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# **German Mission Orders--**

## **Their Doctrinal and Operational Development from 1866-1940 and Mission Order Combat Illustrations from the 1870-71, 1914-18 and 1939-45 Wars**

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*Orders are not written out in the minutest detail, a mission is merely given the commander. How it shall be carried out is his problem. This is done because the commander on the ground is the only one who can correctly judge existing conditions and take the proper action if a change occurs in the situation.<sup>1</sup>*

--German Captain Adolf Von Schell, *Battle Leadership*, 1933

### **Introduction**

Mission orders proved to be one of essential keys to German tactical success from 1866 to 1940. How did this German idea on combat leadership come into being? What is the German doctrinal history of this indispensable type of leadership? Were German mission orders successful in combat?

The heritage of mission orders is important across today's Army for several reasons. The legacy of mission orders continues within the Mission Command Center of Excellence (MCCoE) and *Mission Command*, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0. Reading about the military moments where mission orders were born helps in understanding how to apply and use today's doctrine. Even more important, mission orders give a proven tactical leadership edge in combat. Mission orders allow leaders to adapt, innovate, and react with decisions faster than their opponents in the chaos of battle.

Before diving in to German military history concerning mission orders, one should define mission orders. Auftragstaktik, mission orders, or mission tactics, are all attempts to translate and understand the German decentralized concept of leadership and command used with great success during the years 1866-1940. For the remainder of the paper this command philosophy will be referred to as mission orders.

So what is this excellence surrounding mission orders? This paper will explore the doctrinal and operational history of mission orders from 1866 to 1940 and their great success in combat. Included are three combat examples, at three different levels of command, to illustrate that mission orders are initiated top down but executed from the bottom up.

### **Mission Orders' Germanic Origins**

The cloaked beginnings of Prussian mission orders are lost to time and historical debate. Authors argue whether Frederick the Great or General Scharnhorst might have developed the idea of mission orders.<sup>2</sup> However, the mission order concept never reached implementation into German doctrine and training until the 19th century. Mission orders implementation and doctrine are associated with General Helmuth von Moltke.

### **1857-1870, General Helmuth von Moltke, Mission Orders and Prussian Doctrine: Instructions for Large Group Commanders, 1869**

General Helmuth von Moltke became the Chief of the Prussian General Staff in 1857 and remained so for the next thirty one years. Following the victorious 1866 war against Austria, General von Moltke ordered the General Staff's historical section to prepare a study of the army's strengths and weaknesses and the lessons of the campaign.<sup>3</sup>



The results of the study, other Prussian General Staff inputs, and General Moltke's wisdom produced the 1869 Prussian doctrine titled, *Instructions for Large Unit Commanders*. With that document General Moltke wrote the first doctrinal mission order instructions.

The following Moltke quotes illustrate the essence of mission orders. These ideas were unique in 1869 and still echo across time in today's *Mission Command*, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0.

*There are many situations in which the officer must act according to his own judgment. It would be indeed absurd if he waited for orders in moments where often no orders could be given. As a rule, however, his work is the most profitable for the whole when he carries out the will of his superior.*<sup>4</sup>

The higher the authority, the shorter and more general will the orders be. The next lower command adds what further precision appears necessary. The detail of the execution is left to the verbal order, to the command. *Each thereby retains freedom of action and decision within his authority.*<sup>5</sup>

Moltke concluded that decisions in war are challenging. Why? Because no plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond the first contact with the main hostile force.<sup>6</sup> So with that in mind, leaders must make wartime decisions "from such surrounding darkness what is correct [must] be discovered (often only guessed at), in order to issue orders. In the path of execution of these orders enter incalculable chance and unforeseeable hindrances. But in this fog of uncertain at least *one thing must be certain: one's own decision.*"<sup>7</sup>

To Moltke, mission orders are an intricate part of the overall German Army philosophy of leadership and tactics. Mission orders are not a stand-alone technique to be inserted under certain conditions. General Moltke's doctrine, including mission orders, provided the basis for German theory on large unit operations for more than seventy years.

The first combat test of mission orders and von Moltke's doctrine came very soon. One year after publication in 1869, the Franco-Prussian War began.

### **1870 - Mission Orders in Combat - Prussian Corps Commander General Hugo von Kirchbach Refuses Crown Prince Wilhelm's Battle Instructions.**

On 16 July 1870, France declared war on Prussia. Prussia mobilized quickly and attacked. The Prussian Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm had three corps under his command to attack across the border into northeastern France. Prussian General Hugo von Kirchbach commanded V Corps, one of those three corps. General Kirchbach advanced his corps and found the French dug in at the town of Froeschwiller on 6 August 1870. On that day, Prince Wilhelm and his other two corps, I Bavarian Corps and XI Prussian Corps, trailed behind General Kirchbach's V Corps.

French General MacMahon commanded the French forces blocking a further German advance into France at Froeschwiller. Against French General MacMahon's corps of 50,000, Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm had an army of 100,000 descending on Froeschwiller in three corps.<sup>8</sup> MacMahon ought to have abandoned the position and withdrawn through the Vosges Mountains, but he needed time to collect other French forces and still hoped to combine with other troops in the area to counter-attack the Prussians and recover the ground lost at the battle of Wissembourg on 4 August 1870.

Why was the French town of Froeschwiller important? Froeschwiller's road and railroad network controlled access into northeastern France. If it fell, the Prussians would be able to seize control of the railway as well as the principal roads passing through the Vosges Mountains. This, in turn, would isolate the French garrison at Strasbourg and make it easier for the Germans to supply their large armies in France.<sup>9</sup>

Without hesitation, Prussian General Kirchbach attacked MacMahon's fortified position. The initial fight against the entrenched French forces on high ground went badly, but the attack pinned the French forces in place.



In the midst of the fight at 10:30 AM, General von Kirchbach received instructions from the Crown Prince, who did not wish to give battle until his army of three corps concentrated: "Do not continue the struggle, and avoid everything which may induce a fresh one."<sup>10</sup> However, these instructions were based on the tactical situation at 9 am, not on the situation at 10:30 am, the hour in which they were delivered.

According to Prussia doctrine, *Instructions for Large Group Commanders*, blind obedience is not compulsory on any officer except when the superior issuing the order is actually on the spot, or at least cognizant of the situation as it stands at the moment the order is delivered. The Crown Prince was not on the spot, and knew nothing of the tactical situation at 10:30 am. Blind obedience, therefore, was not expected, reasoned General von Kirchbach.<sup>11</sup>

Due to the tactical circumstances, General von Kirchbach decided to ignore the Crown Prince's instructions. His first step was to inform the other two Army Corps of his intention, and demand their cooperation in the attack; his next step, how best to continue the fight.<sup>12</sup> Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm arrived at 1 PM, assessed the situation and agreed with General Von Kirchbach's tactical assessment and had the other two corps join the attack.<sup>13</sup> Soon thereafter the three Prussian corps began to encircle the French forces.

General MacMahon now faced a dilemma. Stay and die in place, or retreat. General MacMahon retreated westward into France on the other side of the Vosges Mountains.

*Impact of Mission Orders:* Due to General von Kirchbach's ability to use mission orders and continue the battle contrary to the Crown Prince's initial instructions, the three Prussian corps prevailed. The impact of General von Kirchbach's mission orders soon became evident. The battle of Froeschwiller paved the way for the decisive battle at Sedan three weeks later on 1 September 1870, where MacMahon surrendered the 120,000 strong French Army after being encircled by the Prussian forces, effectively ending the Franco-Prussian war.

The next test of mission orders and doctrine revision in a major conflict did not occur until World War I, over four decades later. This time a Captain with mission orders greatly impacted tactical combat.

### **1915-1918, WWI Mission Orders, Captain Willy Rohr, Infiltration Tactics and The Attack in Position Warfare, 1918**

In 1915 the German Army needed offensive tactical innovation to overcome the stalemate of trench warfare. The German General Staff turned to a combat veteran and pioneer (engineer) named Captain Willy Rohr to develop a way to overcome trench warfare.

On 8 Aug 1915 Captain Rohr assumed command of the experimental unit "assault detachment Rohr" and his mission orders were to experiment "according to the lessons that he had learned during his front line service."<sup>14</sup> He immediately began to innovate on the front line with new weapons, tactics and infantry organization.

In only a few weeks the officers of the assault detachment developed the assault squad concept, which remained the basis of German infantry tactics for the next 30 years.<sup>15</sup> What distinguished Rohr's techniques from the prewar German tactical doctrine were the organization of attack forces in small groups that were deployed in depth instead of a broad firing line, and the arming of individual infantry soldiers with various types of weapons instead of the standard-issue rifle.<sup>16</sup>

The assault squad provided flexibility of maneuver and control, specialized weapons, and quick response to the changing tactical battlefield conditions. The assault squad gave the on-scene infantry commander the optimum in flexibility of maneuver and combat power.

Rohr developed new tactics which depended on decentralized command for the infantry commander to choose where to attack the enemy, operational adaptability to organize the assault squad as the mission dictated, and mission orders for maximum freedom in tactics to accomplish the mission. The solution to overcome the trench warfare stalemate became known as infiltration tactics.



Infiltration tactics attacked weak points and sought to overwhelm the defenders with hand grenades, flamethrowers, machine guns, trench mortars, and other specialized weapons. The heavy weapons and offensive firepower within the squad made a local fire storm which overwhelmed an isolated trench area.

Once the infiltration made a penetration into a weak point in the enemy trenches the German assault squads sought to broaden the attack into adjacent trenches while simultaneously continuing to attack deeper into the enemy rear. These tactics greatly aided in collapsing enemy resistance and widening the breakthrough gap for follow-on assault forces.

On 12 October 1915 Captain Rohr led his men into combat to test the new infiltration tactics. The assault squads with infiltration tactics successfully attacked the French trenches in the Vosges Mountains. Then on 22 February 1916 Captain Rohr led his assault squads to success in the fight at Verdun.

Based on the success of the Rohr's assault squads, mission orders, and the infiltration tactics in combat, a new offensive doctrine came into existence. On 1 January 1918 the German General Staff published *The Attack in Position Warfare* which became the basic doctrine document for the German offensives of 1918.

The German Spring Offensive of 1918 began on 21 March 1918 with assault squads and battalions spearheading the attack against the British lines. The assault forces quickly overran the British 5th Army trenches. The dispersed and moving swarms of German assault teams not only overran the British trenches but initially paralyzed the British high command's ability to react.

In the end, the German breakthrough was successful, the breakout was not. German follow up forces, logistics, and equipment did not match the Allies ability to reinforce and resupply the interior lines. Tactically, however, the new infiltration tactics, mission orders and assault forces were a tremendous success.

*Impact of Mission Orders:* Captain Rohr and his Assault Detachment's mission orders to experiment "according to the lessons that he had learned during his front line service" resulted in tremendous impact to the German Army. His unit innovated, developed and tested: new functional uniforms, the assault squad design, assault squad weapons, infiltration tactics, infiltration tactics training, and the 1918 *The Attack in Position Warfare* doctrine.

### **1919-1940, General Hans von Seeckt, Post World War One Mission Orders and German Doctrine: Leadership and Battle with Combined Arms, 1921-1923**

General Hans von Seeckt, head of the German army from 1919 to 1926, faced a daunting challenge in 1919: how to build a cadre army after the catastrophic defeat of World War I. One of his first tasks saw him looking to the future by capturing the German World War I lessons learned. General von Seeckt found that "It is absolutely necessary to put the experience of the war in a broad light and collect this experience, while the impressions won on the battlefield are still fresh and a major proportion of the experienced officers are still in leading positions."<sup>17</sup>

To accomplish this task, he established no fewer than 57 committees to capture the lessons of World War I. General von Seeckt's briefing to the committees was simple and direct: their guidance was to produce short, concise studies on the newly gained experiences of the war and consider the following points:

1. What new situations arose in the war that had not been considered before the war?
2. How effective were our prewar views in dealing with those situations?
3. What new guidelines have been developed from the use of new weaponry in war?
4. Which new problems put forward by the war have not yet found a solution?<sup>18</sup>





One of the lessons learned attested to the high value of mission orders in conjunction with the success of the German World War I infiltration doctrine with assault squads.

Based on the lessons learned of WWI, further German General Staff analysis, and von Seeckt's guidance, the German General Staff produced the next doctrine, *Leadership and Battle with Combined Arms* in two parts. Part one released on September 1921 and part two on June 1923. The basic ideas were simple and powerful. The doctrine emphasized maneuver, *decentralized command and control*, and rapid, driving exploitation.<sup>19</sup>

Specifically, the regulation advocated considerable independent tactical authority for junior leaders. In the pursuit phase of the war of movement as soon as the enemy weakens, the junior leaders should immediately, *and without waiting for orders*, and without regard to the fatigue of troops, carry on the pursuit of the defeated enemy.<sup>20</sup> The essence of this doctrine provided the foundation for the German tactical operations in WWII.

The results of German doctrine and mission orders produced amazing tactical results early in World War II. One example concerns a German senior NCO paratrooper in a unique innovative assault.

### **1940 - WWII Mission Orders, German Paratrooper Oberfeldwebel (Senior NCO) Helmut Wenzel and the German Glider Assault on Belgian Fortress Eban Emael**

On 10 May 1940, paratroopers of the German 7th *Flieger* Division landed atop the Belgian Eban Emael fortress aboard nine DFS 230 gliders. The paratroopers, in addition to their basic weapons load, carried new shaped charges to destroy or disable the Belgian guns/cupolas from atop the expansive fortress. This attack using gliders and shaped charges to disable a fortress was the first of its kind.

The fort contained an impressive array of weapons that included two 120mm guns, sixteen 75mm guns, fourteen 60mm anti-tank guns, five 60mm anti-aircraft guns and eleven machine-gun positions. Also over 800 Belgian troops manned the fortress complex. The fort's weapons were in place to deny the Wehrmacht the road and bridge network into Belgium.

The German mission attack plan stressed simplicity. Paratroopers, in eleven gliders, were to land on top of the fortress, eliminate any defenders attempting to repel them, use the shaped charges to destroy the large caliber weapons, and defeat any counterattacks until German infantry and armor arrived.

In route, two gliders experienced major problems and did not make the initial glider assault landing on top of Eban Emael. One of those two gliders carried the mission commander, Oberleutnant Witzig. Compounding the problem, the two gliders carried paratroopers and shaped charges who were assigned specific Belgian guns that were now not designated for destruction. With the loss of two gliders, the German attack force degraded from 85 to 70 members.

The nine remaining gliders transporting the paratroopers successfully landed on the roof of Fort Eben Emael, utilizing arrester-parachutes to slow their descent and rapidly bring them to a halt. The German paratroopers immediately emerged from the gliders and spread out in their well-rehearsed plan to attach the shaped charges and incapacitate the gun emplacements.

On top of the fortress Oberfeldwebel Wenzel emerged from his glider and assessed the tactical situation. He quickly realized two gliders were missing, one which included the commanding officer. Oberfeldwebel Wenzel assumed command on top of the fortress and realized the impact of the two missing German gliders. He immediately issued additional mission orders to the German paratroopers to assault the casements assigned to the missing two glider sections.

He then organized a hasty defense for the expected Belgian counterattack and reported the mission status.<sup>21</sup> Within 20 minutes of glider assault landing, the 70 German paratroopers rendered Belgium's most modern fortress, garrisoned by more than 800 soldiers, useless.<sup>22</sup>



*Impact of Mission Orders:* The impact of Oberfeldwebel Wenzel's mission orders and success quickly became apparent. The neutralization of the Eban Email fortress allowed infantry and armor from the 18th German Army to bypass other Belgian defenses and enter Belgium. The German attack in Belgium was a carefully planned feint. The German attack in Belgium drew the bulk of French and British forces to northern France. On 13 May 1940 the concentrated German panzer divisions attacked out of Ardennes Forest across the Meuse River and broke through at Sedan, France. The panzer forces then raced west to the Atlantic Ocean which they reached on 20 May 1940 thereby cutting all the supply lines for the British and French forces in northern France. On 22 June 1940 France surrendered.

## Conclusion

From 1869 to 1940 mission orders were a foundational element of the German way of war, doctrine and tactical excellence. Mission orders formal incorporation into German doctrine began with General von Moltke in 1869 and for the next 71 years each successive German Chief of the General Staff insisted on mission orders as part of the doctrine, tactics, leadership and education program for the German soldier.

During those 71 years mission orders proved highly versatile in both the attack and defense. Even with changing doctrines, technology and foes, mission orders proved resilient and adaptable in all manners of tactical combat across the span of three very different wars.

Another common thread of mission orders is the success and impact of mission orders across all ranks. As shown in the three combat examples spanning the 1870, 1914 and 1940 German wars mission orders were critical at all levels of command.

The German use of mission orders 1870 to 1940 revealed several key advantages. Mission orders allowed German troop leaders to make rapid decisions, mission orders allowed for unusual non-doctrine solutions which in turn kept the enemy guessing and off balance, mission orders allowed for command and tactical flexibility during combat, and mission orders created a better command climate based on trust.<sup>23</sup>

The entire German army education, training, doctrine and leadership functions supported the mission orders construct. The end result and impact: mission orders gave a tactical advantage to German commanders who could adapt, innovate, and react with decisions faster than their opponents, because no plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond first contact with the main hostile force.

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## NOTES

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5. *Ibid.*, 185.
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7. *Ibid.*, 173.
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