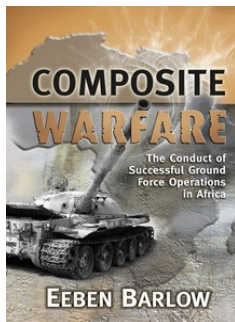


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BOOK REVIEW / BOEKBESPREKING **COMPOSITE WARFARE: THE CONDUCT OF SUCCESSFUL GROUND OPERATIONS IN AFRICA.**

Eeben Barlow, *Composite warfare: The conduct of successful ground operations in Africa*. Pinetown: 30 Degrees South Publishers, 2016. ISBN 978-1-928211-76-1. 544 pages.

This book constitutes lessons learned on how to engage in successful ground warfare in Africa. These lessons were painfully learned over a life time of war by the former South African Defence Force (SADF) Special Forces covert operator turned private military contractor, Eben Barlow. Barlow has experienced war in the Far East, South America and throughout the length and breadth of the African continent.

The book provides an illuminating guide to African soldiers and policy makers on issues such as the onset of hostilities, strategy, operational design, doctrine and tactics. Whilst the focus is on military strategy, he is quite aware of the larger context in which these conflicts are played out. The opening chapter, therefore, provides a very useful overview of causes of conflict in post-colonial Africa, covering such diverse areas as poverty, issues of governance and political contestation to issues of grazing rights and identity, ranging from xenophobia to religious differences. Whilst this book focuses on the military, the author makes it clear that military strategy is but one facet of grand strategy and can only work effectively if all instruments of the state are working in tandem towards the same objectives. In other words, the military, economic and political instruments of state, including diplomacy and intelligence, all have to reinforce each other.

Given the specificity and uniqueness of the African environment, Barlow proposes that African governments adopt composite warfare which, "is a comprehensive, multi-dimensional politico-military approach to conflict and

war in which assistance, input, intelligence and support from all the Pillars of State reinforce the primary principles or fundamental battlefield truths” (p. 453). The primary elements of such composite warfare include target exploitation, intelligence, control and domination of the cyber environment, determination and maintenance of aims, prioritization of objectives, psychological attacks, offensive posture and action, surprise, speed and flexibility, domination, and manoeuvre and attrition.

On target exploitation, Barlow makes clear that all elements of the state must be focused on the enemy’s “trinity of gravity” in a coordinated fashion. This trinity of gravity refers to the hub of all power and movement in the enemy’s ranks (p. 27). All one’s energies and resources must be focused on neutralizing this central hub. In order to identify this hub correctly, intelligence is crucial; before hostilities commence, during operations to assess damage to the hub and its likely consequences, and after hostilities has ceased. The latter is important, given the stop-start nature of African conflicts where the phenomenon of “return conflicts” is all too real.

Given the sophisticated nature of modern warfare, the importance of dominating and controlling the cyber environment is absolutely crucial. Hacking the communication systems of one’s opponent can wreak havoc to their command and control; disrupting and jamming their radar systems provide one’s aerial assets with an additional advantage, whilst the manipulation of their digital channels, like social media platforms and chat rooms, can sow confusion and suspicion in enemy ranks.

The success of the composite war strategy also depends on the political and military leadership staying focused on the central objective of the campaign. Success depends on staying focused on a well-defined, vital and realistic objective. This presupposes, Barlow convincingly argues, that there has been a prioritization of objectives and sufficient resources has been secured to ensure that the objective will be achieved.

It is imperative to understand that the psychological element of warfare is an integral part of any effective military strategy. Psychological operations have two targets. Firstly, the enemy combatant and their population; it will seek to demoralise, confuse and misinform the enemy’s populace and its rank and file fighters and will ultimately aim to erode the will to resist an armed invasion or strike. The second target is one’s own populace; it will strengthen the popular resolve against the enemy, whilst accepting one’s own battlefield losses as a price they are willing to pay for the defeat of the enemy. This latter strategy, the author stresses, will only be successful where one’s own government is regarded as legitimate (something which many African governments sorely lack).

The success of composite warfare, Barlow makes clear, is dependent upon maintaining an offensive posture. Whilst defence may be a temporary posture adopted, it is only by aggressive and relentless offensive operations that one

can neutralize the enemy's "trinity of gravity" alluded to earlier. Such offensive measures will only achieve success when strategic, operational and tactical surprise is regularly used against the enemy, keeping them off-balance. Surprise is dependent on deception, secrecy and the speed and flexibility of one's forces to change tactics mid-battle. This, of course, presupposes that one's own armed forces are adequately trained and equipped to make such dramatic changes to the battle order, whilst trusting their officers unequivocally. Success in the military sphere, however, is also dependent on dominance in the economic and diplomatic spheres. It is no coincidence, therefore, that one of the most common terms in the United States' military is the notion of "full-spectrum dominance".

The success of the military offensive is also dependent on knowledge of the diverse African terrain, poor infrastructure and scattered human settlements in which the military is to be deployed. Commanders must take into consideration how climatic conditions, population and infrastructure affect terrain and, therefore, plan operations. Heavy rains, for instance, may render a wheeled force immobile. Such immobility will render the operation a failure, unless mobility can be retained, whether utilizing a pioneer force to open roads or utilizing parachute insertions behind enemy lines.

Composite Warfare is a wonderful read with superb photographs and diagrams to elucidate key points. It should be required reading in every African military academy and policy makers in the security realm would also benefit from its sage advice.