

Military history can and must be used as a good dramatic narrative to promote service and unit identity and cohesion. This would normally be done during basic officer education, and the form should also inspire reading of military history throughout the the officer's career.

This is therefore only about advanced development of the mature professional officer about how to use military history to catalyse professional insight.

As an initial provocation:

Battlefield tours (staff rides) are only relevant because they can give the officer an impression of the character of the battlefield terrain and the actual conditions and problems of the time. Visits to military cemeteries underline the human costs of the fighting.

However, if the terrain has been changed, the rest is just military tourism: worthwhile for those interested, attractive if in a nice place in good weather, but with no relevant professional substance or possible effect.

Basic observations

- The central element and result of adequate professionalism is the ability to outline probable outcomes and risks of a course of action
- All activity of a military organisation (structure; doctrine; administration; training and education) is built on a more or less conscious understanding (theory) of what will be effective in operations

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Basic observations

- The military being a practical profession this understanding (“theory”) must to a significant degree be based on an analysis of projected experience
- All experience in a profession that cannot conduct realistic experiments must be historical

Basic observations

- All sound war studies must be based on comparative in-depth studies of historical cases

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Alfred von Schlieffen's Germany needed quick operational victories and he sought a usable template of "best practice". He chose Hannibal's victory at Cannae 216 before Christ. In a book written after his retirement and published in 1909, he presented Hannibal's scheme as the operational model for Germany's military strategy in a future continental war.

Schlieffen's "best practice" lesson extracted from Cannae:

- *The precondition for success* was that the enemy deployed with vulnerable flanks.
- The main attack should then be directed against the flanks to destroy them with own mass and reserves.
- Total destruction of the enemy force should be sought by attacking his rear with mobile troops.



Case as illustration and “best practice” guide

- Promotes direct application of that illustration rather than critical identification of difference (officers think with their memory)
- Legitimises and reinforces the already too widespread tendency of the intellectually lazy to make doctrine dogmatic

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A Danish Cold War example: The (mis)use of German operations at Arnhem 1944 as illustration of "best practice" in the reaction to air landings



The best practice illustration chosen was the successful German reaction to the British air landing at Arnhem in September 1944:

- The action of even low quality German units west of Arnhem against the 1st Airborne Division landings became the model behaviour to be copied to give the airborne units' serious casualties and block or delay their formation of effective combat elements.
- The immediate attack by all types of units on air landings within the designated area of responsibility was made doctrine in the Danish Army field manual exercised in field manoeuvres.
- The case was presented and discussed during basic officer education at the Military Academy, and during the General Staff Course, a battlefield tour was conducted that included a discussion at the Landing Zones north of Oosterbeek.

However, we were not seeking insight into why and how it was possible for the German troops to act as they did. The case therefore became a rather empty and dogmatic illustration.

Accepting the German leadership philosophy behind their troop behaviour would have been likely to undermine the contemporary wish to keep control of the action of the subordinate units as considered required on the then expected nuclear battlefield.

Another example of case as illustration: Finnish use of WW2 cases as inspiration



- I. Finnish forces defeated far superior Soviet forces in the manoeuvre Battle of Suomussalmi 7 December 1939 to 8 January 1940.
- II. Finnish forces defeated the Soviet forces by positional and mobile defence in the defensive Battle at Tale-Ihantala on the Karelian Isthmus June-July 1944.
- III. Finnish forces defeated the final massive attack of the Soviet forces by massive use of artillery in the defensive Battle of Ilomantsi 31 July to 13 August 1944.

The battles naturally inspired and defined the post-WW2 Finnish military doctrine to become de facto dogma from strategic to tactical level.

The reason why more relevant than the Danish use of the Arnhem case:

- Same enemy
- Same terrain
- Same climatic framework
- Enhances deterrence as the Soviet Union/Russia employed/employs WW2 cases as illustration in the same way

However, also the same problem as the Danish use. As Finnish LtCol Mika Kerttunen of BALTDEFCOL has underlined, the use of cases as illustrations:

- Promotes superficial, dogmatic learning to become a "one mission" officer
- Does not encourage critical investigation into fundamental changes in conditions and framework
- Does not necessarily promote general political insight.

An aerial photograph of a city, likely Rotterdam, showing a large bridge in the background and numerous buildings in the foreground, many of which are damaged or in ruins. The image is in black and white, with a faded, historical appearance.

The necessary alternative

*Use of military
history cases
mainly to deepen
professional insight*

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Case Market-Garden re-visited

- **Paradigm weakness:** Combat management culture, especially in the British Army.
- **Nepotism:** Failure in the British Army to shift promotion criteria from seniority to relevant proven leadership.
- **Intelligence arrogance:**
 - Over-optimistic, arrogant Allied views of the German situation.
 - The path to the choice of British landing zones (not using available intelligence (continued after the landings)).

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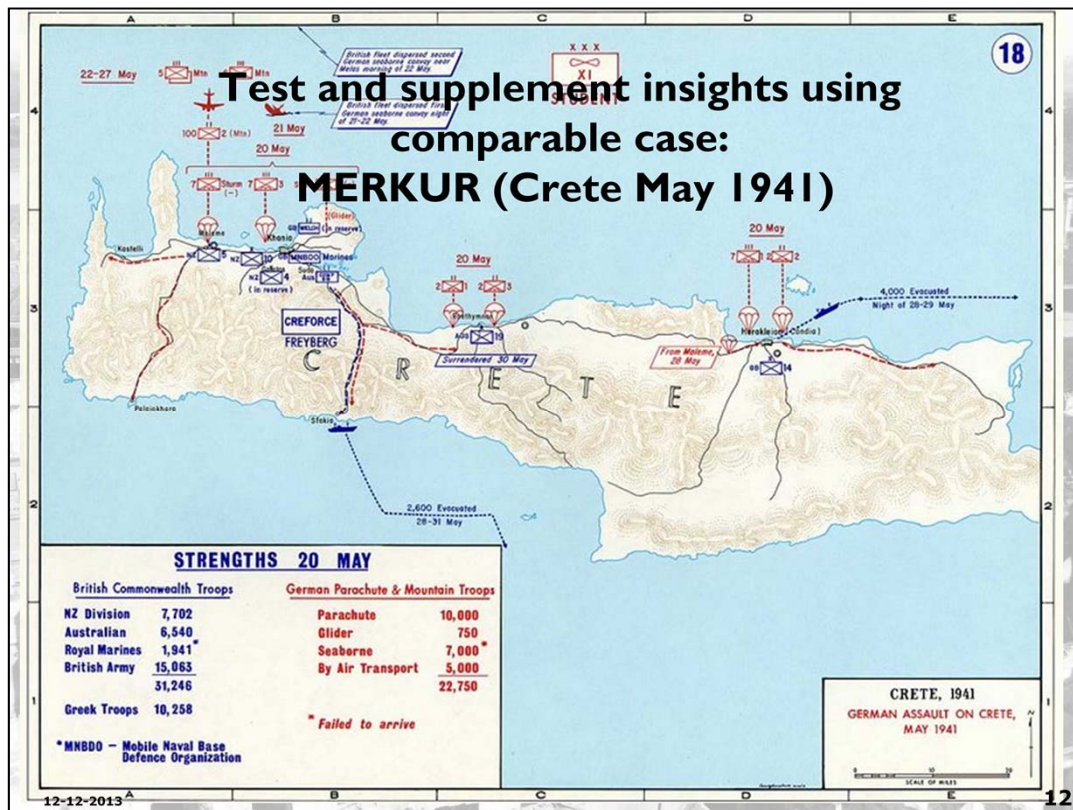
To achieve insight rather than just get an illustration, the focus will have to include the Allied side in an in-depth study to extract the sources of the failure at all levels

Case Market-Garden re-visited

- **Failure to enforce unity of command:** The flawed choice of British landing zones due to lack of determination to force the RAF to take necessary risks.
- **Failure of tactical imagination and flexibility:**
 - No Allied consideration or planning of secondary river crossing options.
 - Failure of dynamic employment of follow-up forces including the use of the terrain outside the roads between the Waal and Rhine rivers (distance on foot 10-15 kilometres).
- **Amateurism in preparation:** Lack of British professional testing of signals equipment.

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Key similarities:

As in MARKET GARDEN, MERKUR is very well documented.

As at Arnhem, the battle could have gone both ways.

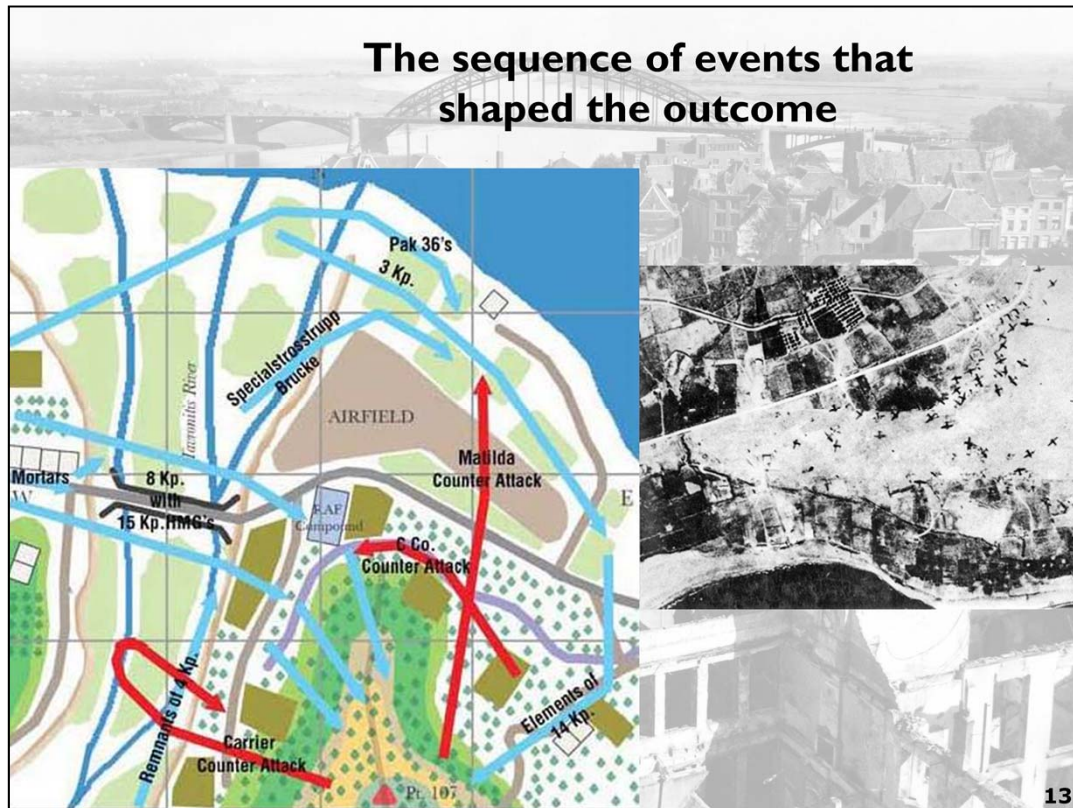
As in MARKET GARDEN both sides fought extremely well at the tactical level.

As in MARKET GARDEN the follow-up operation was defeated.

As in MARKET GARDEN, the attacking side enjoyed clear air superiority over the battle area.

As in MARKET GARDEN, MERKUR was decided quickly in in days in engagements involving from one to a few battalions.

However, in Crete, the landing succeeded, in spite lack of surprise (as the British operational commander knew the German plan).



Outcome decided by the German willingness to take decisive risks and by the superiority of delegated authority over combat management in chaotic situations such as the this and Arnhem.

"Honed common sense" insights

- An organisation's inherent search for order and respect for privilege and seniority (+elite clientism/nepotism)
- An organisation's tolerance of "tribal" behaviour (not using outside help, avoidance of organisational conflict)
- A constant tendency to ignore the fundamentally chaotic character of combat in Western operational planning and tactical organisation

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A grayscale background image of a cityscape, likely Pittsburgh, featuring a prominent arched bridge over a river and dense urban buildings.

”Honed common sense” insights

- The need for tough and realistic training of units and leaders
- The requirement to weed cadres to ensure high quality subordinates rather than loyal clients
- The need for unity of joint central authority and responsibility
- The importance of robustness and simplicity of plan

”Honed common sense” insights

- The requirement of brutal testing of the plan by gaming aimed at “destroying” it
- The need for realistic testing of key equipment
- The importance of redundancy
- The importance of the delegation of authority and resources
- The importance of the encouragement of local flexibility and initiative

Main advice:

1. Study cases to seek insight rather than an illustration of your preferred doctrine.
2. The best chance of gaining relevant insight is by studying cases where the result hangs in the balance in-depth. This is the most important single recommendation of this list.
3. Even if one can get insight from looking at the tactical winner, focus initially on the losing side to identify and analyze the reasons for failure.

Secondary advice:

1. Analyze if possible at least one other similar case in-depth to consolidate your insight, if possible with same opponents and from the same period.
2. Some types of modern warfare is not decided by battles. In those study phases of campaigns where the outcome still hangs in the balance.
3. Compare with similar campaign phases to consolidate insight.

An aerial, grayscale photograph of a city, likely Pittsburgh, showing a large bridge spanning a river. The city's dense urban landscape with various buildings and streets is visible below the bridge.

The Challenge

- Such insights are extremely difficult to institutionalize because they are expensive and awkward to apply and therefore inopportune for the ambitious professional to adopt and promote.
- Such insights do not have the fascination of predictive theory to a Westerner

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