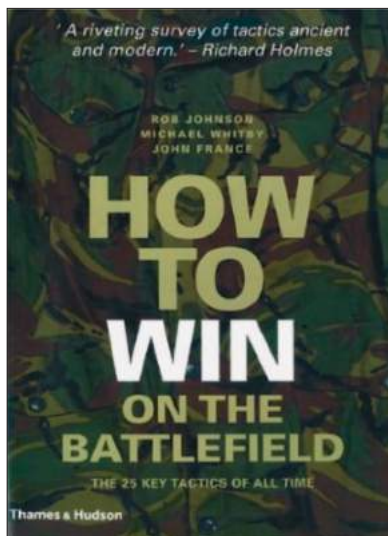


Book Review



Rob Johnson, Michael Whitby and John France, *How To Win On The Battlefield: The 25 Key Tactics of All Time*, (Thames & Hudson), 2010, 256 Pages

by **ME5 Seah Ser Thong, Calvin**

INTRODUCTION

"Much can be learned from studying the tactics of the great captains of the past. This excellent book should be read widely by today's commanders."

*General Lord Guthrie,
former Chief of the Defence
Staff, United Kingdom
(1997-2001)*

In this book, 25 battle tactics that have achieved victory through the ages are presented through a series of land, sea and air battle case studies spanning both ancient and modern battles. The authors present the key principles behind each tactic and use the case studies as well as accompanying battle plan to illustrate their actual deployment. The authors emphasised that while military history cannot provide formulas to guarantee success in modern war, an examination of the tactics used

in the past reveal patterns and principles that can be instructive. Overall, the tactics presented in the book are easy to comprehend and the book should provide light reading for both military as well as general readers. In this review, I have provided key reflections as well as a summary of ideas that can be glimpsed from a study of the tactics presented.

REFLECTIONS

After reading the book, my main reflection is that many of the battlefield tactics discussed and the fundamentals of tactics remain valid even after their use many years ago. However, as the most recent conflict mentioned is the Yom Kippur in 1973, there are still many factors that we may need to consider. These include factors such as modern weapon systems, more urbanised landscapes as well as the political landscape. While the authors have suggested that

a closer inspection of historical examples suggests that a reliance on a new technology on its own was not sufficient to produce a victory, some modern conflicts such as World War II and the Gulf War have shown how technology could be a trump card for victory.

At the same time, it also appears that every tactic has a method that can be used to counter it; therefore, it is the timing and situation of the ground that must be continually assessed. For example, the tactics of committing a 'mass' may be countered by 'drawing the enemy' into an ambush, gunfire or missile fire of a main body or 'deception and feints'. Every situation also seems to have an appropriate tactic that could be deployed for use. A critical enabler for deciding on the tactic to be deployed is still good intelligence and quick improvisation on the ground.

As the battle examples are not long nor detailed enough, a more thorough analysis may be required on individual battles to gain better insights. Moreover, as many of the battles highlighted were conducted under vastly different conditions, all the principles for the different tactics may need to be adjusted accordingly. While many of the ideas are intertwined,

based on the various tactics mentioned, I have summarised a few key ideas that I believe may be useful in many of the battles mentioned. While the book has simplified many of the tactics for general readership, it must be iterated that none of the tactics work alone and a combination of tactics are required to produce victory.

SUMMARY OF IDEAS

Concentration of Force. As mentioned in the book, Clausewitz who is one of the best-known Western strategist, had argued that this was one of the most important principle of wars, as it ensured local superiority at a critical geographical point. And, two of the highlighted tactics *Mass and Concentration* & *Culmination of Force* displayed its effectiveness. Furthermore, concentration of force to attack at the enemy's centre of gravity would help swing in favour of the battle with the sheer weight of numbers overwhelming the enemy. Even without a big force, it was interesting to note that historically, many armies had augmented their core of professional or semi-professional forces with larger numbers of less well-trained and cheaper levies and auxiliaries to create numerical superiority and ensure a minimum ratio of 3:1. While this may be

ignored, I believe that teamwork is crucial even with a sizeable force and this can only be achieved through constant training and rehearsals.

Intelligence. No matter what the situation is, good intelligence is always vital and may mean the difference between victory and loss. As seen in Omdurman, 1898, while the plan by Khalifa was not badly conceived, it was the fatal miscalculation of the enemy's firepower and insufficient knowledge of the enemy that led to his downfall. Clausewitz had mentioned that war was the realm of chance, and while the fog of war may always exist, it was a well-known military maxim that "time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted" as quoted from Sun Tzu's *Art of War*. As there has never been a 'full' intelligence picture for any army, clear communications, a simple plan and continued vigilance must still be maintained, as the opportunity for a counter-attack comes "from the negligence of an enemy, who after victory, often grows careless and gives you a chance to defeat him." As highlighted for the tactic *Strategic Offence and Tactical Defence*, it is vital for commanders to continually read the tactical situation and the configuration of the ground and make assessments all the time

and this is equally applicable to forming an intelligence picture.

Improvisation. In war, anything may happen, and all commanders must be prepared to expect the unexpected and it is important to improvise as carefully laid plans can be upset anytime by changes in the enemy's decisions and actions, the weather or even just by accidents.

Psychological Impact. While this may be an afterthought as war typically denotes physical capacity, many of the tactics such as Flanking and Blitzkrieg have been used to break both the psychological will and the physical capacity of the enemy to fight. Tactics such as the use of *Shock Action* may even prove too much for troops on the receiving end; even those trained and disciplined to expect it and create a devastating impact. Examples have also demonstrated that dealing a psychological impact may also swing in favour of armies with smaller size forces. Tactics such as *Committing the Reserve and Defence in Depth* can be used not just to create a psychological impact on the enemy, but also to create a favourable psychological effect and boost the morale of friendly forces and renew their energy in the fight. Psychologically, tactics such

as *Deception and Feints* can also be used to establish significant doubt in the minds of the enemy so that they alter their original plans.

Political Posture. Clausewitz regarded war as a "remarkable trinity", an interplay of violence, chance and the rational, intellectual and political purpose. Many of the tactics used such as *Insurgency and Guerrilla Warfare* and *Counter-Insurgency* have shown that such kinds of warfare neatly illustrate that 'war', as Clausewitz had reminded us, "is an extension of politics." Regardless of the tactical situation, political success almost certainly means operational success in the long term. As one United Nations (UN) special representative put it during the Malaya campaign from 1948-60, "Soldiers in this situation do not win the peace—they simply hold the ring while a political solution is found."

Timing, Judgement and Quick Decision Cycles. Timing for any tactic to be useful is important; however, it needs to be complemented with a sound intelligence picture, the commander's judgement as well as a quick decision cycle. It is a fundamental principle that commanders need to seize and retain the initiative in battle.

To carry out the tactic of *Seizing and Retaining the Initiative*, commanders need to keep ahead of the enemy's decision-making by reading the situation, issuing orders and effecting changes before the enemy can react. For tactics such as *Shock Action*, it is a combination of good timing and cohesion that gave the charges at Arsuf in 1191 and Balaclava in 1854 their devastating effect. Good communication as well as a simplified chain of command were also enablers for a quick decision cycle to carry out a counter-attack for the German counter-attack at Cambrai in 1917. However, good timing requires patience. Sun Tzu had urged that patience and resolution were the best attributes for a commander and indeed, the criticality of timing can never be understated as it could make the difference between victory and defeat.

Co-operation and co-ordination. It is difficult for any force or army to work alone to achieve victory in any conflict. As noted in the book, while individual national histories had a tendency to downplay or even ignore this critical dimension, alliances and coalitions were important to the outcome of a conflict. Co-ordination was a key concept in the tactic of *Co-ordination of*

Fire and Movement and it is closely linked to that of concentration and emphasised the right combination of force structures.

Logistics. While logistics may be the lifeline of militaries in war, it usually fades into the background during conflicts. In some cases however, the management of military logistics can actually be decisive in war. As detailed in the *Counter-Insurgency* tactic, by dealing with the external suppliers of logistical support, the insurgents were made visible and vulnerable. As such, it could be seen that logistics may be either a 'force multiplier' or the 'weakest link' as displayed by the tactic *Seizing and Retaining the Initiative* in which the destruction of logistics in depth was frequently used in the second world war to deprive opponents of supplies.

CONCLUSION

While there were other points highlighted which relates to employing deception, utilising the terrain and establishing good security, the key points have been extracted in the preceding section. In conclusion, the authors have iterated that readers may have to interpret how best to use the different tactics to suit different scenarios and that it would be misleading to give the impression

that battles have always been the sole arbiters of victory. Through studying all the 25 tactics presented, there are lessons that can be learned by any military organisation. However, it must be reiterated that none of the tactics work alone and a combination of tactics are required to produce victory.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Johnson, R., Whitby, M. and France J. *How To Win On The Battlefield: The 25 Key Tactics of All Time*, (Thames & Hudson, 2010).