



Brigade executive officer Lt. Col. Eric Wesley of 2nd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, leads the fight from a hasty tactical operations center (TOC) established following a rocket attack on the original brigade TOC on 7 April 2003 near Baghdad. (Photo courtesy of Lt. Gen. Eric Wesley, U.S. Army, retired)

Setting the Conditions for Mission Command to Flourish

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In April 2003, the 2nd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division “Spartans,” as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom, successfully executed a large-scale combat operation (LSCO) across diverse terrain to include urban and suburban, agrarian desert, and remote wadis. The operation, now referred to as the Thunder Run, culminated in a complex urban environment as the brigade attacked into downtown Baghdad. The complex nature of both the terrain and the operation necessitated decentralized execution. The commander, Col. David Perkins, recognized the challenges inherent in such a chaotic environment and assessed that

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his brigade combat team could exploit the chaos because he trusted his subordinate units to operate successfully under those conditions.¹

At the time, well before Army Doctrine

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Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command*, had been published as U.S. Army doctrine, the Spartan Brigade exercised many of what have subsequently evolved into the principles of mission command to successfully execute LSCO, unleashing the talent and disciplined initiative of subordinate units and individuals to accomplish the commander's intent. The success of the Thunder Run on 7 April 2003 was not due to some pristine or adroit planning actions the night before. Rather, it was the culmination of more than a year of developing a command climate of trust based on positive leadership, competence developed during training, and a shared/collective understanding of the bigger operational purpose.²

Mission command is the U.S. Army's current doctrine for command and control. It describes how commanders, supported by their staffs, integrate the art and science of command and control to lead forces toward mission accomplishment. When properly exercised, mission command “empowers subordinate decision-making and decentralized execution appropriate to the situation” within the higher command's intent and purpose.³ Ultimately, it maximizes the talent and capabilities of the organization to exercise disciplined initiative to achieve the commander's refined purpose as stated in his or her intent.

The reality is that a commander cannot just show up to the unit and declare they will use the principles of mission command. It requires a process to set the conditions that will eventually allow the unit to flourish under any conditions. The entire organization, starting with the commander, must embrace and cultivate the principles of mission command. When done effectively, the result is an organization that flourishes—one that can reach greater heights of success, thrive even under challenging circumstances, and grow exponentially. Units and individuals can unleash their full capabilities and talents to meet and exceed expectations. More importantly, subordinates can achieve positive results under unexpected conditions the commander never anticipated because subordinates at echelon are adapting to conditions that the commander may not be able to see. Mission command is like a 401(k) that produces consistent returns.⁴

Before leaders can leverage the benefits of empowerment, they must build trust, develop a positive organizational climate, and create a cohesive team. In many ways, it is about sequencing and continuous



1st Battalion, 64th Armored Regiment at Red Cloud tank range preparing for overseas deployment in May 2002 at Fort Stewart, Georgia. (Photo courtesy of Brig. Gen. Andy Hilmes, U.S. Army, retired)

application of the principles that lead to empowerment. A climate of mutual trust is not built all at once; it is a continual process, and it can be strengthened or weakened every day.

An organizational climate that flourishes in the application of the principles of mission command develops them through three key steps—building teams, communicating, and empowerment:

1. *Build teams*
 - ◆ Competence
 - ◆ Mutual trust
2. *Communicate*
 - ◆ Shared understanding
 - ◆ Commander's intent
 - ◆ Mission orders
3. *Empowerment*
 - ◆ Disciplined initiative
 - ◆ Risk acceptance⁵

Effective employment of mission command principles results in what Dr. Stephen Covey calls “creative excitement.”⁶ It loosens the bands of heavy control and empowers the team to exceed compliance of stated standards and allows them to seek the best possible

way to accomplish the purpose outlined in the mission statement. A cohesive unit of trustworthy individuals working in an organizational culture based on mission command principles is prepared to unleash their talents to accomplish the commander's intent. The application of mission command principles demands more from subordinates at all levels since it is ultimately empowerment based on trust and professionalism.⁷

Building this type of organization requires a unit culture of trust that encourages subordinates to take the initiative instead of controlling information and decision-making at a central point. Mission command, when employed effectively, creates a learning organizational climate that is literally a team of teams empowered and trusted down to the lowest level to make the right decisions within the scope of the commander's intent. The leaders influence the overall culture by developing a climate based on trustworthiness. Commanders are still responsible for what the unit does or fails to do, but when they appropriately create a unit climate based on the principles of mission command, they become facilitators rather than controllers with an “eyes on/hands off” mentality and functionality. The temptation



A 3rd Infantry Division soldier trains at the Udari Range Complex in Kuwait during March 2003 prior to the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom. (Photo courtesy of the 3rd Infantry Division)

to lead as a chess master, deliberately controlling each move of the organization, must give way to an approach of the farmer, setting conditions that enable the crops to flourish rather than directing every detail.⁸

Alternatively, absent mission command, leaders will find themselves overwhelmed with requirements and are dependent solely on their own judgment, which means they fail to leverage the extended capacity of the senses and judgment of everyone in their formation. In the case of the Spartan Brigade, Perkins was able to unleash not only his own mind and observations but also five thousand minds and senses on the battlefield.⁹

Build Teams

The development of a positive command climate based on trust is critical in the first step, “Build Teams.” Leadership is more than simply telling people what to do; it is about inspiring an understanding and belief in the mission in others then enabling that belief to become a reality. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, defines leadership as “the activity of

influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization.”¹⁰ The leaders of a unit have significant influence on how the climate is developed and nourished; they can take a direct and controlling approach, ensuring strict adherence to a specified set of expectations enforced at every turn—not unlike playing a board game where the player has complete control of every move—or they can create the conditions to establish a learning organization. To build a learning organization, leaders must also develop a sense of trust and psychological safety that encourages subordinates to break out of their comfort zones, take risks, learn and grow from their mistakes, and seek new heights. This type of organization takes longer to cultivate, like a farmer tending his fields seeking a better harvest. When done correctly, it can result in a team that feels trusted and holds itself accountable to grow trust.

Commanders are ultimately responsible for the climate of the organization at every level—company, battalion, brigade, and upward. The *Army People Strategy* defines Army culture as “the foundational

values, beliefs, and behaviors that drive an organization's social environment, and it plays a vital role in mission accomplishment.”¹¹ The Center for the Army Leadership describes the difference between a unit climate and culture. Army culture is the larger, strategic level beliefs, customs, norms, symbols, traditions, language, and artifacts of the organization and are very long-lasting and difficult to change, while the climate is much more localized and influenced by the leaders and members of the organization.¹²

In a climate of mutual trust within a learning organization, leaders and subordinate units become more comfortable adapting, innovating, and applying creativity to solve complex challenges. This is because leaders have developed trust in subordinate judgment, and subordinates become confident their leaders will support their decisions. Over time, this atmosphere of mutual trust encourages subordinates to take risks and implement fresh, original ideas in execution. This is the potential power of the application of mission command—but leaders and units must be allowed to make “honest” mistakes as part of the learning process to continue improving performance.

The organizational climate reflects members' perceptions and attitudes about the unit, and it comes from the organization's daily operations and functioning. The climate impacts team members' morale, cohesion, commitment, initiative, trust, motivation, and, ultimately, performance. It is generally much more palatable based on the current network of personnel and can change as leaders come and go. Creating a positive organizational climate is a core leader competency. The climate of the organization is a subset of the overall culture heavily influenced by current leaders, eventually leading to impact on the greater organizational culture.¹³

When we wrestle with defining trust, several terms come to mind including credibility, belief, delegation, empowerment, and confidence. We can simply define trust as “confidence,” while its opposite is “suspicion” or “doubt.”¹⁴ If there is trust in someone (or a team), there is confidence in that person's ability and commitment to accomplish specific outcomes. When we lack trust in someone or something, we are suspicious or doubtful in their ability to accomplish something. In broader terms, trust is our belief in the reliability, ability, capability, or credibility of someone or something. Mutual

trust engenders confidence in the capability, reliability, and credibility of the entire unit.

Inspiring trust is critical to success because it fosters positive behaviors that lead us to trust or have confidence that a person (or unit) can achieve positive outcomes. We define this as our level of trustworthiness. Since others see only our behaviors, we, as individuals, control how worthy we are to be trusted by the choices we make and the behaviors we demonstrate. When we demonstrate the behaviors associated with trustworthiness, we provide the opportunity for others to extend trust to us—we are showing that they and others can rely on us, and we are inviting them to have confidence in our ability and commitment to accomplish the desired outcomes or commander's intent. We are sending the message that we are reliable.

Trustworthiness is a prerequisite for professional autonomy, but we often do not think about the multidimensional nature of trust. Levels of trust are influenced by the trustor's propensity to trust and the trustee's character, competence, commitment, and caring. In simple terms, even if someone is worthy of trust it doesn't mean they are trusted because that requires others to extend trust.

Coach John Wooden often used a quote attributed to Abraham Lincoln, “If you trust, you will be disappointed occasionally, but if you distrust, you will be miserable all the time.”¹⁵ It is true that when you empower others (trust them) they may not accomplish the task in the same way you might have done it. It is also true that there is a chance they might not accomplish the task at all. But as Lincoln's quote indicates, *if you distrust, you will be miserable all the time because you are convinced you have to do everything or at least control every step of the process.* Trust requires the humility to be coachable coupled with a willingness to be accountable as well as a willingness to recognize the potential in others. A culture of trust means that we can provide each other feedback and see it as supporting our improvement. We own our mistakes, create a plan to improve the process, and apply those lessons, resulting in better performance, and resulting in a true learning organization.

In order to create this climate, the Spartan Brigade spent months trying to understand the complexity of the challenges they would face. A leader and a unit must learn to understand each other, the environment, and the enemy. They need to take in many different viewpoints,

challenge assumptions, and stress-test ideas and solutions. Prior to the Thunder Run, members of the Spartan Brigade conducted more than a year of intense training on Fort Stewart and at the National Training Center (NTC), followed by months of live-fire training in the Kuwaiti desert prior to crossing the line of departure.¹⁶

During each iteration of the training, leaders sought and tried new methods to command and control on the move, used different maneuver formations, and found innovative ways to employ resources. In many ways, training is a way to visualize what the enemy could do and what the options are to respond. Perkins stated, “I can’t overstate how much training, analysis, and self-examination we put into everything from TOC [Tactical Operations Center] configurations to individual load plans to how to leverage Blue Force Tracker, which was bolted on right before crossing the line of departure. During all this training, you are continuing to build the all-important ‘secret sauce’ of knowing yourself and your unit.”¹⁷

Every mealtime and every evening, the leaders would get together and conduct a sort of informal wargaming, reviewing possible and “what if” scenarios about potential situations they might encounter. No discussions or ideas were off-limits. Then, many times over the following days, the unit would test out new ideas in training—some made it to the finals, others were immediately discarded without any “penalty” for the idea or execution. The aim was to always get better and develop multiple options to present the enemy with multiple dilemmas. Constant dialogue is key to building a thorough understanding of the problem and describing all the way down to the most junior soldier. It is also a key ingredient for building trust. Perkins said, “Show me a unit that doesn’t trust superiors or subordinates, and I will show you a unit that doesn’t have good dialogue.”¹⁸ As Brig. Gen. (retired) Andrew Hilmes, Company A, 4th Battalion, 64th Armor Regiment, commander during the Thunder Runs later remarked, “Our success stemmed from that culture of trust, and the desert training experience strengthened it.”¹⁹

The climate of an organization emanates from members’ shared perceptions and attitudes—how they think and feel about it daily. The current state of the climate is demonstrated through the regular behaviors of the unit members and, ultimately, by their performance. According to ADP 6-22, everyone within the organization contributes to the climate, and if you seek

a positive, trusting climate, their behaviors and performance are part of it.²⁰

The most important role of a leader is to create a positive climate that energizes and encourages people, fosters connected relationships and great teamwork, and empowers and enables people to grow, providing the opportunity to achieve the organization’s desired outcomes. The organizational climate drives expectations and beliefs that in turn drive behaviors. The behaviors, which demonstrate character, competence, and commitment, lead to organizational trust. It requires the leader to facilitate helping subordinates learn how to think and exercise their innovation and creativity in lieu of teaching them what to think. We do not seek the clone army from *Star Wars*—we seek a trusted and adaptive organization to meet the ever-changing requirements in the multidomain operations battlefield.

Leaders cannot build a positive climate based on trust in a day—it is more like a garden or farmer’s field that must be prepared, planted, fed, weeded, and cultivated to create a place where the principles of mission command can be applied and thrive, empowering the organization to unleash their talent and take the disciplined initiative necessary to achieve greatness. Leaders who understand the potential in a tiny seed understand that it takes significant effort and patience to achieve the desired harvest, but if they set the conditions and continue to nourish that seed, it can flourish and thrive and achieve greatness.

Communicate

Commanders use the operations process to accomplish step two, “Communicate,” effectively. The commander drives an effective planning process to understand, visualize, and describe the operational environment and articulate their intent to their unit.²¹ Through this process and the use of mission orders, the commander facilitates clarifying purpose, aligning resources, and communicating their vision and end state.²² It is nearly impossible for the commander, even if he or she has developed a great team, to unleash their talents if the commander is unable to effectively complete the communicate elements of mission command because the organization will not have the shared understanding necessary to be empowered.

Gen. George S. Patton once said, “Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will



3rd Infantry Division soldiers dine in the Kuwaiti desert during March 2003 prior to the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom. (Photo courtesy of the 3rd Infantry Division)

surprise you with their ingenuity.”²³ However, the Army has a tradition of more rigid command and control—often emphasizing strict obedience. Many commanders are very controlling as they seek to force the organization to conduct operations “their way.” This controlling style of leadership can lead to almost immediate results, but at what cost? In a controlling organizational climate, members of that organization tend to fall into a habit of doing nothing more than what they are told. They comply with the commander’s expectations but rarely exceed them because they are not trusted or empowered to do anything more than what is asked of them. They focus on compliance and avoiding failure rather than seeking and exploiting new opportunities. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, if conditions change, they do not have the muscle memory or perceived authority to adjust and adapt.²⁴

The principles of mission command build upon each other. Mission command requires competent leaders, staffs, and teams operating in an environment of shared understanding and mutual trust. It hinges on highly effective teams functioning in a climate where

subordinates are expected to seize opportunities and mitigate risks within the scope of commander’s intent.

Achieving an organizational climate based on trust and empowerment—even inspiration—where members of the team are innovative and creative to not just meet expectations but exceed them, requires a commander who is willing to accept risk and allow subordinate organizations to seek innovation, which may occasionally result in less-than-ideal results. If these failures along the path of improvement are seen as learning opportunities instead of black marks against the unit, they can help foster a learning organization that consistently seeks to exceed previous performance and stated expectations. As the unit learns, it gains greater competence and understanding—the members will seek to not just comply but to cooperatively exceed expectations, holding each other accountable along the way and eventually resulting in an exponential increase in performance as their heart-felt commitment leads to creative excitement.²⁵

Going back to the Spartan Brigade’s successful execution of LSCO in Iraq, it must be recognized that Perkins and his command team of battalion commanders,



3rd Infantry Division M1A1 tanks firing at the Udairi Range Complex in Kuwait during March 2003 prior to the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom. (Photo courtesy of the 3rd Infantry Division)

battalion sergeants major, and company commanders had been together for nearly two years prior to the final attack into Baghdad. During this time, the brigade trained extensively at Fort Stewart, Georgia, completed a high-intensity (now LSCO) rotation to Fort Irwin's NTC, and trained together for months in the Kuwaiti desert prior to crossing the line of departure for Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Early in Perkins's command tenure at Fort Stewart, he conducted "company lanes," a training event focused on the company-level echelon and their skill sets and requirements. During this exercise, the commander and brigade staff developed a "lane" that was embedded with challenges that made mission accomplishment nearly impossible. Perkins was less interested in mission accomplishment and more interested in cultivating an environment for decision-making. He was more interested in his commanders' ability to assess and decide with agility than he was with *compliance*. In this exercise, he planted and watered the seeds of mission command.²⁶

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of

comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."²⁷ As leaders, it is important to understand how our team members behave and that their behavior reflects our values and command climate. Does this mean nobody ever fails or gets in trouble? No, these things occur in every organization. The key to developing a trusting, learning unit climate is how the leaders react to these experiences—that is what really defines what we represent as leaders. In most cases, the unit's climate is truly defined by how we react to challenges. This is exactly what Perkins was doing with his company lanes exercise.

These training experiences were not always perfect execution and high fives on the objective for the training units. Members of the Spartan Brigade, like most units, had performance successes and failures regularly. However, the real success of the training was due to the climate of the organization. Individuals and units learned from these experiences and were willing (more importantly, *empowered*) to adjust, accept risk, empower subordinates to try new things, and then review performance again.

Similarly, the Spartan Brigade's NTC rotation was not seen as a final grade but rather as an opportunity to apply what they learned at home station in a unique environment against an adaptive enemy—and the results were not always great. As they trained, they adapted and tried again, building greater trust as relationships and outcomes improved.²⁸

As an example, Perkins attempted to conduct a unique command-and-control methodology in each operation at NTC. One emphasized a command-and-control effort that was fixed and static; one focused on an effort with a lean and agile command post absent all capabilities; a third split efforts from the air in a rotary command post paired with a ground command post. The point here was that he was less concerned about the objective and more concerned about lessons learned and how best to adjust to the changing environment of the battlefield. It was this approach at the NTC that led to an effective command-and-control infrastructure later in Baghdad.²⁹

Even the brigade TOC was a learning organization applying principles of mission command. Initially, it was a large complex series of tents and vehicles. They learned and adapted through experimental learning at the NTC and later in the Kuwait desert. By the time combat operations commenced, the main TOC consisted of three armored M577 Command Post Carriers and three HMMWVs—a much more agile command center that was followed by the larger infrastructure of the TOC as time permitted. This allowed for a brigade TOC that was relevant to the maneuver battalions in the current fight and could provide subordinate units with the resources they needed. This is also the brigade TOC that would be struck by a missile attack during the morning of the 7 April Thunder Run attack and would have to quickly adapt and reconstitute under the leadership of the brigade executive officer, Lt. Col. Eric Wesley.³⁰

These experiences built on each other, resulting in increased competence, mutual trust, shared understanding, and a willingness to accept risk. If mission command is to be effectively employed, the commander, and in fact the entire organization, must set the conditions. The leaders of the Spartan Brigade recognized that when it was time to cross the line of departure to initiate LSCO, it was too late to try and build trust. It must be built before that point; it must be cultivated in advance. “Like ethics, you can’t surge on trust.”³¹

While in Kuwait prior to the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the command sergeant major of 3rd Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment, Command Sgt. Maj. Robert Gallagher, a veteran of operations in Mogadishu, Somalia, engaged Perkins every day, imploring him, “Not another Mogadishu!” Since he trusted Gallagher, Perkins also empowered him to design and build an urban training area in the Kuwaiti desert made of various Conex containers, then to facilitate every unit in the brigade executing various battle drills in this simulated environment. The climate of trust allowed subordinates the opportunity to lead up and then be empowered to enhance the overall unit’s competence, ultimately impacting positively in competence, cohesion, and trustworthiness.³²

Empowerment

The third step, “Empowerment,” including subordinate organizations exercise of disciplined initiative and the commander’s willingness to accept risk, is only possible after the first two steps have been achieved. Effective team building includes a command climate of mutual trust, and communication that leverages the commander’s role in the operations process to effectively convey the commander’s intent with its refined purpose and alignment of resources. This allows the organization to attain a shared understanding of the situation and desired end state, employing mission orders to allow flexibility and empower subordinates to do what is necessary to achieve the defined end state.

It is important to note that trust is not the same as “certainty.” There cannot be a claim of trust when the outcome is certain. Confidence in decision-making (that of both subordinates and superiors) in uncertain outcomes is the real indicator of trust. This implies that those who trust know there is an element of risk. Both leaders and subordinates assume risk in a trust environment because the outcome is uncertain, but they choose to trust based on established relationships and previously demonstrated competence. There is a belief that the organization can make it happen when empowered. Finally, the implication of this is that when trust is extended, the expectation is that commanders will underwrite assumed risk if the understood mutual relationship is not violated. Risk is inherent in trust.³³

The Thunder Runs were successful to a great extent because the V Corps and 3rd Infantry Division

commanders established clear commander's intent and then empowered 2nd Brigade to take the initiative to achieve it. Perkins describes it like this: "These thunder runs were successful because the corps and division-level commanders established clear intent in their orders and trusted their subordinates' judgment and abilities to exercise disciplined initiative in response to a fluid, complex problem, underwriting the risks they took."³⁴

Within the brigade, Perkins followed a similar pattern because he trusted his subordinate units to successfully achieve his intent. This was possible because of the time and effort put into

- developing effective, competent teams and a command climate of mutual trust,
- using the operations process to develop a commander's intent and then creating mutual understanding by communicating that higher purpose and his visualized end state through mission orders, and
- empowering subordinate units through risk acceptance and allowing them to exercise disciplined initiative within his intent.

In simple terms, the commander's role is to inspire trust through the organization, clarify purpose, describe a desired end state, align systems to accomplish that intent, and then unleash the innovation and creativity of the team to accomplish it.

In a careful analysis of the second Thunder Run into the city center, Perkins only retained a small handful of decisions at his level, delegating the rest to subordinate leaders.³⁵ He could do this because of the culture of trust that existed within the unit. He sought to convey his intent by clarifying purpose, aligning systems, providing a vision for end state, communicating those few critical decisions he sought to retain at his level, and then unleash the talent of the subordinate units to accomplish the mission. Once he ensured mutual understanding of his intent, he sought to be physically present where he envisioned the critical "brigade relevant" decisions had to be made.

As the actions on 7 April unfolded, subordinate units and even individuals were empowered to make things happen. Every time a new challenge unfolded, someone or a unit did not wait for orders to come down the chain of command. Rather, they took the disciplined initiative to overcome the challenge. Officers, NCOs, and soldiers reacted in a positive manner to avoid catastrophe because they understood the

commander's intent, including the bigger purpose for their organization and their necessary role, and made it happen by exercising disciplined initiative.

Literally hundreds of actions occurred within subordinate units that the brigade leadership did not need to know about, and which ultimately led to mission accomplishment. This was not because they "performed better," but because they were empowered to make adjustments that made the entire unit better because they made an audible under the framework of intent.

Conclusion

Brick by Brick, Day by Day

Culture isn't built in a day.

Success isn't built in a day.

Mindset isn't built in a day.

Habits aren't built in a day.

Greatness isn't built in a day.

The foundation isn't built in a day.

It's built one day at a time. Keep showing up. Keep doing the work.

—Kevin DeShazo³⁶

The success of 2nd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division's Thunder Run on 7 April was not due only to planning and preparation on the night of 6 April; it was primarily due to the development of a positive command climate based on mutual trust over the course or nearly two years.³⁷ The decision to remain in downtown Baghdad overnight on 7 April was not a rash decision. This decision required the concurrence with the 3rd Infantry Division command group and corps commander, but it was the culmination of nearly two years of training and team building that ultimately made it happen. Trust flowed in multiple directions, upward to the division and corps, laterally to the other brigades, and downward to battalions and companies, all the way to the newest privates. "If you get the command climate right ... any Army unit can do this."³⁸

Developing a unit who flourishes, consistently exceeding expectations, is about sequencing and continuous application of the principles of mission command. They can be packaged as team building, communication, and empowerment. Before you can begin to leverage the benefits of mission command you have to build trust, develop a positive command climate, and build a cohesive team. Only then can you



Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 64th Armor Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division, rolls into downtown Baghdad on 7 April 2003. (Photo by Brant Sanderlin, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*)

start to put the elements of mission command together. You don't build trust and command climate in a day; it is a continual process, and every day, it can be strengthened or weakened. Building the team and a positive command climate alone will not get the job done; as

that climate is established, it requires the engagement of the commander in the operations process, constantly communicating to create the mutual understanding of the commander's intent, refining purpose, aligning resources, and inspiring subordinate organizations.³⁹ ■

Notes

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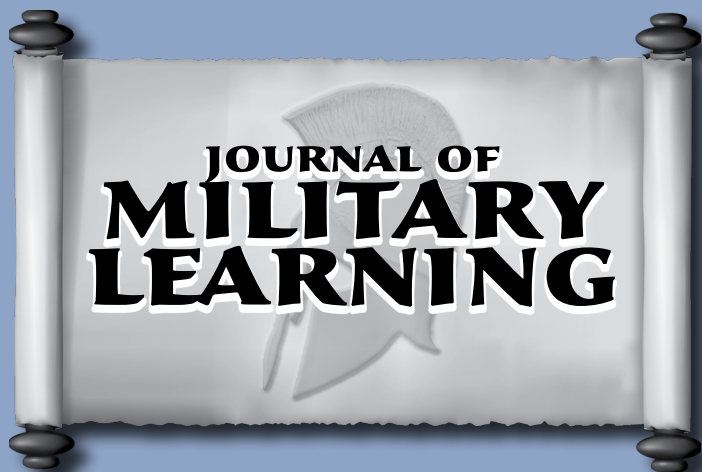
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38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.



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