CHAPTER 25

Military Strategies for Samhandling in Unforeseen Situations – A Historical Perspective

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Abstract: The purpose of this chapter is twofold. Firstly, a rather paradoxical situation will be discussed. Even though most military practitioners seem to agree on the characteristics of war, two almost diametrically-opposed norms for how to *samhandle* have arisen: a centralized one and a decentralized one. We argue that the decentralized approach, called *Auftragstaktik*, is the most effective. In the second part of the chapter we discuss the pedagogical challenge of educating personnel to thrive in a decentralized organization, which must operate effectively in unforeseen and threatening environments. Based on the teachings of Moltke the Elder (1800–1891) and the much more recent writings of Torgersen, Steiro and Saeverot (2015), we argue that a crucial step in educating for the unforeseen is to give the students the opportunity to solve new problems by themselves, gaining experience that is, as far as possible, self-generated and thereby becoming more aware and confident in dealing with new situations.

Keywords: Samhandling, Auftragstaktik, interaction, leadership, education, problem solving, unforeseen

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Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the historical roots of mission command as a norm for how to *samhandle* ["interact"] when facing the unforeseen in high-risk military operations. Throughout history, both practitioners and researchers have seemed to agree that war and conflict imply a high degree of uncertainty. Due to this pervasive uncertainty, the development of military command systems has, according to van Creveld (1985:264), "From Plato to NATO…been an endless quest for certainty." Where is the enemy? Who is the enemy? What is the weather going to be like? Not to mention your own forces' activities and intentions. In a rather sharp contrast to the agreement when it comes to uncertainty as a defining character of military operations, there has been and perhaps still is, strong disagreement when it comes to the design of military command systems (Murray, 2011). However, one command system stands out in an almost mythically canonized way, namely *Auftragstaktik* (Shamir, 2011).

As a command system, *Auftragstaktik* embraces both a tactical norm (maneuver warfare), and a norm for how to samhandle (mission command), which will be the main focus in this chapter. In Norway's case, mission command was implemented in response to a lesson identified after a tragic accident where 16 soldiers died, as a measure to improve the ability to samhandle when facing uncertainty (NOU 1991:19). However, in an interesting comment to the implementation of mission command in Norway, Lind (2001:19) writes that the Norwegian government did not have "the slightest idea of what it is." And in more recent research, it is claimed that mission command has not been implemented yet, more than 20 years after it was formally implemented (Krabberød, 2017). But also international research indicates that implementing mission command is challenging (Muth, 2016; Shamir, 2011; Vandergriff, 2015). One challenge that has been identified, perhaps the most important, is pedagogical – how to educate military personnel in the use of mission command. Thus the challenge of how to develop and train military personnel to be able to act according to the mission command norm will be discussed.

The non-repetitive character of war

If we define complexity as unpredictability that can vary from a high to a low degree, then chaos will represent states or situations where it is meaningless to calculate probabilities. Anything may happen. War will always be characterized by uncertainty and chaos, because there is a thinking opponent who thinks he or she can win; if not, there would be no war (Herwig, 1988:75). This makes the uncertainty and chaos aspect fundamental; you can never be sure what the enemy's next move will be. In addition, there is what Clausewitz (1832/1976:119) termed "friction", which are the "factors that distinguish real war from war on paper." Clausewitz describes friction as a force that makes the apparently easy so difficult. In the Bow-tie Model (Chapter 1, Torgersen, 2018), these challenges are presented as three phases (warning signs, event/accident (UN-o) and recovery).

In modern times, two very different kinds of organizational designs have been established as formulas for how a military organization should *samhandle*, in order to avoid the demoralizing effects of mastering a continuous stream of unpredictable high-risk situations, and win. In one design, the intention is to enforce order on the battlefield by focusing on pre-planning, centralization and strict internal organization as mechanisms to secure effective *samhandling*. In the other design, the intention is to use the chaos of the battlefield as an advantage. The purpose is to increase the enemy's perception of chaos and thereby increase the enemy's friction, by exploiting windows of opportunity quickly and in unpredictable ways. This school focuses on agility, initiative and decentralization. The mechanism for ensuring *samhandling* is the intention and not the plan. Thus, in an almost paradoxical way, two diametrically-opposed organizational designs have been developed as norms for handling the same challenge: effective *samhandling* when facing the unforeseen.

Order and structure as mechanisms for *samhandling*

When the Dutch wanted to start an uprising against their Spanish rulers, they needed to develop a new way to fight if they were to be able to defeat

the superior Spanish army. Fortunately for the Dutch, a large part of the Spanish army was taken by a heavy storm in the English Channel on its way to conquer England. Additionally, the Spanish fleet was attacked by English warships and a significant part of the Spanish forces were lost. This gave the commander of the Dutch forces, Maurice of Nassau, a golden opportunity to organize a new army.

Inspired by his brother, who was a historian and had studied ancient Roman drill manuals, Maurice of Nassau developed an army organized like the Roman Legion, but using muskets as their main weapon. He found out that the soldiers had to perform 16 movements between firing the musket until it was ready to fire again (Parker, 1988:21). These movements could be drilled so that they were performed automatically, regardless of the chaos that ruled on the battlefield. The timespan for completing the drill laid the basis for the number of rows the soldiers were organized in. They were set up in eight rows, where the first row fired their weapons and then stepped back and began performing the 16 movements. At the same time, all the others took one step forward. When the full drill was completed, the row that had fired their weapons first, had moved, stepby-step, forward to the front row again, and were loaded and ready to fire their second shots (Parker, 1988:20). All soldiers were led by officers and all movements were commenced on command. If the enemy tried to outflank them, only one command (e.g. turn right) was required to turn the front towards the enemy.

An important prerequisite for this drill to work in battle was that the soldiers must arrive on the battlefield in the same formation they were going to fight in. Thus, Maurice implemented close-order drills as an important part of his tactics. The soldiers were drilled to stop on the same foot, raise their guns simultaneously and fire at the same time. If the enemy came from an unexpected direction, the troops could be moved quickly to the new location or direction. The crucial thing was that they did not lose the basic eight-row order, which was the basis for the sequence of firing and recharging the musket (Rothenberg, 1986:43). In this system, there was no room for independent action or initiative, beyond fulfilling one's role in the larger system. Obedience, in the form of complete and immediate execution of orders, was the requirement.

According to Max Weber, it was this tactic that made gunpowder a significant force multiplier on the battlefield; it was not the gunpowder that developed the tactics (Weber, 1978:1152).

In the war against the Spanish, Maurice's way of fighting turned out to be superior. The Spaniards were not able to develop a tactic that could beat the Dutch, and all the rulers of Europe marveled at what Maurice had developed and tried to copy his tactics. One of those who found inspiration in Maurice of Nassau's tactics was King Gustav Adolf of Sweden. He developed the tactics to be used offensively, each line now going forward and passing by the others while they were charging. In that way, the army could roll forward.

In the Battle of Breitenfeld in 1631, this way of fighting turned out to be superior once again. The Swedes had been assigned a role as the Saxons' reserve troops in the battle, but after General Tilly, the leader of the German-Roman forces, had broken the Saxons, he turned his forces to the Swedes' flanks and attacked. However, in what seemed to Tilly as an incomprehensibly short time, the Swedes had maneuvered their forces. What Tilly thought was the Swedish flank had now become their main front, and the Swedish forces rolled systematically towards Tilly's. Tilly failed to reorganize his forces and they were crushed. Nine thousand prisoners of war were enrolled in the Swedish army and trained in its way of fighting, which made the Swedish army even more terrifying (Rothenberg, 1986:52; Wilson, 2009:472-75). Gustav Adolf's great victories and the unexpected success of the new tactics made almost everyone copy them, except in the Ottoman Empire, where they still believed more in individual skills than organization. The Ottoman Empire thereby started its long decline, which led to a full dissolution of the empire. In this light, Napoleon's statement that, "whereas one Mameluke was the equal of three Frenchmen, one hundred Frenchmen could confidently take on five times their number in Mamelukes" (Høiback, 2014:293), is rather interesting; that is, organization is the key.

Out of the ruins of the Thirty Years' War, Prussia survived. From being a poor scattered backdrop, the Hohenzollern's kingdom grew strong, by becoming the best in class on strict organizational structure on the battlefield. Frederick the Great's victorious army functioned on the basis of the maxim, "No one reasons, everyone executes" (Palmer, 1986:99). However, in the battles of Jena and Auerstadt, Prussia lost to Napoleon's army both times. To Prussia, these were shocking defeats, and they led to a prolonged and profound reform in the Prussian, and later German, forces. In the Prussians' own analyses of what had failed, it became apparent that not only did Napoleon's soldiers have higher morals but, perhaps even more importantly, the French forces were able to utilize windows of opportunity faster than the Prussians; they were far more agile.¹

Auftragstaktik - harvesting the fruits of chaos as a strategy for samhandling

Learning is a difficult exercise, also for military organizations (Murray, 2011). For what should be learned? There may be many explanations for a defeat, but if you change too much, it may be that the things that worked well will also be affected. However, many organizations conclude that "bad luck" or the failure to follow plans or procedures are the main explanations if something goes wrong, and consequently little is changed. Be that as it may, the Prussians did not follow this path and their defeat to Napoleon led to massive innovation and organizational development.

Scharnhorst, who himself participated in the Jena-Auerstadt battles, was responsible for the reforms and started a thorough process. Mercenaries fight without heart and had to be replaced by conscripts. Nobility was no guarantee of effective leadership, and all officers had to attend a military academy. And during a war, the officers had to have the opportunity to make decisions based on their own judgment, so they could act without first sending a request for permission through the chain of command, thus saving time. It was not the lack of courage but rather the lack of wisdom and initiative that had been the main problem when they were beaten by Napoleon. The problem, as perceived by Scharnhorst, was

I It is interesting to note that Maurice's reforms gained their renaissance in civilian working life, when Fredric Taylor introduced them as principles for organizing the workplace. Taylorism, or "Scientific Management" as his school is called, studied the workers' movements to reduce all the unnecessary ones and standardize the most effective in task-work procedures. Along with organizing the production lines, this led to an explosion in productivity, and became an important formula for organizational design in the United States.

the norm "*Nie eine Schritt ohne Befehl*"; that is, the operation was to be carried out according to plan and if changes were to be made, they would be implemented by the commander-in-chief (Oetting, 1993:42–43).

In 1857, Helmuth von Moltke was appointed Chief of the Prussian General Staff, a position he held for 30 years, and he gave new impetus to the reforms Scharnhorst had started. Moltke abandoned the idea that internal order and structure could tame the chaos of war. As Chief of the General Staff, he was stunned by the huge amounts of paper and the degree of detail that were needed to formulate orders to his own forces. Moltke claimed that, "as a rule, an order should contain only what the subordinate, for the achievement of his goals, cannot determine on his own." (Muth, 2016). The non-repetitive character of war implies that no one can know in advance which decision is the best; on the contrary, decisions in war are taken in a fog of uncertainty, by the person on the spot. "To know" is a luxury reserved for historians (Oetting, 1993:105).

Moltke was convinced that on the battlefield, haste was essential. Thus, in Moltke's system, the worst sin was to be passive and wait for orders. The second worst was not to think, and to execute orders that the enemy might have made irrelevant, instead of acting on the basis of one's own judgment of the situation (Oetting, 1993:117). Fast and self-reliant action was the new norm. It was crucial to have the shortest UN-interval (unforeseen-interval, see Chapter 1). To begin with, only army commanders were authorized to make adjustments based on their own judgment, but after a while, this authority was decentralized to corps commanders, and then to commanders of regiments, company commanders and finally, in 1877, it was set as a requirement that the army should be a decentralized organization. Everyone, from the oldest General to the youngest soldier, was expected to show initiative and take appropriate action.

As commander-in-chief, Moltke did not perceive it as his primary task to make detailed plans for how his forces should solve their missions. His job was to try to keep up with what was happening, in order to have an updated situational awareness and, on that basis, send out strategic guidelines and intentions, for the purpose of supporting and coordinating further actions (Wittmann, 2012). Soldiers had to learn to act on less information. They had to be given less restrictive instructions and more leeway, by using general directives (Bungay, 2011). Any plan, regardless of how meticulously it was laid out, would be offset when meeting the enemy (Gross, 2016:29). In the system that emphasized strict internal order and structure as mechanisms for effective *samhandling*, the response to a lack of information was to seek more, and the response to subordinates that did not do exactly what they were told was to give them supplementary instructions and tighten control, and the response to uncertainty and risk was better and more detailed plans.

How radical Moltke's system was cannot, probably, be overestimated. The belief that order and structure could tame the battlefield was replaced by an acknowledgment that war consisted of unforeseen events, that had to be exploited when and where they arose, and without certain knowledge of the outcome. Rather than meeting friction with structure, the fruits of chaos should be harvested. By exploiting windows of opportunity faster than the enemy, the ambition was to create more unforeseen events for the enemy; new elements of surprise, i.e. new DU-intervals, that the enemy had to use time and energy to figure out. The basic assumption in Moltke's strategy is that as the enemy no longer manages to make sense of the surroundings and create a meaningful basis for *samhandling*, he will mentally collapse and surrender. This formula for *samhandling* is called *Auftragstaktik* (Shamir, 2011).

However, *Auftragstaktik* is a very ambitious norm. It is naïve to think that harmonized *samhandling* will occur spontaneously, and an organization cannot be ordered to function in a decentralized manner. *Auftragstaktik* is a certain organizational culture (Vandergriff, 2015). Moltke emphasized that *Auftragstaktik* was something that had to be trained, practiced and lived, on all levels in the organization. It had to be socialized (Muth, 2016). This had implications for officer selection, personnel administration and, last but not least, education.

Through conscious training, the officers developed an intuitive knowledge of their commanding officers', peers' and subordinates' thinking and how they approached tactical challenges. This established a basis for an implicit mutual adjustment when facing unforeseen situations. In an interview with John Boyd (1982), German World War II General Blumentritt explains: "a common outlook, based upon a body of professional officers who have received exactly the same training during the long years of peace and with the same tactical education, the same way of thinking, identical speech, hence a body of officers to whom all tactical conceptions were fully clear." (Boyd, 1982:74).

After completing education at the academy, officers in the German army served in the same unit their entire career, where they also continued their education. If a unit had casualties during battle, they were not replaced individually. In order to maintain the degree of cohesion and common outlook needed to operate in a decentralized fashion, a whole unit was replaced by another unit. (Van Creveld, 1982:75–76). Cohesion and common outlook were deemed more important than merely unit size.

In Martin van Creveld's (1982) comparative study of the *Wehrmacht* and the US Army during World War II, he shows that, although the conception of how to fight a war was relatively similar, and the American doctrine was almost a pure translation of the German doctrine in which *Auftragstaktik* was described, the two forces ended up fighting very differently. In a study of the US officer's education before WWII, Muth (2011) claims that an important reason why the US Army failed to deal with chaos as well as the German *Wehrmacht*, despite having attempted to copy *Auftragstaktik*, was to be found in their pedagogical approach. The officers had not learned to trust their own judgment when having to make decisions in unforeseen situations. Instead, as cadets, they had been trained in hunting for the school's solution.

Educating for the unforeseen

Torgersen, Steiro and Saeverot (2015:297) raise the question whether it is at all possible to train for something that is not yet known. Is it possible to put in place some educational principles for how to train in a structured way, in order to reduce the UN-interval? Torgersen, Steiro and Saeverot (2015) believe that it is possible to present what they refer to as a "fourth way". Particularly interesting in this context is that the authors explicitly write that they base "the fourth way" on "military experience-based learning models" (Torgersen et al., 2015:297). They further argue that the model focuses on "generic general skills and the competence needed to solve complex military missions" ("the demands of war") and that, "the goal is to develop the soldiers' competence to act when facing the 'demands of war'." (Torgersen et al., 2015:301).

The "fourth way" differs from the other three in that it is based on "indirect education"; that is, the students are given the opportunity to solve new problems by themselves, to gain experience that is, as far as possible, self-generated and thereby they become more aware and confident in dealing with new situations. The problem with the other three "direct education models" is that the teacher remains the master and thereby controls the student's thinking when acting in unforeseen situations. Done that way, it shines through that there is one, and only one, solution to the problem, and that is the teacher's solution. Thus, the student's mindset is directed towards finding out how the teacher would solve the problem, rather than reaching a solution by himself. Hence, the teacher in fact prevents the student from becoming confident in his or her ability to act in unforeseen situations. The same problem applies when role modeling is an important part of an education; the student is socialized into a pattern that has to be followed. (Torgersen, Steiro & Saeverot, 2015:301–304).

But as we have explained above, two very different ways of organizing have crystallized in order to be able to *samhandle* effectively in war, that is, reduce the UN-interval faster than the enemy. One strategy that focuses on strict internal order and adherence to a detailed plan, and another strategy, *Auftragstaktik*, where the focus is to ride the chaos and thereby confuse and demoralize the enemy. And according to military historians, how you train will decide whether the organizational culture will be a centralized, order culture or decentralized (Boyd, 1986; Vandergriff, 2006; Shamir, 2011). It has even been argued that by using improper pedagogy, military organizations have ended up with an order culture, even though they believed that they were training for *Auftragstaktik* (Muth, 2011; van Creveld, 1982; Vandergriff, 2015). It may therefore appear that "the demands of the war" can give rise to widely different educational arrangements.

The issues with direct education, as outlined by Torgersen, Steiro and Saeverot (2015), are described in a number of studies as an explanation

for why military organizations fail to implement a decentralized organization that will be effective when facing the unforeseen in high risk environments (Creveld, 1985; Muth, 2011; Vandergriff, 2006). And in a similar manner, but with positive signs, indirect education seems to harmonize with Moltke's and several others' logic of how to educate soldiers in order to develop and maintain an *Auftragstaktik* culture.

The essence of the pedagogy that formed the basis of the *Auftragtaktik* was that the cadets should learn to think, and the instructors focused on what the cadets did in new and complex situations. The crucial thing was whether the cadet showed willingness to solve the problem and not what the cadet had already learned. It was not the solution in itself that was the learning objective, but how the cadets reasoned before they arrived at a decision, and their ability to elaborate on and defend their choice to their peers. By exercising defending and explaining difficult decisions that were made in new and complex situations, the cadets developed their character. The worst thing a cadet could do was to not make a decision. Inability to make independent decisions, or inability to substantiate their decisions could result in relegation.

Leadership in war was a function of the officers' ability to apply their professional judgment in chaotic, unexpected situations, which is quite different from applying preplanned responses, that is, standardized drills and procedures, to predictable situations. In Moltke's system, the emphasis was on learning how to think about a problem, rather than what to think in pre-defined, clear-cut situations (Vandergriff, 2006). As exemplified by a superintendent of the German Military Academy:

"In training officers, I will pose a problem for them in field exercises that cannot be solved within the framework of their explicit orders. For example, to go through one element of your division and lead a river crossing [sic!]. But there was also a hill to the right, and enemy forces were moving toward that hill to threaten the division flank. The young officer had to see that the proper response was to change his own orders and protect the division flank by taking the hill, thereby making it possible for the division to cross the river later. This is the essence of *Auftragstaktik*, to be free to interpret orders so as to fulfill the larger goal. If they can't see that, they get poor marks. If the pattern persists, they will eventually be marked as either too stupid or to servile to ever be effective field commanders, and get pushed aside into less responsible positions. " (Rochlin, 1995:6).

Conclusion

To be able to *samhandle* effectively in the face of the unknown, under time pressure and high risk, is to put high expectations on an organization. In modern military history, two fundamentally different strategies for *samhandling* in response to the "demands of war" are presented, one based on strict, internal order and one based on initiative and "riding" the chaos, which is called *Auftragstaktik*. History has shown that if you are to succeed in operating according to the *Auftragstaktik* standard, you must be very deliberate when it comes to pedagogy. "The fourth way" seems to be a fruitful contribution to that deliberation.

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