

LESSON 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL OF WAR

“At the operational level ... your goal is not to kill the enemy, but to provide opportunities for the commander at the tactical level to kill the enemy. Your operational objective is to put the enemy in harm’s way.”

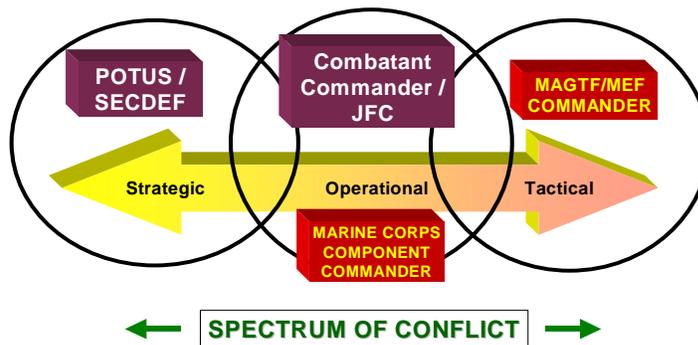
—General Glenn K. Otis
Former Commander U.S. Army Europe

Lesson Introduction

In the 8802 or 8802A course you learned that the strategic level of war is the level of war at which a nation, often as a member of a group of nations, determines national or multinational security objectives and guidance and also develops and uses national resources to accomplish these objectives. Activities at this level establish national and multinational military objectives; sequence initiatives; define limits and assess the risks with the use of military and other instruments of national power; develop global plans or theater war plans to achieve these objectives; and provide military forces and other capabilities in accordance with strategic plans.

On the other end of the spectrum of war is the tactical level of war, defined as the level of war at which battles and engagements are planned and executed in order to accomplish military objectives assigned to tactical units or task forces. Activities at this level focus on the ordered arrangement and maneuver of combat elements in relation to each other and to the enemy in order to achieve combat objectives.

The operational level of war connects the strategic level of war to the tactical level of war in order to accomplish strategic objectives (see diagram below).



The operational level of war is the level at which campaigns and major operations are planned, conducted, and sustained to accomplish strategic objectives within theaters or areas of operations. Activities at this level link tactics and strategy by establishing operational objectives that are needed to accomplish the strategic objectives, by sequencing events to achieve the

operational objectives, by initiating actions, and by applying resources to bring about and sustain these events. These activities imply a broader dimension of time or space than do tactics; they ensure the logistic and administrative support of tactical forces and provide the means by which tactical successes are exploited to achieve strategic objectives.

Student Requirements by Educational Objective

Requirement 1

Objective 1. Understand the linkages between strategy, the operational level of war, and the tactical level of war. [JPME Area 2(a), 3(a)(e), 4(c)]

Read:

- “Strategy and the Operational Level of War,” Part 1, by David Jablonsky (8 pages)
- “Tactics and the Operational Level of War,” by David Jablonsky and William J. Bolt (14 pages)

David Jablonsky does an excellent job of demonstrating how the strategic level of war affects the operational level. His point involving the fact that the strategic ends must match the operational ways and means is well made. He also points out that strategic constraints can significantly limit operational commanders’ alternatives. Communication between decision makers at the strategic level and those individuals commanding at the operational level must be open and frank. Jablonsky cites an example of the Korean War. He claims that the aura of MacArthur’s WW II successes, the rank and generational differences between MacArthur and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the fact that MacArthur had been a virtual warlord in the Pacific for decades inhibited a functional and open dialogue between the operational and strategic levels. Additionally, an associated and equally important problem can occur when the operational perspective becomes so narrow or self-absorbed that there is a strategic disconnect. Jablonsky demonstrates this possibility by the following example:

Ironically, this type of problem is illustrated by the desert campaigns of Field Marshal Rommel, normally considered a paragon of operational virtue. North Africa was not a major theater for Germany, which had entered the conflict there only because of Italian reverses at the hands of the British in the fall of 1940. Rommel repeatedly violated the intended economy-of-force strategy by attempting to advance beyond a reasonable distance from his bases. His initial successes in these forays prompted him in March 1941 to raise his sights to include the seizure of the Suez Canal and the eastern oil fields. Unfortunately for Germany, these operational goals were neither derived from, nor consonant with, Berlin’s military strategy. The result was strategic resourcing priorities that never matched the operational sustainment needs of the *Afrika Korps*.

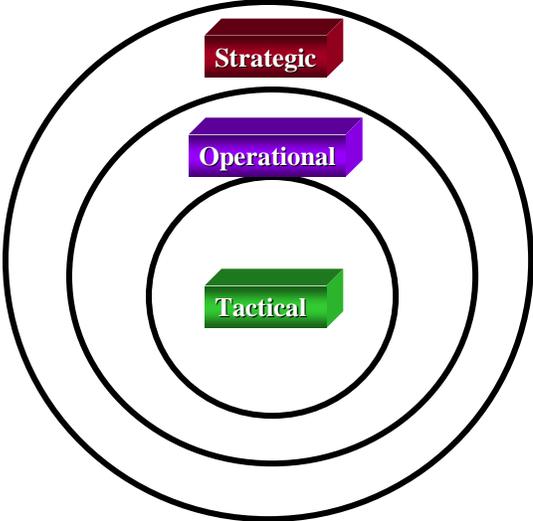
The second article by Bolt and Jablonsky compares the operational level of war with the tactical level. The authors interestingly instruct us that the complexity of modern warfare in the stalemated attrition of WW I brought home the point that individual tactical engagements and battles would have to be orchestrated if they were to achieve strategic results. The Soviets identified the relationship of tactics in this continuum of war as early as 1927 when a Frunze Academy (Moscow) faculty member wrote, "Tactics make the steps from which operational leaps are assembled; strategy points out the path."

The authors discuss the decision-making aspect at the operational level and demonstrate how the tactical level is affected. They explain that, because the quest for certainty can never completely be fulfilled, the operational commander must live in a constant environment of "what ifs" that can only be met by flexible planning and well thought-out alternative courses of action. In the fast-moving operational environment, decisions that are made too high in the chain of command may be untimely and unresponsive. What is required at the operational level of war is decentralized decision making based on a clear statement of overall intent and mission-type orders. Historically, armies have been most successful when they have operated in this manner, subordinating requirements for centralized command and control to the demands imposed by the modern battlefield upon tactical commanders for initiative, flexibility, and quick reaction.

A thorough knowledge and understanding of tactics as well as detailed tactical experience is required in order for the operational commander to sustain his confidence in such an environment. The authors point out that it is this very experience that makes it so hard for these commanders to avoid the tendency to become too narrowly focused at too low a level. As General Robert W. Sennewald has stated, "There is no unknown in looking downward." Clearly, if the operational commander is to function in an environment of disorder and confusion (the fog of war), he must create an effective balance between centralization and decentralization, conformity and initiative, and authority and individual responsibility. Here is an interesting question to ponder: What are some historical examples in which tactical subordinates were given decentralized command and control and, subsequently, lost the perspective of the operational commander's intent, focusing entirely on optimizing their own situation? An equally interesting debate would be to determine whether the Marines in Desert Storm did this very thing...continuing the initiative of the attack into Kuwait despite General Schwarzkopf's desire for U.S. Army forces to "close the door" on the Iraqi ground forces and, specifically, trap the Republican Guards.

Today, there are those who argue that the combatant commander is no longer a translator of strategic objectives, since the operational and tactical levels of war have, in essence, become subsumed into the strategic level of war (see the following diagram). With access to information so pervasive throughout all military operations (be it on the battlefield or in the halls of the Pentagon), it is now argued that even a **tactical** action by any military member can have strategic results. It is incumbent on you, the future Joint operational planner, to have considered all the politico-military aspects of an operation and then craft plans that enable participants at all levels of war to understand the synergy required to achieve the nation's objectives.

Levels of War



Lesson Summary

This lesson introduced the operational level of war and compared it to the other two levels, the strategic and tactical levels. This lesson builds upon the material covered in the previous courses on the Theory and Nature of War (8801) and The Strategic Level of War (8802) or Strategy and Policy (8802A). While serving as a bridge between these courses, this lesson helps the student to begin developing some thought about how to engage in the operational level of war, which is essential for students who are about to begin efforts planning at the operational level of war using Joint warfighting doctrine and techniques. The operational level of war links what you have principally been doing in your career with what you will increasingly be engaged in for the rest of your career as a member of the profession of arms—commanding, planning, or in some way supporting operational efforts that are designed to help achieve a strategic result.

JPME Summary

AREA 1					AREA 2				AREA 3					AREA 4					AREA 5			
A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D
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