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Module 3: Operational Art

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Military success depends on the commander's orchestration of a triad of operational factors: time, space, and force. The delicate balance of these factors, complicated by the role of information, influences the freedom of action needed to achieve strategic objectives. At the heart of operational warfare lies this triad. Leyte showed it vividly, as space, time, and force pulled against each other in an uneasy balance.

Space is the canvas on which every operation unfolds. Islands rise from the sea like walls, straits squeeze fleets into narrow funnels, and long distances wear down endurance. The Philippines scattered land and water into a labyrinth that twisted movement and fractured supply.

Commanders measured every mile, because each one drained fuel, time, and energy. Bases helped, but they did not erase distance. Geography still dictated where fleets could strike and how long they could stay. The theater's shape pressed on every decision.

Time slips away faster than any fleet can sail. Once gone, it does not return. Commanders who act with speed take the initiative, driving events forward before the enemy can answer. Those who hesitate invite peril. At Leyte, mere hours decided whether American escorts fought for survival or prepared in strength. A narrow gap in time opened San Bernardino Strait, and Kurita's battleships surged through. Campaigns stretch or collapse depending on pauses, refueling, and

regrouping. Momentum belongs to the side that can continuously observe, orient, decide, and act faster. The slower force inherits only reaction, stumbling in the wake of decisions already made.

Force is raw combat power, yet never only numbers. Numbers matter, but leadership, training, and morale animate them. A fleet is not its tonnage, it is its will to fight. At Samar, thin-skinned escort carriers and destroyers confronted leviathans armed with massive guns. By measure they should have been crushed, but cohesion and spirit carried them forward. The balance between tangible strength and intangible resolve is never clear until the battle begins. Commanders estimate, sometimes guess, and only combat reveals what the force truly is.

Balance is the hinge of operational art. Space, time, and force strain against one another. A theater too wide without strength collapses into overextension. Force committed without time dissolves into waste. Time, even with numbers, can vanish in hesitation. Moltke urged planners to regress from the aim, defining how much space must be held, how much force gathered, how much time allowed. Commanders who forget this triad invite imbalance. Perfect harmony is rare, yet without the attempt, campaigns unravel.

Leyte showed time and force colliding in every decision. The Americans landed over 130,000 troops and nearly 200,000 tons of supplies in four days, speed that secured a foothold before Japanese counterattack (The Battle for Leyte Gulf, n.d.). That same speed clogged Tacloban's single road and airfield (Hime, 2013, p. 31). Halsey's dash after Ozawa's decoy carriers squandered hours that should have sealed San Bernardino, allowing Kurita to break through and nearly crush escort carriers at Samar (Drachinifel, 2020). Japan gambled on simultaneous thrusts, but coordination failed, fuel ran short, and their fleets arrived piecemeal. History's judgment was blunt: when time slips, force is drained; when force moves without time, it breaks apart (Vego, 2009, p. III-60).

Time and space intertwined at Leyte. The island straddled Japan's sea lanes, its capture promising to sever the southern resource area. The landings succeeded quickly, yet tempo strained supply. Tacloban's bottlenecks exposed vulnerability. Japan's Sho-Go demanded converging strikes, but distance and fuel made timing impossible. Their fleets arrived in fragments, space outrunning time (Hime, 2013, p. 24). Halsey's chase north left San Bernardino open. Kurita advanced, but Taffy 3 fought back with torpedoes, aircraft, and smoke, trading lives for minutes that saved the invasion force (Hime, 2013, p. 27).

The straits revealed space and force in stark contrast. San Bernardino, left unguarded, gave Kurita a corridor. At Surigao, Oldendorf massed battleships and cruisers, turning geography into a killing ground that destroyed the Southern Force. A chokepoint without force is opportunity; with force, it becomes decisive (Vego, 2009, p. IV-61). Theater geometry that includes bases, lines of communication, and decisive points, formed the bridge linking operational factors to objectives, shaping how space, time, and force could be applied.

Space, time, and force are the elemental grammar of operational art. At San Bernardino, the absence of U.S. strength in a decisive chokepoint almost unraveled the invasion. At Surigao, the opposite unfolded. Oldendorf packed heavy guns into narrow waters and crushed the Japanese Southern Force. One strait exposed weakness, the other delivered annihilation. The contrast still speaks: when space and force are held in balance, commanders preserve freedom to act. When that balance breaks, the enemy seizes the initiative.

References

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