

Chapter 10-5 – INDIVIDUAL AND TEAM CHARACTERISTICS FOR SUCCESSFUL COMBAT OPERATIONS

A Note on the 1980 BDM-Report on “Generals Balck and von Mellenthin on Tactics: Implications for NATO Military Doctrine,” by General William DePuy (U.S. Army)

INTRODUCTION

This note is based on the edited version of the BDM-report* by General William DePuy (U.S. Army, Ret.) summarizing the analysis of the opinions and ideas of retired German Generals Balck and von Mellenthin with respect to tactical problems of NATO vis-à-vis the Soviet Union in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It was rediscovered when searching the first named author’s personal archives for pre-Internet materials on human and organisational factors relevant for military Command and Control.

Even though C2 is not addressed in any detail in the BDM report, and with reference to organisational aspects only, in their statements the German Generals referred to a series of human factors and behavioural parameters that they regarded as important to success based on their extensive field experience in World War II, especially in situations when they fought successful battles against a numerically superior enemy. The respective statements in the report are marked by a yellow background.

Below, the relevant variables identified from the report and the implied relationships between them are presented as a contribution to SAS-050.

VARIABLES

The characteristics/variables mentioned by Balck and von Mellenthin in their discussion with the U.S. Generals (Gorman and Otis) and analysts (Dunnigan, Karber, Sprey), and identified by General DePuy as characteristic for the German Generals, fall into four categories related to:

- Higher level commanders (as represented by the Generals Balk and von Mellenthin);
- Lower level commanders (including NCOs);
- Soldiers in general; and
- Organisational and institutional aspects.

HIGHER LEVEL COMMANDERS

The factors listed under this category were addressed by Balck and von Mellenthin when they described each others’ characteristics and their mutual interactions as Commander 4th Panzer Army (General Balck) and his Chief of Staff (Major General von Mellenthin) during WW II operations in Russia. They include:

- Authority;
- Mental stability (iron will);

* Technical Report BDM/W-81-077-TR, McLean, VA, December 19, 1980. An edited version of the report is available for downloading at the following Web site: <http://www.dodccrp.org/>

- Determination (iron will);
- Self-confidence;
- Confidence in subordinates;
- Confidence in institution (German Army);
- Professionalism;
- Experience;
- Performance record;
- Cognitive abilities (brightness);
- Thoughtfulness;
- Creativity;
- Risk propensity (cautiousness);
- Familiarity with peers (live together, think together); and
- Loyalty.

LOWER LEVEL COMMANDERS (INCLUDING NCOs)

The variables in this category refer to characteristics that distinguish field successful troop commanders:

- Trust (deference to superior commander);
- Knowledge of superior commander's concept;
- Understanding concept and operational objectives (commander's intent);
- Instinctive grasp of situation (sixth sense, "Fingerspitzengefühl");
- Willingness to take initiative (strong initiative);
- Flexibility / responsiveness / learning aptitude;
- Cognitive abilities (imagination, apprehensiveness);
- Leadership (ability to convince and motivate subordinates);
- Wartime leadership / peacetime leadership;
- Attention to detail;
- Training;
- Experience;
- Decisiveness;
- Creativity;
- Risk propensity (boldness); and
- Respect for human being.

Based on their personal experience, both generals emphasized that at any level a commander's performance record is a prime factor affecting the battlefield performance of his troops. However, individual characteristics observed in peacetime rarely provide a basis for assessing the competence as a wartime leader.

Balck: "It is just by accident if you can observe that in peacetime... You will experience in any war that there will be a total reversal. Those people who were considered very good people in peacetime often would be lousy in war, and those who were doing very poorly in peacetime can suddenly become excellent."

Another important, albeit rare, property of successful military leaders is captured by what both German generals named "Fingerspitzengefühl" (fingertip feeling), a German term that conveys the idea of an instinctive sixth sense for terrain and tactics. Asked by General DePuy how many German generals had Fingerspitzengefühl, General Balck said "...three or four (out of every one hundred), but they were unrecognized in peacetime."

SOLDIERS IN GENERAL

Regardless of rank, the following characteristics of soldiers were considered as decisive for success in battle by the German Generals:

- Craft knowledge (training and experience);
- Courage;
- Steadfastness / perseverance;
- Familiarity with peers;
- Understanding;
- Trustworthiness;
- Individuality (autonomous thinking, cognitive maturity);
- Cultural attitudes / orientation;
- Cognitive flexibility; and
- Physical flexibility.

In addition to the level of training and experience, and institutional and other factors that affect the behaviour of soldiers, General DePuy concluded that it was the meticulous attention to detail by commanders at all levels, and the manifest courage and steadfastness of German soldiers in the face of difficulties as well as their strong initiative and perseverance that were key to German successes on the battlefield in WWII.

ORGANISATIONAL / INSTITUTIONAL

The organisational/institutional variables refer to parameters that characterize the cultural background and traditions of a military organisation and its operational philosophy, doctrine, and constraints. They include:

- Cultural background;
- Military tradition;
- Command philosophy ("Auftragstaktik");

- Degree C2 centralisation;
- Education/training;
- Training and doctrine;
- Freedom to take initiatives;
- Freedom of action;
- Reputation of organisation; and
- System of rewards / reprimands.

In the context of holding the defence line at the Chir River against the overwhelming numerical superiority of the Russians, General Balck observed that “we lived of a century-long tradition, which is that in a critical situation the subordinate with an understanding of the overall situation can act responsibly. We always placed great emphasis on the independent action of subordinates, even in peacetime training.”

Both German Generals considered the individuality of the German fighting man – his freedom to take initiative and the system that engendered these policies and attitudes – to be the key to superlative German performance.

In the context of success and failure associated with individualistic responses to situations, opportunities, and initiatives, General Balk pointed out that German high commanders were fostering the individual’s initiative: “They left him (the soldier) room for initiative, and did not reprimand him unless he did something very wrong. Of course, there were exceptions, and there was sometimes trouble, but generally independent action along the line of the general concept was praised, and accepted as something good.”

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN VARIABLES

The relationships between variables retrieved from the analysis of the DePuy report are depicted in Figures 10-5.1 through 10-5.3. In conjunction with text interpretations made by the authors of this paper, the identified relationships are captured in the following quotes by the German Generals in the report (the respective pages in the report are listed in parentheses):

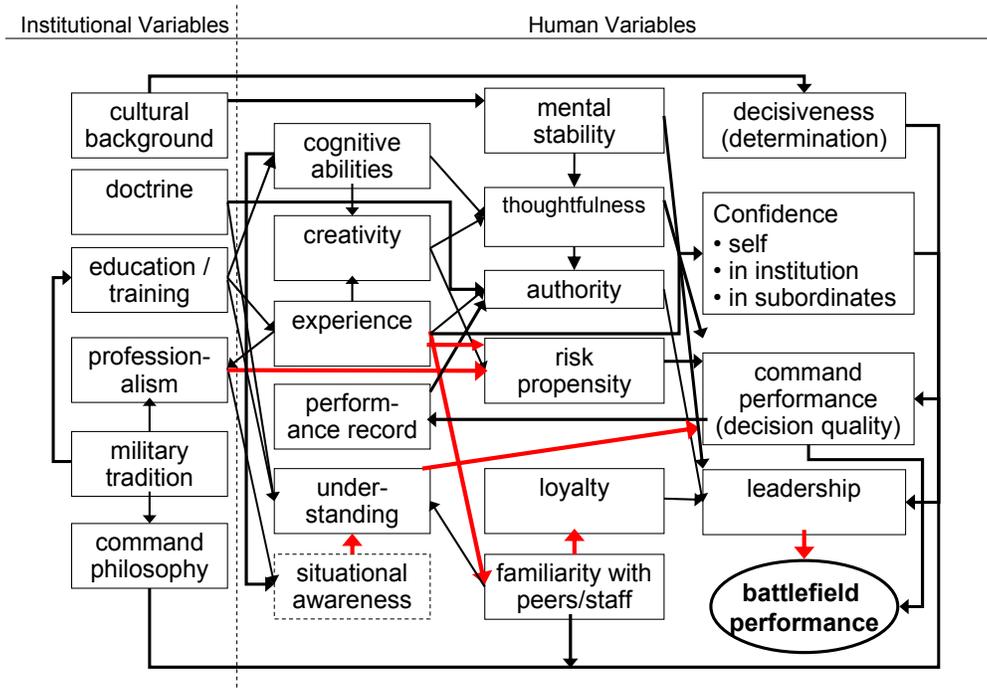


Figure 10-5.1: Relationships between Human and Institutional Variables (Higher Level Commanders).

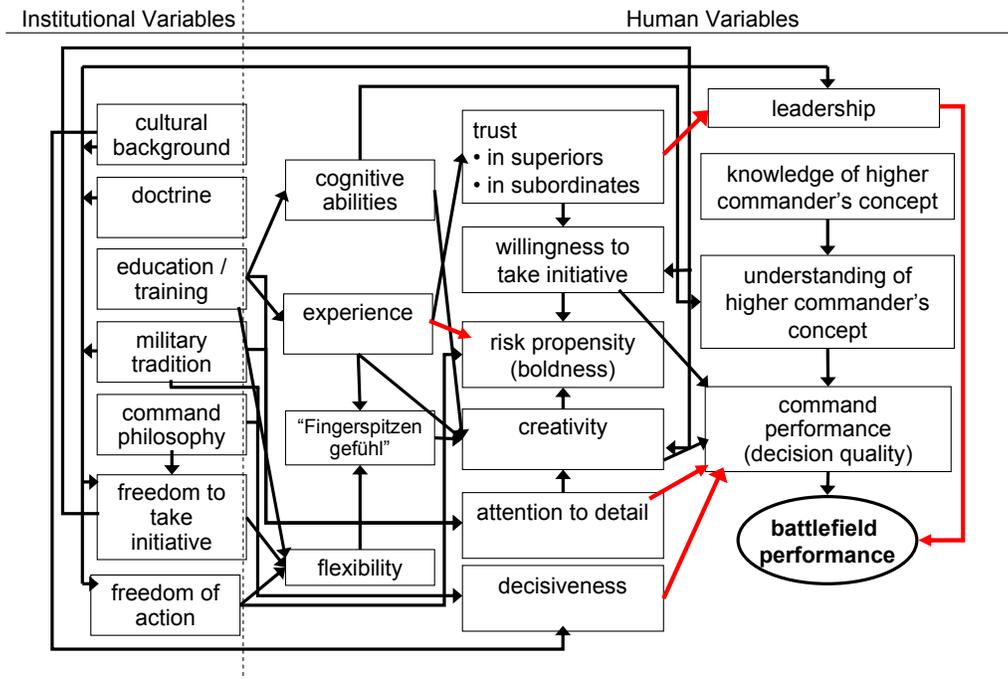


Figure 10-5.2: Relationships between Human and Institutional Variables (Lower Level Commanders).

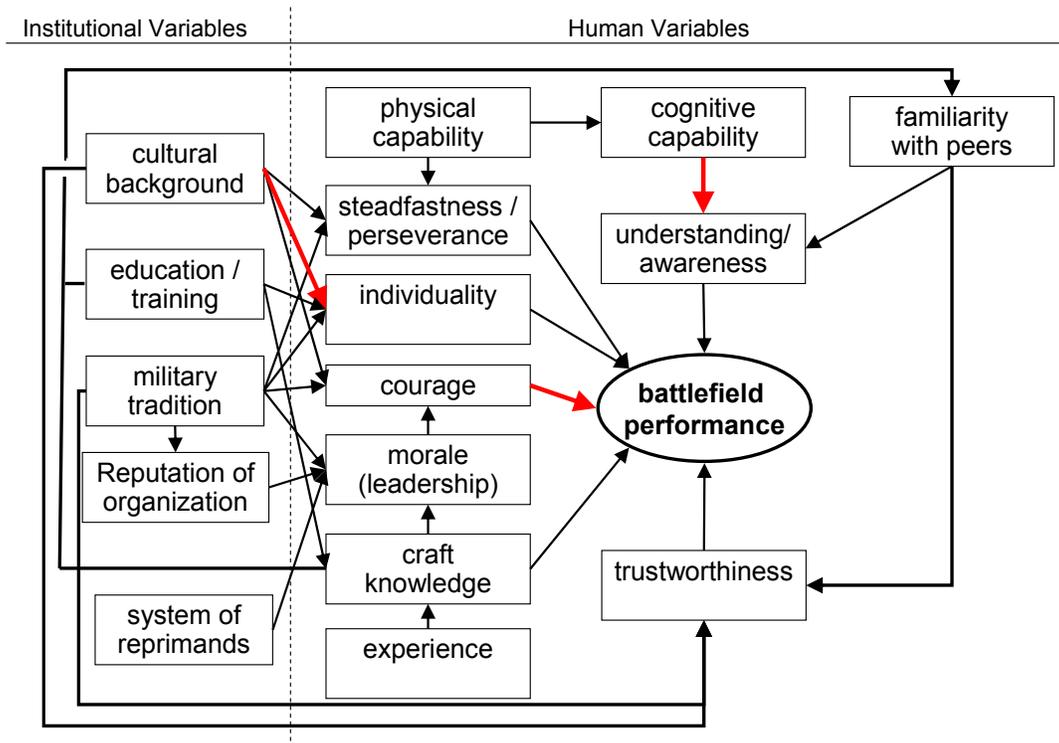


Figure 10-5.3: Relationships between Human and Institutional Variables (Soldiers in General).

- Authority growing out of an incomparable set of experiences in war and a record of battlefield performance (p. 9);
- No army can separate itself from the principles on which it has acted from the very outset (p. 11);
- They (Russians) are rigid and bound to certain patterns, and they are thus more vulnerable than we are (p. 13);
- Auftragstaktik, the theory and practice and training, in order to amplify the advantages that flow from the full exploitation of the battlefield initiative (p. 15);
- Success of Auftragstaktik rests, at least in part, on knowledge of higher commander’s concept and operations and objectives (p. 15);
- Understanding is achieved either through careful explanation or campaigning together long enough that the “modus operandi” is second nature to all ...it is also by-product of doctrine and training (p. 15);
- Leaders at any level grow with their experience (p. 19);
- The better they know each other, the shorter and less detailed the orders can be (p. 19);
- Reasons for success on the battlefield include (commanders’) attention to detail, their manifest courage and steadfastness in face of the difficulties, and their strong initiative and perseverance (p. 19);

- During each phase of the battle, factors such as doctrine, terrain, and force relationships were considered in connection with the probable battle outcomes (p. 21);
- Success depends on quality of leadership and the size of the units being led; avoid big units (pp. 41-42);
- “Pure” (homogeneous) companies and battalions facilitate training, maintenance, and leadership (p. 42);
- Integrity of the organisation must be maintained because it is the basis for training and feeding and Command and Control of the unit (p. 42);
- Small forces skilfully led can win battles against large forces if the small force is synchronised and the large force is disorganised (p. 46);
- Essence of battle is to synchronise own forces and disorganise the enemy’s (p. 46); and
- Creation of opportunities depends on the enemy’s susceptibility to disorganisation when confronted with new and unexpected situations (p. 46).

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis of the historical account of the field experience of the German Generals Balck and von Mellenthin in World War 2, the following conclusions may be drawn:

- The evaluation of the Balck / von Mellenthin accounts supports the hypothesis that the documentation of or lessons learned from historical military operations can be helpful in validating conceptual models;
- The experience captured in historical accounts offers valuable clues as to the potentially most important individual and team characteristics/variables and their relationships and may be helpful to focus on core variables in a specific C2 context;
- Variables identified from historical case studies can be used to develop hypotheses on relationships, which then can be examined in the light of empirical studies;
- Psychological research supports some of the relationships between variables that were identified from the Balck / von Mellenthin account;
- The majority of the identified variables are covered by the CM, however some variables important in a warfighting context are missing;
- The CM is helpful in structuring historical accounts of military operations to provide a basis for the validation of models; and
- The accounts emphasize the need for flexibility and maintaining the initiative, and understanding higher intent.

