



# The leader's initiative in combat: exploitation of a tactical opportunity or an act of disobedience?

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Published on 29/07/2018

Histoire & stratégie

**Although, by definition, an initiative is considered to be a variant of the plan prescribed by the higher echelon, it is not an act of disobedience provided it is within the interpretation of the chief's intent. This initiative can only result, on the one hand, from the expression of a community of thought necessary for the appropriation of this intention and, on the other hand, from the consideration of sufficient room for manoeuvre left to the subordinate by his leader.**

Based on a hot assessment of a situation, sometimes mixing intuition and calculation, taking the initiative is like a flash of lightning that can make the fight swing from one side to the other. A prerogative of the greatest military leaders, the spirit of initiative is the ability to know how to interpret and exploit tactical, operational or strategic opportunities within the appropriate time and space, to gain the upper hand over one's opponent, sometimes in defiance of the planning so narrowly established, but always accepting a leap into the unknown, into the uncertainty of the battlefield. It is therefore indeed a risk, a daring one, that only the military leader in combat, whatever his level of responsibility, is in a position to take.

The compelling need to seize the fleeting opportunity, which may never come again, pushes the leader into his entrenchment and sends him back to the very essence of command: He is left alone with a choice which, due to material contingencies, he cannot usually submit to the higher echelon for approval. Is it then an act of disobedience to violate the plan formally prescribed by one's leader in order to exploit a tactical opportunity? Some historical examples of victories achieved by the initiative of a subordinate, a stroke of genius forcing fate, leading to a result far exceeding the objectives initially hoped for, appear at first glance to be acts of disobedience which, had they not had such a glorious outcome, would have had serious consequences for their perpetrators and even more so for the outcome of the fighting concerned.

An initiative, although constituting, by definition, a variation from the plan prescribed by the higher echelon, is not an act of disobedience as long as it falls within the interpretation of the leader's intention, which cannot be reinterpreted by the lower echelon. It can only

result, on the one hand, from the expression of a community of thought necessary for the appropriation of that intention and, on the other hand, from the taking into account of sufficient room for manoeuvre left to the subordinate by his leader.

If the historical example of General Guderian's breakthrough at Sedan in May 1940 provides us with an illustration of the paradox of taking the initiative between tactical opportunism and disobedience characterized by a lack of political will and a lack of political will. However, it seems necessary to study what are the indispensable conditions that make it possible to place the military leader in combat in the intellectual dispositions conducive to such initiative-taking.

### **The Sedan Breakthrough, May 1940: Engineer's Initiative or Act of Disobedience?**

The German campaign of 1939-1940 offers examples of initiatives that are as instructive as they are painful for us Frenchmen. One man, in particular, seems to perfectly illustrate the paradoxical dimensions of the spirit of initiative between military genius and outright disobedience: General Guderian. While it is clear that he has, on many occasions, deliberately disobeyed the orders of his direct superior and the highest German military authorities, he has always maintained He has always remained faithful to the spirit of the plan inspired by General von Manstein, a plan known to posterity as the "sickle stroke".

Thus, the high command of the German Army, after having timidly accepted, under pressure from Hitler himself, the innovative and bold plan of the General von Manstein, the German Army's General of the Interior, who was the first to accept the plan.s innovative and daring plan, has totally distorted it, emptying it of its meaning and coherence to the point of making only a pale adaptation. The Führer, used to risking everything in international politics in a single move, was seduced by the daring idea of putting the effort where it was needed. The Führer, used to risking everything in international politics with a single blow, was seduced by the daring idea of taking the effort where the French did not expect it, in the supposedly impassable Ardennes, and crossing the Meuse at Sedan, the historic site of the German victory of 1870. But, having only tactical considerations, Hitler did not consider the operational, or even strategic, possibilities offered by the plan proposed by von Manstein. Thus, under the action of the highest German military officials, most of whom were unable to perceive the value of this plan, which was too risky or even unrealistic in their eyes, the Sedan breakthrough was largely distorted.

Originally conceived by General von Manstein, and inspired by the innovative concepts of the use of tanks proposed by General Guderian, the "sickle stroke" was based on the idea that the large unitss armoured units, after having crossed the Ardennes and the Meuse, had to immediately advance westwards, towards the Channel, without worrying about their open flanks, in order to win the race of speed which would oppose them to the Allies.

However, the lack of confidence in Manstein's plan led first of all the German high command, and in particular General von Rundstedt, commanding Corps A, to n'grant only an insufficient number of axes of progression in the Ardennes to the large armoured units [1], limited by the many axes left to the infantry considered safer. Then, General von Kleist, Guderian's direct superior, ordered him to cross the Meuse at Flize and not at Sedan, 13 kilometres away, and moreover under classical Luftwaffe air support, consisting of a massive, short and concentrated bombardment. But, in keeping with the spirit of concentration of the armoured forces and relying on a more adequate geographical situation, Guderian disobeyed the orders of the Luftwaffe.it by keeping Sedan as the

strong point of the crossing of the Meuse, benefiting in addition from the air support he had initially requested, the bombing was excessive<sup>[2]</sup>. Then the two generals opposed each other over the depth of the bridgehead conquered on the Meuse. General von Kleist considered a depth of 6 to 8 kilometres sufficient, while General Guderian opted for a depth of 20 kilometres encompassing the closest crests, those of Stonne, from which the French counter-attack could have taken support. On this point too, General Guderian knowingly ignored the orders of his direct leader.

Finally, and it was certainly on 14 May 1940 that General Guderian most exceeded the orders of General von Kleist, with the most obvious and decisive initiative of this western campaign. General von Kleist ordered that the attack from the conquered bridgehead on the Meuse River should not be launched until the infantry divisions and tanks had been regrouped in sufficient numbers. At midday on 14 May, General Guderian was informed that a bridge was intact at Malmy on the Canal des Ardennes, which authorised the offensive to continue. Aware that the bridgehead just conquered is not sufficiently held, he decided to disobey and continue the attack westward from 14 hours, thus exploiting the favour of the moment. Breaking the orders of his superiors, but also those of Hitler, he then set off a chain reaction that would lead all the large armoured units in a frantic race towards the Channel, the key to German victory in this western campaign, and to French disaster.

Thus, it seems obvious, in the light of history, that the example of General Guderian's breakthrough at Sedan in 1940 corresponds to a succession of acts of disobedience towards his direct superior, General von Kleist. However, under a more relevant prism, it appears in fact that Guderian remained faithful not only to the initial plan of General von Manstein, but above all to the spirit of the latter, emphasizing the effect of surprise that the breakthrough of armored units towards the Channel would constitute, without worrying about open flanks.

Taking the initiative therefore implies taking a risk based on an arbitrary choice by the military leader, the result of the confrontation of current events with the established plan, in the light of the leader's intention and the objective sought. Two qualities seem to be essential to allow this risk-taking to take place: Firstly, a perfect understanding of the leader's intention by the subordinate, which requires a communion of thought, a unity of tactical culture, but also, and far beyond that, a freedom of decision obtained by the margin of manoeuvre granted by the leader to his subordinate.

### **Tactical decision-making training**

The previous example of General Guderian, discerning the true operative, even strategic, dimension of the manoeuvre in progress in May 1940, can of course be fully attributed to the tactical genius of this outstanding military leader, who was able to exploit perfectly the new possibilities offered by the large tank units as well as the combination of the panzer and stuka binomial. Nevertheless, it does not seem absurd either to think that such perspicacity and such a complete apprehension of Manstein's plan are also the consequence of the tactical training instilled in the German army from the lowest levels of command, through command by objective. Thus, leaving aside the minority cases of maneuvers conducted by leaders with an innate tactical sense, an initiative, meeting the criteria of an opportunity which leads to the realisation of the leader's intention, can only be consciously carried out with the support of a particularly solid military culture.

In the case of Guderian and his subordinates in May 1940, command by objective largely

explains the many initiatives at all levels to assist in the rebuilding of the military. In the case of Guderian and his subordinates in May 1940, command by objective largely explains the many initiatives undertaken at all levels to help achieve the goal of the Guderian armoured group, illustrated by the two leitmotifs "the Ardennes in three days, the Meuse in four" and "we're going all out, no savings". Under such conditions, it is not surprising that a lieutenant engineer, stuck in the endless traffic jams caused in the Ardennes by the 40.000 vehicles engaged, took the initiative to gather all the elements he could find without a leader and to rush as quickly as possible towards the Meuse, where he knew he was most useful for the development of his general's plan.

Beyond the chief's intention expressed through the formal orders, it also appears that the full understanding leading to a perfect appropriation of these orders is also the result of an adapted tactical training, forging within the military tool a community of thought. Far from tending towards reductive and counter-productive single-mindedness, this community aims to provide leaders at all levels of responsibility with a common base which should enable them to easily reach a full and complete understanding with their subordinates. One of the aspects of this approach is the precise doctrinal definition of mission terms which, known at all tactical levels, contain the letter but above all the spirit of the leader's intent. It is therefore by approaching the orders transmitted through a similar prism that the leader and his subordinates belong to the same community of thought, leading to a better understanding of the desired effects and how to achieve the accomplishment of the mission. The chief therefore transmits through his orders not only the actions he wishes to have carried out, but above all the style to be adopted in order to fulfil the assigned missions. It is thus by having correctly assimilated this dimension of orders that the subordinate may be able to discern the real opportunities likely to contribute to the attainment of his leader's intentions.

### **The role of the leader in the initiative of his subordinates**

While it is clear that the spirit of initiative can only be fostered by adequate training, allowing all levels of responsibility to position themselves correctly in the manoeuvre. While it is clear that the spirit of initiative can only be fostered by adequate training to enable all levels of responsibility to position themselves correctly in the manoeuvre desired by the leader, and above all to understand the intention behind it, it seems just as essential to place subordinates in the intellectual posture conducive to taking the initiative. In other words, the spirit of initiative must be cultivated by leaders by giving their subordinates the necessary freedom of action.

First of all, assuming that the subordinate is fully aware of his leader's intention, the fact remains that the exploitation of a tactical opportunity implies significant, sometimes even critical, risk-taking, i.e. of such a nature as to call into question the accomplishment of the mission assigned to him. An overly directive plan, lacking in subsidiarity, would then tend to inhibit any desire for initiative by confining the executor to a role of implementation and not of designing a tactical manoeuvre. It is therefore essential that the leader respects the prerogatives of each subordinate level in his orders by delegating to it the capacity to analyse the tactical situation at his level. Implicit in the principle of subsidiarity is the confidence that a tactic will be developed to best achieve the desired effects on the enemy or terrain as the circumstances dictate, but always through the prism of the leader's intent.

Second, it is important that the spirit of initiative be culturally understood. Indeed, even if the principle of subsidiarity is properly disseminated at the various tactical levels, the fact



remains that the subordinate must be encouraged throughout his training and learning to take initiatives. As in other areas related to command, such as the promotion of esprit de corps, it is not on the battlefield that the main steps must be taken, but well in advance, in the slightest events of military life. It is a process that has its origins in peacetime, in the most varied tasks, but which requires constant attention. Each echelon must therefore retain all its command prerogatives in order to regularly exercise thoughtful initiative and thus sharpen this primordial aptitude for combat.

Thus, the example of initiatives taken against formal orders, constituting genuine acts of disobedience, must not mislead as to the real nature of a tactical initiative. Above all, it is the exploitation of an opportunity to give effect to the leader's intention. For this to happen, it is essential that the different levels of command are united by the same tactical culture, which is the only guarantee of perfect understanding, but also that the leader plays his role to the full by allowing his subordinates to fully express their spirit of initiative.

At a time when the political repercussions of tactical considerations go far beyond the battlefield, it seems all the more essential to encourage, promote and even systematise the taking of initiative in order not to lose sight of the real tactical issues. Losing this spirit of initiative in favour of planning, which is certainly essential, but which would become sclerotic, risks distorting future commitments and, in the long run, would be tantamount to deliberately depriving oneself of freedom of action.

Moreover, in a conflict that is spread over a long period of time, it is also undeniable that the adversaries adapt to each other according to their aptitudes, means, resources and intellectual stance. Even asymmetrical or even asymmetrical conflicts presuppose this adaptation even on the side of the strong, which cannot afford the political cost of getting bogged down. Beyond reactive adaptation measures of a technical and material nature, the capacity for initiative is a force of the first order because a belligerent, unable to break free from a predefined straitjacket, can be more easily defeated.

Cultivating and fostering the spirit of initiative remains a priority in the tactical training of modern armies, which, like the French army, must meet the challenge, nowadays ever more acute, of reconciling the capacity for advanced planning with the ability to seize initiatives at all levels of command. The military leader must thus remain capable of daring while retaining the responsibility of knowing how not to curb the boldness of his subordinates.

1) The Guderian Armoured Corps alone consisted of nearly 60,000 men and 22,000 vehicles spread over only 4 axes of advance, which caused the congestion of vehicle columns of up to 250 km.

2) The Stukas attacked according to the planning established between General Guderian and General Loerzer, commander of the II Air Corps, the latter refusing to change at the last moment the plan of maneuver despite the requests of General von Kleist.

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**Release date** 12/02/2021

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