

## **Analysis of the Battle of Surigao Strait**

### **By Walter S. Zapotoczny**

Today, all great nations recognize basic principles of war and incorporate them in their doctrine. The lists vary from nation to nation. In the Western World, the accepted principles are essentially a post-Napoleonic conception, advanced by Clausewitz, the great Prussian philosopher of war in the early nineteenth century, and his contemporary, Jomini, the well-known French general and theorist. These principles are common to ground, as well as, naval operations. The United States Army recognizes nine principles and includes them in its *Field Manual 100-5*. Their proper application, the Army holds, is essential to the exercise of effective command and to the successful conduct of military operations. These nine principles provide an effective model to analyze the Battle of Surigao Strait.

#### **OBJECTIVE**

The first of the nine principles is *Objective*. The FM 100-5 definition states that every military operation must be directed toward a clearly defined, decisive, and attainable objective. The ultimate military objective of war is the destruction of the enemy's armed forces and his will to fight. The objective of each operation must contribute to this ultimate objective. Each intermediate objective must be such that its attainment will most directly, quickly, and economically contribute to the purpose of the operation. The selection of an objective is based upon consideration of the means available, the enemy, and the area of operations. Every commander must understand and clearly define his objective and consider each contemplated action in light thereof. Once planes from Admiral Halsey's carriers spotted Admiral Nishimura's fleet making for the Surigao Strait and Admiral Kurita's large fleet coming through the San Bernardino Strait, it was obvious to Admiral Kinkaid that the Japanese planned to converge in Leyte Gulf to attack MacArthur's invasion ships. He immediately sent word to Admiral Oldendorf to take his fleet to the north side of the Surigao Strait and prepare for a night battle. The objective was to engage and destroy the enemy force.

#### **OFFENSIVE**

The second principle of war to examine in the context of the Battle of Surigao is *Offensive*. Offensive action is defined in FM 100-5 as, "... that action that is necessary to achieve decisive results and to maintain freedom of action." It permits the commander to exercise initiative and impose his will upon the enemy; to set the pace and determine the course of battle; to exploit enemy weaknesses and rapidly changing situations, and to meet unexpected developments. The defensive may be forced on the commander, but it should be deliberately adopted only as a temporary expedient while awaiting an opportunity for offensive action or for the purpose of economizing forces on a front where a decision is not sought. Even on the defensive the commander seeks every opportunity to seize the initiative and achieve decisive results by offensive action." Admiral Oldendorf formulated an offensive plan that utilized his destroyer's potent hitting power. His PT boats would attack first then withdraw under the cover of darkness, to lurk nearby to report the Japanese positions to. The destroyers would then attack the Japanese fleet in three squadrons, ranging down both the eastern and western sides of the narrow strait to launch torpedoes at the enemy from the flanks. Each destroyer carried ten torpedoes and Oldendorf and his commanders hoped they would be devastating. The results of

the destroyer attacks were devastating to the Japanese. Two of their ships were hit by the first salvo of torpedoes. The attacks continued until the battleship *Fuso* blew up and split in two. Nishimura's flagship, the battleship *Yamashiro* took hits, and two of his destroyers were sunk. Clearly, the audacious plan devised by Admiral Oldendorf met the definition of *Offensive*.

#### MASS

*Mass* is the third principle to be examined. It is defined as, "Superior combat power must be concentrated at the critical time and place for a decisive purpose. Superiority results from the proper combination of the elements of combat power. Proper application of the principle of mass, in conjunction with the other principles of war, may permit numerically inferior forces to achieve decisive combat superiority." Oldendorf's plan for massing fire power involved his six battleships, under the tactical control of Rear Admiral Weyler, cruising single file across a fifteen nautical-mile stretch of water at the northern outlet of the strait. Steaming parallel to them, five miles to their south, would be eight cruisers under Rear Admiral Berkeley, three to Weyler's right and three to his left. Straddling the exit of the strait, the battle line would be poised to finish off any of Nishimura's ships that survived the destroyer attacks. Salvages from the wreckage of Pearl Harbor most of the battleships were equipped with modern fire control systems. They would, as the Naval War College textbooks dictated, cross the T of the enemy fleet, thereby bringing more guns to bear. With overwhelming force, Oldendorf's classic maneuver clearly satisfied the principle of *Mass*.

#### ECONOMY OF FORCE

The fourth of the nine principles is *Economy of Force*. FM 100-5 defines it as, "Skillful and prudent use of combat power will enable the commander to accomplish the mission with minimum expenditure of resources. This principle is the corollary of the principle of mass. It does not imply husbanding but rather the measured allocation of available combat power to the primary task as well as secondary tasks such as limited attacks, the defense, deception, or even retrograde action in order to insure sufficient combat power at the point of decision." When Oldendorf's destroyers executed their battle plan firing salvos of torpedoes at ranges of about four miles, and then turning and speeding away before the Japanese guns could find them, they minimized the risk to themselves. The destroyers escaped the enemy fire by zigzagging and throwing up smoke screens. Executing this principle permitted them to be able to continue attacking the Japanese formation while protecting and economizing their force.

#### MANEUVER

*Maneuver* is defined as, "... essential ingredient of combat power. It contributes materially in exploiting successes and in preserving freedom of action and reducing vulnerability. The object of maneuver is to dispose a force in such a manner as to place the enemy at a relative disadvantage and thus achieve results which would otherwise be more costly in men and materiel. Successful maneuver requires flexibility in organization, administrative support, and command and control. It is the antithesis of permanence of location and implies avoidance of stereotyped patterns of operation." The very essence of Oldendorf's plan was *Maneuver*. From the PT boat attacks to attacks by his destroyers and finally the damaging fire brought by his battleships and cruisers, the plan clearly exploited successes, preserving freedom of action, reduced vulnerability, and denied the enemy freedom of action.

## UNITY OF COMMAND

*Unity of Command.* The decisive application of full combat power requires unity of command. Unity of command obtains unity of effort by the coordinated action of all forces toward a common goal. While coordination may be attained by cooperation, it is best achieved by vesting a single commander with the requisite authority. Admiral Oldendorf conferred with his principle commanders aboard his flagship insured that all of his commanders understood their parts. While each was in tactical control of his own force, each knew the intent of the overall plan.

## SECURITY

The seventh principle of war is *Security*. FM 100-5 states, "Security is essential to the preservation of combat power. Security is achieved by measures taken to prevent surprise, preserve freedom of action, and deny the enemy information of friendly forces. Since risk is inherent in war, application of the principle of security does not imply undue caution and the avoidance of calculated risk. Security frequently is enhanced by bold seizure and retention of the initiative, which denies the enemy the opportunity to interfere." Based on the sightings by aircraft from the Third Fleet carriers *Enterprise* and *Franklin* of Rear Admiral Davison's task group Oldendorf knew the position Nishimura's Force and Shima's Second Striking Force. After Halsey ordered the carriers north, Oldendorf stationed his PT boats along the south entrance to the strait. While they attacked the Japanese force, more importantly, they were able to provide an early warning net, reporting the Japanese position as they steamed north up the strait.

## SURPRISE

*Surprise* is the eighth principle of war and FM 100-5 says, "Surprise can decisively shift the balance of combat power. By surprise, success out of proportion to the effort expended may be obtained. Surprise results from striking an enemy at a time, place, and in a manner for which he is not prepared. It is not essential that the enemy be taken unaware but only that he becomes aware too late to react effectively. Factors contributing to surprise include speed, deception, application of unexpected combat power, effective intelligence and counterintelligences, to include communication and electronic security, and variations in tactics and methods of operation." The PT boats were the first to surprise the Japanese fleet. They were able to fire their torpedoes and escape into the darkness before the Japanese could do much damage. The destroyers attacked and withdrew behind smoke screens. They could emerge from the smoke and attack again without being detected. Finally, the array of Oldendorf's battleships and cruisers was the last surprise for Admiral Nishimura's fleet.

## SIMPLICITY

The ninth and final principle of war is *Simplicity*. It is defined as, "Simplicity contributes to successful operations. Direct, simple plans and clear, concise orders minimize misunderstanding and confusion. If other factors are equal, the simplest plan is preferred." Admiral Oldendorf's plan for defeating the Japanese in the Surigao Strait was not complicated. It did not require the near-impossible precision of the Japanese plan. The plan was simply to attack Admiral Nishimura's fleet until they were destroyed and in doing so it marked the last time the T was

crossed in an engagement between battleships, and in fact was also the last occasion ever on which one battleship fired its main armament at another.

Admiral Oldendorf ability to take full advantage of both the geography of the battle area and his foreknowledge of the enemy's route of advance enabled PT squadrons to be deployed at the entrance to Surigao Strait at a place where the Japanese would have to reform in column to negotiate the narrow passage. Behind the torpedo boats, covering the northern part of the strait, were posted the destroyer squadrons, cruisers, and battleships to form the horizontal bar to a "T" of vast fire power which the enemy would be forced to approach vertically as he moved forward. With overwhelming force, Oldendorf created an impenetrable gauntlet that defeated the Japanese at Surigao Strait and played a significant in winning the Battle of Leyte Gulf and in so helping to secure the beachheads of the U.S. Sixth Army on Leyte against Japanese attack from the sea.

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