We Don't Run with Scissors

Why the U.S. Army Struggles with Risk Acceptance

Maj. Michael J. Rasak, U.S. Army

In 1952, retired British Field Marshal Sir William Slim delivered a forty-five-minute address on aspects of "Higher Command" to the students of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. Toward the end of his speech, Slim impressed upon his audience an important concept: if a subordinate suffers from a setback borne from his own carelessness, stupidity, or cowardice, then his commander should fire him. "But," Slim continued, "if he did it because he was a little bit overeager, because he took just a little bit too much risk, or because he was a little bit too pugnacious, give him another chance."[1] Though profound, Slim's advice in fact echoes the words of military thinkers dating back two millennia. In the first century AD, Greek philosopher Onasander recognized the battlefield value of subordinate initiative and urged prospective commanders to allow their soldiers to take high payoff risks.[2] Three centuries later, Vegetius Renatus observed that while fear and punishment helped instill camp discipline, hope and rewards more effectively fostered aggressive soldierly behavior.[3] In other words, military leaders should be slow to punish and quick to reward audacity and boldness of action. Unfortunately, a combination of institutional mechanisms and internal cultural forces hinders subordinate initiative in the U.S. Army. Instead of encouraging audacity of action, the U.S. Army encourages cautiousness and conformity, ultimately undermining the development of the exact sort of bold leaders it wishes to produce.

If nothing else, what Slim, Onasander, and Vegetius have in common is a firm belief in the benefits accrued from applying the doctrinal principle of risk acceptance.[4] This principle contains several aspects including resource allocation, time management, and cost analysis, but most importantly, trust. To promote disciplined initiative, a level of trust must exist between commander and subordinate—that the commander will accept his or her subordinate's risk-taking and will demonstrate that trust by underwriting any honest mistakes produced as an outcome.[5] Theoretically, this process not only encourages decentralized execution but also fosters the development of bold, intelligent,

and innovative leaders—leaders who are able and willing to aggressively exploit fleeting opportunities in sometimes unique and imaginative ways.

Though the U.S. Army codifies the intellectual underpinnings of risk acceptance into its doctrine, the principle is conspicuously absent in practice. Evidence of this point is visible in annual leadership surveys, combat training center (CTC) lessons learned, and various Army leaders' published observations. These sources suggest a large portion of officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) simply do not possess the level of trust they need to feel comfortable exercising disciplined initiative as prescribed by Army Doctrine Publication 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*, or as exhorted by senior leaders like Gen. Stephen Townsend.[6] Two interconnected causes likely contribute to this phenomenon: (1) there currently exists no significant incentives for leaders to execute operations in a bold, innovative manner during training; and (2) Army culture discourages (if not outright punishes) such an approach. As such, it seems the calculus many leaders make when determining the cost-benefit analysis associated with risk taking often leads them to pursue courses of action that can only be described as conventional, prosaic, or just good enough to not get fired.
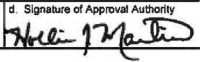
By design, CTCs like the National Training Center or the Joint Readiness Training Center serve as the premier locations for Army leaders to experiment and practice such risk-taking. CTCs offer commanders the rare opportunity to assemble their entire organization in a single space to execute operations in a dynamic, realistic training environment against a free-thinking and highly capable opposing force. Leaders are assigned objectives, tasks, and resources, and they are given an opportunity to put into practice their craft under the gaze of observer-controller/trainers, superiors, peers, and subordinates. This process typically occurs just once a year. If combat operations are not on the horizon, leaders have just one opportunity to impress evaluators with their ability to apply years of experience, training, and education; one opportunity to secure a "Most Qualified" annual evaluation. The stakes are without

Previous page: Georgia National Guardsmen rush to their objective during a live-fire exercise 12 May 2018 at the Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk, Louisiana. By design, combat training centers serve as the premier locations for Army leaders to experiment and practice risk taking. (Photo from JRTC Operations Group Public Affairs Office)

question incredibly high. And they are higher still if one considers these exercises are usually the most significantly weighted events during an officer's time in a key developmental assignment, and that most officers are highly cognizant that they require at least three "Most Qualified" evaluations over a five-year span to secure their promotion to the next rank.[7] Understanding this, one can see why leaders might be hesitant to deviate too far from standard convention—why they might avoid devising the "bold," "innovative," or "creative" schemes that CTCs are uniquely designed to facilitate.

Some may be skeptical of the notion that a leader's performance during a ten-day CTC exercise disproportionately influences the outcome of an evaluation that should ostensibly reflect his or her performance over an entire year, but evidence indicates this indeed occurs. A study conducted by Lee A. Evans and G. Lee Robinson reveals raters and senior raters, like all humans, rely on cognitive biases like the "halo effect" or "duration neglect" to simplify the complex task of writing a comprehensive evaluation that encompasses twelve months' worth of interactions, decisions, and actions.[8] Both of these biases lead evaluators to excessively fixate on a single aspect of the ratee's character or performance during this period. Given the significant and lengthy process of preparing for and executing a CTC rotation, how could unit leaders not become unwittingly wed to their impressions built there when it comes time to put pen to evaluation paper? Moreover, it is precisely because CTC exercises shed light on how subordinates will perform in actual combat that they carry so much weight.

Others may be skeptical of the idea that many Army leaders would allow careerism to influence their decision-making in training or combat. However, this notion not only appears overly optimistic but contradicts a

significant volume of data suggesting otherwise. To begin with, Leonard Wong and Stephen J. Gerras's landmark study *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession* explicitly cites careerism as a force contributing to leaders' willingness to "lie, cheat, or steal for self-advancement."[9] The Army's "up-or-out" policy and leaders' anxiety surrounding job security becomes even more apparent when one takes into account that most leaders envision staying in the Army for a full twenty-year career. Over 90 percent of field grade officers, 62 percent of company grade officers, and 85 percent of

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DELIBERATE RISK ASSESSMENT WORKSHEET

1. MISSION/TASK DESCRIPTION
Troop Formation (Running Route)

2. DATE *(DD/MM/YYYY)*
25/09/2019

3. PREPARED BY

a. Name *(Last, First, Middle Initial)* Lawrence, Timothy, D.	b. Rank/Grade GS-13	c. Duty Title/Position Director
d. Unit USAG Fort Lee, VA., Safety	e. Work Email timothy.d.lawrence.civ@mail.mil	f. Telephone *(DSN/Commercial (Include Area Code))* 539/765-3132
g. UIC/CIN *(as required)* W6CPAA	h. Training Support/Lesson Plan or OPORD *(as required)*	i. Signature of Preparer LAWRENCE.TIMOTHY.D.1228488310 Digitally signed by LAWRENCE.TIMOTHY D 1228488310 Date: 2019.09.26 08.27.53 -04'00'

Five steps of Risk Management: (1) Identify the hazards   (2) Assess the hazards   (3) Develop controls & make decisions   (4) Implement controls   (5) Supervise and evaluate   *(Step numbers not equal to numbered items on form)*

4. SUBTASK/SUBSTEP OF MISSION/TASK	5. HAZARD	6. INITIAL RISK LEVEL	7. CONTROL	8. HOW TO IMPLEMENT/ WHO WILL IMPLEMENT	9. RESIDUAL RISK LEVEL
PT Testing and Daily 4 mile runs troop formation	Vehicular/Pedestrian accident	H	-Closed and joint (running/vehicular) routes. -Barriers/cones/signs/Road Guards -Publicize PT Maps/Policy	How: Unit Policy/Media channels/signage Who: Leaders, DPW, MP Presence/Safety	M
	Roadway conditions Potholes, ice, and snow	M	-Ensure roads are maintained -Evaluate risks -Develop Unit Policy and unsafe road conditions procedures	How: Internal unit running policy/DPW Who: Leader, DPW (Roads and Grounds)	L
	Weather Conditions (Fog, Heat, Cold)	M	-Develop Unit Policy -Assess conditions, Develop controls and supervise/evaluate conditions	How: Unit Policy/Risk Mgt. Worksheet Who: Leader	L
				How: Who:	
				How: Who:	

Additional entries for Items 5 through 9 are provided on page 2.

10. OVERALL RESIDUAL RISK LEVEL (All controls implemented):
[ ] EXTREMELY HIGH   [ ] HIGH   [X] MEDIUM   [ ] LOW

11. OVERALL SUPERVISION PLAN AND RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION
At a minimum, barriers/warning signs will be placed at the following intersections: B Avenue at 38 Street, B Avenue at Mahone Avenue, B Avenue at Lee Avenue, B Avenue at 16th Street, B Avenue (North) at Sisisky Boulevard, Shop Road at 19th Street, and Shop Road at 11th Street.

12. APPROVAL OR DISAPPROVAL OF MISSION OR TASK   [X] APPROVE   [ ] DISAPPROVE

| a. Name *(Last, First, Middle Initial)* Martin, Hollie, J. | b. Rank/Grade O6 | c. Duty Title/Position Garrison Commander | d. Signature of Approval Authority |
| e. Additional Guidance: | | | |

ENCLOSURE 2

A sample page of a DD Form 2977, *Deliberate Risk Assessment Worksheet*. The author contends that Army leaders tend to be risk averse, although tools like this help mitigate risk during military operations. (Image from Fort Lee Policy 20-7, *Troop Movements and PT [Running Routes]*)

NCOs report this to be the case, according to the *2016 Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL)*.[10] This would suggest, then, that most leaders have made life arrangements centered on their careers in the Army, often at the expense of their spouse's career or children's educational opportunities. Moreover, a recent RAND study indicates 46 percent of all soldiers entering the force do so for strictly occupational benefits such as a stable paycheck, health-care

events of their rating period, the law of averages suggest they can attain their goal of retirement—with no bold or aggressive risks required.

Even if particularly motivated leaders are free from self-imposed careerist predilections, evidence indicates there is a distinct likelihood they will find themselves serving in a unit where supervisor risk acceptance is generally unfavorable or outright absent. In the 2016 *CASAL* report, only 66 percent of leaders from sergeant

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benefits, and presumably the prospect of receiving a life-long pension. Conversely, only 9 percent join exclusively for institutional reasons (e.g., patriotism, call to serve, family history).[11] Coupling the datasets above reveals an institution saturated with individuals and leaders, for better or worse, glued to the financial underpinnings of their career. While it may be impossible to determine the exact percentage of leaders who allow job security to affect their willingness to pursue bold or creative plans, a very conservative estimate may sit at around 35 percent, though a much higher number is perhaps more likely.[12]

These considerations raise the following question: What incentives do leaders have to be bold, innovative, or creative? At best, a leader could receive recognition and high marks for excellent performance. At worst, this same leader could be fired, be labeled inept, and could struggle to rehabilitate his or her professional reputation. Phrased a different way, the choice to be bold or innovative has a potentially career-ending outcome. Conversely, if a leader sticks to routine convention and executes the minimum tasks outlined by doctrine or higher headquarters' orders, then he or she has a good chance of succeeding and simply riding a wave of safety to promotion. It is a fact that at each rank leading up to lieutenant colonel (the rank most officers must attain to retire) virtually every branch has a promotion rate of over 50 percent.[13] Thus, if leaders can simply avoid drawing negative attention to themselves during one of the most important

to captain felt unit members were "allowed and encouraged to learn from honest mistakes."[14] Revealingly, this trend is worse for individuals assigned to table of organization and equipment (TO&E) units rather than Table of Distribution and Allowances (TDA) units—indicating it is precisely those operating units that train for and deploy to combat that suffer greatest from risk-averse leadership.[15] While 71 percent of company grade officers in TDA assignments feel unit members are "empowered to make decisions pertaining to their duties," only 63 percent of officers assigned to a TO&E unit feel the same. For NCOs in TO&E assignments, the level of distrust is significantly worse: only 57 precent feel encouraged to learn from honest mistakes, and 54 percent feel empowered to make decisions pertaining to their duties. Lastly, and most compellingly, only 52 percent of *all* leaders surveyed—from sergeant to colonel—felt their immediate supervisors "fostered a climate for development (e.g., allowed

Maj. Michael J. Rasak, U.S. Army, is an Art of War Scholar at the Command and General Staff College. He holds a BA from Michigan State University and is pursuing a postgraduate degree in history from Western Kentucky University. His assignments include two combat deployments to Afghanistan, one as an infantry platoon leader and another as a squadron intelligence officer.

Arkansas Army National Guard soldiers with the 1036th Engineer Company from Jonesboro, Arkansas, detonate an M58 Mine Clearing Line Charge 16 August 2015 at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California. Combat training center lessons learned indicate risk acceptance is conspicuously absent during training. (Photo by Maj. W. Chris Clyne, 115th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)

learning from honest mistakes)."[16] Thus, a reasonable estimate of the percentage of leaders who find themselves serving under a risk-averse supervisor who discourages their learning from mistakes may sit at approximately 45 percent.

Synthesizing the data above yields noteworthy results. If 35 percent of all leaders are instinctively opposed to pursuing "bold" actions for careerist reasons, and 45 percent of all leaders find themselves serving under a risk-averse commander, then the percentage of leaders possessing *both* the internal willingness and external support to take risks can range anywhere from 20 percent to 55 percent, with a mean of 37.5 percent.[17] In a simulation conducted by the author using a random sample of five hundred hypothetical leaders, only 31.4 percent possessed both characteristics.[18] Of course, this number could fluctuate up or down depending on the distribution of risk-takers to risk-tolerant units. Nonetheless, it seems on average only one-third of officers heading to CTCs are able to buy what Townsend is selling, that "it's okay to run with scissors."

This minority of officers, however, do have other considerations in mind that further diminish any opportunity to run with scissors—namely, a seemingly institution-wide reluctance to privilege innovation, creativity, and outside-of-the-box thinking at the tactical and operational levels. A 2019 CTC trend report from the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center indicates commanders consistently stymie staff initiative and analysis by immediately directing a single course of action (COA) at the start of the planning process.[19] As time efficient as this may be, the habitual use of command-directed COAs can ultimately detract from a climate of free-thinking, brainstorming, red-teaming, or other creative or collaborative planning processes. Instead, directed COAs foster these processes' antithesis: groupthink and a mindless obedience to higher direction. A Harvard study conducted by Sayce Falk and Sasha Rogers reveals such a pattern. According to

their research, nearly half of junior officers who leave the military report doing so because they feel it does "a poor job at identifying and rewarding traits such as creativity, as opposed to qualities such as endurance or ability to follow orders."[20] Moreover, of all the Army leadership attributes, soldiers consistently rate "innovation" as the lowest one demonstrated by their immediate supervisor.[21]

Army leaders' historic tendency to issue overly prescriptive mission orders likewise reveals an institution inundated with officers unwilling to deviate from a strict adherence to doctrinal outputs or evaluation requirements. This fact is evident in numerous observations recorded by CTCs, the Army's Mission Command Training Program, and the Combined Arms Doctrine Directorate.[22] These entities posit that units habitually generate overly detailed orders containing enormous volumes of information that are nearly impossible for subordinate commands to receive, digest, and act upon in a timely manner. Units can expect a single order to contain dozens of products serving both regulatory and informational purposes, to include overlays, templates, matrices, checklists, graphics, annexes, appendices, maps, and intelligence updates. Such a massive directive—containing countless tasks, requirements, and timelines buried beneath tombs of data—undermines any perception of subordinate autonomy or freedom of action.[23] Worse, leaders often find themselves delivering or receiving these orders through inefficient or redundant means; one Joint Readiness Training Center participant noted his requirement to convert his lower-echelon analog products into digital ones so that his higher headquarters could have visibility on his units' operations.[24]

Considering the above, it is little wonder why the Army has a risk acceptance problem. Roughly one-third of officers are unwilling to jeopardize their financial security by pursuing potentially career-ending acts of audacity or creativity; another one-third are situated in units where direct supervisors are unwilling to tolerate such risk taking; and the remaining one-third are operating in an institution that generally privileges tight, hierarchical control over subordinate autonomy. As hard as they may try, Army senior leaders are unlikely to change this trend through simple exhortations on the importance of mission command. Instead, to affect genuine change, their words must alter how the Army evaluates its leaders. Until boldness, creativity, and aggressiveness are properly incentivized, officers and NCOs will continue to play it safe at places like the National Training Center. And this is unfortunate, as many of humanity's greatest military thinkers, doctrinal innovators, and combat leaders blossom from years of fearless experimentation and unconventional thinking. As Gen. Omar Bradley once observed, "Judgement comes from experience and experience comes from bad judgement."[25] ■

Notes

1. Sir William Slim, "Higher Command in War," *Military Review* 70, no. 5 (May 1990): 20.

2. Onasander, *Strategikos* [The general], trans. Illinois Greek Club (Harvard, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1923), 32.3.

3. Vegetius, *Epitome of Military Science*, trans. N. P. Milner (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2001), 3.26.

4. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 2019), 1-13.

5. Ibid., 2-17.

6. Stephen Townsend, Douglass Crissman, and Kelly McCoy, "Reinvigorating the Army's Approach to Mission Command: It's Okay to Run with Scissors, Part 1," *Military Review* 99, no. 3 (May-June 2019): 4–9, accessed 25 March 2022, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/May-June-2019/Townsend-Mission-Command/.

7. For example, see "Infantry Branch FY22 LTC PSB Analysis and Key Points," U.S. Army Human Resources Command, 8 March 2022, accessed on 27 March 2022, https://www.hrc.army.mil/content/ACTIVE%20OFFICER%20SELECTION%20BOARDS (CAC required).

8. Lee A. Evans and G. Lee Robinson, "Evaluating Our Evaluations: Recognizing and Countering Performance Evaluation Pitfalls," *Military Review* 100, no. 1 (January-February 2020): 97–98.

9. Leonard Wong and Stephen J. Gerras, *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2015), 26–27, accessed 21 March 2022, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/466?utm_source=press.armywarcollege.edu%2Fmonographs%2F466&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages.

10. U.S. Army Center for Army Leadership (CAL), "Military Leader Findings," *2016 Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL)*, Technical Report 2017-01 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: CAL, August 2017), 37.

11. Todd C. Helmus et al., *Life as a Private: A Study of the Motivations and Experiences of Junior Enlisted Personnel in the U.S. Army* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), 26–27.

12. CAL, "Military Leader Findings," 48. Thirty-five percent is a low estimate derived by the author. It considers the percentage of soldiers who join purely for occupational reasons (approximately 50 percent), the percentage of leaders who envision remaining

FUTURE WARFARE WRITING PROGRAM

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Military Review calls for short works of fiction for inclusion in the Army University Press Future Warfare Writing Program (FWWP). The purpose of this program is to solicit serious contemplation of possible future scenarios through the medium of fiction in order to anticipate future security requirements. As a result, well-written works of fiction in short-story format with new and fresh insights into the character of possible future martial conflicts and domestic unrest are of special interest. Detailed guidance related to the character of such fiction together with submission guidelines can be found at https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Special-Topics/Future-Warfare-Writing-Program/Future-Warfare-Writing-Program-Submission-Guidelines/. To read previously published FWWP submissions, visit https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Special-Topics/Future-Warfare-Writing-Program/.

in the Army for a full twenty-year career (approximately 80 percent), and the percentage of leaders who feel their immediate supervisor is intolerant of subordinates' learning from honest mistakes (approximately 45 percent).

13. For promotion rates, see U.S. Army Human Resources Command's "PSB Results & MOI" for each convened board, https://www.hrc.army.mil/content/ACTIVE%20OFFICER%20SELECTION%20BOARDS (CAC required).

14. CAL, "Military Leader Findings," 48.

15. Army Regulation 71-32, *Force Development and Documentation Consolidated Policies* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2019), 32–33. Unlike deployable MTOE units, TDA units are generally nondeployable, and are organized to fulfill HQDA-directed missions.

16. CAL, "Military Leader Findings," 96.

17. The high end of the range could occur if solely noncareerist subordinates happened to serve under the 55 percent of available risk-accepting supervisors. The low end could occur if every careerist subordinate (35 percent) was placed under a risk-accepting supervisor (55 percent), leaving only a 20 percent difference remaining for a noncareerist subordinate/risk-accepting supervisor match.

18. This simulation was done on Microsoft Excel. Five hundred rows were created to represent each leader. Each row had two cells containing a randomly generated two-digit decimal. The first cell represented the leader's likelihood of predisposition toward placing their career over boldness, and the second cell represented the leader's likelihood of assignment to a unit with a risk-averse supervisor. If a row had a decimal below 35 percent in the first cell, that row was deleted. If a leader had a decimal below 45 percent in the second cell, that cell was deleted. The remaining rows were added up, equaling a total of 157. 157 / 500 = .314, or 31.4 percent.

19. U.S. Army Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL), "Combat Training Center Trends 2019," No. 20-10 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: CALL, 2019), 2–3, accessed 17 May 2022, https://call2.army.mil/docs/doc17997/17997.pdf (CAC required).

20. Sayce Falk and Sasha Rogers, "Executive Summary," *Junior Military Officer Retention: Challenges and Opportunities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government, March 2011), accessed 17 May 2022, https://officercandidatesschool.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Junior-Military-Officer-Retention-Challenges-and-Opportunities-by-Sayce-Falk-Sasha-Rogers-John-F.-Kennedy-School-of-Government-Harvard-University.pdf.

21. CAL, "Military Leader Findings," 11.

22. Townsend, Crissman, and McCoy, "Reinvigorating the Army's Approach to Mission Command," 8; Mission Command Training Program members, discussion with author, Art of War Scholars seminar, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 21 March 2022; Combined Arms Doctrine Directorate members, discussion with author, Art of War Scholars seminar, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 9 March 2022.

23. Townsend, Crissman, and McCoy, "Reinvigorating the Army's Approach to Mission Command," 6. The authors argue overregulation and long lists of tasks, "much of which had little to do with warfighting or combat readiness," has fostered an environment where leaders are now accustomed to less autonomy—in both training and combat.

24. John Bolton, "Overkill: Army Mission Command Systems Inhibit Mission Command," Small Wars Journal, August 2017, accessed 25 March 2022, https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/overkill-army-mission-command-systems-inhibit-mission-command?msclkid=99c9c6ee-b0a111ec9023932ca93ee17d.

25. ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, 2-17.