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Synchronization, Balance and Coup D'oeil

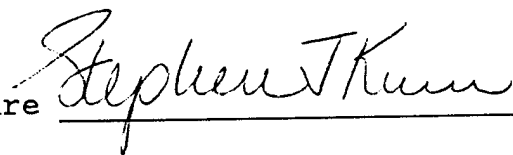
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ABSTRACT

Synchronization was introduced into U.S. Army doctrine in 1980 to capture the idea of a higher order of sophistication in the application of combat power. Since then it has become the "overarching operational concept" of Joint Doctrine and an increasingly popular term in doctrinal jargon. Unfortunately, it is also frequently misunderstood and a source of ambiguity. Some contend that it is just another term for coordination and fail to conceptualize the term's doctrinal implication. Others argue that it is a disguise for centralized control and is diametrically opposed to initiative and decentralized execution.

It is interesting, therefore, to examine the events of Operation EXTENDED CAPITAL, in which Field Marshall Sir William Slim achieved decisive victory over the Japanese in Burma, an operation which is considered a masterstroke of synchronization. This operation is particularly enlightening because it offers a vivid example of the distinction between synchronization and coordination. In addition, it provides clear evidence that synchronization and decentralized execution can be mutually supporting imperatives. In this operation, Slim displayed his operational experience and coup d'oeil by creating simple plans, insuring a thorough understanding of his intent, focusing his staff on critical issues, and endorsing the flexibility of his subordinates. These actions allowed him to synthesize the benefits of both synchronization and initiative in order to achieve dramatic and overwhelming victory.

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"Synchronization - the arrangement of military actions in time, space, and purpose to produce maximum relative combat power at a decisive place and time."

Joint Pub 1-02

INTRODUCTION

In 1980, General Starry, then Commander, US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), directed that synchronization be included as a fundamental tenet of airland battle doctrine in lieu of integration. Starry believed that synchronization better captured the idea of the "combat-power value to effective command control,"¹ that "second order of sophistication"² achieved through the proper application of combat power. He was influenced by General DePuy, a former TRADOC Commander, who suggested that a balanced doctrine should capture the synergy created by both "the concentration of forces in space via maneuver" and "the concentration of actions in time via synchronization."³ Since Starry's decision, synchronization has not only remained a fundamental tenet of Army operations but has become the "overarching operational concept"⁴ of joint doctrine.

Despite ever-increasing references to synchronization in current doctrine, however, this concept remains quite ambiguous. On one hand, there are those who fail to recognize the higher order implications of the concept and they dismiss synchronization as just another term for coordination or integration. On the other hand, there are those who emphasize this higher order implication and contend that synchronization is a disguise for centralized control. They argue that

synchronization and decentralized execution are mutually exclusive imperatives.

It is interesting, therefore, to examine the actions of Field Marshall Sir William Slim as he decisively defeated the Japanese in Operation EXTENDED CAPITAL, an operation that can be considered a masterstroke of synchronization. We will first review the events of this operation as they provide a vivid example of the distinction between synchronization and coordination. We will then examine this proposed incompatibility of synchronization and decentralized execution and the potential challenges this may imply for the operational commander. Finally, we will revisit Slim in Operation EXTENDED CAPITAL to examine how he met that challenge and, in fact, demonstrated that these concepts can be mutually supporting tenets.

OPERATION EXTENDED CAPITAL

THE OPERATION IN PERSPECTIVE

Operation EXTENDED CAPITAL was the third phase of a four-phase campaign. The first phase, conducted in India, focused on rebuilding the British 14th Army and correcting those lessons Slim had learned during the evacuation of Burma. He implemented extensive training programs, worked to improve health and morale, rebuilt the Army's confidence and, most importantly, permeated his intent "to destroy the Japanese Army, to smash it as an evil thing."⁵ The second phase

consisted of the major operation on the Imphal Plain. Slim understood that the Japanese intended to attack in the central Burma-India border region in order to open a potential supply route to India, eliminate the British as a threat, and encourage the Chinese to sue for peace. Slim recognized that the key to success was to regain the initiative and force the battle on terrain that would exploit his forces' mobility and would significantly extend the Japanese lines of communication. Consequently, he initially deployed a covering force in the Chin Hills which, as the Japanese began their offensive, withdrew to join the remainder of Slim's forces on the Imphal Plain. In the vicious battles at Kohima and Imphal, the Japanese suffered an overwhelming defeat and the opportunity for the British to initiate offensive operations was now available. The drive to reenter Burma was the focus of the third phase, Operation EXTENDED CAPITAL. Once victory was achieved in this phase, Slim intended to "give the Japanese no respite"⁶ and to immediately initiate phase four, the exploitation to Rangoon to eliminate the Japanese from Burma.

PHASE 3 - THE PLAN TO CROSS THE IRRAWADDY

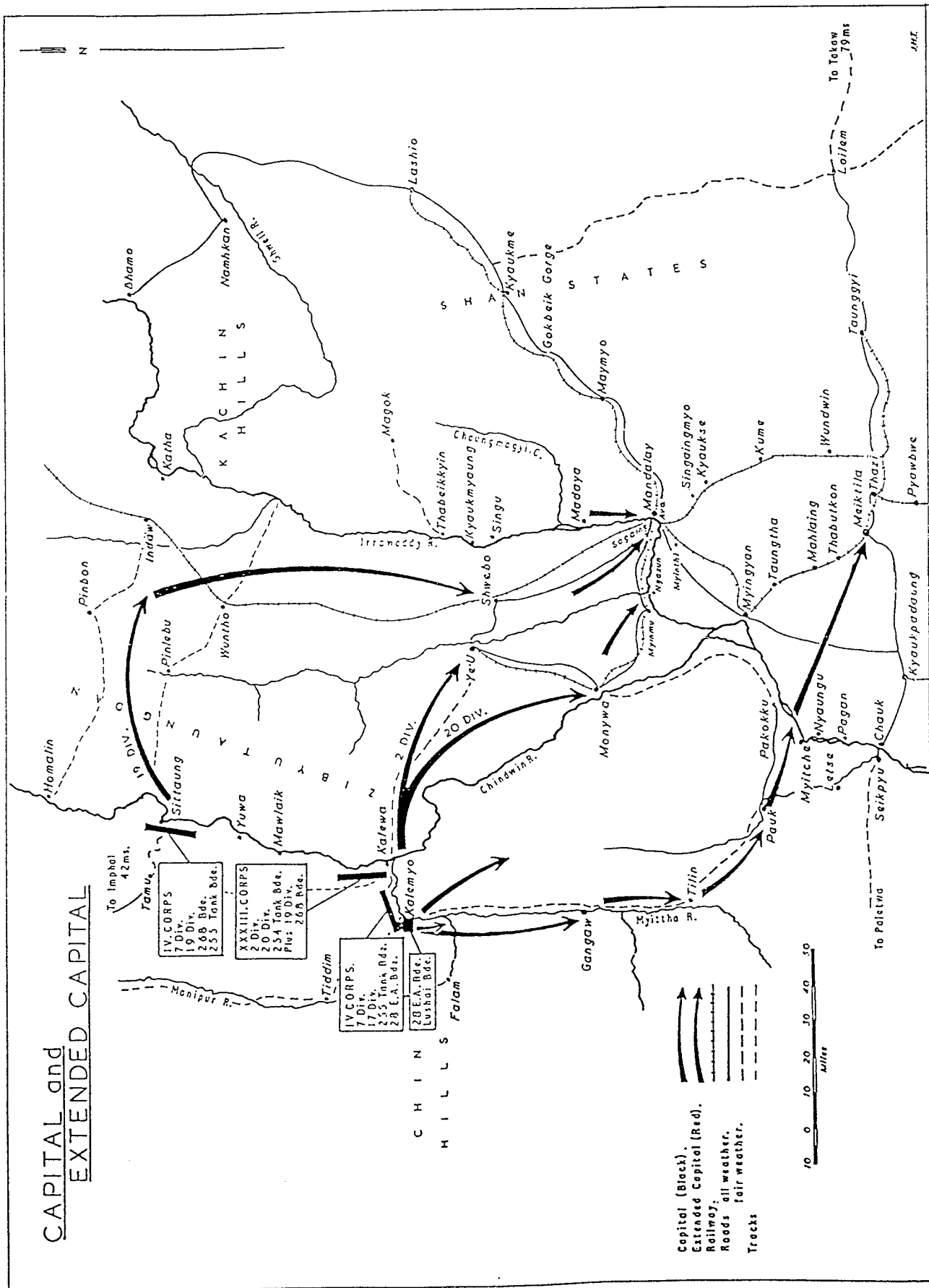
Slim's initial mission for the third phase was to occupy the Kalewa-Kalemyo area, secure the Shwebo Plain and liberate Burma as far south as Pakokku-Mandalay. Slim felt that these objectives were too limited and that they failed to recognize the Japanese Army as the operational center of gravity. His concerns were relieved in September, 1944, when the Combined

Chiefs of Staff directed that Burma be recaptured as soon as possible. Slim responded by planning to force "another major battle on the enemy at the earliest feasible moment." ⁷

For this operation, Slim's 14th Army consisted of two Corps with seven subordinate divisions and two tank brigades. This organization, having recently tasted victory on the Imphal plain, now realized that the Japanese had reached their culminating point and were in "the whole horror of retreat in the monsoon."⁸ Slim's initial plan, Operation CAPITAL, was remarkably simple and called for a coordinated attack down the Shwebo plain. 4th Corps, the main effort on the left flank, would cross the Chindwin River at Sittaung, seize Pinlebu and then turn south to capture Shwebo. 33rd Corps, on the right flank, would cross the Chindwin River at Kalewa, drive southeast to seize Ye-u and support 4th Corps as necessary. Although Shwebo and Ye-u were considered decisive points because their airfields would allow Slim to extend his lines of communications, Slim's main focus remained force-oriented. His intent was to destroy the Japanese Army north of Mandalay.

The major operational restraints in this phase were logistical support and mobility operations. The Burma Campaign was a secondary effort in a secondary theater and Slim "had to make do with the barest resources to fight a mobile campaign in the most trying conditions."⁹ The resupply routes stretched some five hundred miles from the railhead at Dimapur to Shwebo across terrain that was "virtually trackless, disease-infected,

Map source - Evans, Geoffrey, Slim as Military Commander, B.T. Batsford Ltd., London, 1969, p. 184.



jungle clad mountains, swamped for half the year by monsoon rains"¹⁰ and required significant engineering effort to improve and maintain. Slim's analysis indicated that resupply would be difficult, if not impossible, without significant air resupply. Unfortunately, even as the operation was underway and units were advancing towards their objectives, Slim lost three air transport squadrons. This forced the development of some ingenious alternatives, to include the construction of over five hundred teak log barges to float supplies down the Chindwin and Irrawaddy rivers.

The Shwebo Plain did, however, offer significant advantages. Units would be out of the jungle and could exploit the mobility and firepower of armored forces and employ artillery at longer range. Air support could be optimized and did, in fact, eventually deliver over one thousand tons of supplies daily, fly over seven thousand daily sorties and conduct critical aerial reconnaissance missions. A battle on the Shwebo Plain would also put the Irrawaddy River at the back of the enemy. Slim was convinced that the Japanese would not "let Mandalay go, or even be brought into the front line, without a pitched battle"¹¹ and this became the primary assumption upon which Slim based his operational scheme. Almost immediately, however, this assumption proved invalid. As the lead division of 4th Corps passed through the Zibyu-Taungdan mountains, it met little enemy resistance. Air reconnaissance revealed troop movement across the Irrawaddy

River and HUMINT sources indicated that the Japanese were occupying positions south and east of the river, all clear indications that the Japanese did not intend to fight on the Shwebo Plain.

Slim recognized that his plan had run its course and that a quick change was needed, a change that was to be considered the "master stroke of strategy of the Burma campaign."¹²

Under Operation EXTENDED CAPITAL, Slim directed 4th Corps to leave its lead division and one independent brigade in place, swing behind 33rd Corps and continue south through the Gengaw Valley. Once it came out of that valley, it was to seize a crossing in the Pagan-Pakokku area and drive to Meiktila. Meiktila was the main logistical center for the Japanese forces, a clear decisive point. "Crush that wrist, no blood would flow through the fingers, the whole hand would be paralyzed, and the Japanese armies on the arc from the Salween to the Irrawaddy would begin to wither."¹³ 33rd Corps, reinforced with the units from 4th Corps, would continue its drive on Mandalay from the north and seize a series of bridgeheads across the Irrawaddy River.

The success of this revised plan was dependent on logistical flexibility, deception, and timing. As 4th Corps moved through the Gengaw Valley, a distance of over two hundred and fifty miles, it had to build its own road and create airfields every fifty miles to insure effective resupply. 4th Corps' advance was conducted under radio silence and with tight

air cover to preclude Japanese observation. A dummy corps headquarters replicating the 4th Corps' headquarters was established north of Mandalay. 33rd Corps had to convince the Japanese that they were the main effort by conducting multiple river crossings in the Thabeikkyin area. Once these crossings had forced the commitment of the Japanese reserve to the north, 4th Corps, reinforced by one of the Army's reserve divisions, would initiate their crossings in the Pagan-Pakokku area.

This operational design employed the indirect approach to attack the enemy center of gravity. Slim understood that he possessed neither the appropriate assets nor the forces to conduct a major river crossing. However, by conducting a series of orchestrated crossings along a two hundred mile front, he could exploit two Japanese vulnerabilities. First, their lack of air support and reconnaissance assets prevented the Japanese from identifying the primary crossing sites and allowed Slim to maintain the initiative. Second, the Japanese leadership had consistently forfeited their overwhelming strength advantage by committing their forces "into the attack piecemeal as they arrived."¹⁴ Slim knew he was fighting outnumbered and intended to defeat the Japanese through a synchronized offensive operation that did not directly challenge their massed strength.

On 10 February 1945, elements of the 33rd Corps initiated several river crossings and within two days the Japanese had committed all available forces against that effort. On 14

February, lead elements of 4th Corps crossed the Irrawaddy River and moved to Meiktila. This was the decisive point and time for Slim to mass the effects of his combat power to shatter the coherency of the Japanese defense. Through his efforts, every element of the operational art, to include intelligence, air support, engineering operations, use of reserves, "deception and surprise, flexibility, concentration on the objective, calculated risks, the solution of grave administrative problems, imagination, sang-froid, invigorating leadership ... were simultaneously and harmoniously brought to life."¹⁵ Though separated in time and space, the combined effects of these activities created a synergy that exceeded the potential of mere coordination and created "kaleidoscopic changes in the situation"¹⁶ for the defending Japanese. As the Japanese attempted to protect Meiktila, 33rd Corps pressed the attack from Mandalay, acting as the hammer that smashed the Japanese into 4th Corps, the anvil at Meiktila. At the conclusion of these battles, the Japanese force, reduced from over eight divisions to three infantry battalions, was virtually eliminated as an effective fighting force.

THE NEED FOR BALANCE

The events on the shores of the Irrawaddy River highlight the distinction between synchronization and coordination. But is it valid to conclude that this level of synchronization can only be achieved at the expense of decentralized execution?

Did Slim achieve his dramatic synchronization by limiting his subordinates' initiative or did he, perhaps, demonstrate certain techniques that may have utility for today's operational commander? Before we examine Slim's approach, we will review some current thoughts on this issue.

One author, in an article entitled, Pushing Them Out the Back Door, asserts that the failure of the coalition forces to prevent the Republican Guard's escape can be traced to a "strict adherence to the synchronization element" of doctrine. The author contrasts "Schwarzkopf's synchronized modern Army" whose tempo was governed by self-imposed limits of advance and whose "units had to stop when they reached the next phase line" to General Patton's 3rd Army, which "was limited only by the action of the enemy." He argues that the VII Corps Commander was "so busy refueling and synchronizing that he did not have time to get after the enemy." FM 100-5, the author points out, indicates that "commanders will adjust tempo to maintain synchronization" and herein lies the major danger of synchronization; it forces commanders to focus on their own units rather than keying off the actions of the enemy. In short, he concludes, synchronization is "an excuse for control freaks to run wild."¹⁷

As a counterargument, others point to the lessons of OPERATION HUSKY, the Allied invasion of Sicily during World War II. This was a major operation whose "planning was packed with controversy, indecision, and a lack of aggressiveness"¹⁸ and,

as a result, the Axis defenders were able to mount an effective holding action and escape to the Italian mainland. In this operation, General Alexander, the Ground Component Commander, admitted that "he had not prepared detailed plans" and that his operational concept was based on "chance and the reactions" of his subordinate Army Commanders.¹⁹ Alexander's operational leadership had a "serious flaw":

"his consistent inability to grasp the reins of higher command, to make the distinction between interference in the actions of his subordinate Army commanders and the necessity to impose his will at the right time and place"²⁰

Consequently, although the Allies possessed overwhelming combat power, there was never an attempt to synchronize the Allied combat power to strike the vulnerable Axis forces as they evacuated Sicily.

Such arguments fall into DePuy's "logic trap"²¹ by offering extreme arguments that ignore the common ground, the potential benefit of a balanced application of these concepts. Joint doctrine argues that "in all cases CINCs must balance the need for centralized direction with decentralized execution."²² FM 100-5 warns that

"initiative requires decentralization of decision authority to the lowest practical level. At the same time, decentralization risks some loss of synchronization. Commanders constantly balance these competing risks, recognizing that the loss of immediate control is preferable to inaction."²³

Even FMFM-1, which proclaims maneuver warfare as the Marine Corps' warfighting philosophy and builds its doctrine on decentralized command, explicitly recognizes the danger of

uncontrolled decentralization and encourages "harmonious initiative."²⁴

The obvious question, then, is how does the joint force commander achieve this balance? Several senior leaders have addressed this issue and offer certain proposals. The essence of these proposals is the expectation that operational commanders will generate a common view of the battlefield and a clear understanding of their intent while "avoiding too much interference with their subordinates."²⁵ General Sullivan, current U.S. Army Chief of Staff, defines a need to share expectations, establish priorities and enhance mental agility while empowering subordinates to take independent actions.²⁶

But these senior leaders also clearly recognize that there can be no definitive answer, no recipe that defines how the commander should achieve this balance. To suggest an appropriate theory would deny the importance of the commander's intuition, his coup d'oeil, that mix of experience, training and situational awareness that allows the commander to deal with the uncertainty of combat. One author suggests that "reconciling these competing imperatives, each of which is fully justified within its own particular logic, ... is the essence of the operational art."²⁷ Recognizing this, we return to Operation EXTENDED CAPITAL to understand how Slim met this challenge.

SLIM'S BALANCE

Slim's ability to achieve this balance can be traced to two elements of his operational leadership; his role in the deliberate planning process and his relationship with his subordinate commanders. In the deliberate planning process Slim laid the foundation for a synchronized operation. He believed that effective planning was based on four key principles, to include:

- a. the ultimate intention must be an offensive one
- b. the main idea on which the plan was based must be simple
- c. that idea must be held in view throughout and everything else must give way to it
- d. the plan must have in it an element of surprise ²⁸

All four conditions are obvious in EXTENDED CAPITAL. It was an offensive action that hinged on surprise and deception. The principle idea was the destruction of the Japanese force and the supporting concept of operations was quite simple.

Slim exerted significant effort to insure that the main idea, the destruction of the Japanese, was clearly understood. He personally developed the alternative courses of action to insure they supported his intent. For EXTENDED CAPITAL, as for all other operations, Slim personally drafted his intent statement, the most important component of the operations order.

"It is usually the shortest of all the paragraphs, but it is always the most important, because it states - or it should - just what the commander wants to achieve. It is the one overriding expression of will by which everything in the order and every action by every commander and soldier in any army must be dominated."²⁹

Slim's intent for EXTENDED CAPITAL was focused, direct and

generated a clear understanding of his desired endstate.

"In conjunction with NCAC to destroy the enemy forces in Burma, to advance to the line HENZADA-NYAUNGLEBIN and to seize any opportunity to advance from that line and capture a South Burma port."³⁰

Slim explicitly recognized that synchronization was dependent on careful staff work, particularly in light of the many operational restraints impacting on EXTENDED CAPITAL. He acknowledged that even a simple plan still requires significant effort "to get the thousand and one things required moving"³¹ and argued that:

"Unless one has been engaged in the actual staff work of such operations, it is impossible to realize the vast amount of detail and the accurate timing on which, by the narrowest margins, success may depend."³²

The 14th Army staff worked diligently to solve the "innumerable problems of supply, transportation, air support, medical arrangements, engineering, communications, reinforcements, reorganization, and training,"³³ many of which had to be readdressed once the plan was revised. The successful application of Allied airpower was a direct result of the joint efforts of the Army and Air Force staffs who worked "out their intricate, dovetailed programmes."³⁴ This concerted staff effort played a significant role in achieving the level of synchronization evident in EXTENDED CAPITAL.

Slim's interaction with his subordinate commanders is the second and, perhaps, more significant key to his ability to achieve balance. There were three critical aspects to that interaction. First, he made every effort to involve the

commanders in the planning process. Slim frequently consulted with each commander, recognizing that the operation "would be very largely his battle and it was important to have his agreement."³⁵ Slim believed that he should personally brief the Corps Commanders and he routinely briefed them at their headquarters, soliciting their input.

Second, he recognized the distinction between his role as army commander and their role as corps commanders. Once they understood his intent, Slim did not hesitate to give each commander "tactical freedom in the methods he chose."³⁶ That latitude is evident in Slim's thoughts as the Army prepared for EXTENDED CAPITAL:

"I left it to Corps Commanders to select the exact locations for their crossings, to choose which divisions should make them, and to prepare the best tactical plans and arrangements that the meagre resources I had allotted them would permit."³⁷

Slim, meanwhile, shifted his focus to "see that the transportation resources of the army brought forward smoothly and steadily the great tonnages of supplies, ammunition, and equipment required for the crossings and for the new battles that would follow."³⁸ While Slim frequently went forward to observe some ongoing action, this decision was motivated by the realization that battles seldom went according to plan and that it was his function as the Army commander to "grasp opportunity as it was presented."³⁹ During his visit to 4th Corps during its preparation to cross the Irrawaddy River, for example, he recognized that this was the moment on "which the whole fabric

of my battle plan rested." Rather than interfere, however, he focused on "doing what I could to support" the commander.⁴⁰

Finally, Slim believed that it was his responsibility to develop a flexibility within his subordinates that allowed them to act without guidance from their superiors. Based on his confidence in his subordinates, Slim, in fact, amended his intent for EXTENDED CAPITAL and authorized his commanders "to take certain risks, which in other cases would not be justified."⁴¹ He applauded one commander who acted swiftly and "seized a chance to slip across the Irrawaddy and at the same time make a dart at Shwebo, to 'shoot a goal when the referee wasn't looking'."⁴² He was a firm advocate of controlled, decentralized execution:

"This acting without orders, in anticipation of orders, or without waiting for approval, yet always within the overall intention, must become second nature in any form of warfare ... It requires in the higher command a corresponding flexibility of mind, confidence in its subordinates, and the power to make its intentions clear through the force."⁴³

CONCLUSIONS

Several distinct lessons can be drawn from Operation EXTENDED CAPITAL. First, synchronization is a force multiplier that can generate maximum combat power. Despite several operational restraints, Slim was able to synchronize his assets to defeat a numerically superior enemy. Second, there is a distinct difference between coordination and synchronization. As demonstrated in EXTENDED CAPITAL, synchronization implies the dramatic synergy created by the massed effects of disparate

activities at the decisive time and place. Third, synchronization does not necessarily depend on a choreographed gameplan that limits flexibility but it does require carefully analyzed plans that address the details of the operation. Finally, a certain tension will always exist between absolute synchronization and uninhibited initiative, but it is the responsibility of the operational commander to address that tension and achieve a balanced application of these concepts. The ability to achieve this illusive balance is a function of the commander's coup d'oeil, that intuition that allows him to judiciously apply doctrinal principles in the face of uncertainty. Slim's performance in Operation EXTENDED CAPITAL, his coup d'oeil, honed through several years of operational command, provides clear evidence that it is possible to "synthesize the virtues" of these imperatives to realize a "higher order of competence and professionalism"⁴⁴ and to achieve decisive victory.

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