



HFM 035 – Hannibal of Carthage and the Pincher Move: The Hardest Military Maneuver in History

Michael Rank: This is the History in Five Minutes Podcast, the #1 podcast for learning about anything in history in no time at all! I'm your host, Michael Rank.

Today's topic is Hannibal of Carthage and the Pincher Move: The Hardest Military Maneuver in History.

Today, we're going to talk about a military maneuver that's sort of the holy grail among generals and military historians. This move was executed by Hannibal at the Battle of Cannae in 216 BC. It's considered as one of the greatest battlefield maneuvers in history and is cited as the first successful use of the pincher move to have been recorded in detail by the Greek historian, Polybius. The pincher move or the double envelopment is a complex military maneuver. How it works is the flanks of the enemy are attacked simultaneously in a pinching move after the opponent has advanced towards the center of the army which is responding by moving its outside forces to the enemy's flanks in order to surround it.

Where it gets complicated is at the same time, a second layer of pinchers attack the enemy's more extreme flanks so as to prevent any attempts to reinforce the target unit and it also prevents the enemy's escape. Because Hannibal was able to pull this off successfully, historians say he ranks among the greatest military commanders in history. Historian, Barry Strauss, set out to determine him as this in his 2013 book, *Master of Command: Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, and the Genius of Leadership*. Here, he says that Hannibal may not have been able to martial and direct his armies and he may not have been the best in transferring his military victories in the political power since he ultimately lost the Second Punic War against the Romans, but he was a genius when it came to using his forces for optimal strategic effect. So, you could say by a lot of people's standard that he was history's most brilliant battlefield tactician.

Let me give you a little background on how Hannibal used this move against the Roman Army. During the Second Punic War, Hannibal was running across Italy, ravaging the Roman countryside. He was pitted against Roman general Fabius. Fabius' strategy was a war of attrition, meaning that he knew he couldn't defeat Hannibal in the battlefield so he kept withdrawing across Italy and made sure that villagers in the countryside didn't offer Hannibal's army's resources. Because Hannibal didn't have good supply lines back to Carthage, eventually he would have to give up his campaign.

Although Roman senators supported Fabius' strategy, but officers and soldiers considered it unbecoming of an army accustomed to crushing its enemies on the battlefield. They were infuriated that Hannibal plundered Italy unopposed. Marcus Minucius Rufus, a political enemy of Fabius, was quoted as saying, "Did we come here to see our allies butchered and their property burned as a spectacle to be enjoyed?" So in 216 BC, the Roman senate replaced him with Consuls Gaius Terentius Varro and Lucius Aemilius Paullus and rose up an enormous army of 50,000 to 80,000 men to crush Hannibal once and for all. They readied for battle at Cannae along the Aufidus River. The plan was to attack with a strong tight infantry at the center which was flanked by the cavalry. Hannibal set up his army with light infantry flanked by experienced infantry and cavalry.



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When the battle began, the Carthage forces surged forward, pushing back the Roman troops in what looked like a crescent. The cavalry on the left flank made quick work at the enemies and swung around the rear of the Romans to assist their counterparts on the right flank. Hannibal then had his central infantry retreat slowly while those on the outside held their ground to strew in the core of the Roman infantry. And upon Hannibal's order, they surged along with the flanking cavalry to strike directly at them. The Romans were surrounded. They couldn't move and had no means of retreat. Hannibal had severed their Achilles tendon. Despite having inferior numbers, he obliterated their forces. Over 50,000 Roman troops were killed and 5,000 taken prisoner. Among the dead were three consuls, the casters, and 80 out of the Roman republic's 300 senators.

The victory was so extreme that it topped off what in 20 months were Hannibal's work in which he defeated the equivalent of eight consular armies which is 16 legions plus an equal number of allies. Rome had lost one-fifth of its entire population of male citizens over 17 years of age. In fact, the victory was so strong that much of Southern Italy joined Hannibal's cause and swore allegiance to Carthage. Eventually, he lost it when Hannibal ran out of resources and had to return home, but a lot of people think this is the high point for Carthage's side of the Second Punic War.

The reason why this is such an extremely hard military maneuver to execute is that the double pincher requires extreme discipline of the cavalry forces not to retreat in fear since they're facing down an infantry that's oftentimes larger than them. Also, it's one thing to do a pincher move and attack a flank but to have a double pincher move and orchestrate the first attack, the feigned retreat, and the second attack is very difficult and requires perfect knowledge of the environment. Since the terrain isn't appropriate or the enemy can set themselves up so they're not open to a direct attack by cavalry forces, then it's almost impossible to execute. There are so many things that can go wrong with it that it hasn't been done very many times in history.

In fact, the second time it was done successfully was almost a thousand years later by Khalid ibn al-Walid, the first major powerful military commander as Islam spread and the person responsible for basically destroying the Persian Empire and removing the Byzantines from Syria. He was known as the Sword of Islam and he used the double pincher at the battle of Wallachia in May 633. Here, he faced down a Persian army and its Arab allies at least three times the size of his own army. Although he used the double envelopment maneuver as well, many historians believe that he came up with this independent of Hannibal since he probably wasn't familiar with the Roman military tradition.

The double pincher move has been used in different times in history. According to Wikipedia, it was done by Alp Arslan at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071; at the Battle of Mohacs by Suleiman, the Ottoman sultan in 1526; and by Daniel Morgan at the Battle of Cowpens in 1781 in South Carolina which is considered by many historians to be the tactical masterpiece of the American War of Independence. Another legacy that the pincher move and the Battle of Cannae represents to military generals today is the idea of a complete and total annihilation of an enemy, something that has been rarely executed successfully in modern history.



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Dwight Eisenhower when he was the supreme commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force in World War II wrote, "Every ground commander seeks the battle of annihilation. So far as conditions permit, he tries to duplicate in modern war the classic example of Cannae." So this has become a byword for a complete military success and still studied in extreme detail in military academies around the world.

In the age of guerilla warfare where we don't have standing armies but instead combat insurgents, unfortunately this move probably exists more in fantasy than it does in military tactical reality, but what Hannibal did 2000 years ago is something that tacticians still aspire to today.

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