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***Coup d'oeil:* The Commander's Intuition in Clausewitzian Terms**

by

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*"... the side with the initiative moves and the enemy
responds."*

Eric Bergerud, Author
*Touched with Fire: The Land War in the South
Pacific*

Introduction

The 19th Century military philosopher, Carl von Clausewitz, wrote that, "the aspect of war that always attracted the greatest attention is the engagement."¹ To gain and maintain the initiative, as Bergerud states above, is based on the commander's ability to make quick and knowledgeable decisions. Clausewitz calls this quick recognition of the truth the commander's *coup d'oeil* or intuition. It is the leader's ability to recognize at the precise moment in battle the truth, or in other words, a high level of situational awareness "that the mind would ordinarily miss or would perceive only after long study and reflection."²

Not since the Clausewitzian era, have the "time-tested" leadership principles, so aptly described in both historic and scientific literature, focused upon a critical trait that most good leaders possess. That quality is intuition.

The masters of theoretical warfare, Jomini, Sun Tzu and Clausewitz, insist it is crucial to find an inspired commander whose intuition or, as Clausewitz terms it, *coup d'oeil*, will ensure the correct application of the principles of war. FM 22-100 indicates that the commander "must understand" these principles in order to become tactically proficient while in command.³ However, the commander's intuition is only briefly covered in our leadership manuals. Furthermore, when it is mentioned, it is oversimplified as a facet that merely "tells [a commander] what *feels* right or wrong..." Current leadership doctrine conveys intuition as an element belonging solely in the decision making processes that "flows from [a commander's] instincts... and experience."⁴

This paper will show, on the other hand, that a commander's intuition is much more than just a proverbial hunch. We believe that a commander's *coup d'oeil* is more important to the success of command than the leadership manuals lead one to believe. Its importance is clear when one views the new officer efficiency report (OER). The new OER defines three attributes, *mental*, *emotional*, and *physical* as those areas from which an officer is best characterized. However, nowhere in any of our leadership manuals are those facets defined in detail to describe what, in fact, they mean. This paper will show that many characteristics of a successful leader, to include the three aforementioned attributes, stem from the level of intuition possessed by the commander, and is in that context that those qualities should be assessed.

In short, this paper uses what Clausewitz describes as the *Military Genius*,⁵ or "... the very highly developed mental aptitude for a particular occupation,"⁶ to describe in full detail how a commander's intuition is a vital ingredient to success. It defines those sub-elements of intuition, thus providing a hierarchy of attributes crucial to the officer corps in today's Army.

The Military Genius

"This type of knowledge... can only be gained through a talent for judgment and by the application of accurate judgment to the observation of man and matter."

Carl von Clausewitz
- On War, 186

The "genius consists of a harmonious combination of elements, in which one or the other ability may predominate, but none may be in conflict with the other."⁷ Clausewitz writes in detail about those elements, however he defines two distinct qualities, which are indispensable, that a commander must possess in order to be deemed a Military Genius. Clausewitz defines these qualities as "... first, an intellect that, even in the darkest hours, retains some glimmering of inner light which leads to truth, and second, the courage to follow this faint light wherever it may lead."⁸ He defines the first of these qualities as *coup d'oeil* or intuition and the second, determination. The study of a leader's determination, or his courage, arguably has been done many times over, therefore we will focus this paper on the leader's intuition, a facet we believe historians, analysts and military leaders often overlook.

Coup d'oeil, "that superb display of divination" is action that is not based on anything firmer than instinct or a sensing of the truth. Clausewitz writes that "circumstances vary so enormously in war, and are so indefinable, that a vast array of factors has to be appreciated... The man [the leader] responsible for evaluating the whole must bring to his task the quality of intuition that perceives truth at every point."⁹ Even Jomini, who strove to develop a scientific theory for the conduct of war, understood that the successful commander possessed innate talents, thus rendering his 'scientific approach' impossible.

"The coup d'oeil of the Military Genius is not irrational; it simply reflects a different mode of rationality in which intuitive decisions can be explained rationally ex post facto."¹⁰ Some examples in recent history of a Clausewitzian Military Genius include Rommel, Guderian, Napoleon, Nelson and Lee. Inasmuch as no single military leader, to include those previously mentioned, can embody all of the qualities necessary to satisfy the demands of war, we can functionally decompose the ingredients of what makes up a 'genius' (and more appropriately, the intuition part of the genius) to help us define what attributes are necessary. Additionally, by viewing an interactive model, one can see how, over time, the development of component characteristics contribute to the leader's intuition.

Genius: An Interactive Balance of Personal Attributes

In seeking to upset the enemy's balance, a commander must not lose his own balance. He needs to have the quality, which Voltaire described as the keystone of Marlborough's success - "that calm courage in the midst of tumult, that serenity of soul in danger, which the English call a cool head." But to it he must have the quality for which the French have found the most aptly descriptive phrase - "le sens du practible." The sense of what is possible, and what is not possible - tactically and administratively. The combination of both [of] these two "guarding" qualities might be epitomized as the power of cool calculation. The sands of history are littered with wrecks of finely conceived plans that expired for want of this ballast.

- B.H. Lidell Hart

Balance. The right combination of qualities and character traits. What is the optimal mix? This is something that senior leaders, teachers, and students typically debate. In fact, everyone can honestly assess that if they could improve just a couple things about themselves as leaders they would choose quality x, y, or z. It always comes down to something as simple as being more patient, detail oriented, or physically fit. Few people, though, can offer a model of qualities that are all important to the military leader. The typical laundry list mentions dozens of attributes that collectively contribute to a person who can define organizational purpose, direct activities, and motivate subordinates to achieve under a variety of circumstances. Yet these lists do little to demonstrate interaction and linkage to those attributes required on the field of battle.

Clausewitz, regarded less for his insights into leadership and more for his understanding of warfare, provides just the right combination of qualities. In fact, it is so simple that the wisdom in the model is only appreciated by analyzing its functional components.

The Functional Decomposition of a Genius

To put this into perspective let's consider the new OER system developed by an OPMS team led by Major General David Ohle. There is a clear set of attributes outlined on the front side of the new OER. These terms include, as mentioned earlier, the mental, emotional, and physical characteristics of an officer along with a myriad of attributes that judge an officer's competence and "major activities [that] leaders perform." Since these are the categories from which we must judge all officers in the Army, it is clear that they are important for an officer to possess.

If we are going to rate our officers with such terms (and indeed we must), it is critical to define in detail what each characteristic, or quality, means. Imbedded in these qualities are numerous other attributes that describe an officer's abilities. The new OER offers bullets to describe each attribute, but nowhere in our doctrinal field manuals is there a complete description of each attribute.¹¹ This is clearly a void.

While the following discussion does not prescribe definitions for each attribute identified on the new OER, it hopefully will indicate an obvious void in how we view our officers and attempt to define that missing characteristic. That void is the measuring of an officer's intuition.

Coup d'oeil's Intuition

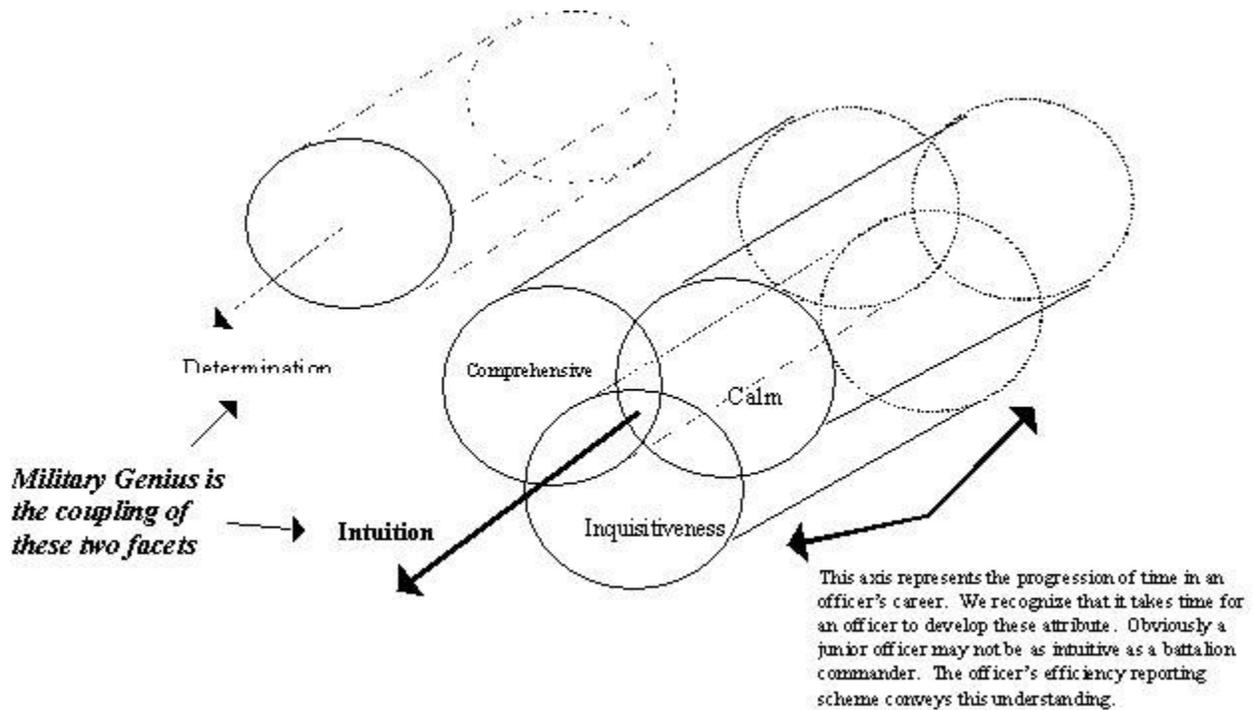


Figure 1: The Facets of Intuition

Military Genius is the combination and balance of the qualities of intuition (coup d'oeil) and determination. Each of these qualities is further composed of an interactive combination of three core characteristics.¹² The model enclosed (Figure 1) also describes a kind of "quality overlap" in applying three additional characteristics that describe the interaction among core characteristics as they relate to intuition.

While not the focus of this paper, it is important to understand the other facet of Clausewitz's Military Genius; determination. Determination is defined by Clausewitz as the interaction between three qualities. Ambition, motivation, and commitment all contribute to determination. They are the ingredients that allow the leader to apply discipline in the exercise of his or her mental talents. Determination acting in concert with a leader's intuition or coup d'oeil is what Clausewitz defines as the genius of a leader.

The individual leader who then interacts with other leaders, observes other leaders, and participates as a leader, over time, refines the experiential database required for the development of Military Genius. Arguably, this evolution is apparent if one observes an officer's level of determination; it is less apparent when one attempts to interpret an officer's level of intuition.

INTUITION

Let's look more closely at the core characteristics that define intuition. Inquisitiveness is a talent of the mind that closely resembles curiosity. It is the ever-present desire for information and understanding. It is the characteristic that prevents intellectual complacency. A leader with an inquiring mind is never satisfied with the simple meaning or cause of events in a confusing situation. The inquiring leader searches for the truth before taking action or risking lives. Fidelity in information and analysis excites an inquiring leader and often frustrates those who cannot keep the same "mental pace".

Calm is a characteristic that is most closely compared with patience. Yet, with calm there is a simple, unexcitable mood in the face of danger and human emotional extremes. The Military Genius is the person who remains almost stoic while others panic, cry, and run for safety. The truly calm leader knows when to become more directive, knows how long to wait before committing a reserve, and knows when to exploit success. The calm leader is at peace with fear, danger, and confusion. The calm leader can sort through this array of conditions and apply his mental talent in any situation.

Comprehensive is a characteristic rarely used in contemporary leadership lexicon. The term is descriptive. Understanding is a small part of comprehensive. The real meaning is in the depth and breadth with which a leader attends to the smallest details. However, the detail is not as important as the fact that the comprehensive leader is wise enough to consider an array of details across areas relevant to a decision or situation.

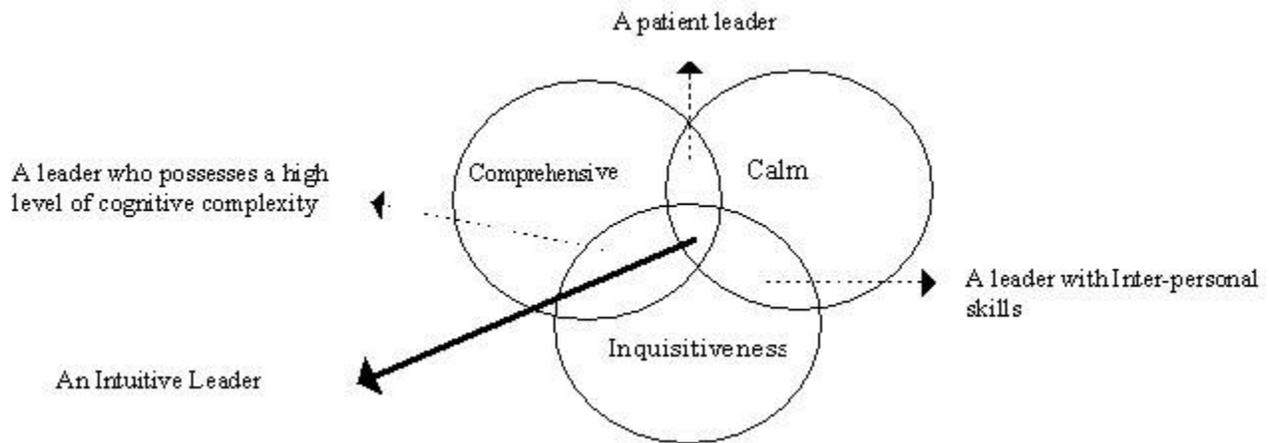


Figure 2: The Core Characteristics of an Officer's Intuition

Now consider the marginal genius who may possess two of the three characteristics in some combination. Figure 2 depicts a Venn diagram of intuition showing the interrelated characteristics modeled by the overlapping circles that define the three facets of Clausewitz's definition of intuition. The intersection of each cylinder models the following core characteristics.

The Inquisitive/Calm leader is one who likely possesses inter-personal skills. The Calm/Comprehensive leader is an example of a patient leader. And the Inquisitive/Comprehensive leader is one who possesses a level of cognitive complexity and attention to detail in pursuing excellence, particularly when combined with the proper level of determination.

The quality overlap explains some of the leader qualities that relate to core characteristics and intuition. Yet, it is the synergistic effect of the three combined that, over a continuum of time, lead to complete intuition.

A Test of Time

As an officer progresses, both in level of responsibility and time in the service, we expect his level of experience to grow. In the same light, we can expect his level of intuition to also expand. In decomposing the characteristics of intuition in Figures 1 and 2 above, we are able to compose the following simple algorithm: Experience = fn (observation, interaction, participation). These functions are all held in relation to time. Where this becomes important, in a practical sense, is when we attempt to place officers in particular assignments and how we measure an officers success given his assignment history.

Often the level of experience is misunderstood. Just because an officer remains in the service does not mean that he possesses that level of intuition necessary to make the

decisions required of a combat leader. His experience, as defined above, must be accurately measured. By doing so, personnel managers can place the right officer in the right job.

Conclusion

"To meet the requirements of the ... battlefield and deal with its challenges, senior leaders and commanders possess special characteristics."¹³ Army field manuals describe these characteristics by identifying that leaders must first, be able to assess the situation and, from that assessment, form battlefield vision. Second, leaders must possess a high tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty. Finally, they must have an innate capability to learn rapidly and possess the ability to counter the "free will of the opponent [that] will ensure that most situations and circumstances appear different from what is expected."¹⁴

FM 22-103 goes on to say that, "combined, these characteristics provide a capability to make timely decisions."¹⁵ Referring back to the opening quote of this paper, Bergerud writes that success is based on initiative and the ability to gain and maintain the initiative is based on the commander's ability to make quick and knowledgeable decisions. The attribute that does all of this is intuition. However, it is one that is often overlooked.

Notes

1. Clausewitz, *On War*, 102.
2. *Ibid.*, 102.
3. FM 22-100, 1990, 41-42 and Handel, *Masters of War*, 3.
4. FM 22-100, 47.
5. Sun Tzu refers to this characterization as the master of war or the skillful commander.
6. Clausewitz, *On War*, 100.
7. Clausewitz, 100.
8. *Ibid.*, 102.
9. Clausewitz, 112. Michael I. Handel compares Clausewitzian genius to Thucydides description of Themistocles who was a man who exhibited the most indubitable signs of genius who was at once the best in those sudden crises which admit little or no deliberation. *Masters of War*, 279.
10. Handel, 170.

11. FM 101-5 defines a series of attributes essential for a staff officer, however, no where in our doctrine or field manuals does one describe in detail the necessary attributes of a leader.

12. Represented by the **cylinder** on the model in Figure 1.

13. FM 23-103: Leadership and Command at Senior Levels, p. 2.

14. Ibid., p 2-3.

15. Ibid., The characteristics described in FM 23-103 include the ability to rapidly assess the situation and form a vision, showing a high tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty, and the ability to learn rapidly.

Disclaimer

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