

## Excerpt from the Junior Officer's Pocketbook - 1894

### Considerations for Small Unit Actions

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There shall come a time in every Junior Officer's career where he shall find himself leading a handful of men against a capable and cunning foe. The guidance below is based upon notes made by the author in small unit actions across Africa, the Caribbean and China.

Such small engagements are often the fulcrum upon which events of much greater import revolve. The turning of an enemy flank, the capture of an enemy leader or flag, the stalwart rear-guard that enables the regiment to withdraw and reform, and in more recent times, the thwarting of foreign agents and their nefarious schemes.

To paraphrase the late Field Marshal von Moltke, "No operation extends with any certainty beyond the first encounter with the enemy". This is no truer than in the command and leadership of small units in the oft-times chaotic engagements they endure. The force that succeeds shall not necessarily be the one with the greater numbers or better equipment. Instead it is the force that has the most adaptable leadership and the most complete moral certainty in their cause. The author has seen bellicose Highlanders put to flight by savage Pathans for this very reason.

When one leads men into such a situation one must assess the following:

1. The objective of the mission;
2. The ground across which one must fight;
3. The troops and equipment at your disposal;
4. The likely actions of the enemy.

The author shall address each of these in turn below, but first he shall address the matter of good leadership.

In Small Unit Actions everything shall depend up on the steadiness of command. With such a small number of men they shall advance or retreat depending on their faith in the strength of character of their commander. Such actions are often over in mere minutes and, without bold and decisive leadership, the men shall waiver and fall to confusion.

At the Royal Military College you men will have learnt how to give orders with accuracy, brevity and clarity. This skill shall show its worth in such engagements as we here discuss. Direct your men with confidence and precision and you will often succeed by that alone. For given a clear order a man shall do his utmost to complete it. If confused he can become distracted and easily put to flight.

Make good use of your NCOs, especially the senior men. They have the trust of the soldiers they lead, for they may have been with them for many years. They are the steadfast example their men need when all falls to chaos and bloodshed around them. In Small Unit Actions you should take these men into your confidence as far as you are made able by your orders. If you must divide your force then they shall then act for as leaders of the other parts and as such the more they know the better they can continue the

mission should you fall. Ask for and respect their opinions as usually they shall be more experienced than you. At the end of the day though you are the Officer and must take the decisions that will save or doom your men. The NCOs know this and shall rely upon you for it.

#### The Four Principles of Small Unit Action

##### 1. The Objective

In most cases you shall have your orders. You may not be entirely wise as to why you are ordered to do or achieve what is stated within them and it is not your place to question. It is only important that you succeed in carrying them out to the best ability of your men and yourself. The cost you may be asked to pay is of no consequence when put against the larger picture seen only by your superiors.

When engaging the enemy you must put other considerations aside and concentrate wholly on your objective. Anger, the fear of loss of good men and equipment, the wish to return harm unto your enemy, or other motivations must not divert you from this.

##### 2. The Ground

Your appreciation of the ground across which you shall fight may be the determining factor in whether you succeed or fail, live or die. As you did in training ask yourself the following questions:

- a. Where is the objective?
- b. What cover may be gained from the terrain before you?
- c. What are the clearest lanes of fire that you might dominate by well-placed men?
- d. From where are your enemy most likely to come?
- e. What cover might be afforded to them and how might you deny them that refuge?
- f. How shall the terrain hinder or aid your movement?
- g. To where might the enemy escape if defeated?

The terrain may afford you the luxury of a well-covered approach, or place you in the position where you must move with boldness and speed to achieve your objective.

Open ground always holds deadly potential and, if you must attempt it, do your best to make any enemy uncomfortable through accurate covering fire. Grenades and smoke are often useful for obscuring your advance.

It is important to remember that you shall not have a battalion at your back in Small Unit Actions. So you must enlist the ground itself to multiply your effectiveness and become that battalion.

##### 3. Troops and Equipment

You must appreciate that you shall never have enough men, nor all the equipment that you might want. With the best will in the world you are

probably are going to suffer a lack of some measure. So you must make best use of what you do have. Small Unit Actions are mostly short, on occasion only a minute or two in duration, and seldom longer than twenty. Your men must be able to move quickly and be prepared to fight at close quarters. One could deploy a squadron of Guards in full armour, carrying heavy weapons and enough ammunition to refight the Crimea but your enemy shall dance around them and be off before you can even turn to face.

For an ordinary infantryman one recommends a reinforced tunic or, if the enemy is expected to have heavier weapons, brigandine. Give each man a rifle, three clips of ammunition, a bayonet (fixed before the engagement to save time) and possibly a grenade or two. This is more than enough for the purpose.

Armour, such as it is, often has a greater effect by instilling confidence in the wearer than it does in actually stopping injuries.

If you need heavy support then deploy two men to carry and use a Maxim – or better yet one of the new Vickers models being considered by the Ordnance Board. Perhaps add a Sapper to bring a Congreve. You should not need more, this is not Omdurman.

For yourself the classic Pistol and Sabre combination, and perchance a Breastplate should suffice. Some Officers in the Extraordinary Battalion are known to favour shortened shotguns or even carbines. However, I find these hard to fire in one's offhand. Personally I do not favour the new-fangled Arc pistols as they are useless when pressed in close combat, yet some of my fellow Officers swear by them.

I recommend heavier armour for the Officer because you are the core about which your enterprise succeeds or fails. If you should fall then the chances of success are greatly diminished.

On occasion you may have access to extraordinary equipment. The usefulness of Faraday or Vulcan coats cannot be underestimated against the right foe. Heavy support from a Mechanical Walker, despite their innate unreliability, could provide a real advantage. In each case though take only what you actually need for each of these items comes at a tactical cost.

One of the problems common to Small Unit Actions is the effective concentration of force. It is not unusual for men to become quickly separated and fall to confusion as a result.

At most divide your force into three parties. Each with a minimum of three men and each given clear orders, amongst which must be the command to stay together. In a classic engagement one of these three is the support party. This contains a heavy weapon if you have one, or acts a reserve. If it is the former it should move to a point where it commands the greatest part of the field of battle. If it is the latter then it must keep pace with the others and be prepared to act upon command with immediate effect.

The other two parties, led by your NCO and yourself, should be prepared to lend fire support to each other and to drive out the enemy where

necessary. One of these two should have the task of securing/achieving the objective. Whereas the task of the other is to engage, frustrate and prevent the enemy from doing likewise. Which one you choose to command is your decision.

If you have insufficient men and can only manage to divide into two parties then set one to frustrating the enemy and the other to the achievement of the objective. If one has a surgeon or medical orderly place him with the latter.

#### *4. The Enemy*

"Know thine enemy as thyself" is the wisest advice I can give.

It is not often that you shall be sent into action with absolutely no knowledge of your enemy and his capabilities. Take what time you have to acknowledge his strengths and weaknesses, what equipment he shall likely bring to the field and what tactics he favours. Perhaps engage the support of other Officers who have met this enemy before.

Do not fall to arrogance lest you underestimate your foe. We did so at Isandlwana and paid a heavy price for our belief that the Zulu was an untutored and cowardly savage. That a much smaller force survived at Rorke's Drift was due in no small part to two British Officers realising how powerful their enemy could be, and thus playing to their own strengths and planning their meagre resources accordingly.

If competently led, each enemy shall play to their strengths. The fanatical zeal of the Boxer, the fearsome hand-to-hand fighting skills of the Zulu, the guile and marksmanship of the Pathan, the desperate courage and self-sacrifice of the Anarchist, the precision of the Prussian, the élan of the French Legionnaire. Place yourself in the shoes of the leader of such men and consider how you would use them to achieve the objective. Then plan to frustrate them by this insight.

Some of our enemies have begun to use great beasts in Small Unit Actions. These are a terrifying spectacle to behold and can cause a man's courage to drain away like water. The best way to deal with these is concentrated fire, something to which fortunately most seem especially vulnerable. Once downed the moral advantage moves to your men for they have defeated a denizen of Hell and are subsequently less afraid of the mere men that summoned it.

At the end of the day, what you shall achieve in a such an engagement shall be in direct proportion to that which you are willing to hazard. You shall lose men and you may also fall, but this matters naught if you succeed. It is only a waste if you fail.

Finally, concern yourself only with that which you can command. Let the Lord God concern himself with the rest.