

Reinvigorating the Army's Approach to Command and Control

Leading by Mission Command (Part 2)

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This is as good a place as any to start the war. We'll start right here.

—Brig. Gen. Theodore Roosevelt Jr.
Utah Beach, 6 June 1944

Through the chaos on the beaches of Normandy on 6 June 1944, men with white stripes on the back of their helmets were clearly visible among the most forward troops, shouting orders and leading the way. The scene was reminiscent of Gen. George Washington's order on Christmas day that every officer put white paper in their hats to distinguish themselves as they prepared to cross the ice-filled Delaware River to attack the British position at Trenton.¹ For D-Day, officers and noncommissioned officers had painted those white stripes with the intent that any soldier in the heat of battle would see leaders wherever they looked. The most senior American leader to arrive in the first wave was Brig. Gen. Theodore "Ted" Roosevelt Jr.² Once on land, Roosevelt realized his division was two thousand yards off their objective and immediately took decisive action to restore some semblance of order

and move units off the beach. His commitment to lead from the front significantly reduced confusion and prevented the Germans from defeating the first Allied landings on the beaches of Normandy.

Leading from the front is a defining characteristic of leadership in the U.S. Army. It is not limited to being the first out of the boat, the lead in the stack, or the point on patrol. Leading from the front applies in garrison and training, just as it does in war. It means being where your soldiers are—demonstrating that you are capable and willing to do what you are asking them to do. Good leaders continuously employ a philosophical approach that is adaptable and effective in every context.

In our Army, that approach is mission command. Leading by mission command requires a commitment to action, not just words. Developing competence, establishing mutual trust, and learning to operate from shared understanding does not start in the field. It starts in the unit area with clear commander's intent. It is tested and refined on operations with mission orders and risk acceptance, and it culminates in action with disciplined initiative. Successful leaders instill a culture of leadership by mission command, and their units live it every day.



In his jeep, "Rough Rider," Brig. Gen. Theodore Roosevelt Jr. moves with frontline troops 6 June 1944 away from Utah Beach in Normandy, France. He was the only general officer to accompany U.S. troops on the initial Operation Overlord landings. (Photo by Walter Scott Shinn via the U.S. Library of Congress)

single individual has a monopoly on all the best ideas or all the information necessary to make every decision. Self-confident commanders foster a culture of teamwork and unit cohesion, and they build trust and confidence in every member of the team. Self-confident and humble leaders also dedicate their personal time and energy to developing subordinate leaders' initiative and empowering their decision-making and risk acceptance. In doing so, commanders set conditions to routinely push their authority downward to enable subordinate leaders while constantly managing the combination of leader control and subordinate initiative to accomplish missions.

Leader control is fundamental to mission command. Given their inge-

They give subordinate leaders opportunity for frequent repetitions—repetitions in every context that pay dividends in combat when the plan is faltering or unforeseen opportunities arise and soldiers' lives are on the line.

So how do leaders actually employ these principles? They do so with a commitment to lead from the front and set the example. Leaders committed to mission command balance self-confidence with humility. No

nuity, instinctive can-do attitude, initiative, and bias toward action, well-trained American soldiers naturally thrive in decentralized environments. However, appropriate supervision and control are not micro-management; they are a leader's duty. Leaders adapt the amount of guidance they provide and control they exert to the specific conditions and personnel involved. This applies equally for company commanders

Mission Command Instilled in Soldiers

“ One of the bravest men that I ever saw was a fellow on top of a telegraph pole in the midst of a furious fire fight in Tunisia. I stopped and asked what the hell he was doing up there at a time like that. He answered, ‘Fixing the wire, Sir.’ I asked, ‘Isn’t that a little unhealthy right about now?’ He answered, ‘Yes Sir, but the Goddamned wire has to be fixed.’ I asked, ‘Don’t those planes strafing the road bother you?’ And he answered, ‘No, Sir, but you sure as hell do!’ Now, there was a real man. A real soldier. There was a man who devoted all he had to his duty, no matter how seemingly insignificant his duty might appear at the time, no matter how great the odds. And you should have seen those trucks on the road to Tunisia. Those drivers were magnificent. All day and all night they rolled over those son-of-a-bitching roads, never stopping, never faltering from their course, with shells bursting all around them all of the time. We got through on good old American guts. Many of those men drove for over forty consecutive hours. These men weren’t combat men, but they were soldiers with a job to do. They did it, and in one hell of a way they did it. They were part of a team. Without team effort, without them, the fight would have been lost. All of the links in the chain pulled together and the chain became unbreakable. ”

—Gen. George S. Patton Jr. extract from speech to soldiers in Great Britain, June 1944,

<http://www.pattonhq.com/speech.html>



developing platoon leaders or division commanders developing battalion commanders. A squad leader rightfully applies a greater level of control to the bravo team leader who is new to the position and the squad. That same squad leader applies a lower level of control to the alpha team leader—an experienced team leader who has many training repetitions with the squad and consistently demonstrates competence, initiative, and positive results when completing tasks. Through repetitions, the squad leader adjusts the level of control applied to accomplish missions and to build trust and confidence in the bravo team leader.

Leaders apply this same approach when employing command-and-control systems to establish adequate connectivity and situational awareness. This approach to command and control does not require continuous communication or leader interaction to accomplish missions. Well-trained units discipline their use of these systems to protect the initiative of soldiers closest to the problem. Mission command leaders avoid the temptation of unnecessarily applying increased control or “reaching down” just because they have the tools to do so. This commitment starts with commanders, but it is shared by competent subordinate leaders acting decisively to accomplish the commander’s intent.

The most effective leaders routinely enable training repetitions up to the edge of failure. They accomplish this by underwriting the well-intentioned mistakes of subordinate leaders to promote learning and build competence for future training repetitions and readi-

ness for combat. It is the leader’s objective to adjust the level of control

exerted to the lowest level to accomplish missions and maximize the natural strengths of the American soldier and their subordinate leaders.

Of the seven principles that underpin the Army’s leadership approach to command and control, one deserves further examination—risk acceptance. Leaders’ willingness to accept risk is fundamental to mission command. A common fear regarding risk acceptance is that a leader will be criticized or censured if the result of their acceptance of risk and employment of initiative comes up short. For our mission command approach to work, leaders must encourage subordinate leaders to use their initiative to achieve the commander’s intent and to measure and accept risk when doing so.

In 1776, had Washington and his forces failed in crossing the Delaware River or at the Battle of Trenton, it would likely have accelerated the end of the Continental Army. However, their story would still serve as a good example for initiative and risk acceptance because all of the options were high risk. Despite a string of defeats, Washington saw an opportunity to gain a strategic advantage and disrupt British attempts to secure New Jersey. His new plan exploited the opportunities of surprise and enemy overconfidence. His choices were stark: (1) continue to march a weak and demoralized army and hope for a better opportunity, (2) cross the Delaware River and seize a strategic advantage, or (3) cross the Delaware River

Previous page: Gen. George S. Patton Jr. provides guidance to subordinate commanders during the military campaign for Sicily in 1943. (Photo courtesy of Foy S. McNaughton, *McNaughton Newspapers*)

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commanding general of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, has led soldiers from the company to corps level and deployed in support of six major combat operations. His previous assignment was commanding general, Combined Joint Task Force—Operation Inherent Resolve and XVIII Airborne Corps.

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Battle of Trenton (July 1975), painting, by Hugh Charles McBarron Jr. The painting depicts Gen. George Washington leading American revolutionary forces 25 December 1776 in a surprise attack against a Hessian mercenary garrison at Trenton, New Jersey. (Image courtesy of the U.S. Army Center of Military History)

and fail. In this case, marching away to await a better opportunity would have likely guaranteed a dismal end to the Revolutionary War. By accepting risk to gain an advantage over the adversary, Washington regained the initiative, boosted American morale, and began setting conditions for victory that would come almost five years later. Accepting risk requires a mindset that does not start on the battlefield. It is critical for commanders to seek opportunities to accept risk in both garrison and training. It is only then that you can practice risk acceptance and build it into the culture of your organization.

As we laid out in the first article of this series (*Military Review*, May-June 2019), the mission command approach has not yet taken root deeply enough in our Army's culture. Reinvigorating mission command by continuing to adapt leader development is one essential step. Leaders are personally responsible for their own self-development and for developing their subordinates, both directly and indirectly. Leaders read and study to expand their knowledge and prepare themselves for new operational environments

and future leadership opportunities. Self-development also improves the leaders' self-awareness and interpersonal skills necessary to establish developmental relationships with their subordinates. Direct leadership development is a continuous process that includes schooling, assignments, specific training opportunities (i.e., situational training exercises), coaching, and counseling. Indirect leadership development includes fostering a culture that promotes open dialog, critical thinking, initiative, risk taking, learning from failure, and leading by example.

Everything a leader does achieves two things—accomplishes the task at hand and provides an example for others. In that context, Dwight D. Eisenhower and George

S. Patton Jr., as company- and field-grade officers during the interwar years, frequently gathered in the evenings to discuss battle problems and solutions over drinks—vignettes we would call tactical decision games today. These sessions provided them and their peers with experiential learning repetitions and prepared them to execute their responsibility to develop their subordinates.

In 1962, the Army's Infantry School published a booklet of vignettes called *Basic Problems in Small-Unit Leadership*. Later, in 1975, Maj. Gen. Howard Stone, then commanding general of the 9th Infantry Division, commissioned a booklet of leadership development vignettes called *What Now, Lieutenant?* Both of these booklets served as great guides for direct leader development. They were easy to read and inexpensive, and yet highly effective tools for small-unit leaders to gain decision-making repetitions with problems similar to those they would likely encounter in garrison, training, or combat. These approaches remain relevant today.

Also, there is no shortage of historical or fictional vignettes to drive leadership development discussions. For example, the Army's Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) maintains a growing collection of tactical, moral, and ethical vignettes relevant to today and the future fight. The study of military history can also further a leader's ability to "what if" their way through military problems and expand their appreciation for decision-making and solutions. One example of a historical case study for such a purpose is *Experience Gained in Combat Against Soviet Infantry* (see page 8 for links to the four items discussed above).

Mission command is the Army's approach to command and control of Army forces whether in garrison, during training, or while deployed for operations around the world. Its principles of competence, mutual trust, mission orders, commander's intent, shared understanding, disciplined initiative, and risk acceptance require judgment in application in each specific context. Good leaders practice mission command daily, continuously applying its principles during everything their units do in order to maximize the repetitions essential for making the principles second nature to everyone on the team. They balance self-confidence and humility to develop and empower subordinates' decision-making and initiative to accomplish the commander's intent. They foster a willingness to accept risk to gain an advantage over the enemy and accomplish the mission. At every echelon, leading by mission command requires a significant investment of leader's time and self-study to develop themselves and their subordinates.

Mission command is the only way to lead a winning Army. All of us have the professional responsibility to reinvigorate this approach now, or the Army will not be ready to fight the way we must to win the next first battle. ■

The next part of this article series will focus on training for mission command.

Military Review thanks Russell "Rusty" Rafferty, Reference Librarian, Classified Services, Ike Skelton Combined Arms Research Library, Fort Leavenworth for his special efforts to find and make available the three training booklets referenced on page 8 that are discussed in the text of this article.

Notes

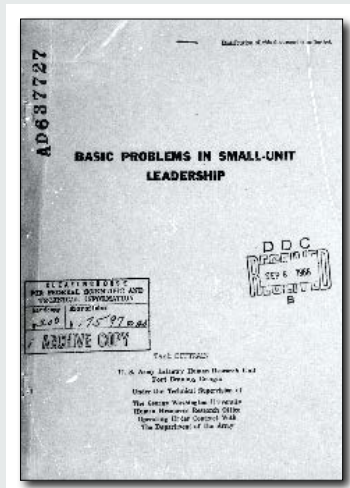
Epigraph. William C. Meadows, *The Comanche Code Talkers of World War II* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004), 141. There are different versions of the reputed quote by Brig. Gen. Theodore Roosevelt Jr. as he conferred with his staff and commanders regarding what to do after U.S. forces had landed at the wrong location on Utah Beach. The one quoted here was provided by an eye-witness present at the meeting, Comanche Code Talker Larry Saupitty, the driver-radio operator for Roosevelt.

1. David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 208.

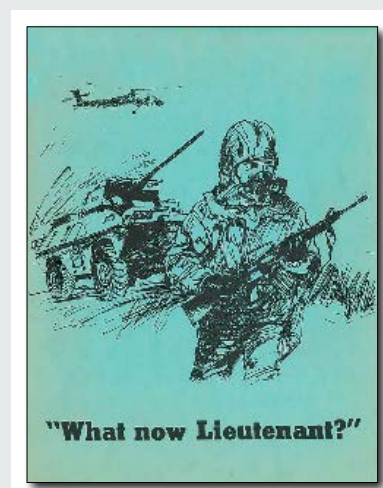
2. Center of Military History (CMH), *Utah Beach to Cherbourg (6-27 June 1944)* (1948; repr., Washington, DC: CMH, 1990), 45-47, accessed 20 May 2019, https://history.army.mil/html/books/100/100-12/CMH_Pub_100-12.pdf; William M. Hammond, *Normandy: The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II* (Washington, DC: CMH, 1994), 27-28, accessed 20 May 2019, https://history.army.mil/html/books/072/72-18/CMH_Pub_72-18.pdf.

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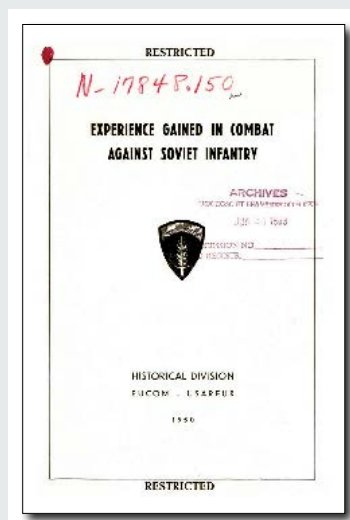
REFERENCED MATERIAL



Republished in 1965 (originally published in 1962), *Basic Problems in Small-Unit Leadership* by T. O. Jacobs may be found at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Online-Publications/New-Extended-Battlefield/#small-unit>.



Published in 1975, *What now Lieutenant?* was commissioned by Maj. Gen. Howard F. Stone and may be found at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Online-Publications/New-Extended-Battlefield/#what-now>.



Published in 1950, *Experience Gained in Combat Against Soviet Infantry* by the Historical Division of U.S. European Command and U.S. Army Europe provides historical vignettes describing combat against Soviet soldiers during World War II. To view this document, visit <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Online-Publications/New-Extended-Battlefield/#experience>.



To view the Center for Army Lessons Learned website, visit <https://usacac.army.mil/organizations/mccoe/call>.