

Belisarius and Small Force Theory

(originally published in the *Armchair General*)

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Your army is thousand miles from home, outnumbered, and surrounded. The enemy, determined and capable, has developed a brilliant plan to encircle and destroy your isolated force. But near a small road marker ten miles from the capital city of Carthage, the enemy's plan unravels.

At the battle of Ad Decimum, in 533 A.D., the great Byzantine General Belisarius saw the destruction of a Vandal army that was nearly twice the size of his army. This hard fought battle only burnished Belisarius's reputation as an outstanding military leader who could achieve tremendous results with the barest of resources.

The military victories of Belisarius spanned the Eastern Roman Empire from the borders of Persia, to Vandal North Africa, to Gothic Italy. Belisarius frequently found himself outnumbered; to compensate, he employed mobile and durable cavalry, political skill, brilliant tactics, and audacity. The consequence was a string of vanquished enemies. Vandals, Persians, Goths, and a host of barbarian enemies soon learned to fear his army. A master of small force theory, Belisarius demonstrated that numbers don't count as much as resolve, toughness, and vision. His battlefield heroics demonstrate to the student of war that tactical durability is the *sine qua non* of small force theory. Small, well-trained, highly mobile units, confident in their equipment, are the components of fighting outnumbered and winning.

Victory by the smaller side in battle is not an exceptional event. **In fact, contrary to popular belief, the smaller side in battle prevails more often than the larger side.** A recent review of 481 engagements found that the smaller side won 56.5 percent of the contests. Only 36.4 percent of the time did the larger side win, while in the remaining seven percent of battles, the sides fielded roughly equal numbers. Historians, such as Colonel Trevor N. Dupuy, present a different opinion: "...[T]he numerically superior side has won perhaps sixty percent of the recorded battles of history. Moreover, if just

the defensive posture multiplier is considered, the numerically superior side has won about eighty percent of the battles of history.”

I believe this statement to be false. Factors other than numbers intrude into the calculus of battle, so that Marshal Saxe’s famous dictum is often true: “Multitudes serve only to perplex and embarrass.” **In the end, leadership, mobility, firepower, and tactical durability usually win the day.**

Belisarius routinely fought while outnumbered and prevailed in all but one major battle, Callinicum, in which the Persians defeated, but did not destroy, his army. The great Byzantine general’s first victory came along the frontier between the Eastern Roman Empire and Persia, near the fortified town of Dara. Recently promoted to command by the Emperor Justinian, Belisarius faced a difficult task. The Persians desired to take the Roman town and destroy its fortifications, and to that end, forty thousand well-trained troops, including the infamous “Immortals,” advanced to do battle with the Romans. Belisarius had only twenty-five thousand soldiers, and was thus considerably outnumbered, but the two sides had roughly equal numbers of heavy cavalry – the decisive arm of that age. The *cataphractoi* were armored cavalry who could fight with the traditional lance for shock action, but who were also skilled with the bow. Thus the cataphracts were mobile, well protected, and lethal both in missile combat and shock action. Compared to them, the infantry of the day were almost a liability. Belisarius’ battles saw little use of the infantry except as bowmen and as a base around which the fast-moving cataphracts could maneuver. He considered the foot soldiers to be “half-trained rustics, only good for trench work and long shooting.”

As the Persians approached Dara, Belisarius ordered his troops into a standard formation: infantry massed in the center and held back with flanks protected, and the cavalry forward on both wings. The Persians, therefore, could not attack the Roman infantry without first fighting the heavy cavalry. Belisarius and his guards remained behind the infantry in the center. The general also placed small detachments of Hunnish cavalry to cover the gaps between the infantry and the heavy cavalry. In addition, he placed a detachment of cavalry behind a hill on the Roman left flank, hidden until the opportune moment. Finally, the Romans had dug a trench all along their front, although historians vary widely in the efficacy of this rudimentary obstacle.

The Byzantine cataphract was the mounted successor of the Roman legionary.

In response to this disposition, the Persians, commanded by Perozes, advanced in two lines, each with a mixture of cavalry and infantry. The first day of battle featured some skirmishing and an individual combat between a Roman gymnast and two Persian soldiers, whom the Roman slew in succession. Around noon on the second day, the Persians initiated an exchange of arrows, but the winds favored the Roman side. Clearly at a disadvantage in the missile contest, the Persians began to advance against the Roman left flank. As the Roman heavy cavalry began to fall back under the weight of the blow, Belisarius launched some of the Hunnish cavalry, who encircled the attacking Persians and threw the attackers into disarray.

The Persians next attempted to defeat the Roman right flank. The dreaded Immortals attacked and drove the Roman cataphracts back toward the gates of Dara. In their advance, the Persian cavalry became separated from their own lines and soon ran into the Roman infantry, with whom they engaged in a volley of arrows. Once the Persian main attack had slowed and was distracted by the missile contest, Belisarius launched his Hunnish cavalry (some of which had been hastily recalled from the concluded action on the left) to encircle and break the Persian attackers. As the Persians drew off in disarray, Belisarius pooled his remaining cavalry and assaulted the now exposed flank of the Persian main line. The infantry there broke immediately, and a rout ensued. By the end of the day the Persians had withdrawn their army.

The Battle of Dara constituted a pattern that Belisarius used repeatedly against the Persians, the Vandals, and the Goths. In 533 Justinian put Belisarius in command of an ambitious expedition to North Africa to defeat the Vandals there and reclaim the province for the Empire. In a campaign of some three months, Belisarius fought two major battles – winning both, though outnumbered – and permanently destroyed Vandal power in North Africa. Two years later, Justinian sent him to Italy to wrest the original Roman homeland from the Goths. **With a mere eight thousand-strong army, Belisarius proceeded to take city after city in Sicily and Italy – at times through negotiation, at other times through ruses. Without fighting a single major engagement, Belisarius**

took both Naples and Rome. Before being recalled by a jealous Justinian, Belisarius broke the power of the Gothic regime, although the war in Italy would continue for years to come.

Upon his return to Constantinople, Belisarius was given command of another Roman army, and sent back to the Persian frontier where he successfully fended off renewed attacks. When another Gothic leader, Totila, reinvigorated the Goths in Italy, Belisarius returned to Italy and fought a mobile but indecisive campaign against him. Deprived of enough troops to win a lasting victory, by an emperor who mistrusted his loyal general, Belisarius was eventually recalled to the capital again. Finally, in 558, when a Hunnish tribe invaded Thrace and threatened Constantinople, the old general was once again summoned from retirement and placed in command of the defense. Outnumbered again, Belisarius combined ruse with selected counterattacks to bluff and demoralize the attackers. With this last victory under his belt, Belisarius retired. Plagued by the conspiratorial politics of the capital, he was arrested, but later acquitted of plotting against Justinian. He died shortly afterward, only eight months before the death of his emperor.

It would be in keeping with modern theory to suggest that Belisarius won his many victories despite enemy numbers because of his use of combined arms, but such is not the case. The early Middle Ages saw the ascendancy of heavy cavalry as the dominant arm. Infantry, which lacked mobility and firepower lethal enough to threaten heavily armored cavalry, were not useful except in ancillary duties and as a base for maneuver. Artillery was virtually nonexistent, except for siege operations. Thus it was a single arm, the heavy cavalry, which delivered the succession of victories to Belisarius. Historians have often pointed to the conspicuous advantages of the cataphracts – their mobility, their lethality with the bow, and their awesome shock attacks with the lance – but there is one factor that commentators have largely ignored but which was **the true key to fighting outnumbered and winning: tactical durability.**

The overriding reason that Belisarius won his victories at Ad Decimum, Dara, and Tricameron was that when hard pressed, *his cavalry formations did not break*. Their durability in battle sprung from strong armor and good training. The Roman cataphract had confidence in his personal protection and in the strength of his fellow horsemen. As

a result, he could endure the terrors of battle long enough to bring about a collapse in the enemy's ranks. Belisarius understood the need for durability as a means to gaining time to out-manuever the enemy. He deliberately kept the infantry out of the main fight, not only because they had little to contribute, but also so that the enemy could not attack and break them. Instead, the enemy's attacks pushed against, but did not shatter, the Roman heavy cavalry. Once the enemy attack was spent, Belisarius would counterattack into the enemy's rear.

The tactical durability of Belisarius' heavy cavalry frequently proved to be the final ingredient of victory. Unafraid of entering into battle when outnumbered, Belisarius maximized the fighting ability of his formations to win.