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TITLE: SURPRISE IN THE ATTACK

SCOPE: A discussion of how surprise has contributed to the success of operations in past wars. Bases for achieving surprise; how surprise may be accomplished in armored and infantry divisions, and a brief discussion of surprise in airborne operations and operations in the Arctic and Desert regions. A summary of considerations in planning for surprise, and the necessity for increased emphasis on surprise in a future war.

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SURPRISE IN THE ATTACK

by

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## GENERAL

The mission of each officer and man in total war is to do all in his power to contribute toward winning battles. This mission will be accomplished in varying degrees, and the degree will depend on the training, initiative, resourcefulness, intelligence, endurance and loyalty of the individual soldier and leader. The leader who can accomplish his mission with the least cost in men and equipment is, in the final analysis, the most successful.

Assuming that a commander conforms generally to the various principles of war in an operation, regardless of its magnitude, the one element which will lead to the least costly victory is surprise. Surprise is one of the most discussed problems in planning an operation and the one the junior commander is very apprehensive about. Victory may be gained without surprise, but the initial cost in equipment and lives will, in the majority of cases, be greater.

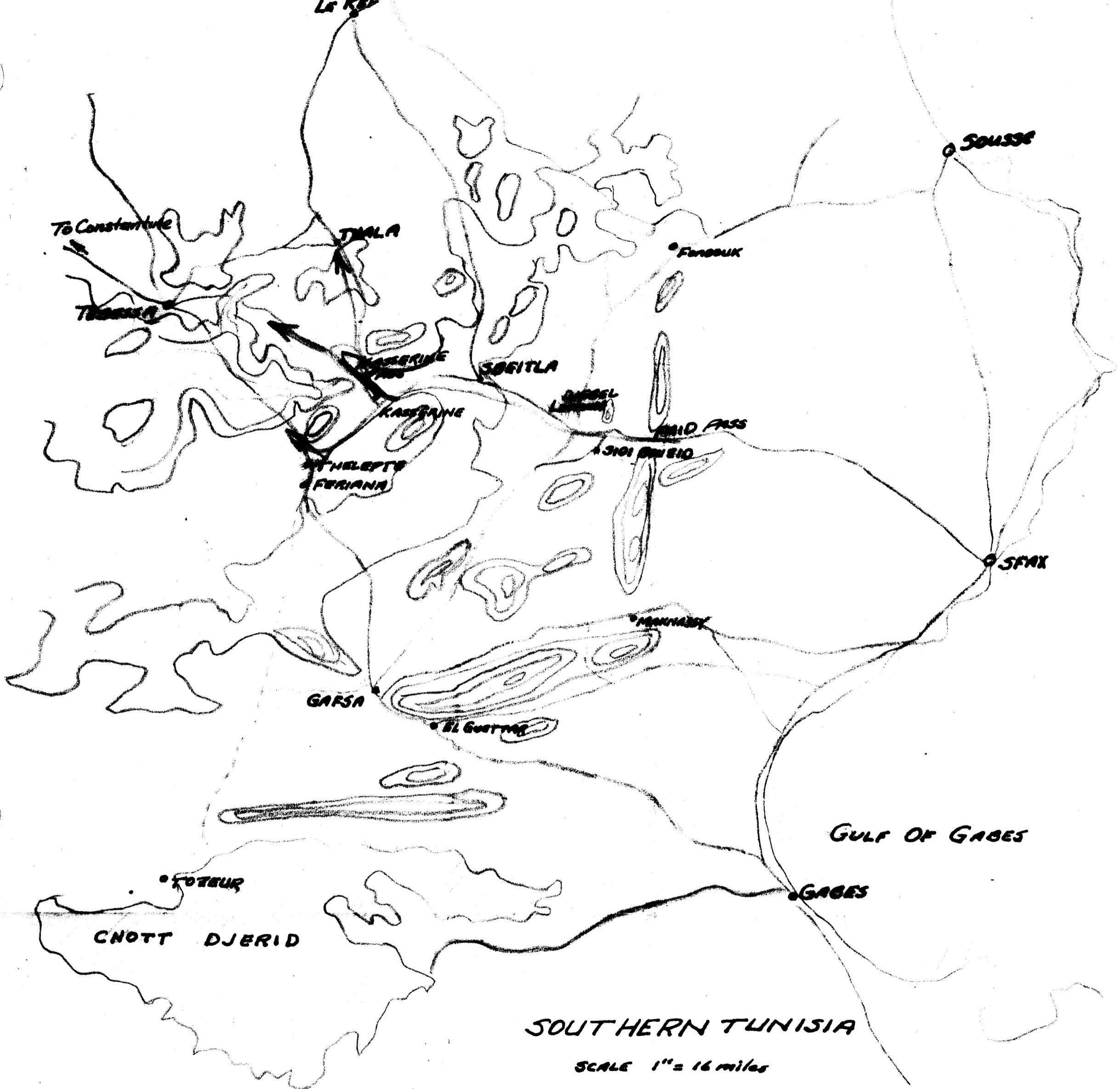
Conceding that surprise is of vital importance in success or failure of an operation the question arises as to how to achieve surprise. History is replete with examples indicating how surprise contributed immeasurably to victory and how lack of surprise resulted in defeat or costly victory.

The achievement of strategic surprise is evidenced by the sudden attack on Pearl Harbor, the German advance into Poland, the Low Countries and France. The effectiveness of these attacks is history; the losses in men and equipment to the attacker were small; the victory was

decisive. Tactical surprise on the battlefield may be as effective and overwhelming on a more limited scale.

When Field Marshal Rommel, commander of the German Afrika Korps in Egypt and Lybia, was a lieutenant colonel, he wrote a book, Infantry Attacks, in which he related his experiences as a small unit infantry commander in World War I. Throughout the book he indicates that in every battle plan and maneuver he tried to introduce some element of deception and surprise. He sought out the weakest element in the enemy position and worked out a plan of attack to exploit that weakness and to confuse the enemy as to his real intentions. He was to a remarkable degree successful. When Marshal Rommel commanded the Afrika Korps, he was called the "Desert Fox" by the British because of his ability to out-maneuver them and his ingenious use of the forces available to him. He applied principles of surprise attack and deception on a major scale in a manner similar to that related in his book of experiences as a junior officer. He exploited weaknesses of the enemy.

His retreat from Lybia to Tunisia gives a striking example of his effective use of surprise. In order to join forces with the German elements in Northern Tunisia he had to keep the coastal route Gabes-Sfax open. The security of this route was being threatened by a build up of American troops in Southern Tunisia. To accomplish this security he first attacked and captured Faid Pass through which ran one of the few East-West roads to the coast. (See sketch No. 1) This critical feature dominated a wide plain broken only by isolated mountain masses. He then



**SOUTHERN TUNISIA**

SCALE 1" = 16 miles

- Roads
- Rommel's axis of advance

attacked suddenly about a week later with armor through Faïd and a pass several miles North of Faïd and surprised the American forces in the Djebel Lessouda-Sidi Bou Zid-Sbeitla area. Severe losses were inflicted on the American forces causing a general withdrawal to the next defensible terrain of which Kasserine Pass is a part. This maneuver forced the Gafsa gap garrison of American and French to withdraw without attack being made directly at that point. Rommel followed the withdrawal closely and attacked by infiltrating infantry into the mountains adjacent to Kasserine Pass. The forces defending the pass were out flanked and the pass captured. By thrusting with armor up the valley behind, he threatened to capture the major supply base in Tebessa and to separate the British and American forces. This attack was successful in thwarting the planned American offensive to seize Sfax and to pin the Afrika Korps between American II Corps and British Eighth Army. It was a direct contribution toward prolonging the German hold in Tunisia. Its success was due largely to the exploitation of initial advantage of surprise and use of terrain to gain further surprise as the penetration continued.

In the fighting in Northern Tunisia, American forces outflanked the strongly held approaches to the Tunis-Bizerte coastal plain in the II Corps zone by attacking over the mountains which were relatively lightly held. We were successful in taking with relatively small losses positions that would have been otherwise impossible to take without great expenditure in men and materiel. This judicious use of terrain was the means for gaining surprise and the first major American victory

over the Germans in World War II.

The 1st Armored Division breakout from the Anzio Beachhead is an illustration of tactical measures to gain surprise. Static warfare reminiscent of World War I characterized the fighting in this sector of the Italian front during the period February to May 1944 when the breakout occurred. The 1st Armored Zone was between two infantry divisions and the division was to attack with combat commands abreast on a narrow front. The problem was to get the division in attack positions without unnecessarily alerting the Germans who had commanding observation and could at night hear movement of armor in any part of the beachhead. This was successfully accomplished by making nightly movements of tanks into forward areas where, after making a great show of movement and firing, the tanks withdrew to their normal bivouac; at least that is what the Germans were led to believe. Some of the tanks remained forward in well concealed positions. These operations lasted for several nights until adequate forces were in position to attack. The Germans became so accustomed to the movement and large artillery shoots (famous sunrise serenade about 850 artillery pieces) which were coordinated with it that when launched the real attack caught them by surprise and went off successfully with remarkably small losses in personnel. Tank and personnel casualties initially were heavy in CCB due to anti-tank mines; CCB did not use "snakes". Vehicle and personnel casualties in CCA were light. CCA used "snakes" to clear lanes through minefields, and took its objective by 1300 the day of attack. CCB did not arrive abreast of CCA

until the following morning.<sup>1</sup>

The following 12th Army Group report emphasizes security measures adopted in the movement and attack of a division:

"The 90th Infantry Division was relieved from one sector of the line by the 94th Infantry Division, moved rapidly to the sector of the 26th Infantry Division and launched an attack which apparently took the enemy by surprise. Security precautions taken to conceal the move included the following:

a. The initial relief of the 94th Division took over radio traffic from the 90th Division in such a manner that the enemy intercept stations would detect no differences in call signs, volume of traffic, or location of transmitters.

b. The 90th Division vehicle markings and shoulder patches were covered before moving up and the movement was made mostly by night. Units went into concealed assembly areas in rear of the 26th Division taking over no part of the line before the attack.

c. Artillery was emplaced battery by battery near positions of the 26th Division artillery and registration was carried out without increasing the density of fire.

d. The attack was launched directly through a portion of the line held by the 26th Division."<sup>2</sup>

The foregoing examples indicate some of the ways in which surprise in the attack has been achieved. There are many others which may be considered and the means to implement them is dependent on the commander and the situation. The following are the general bases for gaining surprise:

1. Use of terrain

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1. Captain John M. Bushey, Instructor TAS in "Breakout of 1st Armored Division from the Anzio Beachhead".

2. Report Headquarters 12 Army Group 22 Feb 1945. AGF # 60; Immediate Report # 35.



2. Deception and Ruses
3. Speed of attack
4. The idea that something cannot be done
5. New techniques and weapons
6. Secrecy discipline including security measures, signal security, counter reconnaissance, camouflage and concealment.
7. Time and space--that is, moving from one location to another and launching an attack in a shorter time than the enemy would possibly estimate.
8. Attacking in an unexpected direction
9. Attacking with unexpected strength and violence

These bases will rarely be used singly; a combination normally will be possible, depending on the situation. It is improbable that a situation will arise in which one of these bases cannot be applied to a limited degree. The commander in making his plan for the attack should ascertain which one or ones can best be adapted to his situation.

In making plans to gain surprise a calculated risk is always present. Whether surprise has been achieved cannot be known until the attack is actually under way. It therefore follows that to reduce the risk element a commander must know and consider all possible factors within the enemy's capabilities which can affect the accomplishment of the mission. All counter intelligence measures must be taken to prevent the enemy from learning or getting indications of the plans. The enemy's intelligence service must not be underestimated.

The primary reason why surprise is so effective in influencing the success of an attack is that the enemy when attacked had not anticipated what was actually done and was not fully prepared to resist. This may be indicated by:

1. Lack of alertness on established positions
2. Inadequate forces at the point attacked
3. Absence, improper sighting or insufficient numbers of weapons to counter weapons used in the attack, for example, improper disposition of anti-tank weapons to combat an attack of tanks.
4. Poor selection of position for reserves which will preclude proper utilization in time to stop a penetration.
5. Enemy radio traffic

The commander recognizing that the enemy has been surprised must be prepared to exploit his advantage and to further the disorganization of the enemy forces. Failure to capitalize on gains thus achieved will cancel efforts made to gain surprise in the initial attack. The smart enemy will then take advantage of our lack of initiative and use all the forces available to stop the penetration and to eject attacking forces from his former positions.

The Armored Division, Infantry Division, and Airborne Division each has inherent characteristics which if properly exploited may result in surprise in the attack.

#### ARMORED DIVISION

The armored division commander has great offensive strength at his

disposal in four battalions each of tanks, infantry and field artillery, the major arms influencing action on the battlefield. These can be welded into a fighting team with three major characteristics: mobility, protected firepower and shock action. Through proper commitment the division has great potentialities for achieving surprise. Surprise may be gained in an attack by utilizing its mobility to attack at an unexpected place, in an unexpected direction, with unexpected speed, at an unexpected time or a combination of these.

These four means, depending on mobility, can further be emphasized by the protected fire power and the shock action of armor appearing suddenly on an enemy battle position. The capability of violent attack and the ability to follow through a penetration to exploit the vulnerable rear areas make the armored division a powerful and dangerous weapon. Its presence on a front will cause consternation in the enemy higher commanders. They realize the capabilities of properly conducted armored action and will take all measures possible to guard against an armored thrust.

In instruction at The Armored School an instructor had this to say: "Before the inception of the armored division the penetration was limited to the endurance of dismounted infantry. With the addition of armor with its mobility and fire power, tactical surprise can be exploited before the enemy is able to maneuver to stop the penetration".<sup>3</sup>

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3. Lt Col Robert M. Parker, instructor TAS in instruction on "Armored Division in the Attack" 9 March 1948.

In very few situations will either the defender or attacker have adequate men and equipment to be strong all along the front. The armored commander then must know the enemy capabilities, the terrain and any other influencing factors so that when he does commit his command it will strike at a time, place or direction unexpected by the enemy, or where the enemy is weakest and least prepared to counter an armored attack.

In planning for his defense against armor the enemy will study the terrain very carefully to determine what is passable and what is not passable to tanks. That which is difficult tank terrain will probably be least heavily prepared with anti-tank measures. If the commander can by use of the organic or other infantry and engineers seize enough of the terrain considered unsuitable for armor to enable him to attack with tanks, then the enemy will, in effect, be surprised. He will have to displace his anti-tank weapons to meet the threat not planned for, and he may be too late to stop the attack.

The Armored Division also has certain inherent characteristics which are disadvantageous in attempting to gain surprise. They are: dependence on radio for communication, number and size of vehicles and tracks made by vehicles, inability to move quietly. Some of these may be overcome easily; others require more time, supervision and planning. The communications problem can be eliminated by enforcing radio silence and resorting to other means of communication until the attack actually is launched. The following report of 12th Army Group indicates the importance they placed on radio security:

"The wide use of radio has given rise to a media through which the enemy deduces our intentions by analysis of our radio traffic and compromise of our messages. The following indicates some of the ways in which we disclose our proposed action: The enemy's system of radio interception and traffic analysis is excellent and extends down occasionally to below division level. He is expert in putting scraps of conversation together and making correct deductions from traffic directions (i.e. traffic control on roads) and "deciphering" amateur attempts at double talk in American slang. . . Throughout the campaign in Europe radio has been the enemy's primary source of information about our order of battle and hence our intentions."<sup>4</sup>

It behooves armored and other commanders to supervise closely and enforce strictly signal procedure regulations and radio silence when in effect. The innocent tuning of transmitters by several operators can alert the enemy and with radio direction finding equipment he may get the location of the unit. He will become more alert and make a greater effort to determine the exact location and nature of the unit.

The noise of moving tanks may be concealed somewhat by artillery firing. Sonic devices imitating moving tanks may be used to mislead the enemy; mock ups and dummy tanks may deceive the enemy; careful concealment of bivouac areas is vitally important. Though the enemy is believed to have been deceived, the attack should be conducted with the idea that the enemy knows the plan to surprise him. Movement to the attack confident that the enemy has been deceived may prove fatal and it is very probable that the attacking forces will be the ones surprised.

It can be seen then that the armored division has characteristics

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4. Report 12th Army Group 22 Feb 1945 AGF # 60 Immediate report # 60.

which if properly utilized may enable it to gain surprise. If adequate precautionary measures are taken, the elements that will compromise its location and probable intentions of the commander can be neutralized.

#### INFANTRY DIVISION

The infantry division in the attack is characterized by its capabilities of closing with the enemy, shock action, great power of sustained action, moving inconspicuously, maneuvering over difficult terrain. Its outstanding limitations are that it is thin skinned and limited in rapid mobility when dismounted.

These capabilities and limitations can be utilized to gain surprise. The principal ways an infantry division may gain surprise are:

1. Attacking at an unexpected time and/or place
2. Attacking over terrain considered impassable
3. Attacking with unexpected strength and violence
4. Security and counter intelligence measures
5. Variation in method of attack

The use of an artillery preparation for an infantry attack may be a means for gaining surprise. The surprise element may be interjected by varying tactics. For example if it is usual to precede the attack with a preparation, launching an attack at an unexpected time without the preparation might catch the enemy unawares. Intense preparations may be made along the most likely avenues of approach and the main effort made at less obvious points. The influence of preparations of this type was demonstrated in the attack in May 1944 of the British, French and American

forces on the Garigliano River-Cassino front. The forces were disposed with two American divisions in the coastal sector, the French in the mountainous terrain between the Americans and the British on the Cassino front. The attack on the American and British fronts was preceded by intense artillery preparations on forward positions and counterbattery fires on known artillery positions. In comparison the artillery in the French sector was slight. All three forces attacked about the same time and initial gains were made. The French, however, made the deepest penetration initially and caught the opposing German elements by surprise. Early in the attack at least one enemy regimental commander was captured in his command post before the Germans realized the strength of the French attack. This initial success can be attributed to two factors, first the Germans apparently considered that only token attack would be made in this sector as the most likely avenues of approach were in the coastal and Cassino sectors, and the terrain was much more difficult in front of the French; and secondly the artillery preparation which so commonly preceded the attack was almost nil on the French front.

Examples of infantry exercising its mobility over difficult terrain have already been related. It is one of the most important capabilities to be exploited in order to gain surprise.

The infantry and artillery strength combined with the added tank strength in the new Infantry Division results in a force capable of striking with unexpected strength and violence. This capability is self evident and needs no further elucidation.

## AIRBORNE DIVISION

The mere presence of an airborne division in a theatre of operations is a constant threat to the enemy. Its mobility prior to commitment and its capability of landing in any part of enemy territory within range of the transporting aircraft make its initial use a surprise to the enemy, assuming that necessary security measures have been taken. After landing the Airborne division with standard attachments can function very similarly to an infantry division.

## SPECIAL OPERATIONS

In special operations the element of surprise is variously affected. These include operations in extreme cold and desert operations. Operations in extreme cold affect the operational characteristics of units organized for temperate climates. An observer on Task Force Frigid had these comments on surprise:

"Surprise will be more difficult to obtain in winter conditions

because:

- (1) Tracks made by personnel and vehicles are easily recognizable from the air and are difficult to obliterate or conceal.
- (2) Fires are required in order to survive for prolonged periods.
- (3) Exhaust vapors in cold weather will disclose the positions of all vehicles and personnel.
- (4) It is seldom practical to keep more than one supply route open.
- (5) In the mountainous areas the observation of the enemy is facilitated."

A further comment which is related to gaining surprise is as follows:

"Concentration. Because of the handicaps imposed by winter



conditions on mobility and the attainment of surprise, the principle of concentration will be more ordinarily difficult to achieve. Although the process may be somewhat slower and more difficult in winter conditions, the commander who "gets there fustest with the mostest" and attacks with resolution will, as in other circumstances, have every prospect of success."<sup>5</sup>

The limitations on mobility imposed by the extreme conditions on both vehicles and foot troops indicates that the element of surprise from concealed approach and rapid movement will require that the ingenuity of commanders be taxed to the utmost.

Other means for achieving surprise must be pursued. The present status of the "know-how" of operations in extreme cold precludes any definite solution to this tactical aspect. Surprise will have to be gained through development of vehicles and weapons which are immeasurably more maneuverable and efficient. Through development and use of these, a degree of surprise can be achieved. Other surprise must come through use of terrain, deception and ruses, and attacking with unexpected strength and violence in an unexpected direction.

Operations in the desert pose problems of concealment, but operations in Lybia and Egypt in World War II indicate that the usual means for achieving surprise can be followed. General Montgomery's conduct of the battle of El Alemein is an excellent example of the use of deception and tactical measures to gain surprise.

In a war of the immediate future numerical manpower superiority will be with the enemy. Accordingly, forces must be committed so that no man

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5. "Operations in Extreme Cold", publication TAS

is used needlessly or killed unnecessarily. Every blow delivered on the enemy must be decisive. Surprise is the one principle of war which if properly planned and executed can result in economy of men and materiel.

To remove many of the uncertainties of success of operations in which surprise is contemplated, detailed knowledge of the enemy and terrain under control of the enemy is of paramount importance. The commander must have sound combat intelligence in order to make a wise decision. No plan for surprise conceived without knowledge of the enemy capabilities has the certainty of success that one has when combat intelligence is accurate and complete. The commander must determine the enemy's weaknesses and devise a plan to exploit them.

With a logical plan based as sound knowledge, execution must be as flawless as possible. This will come through training, discipline and supervision. No plan, regardless of how well conceived it is, can win battles; battles are won through execution. The best plan well executed will, therefore, result in the most decisive victory.

No commander at any echelon must follow principles blindly; principles are guides to be tempered with good judgement based on knowledge, experience, and common sense. Routine for the attack must not be obvious to the enemy. There must be a change of pace to keep the enemy off-balance and uncertain of what the next move will be.

The commander should never become lulled into a belief that the enemy will be deceived by his plan. He should plan to capitalize on surprise gained but not to depend on it to do the whole job. The enemy

may not be surprised and the success of the operation will be jeopardized.

A situation is rare when it is impossible to attain some degree of surprise. Every commander in making his plan should review all possible ways in which surprise may be gained and adopt the most practicable plan and the one most likely to succeed.

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Operations in Extreme Cold. Note: A report by an observer from The Armored School to Task Force Frigid.