



# Lesson 1: Overview of Military Planning and the Staff

Reference: **FM 101-5**

**Study assignment:** Read **FM 101-5**, Sections I-II

## **The military decision making process**

The most important gift of the German military tradition (other than two world wars) is the formal process of assessing a military task, analyzing the best ways to accomplish it, and fashioning a standard, straightforward and comprehensive order for its execution. What we now call the MDMP (Military Decision Making Process) is drilled relentlessly into the skulls of US Officers and has been for a century; but it was originally fashioned under the great military intellect Helmuth von Moltke the Elder. What it accomplished was to reduce the chaos of planning, which had for most of history relied on the impulse of the commander. Things worked well if the commander was gifted, not so well when he was untalented or just not feeling well.

What Moltke added to the process was a formal staff of specialists in the processes and information needed to build an operation—a staff that suggested options to the commander and worked diligently to construct the final orders to subordinate commanders.

Reenactors don't have that tradition, to say the least. But they don't need it, until they do. The need comes when we gather in large numbers and go to the field. How often does that happen? Once or twice a year, if we're lucky? Well, actually MDMP is also useful at smaller events. Whenever we run a patrol for excitement or practice, it's useful to plan systematically (in fact the patrol order is just a slender version of the five paragraph field order that guides a full invasion).

Most reenactors who are introduced to military planning protest that it's "too complicated." They are wrong. It's designed to be *the simplest possible process that will do the job*. A lot of things like that happen in Army World: "master plans" as novelist Herman Wouk put it, "designed by geniuses for execution by idiots."

However: MDMP is not just used by higher level commanders and staff. A company commander or a platoon leader—or just a patrol leader—uses the same steps to plan and the same five-part order to brief. It's just a leadership tool.

## **Combat orders and the "tactical"**

A fundamental fault of living history "tacticals" is the false assumption that the purpose of war is to go out and get into a fight for the sheer pleasure of shooting. This is why I personally dislike this use of the word "tactical" and all it stands for. Tacticals are fun (a lot less fun, though, for those who have seen war), but as living historians practice them they have no actual

meaning in any true military sense. The closest military concept is the “field problem.” But even this is fundamentally different from a tactical in that it has actual training and performance objectives and is therefore constrained by rules and ideas that have nothing to do with trigger time.

**War involves shooting, but "shooting" is not war.** Traditional living historians commonly argue (and I understand the logic) that most members want to burn powder as an objective in itself, and hence the primary goal of a tactical is to let them do it. Point taken. However, this also reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of real combat. The objective of combat is to close with and destroy the enemy by means of fire and maneuver (as Erwin Rommel famously put it, “in the absence of orders, find something and kill it”). Real commanders have no more use for idle triggers than do “play” soldiers. The difference is that all that shooting in actual war is supposed to be done with some intelligence and with a view to victory, not for cheap excitement.

A reenactor "tactical" has little to do with actual training or combat as soldiers understand them. We will use the expression "field exercise" instead. Forget what you know about tacticals, or we will be doomed to spend our time reenacting reenactments.

The result of misunderstanding this basic idea is a pervasive silliness in the tactical. For me the essence of a tactical will always be a nasty Gap II experience a few years ago. I was happily leading a squad. We were in front of one axis, and presently made contact with a German outpost. I got the BAR set up to provide fire support and was just getting the maneuver team moving when we were overrun – not by the enemy, but from the rear by a formless and unled mob of US Reenactors trying to get into the fight. This happened three times, after which we sort of gave up and treated the rest of the exercise as a conditioning hike. It was interesting and noisy, but it had nothing – *nothing* – to do with war.

**We miss what holds a battle together.** Point is, left to itself combat always falls apart into pointless local arguments. What holds it together is command control, which is informed by the field orders and supported by an understanding of fire and maneuver. It’s going to take a long time for this idea to trickle down to Joe Blank Rifleman, but we don’t have control of the hobby. We only have real control of what we do in planning and controlling a field problem. The rank and file don’t know the details of being a pro in this dismal business of defeating an enemy, *but they know when it isn’t being done right*. They deserve more from us. Let’s give it to them.

## Keeping it real

Okay, here are the places tacticals fall short.

First, battles are fought for *objectives*, not for excitement and the prospect of getting into a fight. This is not clear to green troops, but after a few fights the principle gets a lot easier to understand. Most objectives are locations on a map – critical places that allow one side or the other to dominate the battlefield. These objectives are broad and deep – when a local fight is going on, there are usually other developments elsewhere, and the local fight is only a part of the whole.

Second, battles are guided to the extent possible by *command, control, and communication*. I’ve seen few examples of effective C3 at the platoon level, much less up at provisional regiment (though there is always the effort at some level). The use of reliable radios in recent years has

given us the opportunity to take things to a higher level; but we still battle the resistance to innovation.

The field order is particularly important for us because of the ad hoc nature of living history units above squad or platoon level. We never have the opportunity to train together, develop standard ways of operating and reacting to challenges (the tac SOP; see FM 101-5, pp. 34-35), or even learn to recognize faces or build trust and respect. We're always an Army at Dawn with no real long-term way of maturing. Since we're not actually going to be deployed somewhere (as units, anyway), it isn't a life and death matter. But it will make our fun in the sun/pain in the rain/suck in the muck afternoons a lot more meaningful if we have some idea what we're doing.

An argument can be made that it really doesn't matter whether we do it right, as long as everybody has a good time. I understand that point quite well, and do not propose we make the thing so hard that it isn't satisfying for the troops. But the basic argument is fundamentally flawed – the tactical equivalent of arguing that we really don't need to wear authentic gear because nobody will

**Reenactorism, n. An invented procedure or practice based on ignorance of how an army functions and never discarded because it's a habit, no matter how stupid.**

notice the difference. People do notice the difference in gear, and they do notice the silly shortcomings of tacticals. Satisfaction is a complicated and elusive goal, but we know when we haven't got much of it. That's where we are now.

Things will never be perfect, or close to it. But we can do our part. People will notice.

### **People will notice.**

From this point, I abandon use of the expression "tactical", which is an adjective in the Army; as understood by reenactors, it is a thing that has no meaning in war.

From this point we will talk about "field exercises."

### **How we will proceed**

In planning an operation and building an order, we will go through four stages:

- 1. Defining the mission**
- 2. Gathering information**
- 3. Comparing alternatives**
- 4. Preparing the order**

### **The Staff**

Up through company level, the leader will do this on his own, or informed by the staff at a higher level and with input from subordinates. But we will start with the staff, which is used by *every commander from battalion up to the War Department*. We use it at large events now—for example, at Conneaut or the Gap—but it's still a novelty, and if we are ever going to master this it will have to be routine. So let's start with the staff.

**Field Manual 101-5** is the staff officer's bible, and it has been included in the resource library. It contains far more information than reenactors need for even a large field exercise, but

there are some basic principles that need to be learned. We'll start with how a staff is organized and how it works.

The common reenactor "staff" is usually some buddies of the commander who ride along with him in the field. But a real staff is a group of specialists who use their knowledge and skills to advise the commander, to make sure he has accurate information to make decisions. For our purposes we will concentrate on the principal staff and how they operate in an Army and how they should function for reenactors.

The **principal staff** is comprised of four specialist officers. These are the S-1, S-2, S-3, and the S-4. At division or above they stop being staff officers and become general staff officers, G-1 through G-4. But even at that lofty level (which reenactors don't approach) they perform the same general functions.

**The S-1:** This is the **personnel officer**. He manages personnel: maintains strength reports through the morning report, handles detachments and losses, and generally manages the people side of the organization. He is assisted by the **sergeant major** (whose job in WW II was largely administrative—the emergence of a powerful **command sergeant major** would come later) and a section of clerks and personnel specialists. At the regimental level and below, the adjutant assumes S-1 duties; above that (at levels commanded by a general officer) the adjutant is separate. In an infantry battalion, the adjutant/S-1 also functions as the Headquarters and Headquarters Company commander.

**The S-2:** This is the **intelligence officer**. He monitors strength, dispositions, and activities of the enemy through a variety of sources: reports from higherheadquarters, aerial photographs, prisoner interrogations, observations at the front, reconnaissance patrols, and other means. He also performs terrain analysis (see **Map Reading, Lesson 5**) and keeps track of the weather. In time of peace, the S-2 has a lot of down time, but he must maintain proficiency.

**The S-3:** This is the staff officer who is responsible for **operations, plans, and training**. He is the senior officer of the staff (at G staff level there is usually a supervising chief of staff). He is responsible for his own job as well as coordinating the activities of the other principal staffers to the extent that they provide information supporting the planning process.

**The S-4:** This is the supply officer, who is directly responsible for coordinating the logistics of operations—consumables (beans and bullets), repair parts, replacing and evacuating equipment, and like tasks. He also handles route management in the rear area to reduce traffic problems.

Of these, the **S-2** and the **S-3** are most active in a reenactor exercise. In the real world the S-2 often functions as a de facto assistant S-3, since these officers must work closely and continuously together.

## Up next

The most important difference between the dreaded "T-----" word and a real field exercise, is the matter of the mission. Step 1 is *defining the mission*. It's easy to understand that "go out and shoot blanks" is not a valid mission; it will be part of accomplishing that mission, but not an end in itself. So, let's close with this idea:

**IT'S THE MISSION, STUPID.**

When we define the mission – an important first step unaccountably skipped in a lot of t-----s – we are taking a cold look at what we are supposed to accomplish, including an idea of what success will look like. (Even the United States Congress, one of the least suitable entities in the known universe for running a war, has a dim idea how important the last is.) We do this because anything in the order that is not intended to serve the mission is a waste of time and resources.

Next we will look at the basic tools of plans and orders, beginning with military symbols, the overlay, and the use of maps in plans and orders.



### LESSON SUMMARY

1. In planning a tactical operation and preparing the orders that will guide it, we employ the *military decision making process (MDMP)*. This is a formal framework for making informed decisions based on the mission, the enemy, the troops available, and the terrain and weather. MDMP is followed from the planning of a patrol to the planning of a campaign.
2. What reenactors understand as a "tactical" has little to do with actual military operations; most are constructed from "reenactorisms" invented in the absence of real knowledge.
3. An actual military operation is conducted to *achieve an objective*, not just to expend ammunition.
4. MDMP in World War II comprised four steps: defining the mission; gathering information; comparing alternatives, and preparing the order. In this course we will make those steps as simple and intuitive as possible.
5. Every Army organization from battalion up has a standard principal staff: the S-1 (personnel), the S-2 (intelligence), the S-3 (operations, plans, and training); and the S-4 (logistics). Details on their duties will be discussed in later lessons, and are described in FM 101-5.

Now take the self-assessment quiz for Lesson 1.

LESSON 2 will introduce you to military tactical symbols and the overlay.