knowledge. Research in cognitive psychology has established that experts possess a broad but detailed knowledge base that is organized into rapidly accessible categories which accounts for intuitive thought.⁹ The process of accessing this information is not a conscious one. Psychologists believe that four characteristics linked with organization of expert knowledge are essential for intuitive thought:¹⁰

- Experts are able to quickly impose meaning on a complex pattern of information. This reflects efficient use of a detailed knowledge base and not a superior perceptual ability.
- Experts exhibit extraordinary speed in performing mental tasks and solve problems quickly by recognizing a specific pattern of events. This triggers a sequence of problem solving responses by matching the current situation with a similar historical or experiential event in the memory.
- Experts rapidly interpret and give meaning to information based on general principles stored in their memory.
- Experts have superior attention and memory capacities due to organized structure of knowledge.

Therefore, research on intuition has given meaning to the ethereal thoughts of the great military thinkers. “Military genius” and “coup d’oeil” of Clausewitz are synonymous with expert war fighters and battlefield vision. JFC Fuller’s remark that a well stored memory is a great asset for a general and should be like a fully stored library is in line with the rapid accessibility of the expert knowledge base.¹¹ From expert knowledge comes the mental capability referred to as intuition and it can be developed through expertise.

Nature of Modern Command Philosophies

Command is a function that has to be exercised continuously, if the army is to exist and operate. Broadly, command can be exercised in two ways. First is to plan everything in detail, maintaining a tight control during execution and centralization of the decision making process. Second is to fix the decision thresholds as far down the hierarchy as possible with freedom of action granted to the subordinates within the overall concept of operations. Historically, those armies which did not turn their troops into automatons or attempt to control everything from the top have been more successful.¹² German and Israeli Armies have tended to follow the second method whereas the Anglo-American approach has been more biased towards the first method of command. However, presently most of the armies of the world are moving towards directive control and mission oriented orders to cope with the fluidity of the modern warfare. Mission oriented command system is the essence of the doctrines of maneuver warfare and integrated battle.¹³

A command philosophy provides the basis for exercise of command. The main elements of the modern command philosophies are:-

- The importance of making a timely decision. The major factors in decision making are the amount of accurate information and time available.
- Understanding the intention of the commander, both generally and specifically.
- Unambiguous responsibility to fulfill that intention based on initiative to act within any freedom of action given or purposefully in the absence of further orders.

Pressures on the Commander

A commander striving to complete his mission within the parameters of the modern command philosophies is under tremendous stress and strain due to the combined effect of a number of factors, which are discussed below.

Commanders in war strive for certainty about the state and intentions of the enemy's forces, environment in which war is fought - weather, terrain, radioactivity and the location of own forces.¹⁴ To achieve optimum results, a commander needs to be as certain as possible about these factors. In spite of automated and electronic battlefields in which everything that exists can be seen and everything that can be seen can be hit, certainty remains elusive. At the start of the air campaign against Iraq in the First Gulf War, General Schwarzkopf commented, "sitting in the headquarters there was no way for us to tell at first what was going on. As each scrap of information came in, I scrawled it down on a yellow pad".¹⁵ The reasons for uncertainty on the battlefield are:-

- Clausewitz's observation that a great part of information obtained in war is contradictory, a still greater part is false and by far the greatest part is uncertain remains true even today.
- War brings to the fore some of the most powerful emotions like fear, anger, vindictiveness and hatred. The human mind can distort information at any stage of the intelligence cycle. A demand for more information prior to action may well represent an escape from the stress of real decision making and avoiding any calculated risks.
- War consists of two independent wills confronting each other, with each side free to operate and willing to double-cross the other; certainty is impossible.

- The human element still remains more important than the technical element in any situation and hence the unpredictable nature of the decisions of the commanders. Communications and information processing technology are merely components of a command system of which the commander is most important. If we cannot guarantee certainty with technology then the alternative is to organize our command system in such a way that we reduce the damaging effects of uncertainty.

Present day commanders at all levels will be running against time to gather information, evolve a plan and bring to bear the combat power of their force at the point of decision due to wide dispersion and high mobility of the combined arms force. Ability to exploit fleeting opportunities by subordinate commanders using their initiative is the central theme of the mission oriented command. Due to technological advances commanders will be flooded with information from a plethora of sources. Within the constraints of time they will have to judge the reliability of the available information, discard redundant information and arrive at a decision.

Utility of Intuition in Command

Intuition can help us to reduce the subjectivity dilemma. Sun Tzu and Clausewitz identified war as an art and not a science. Each military problem has a graduated spectrum of potentially workable solutions and not just a single optimal solution. These solutions are the product of a commander's imagination and creativity after considering various factors. An intuitive commander who can anticipate the flow of the battle will be able to function on a higher plane, seeing hidden opportunities and solutions.

Intuition can also aid the appreciation process. At first glance one may be tempted to dismiss the role of intuition in the appreciation process as

contradictory. After consideration of various factors in the appreciation process, a number of options emerge. The commander is then expected to make his decision, taking into account the pros and cons of each alternative. Advantages and disadvantages of a military plan are not objective and therefore, cannot be accurately quantified into a mathematical matrix. An attempt at this is fraught with the danger of distorting the deductions of the factors. Ultimately while making the decision, a commander is faced with subjectivity and abstractness just as the analysis of the relative strengths of the opposing forces will not predict the outcome of an engagement. A commander who can see the unfolding of a battle plan using intuition will be in a better position to select a course of action appropriate to the circumstances and achieve surprise.

Intuition also has an important role to play in dealing with information overload. The unconscious part of the mind from which intuition derives is infinite in size and has the ability to process information in parallel with the conscious. The advantage for the intuitive and imaginative commander will be that his mind will continue to process information even when his conscious is occupied with other matters.¹⁶ Despite the technological advancements in reconnaissance and surveillance devices, the intelligence picture will never be complete and accurate. Battlefield will always remain unpredictable, chaotic and non-linear; firmly placing war in the realm of art rather than science. The dynamic nature of war may simply deny the time needed to process a large volume of raw information available to the commanders these days. Commanders will perforce have to make decisions based on incomplete intelligence. There would appear to be no way of doing it except what Napoleon called - “a superior understanding” – one based on, to be sure, on training and practice, but ultimately relying on intuitive judgment than on rational calculation. Moreover, overloading the decision makers with information makes identification of underlying patterns in complicated situations difficult. It has rightly been said that “to be a successful decision maker we have to edit”.¹⁷

Intuition could also help to reduce the decision making time. The friction of battle and free will of the enemy will inevitably result in unexpected and unfamiliar battlefield conditions. While dealing with such situations intuitive commanders can use their organized knowledge base to identify constraints in the situation and quickly rule out options. Thus by reducing the number of alternatives, a commander can reduce the decision making time and arrive at a workable plan. An expert commander can quickly organize the analysis of terrain, weather, threat perception, enemy activity and disposition of forces into meaningful patterns. Thereafter, by matching these patterns with information already stored in memory through experience and historical study, decisions can be made quickly. Comparing the analytical and intuitive decision making processes, neither is good or bad.¹⁸ The key is to have a balance between the two and use them in appropriate circumstances. Deliberate and analytical thinking is apt when there is adequate time for a clearly defined task, and such an analysis can facilitate rapid cognition. In contrast, during combat situations the tendency to create data and information is best avoided.

Matching talent to tasks is an important function of command. A commander must study the personalities and characteristics of his subordinates and staff. Some will excel in a mobile, fluid battle, others are better in a set piece attack or a dogged defense. Field Marshal Montgomery estimated that he spent a third of his working hours in the consideration of personalities. A good judge of character has a gut feeling about people. His judgments may be based on unconscious perception which has the ability to interpret the emotional significance of such things as facial expression and behavior. With joint operations likely to be the norm, a commander may not know all his subordinates in detail. Intuitive people learn a great deal about someone in the early hours of their relationship, later on they may go on discovering more and more, but they are rarely in for major surprises.¹⁹

Conditions for Successful Use of Intuition

Intuition cannot function in a vacuum as solutions to military problems are not grasped from the ether. A commander must have a clear vision or purpose, a grasp of the situation and an understanding of the capabilities of the enemy and own forces. In other words, commanders need to be experts in the art of war fighting to be able to use intuition successfully. Intuition that is born out of a longer period of thought, study and experience, is more likely to be true. The relationship between a commander and his subordinates will affect intuition. The scope of initiative at different levels of command will govern the extent to which imagination and intuition can be used. If a superior commander kills initiative, then he will paralyze his subordinates' intuitive abilities. Also an intuitive commander needs to be supported by competent staff that can quickly carry out necessary staff checks to ascertain the viability of his plan and implement it. Staff officers must have the courage of conviction to present facts to the commander without bias. Montgomery's imaginative Arnhem operation was flawed because the formal appreciations had overlooked some of the vital factors.²⁰

Limitations of Intuition

Intuition is an aid available to a commander for decision making and risk assessment. But it has its own limitations which the commanders need to be aware of. The most discouraging disadvantage is that intuition is indefensible when proved wrong. Emotion and intuition have their sources close together in the hinterland of the brain. Hence strong emotions can affect intuition to a great extent. Fear, anxiety and pressure to make a rapid decision are the biggest enemies of positive intuition. Stresses and tiredness of mind or body can play havoc with the intuitive thinker's immediate comprehension of the situation. Without adequate information, an intuitive commander could let his imagination run wild

and arrive at decisions which may reflect his own wishful fantasies. It is important that intuitive decisions be subjected to a quick verification process by the staff as with decisions arrived at by a deliberate analysis of factors.

Developing Intuition

The first step is to accept intuition as a valid tool available to commanders to reduce response time for the decision cycle. This will change the current attitude amongst the officers of regarding intuition as an irrational, spatial element. The next is to learn to trust the intuitive powers. Commanders should be encouraged to be creative, to use their imagination and follow their intuition. Unfortunately, technological advances have created an impression of absolute transparency of the battlefield and playing down the human and uncertainty factors. It is important to reiterate that no war can be won by technology alone.

Leadership development in the armed forces is based on providing institutional training, operational and combat experience through appropriate assignments, and self development by individuals. Personal operational experience is the most effective way of developing expertise in the art of war fighting and putting to test the competence of the commanders. The reason being that retention of knowledge gained through experience is better and long lasting. In the present geo-strategic environment, we can only provide combat experience to our leaders in low intensity conflict situations and not for high intensity conventional wars. Therefore, the next best thing is training. Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Paul Van Riper, US Marine Corps, says that “how good peoples' decisions are under fast moving, high stress conditions of rapid cognition is a function of training, rules and rehearsal”.²¹ The aim of training to develop intuition should be to expose commanders to a varied spectrum of situations. Due to various constraints, large scale field training exercises are likely to be curtailed

further. Therefore, dependence on simulated training and war games is likely to increase. Facilities need to be created where all commanders, irrespective of their level of command, are practiced and tested under conditions of stress and strain. Exposing commanders to a variety of computer decision games will provide the necessary alternative experience to develop intuitive powers. These games should not be confined to the activities of a particular branch or service as per the background of the officer but cover the whole spectrum of war fighting. John Adair observes that for progress in occupational areas where leadership is necessary, the specialist must give way to a generalist.²²

Intuition is also closely related to imagination and creativity which is lately being referred to as strategic intuition.²³ Put simply, it can be described as a good idea which comes as a flash of insight, when one least expects it. Strategic intuition is different in the sense that a brilliant idea occurs not under pressure but in a new situation, which is when you need your best ideas. Flashes of insight lie at the heart of great achievements of all kinds throughout history. The study of creative thinking confirms that unusual originality is a sudden realization in the subconscious mind or an instinctive judgment. Dixon argues that very few intellectuals join the armed forces. Most of the officers are of average intellect.²⁴ The structured way of thinking in the army further undermines creativity and imagination. Most of our literature on creative thinking is borrowed from the corporate sector. There is an urgent need to commission studies to adapt these techniques to our requirements for developing creativity and imagination in military commanders. 

Notes

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- 5 *Ibid*, p. 150.
- 6 *Ibid*, p. 149.

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