

# Reinvigorating the Army's Approach to Mission Command

## It's Okay to Run with Scissors (Part 1)

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*Commanders make time for the things they and their seniors deem important. If developing the kind of leaders, soldiers and units that win in conditions of combat is not important, if commanders cannot find the time ... then perhaps we ought to reevaluate our priorities.*

—Lt. Gen. James M. Dubik

**T**he mission command philosophy is the U.S. Army's approach to command and control. It empowers subordinate decision-making and decentralized execution, using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative in accomplishment of the commander's intent. On this score, there is good news and bad news. The bad news is many in our Army find the idea of mission command confusing or insincere. For some, there is a significant difference between what mission command should be versus what actually happens. Over the past decade, leaders at various levels routinely cited their personal experience in garrison, during field training, and while operationally deployed as at odds with our mission command philosophy.

The good news is leaders at every level, from warfighters to doctrine writers and squad leaders up to general officers, are talking about mission command. We are

currently engaged in a much-needed professional dialogue to get it right. Now is the time to reinvigorate our approach to mission command by evolving our doctrine, adapting leader development, and refining our training. *It must be clear and convincing that the Army's approach to command and control is mission command—as it is the only approach to leading a winning Army.*

### Foundation

*An order should not trespass on the province of the subordinate. It should contain everything, which is beyond the independent authority of the subordinate, but nothing more.... It should lay stress upon the object to be attained, and leave open the means to be employed.*

—Field Service Regulations, U.S. Army, 1905<sup>1</sup>

The approach of mission command builds off a deep foundation, tracing back across two centuries of U.S. Army history. From George Washington's clear orders and risk acceptance in crossing the Delaware on Christmas day in 1776 to Ulysses S. Grant's simple guidance to William T. Sherman for the 1864 campaign, this approach exemplifies the principles of using mission-type orders and providing clear commander's intent to guide our subordinates in exercising disciplined initiative.<sup>2</sup>



U.S. tanks cross the Ludendorff Bridge 7 March 1945 at Remagen, Germany. The bridge was prepared for demolition but was still intact when the 27th Armored Infantry Battalion arrived at its location. Recognizing the importance of the bridge, battalion leaders acted on their own initiative to change their mission and seize it ten minutes before it was scheduled to be blown up by retreating German forces, ultimately enabling six divisions to cross the bridge and continue the attack before it collapsed on 17 March. (Photo by 12/Alamy Stock Photo)

Senior Army leaders from President Grant to President Dwight Eisenhower and Gen. Matthew Ridgway to Gen. David Perkins serve as examples of adeptly applying mission command. However, this approach does not just apply to generals. Take the exhausted and understrength 27th Armored Infantry Battalion as an example. Approaching the Rhine River in 1945, the Allied armies expected to conduct deliberate, and likely costly, assault river crossings under fire, as all bridges were presumed destroyed. Upon discovering the bridge at Remagen, Germany, intact and recognizing the opportunity to significantly accelerate the entire Allied advance, American leaders in the 27th changed their assigned mission, assuming significant risk to seize the initiative and secure a bridgehead on the eastern bank of the Rhine from German forces. In short, American leaders at the tactical level recognized an operational, even strategic, opportunity and seized it. This was made possible by a shared

understanding of the commander's intent and leaders who were empowered and trusted at all levels. Nazi leadership surrendered two months later.

The 27th Armored Infantry Battalion demonstrated the natural strengths of the American soldier—our can-do attitude, initiative, and bias toward action and innovation. These strengths are deeply rooted in our culture and the American spirit. Any approach to leading American soldiers must cultivate and leverage these traits.

## Challenges

*We preach mission command, but we don't necessarily practice it on a day-to-day basis in everything we do.... If we're going to have to operate like that in warfare, we have to train as we're going to fight. We have to live and operate like that on a day-to-day basis, even on daily administrative tasks you have to do in a unit area.*

—Gen. Mark Milley, Chief of Staff of the Army<sup>3</sup>

While the idea of mission command has been with us for generations, the term “mission command” first came into our Army doctrine in 2003 and underwent a significant revision in 2011. Some find the development of Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0 and Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-0 (both titled *Mission Command*) and the context of their subsequent implementation as sources of confusion within our Army. We see four central challenges.

First, those deployed to support counterinsurgency and security force assistance missions in Iraq or Afghanistan found increasingly restrictive and regulated conditions driven by the need to transition the fight to host-nation partner forces. As a result, home-station and pre-mission training often had a narrow focus. The Army also directed long lists of mandatory training, much of which had little to do with warfighting or combat readiness, a practice that robbed subordinate leaders of the opportunity to lead and promote trust and confidence. Not surprisingly, our units, leaders, and soldiers became accustomed to relatively less autonomy and fewer opportunities to make choices—to exercise initiative.

Second, as the Army implemented its new mission command doctrine, more units found themselves at home station with tighter budgets and a renewed emphasis on readiness for unified land operations. In order to make the most efficient use of constrained resources, many leaders at home station increased control to precisely align and sequence their limited resources to meet expanded training

and readiness requirements. These well-intentioned efforts

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contributed to a garrison bureaucracy often at odds with our Army’s mission command doctrine. Many leaders understandably questioned the sincerity of our mission command principles.

Third, while mission command excels in the uncertainty of combat, it does so with the assumption leaders and soldiers are tactically and technically competent. Achieving competency requires training, education, and self-development. To enable the Army’s transition from counterinsurgency and security force assistance to large-scale ground combat operations, the Army introduced the *decisive action training environment* to drive scenarios at our combat training centers and home-station training. Our readiness models transitioned from Force Generation to Sustained Readiness and, most recently, the Army published its new warfighting concept *The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028*. Collectively, these changes placed increased demands on units, leaders, and soldiers to develop new or different competencies often accomplished through centralized training processes. Increased centralization contributed additional evidence to some that the Army was not serious about mission command.

Fourth is the issue of clarity. While implemented with the best of intentions, many leaders indicate the current version of Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-0 is a source of confusion. The intent was to emphasize mission command as the central philosophy behind our approach to command and control. In actuality, it muddied what were relatively clear waters. The 2012 publication removed the term “command and control” from the Army lexicon and replaced it with the term “mission command” in every context. Mission command became the practical synonym for command and control, a

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warfighting function, a system of systems, and a philosophy providing authority and direction to Army forces. We used the same words to mean too many different things and confusion resulted. The uniqueness and importance of our approach to command and control was lost.



## Doctrine

*Mission command is the Army's approach to command and control that empowers subordinate decision-making and decentralized execution appropriate to the situation.*

—ADP 6-0, “Mission Command” (forthcoming)<sup>4</sup>

Our five-meter target is this issue of clarity. If we cannot clearly articulate our doctrine—our starting point—then how can we expect to overcome any of the other challenges? To fix this, the Army will update its doctrine in 2019 in a revised ADP 6-0, “Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces.”

The revised ADP 6-0 clarifies both the logic and the language we use. In this revision, mission command is the Army's approach to command and control, resting on seven principles: competence, trust, shared understanding, mission orders, commander's intent, disciplined initiative, and risk acceptance. Mission command systems are now command-and-control systems.

Command and control of lethal weapons and violent action remain a fundamental requirement of combat. They require both the *art* of command

and the *science* of control. The art of command is the exercise of leadership and decision-making to accomplish the mission on balance with the soldier's welfare, morale, and discipline. The science of control is the systems and procedures used by the commander to direct accomplishment of the mission. To blend both art and science, we need a leadership approach—ours is mission command.

At its heart, the Army's approach to mission command is about applying the appropriate level of control so that, given the circumstances and information available, leaders make the best possible decision at the right level and at the right time. Achieving this

Bradley fighting vehicle turret gunner Sgt. Ramel Colclough fires at Iraqi positions with his 25 mm cannon as his vehicle breaches an obstacle during the April 2003 push to capture what would become the “Green Zone” portion of Baghdad in an action that became known as a “thunder run.” This mission exemplified mission command; brigade commander Col. David Perkins relayed the mission to his subordinates in concise battle orders, confident that his soldiers could react to the chaos of urban fighting and execute their battle drills better than the enemy. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

requires the constant cultivation of a climate and culture conducive to mission type orders, commander's intent, and disciplined initiative. This takes time, training, and deliberate efforts by commanders to build trust and confidence in subordinate leaders. It also means recognizing every opportunity to apply the approach, whether in garrison or in the field, is

Recent dialogue with combat training center commanders highlights that rotational unit leaders and soldiers understand our approach to mission command but apply it inconsistently. Many of the challenges are not new. Units struggle to issue simple orders with the right level of detail and many do not plan and issue orders in accordance with the

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an opportunity to add mission command repetitions. Especially in garrison, commanders must continuously seek ways to introduce ambiguity into situations that allow subordinate leaders to make choices and provide them with the opportunity to learn from those choices. Commanders must also seek multiple repetitions to the edge of failure in training, underwriting subordinate's risk acceptance through coaching, after action reviews, and leader development.

## Way Ahead

*Since the enemy will disrupt friendly communications and plans, mission command must expand to enable initiative and dynamic cooperation across Service and other partner lines—at some risk—to allow the Joint Force to preserve the ability to continuously and rapidly integrate multi-domain capabilities despite disrupted communications.*

—TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1, *The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028*<sup>5</sup>

For decades, we have operated with relative freedom of action against nonstate adversaries. Today, we face peer adversaries capable of disrupting our networks and jamming and spoofing our command-and-control systems. While technology will play an important role in shaping how we fight across multiple domains, it is not the central solution. In the heat of battle, when communications fail and the plan unravels, soldier solutions and actions powered by mission command and its principles will carry the day.

one-third/two-thirds rule. Communicating a clear commander's intent to subordinate units two levels down, especially to company level and below, is often not happening. Some commanders take an *I can do it all* approach rather than sharing risk up the chain of command, while others delay key decisions in the quest for more information.

Our Army must reinvigorate our approach to mission command to prevail in large-scale combat against a peer or near-peer adversary. Our culture, in garrison, training, or combat, must reflect the principles of mission command. Our orders must be clear and simple enough to be executed without continuous communication or leader interaction, and issued rapidly. Our leaders at all levels must understand their personal responsibility to develop their subordinates sufficiently to ensure the approach to mission command delivers the greatest benefit.

At the end of the day, our approach to mission command is just good leadership. Our success as an Army depends upon our ability to build leaders at all levels who recognize when their plan is failing or when the enemy has presented an opportunity. They must be smart enough to come up with a plan that will work and have the guts and trust to execute—even if out of communications with higher headquarters. To do this, we need leaders—all of them—from our team and squad leaders up to our Army's most senior leaders, to be personally committed to reinvigorating our mission command culture.

This approach is the only way to lead a winning Army. ■

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## Notes

**Epigraph.** James M. Dubik, "Decentralized Command: Translating Theory into Practice," *Military Review* 72, no. 6 (June 1992): 38.

1. U.S. Army General Staff, *Field Service Regulations, U.S. Army*, document no. 241 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1905 [obsolete]), 29–30.

2. Dave Richard Palmer, *George Washington's Military Genius* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2012), 143–49. On 25 December 1776, Gen. George Washington elected to attack Trenton, New Jersey, by crossing the Delaware River. He did so while accepting significant risk. His army had been largely demoralized and battered—failing to take Trenton would have likely been the end of the Continental army. However, by taking Trenton, Washington saw an opportunity to wedge the British out of New Jersey and gain a key strategic victory.

William T. Sherman and James G. Blaine, *Memoirs of Gen. W.T. Sherman, Written by Himself* (New York: Charles L. Webster, 1891), 26. In a letter dated 4 April 1864, Grant proposed to Sherman that he "move against Johnston's army, to break it up, and to get into the interior of the enemy's country as far as you can, inflicting all the damage you can against their war resources."

3. David Barno and Nora Bensahel, "Three Things the Army Chief of Staff Wants You to Know," *War on the Rocks*, 23 May 2017, accessed 25 March 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/05/three-things-the-army-chief-of-staff-wants-you-to-know/>.

4. Army Doctrine Publication 6-0, "Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces" (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, forthcoming).

5. U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Pamphlet 525-3-1, *The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028* (Fort Eustis, VA: TRADOC, 6 December 2018), 21.