

Dogfight Tacks Can Win Big Wars, Preaches Pilot Turned Tactician

By Michael Getler
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Among fighter pilots, "getting inside" of an opponent in a dogfight often means the difference between life and death. Getting inside means turning and maneuvering more quickly than the enemy so you can fix your guns on his plane before he gets a good look at you.

For 25 years, John Boyd, once a topnotch fighter pilot and now a retired Air Force colonel, has wrestled with ideas about how to make that simple-sounding concept of "getting inside" easier to carry out in the dizzying whirl of modern air warfare.

And the longer Boyd thought about it, the more he became convinced that the same fundamental strategy for winning dogfights was applicable to the broad military strategy the United States might need on the ground, at sea and in the air in any future war; namely, a combination of guerrilla warfare and blitzkrieg tactics that, through surprise and speed, throw an enemy off balance.

Today an increasing number of the nation's senior military leaders are listening to the ideas this imaginative and unconventional thinker lays out in a rough, repetitive, yet profound four-hour lecture called "Patterns of Conflict."

"It's a real tour de force," says the Army War College commandant, Maj. Gen. Jack N. Merritt, of Boyd's work. "He really is one of the most innovative and original guys I've ever had anything to do with, and he created a lot of excitement up here among strategists and historians" on the college staff. Merritt says he hopes to use part of Boyd's material in the curriculum and "we also want to get the senior leadership of the Army to hear this thing."

The top leadership of the Marine Corps has already heard Boyd's theories. Senior officers say the Marine commandant, Gen. Robert H. Barrow, has spent hours with Boyd and was "very taken with him." Marine Lt. Gen. P.X. Kelley, head of the new

U.S. rapid deployment force, also is a Boyd listener and supporter.

"An hour spent with John is of inestimable value," says Kelley. "He has become extremely well accepted by field-grade officers in the military. We need officers who think war and how to defeat the enemy."

Boyd's impact is twofold. There is interest in what he has to say. And, though he left the Air Force five years ago, there is interest in him as a commodity that many senior officers acknowledge is in too short supply these days — free-thinking officers with field experience who are also students of military history and have the inclination and the time to figure out the best way to fight and win.

"I think there are far too few people in senior military positions who literally look at history and try and see how military forces have been applied in the past to see if there is any application to now and the future," says Kelley. "John does that very well."

"Of course there are never really enough bright people," says Merritt. "But in my view, over some recent period of time and for reasons that are not altogether clear, we've not had many creative and innovative guys on strategy and doctrine."

Sen. Gary Hart (D-Colo.), another fan of Boyd, said in a Senate speech last June that "our current defense posture is not very promising in terms of the Boyd theory" of maneuver-style warfare. Hart claimed the Pentagon spent too much effort acquiring weapons and new technology while paying "little attention to how to use equipment in new and different ways."

Last month, the prestigious magazine, United States Naval Institute Proceedings, called attention to Boyd's work and its applicability to maneuvering in war at sea.

At 54, Boyd doesn't look much like a defense intellectual. He seems most comfortable in white shoes and plaid pants. But he talks like a machine-gun and does seem to suffer from a terminal case of Pentagonese, which explains why the key to his prescription for victory is to "get inside the adversary's Observation-Orientation-Decision-Action time cycle."

What this means is knocking an enemy off balance by fast, unpredictable tactics that surprise and confuse him. The idea is that by the time the ene-



By James M. Thresher — The Washington Post
Retired Air Force colonel Boyd gives military some new ideas for "getting inside."

my observes what he thinks his opponent is doing, orients himself to it, decides what to do and then takes action to do it, it will be too late. The key to victory, Boyd says, is "to generate this mismatch" by operating at a faster tempo than that of the enemy, which ultimately will cause him to make the wrong move because he

doesn't really know what is happening to him.

It is this type of thing that the Germans did brilliantly in the early blitzkrieg tactics of World War II using lightning thrusts with big armored columns around and through the weak points of static defenses such as the French Maginot Line.

But for Boyd, the light began to dawn about even broader implications for such strategy a decade later when he was a fighter pilot in Korea during the final stages of the war there.

U.S. F86 Sabrejets rolled up impressive victories against Soviet-built Mig15 fighters even though the Migs could outperform them in many of the individual maneuvers — such as sharp turns and fast climbs — that are supposed to win dogfights. When Boyd began to ponder the lopsided U.S. victories, he realized it wasn't simply a matter of better-trained pilots. Rather, it was that the Sabrejet could make the transition from one maneuver to another more quickly. The Mig pilots, therefore, consistently had to react late, fell further and further behind, eventually became disoriented and made a fatal mistake.

In the 1960s, Boyd, a self-taught aerodynamics engineer, expanded on this observation and came up with an "energy maneuverability" concept for new fighters which won him top Air Force recognition and influenced the design of today's frontline F15 and F16 fighters. At the same time, he produced a study of fighter tactics that former civilian official Pierre Sprey — who, along with Boyd, was part of a small group of maverick thinkers in the Pentagon — called the best work of its kind since that done by Germany's famous "Red Baron" of World War I, Manfred von Richthofen.

Once out of the Air Force, Boyd maneuvered his intellect from airplanes to history, and there he found his real master of mismatch. Theories laid out around 400 B.C. by Sun Tzu, the Chinese philosopher of war, form what Boyd indirectly suggests should be the basis for modern U.S. tactics.

Armies, Sun Tzu wrote, should be like water flowing downhill, seeking out the crevices and fissures, finding and attacking weaknesses rather than strengths. Since water has no constant form, he reasoned, neither should war.

Sun Tzu believed in attempting to shatter the enemy before the battle by probing its organization and troop dispositions to unmask strengths and weaknesses and then hurling strength quickly and unexpectedly against weakness. The idea was to disrupt en-

emy plans and alliances, subdue him without too much of a fight, and avoid protracted war.

Many of early history's most successful military commanders in the East, such as Genghis Kahn and Tamerlane, followed Sun Tzu's prescription. Western commanders, Boyd notes, too often are more directly concerned about winning the big battle.

For example, Napoleon as a general was most successful in his early campaigns when he used ambiguity, deception, rapid movement and surprise to defeat larger enemies. But later, as emperor, he eventually met crippling casualties and defeat when he relied increasingly on massed firepower and formations pitched against regions of strong resistance.

Boyd also is critical of the famed German strategist of the 1830s, Karl von Clausewitz, for overemphasis on the "decisive battle," which Boyd feels too often ends in a bloodbath.

Germany's greatest strategist, he believes, was World War II Gen. Erich von Manstein, an officer with the general staff. But Manstein, Boyd says, became a pain in the neck to Hitler's general staff and was transferred out of the place where he would have been best used.

Indeed, Boyd argues that loss of flexibility at the top, symbolized by the increasing rigidity of Napoleon and Hitler, is a major cause of ultimate failure. For all their innovation, he says, the Germans did not really understand grand strategy because they generated enemies faster than victories.

What emerges from Boyd's "Patterns of Conflict" is a premium on maneuverability, surprise, deception and flexibility in command. It is a combination of guerrilla tactics and the lightning-fast heavy attack of the blitzkrieg, all meant to hit an enemy where he is weak and before he can picture what is taking place.

Boyd does not specifically mention current American tactics or strategy in his presentation. He is a man of considerable circumspection from his years in the military, and he is probably content hoping that those who hear him will draw the right conclusions.

Haynes Johnson is on vacation. His column will resume upon his return.