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Surprise in French warfighting culture

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Surprise has always been a phenomenon integral to war. Throughout history, the importance of surprise has been apparent in numerous studies on strategic thinking, be it in the 13th century with the *Poème de Qadesh*, or in more recent times with the document *Action Terrestre Future* (Future Land Action). Some of the most powerful countries in the world – the United States, the United Kingdom, Israel, Russia, plus NATO – have even elevated “surprise” to the status of a principle of war.

France, on the other hand, only recognizes three principles of war at this point in time. These are economy of means, unity of effort and freedom of action. At the beginning of the 20th century, Marshal Foch¹ put forward his theories on these principles. But surprise literally made no appearance, inherently linked as it is to security. Surprise has to be induced, as explained in the handbook FT-02 – General Tactics “the methods of application

for these principles must be surprise-oriented in all aspects because surprise causes a permanent delay in the enemy’s action”.

Our warfighting culture, from the First Empire to the present day can be characterized as such : Cartesian in nature, it gives great importance to axial maneuver, soldier bravery and the position of the leader. Napoleon forged his own model based on maneuver and the speed of execution. Then, from the fall of the First Empire to the First World War, France went through a wilderness period in the field of theory and military doctrine. The end of the 19th century saw the introduction of an highly offensive model. The furor of the First World War made its mark in the field of doctrine, with the prioritization of resolute defense and the building

of the Maginot line – leading to the disaster of 1940. This brief timeline, along with the French mindset, goes some way to explain why “surprise” has never been classed as a principle.

As such, in French culture, surprise is nonetheless tied to three principles of war. From a doctrinal perspective, surprise is a procedure which maximizes their effects, but the inherent nature of surprise prevents it from being classed as a principle.

Some definitions will be provided, before using surprise to filter analysis of the principles of war taken onboard by French doctrine.





Definitions:

Surprise, whether it is tactical, operational or strategic, has been the topic of numerous studies, penned by a wide range of authors. Nonetheless, it is possible to draw some general conclusions. Surprise can occur in the fields of:

- Geographic space : action is executed, or endured, in an unexpected place or via a surprising direction. For example, the German breakthrough in Sedan in 1940.
- Time : Attack takes place at a time which is completely unexpected ;
- Technology, via use of innovative weaponry. For example, the Greek Fire used by the Byzantines against the Arab fleet in 678 AD ;
- Doctrine : In this case, implementing techniques unknown to the enemy, such as the Napoleonic art of maneuver, the surprising speed of which was thanks to the way the armed forces were organized (first appearance of the corps), as well as the organization of command.

FT-02 explains that achieving surprise is to be sought in the technical field (innovation) and the doctrine field (taking action according to new methods and new ways of organizing).

The fields in which surprise has been achieved, as mentioned above, are not mutually exclusive. They can be combined in order to increase the effects of surprise. For example, at tactical level, the seizure of Fort Eben Emael in 1940 combined all of these components: the attack of a fort in Belgium (geographical aspect), 11 May 1940 in the middle of the night (temporal aspect), with the use of glider assets and unlined shaped charges (technical aspect) with airborne units (doctrine aspect).

Finally, in terms of effects, surprise delivers a necessary blow to the latency established between the action taken by the

victim, surprise, and his reaction. The ultimate goal is to paralyze the enemy. To this end, and as a rule of thumb, when it comes to surprise we should take our cues from the enemy leader, or at least, the person holding the reins and the levers necessary for restoring balance. Nonetheless, surprise is a “one shot deal” . It is vital that it comes to fruition, otherwise the risk is that it cannot occur again.

Liddell Hart sets out three levels of surprise determined by the effect obtained¹:

- Tactical surprise, “ which provides an initial advantage from which we can recover”, provided that we have survived and that we have the necessary means for resilience ;
- Decisive surprise “ which destroys the plan and all the dispositions taken, but from which one can survive to give a new kind of combat” ;
- Moral surprise, leading to tetany, which annihilates every capacity for recovery.

These three levels reveal a fundamental aspect of surprise; namely exploitation. To achieve full effect, surprise needs to be exploited as quickly as possible, either by continuing the maneuver, seizing a space (breakthrough in the depth), or maintaining or even increasing the speed of execution (for example, the breakthrough at Sedan in May 1940).

Lastly, surprise remains one of the sole means for tipping the balance of a situation involving several opponents of equal force. It can even create the conditions for victory in a situation which had started off as unfavorable for the party initiating the surprise. The Battle of Gaugamela is the perfect example of this: in 331 BC, Alexander the Great met the army of Darius III, which was six times greater in number. Alexander led a front line great enough to give unexpected charge towards the position of King Darius. Surprised and afraid, the King fled the battlefield, leaving his demoralized army to the mercy of the Macedonian army, which won the battle.

¹ Michel Yakovleff, *Tactique théorique*, Paris, Economica, 3rd edition, pp78-79
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then on, the war became a war of positions.

The French principles of war from a surprise perspective

“The French Army recognizes three principles of war – freedom of action, unity of effort and economy of means – to be applied by land forces at tactical level²”.

Freedom of action

In French warfighting culture, freedom of action is the most important of the three recognized principles. It is considered fundamental. War remains a fight via and for freedom of action. Freedom of action is what secures the initiative of the military or political leader. It should enable the leader to take action how and where it suits him, with the necessary means, to fulfil the set objectives. Freedom of action also remains fundamental for limiting risks and maximizing opportunities. As such, we can better understand why FT-02 stresses that freedom of action is based on; “security, which eliminates surprise, predicting and anticipating the opponent’s events and actions, and the capability

It is also now easier to grasp the extent to which surprise can secure and maintain freedom of action. Freedom of action is won via deception, intelligence and the audacity of the leader, as well as his capability to confront events with a cool head. The reaction of Marshal Joffre to the Schlieffen plan and the failure of plan XVII in 1914 is a good example. Joffre had been taken by surprise by the German maneuver, but he did not succumb to panic. He managed to stop the German offensive by leading an opportunity offensive against the flank of the German army stationed in the Marne. This flank had turned prematurely towards the South-East in order to approach Paris. The German army was taken by surprise and was defeated. From

Unity of effort

Contrary to what we may think at first glance, unity of effort involves the combination of actions and the optimization of effects to “increase the effectiveness on the chosen objective”. As an offshoot, we can grasp the combined arms cooperation necessary to aggregate the various capabilities and skills for the objectives set by Command. This particular principle is therefore distinct from the unequivocal definition of concentration of means.

Seeking a suitable balance of forces and knowing the opponent’s weaknesses therefore take priority. The most appropriate force volume and capabilities should be applied to a specific location in the enemy disposition, at the opportune moment, to make the enemy capitulate. From this point, to a degree that is almost obvious, surprise becomes essential for applying this principle. As part of the framework of kinetic force balance, surprise becomes the best way to tip the balance in our favor and offer opportunities for exploitation. Otherwise, surprise maximizes effects on an enemy who has been completely unaware or even weakened.

The Economy of means

This principle directly concerns the distribution of means. FT-02 explains that this principle aims for the “proper distribution and use of assets in order to obtain the best ratio of capabilities vs effects in order to achieve the assigned goal”. In other words, this principle is part of force generation and the assignment of suitable means and capabilities for mission success, without ever overlooking the logistics involved. Besides distribution, economy of means also covers modularity; the formation of units adapted to our objectives.

2 CDEF, FT-02 – *Tactique générale*

3 He apparently said to his staff, “ *please, don’t panic !*”.

The combined arms detachments (*GTIA* – combined arms battalion task force /*SGTIA* combined arms company team/*DIA* combined arms detachment) are the best examples of these.

The economy of means principle will soon have an increased number of applications with the advent of the Army's SCORPION program. In the fields of distribution and modularity, the system will offer never-before-seen opportunities. We can assume that the changes to distribution currently implemented will be made possible and authorized by information sharing operations.

And so what about surprise? In this case, surprise applies to the freedom granted to the leader to organize his forces, to choose his capabilities and to put them to use in a way that adheres to doctrine (more or less). For example, during certain battles, Napoleon would surprise his enemies with the speed of his maneuvers. The creation of the « corps » level played a particular hand in considerably speeding up tactical maneuver.

Conclusion

In French warfighting culture, the definition of the principles of war selected by Marshal Foch enables to grasp the extent to which surprise is clearly induced. Surprise enables an increase in effects and offers leaders opportunities and the chance to guard against enemy surprise.