Battle of Dara

By Captain Andrew J. Dornstadter

Each session of the Engineer Captain's Career Course (ECCC) is required to write an article analyzing a historical battle, and the best overall professional article receives the Thomas Jefferson Writing Excellence Award. This article was judged the best article of ECCC 1-09.

In the early 6th century A.D., the Eastern Roman—or Byzantine—Empire's eastern boundary was continuously tested by the Persian Empire's aggressive expansion and growing influence. Dara was a fortified city and strategically important Byzantine military post that overlooked a major route between Persia and Mesopotamia. At the Battle of Dara in June 530 A.D., 25,000 Byzantine soldiers led by Flavius Belisarius routed a Persian expeditionary force of 50,000. The Byzantine victory substantially weakened Persia's westernmost army, halting Persian efforts to mount an overwhelming offense across the eastern boundary of the Byzantine Empire and leaving Persia's western border region vulnerable to seizure. Persia was therefore forced to negotiate terms for an enduring peace, and the Byzantine Empire's integrity was preserved.[1]

The Byzantine victory was largely due to Belisarius's effective intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) and his employment of the principles of surprise and unity of command. Superior IPB helped Belisarius anticipate the Persian formations and actions and understand the effects of the terrain on a Persian attack on Dara. The Byzantine use of surprise contributed to a shocking counterattack that unbalanced the Persians and disintegrated their command and control. Finally, the unified Byzantine command structure enabled coordination and defensive flexibility to overcome Persian mass.

Phases of the Battle

The Battle of Dara can be divided into three distinct phases:

- Phase I. Initial formations and first Persian attack
- Phase II. Persian right wing attack
- Phase III. Persian left wing attack

Phase I

On the battle's first day, the two forces placed their formations. Belisarius placed archers and infantry at his army's center behind a considerable trench line, protecting their flanks with light Hun cavalry.[2] Heavy cavalry troops were placed beyond those units to the outside, commanded by leaders named Bousez and John, while Belisarius maintained a heavy cavalry reserve in the rear. The Persian formation consisted of two long lines, each of which had centrally located infantry protected on either side by mixed cavalry.[3] Following a brief correspondence between the opposing generals, Firuz—the Persian commander—sought to determine the Byzantine force's response to an attack on its left. He ordered forward his right wing cavalry, commanded by Pityaxes. The Persian right wing cavalry pushed back the Byzantine left, and Pityaxes observed the possibility that he might be flanked as his Persians achieved depth and exposed their left side. Pityaxes therefore ordered his right wing cavalry to withdraw and avoid a decisive loss.

> ***"...maintaining an unseen and uncommitted force offers a commander the opportunity to surprise an enemy through the application of unexpected combat power..."***

Modern regional map of Turkey

Observing the Persian effort against his left, Belisarius determined that the attack was the rehearsal of a likely future effort. He used this information to understand the Persians' strengths and weaknesses and their reaction to his centrally positioned Hun cavalry. Belisarius identified the Persian vulnerability to a flank attack and anticipated a stronger effort against his center on the next such attack. Therefore, he concealed a small cavalry contingent, commanded by Pharas, behind the dominant hill north of the Byzantine defense. This small force could mount a surprise attack against the Persian right's outside flank on their next attempt.

Belisarius's observation of the Persian maneuver led to conclusions that drove a new course of action (COA), demonstrating the importance of IPB. Observation of the enemy helps a commander evaluate the threat and determine threat COAs, a process that helps the commander understand and visualize the enemy's scheme of maneuver and plan friendly COAs accordingly.

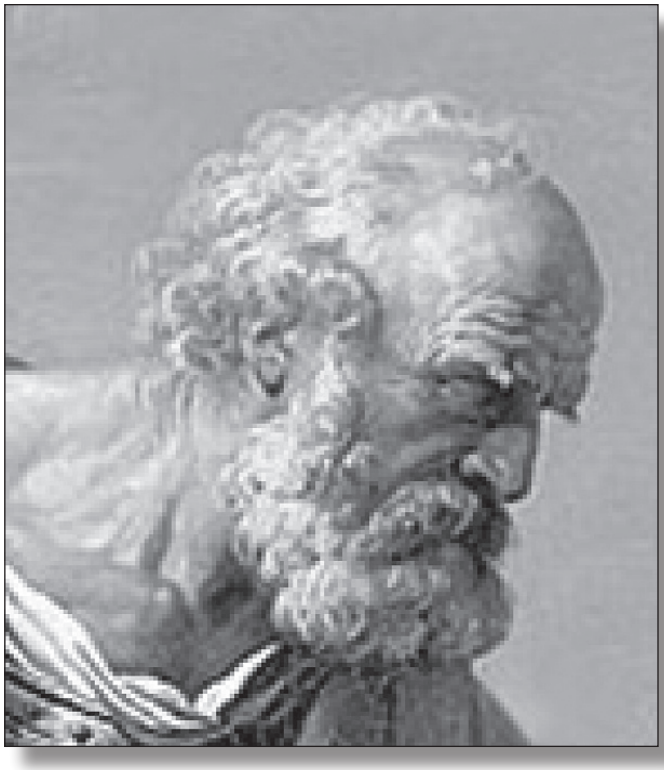
This lesson is captured in modern United States Army doctrine. Field Manual (FM) 5-0, *Army Planning and Orders Production*, defines evaluating the threat as "analyzing intelligence to determine how adversaries normally organize for combat and conduct operations under similar circumstances. Knowing enemy capabilities and vulnerabilities allows the commander … to make assumptions about the relative capabilities of friendly forces."[4] These steps of the IPB portion of mission analysis create or confirm the enemy's doctrinal and situational templates. Commanders may then use those tools to develop and select COAs that accomplish their mission.

Phase II

On the second day of the battle, Belisarius's assumption about the Persian COA was confirmed when the Persian right attacked the Byzantine left for the second time. Belisarius knew the Persians would be unprepared for counterattacks against both sides of their force, and he deployed Pharas's concealed cavalry from behind the north hill. Together, that cavalry and the centrally positioned Hun cavalry flanked both sides of the advancing Persian right, effectively enveloping that force. The Byzantine left's cavalry broke the Persian right's attack, killing roughly 3,000 Persian horsemen and foot soldiers and forcing any remaining soldiers from the Persian right to flee in disarray. This eroded Persian command and control and gave Belisarius an unopposed cavalry unit he could flexibly maneuver to assist other Byzantine units on the battlefield.

Concealing Pharas's cavalry behind the north hill deceived the Persian leadership about the composition, disposition, and strength of forces defending from the Byzantine left, so the Persian force was surprised to find forces arrayed differently on the second attack. Shocked by a double flank, the Persian right wing fell apart, leaving the larger Persian army vulnerable to attacks from the Byzantine left's flexible cavalry. This demonstrates the lesson that maintaining an unseen and uncommitted force offers commanders the opportunity to surprise an enemy through the application of unexpected combat power wherever he sees an advantage.

FM 3-0, *Operations*, lists surprise among the nine principles of war and defines it as "(striking) an enemy at a time or place or in a manner for which he is unprepared."



Detail from the 1776 painting entitled "Belisarius" by François-André Vincent. *Public domain*

It also states that surprise is "the reciprocal of security" and a "major contributor to shock," meaning that effective use of surprise can seriously degrade an enemy's security conditions and reduce the effectiveness of his command and control systems.[5]

Phase III

Also on the second day of the battle, following the Byzantine rout of the Persian right wing, Belisarius maneuvered his left wing cavalry to counter a likely Persian attack against his right. Firuz observed the failure of his attack against the Byzantine left and quickly committed a much stronger force—including the elite Immortals and units drawn from the Persian second line—to attack the Byzantine right wing cavalry commanded by John. This was effective use of shock action, and the Byzantine right initially gave way and withdrew. Belisarius responded quickly by ordering Hun cavalry from his right to attack the long Persian column's inside flank and ordered Hun cavalry from his left to maneuver around the Persian formation's rear and flank the other side.[6]

The two flanks broke the Persian force's advance, and its formation was divided in two. Baresmanes—the Persian left's commander—fell in combat, and John's withdrawn cavalry reorganized and rallied, contributing to the counterattack effort. Together, the flanking Hun cavalry and John's cavalry killed more than 5,000 Persian horsemen and foot soldiers on the Byzantine right. Between this engagement and the rout of the Persian right wing, Belisarius's forces destroyed nearly all of Firuz's cavalry, leaving only the overmatched infantry line, which was exposed and vulnerable.

The Byzantines faced a large, capable Persian force that did not hesitate to mass against their smaller army. By consolidating responsibility and leadership under a single commander, Belisarius overcame a numeric disadvantage. He could quickly and clearly communicate his orders to subordinate commanders, and he could commit resources and apply combat power without confusion or delay. Belisarius's unity of command allowed him to maneuver units where and when they were needed.

FM 3-0 defines unity of command as "(ensuring) unity of effort under one responsible commander" and also that "a single commander directs and coordinates the actions of all forces toward a common objective." [7]

Summary

The Byzantine victory at Dara reestablished the Roman tradition of military excellence on the empire's eastern boundary. Under the command of Belisarius, the Byzantines capably outmaneuvered a much larger force of highly skilled and experienced Persian warriors. The keys to the Byzantine success lay in the commander's mastery of IPB, surprise, and unity of command. Belisarius used these tools and principles to accurately predict the Persian scheme of maneuver and planned his defense accordingly, emphasizing surprise shock action and flexibility under unified effort and leadership. The outcome at Dara guaranteed the Byzantine Empire decades of relative peace along its eastern boundary, and it cemented Belisarius's place as one of the greatest tactical leaders in history.

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Endnotes

[1]John Haldon, *The Byzantine Wars*, History Press, Gloucestershire, 1 November 2008, pp. 28-29.

[2]Lieutenant Colonel Robert R. Leonhard, *Belisarius and Small Force Theory*, <*http://www.armchairgeneral.com*>, accessed 22 July 2008.

[3]Ibid.

[4]FM 5-0, *Army Planning and Orders Production*, pp. 3-17, 3-18.

[5]FM 3-0, *Operations*, p. 4-14.

[6]Simon Goodenough, *Tactical Genius in Battle*, Phaidon Press, London, 1979, p.110.

[7]FM 3-0, p. 4-14.