



Air Force Staff Sgt. Gaberial Solazzo, 701st Munitions Support Squadron, leads a dismounted patrol at Baumholder, Germany, 9 October 2019. The airmen practiced mounted and dismounted patrol tactics and reaction procedures to indirect fire and improvised explosive devices during a four-day exercise. (Photo by Ismael Ortega, U.S. Army)

Toward a Vernacular of Risk

Unmiring Mission Command through Risk Education

Capt. Noah Taylor, U.S. Army

Whether it comes directly as the result of an enemy action or threat-based activity or as the result of other factors (hazard-based), RM [risk management] attempts to identify, assess, and control factors that may adversely affect the capabilities of a military unit or organization. Additionally, RM application ensures the leader at the appropriate level approves the action or operation.

—Army Techniques Publication 5-19, *Risk Management*

The twenty-first-century battlefield demands decisions from junior leaders in tactical situations that can have effects at operational and strategic levels. Whether those effects shape operational and strategic outcomes is still very contested. “Strategic” corporals have played outsized roles in the international media environment, but as Col. Thomas Feltey points out, they have marginal, if any, effect on major operations.¹ On aggregate, however, the emergence of strategic corporals as a concept has had a net negative effect on military leadership—not because of their actions but because senior leaders have since “elevated decision authorities far away from anyone but themselves.”²

This has left the Army facing a crisis of hypocrisy between the doctrine and praxis of its command-and-control philosophy. On the one hand, it espouses empowered, decentralized execution in its mission command doctrine. On the other hand, it struggles to implement this doctrine, requiring “reinvigoration” to achieve its ends.³ While running with scissors is a fun metaphor, its premise as the solution for the Army’s mission command problem ricochets off some of the Army’s deeper struggles with trust and delegation. Simply accepting or promoting more risk, as many suggest, is reckless and lacks nuance. For instance, one does not see many soldiers literally run with scissors; that would create unnecessary risk. Instead, soldiers stow trauma shears, secured in their kit, and perform a variety of hazardous tasks without posing much additional risk to themselves or their comrades.

The crux of the problem is not that the Army is inherently risk averse, but rather that its conception of risk and the education of its soldiers and junior leaders do not go far enough to support its doctrine of mission command. Risk has always had its place in mission command, from the ambiguous, now-rescinded “prudent

risk,” to its current version as “risk acceptance.”⁴ Yet these conceptions do little to emphasize the role risk plays in decision-making on a complex battlefield where decisions made at lower levels can have outsized effects.

To alleviate the risk aversion created by the anxieties surrounding distributed decision-making, we must realize that individuals on the modern battlefield must make hard decisions, often with ethical consequences, at all levels. Risk can and should be seen as a tool for educating subordinates on how to approach hard decisions, and how those decisions will affect conditions and actors elsewhere on the battlefield. For this tool to be effective, the Army must do two things: it must refine its conception of risk to see it as a commodity that can be transferred between all actors on the battlefield, and it must adopt a vernacular of risk at the company level and below to educate its junior leaders and cultivate a culture of risk awareness that will support decentralized decision-making.

Operationalizing these ends will require doctrinal and cultural change across four lines of effort: junior leader development, training design at the company level, senior leader engagement, and training and doctrine reform. Junior leaders should learn to apply risk decision-making (RDM) in garrison and tactical environments. Company commanders and company-grade leaders should educate subordinates on risk and Army risk management. Senior leaders should foster a risk-aware, but not averse, climate. And the Army should further integrate risk into its command-and-control doctrine.

Mission Command in Context

For our mission command approach to work, leaders must encourage subordinate leaders to use their initiative to achieve the commander’s intent and to measure and accept risk when doing so.

—Gen. Stephen Townsend et al.⁵

Before we can begin a discussion of how to adopt and implement a refined concept of risk, we must first understand where it fits in the current professional discourse on mission command. In April 2019, Gen. Stephen Townsend published his inaugural installment of “Reinvigorating the Army’s Approach to Command and Control” with the subtitle “It’s Okay to Run with Scissors.”⁶ Since then, the series has had two more installments, with risk

acceptance featuring most explicitly in “Leading by Mission Command (Part 2).”⁷ Part 2 highlights George Washington’s Delaware River crossing as an example of one where “all of the options were high risk” but does not differentiate between risk to force versus risk to mission, which clearly informed his decision-making.⁸ Using a commanding general as an example also neglects to address how risk figures into the subordinate-driven, disciplined initiative of mission command. While this series provides exposition of senior leaders’ thoughts on mission command—a good thing—it jumpstarts the professional dialogue on the topic of mission command with flawed and incomplete examples of risk.

In the years since, many have taken up the pen—including this author—to engage with Townsend on the topic of mission command’s implementation. The most direct attempts to engage with the topic have thus far been descriptive and diagnostic. In a prize-winning 2022 *Military Review* article, “We Don’t Run with Scissors,” Maj. Michael J. Rasak offers a comprehensive, empirical analysis of how the Army struggles with risk acceptance.⁹ While this is a good step, and empirical analysis is helpful, it is only just that—a helpful first step.

Other recommendations like Maj. Justin T. DeLeon and Dr. Paolo G. Tripodi’s “Eliminating Micromanagement and Embracing Mission Command,” mire themselves in historicism and

cultural critique.

DeLeon and Tripodi recommend an idea from social psychologist Edgar Schein that commanders establish “cultural islands,” where “societal rules can be suspended and people are encouraged to be more open about what normally they would withhold.”¹⁰ This is a good addition to the conversation. However, it gets overshadowed by the authors’

historicist critique of French military influence on the Army’s current organizational culture, and a focus on micromanagement as the most significant symptom of a sclerotic mission command.

The question of how to effect cultural change within the institution remains. This article hopes to offer some answers to that question.

Risk as a Commodity and What Happens to “Accepted” Risk

In the above cases, risk *acceptance* features prominently as a panacea for mission command’s ailments.¹¹ This throughline focuses on relinquishing control and the risks associated with underwriting others’ decisions in the face of potential adverse outcomes.¹² Unfortunately, this myopic approach exacerbates the problem of Feltey’s elevation of authorities, viewing risk as an esoteric concept that should remain cloistered in the hands of those who have the authority to officially approve controls. While understanding the dynamics of relinquishing control is important, it is an uncreative and incomplete framework for understanding RDM.

This approach frames commanders as actors who must continuously relinquish decision-making opportunities to subordinates. With recent advances in command-and-control technology, this is no doubt true and must be emphasized. Changes to decision-making levels like Gen. Stanley McChrystal’s “empowered execution” have clear, positive effects on the collective productivity of military units to be sure.¹³ Nevertheless, this misses a critical and often overlooked premise of mission command, namely that all actors are decision-makers whether turning wrenches in the motor pool or leading a brigade on the battlefield.¹⁴ Understanding this, leaders should focus their efforts twofold: on how to responsibly relinquish control, yes, but more importantly on how to develop informed decision-makers in their formations. To do this, they must be more creative. They must decode risk as an element of decision-making and repackage it for use at every level.

Applying the Marine Corps’ single battle concept to RDM allows for a fresh interpretation of risk. The maxim that “actions anywhere in the operational environment can affect actions elsewhere,” clearly applies to risk decisions.¹⁵ As Col.

Capt. Noah Taylor is the operations officer at San Jose Military Entrance Processing Station. He holds a BS in foreign service from Georgetown University and attended the U.S. Marine Corps Expeditionary Warfare School. He has served as mechanized infantry platoon leader and company executive officer in the First Cavalry Division and has one deployment to South Korea.

Todd Simmons noted in lectures to subordinates and students at the Marine Corps' Expeditionary Warfare School, accepting risk does not make it disappear but often shifts that risk, and therefore the risk decisions associated with it, onto other actors in an organization.¹⁶ Viewing risk through this lens permits individuals at every level to see risk not as

Alternatively, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*, uses the example of Capt. William Carpenter Jr., who called for a napalm strike on his company's position as it was about to be overrun by the North Vietnamese Army in June 1966.¹⁷ ADP 6-0 highlights this as an instance where a leader

“While this may appear to be a negative critique of Carpenter's decision-making, it should be seen as an opportunity to highlight the hard, ethical decisions that military leaders will inevitably have to make—with risk calculus and transferal at the center.”

something to be mitigated away to a point of acceptance but rather as a commodity whose acceptance demands energy and decision-making brainpower from other actors on the battlefield.

A couple examples help illustrate how this applies both up and down the chain of command. Consider a hypothetical mechanized infantry company commander whose mission is to clear a defile in order to pass the rest of her battalion and brigade onto follow-on objectives. Upon reaching a large open danger area on the far side of the defile, she identifies a bridge over a swollen river as key terrain and begins to deliberate on whether to extend her formation another five to ten kilometers. Seizing the bridge would ensure the brigade would be able to cross a major linear obstacle. Alternatively, it would stretch her logistics tether back to her battalion, place her formation out of range of the brigade's self-propelled artillery, and challenge her formation's ability to secure the defile. This would force new decisions associated with the risks of supporting her company onto her battalion and brigade commanders. Without an understanding of risk as a transferrable commodity, she may decide to seize the bridgehead—accepting the risks at her level—without implementing controls to mitigate spreading risk across echelons. In this case, accepting the risk would transfer it onto other decision-makers, namely her superiors, and expose the rest of her battalion and brigade to new and unanticipated hazards.

made informed decisions—he was familiar with the impact patterns of napalm—and accepted risk to save his subordinates. Firstly, this case illustrates valorizing a risk taker whose actions resulted in positive outcomes without a critical interrogation of how his decision would have been received had the napalm strike been less precise and accurate. This is an example of *outcome bias*, where hindsight provides a “halo of prescience and boldness.”¹⁸ More importantly it does not reflect how Carpenter's decision to accept risk transferred residual risks onto his subordinates. While this was probably the only right decision in that scenario—and Carpenter's actions should be lauded—its use by ADP 6-0 only captures risk acceptance from an individual decision-maker's perspective. An improved interpretation of this example would highlight the fact that Carpenter was forced to make a *hard* decision where he had to intentionally transfer risk to his subordinates who had little means to mitigate the residual risk of his decision. While this may appear to be a negative critique of Carpenter's decision-making, it should be seen as an opportunity to highlight the hard, ethical decisions that military leaders will inevitably have to make—with risk calculus and transferal at the center.

If risk can transfer from one actor to another, and if we expect individuals at all levels to confront hard decisions, it should be the Army's responsibility to ensure that its members, especially its junior

leaders, have an understanding of how RDM plays out in a complex environment. In short, they must have a vernacular of risk.

Some Challenges in the Current Risk Decision-Making Framework

I learned that good judgement comes from experience and that experience grows out of mistakes.

—General of the Army Omar N. Bradley¹⁹

Strategic corporals are inherently limited by their short term of service and the absence of a framework of risk in which to consider their decision-making—both tactical and garrison. This is no fault of their own and is why team leaders are so often seen as the leaders where the “rubber” of the Army meets the “road” of the battlefield. This lack of experience is not a strict drawback; rather, it is simply a fact of their location in the institution. And yet the operational environment demands decision-making that requires critical thinking and familiarity with the tradeoffs of risk environments. This is where the second limitation—lack of a framework—becomes a potential unnecessary risk for units and the Army as a whole. To develop intuition and judgment, individuals require a “sufficiently regular environment” in which to practice.²⁰ In the case of RDM, the structures to facilitate this kind of practice—usually unit leader professional development programs—do not formally exist, are underresourced, or do not focus on topics like risk. As a result, junior leaders have the potential for making consequential decisions without sufficient understandings of risk and how it figures in their environment.

On the other hand, company commanders—those in charge of training design—face the challenge of having more experience but are the first level of command in the Army. In this light, they usually have minimal levels of exposure to Army systems and processes, namely Army risk decision-making doctrine, and have only just entered the community of leaders who traditionally hold the authority to officially implement controls and approve risk management. This presents a challenge of legitimacy where company commanders hold sway over junior soldiers but often appear young and naive to their noncommissioned officers and superior commanders.

Commanders at echelons battalion and above have more experience and often much more education than their subordinate commanders and leaders. However, saturated in professional discourse that focuses on the decisions and effects of strategic corporals, senior commanders have “sacrificed (trust) for the illusion of control of risk,” which they see as emanating from their own formations.²¹ This breakdown in trust has driven a perception of micromanagement and hypocrisy.

At an institutional level, the Army can do more to refine its doctrine and systems for RDM. RDM at the right level is an important part of existing doctrine as it highlights individual agency of all battlefield actors. Yet this is as far as the Army’s doctrine goes in systematizing the language of risk as it applies to decision-making. The Army needs a more versatile conception of risk to aid in its application of mission command.

The Criticality of the Company and Below

Before discussing what a vernacular of risk should look like, an examination of the location of companies in the Army will provide a better platform for understanding the importance of implementing a vernacular of risk at the company and below. In short, the company is the optimal echelon at which to cultivate a vernacular of risk for circumstantial and educational reasons.

Circumstantial. As the strategic corporal team leaders who translate collective, tactical movements into individual actions, company-grade officers translate operational objectives into tactical actions. The culture of risk within a company can greatly affect how that unit performs in stressful and inherently risky environments. Tactical examples are easy to consider. For instance, if a company commander tasked with guarding a critical piece of equipment (e.g., a Patriot system) has an uninformed preference for mitigating risk to force, their tactical decisions could leave the critical asset unnecessarily vulnerable to enemy attack. Alternatively, if a signal company had a culture with little awareness of risk, it might focus on training mission-essential tasks without adding the friction of variables like degraded or jammed communications; weather effects; or



Capt. Beverly Nordin (left), 173rd Airborne Brigade Support Battalion operations officer, and Command Sgt. Maj. James LaFratta make decisions about the employment of heavy machine guns as their paratroopers conduct a base defense live-fire exercise in Slovenia on 13 March 2018. (Photo by Lt. Col. John Hall, U.S. Army)

chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear operations. This would leave the higher echelons it supports vulnerable in uncertain environments, characterized by such frictions. These examples show how lack of education or even a particular preference for mitigating risks to force at the company level could transfer risks to higher-level commanders and have operational effects.

Educational. Furthermore, the company is the first level that can truly self-support internally planned training. The internal resources of company commodity shops and the number of officers and noncommissioned officers create a rich environment where the commander can organize training yet maintain personal relationships with most of the formation. This enables company commanders to leverage personal connections and develop programs aimed at individualized, professional growth. In this light, the company is the ideal place to cultivate RDM education. When combining the educational accessibility with the circumstantial importance of

companies, the Army must focus its efforts on the company and below if it wants widespread implementation of mission command.

A Vernacular of Risk

*Mission command is the U.S. Army's philosophy of command that empowers subordinate leaders using mutual trust, cohesion, and shared understanding to make decentralized, risk-informed decisions in complex, inherently hazardous environments harmonized through commander's intent.*²²

To begin building a vernacular of risk within companies, company commanders and leaders should begin the conversation by focusing on why risk is an important component of military operations. This should involve an in-depth discussion of cost-benefit calculus culminating with the significance in interpreting hazards efficiently and effectively. In this portion, clarifying the concepts of severity and probability to subordinates is of paramount importance. When confronting situations that have high severity and low probability—as soldiers and leaders



Staff Sgt. Jessica Spencer, a small group leader from 640th Regional Training Institute attached to the U.S. Army Central Noncommissioned Officer Academy, evaluates a squad leader's mission preparation at Camp Buehring, Kuwait, 5 March 2016. The soldiers rehearsed with a sand table to ensure everyone understood and coordinated their movement throughout the operation. (Photo by Sgt. Youtoy Martin, U.S. Army)

inevitably will in their military careers—it is common for people without common language to make drastically different risk decisions. Take gun ownership for self-defense against home invasion or disaster preparedness as examples. Even though home invasions and natural disasters are relatively low-probability events, some people choose to purchase firearms or invest thousands of dollars in “prepping” because of the severity associated with these events. On the other hand, others look at these events and choose not to own firearms or “prep,” because they place emphasis on the low probability of such events. Both are rational interpretations of the risk environment yet offer drastically different approaches to controlling against hazards.

To create a common approach to severity and probability, company commanders must articulate their priorities and vision for company. This would come through the commander's values, unit mission statement, and an emphasis on programs like the thoroughness of preventative maintenance, the importance of incorporating *relevant* safety briefs in all training and articulating the relationship between critical information requirements

and significant incident reporting. In the end, the goal should be to establish a common outlook and approach to risk management that helps junior leaders understand how to balance severity and probability.

Second, company commanders should educate platoon and squad leaders to understand information requirements as RDM tools. Commander's critical information requirements serve to inform commanders of constantly changing mission variables to enable their decision-making. A vernacular of risk would take this a step further and articulate to junior leaders the costs and benefits to a commander of having or not having information from subordinates. Commanders could use this to their advantage in garrison, training, and combat environments. Articulating and framing information requirements effectively, in all environments, will show individuals and leaders where the unit's risk tolerances lie and will enable those leaders to make their own risk-based decisions at the right level.

Third, a vernacular of risk should incorporate an understanding of risk decision-makers at other echelons,

especially higher. This includes describing how the level of the decision-maker's responsibility changes the considerations and controls required to effectively manage risk. For instance, a battalion commander makes risk decisions that affect five hundred soldiers as opposed to a squad leader who makes decisions that affect nine soldiers, yet the consequences can be equal for those soldiers. For example, a squad leader can verbally tell a soldier to find cover, but the battalion commander publishes the entire unit's combat uniform. Both are efforts to physically protect the soldier but they exercise different controls to reduce the risk posed by potential hazards.

With this laid out, leaders should finally frame risk acceptance as a zero-sum concept. Put simply, risk acceptance does not abolish that risk, but often transfers it, sometimes in another form, to another group or actor on the battlefield. Understanding this will help junior leaders look up and out, and better understand the context in which their decisions take place. Ultimately, the vernacular of risk should establish an understanding of risk, to the lowest private, as a commodity whose acceptance changes the battlefield environment and the decisions other actors will have to make.

Before moving on, we should disclaim the idea that a vernacular of risk is meant to create "good" decision-makers. As Townsend et al. point out, many fear being "criticized or censured if the result of their acceptance of risk and employment of initiative comes up short."²³ Instead of seeing decisions as good or bad in themselves, this article understands that "good" decisions do not necessarily yield good outcomes and vice versa. As such, it does not intend to suggest that the Army can "optimize" decision-making. Instead, a vernacular of risk should be seen as a way of including risk calculus as an element of decision-making.

Recommendations for Every Level

To develop a vernacular of risk, individuals at all levels can make small adjustments to enhance common understanding and help manage the impacts of risk transfers vertically and horizontally in their organizations.

Individuals and Junior Leaders

- **Learn the vernacular of risk.** Junior leaders should commit themselves to understanding how leaders above them frame decisions in terms of risk.

- **Frame all decisions in terms of cost-benefit strategies with hazard mitigation techniques.** Breaking down decision-making into the doctrinal components of risk will begin shaping the way junior leaders understand complex problems and can be used in any environment from the barracks room to combat.
- **Seek out risk-taking opportunities.** Risk decisions should motivate junior leaders to grow in their attributes and competencies. They should view risk decisions as opportunities.
- **Embrace acceptable failure.** Junior leaders should see failure as a positive learning experience when done in a controlled environment, and where failure is acceptable. This will help them build a growth mindset and develop their judgment and personal understanding of RDM.

Company Commanders

- **Make risk language accessible to junior leaders.** As the "first commanders" in the Army, company commanders have the obligation to translate concepts of risk, authority, and responsibility into layman's terms and establish a common understanding of right-level RDM within their units.
- **Train, educate, and mentor platoon, squad, and team leaders in deliberate risk planning using DD Form 2977, *Deliberate Risk Assessment Worksheet (DRAW)*.** The DRAW is the Army's most accessible way for coaching inexperienced leaders through deliberate risk management. This will help leaders begin to develop their judgment and transition their thinking from deliberate to intuitive.
- **Plan and prioritize ethical/tactical decision-making exercises (EDMX) that highlight risk decisions.** EDMXs and case studies are low-risk opportunities for developing subordinates' decision-making abilities and intuition. This should be an environment where junior leaders can receive feedback in a "sufficiently regular environment" to begin building their judgment. These activities require dedicated time and adequate resourcing. As such, company commanders must schedule these on their unit training calendars and protect the allocated time and resources to execute them effectively.

Senior Commanders

- **Provide copies of Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 5-19, *Risk Management*, to subordinates.** Many units struggle to maintain publications accounts. Senior commanders should prioritize unit doctrine libraries to ensure that subordinate units have adequate, print reference materials to build a vernacular of risk.
- **Emphasize RDM in professional development programs.** Targeting RDM through EDMXs in battalion and higher leader professional development programs will not only offer commanders an opportunity to focus on risk with their subordinate commanders and leaders but will allow them to share their personal interpretations and nuanced understanding of RDM as a way of establishing trust and shared understanding.
- **Highlight risk locations in their commander's intent.** Senior commanders should indicate where they personally see risk to shape their subordinates' understandings of the unit's risk tolerances. Framing these "risk locations" as critical vulnerabilities and including them in their intent will help subordinates to couch their decision-making in terms of leveraging the unit's strengths while protecting its vulnerabilities.

Commanders at All Levels

- **Foster a risk-aware climate.** Commanders should prioritize risk awareness instead of risk acceptance. Doing so through a vernacular of risk will unlock the "ways" to implement the "means" of disciplined initiative that will help achieve the "ends" of mission command.
- **Create spaces for candid communication.** Creating "cultural islands," as recommended by DeLeon and Tripodi, will create collaborative spaces where senior commanders can deliberately reduce the stress of performance anxiety produced by overzealous careerism.²⁴
- **Exercise patience and forgiveness with subordinate commanders.** "Some mistakes are made with great confidence."²⁵ While poor risk calculus from subordinates may frustrate more experienced commanders, patience, forgiveness, and humility will create a positive environment in which subordinates can learn to be more effective risk decision-makers.

The Army as an Organization

- **Publicize and integrate the Joint Risk Assessment Tool (JRAT).** Many leaders are unaware of JRAT's existence. JRAT streamlines the deliberate risk assessment process by offering a flexible tool for filling out the DD Form 2977, *Deliberate Risk Assessment Worksheet (DRAW)*. Using this tool will help more leaders avoid simple mistakes, like not listing the highest risk hazard first on a DRAW. Like many things in the Army, the tool exists; many are simply unaware of its existence.
- **Elevate the position of risk in ADP 6-0.** The Army should make risk the "language" of mission command. Mission command requires disciplined initiative informed by shared understanding, and a vernacular of risk is the framework through which commanders and leaders achieve that. Making risk as a commodity central to ADP 6-0 will synthesize how leaders and subordinates use risk to communicate and interact in inherently hazardous situations and will support junior leaders in participating in collective problem-solving.
- **Introduce the concept of risk earlier in its professional education.** The Army should formally introduce the concept of risk, ATP 5-19, and the DD Form 2977 in precommissioning programs and in advanced leader's courses. Introducing a working understanding of risk earlier in professional military education will jumpstart the process of building a vernacular of risk.
- **Realign the values emphasized for promotion.** As Rasak notes, the incentive structure for officer promotion does not incentivize "boldness, creativity, and aggressiveness."²⁶ Instead of relying on extrinsic motivators like the number of "most qualifieds" an officer receives on evaluations leading up to promotion, the Army should continue to emphasize and develop programs like the Command Assessment Program and Leader 360 assessments that can better target attributes of intrinsic motivation. As DeLeon and Tripodi note, "intrinsic and autonomous motivation allows people to have the power of choice, which has a strong effect on performance."²⁷ Tools like the Command Assessment Program and Leader 360 provide opportunities

to assess qualitative data that captures individual behaviors driven by intrinsic motivation.

Challenges to Implementation

Some might argue that a vernacular of risk could lead to risk averse behavior at junior levels or that teaching risk decision-making to inexperienced people will overcomplicate their understanding of military operations. Under this critique, junior leaders would find themselves in decision paralysis, made anxious by the task of considering all the risks and ramifications of their potential decisions.

While this concern has validity, its premise—that junior leaders are young and susceptible to information overload—is an affront to the capability of our junior leaders and does a disservice to the institution as a whole. Teaching RDM earlier and developing a vernacular of risk should not be construed as an expectation for tactical genius at junior levels of leadership. It is also not intended as a cure-all for the Army's inconsistent implementation of mission command. Instead, a vernacular of risk gives a working language that focuses on risk locations and risk tolerances, that units can use to develop the trust and shared understanding required to build better decision-makers and realize mission command's ideals.

Alternatively, some might argue that RDM education would incentivize more reckless behavior in the name of pursuing the limits of a unit's risk tolerances. This also runs afoul, as the premise for a vernacular of risk is that the Army operates in inherently hazardous environments that require informed decisions prioritizing the mission. A vernacular of risk, with risk as a transferrable commodity, promotes decision-makers who clearly see the tradeoffs of the environment, not ones who seek to push the boundaries of risk.

In this light, leaders at all levels, and in all locations, should use the recommendations above to work with subordinates and develop a risk-aware climate through training and education. This is a leader responsibility that should be treated with care. A vernacular of risk should be used to flatten the framework of risk so that junior leaders can use the definitions and terms of risk management to understand their decisions and learn from them.

In an organization that strives for “decentralized execution,” it is never too early to start learning, and only through learning a vernacular of risk will decision-making become a collective endeavor.²⁸

Conclusion

To fix the Army's mission command implementation problem requires clear language to harmonize disciplined initiative within the commander's intent. It requires a vernacular of risk that democratizes the terminology and gives a framework to decision-makers down to the lowest-level individuals in the Army. To achieve this, the Army will have to implement a strategy across individual and organizational lines of effort. It should refine its training and doctrine to reflect risk as a commodity and adopt RDM as a collective effort that all individuals are engaged in.

The fulcrum for effecting this change resides at the company level. Company commanders should embrace a risk-aware culture and communicate using a vernacular of risk, both up and down the chain of command. As translators between senior commanders and junior leaders, they should use risk as the terminology to translate operational objectives into tactical actions. Only through a shared understanding of RDM, can the company commander and his or her unit exercise mission command.

Commanders at all levels should work to create “cultural islands” and training scenarios where subordinates can learn from acceptable failures before applying RDM in more critical environments. The success of junior leaders depends on their ability to learn in hazardous situations with sufficiently regular feedback to help them develop their judgment. This should happen in the classrooms as well as the field.

At the end of the day, our junior leaders are intelligent and motivated to accomplish the mission. Given the right tools and framework, the strategic corporals of the Army are the ones who will put mission command into practice. To enable that, we need to help them become risk decision-makers who understand the environment and context within which the act. If we fail to do so, we cannot expect mission command to materialize. We must invest in those who will make mission command a reality. ■

Notes

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20. Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 240.

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22. The author rephrased the definition of "mission command" from ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, Glossary-3.

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25. Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 243.

26. Rasak, "We Don't Run with Scissors," 77.

27. DeLeon and Tripodi, "Eliminating Micromanagement," 90.

28. ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, 1-3.



Understanding Combined Arms Warfare is a film that defines and outlines the important aspects of modern combined arms operations. Designed to support the Captains Career Course, this documentary is not a complete history of combined arms warfare, but is intended to highlight the most important aspects of the subject.

Covering doctrinal and equipment developments in World War I, contrasting French and German armies mechanization during the interwar period, and showing how the United States applied combined arms operations in World War II, the film can be found on YouTube at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Educational-Services/Documentaries/Combined-Arms-Warfare/>.