



Soldiers with 2nd Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment dismount their Stryker combat vehicle to join Bulgarian army special forces soldiers as they conduct a cordon-and-search during Kabile 15, a multilateral joint-training exercise, as part of Operation Atlantic Resolve 17 June 2015 at Novo Selo Training Area, Bulgaria. (Photo by Spc. Jacqueline Dowland, U.S. Army)

Leeroy Jenkins and Mission Command

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Let's do this ... Leeeroooy Jeeeenmnknks!

– Ben Schultz as Leeroy Jenkins in *World of Warcraft*

Many of us have seen [the video](#). The group gathers in a circle and talks through a complicated plan of attack. Suddenly

one of the players screams his battle cry and runs in. The others hesitate for a moment, and then under the mantra of “stick to the plan,” they all follow into the castle and promptly die. Leeroy’s actions led to the slaughter of his entire force. It was not until recently though, that I had this thought: How would we view Leeroy if he were a commander who saw an opportunity that no one else saw? Was his larger organization flexible enough to trust and support a subordinate commander’s initiative?

The Reality of Mission Command

The Art of War Scholars group from the 2016/17 class at the Command and General Staff College received a briefing from the mission command team at the Combined Arms Doctrine Directorate (CADD). During a rich discussion on mission command, the group elaborated on the ideas of disciplined initiative, trust, and some of the tenets of unified land operations. This discussion led me to some introspection regarding my commissioned career. I realized that to some degree, our application of mission command tends to be the opposite of the philosophy and of our published doctrine. I mulled over a flood of memories: fifteen-page base orders with pages of tasks to subordinate units, coordinating instructions, and detailed commander's intents. I had new insights into the extent to which processes and orders restrict the subordinate to do precisely what the boss says, with little room for initiative.

Since its inception, the Army of the United States has triumphed in the most complex forms of warfare. However, most of these victories took place before the development of complex communications systems. Today, decision makers at all levels face a barrage of information, which they must filter and fight through to achieve some sense of situational awareness. Consider, for example, the five domains of warfare identified during current discussions of multidomain operations, each with its own overlay, sitting on a two-dimensional map.¹ This flood of information would delay the responsiveness of a headquarters as it fought to understand a developing situation.

A slower response time is not always a bad thing. The counterinsurgency wars in Iraq and Afghanistan lent themselves to making very careful moves, given the overall complexity of the operational environment, especially with regard to political and social issues. Carefully considered decisions came at the end of papers and meetings. This way of operating, however, will not work for large-scale combat operations. As Gen. Mark A. Milley recently stated, "I think we're over-centralized, overly bureaucratic, and overly risk-averse ... that overly bureaucratic environment may work in garrison, during peacetime ... but it's the opposite of what we are going to need in any type of warfare ... but in particular, the warfare I envision."²

Mission Command in the Future Operational Environment

Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, is currently in draft stages with a CADD writing team. The focus of the FM is to describe how the Army would fight large-scale combat operations. The current draft language describes large-scale combat operations "at the right of the continuum of conflict. Large-scale land combat against a regional peer is an intense, lethal human activity. Its conditions include complexity, chaos, fear, violence, fatigue, and uncertainty."³ Organizations should not expect to enjoy the luxury of long targeting cycles and the time to make 100 percent informed decisions. Future conflict, like the large-scale combat operations of the past, hinges on the principles of mission command as envisioned in Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command*.

Trust and Shared Understanding

ADP 6-0 defines mission command as "the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land operations."⁴ Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-0, *Mission Command*, further states, "This philosophy of command helps commanders capitalize on the human ability to take action to develop the situation."⁵ Six principles of mission command guide this philosophy:

- ◆ build cohesive teams through mutual trust,
- ◆ create shared understanding,
- ◆ provide clear commander's intent,
- ◆ exercise disciplined initiative,
- ◆ use mission orders, and
- ◆ accept prudent risk.⁶

I would argue that building cohesive teams through mutual trust is first on the list of the six principles of mission command for a reason. Trust penetrates deeper than the commander does; it extends to the

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staff members and subordinate commands. The notion that a commander sees a subordinate, “Chris,” and knows Chris will always get it done, is an oversimplification of trust. The higher commander understands that Chris built an organization that can execute seamlessly without Chris being there. The commander knows this because they have executed several training events with that formation. If we are gauging unit performance on the commander’s abilities, we are a bit far off the mark. Chris has a trusted organization because he or she built a team, and integrated the team into the higher echelon.

Trust discussions dovetail nicely into shared understanding discussions. All of us have a different worldview. While we may share myriad similarities in values and ethics, how we perceive the world may be unique. An example of how two educated and experienced leaders’ opposite understanding of a situation can lead to friction is the directive Brig. Gen. John Church gave Lt. Col. Charles B. Smith in the summer of 1950. In essence, Church told Smith to go north and fight alongside the Republic of Korea soldiers so they would not run—to provide moral support. There is no record of Church issuing Smith an order or providing his personal assessment of the operational environment. Smith, with his experiences fighting in the Pacific, knew that Asian soldiers were not cowards, and that the enemy must be formidable to push the Republic of Korea soldiers south. Smith proceeded to defensible terrain north of Osan and made a stand as best as he could as per intent issued to him by leadership in Japan. While he achieved a delay for the larger force, his own unit was quickly routed, and Smith became infamous.⁷ Task Force Smith has become a soundbite for a lack of readiness. In reality, this historical moment is a fantastic study in mission command, the ideas of trust and shared understanding, and the importance of articulating commander’s intent.

Commander’s Intent

Internally to the CADD we have entertained discussions on the purpose of commander’s intent. Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations*, defines commander’s intent as

a clear and concise expression of the purpose of the operation and the desired military end state that supports mission command,

provides focus to the staff, and helps subordinate and supporting commanders act to achieve the commander’s desired results without further orders, even when the operation does not unfold as planned.⁸

In some cases we have made commander’s intent a form letter. My inner small-group leader says, “the purpose of this operation is ... we will accomplish this by ... the key tasks are ... and the end state is” I format the intent with an expanded purpose statement, three-to-five key tasks, and an end state oriented on friendly, enemy, terrain, and civilian conditions. To this day, we see brigade orders from combat training centers with eight key tasks, to include language similar to “consider safety in all operations!”

By definition, the entirety of commander’s intent is three-to-five sentences that link the expanded purpose to the end state. It would appear that as a matter of habit, we have altered commander’s intent to a series of set-piece actions to an end state. This invariably changes the spirit of the intent from the commander’s visualization, the art of the operation, to a distillation of the scheme of maneuver, the science. Commander’s intent describes what must be achieved and why; that is all. As most plans do not survive first contact, consider how liberating a concise intent statement would be for a subordinate commander. Within this lightly constrained environment, subordinates exercise disciplined initiative.

The word “disciplined” touched a few of the scholars’ nerves. The standard comment seemed to be, “As opposed to what, indisciplined initiative?” They have a point. Did we attach a word as a qualifier, or future mea culpa? When we look at that one single word, it is telling of other challenges we have with validating mission command. If I have to tell a subordinate, literally, apply discipline to your initiative, am I not suggesting there may be a small lack of trust? Any army has stories of how initiative cost a formation dearly. However, they also could fill tomes with success stories. The 1941 U.S. Army had this to say: “The subordinate unit is a part of a tactical team employed by the higher commander to accomplish a certain mission, and any independence on the part of the subordinate commander must conform to the general plan for the unit as a whole.”⁹ That is all they had to say about that. Here is your left and right limit, go

fight. This need to control, to be perhaps risk adverse, and obfuscate outcomes with exculpatory language, leads us to be excessively prescriptive. This practice seems to have made its way into our orders processes as well.

Mission Orders

An order should not trespass upon the province of a subordinate. It should contain everything that the subordinate must know to carry out his mission, but nothing more.

—Field Service Regulations: Operations (1941)¹⁰

Mission orders are “directives that emphasize to the subordinates the results to be attained, not how they are to achieve them.”¹¹ Consider this order from 18 June 1944 to the 8th Infantry Regiment: “Attack to the northeast making your main effort on the right and seize the high ground vicinity TANERVILLE, see overlay.”¹² Contrast this with a battalion generating an order with appendices. In this era of linked communications, we find it prudent to consume staff time generating printed work, rather than using those communication tools and time available to conduct parallel coordination. I can imagine the staff of a subordinate unit receiving this order immediately liaising with the appropriate staff functions and headquarters, and synchronizing and re-sourcing their operations. A recent observation from the Joint Readiness Training Center is that units do not do a good job maintaining digital and analog running common operational pictures.¹³ Arguably, this is because the quantity of information pushed through digital systems considered relevant exceeds any human capacity to keep current on an analog product. This observation should drive units to consider what they *must* know, rather than attempt to know all that could potentially be known. Is it better for a staff to invest its energy typing and drawing, or thinking and talking? It has been said a mediocre staff provides information, a good staff provides information and analysis, a great staff provides information, analysis, and recommendations. Becoming a great staff requires room to think and discuss. Maybe some commanders need the detail to manage their perception of risk.

Risk Management

Prudent risk is “a deliberate exposure to potential injury or loss when the commander judges the outcomes in terms of mission accomplishment as worth the cost.”¹⁴ I have the same comment for the word “prudent” as I did for “disciplined” above. Beyond that, look at the last three words of the definition, “worth the cost.” In the Army, we use deliberate risk management. Take flat, static, administrative rifle qualification. If we asked the safety center how many soldiers fired on flat ranges in a given fiscal year and how many accidents took place on those ranges that were career or life ending, I am sure we would discover it is statistically insignificant. Yet, in some organizations, a company commander does not have the authority to sign the risk assessment for qualification ranges. This is the same commander we expect to duel tank on tank.

How we treat risk as a matter of course shapes how our subordinate commands function and think. I would ask the reader if a risk adverse outlook is “worth the cost” to our organizational climate. If I have to ask the boss to underwrite my risk for soldiers on a flat range because I as a company commander am considered incapable, precisely what message does that communicate? How does that generally influence training, thinking, and initiative?

Conclusion

Mission command is not just some catchphrase. It is the central nervous system of our organization. All aspects of the above principles have real impacts on a daily basis in our formations. Leeroy may have been right. Maybe he attacked the ghouls and goblins in the room because he saw they were still in assembly areas (unready for a fight). He was in a communications degraded area. He knew the overall objective to destroy the enemy and the why. He saw a momentary window of opportunity and seized it. Meanwhile, his superior headquarters’ organizational climate was inflexible to his initiative. They fought the plan instead of the situation with predictable results.



Notes

Epigraph. "Leeroy Jenkins HD 1080p," YouTube video, from a game of World of Warcraft, a massive multiplayer online role-playing game, posted by "JJonah Jameson," 11 June 2014, accessed 26 April 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mLyOj_QD4a4.

1. Martin Dempsey, November 2011, cited in Jeffrey M. Reilly, "Multidomain Operations: A Subtle but Significant Transition in Military Thought," *Air and Space Power Journal* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 61, accessed 2 December 2016, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/afri/aspj/digital/pdf/articles/2016-Spring/V-Reilly.pdf>. The five domains in the multidomain concept include, air, land, maritime, space, and cyber.

2. C. Todd Lopez, "Future Warfare Requires 'Disciplined Disobedience,' Army Chief Says," Army.mil website, 5 May 2017, accessed 15 May 2017, <https://www.army.mil/article/187293>.

3. Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], forthcoming).

4. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2015), Glossary-2.

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

6. *Ibid.*, 2-1.

7. John Garrett, "Task Force Smith: The Lesson Never Learned" (monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, 2000).

8. Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, January 2017), GL-7.

9. FM 100-5, *Field Service Regulations: Operations* (1941; repr., Fort Leavenworth, KS: Command and General Staff College Press, 1992), 24.

10. *Ibid.*

11. ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, Glossary-2.

12. Brian C. North, *Making the Routine Difficult* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2016), 31.

13. "JRTC Trends 3rd and 4th Quarter FY 16: Trends as Observed by Observer/Controller Trainers at Fort Polk, LA" (Center for Army Lessons Learned, 10 February 2017), "Challenge 5. Common Operational Picture," accessed 26 April 2017, <https://call2.army.mil/docs/doc7456/7456.pdf> (CAC required).

14. ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, Glossary-2.