



The USS Arizona (BB-39) burning after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. (National Archives)

Determining Operational Objectives

By Milan Vego

Full knowledge and understanding of the true meaning of operational objectives are the main prerequisites for sound planning and execution of major operations. A major operation (on land, at sea, and/or in the air) is aimed at accomplishing a *single operational objective*. Such an operation can be conducted predominantly by a single service or two or more services. A campaign in a high-intensity conventional

war consists of a series of related major operations plus numerous tactical actions aimed at achieving a *single military- or theater-strategic objective*. Yet despite the importance of operational objectives, theorists and doctrinal documents have given relatively little attention to what constitutes one. In recent decades, there has been a tendency in the U.S. military to consider some elements of a major operation, and even purely political activities, to be operational objectives. For instance, it is a stretch to consider actions not involving use of lethal force, such as “alerting,” “posturing,” or “deploying forces,” or purely political actions, such

as “securing regional and international support,” to be operational objectives.¹

A military- or theater-strategic objective cannot be accomplished by a single act. It must be divided into several intermediate—*operational*—objectives (see figure 1). The accomplishment of any operational objective requires the use of *lethal force* and should result in a *drastic (radical) change* of the situation in a given theater of operations. For example, the Allied capture of Guadalcanal in the Lower Solomon Islands on February 9, 1943, was an operational objective that drastically changed the situation in the South Pacific Ocean Area.

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Figure 1. Operational Objectives



Source: Author.

The main prerequisites for determining operational objectives are good operational intelligence and sound operational assumptions. Major flaws in tactical and/or strategic intelligence will have an adverse effect on the quality of operational intelligence. The forces assigned to the accomplishment of an operational objective should be based not on their availability but on the objective and on the enemy's expected resistance and will. Considerations that are purely political, geographic, or economic should play a role secondary to that of destroying or neutralizing the enemy's forces. For example, in the invasion of both Sicily in July 1943 and Italy's mainland in September 1943, the Allies focused primarily on seizing terrain and major cities rather than on defeating the German forces.² To block the Axis escape from Sicily, the Allies had to capture the port city of Messina (near mainland Italy) before the Axis forces could do so. The Allies had two options: either land as close to Messina as possible, or land on the eastern and northern shores of the island and drive on converging lines to Messina. Instead, they chose to come ashore with two armies massed around Sicily's southeastern tip,

as far away from Messina as possible. After some 38 days of heavy fighting, the Allies overran the island but failed to trap significant numbers of Axis troops.³ By the time the Allies reached Messina, some 60,000 Germans and 70,000 Italians had escaped to the mainland with most of their heavy equipment.⁴

Ideally, an operational commander should be solely responsible for determining operational objectives. Except in very rare cases, political leaders should not interfere in selecting operational

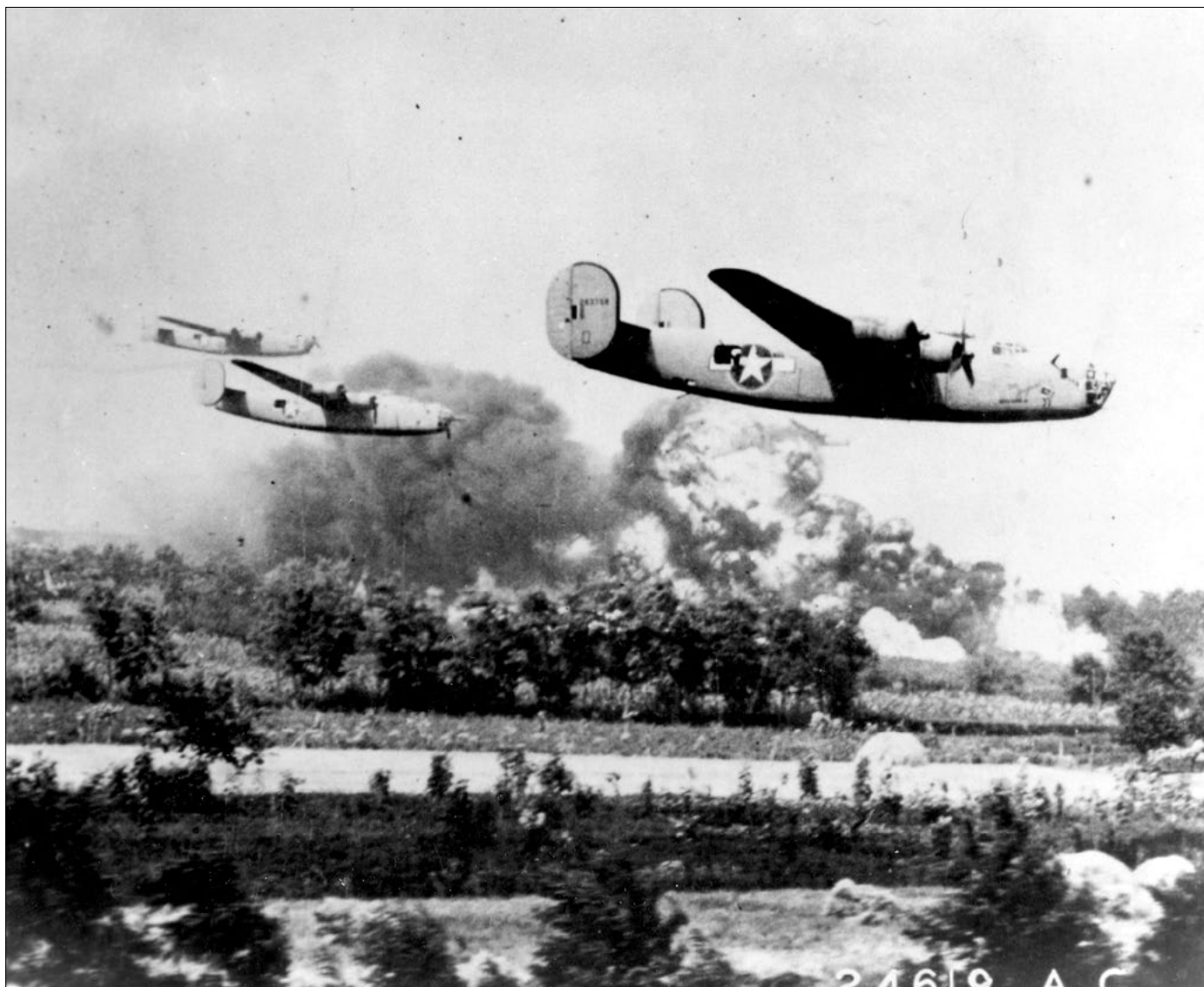
objectives, as the British prime minister Winston Churchill did on many occasions during World War II. Churchill was the biggest advocate for an amphibious landing in the rear of the German army fighting on the Gustav Line (some 60 miles south of Rome). Because of Churchill's personal interference in the theater planning process, the Allies selected the port of Anzio-Nettuno for an amphibious landing on January 22, 1944 (Operation *Shingle*).⁵ General Dwight D. Eisenhower, commander of the European theater of operations, disagreed but was overruled.⁶ Churchill and his advisors mistakenly believed that a two-division landing force plus some paratroop units would, by cutting off the German 10th Army's lines of communication, force the Germans to withdraw their troops from the front or to immediately retreat.⁷

Types. Operational objectives can be physically located on land, at sea, and in the air. In a *war on land*, an operational objective could be a strongly defended geographic area or position, the enemy's capital, a large city or urban area, or a critically important economic area (see figure 2). In each case, the accomplishment of a given operational objective would require the destruction or annihilation of a major part of the enemy army. In the past, all successful commanders intuitively understood that if an enemy's main source of power were destroyed, all other objectives in a war

Figure 2. Samples of Operational Objectives Physical Medium

Land	Sea	Air
• Capturing/defending: ➢ Country's capital ➢ Large city/urban area ➢ Geographic position ➢ Geographic area ➢ Major naval base ➢ Major port ➢ An airfield cluster/major air base • Destroying military-economic area: ➢ Heavy industries ➢ Nuclear weapons research/production plants ➢ Sources of energy (oil fields/refineries' gas; hydroelectric dams, etc.) ➢ Sources/processing plants for ores/minerals ➢ Major land transportation hub ➢ Others	• Obtaining sea control of a major part of a theater • Denying sea control in a major part of a theater • Capturing/defending: ➢ Large island ➢ Large archipelago ➢ Major naval base/port • Obtaining/denying control of an international strait ("choke point")/artificial canal • Destroying/defending elements of maritime trade: ➢ Large convoys ➢ Shipping in a large area ➢ Major port ➢ Shipbuilding/repair area • Securing/denying control of a basing/deployment area • Others	• Obtaining air superiority in a large part of a theater • Denying the enemy's air superiority over a major part of a theater • Suppression of the enemy's air defenses in a major part of a theater • Destroying an airfield cluster/major air base • Destroying enemy military-economic important areas: ➢ Heavy industrial area ➢ Nuclear weapons research/plants ➢ Sources of energy ➢ Sources/processing plants for ores/minerals ➢ Major land transportation hub ➢ Others

Source: Author.



B-24s at treetop level as they pass through the target area during the Ploesti Raid. (U.S. Air Force)

would be accomplished. This helps to explain why Napoleon's way of warfare was characterized by his unwavering focus on destroying the enemy army.⁸ Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke the Elder insisted the *object* of an operation is the hostile army, insofar as it defends the object of the war (landmass and the enemy's capital, and—along with them—the resources and political power of the state).⁹

Very often the principal objective in war on land has been to *capture or defend an important geographic position or area*. The fastest and the most effective way to achieve such an objective was to destroy a major part of the enemy army. However, in some cases,

the operational commanders focused primarily on capturing territory and avoiding engaging enemy forces. The Allies in the European theater in World War II repeatedly focused the majority of their efforts on capturing enemy-controlled territory as quickly as possible.¹⁰

In purely military terms, *capturing or defending the enemy's capital* is an operational objective. Capital cities are usually large in terms of physical extent and population. They are the centers of the country's political, economic, and cultural life. Many capitals and their suburbs are sources of the country's economic strength. They are often a large hub of the country's transportation system. Capitals also exert significant

psychological and symbolic influence on both the country's population and the enemy's leadership. Generally, the importance of a capital is much higher for countries that are traditionally highly centralized, such as France or Russia, than for countries that are relatively new national states, such as Germany. Attacking the enemy's capital would usually force the defender to commit large forces in its defense. In their attack on Budapest (beginning October 29, 1944) and the subsequent siege (December 29, 1944, to February 13, 1945)—which led to some of the bloodiest fighting of World War II—the Soviets used more than a million men. The Germans and the Hungarians defended the city with only

about 70,000 men. The Soviets massed some 2.5 million men, 6,250 tanks, 7,500 aircraft, and 41,600 artillery pieces for their final assault on the German capital of Berlin (April 16 to May 2, 1945). The Germans defended the city with about 1 million men, 1,500 tanks, and 3,300 aircraft.¹¹

The importance of the capital city in a country that is already occupied by enemy forces is usually much lower than at the outset of hostilities. In addition, the fall of an enemy capital might have a less dramatic effect if coinciding with a much larger and more important event. The Allies entered the Italian capital of Rome on June 6, 1944—the same day the Allied forces landed in Normandy. Liberating Rome allowed the Italian government to be established there and become a co-belligerent. The Allies also gained control of several nearby airfields. Yet this event did not have a major impact on the German efforts to defend the remaining parts of Italy.¹²

In the modern era, strongly defended *large cities or urban areas* have often been selected as operational objectives. Large urban areas generally contain sizable parts of the country's industry and services and large populations. Urban terrain greatly favors the defender.¹³ An attack on a large urban center usually requires disproportionately larger forces, special equipment, and more time than operations on open terrain. Attacks on cities tend to result in large losses of personnel and materiel on both sides. For example, in the siege of Leningrad (September 8, 1941, to January 27, 1944), the Soviets claimed to have lost 670,000 people. Some independent historians estimate their losses as between 700,000 and 1.5 million. This includes 300,000 military casualties.¹⁴

The need to control areas that are economically important for the war effort is often a part of land campaigns or major land/joint operations. Such areas include those with large heavy industry, nuclear weapons research or production, energy sources (such as oil fields and oil refineries, oil and gas pipelines, and nuclear plants), sources of important ores or minerals (such as iron, copper, and nickel), rare metals, major ports, facilities

for building or repairing ships, and microchip production plants. These can be considered as operational objectives if their destruction or defense has a major effect on the combat employment and sustainment of enemy or friendly ground and/or air forces.

The final version of the German plan for the invasion of the Soviet Union (Operation *Barbarossa*), Instruction (*Weisung*) no. 21, issued on December 18, 1940, directed German forces in the southern part of the theater to capture “the military economic important Donets Basin” (the Dnepr–Donets area, or Donbas) early on.¹⁵ Before the start of the invasion of the Soviet Union, Hitler and the Supreme Command of the Wehrmacht (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*) agreed with the Army General Staff (*Oberkommando des Heeres*) that the main operational objective should be the destruction of the enemy forces and the capture of Moscow. However, after the start of the invasion in June 1941, Hitler put less emphasis on this objective. For him, the most urgent problem became getting control of the Baltic ports, the grain-producing areas of Ukraine, and the Caucasian oil fields.¹⁶ On August 12, 1941, Hitler stated that the most important objective before the onset of winter was not Moscow but the Crimea, the Donets Basin's industrial areas, and Leningrad.¹⁷ The Donets Basin in Ukraine was important for Germany's economy on account of its heavy industries and ores.¹⁸ Hitler wanted to capture the Caucasus oil fields and destroy Soviet naval/air bases on the Black Sea, which posed a threat to the German oil supplies from Romania.¹⁹ In 1938, the Soviet Union produced 27 million tons of oil.²⁰ The British Ministry of Economic Warfare estimated that the Soviet oilfields of Maykop and Grozny were each producing 2.71 million metric tons a year and that Baku produced 23.7 million metric tons a year. Germany produced only about 500,000 tons of oil annually. The Germans calculated that during the war, they needed 24 million tons of oil.²¹

An important source of oil for Nazi Germany was its ally Romania. In

1939, Romania produced 6.2 million tons of oil, or 2.2 percent of global production.²² The largest oilfields and refineries were in the city of Ploesti (Ploiești in Romanian)—35 miles north of Bucharest—and its vicinity. The biggest user of Romanian oil was the Wehrmacht, and Romania provided some 60 percent of the German crude oil supply. Ploesti's refineries produced 10 million tons of oil per year, including 90-octane aviation fuel.²³ They provided one-third of the high-octane gasoline, Panzer fuel benzene, and lubricants for the Wehrmacht.²⁴

In World War II, ball-bearing plants were considered critical for production of military items such as airframe controls, guidance systems, artillery, armored vehicles, U-boats, and other weapons and equipment. The German industry consumed 2.4 million ball bearings annually. Five ball-bearing plants in Schweinfurt alone produced some 52.2 percent of Germany's total output of ball bearings. In contrast to other German ball-bearing plants, the Schweinfurt ones produced the whole range of ball bearings.²⁵

Operational objectives in a *war at sea* are an integral part of obtaining, exercising, and denying sea control. These objectives are usually accomplished by destruction or neutralization of a large part of the enemy fleet at sea and their bases, destroying an amphibious task force, destroying or defending a major convoy, capturing or defending an operationally significant position ashore, and securing or denying control of the basing or deployment area. The U.S. Navy achieved an operational objective in the Battle of Midway (June 4 to 7, 1942) by denying the Japanese combined fleet control of the eastern part of the Pacific. The Japanese lost 4 frontline carriers, 253 aircraft with the most highly skilled pilots, and 1 heavy cruiser. In addition, one heavy cruiser had been heavily damaged, and one destroyer suffered moderate damage; one battleship, one destroyer, and one oiler had each suffered slight damage.²⁶ The Japanese losses were about 3,500 men. In contrast, the U.S. Navy lost 1 fast carrier, 92 officers, and 215 men; 3 carrier air groups had been mostly



Allied troops disembarking onto a beach near Licata, Sicily, from a barge after being ferried from an outlying LST (landing ship, tank), July 10, 1943. (U.S. Signal Corps/National Archives, Washington, DC)

destroyed.²⁷ American losses in aircraft had been heavy; 147 were shot down.²⁸ This victory was a turning point in the Pacific War because it allowed the Allies to go strategically on offensive in the summer of 1942.

Japan's objective in its surprise attack on the naval base of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, was to destroy a major part of the U.S. Pacific Fleet and thereby prevent it from interfering with the Japanese invasion of the Philippines. The Japanese attack force consisted of six fast carriers screened by one battleship division, one cruiser, and one destroyer squadron.²⁹ The Japanese executed a two-wave attack with some 360 aircraft. In these attacks, three U.S. battleships were sunk, one capsized, and one was heavily damaged, with three others lightly damaged. In addition, two U.S. heavy cruisers were heavily damaged and another cruiser was lightly damaged.³⁰ The U.S. losses were more than 2,000 men killed and 710 wounded.³¹ The Japanese lost only 30 aircraft in the attack.³² The Japanese attackers temporarily crippled the U.S. Pacific Fleet's battle line. However, they did not destroy the fast carriers, which were by fortunate coincidence at sea and not in Pearl Harbor, nor did they destroy the exception critically important shore installations.³³

A stronger side at sea would project its power ashore by *capturing operationally important positions ashore*, such as large islands, straits, and major naval bases or ports. Such positions are usually geographically large and are heavily defended by the enemy's forces. By capturing an operationally important position, one's forces would greatly extend *operational reach*—the distance over which one's combat potential can be concentrated and employed *decisively*. Capturing several successive operationally important positions would significantly shorten the war. Such operational objectives could be accomplished by planning and executing major amphibious landings, and such operations are inherently joint and often multinational. During World War II, the Allies conducted a number of amphibious landings in the Pacific and the European theaters, all of them successful. In the Pacific, perhaps the best known are those on Guadalcanal (August 7, 1942), Saipan (June 15, 1944), Leyte (October 17, 1944), Luzon (January 9, 1945), Iwo Jima (February 19, 1945), and Okinawa (April 1, 1945). In the European theater, the Allies accomplished several operational objectives in each of their major landing operations: Sicily (July 9, 1943), Salerno (September 9, 1943), Normandy (June 6, 1944), and southern France (August 15, 1944).

Capturing one or both shores of a strongly defended *international strait* (or "choke point") is usually an operational objective for a stronger side at sea and a defensive operational objective for a weaker side. Control of an international strait is the main prerequisite for obtaining or denying strategic control of an enclosed sea, such as the Persian (Arabian) Gulf. Strategic control of a semi-enclosed sea, such as the Red Sea or the North Sea, is obtained by controlling all the exits; otherwise, an attacker or defender would have only operational control of a given exit. In World War I, the allies had strategic control of the North Sea because they controlled both of its exits. The German navy, with the exception of U-boats, was unable to operate beyond the confines of the North Sea. It is necessary to control both the Bab-el-Mandeb and the Suez Canal to have strategic control of the Red Sea. Germany's control of the approaches to the Danish Straits in 1914–18 effectively prevented Great Britain from sending reinforcements to its Russian ally. The occupation of Denmark in April 1940 gave the Germans strategic control of the Baltic, cutting the Royal Navy off from the Baltic and allowing the Germans to use the economic resources of the Scandinavian countries—especially Sweden's ores—and establish bases in Finland.

Obtaining full control of the Strait of Hormuz and its approaches is the first and most important offensive operational objective for the attacker. It is a defensive and the most important operational objective for a defender. By obtaining this control, the attacker would then effectively possess strategic control of the Persian Gulf. Yet gaining full control of the Gulf would require capturing several critically important positions within its confines, such as Kharg Island and Bahrain Island.

Experience shows that obtaining or denying control of an international strait cannot be accomplished by naval forces or air forces alone. It would need participation of strong ground forces to capture a lodgment on one or both sides of a strait. The method of accomplishing such an operational objective would

require planning and execution of a major joint operation.

Capturing control of a strongly defended *major port* by an attack across the sea is usually an operational objective. During the Korean War, General Douglas MacArthur organized the U.S. Army's X Corps—formed around the 1st Marine Division and the 7th Infantry Division, plus Republic of Korea (ROK) Marine units—to capture the port of Inchon and then drive inland and capture Seoul and eventually cut off the enemy's main supply lines to the south.³⁴ The amphibious objective area was an arc extending some 30 miles inland. By September 17, 1950, Kimp'o airfield was secured, and Seoul was captured on September 27.³⁵

Destruction of a *major convoy* or its defense is often an operational objective in a war at sea. In July 1942, the German Luftwaffe in cooperation with U-boats achieved an operational objective by destroying a major part of the Allied Convoy PQ 17 in the Barents Sea. Out of 33 ships, 22 (or 66 percent) sank.³⁶ These ships carried 430 tanks, 210 aircraft, and 3,350 motor vehicles, plus 99,316 tons of other cargo.³⁷ In many cases, the U-boats sank heavily damaged ships that had been hit initially by the Luftwaffe.³⁸ In the aftermath, all Allied convoys to Russia via the Arctic route were suspended for almost 2 months. The next convoy did not sail until September 2, 1942.³⁹

The Allies were more successful in defending a major resupply convoy to Malta from August 10 to 15, 1942 (Operation *Pedestal*). Despite rather high losses (one carrier, two light cruisers, one destroyer, and nine freighters were sunk, and one carrier, two light cruisers, and three destroyers were damaged) five merchant ships (four freighters and one oiler) reached Malta, bringing 32,000 tons of supplies (flour and ammunition) and 15,000 tons of fuel. This was sufficient to keep Malta operational as an air/naval base until the Allied victory in the battle of El Alamein in November 1942, which turned the tide of the war in North Africa.⁴⁰

Operational objectives in the air can range from obtaining or denying control of the air over major parts of the land or

maritime theater, destroying or suppressing enemy air defenses in a major part of the theater, destroying a large airfield cluster, or destroying a large part of the ground-based air-related infrastructure. In the German invasion of France in May 1940, the Luftwaffe initially obtained *air superiority* over Belgium and the northwestern part of France. At dawn on May 10, some 300 German bombers attacked 22 airfields in the Netherlands, Belgium, and northern France. The attacks focused on the aircraft on the ground and air installations. By the evening that same day, three-fifths of the Dutch air force had been either destroyed or rendered ineffective.⁴¹ The Luftwaffe destroyed a major part of the Belgian and French aircraft on the ground.⁴² The Germans claimed to have destroyed about 2,000 Allied aircraft between May 10 and May 21. After a week of hostilities, the Dutch, Belgian, and French air forces had been eliminated as fighting forces, and even the British lost half of their frontline aircraft.⁴³ Yet the Luftwaffe suffered high losses too—some 1,130 aircraft of all types, or roughly 25 percent of its total strength. Of these 1,130 aircraft, some 540 were lost during the first 6 days of the campaign.⁴⁴

In the Six-Day War of 1967 (Operation *Focus*), the Israeli air force obtained air supremacy over the southern front by destroying a major part of the Egyptian air force on the war's first day (June 5). The Israeli air force's order of battle on that day consisted of about 250 aircraft. The Israeli plan envisaged joining a dozen squadrons over 11 targets located between 20 and 45 minutes' flying time away.⁴⁵ The results were catastrophic for the Egyptian air force. Out of 420 combat aircraft, 286 were destroyed. Thirteen air bases, 23 radar stations, and 10 antiaircraft sites were made inoperative.⁴⁶ Out of about 350 qualified Egyptian pilots, some 100 were killed.⁴⁷ In effect, the Egyptian air force ceased to exist.⁴⁸

The Battle of Britain (July 10 to October 31, 1940) is an example of a weaker side successfully *denying control of the air* to a stronger side. The Luftwaffe was in 1940 the most combat-experienced

air force in world. On July 16, Hitler ordered preparations for the invasion of England (Operation *Sea Lion*). The main prerequisite for a successful landing was to establish control of the air over the English Channel and southeastern England. The German objectives as stated in July 1940 were to eliminate the Royal Air Force (RAF) both as a fighting force and as a ground organization and to strangle Great Britain by destroying its ports and shipping.⁴⁹ Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, Commander-in-Chief of the Luftwaffe, believed that it would take only 4 days to destroy the fighter defenses of southern England and then another 4 weeks to defeat the rest of the RAF.⁵⁰ On July 17, 1940, the Luftwaffe's 2nd and 3rd Air Fleets had a total strength of 2,600 aircraft. This included 1,200 long-range bombers, 280 dive bombers, 760 single-engine fighters, and 220 twin-engine fighters.⁵¹ Based in Norway, the 5th Air Fleet had 95 bombers. On July 1, 1940, the RAF's Fighter Command had in service 754 single-engined fighters and 149 twin-engined fighters and bomber destroyers.⁵²

On September 17, Hitler ordered indefinite postponement of Operation *Sea Lion*.⁵³ He ordered the dispersal of the invasion fleet and settled for continuing the night raids against England. In the Battle of Britain, both sides suffered high losses. The RAF's Fighter Command lost 1,004 fighters and 81 other planes. The Luftwaffe lost 636 single-engine fighters, 243 bomber destroyers, 80 dive bombers, 881 bombers, and 82 other aircraft.⁵⁴ Among the reasons for the Luftwaffe's failure was its overestimation of its own capabilities.⁵⁵

Heavily defended, critically important economic areas can be destroyed or neutralized by mass attacks from the air. They are operational objectives if their destruction would result in major effects on the course and outcome of a campaign. In World War II, the U.S. Eighth Air Force conducted a massive attack on the ball-bearing plants in Schweinfurt and the Messerschmidt works in Regensburg on August 17, 1943 (Operation *Pointblank*).⁵⁶ The attacking force consisted of 376 B-17s

escorted by fighters. After the fighters turned back, the Luftwaffe's fighters and antiaircraft guns shot down 60 B-17s and damaged an additional 11 B-17s beyond repair. Six hundred and five crew members were lost, the majority as prisoners of war. The Luftwaffe lost only 27 fighters.⁵⁷ The B-17s scored 80 hits on the ball-bearing plants, reducing their production to one-third of the pre-raid level.⁵⁸ Although the Messerschmidt factory was out of operation for only several weeks—the building was destroyed, but not the machinery—the attack prevented 1,000 fighters from being built and forced the dispersal of production.⁵⁹

At the Allied Casablanca conference in January 1943, the parties decided to start bombing the oil installations in Ploesti, Romania. This mission was assigned to the U.S. Ninth Air Force, based in North Africa. The plan was to cripple German oil imports and shorten the war by 6 months.⁶⁰ Ploesti's complex consisted of five major and seven minor refineries located in a 3-mile ring around the city. Some refineries were located 18 miles north and 5 miles south of the city. At the Germans' insistence, all refineries were linked with a trunk pipeline to

ensure that the refineries could operate even in cases of heavy damage.

Ploesti was strongly defended. The outer defense ring consisted of German and Bulgarian fighters, with a mission of preventing enemy heavy bombers from penetrating central Romania. The inner defense ring consisted of 52 Me-109 fighters based at Mizil, 17 Me-110 night fighters at Zilistea, and 20 Romanian IAR-80s/-81s at Bucharest, plus some Ju-88 multipurpose fighters.⁶¹ Ground defense consisted of 237 88mm and 105mm antiaircraft guns. Some 80 percent of these guns were manned by the Germans. Additionally, defenses included a large number of barrage balloons, light flak towers, and hundreds of machine guns.⁶² The Germans linked their air and ground defenses. The Allied aircraft flying from North Africa to Romania had to cross six air defense zones. Ploesti was in Zone 24 East with headquarters at Otopeni.⁶³ The Germans also had an effective radar net plus a signal interception unit near Athens. This provided the Germans with the capability of tracking all enemy aircraft.⁶⁴

The first Allied attack on Ploesti was conducted with 178 B-24 heavy bombers by the U.S. Ninth Air Force (based

in North Africa) on August 1, 1943 (Operation *Tidal Wave*).⁶⁵ The initial force of heavy bombers was doubled to account for anticipated attrition. The raid inflicted significant but not crippling damages.⁶⁶ Two out of seven refineries were permanently destroyed; the others were repaired within a few weeks.⁶⁷ During the raid, 54 B-24s were lost (41 in combat) and 55 more were damaged, many of them never to fly again. Out of 1,726 crewmen, 532 were either dead or missing. The next day—August 2—only 33 B-24s were mission capable. For all practical purposes, the Ninth Air Force ceased to exist.⁶⁸

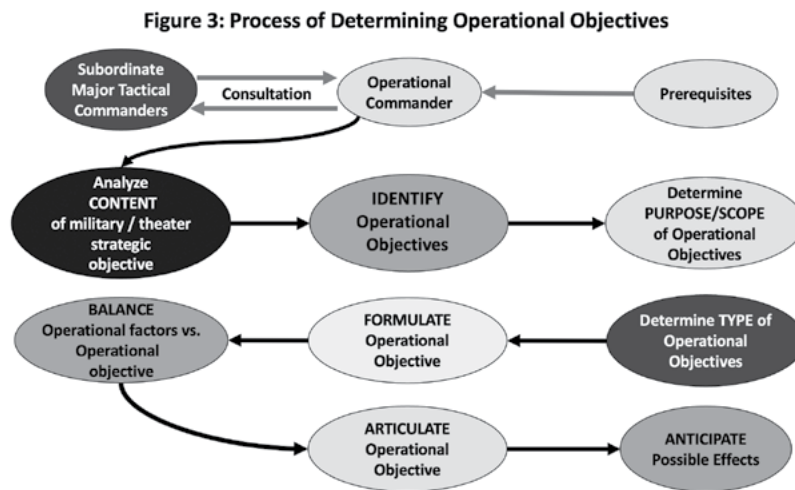
Process. A logical and coherent process for determining operational objectives should be used to ensure that no matter of importance is omitted. (See figure 3.) In the first step, the *content* of the military- or theater-strategic objective should be reviewed. Afterward, the operational commander and the staff should provisionally *identify* several potential operational objectives. For each objective, the *operationally* important elements of the factors of space, time, and force from the *enemy's perspective* should be evaluated. The focus in analyzing the *factor of space* should be on location and the size and characteristics of the operating area, distances to friendly basing areas, the area's oceanography or hydrography, and its weather and climate. In evaluating the *factor of time*, the main considerations should include the time required for the enemy's forces to be deployed, concentrated, and reinforced; warning/reaction time; the time required to commit enemy reserves; and so on. The main considerations in the *factor of force* should include the size and/or composition of enemy forces attacking or defending a given area or position, their mobility, logistic support and sustainment, combat readiness, morale and discipline, skills of the commanders, soundness of doctrine, and the enemy's anticipated resistance and will. This list is not all-inclusive. It is critically important to evaluate not only tangible elements of the factor of force, but often even more important intangible elements.

The commander and the staff must reduce the number of potential



A B-24 Liberator over Ploesti, Romania, during Operation Tidal Wave. (Collection of The National WWII Museum)

Figure 3. Process of Determining Operational Objectives



Source: Author.

operational objectives to those considered essential for the accomplishment of the military- or theater-strategic objective. Obviously, in any joint employment of combat forces, the most important operational objective is on land. It is there where the humans live. The operational commander and the staff must determine the *size of the operating area*, the *tentative timeline*, and the rough estimate of the *forces required* to accomplish a given operational objective.

The commander and the staff must first reevaluate the purpose and scope of a given military- or theater-strategic objective. An operational objective could be either offensive or defensive in its basic *purpose*. Theoretically, it can be limited or unlimited in *scope*. However, in contrast to accomplishing military- or theater-strategic objectives, accomplishing an operational objective would normally require employment of most of the forces available and maximum effort. In other words, operational objectives are inherently *unlimited* in terms of their scope.

In terms of its *importance*, an operational objective could be main or alternate. The *main objective* reflects the best course of action determined during the commander's estimate of the situation. Prudence dictates selecting not only the main objective but also an *alternate objective* in case some unanticipated events preclude accomplishing the main

objective. The alternate objective is based on the second-best course of action.

In a major joint operation, accomplishing a main objective would require accomplishing one or more *supporting objective(s)*, and these supporting objective(s) would be accomplished by other services of the armed forces. In a major operation on land or aimed at capturing lodgment ashore, ground forces would be employed for accomplishing the main objective while other services would accomplish the supporting objective(s) in their respective

physical mediums. For example, in a major amphibious landing, ground forces or marines would accomplish the main objective—establishing the initial lodgment ashore. Naval forces would obtain and maintain local sea control of the approaches to the landing site and control of the air. Air forces would secure local air superiority, provide close air support, and conduct air interdiction.

In case of capturing a large archipelago or an operationally important position ashore, one *initial* and two or more *successive* operational objectives must be accomplished. For example, in the Solomons Campaign of 1942–44, the Allied theater-strategic objective was obtaining control of the Solomons Archipelago and adjacent positions. This required accomplishing one initial and two subsequent operational objectives: capturing Guadalcanal (August 7, 1942–February 9, 1943), New Georgia (June 30–October 7, 1943), and Bougainville (November 1, 1943–April 18, 1944).

In *formulating* an operational objective, the commander should ensure that it is first and foremost in consonance with a given military- or theater-strategic objective. The main purpose and scope of the objective should be clearly stated or implied. For an offensive operational objective, the desired degree of damage to be inflicted on enemy forces should



German soldiers fighting in the Soviet Union as part of Operation Barbarossa, 1941. (NARA/U.S. Department of Defense)

be expressed in terms of destroying, annihilating, neutralizing, suppressing, and so on. In case of a defensive operational objective, one's actions can be described in terms of retaining control, fixed or delaying defense, suppression, hold or slowing down, etc. An operational objective should not be grouped with routine military matters, or even worse, political aspects of a war. This makes it not only too wordy but makes it unnecessarily difficult to differentiate what is more or less important.

After the operational objective is formulated, the commander and the staff should evaluate the validity of their decision. For *balancing operational factors of space, time, and force against an operational objective*, the first step is to determine a framework for the analysis. The size of physical space is an area of operations; for the factor of time is anticipated time required for accomplishing the operational objective (duration of a major operation); and for the factor of force is size/composition of friendly forces (combined arms/branches) required to accomplish a given operational objective. Afterward, the commander must select *operationally significant* elements of each operational factor to be used for analysis. Examples of operationally significant factors of space are central or exterior position, distances, topography, oceanography/hydrography of the operating area, and the weather/climate. Operationally important factors of time are time for deployment/redeployment; time between consecutive major operations, warning and reaction time, time to commit an operational reserve, and time required to regenerate combat potential. Examples of operationally significant factors of force are major service/joint forces, operational mobility, service/joint doctrine, and so on.

Perhaps the most difficult task is to determine a method of balancing each operational factor individually and then in combination (space-force; space-time; force-time) against a given objective. It requires much creative thinking on the part of operational commanders and their respective staffs. Balancing can reveal a rough harmony or a negligible, modest,

or major disconnect between a given operational factor and the objective. Afterward, the operational commander and the staff must devise the best ways to bring operational factors into harmony with a given objective.

Disconnect between the factors of space and force can be resolved by:

- shifting from an offensive to a defensive objective
- increasing the size of combat forces
- dividing the operating area into several segments
- reducing the length of the front line
- reducing the size of forces for rear defense
- operating from an exterior position
- conducting a prepared defense
- achieving operational surprise
- conducting operational deception
- reducing forces in a secondary sector of effort
- increasing the space-to-force ratio
- abandoning currently held positions or areas

The factors of space and time could be balanced by:

- extending the duration of a major operation
- shifting from an offensive to a defensive objective
- operating from a central position
- employing highly mobile forces
- reducing the distance for deployment
- reducing the number of intermediate objectives or the distance separating them
- using faster modes of transportation for deployment
- shortening the time for bringing up supplies
- achieving operational surprise
- conducting operational deception
- conducting a delaying defense
- increasing attrition of the enemy's forces

An operational commander could balance factors of time and forces by:

- shifting from an offensive to a defensive objective
- dividing the operating area into several smaller segments

- assigning forces with higher mobility
- reducing the number of intermediate objectives
- forward prepositioning
- conducting operational deception
- achieving operational surprise
- shortening supply lines
- extending a timeline for accomplishing ultimate or intermediate objectives
- operating from interior lines

The result of balancing operational factors versus a given operational objective would require a change to, modification of, or scaling down of a given objective. In extreme cases, the initially determined operational objective must be abandoned and replaced with a new objective. During combat, any major change in military- or theater-strategic objective or in operational objective would require quick reevaluation of the pertinent operational factors and rebalancing with the respective objective.

Operational objectives should be *articulated* clearly and succinctly. Clarity requires precise wording so that a directive cannot be misunderstood. The objective could be perfectly clear to the operational commander issuing it, but not to subordinate tactical commanders. Brevity calls for omitting superfluous words and unnecessary details. Trivial and meaningless expressions should be avoided. Short sentences are more easily and quickly understood than longer ones. Yet there is a danger in being too concise and thus possibly unclear. This should be avoided. Expressing an operational objective concisely should not be to the detriment of clarity. Needless words should not be used nor words that can be misunderstood. Without a clear operational objective, it is difficult to issue the mission to subordinate commanders. Writing concisely but clearly is an art.

The operational objective should be articulated in *affirmative* and *positive* form. *Authoritative* expression is closely linked to the principle of positivity. The directive should reflect the commander's intent and will—hence the need for the commander to express those ideas in direct and authoritative language.



American paratroopers of the 504th PIR bound for Sicily, July 1943. (U.S. Army Photo)

Positivity of expression suggests the commander's firmness of purpose. The use of indefinite and weak expressions leads to a suspicion of vacillation and indecision. Such expressions also tend to impose upon subordinates' responsibilities that belong to and are fully accepted by a resolute operational commander.

In the last step, the operational commander and the staff should try to *anticipate* physical and cognitive effects after the selected operational objective is accomplished. In some cases, political and psychological consequences might be so adverse that it would require radical change or even abandonment of the selected operational objective. The Japanese surprise attack on the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor was not a strategic necessity as argued by the Japanese officials. Not all Japanese high officials supported the plan prepared by Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, commander in chief of Japan's combined fleet. Japan's navy minister, Admiral Shigetaro Shimada, was strongly against the plan to attack Pearl Harbor. He wanted the United States to commit the first act of war and thereby enable Japan to declare war. Shimada wanted Japan to declare war only on Britain and the Netherlands.⁶⁹ In fact, if the United States had adhered to its war plans, the Pacific Fleet would not be employed in the Far East but would have confined its activities in the operations on the Japanese perimeter. The unprovoked Japanese attack brought the Americans solidly into the war as nothing else could have done.⁷⁰

Conclusion

A military- or theater-strategic objective must be divided into two operational objectives. Otherwise, the only solution is to conduct numerous and possibly unrelated tactical actions, resulting in both a waste of one's time and effort and unnecessary losses. Determining an achievable operational objective is the single most important decision by an operational commander. Any major operation is aimed at accomplishing a single operational objective. It is planned and executed in accordance with tenets of operational art. Like any military objective, an operational objective is accomplished by using one's lethal forces and should generate a radical change of the situation in a given theater of operations.

The operational objective must be formulated and then balanced against one's factors of space, time, and force to make sure that it is militarily achievable. Any major disconnect between these factors and a given operational objective must be resolved by modifying, altering, or drastically scaling down the operational objective. The process of balancing will also provide some rudimentary elements of the operational idea.⁷¹

An operational objective must be articulated clearly and succinctly. The operational objectives on land, at sea, and in the air should be stated separately because they each require different methods of combat employment. The operational commander and the staff must give some thoughts on anticipated military and nonmilitary effects of a given operational objective. Undesired effects with possible adverse strategic consequences should be avoided if possible. JFQ

Notes

¹ For the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003 (Operation *Iraqi Freedom*), in the document "Phase I—Preparations," the planners inexplicably listed the following among the operational objectives: "Secure regional and international support," "Alert, deploy, and posture forces for shaping operations," and "Set conditions to neutralize Iraqi forces." In the document "Phase II—Shape the Battlespace," they listed the following among the operational objectives: "Maintain international and regional

support for operations," "Continue to deploy and posture forces for decisive offensive operations," "Deter WMD [weapons of mass destruction] employment, suppress Iraqi TBM [tactical ballistic missiles]/WMD delivery/storage systems," and "Suppress TBM/WMD production processes and deny access to WMD facilities." These documents were U.S. Central Command PowerPoint slides that were briefed to the White House and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in 2002. *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 214*, ed. Joyce Battle and Thomas Blanton, Tab K, slides 4 and 5 respectively, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB214/Tab%20K.pdf>. In another example, the initial operational objective was (falsely) considered to be "allow[ing] follow-on forces from the United States, allies, and partners to flow toward Taiwan . . . to regain sea control in the approaches to China." Scott Tait and Anthony LaVopa, "It All Comes Down to Sea Control," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 149, no. 12 (2023): 33, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2023/december/it-all-comes-down-sea-control>.

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