



Soldiers with the 2nd Battalion, 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division conduct building clearing operations 6 March 2013 at range 68, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, during Joint Operational Access Exercise (JOAX) 13-02. A JOAX is designed to enhance cohesiveness between U.S. Army, Air Force, and allied personnel, allowing the services an opportunity to properly execute large-scale heavy equipment and troop movement. The infamous Leeroy Jenkins video is exemplary of the tension that arises between the need for planning and latitude for action in such operations. (Photo by Sgt. Diandra J. Harrell, U.S. Army)

A Response to Leeroy Jenkins and Mission Command

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On 16 May 2017 the Army University Press published [an article written by Maj. Robert Phillipson](#) in which he presents a case for World of Warcraft legend Leeroy Jenkins as a model of mission command.¹ Phillipson makes compelling points throughout his piece that can and should be discussed in OPDs, NCOPDs, and ROTC military science classes this fall.² This is a welcome event, because getting the Army's mission command philosophy to the lowest echelons of the force and into the minds of future junior leaders is critical to the Army's ongoing ability to maintain its edge. We often use characters from texts, movies, and plays (Anton Myrer's *Once an Eagle*, Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*, and Shakespeare's *Henry V* come to mind) to discuss larger principles.³ Leeroy Jenkins is no different; he is an ideal character to examine in any discussion of mission command. It is my intent to extend the discussion a bit further and consider the Leeroy Jenkins take on mission command from other angles. I hope to add to Maj. Phillipson's conversation, not detract from it.

As Phillipson offers, most of us who have served on staffs or in command have slogged through "fifteen-page base orders with pages of tasks to subordinate units, coordinating instructions, and detailed commander's intents."⁴ For those required to write or carry out such orders—particularly in combat environments—navigating the specifics can be difficult at best. Many leaders and staff officers would love to "go all Leeroy Jenkins and just do this thing." Phillipson expands his point by stating that in future conflicts "organizations should not expect to enjoy the luxury of long targeting cycles and the time to make 100 percent informed decisions."⁵ I think that there would be nearly 100 percent agreement with that assessment.

A case can be made, however, that we have already taken steps towards a de facto Leeroy Jenkins approach to mission command. Over the last several years, how many of those turgid operations orders have been distilled to a one-slide concept of operations out of time-constrained necessity? Is it possible to understand the depth and breadth of an operation from a single page? Is it possible to create shared understanding with such little information about the situation and environment? It is reasonable to think that massive orders can be less than helpful at the lowest echelons of command, but is a sound bite of an operations order more or less

helpful? How much detailed information is required to cross the threshold of shared understanding required for the best application of mission command?⁶

In 2009, four years after the Leeroy Jenkins video was released, then Army Capt. Robert Chamberlain wrote an article published in *Armed Forces Journal* titled "[Let's Do This: Leeroy Jenkins and the American Way of Advising](#)."⁷ Chamberlain makes the case that the Leeroy Jenkins way of doing things was inadequate for the mission of advising and assisting the Iraqi security forces. Much of that work was done at the lowest tactical echelons; company-level leaders and line-unit soldiers were deeply involved in this mission. It was an environment seemingly made for disciplined initiative and prudent risk. Chamberlain, however, believed that the Leeroy Jenkins model hindered shared understanding:

The situation in Iraq is changing rapidly, and soon, the coalition presence will consist almost entirely of advise-and-assist brigades devoted to enhancing the capabilities of the Iraqi Security Forces and contributing to a safe and stable Iraq. *This presents a unique opportunity to re-evaluate and improve the organizational techniques American forces employ in their advisory effort—to put a stop to the ad hoc, idiosyncratic, Leeroy Jenkins philosophy of advising and replace it with a coherent institutional approach* [emphasis added].⁸

The planning at the beginning of the Leeroy Jenkins video can be seen as a lesson on combined arms maneuver planning. The discussion includes making a bypass (engineers), intimidating shouts to scatter the enemy (artillery), and calling in divine intervention (close air support). To see Leeroy as a positive example of mission command in that environment can feed a potentially damaging cultural bias toward combined arms maneuver as articulated in the 2016 U.S. Army War College Carlisle Scholars

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Study, [The Total Army](#).⁹

The study finds that "the institutional bias toward the Combined Arms Maneuver sector of the Regular Army inhibits the Total Army's ability

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to present the full range of potential options to policy makers.”¹⁰ The writers go on to say that currently, “conventional war fighting represents the pinnacle of the profession” and provides four distinct and dangerous vulnerabilities that grow from this mindset.¹¹

This mindset that privileges combat action over intellectual effort has led to the need to make a case for preserving intellectual capital in the Army against officer promotion trends that favor those who are viewed as willing to be in the fight without taking time to understand the fight or the context around the fight. A key component of the argument against intellectualism in the Army is that time spent learning—time out of the fight—is down time; time to take a knee and think, which “implies that thinking is separate from doing.”¹² This implication, if true, can be problematic when the Army is operating in an increasingly complex world and needs as much intellectual capital as it has kinetic capacity.

All military leaders envision leading a well-prepared team into battle after having identified an enemy weakness that everyone else missed. Those occasions are rare. Leeroy did not even get it right. At the end of the video he is heard saying, “At least I got chicken.”¹³ There are stories that he was not even “on the net” when the planning was being done for the ill-fated mission; that he was in the kitchen of his house making a chicken

sandwich.¹⁴ [Another video](#) recasts the Leeroy Jenkins story in a different setting that more clearly presents Leeroy’s unpreparedness for the mission.¹⁵ The story of Leeroy would end differently if he had followed standard operating procedures that he understood, had been part of the planning process, had offered up refinements based on his experience and understanding, and had conducted rehearsals. None of that happened, and the results were predictable.

Phillipson cites recent remarks by Gen. Mark A. Milley about the need for the Army to decentralize, reduce the bureaucracy, and become less risk-averse. The Army desperately needs leaders at all echelons who are willing to accept prudent risk and exercise disciplined initiative; those that even have “the willingness to disobey specific orders to achieve the intended purpose.”¹⁶ Furthermore, and precisely to Phillipson’s point, the Army’s organizational bureaucracy desperately needs to increase its flexibility in order to provide the space for young and developing leaders to see and take advantage of “a momentary window of opportunity.”¹⁷

I hope that today’s and future Army leaders look at Leeroy Jenkins as both a good and not-so-good example of mission command. By senior leaders providing junior leaders the space to “do by thinking”—through example, encouragement, and promotion—the Army will be stronger and better prepared for all future missions. ■

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Notes

1. Robert R. Phillipson, “Leeroy Jenkins and Mission Command,” Army University Press Online Exclusive article, 16 May 2017, accessed 28 June 2017, <http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2017-Online-Exclusive-Articles/Leeroy-Jenkins-and-Mission-Command/>.

2. OPDs and NCOPDs are a shorthand reference to officer and noncommissioned officer professional development classes.

3. Anton Myrer, *Once an Eagle* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002); Robert A. Heinlein, *Starship Troopers* (New York: Ace, 1987); William Shakespeare, *Henry V*.

4. Phillipson, “Leeroy Jenkins and Mission Command.”

5. Ibid.

6. Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-0, *Mission Command* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2012), 1-1.

7. Robert M. Chamberlain, “Let’s Do This! Leeroy Jenkins and the American Way of Advising,” *Armed Forces Journal*, 1 June 2017, accessed 28 June 2017, <http://armedforcesjournal.com/lets-do-this/>.

8. Ibid.

9. U.S. Army War College Carlisle Scholars Program, *Elihu Root Study: The Total Army* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 3 May 2016), accessed 27 June 2017, <https://www.army.mil/e2/c/downloads/435782.pdf>.

10. Ibid., 29.
11. Ibid.
12. Everett S. P. Spain, J. D. Mohundro, and Bernard B. Banks, "Intellectual Capital: A Case for Cultural Change," *Parameters* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 88, accessed 27 June 2017, https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/Parameters/Issues/Summer_2015/Parameters_Sum2015v45n2.pdf.
13. "Leeroy Jenkins HD 1080p," YouTube video, 2:49, from a game of World of Warcraft, a massive multiplayer online role-playing game, posted by "Jonah Jameson," 11 June 2014, accessed 30 June 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mLyOj_QD4a4.
14. Reena Khan, "'Leeroy Jenkins' Will Forever Be Known As the Video that Started All Memes," Trill! magazine website, 22 May 2017, accessed 30 June 2017, <http://www.trillmag.com/17044/internet/leeroy-jenkins-will-forever-known-video-started-memes/>.
15. "Leeroy Jenkins: Reimagined as a Short Film," YouTube video, from Worldwide Short Film Festival, conceived by "doug & serge inc.," 18 May 2012, accessed 28 June 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rj22DbRoAPM&t=17s>.
16. C. Todd Lopez, "Milley: Army on Cusp of Profound, Fundamental Change," Army.mil website, 6 October 2016, accessed 27 June 2017, <https://www.army.mil/article/176231>.
17. Phillipson, "Leeroy Jenkins and Mission Command."