The Next Gunpowder:
The Power of BCKS and the Command Net Forum

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I MAGINE A BATTALION or brigade commander able to quickly and easily access a well developed data bank from online knowledge resources and from information provided by members of a virtual community that shares common experiences and solutions to specific issues of command. Imagine further that commander being able to readily discuss such issues online in discussion groups made up of current and former commanders who face, or have faced, similar challenges.

Such a system now exists. Command Net is a functioning online professional forum designed specifically for past, present, and future battalion and brigade commanders. It offers large amounts of data relevant to brigade and battalion command while it hosts just such virtual discussions among commanders on topics of concern and interest. The implications are profound. At no time in the Army's history have battalion and brigade commanders had the kind of advantages such a Web-based discussion platform provides. Knowledge can now be shared on a massive scale among peers, and with unprecedented efficiency and speed.

Command Net is a key initiative within BCKS—the Battle Command Knowledge System, centered at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The mission of BCKS is to support the online generation, application, management, and exploitation of Army knowledge in order to foster collaboration among Soldiers and units. The forum enables the sharing of expertise and experience; facilitates leader development and intuitive decision making; and supports the development of organizations and teams. Its objectives are to—

- Enhance professional education.
- Facilitate exchange of knowledge.
- Foster leader development.
- Support doctrine development.
- Support lessons learned.
- Support training.
- Enhance battle command.[1]

Command Net has been designed specifically to enable discussions between commanders in such areas of interest as warfighting, military law, command philosophy, and standard operating procedures, among others. Sponsored by the School for Command Preparation at Fort Leavenworth, Command Net is a natural offspring of the powerful CompanyCommand. army.mil, an online community with which many commanders are already familiar, and the BCKS S3-XO Net professional forum (sponsored by the Center for Army Tactics at Fort Leavenworth).

The technology platform supporting Command Net allows commanders to participate in their community of practitioners in a myriad of ways. When commanders register for an account in Command Net, they give enough information about their backgrounds and areas of expertise to allow other members to locate their names when conducting a keyword search. After registration, commanders are expected to contribute to the collective database by posting documents or briefings of general concern or relevance that may start or stimulate discussion threads. The postings provide context for discussion and facilitate the networking of members through virtual interface with others sharing similar problems and challenges. Through conversations and interactions sparked by the discussion threads on Command Net, battalion and brigade commanders can access a treasure-trove of military experience of potentially inestimable value. Over time, this process will not only enhance the professional education of incoming commanders, but also support individual decision making during actual command in battle.

Although individual learning is important, organizational learning through such collaborative methods is increasingly essential to the Army's overall success. To promote the internal military culture required for organizational learning, students at the Command and General Staff College are familiarized with Command Net. Once they leave the schoolhouse and take command, they can then use BCKS as a reach-back tool.

Power of Access, Exchange of Knowledge

Because BCKS and Command Net exploit the true power of the information age, they may eventually come to be viewed as being among the most significant advances in military affairs since gunpowder. The proliferation of centers of information to which soldiers and commanders have instantaneous access is changing fundamentally the way we will manage the application of military force in the future.

Information is among the key elements for exercising control of any kind—including control of military power. The fundamentals of control in past conflicts were shaped in large measure by the (often restrictive) methods used for gathering and synthesizing information and then disseminating the results to users. Not surprisingly, today's proliferation of means to

information access has not only changed the dynamics governing how information itself is collected, processed, and distributed, but has also changed with it the fundamental dynamics of control.

Previously, in the competition for control, whoever was the gatekeeper of information collection and dissemination processes controlled information, thus controlling its associated entity. Before the proliferation of information access capabilities, media outlets that transmitted information were relatively few in number and weren't widely interconnected; as a result, control over the processes for collecting and disseminating information remained largely the purview of those who could or would grant access. In contrast, today, even though there are ongoing challenges regarding how information is gathered and synthesized, dramatic advancements in the means to broadly disseminate information through the worldwide Web have shifted information control away from a select few to virtually anyone who has access to the Internet.

Information access by way of cheap technology solutions has proliferated across the globe to every sector of society, including those who mean to do only harm. Moreover, because any person at any echelon of an organization can, at least theoretically, gain unprecedented access to formerly restricted forms of information, the complexity of solution sets to issues caused by access has increased exponentially. Similarly, because of untethered access throughout the global community, the sheer number of problems demanding resolution has also increased. As a result, although the emerging global

information system has remarkable potential for supporting those who would solve problems, it also provides equally great potential for those who want to promote an unacceptable societal agenda.

Why has this happened? The answer lies in each individual's ability to access any and all types of information, which in turn has removed the controls—both formal and informal—that previously governed the use of information in society. From the perspective of those who deem knowledge sharing to be among the features of technology that promote the highest social good, such universal access is a highly positive development. They believe that information access will ultimately empower social strata previously bound by the shackles of ignorance and denied access to information that would end their intellectual dark age. By connecting the world in a virtual global society that can share knowledge, intelligent inquiry and informed opinion, information empowerment will be key to removing barriers to social growth and political participation.

While thinkers and practitioners are still debating the final impact of these revolutionary developments in information access, potential concerns should not inhibit our developing and extending the processes of knowledge sharing within the military. Harnessing the collective intelligence of the military as a professional body promises to be a tremendous enabler. Toward the objective of exploiting the Army's collective knowledge and experience, BCKS Command Net has an ever-expanding capability to collect, collate, and distribute specific bodies of knowledge—bodies adapted for either the Army as a whole or for members of discrete specialties—unimpeded by the previous restrictions of geography, time, and physics.

A few real-world examples might best illustrate how unfettered access can generate military power. Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth Cerney teaches and directs the U.S. Army Reserve's Battalion and Brigade Pre-Command Course. To facilitate knowledge exchange and to enhance the professional education of his students, he started a discussion in Command Net. Cerney posted a request asking current commanders to share their unit's training guidance with his students. Within a week, he received replies with attachments of training guidance from commanders in the field.

Cerney directed his students to join Command Net and download the experienced commanders' training guidance from the discussion thread in the course topic folder. The students and Cerney then used the guidance to generate classroom discussion. Discussion stimulated thought, and thought yielded feedback, which they posted on Command Net so that each contributing current commander could read the assessments of his or her guidance. After considering the changes the classes recommended and adjusting his guidance accordingly, one commander emailed his revised guidance to Cerney for posting on Command Net. He commented on the value of getting feedback from the students and how interesting it was to see their thoughts, thus closing the feedback loop in the discussion thread. Cerney continues to facilitate this ongoing discussion with each new course.

The experience of Lieutenant Colonel Marcus De Oliveira, an observer-controller at the Joint Readiness Training Center who started a reconnaissance squadron discussion forum on Command Net, produced similarly positive results. Over the course of six months, De Oliveira initiated and facilitated a discussion thread that provided feedback from rotations as commanders posted replies. Due to the observations collected, the discussion thread effected a change in Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs).

Apart from changes to training guidance and TTPs, such feedback will also be key in facilitating needed changes to doctrine in a more timely manner. As an example, after discussions within the Air Force and Army training communities, Colonel Mark R. Mueller, Joint and Combined Arms Training Directorate, wanted to investigate other issues pertaining to air-to-ground training. Mueller therefore posted a request on Command Net for feedback from battalion and brigade commanders. He received numerous insightful replies from experienced commanders.

Saving Commanders Time

Currently, all future commanders are familiarized with the capabilities of Command Net during pre-command training. These future senior leaders are exposed to the system's tools and links and shown how to navigate and contribute to the site. More importantly, they assume ownership of the Command Net forum and its potential. The goal of BCKS and the School for Command Preparation is to expand and evolve the forum to create a broad but professional information repository for commanders at all levels. Command Net is the digital portal to command excellence. By teaming with our customers, we at Command Net continue to improve

the forum, maintaining its relevancy and harnessing the power of collective professional wisdom. We aim to provide commanders with professional development tools and information related to research topics on battle command, commandership, rear detachment commands, non-traditional commands, and the human dimensions of command. We also offer professional reading lists for commanders and serve as a place to find qualitatively evaluated recommendations about relevant issues. Other BCKS goals and concerns are to—

● Expand the learning environment of the School for Command Preparation by putting the Pre-Command Course and Tactical Commanders Development Program curriculum on the Web, along with other online educational tools.

● Increase the sharing and exchange of tacit knowledge from all corners of the profession as it relates to the art and science of command.

● Give commanders access to subject matter experts in various fields who can offer a true reach-back capability.

● Expand the professional body of knowledge through collaborative teaming that combines the theoretical underpinnings of research with real-time feedback from the laboratory of real-world operations—all through networked forums.

To provide pertinent, fast, and unfiltered access to any type of information related to the profession of arms that commanders might need is the crux of our challenge. What information do commanders need, and when? These questions need answering if commanders are to truly capitalize on access. Command Net also seeks to save battalion and brigade commanders time. As the community continues to grow with the addition of new members, so will the likelihood that someone has already contended with a problem another community member may be facing. Using the search features in Command Net, a member can quickly discover if anyone else has already developed a solution. If a solution cannot be uncovered in a keyword search, then posting a discussion thread might solicit useful feedback from other commanders. Another benefit is that such interactions further link our Army's strategic and operational leaders to its tactical level commanders. By registering and posting issues, experienced commanders will contribute to the profession's collective knowledge and receive real-time feedback from current commanders—a win-win result for our Army.

Future Direction of Command Net

In the future, Command Net will use its discussion forums to garner vignettes from the field and develop instructive scenarios based on leadership and command challenges. A sample scenario, such as the following from the "Tacit Knowledge for Military Leaders: Battalion Commander Questionnaire," may be placed on Command Net and tied to a discussion thread where commanders not only rate their choices of the worst to best actions while viewing the choices of their peers, but also participate in a dialogue about those choices:

"*You are a battalion commander and it is the end of your first battle at a major externally evaluated training exercise during which your unit revealed some major shortcomings. During the After Action Review, the Chief Evaluator is highly critical of the battalion and dwells on all the negative things your unit did that day. You carefully record all of the negative observations, but you know full well that the battalion also did some very positive things that day. What should you do?*"[2]

Using this scenario as an example, ideal discussion postings would include commanders sharing tacit knowledge from their experiences in the field. From those discussions and experiences, we could then develop a collaborative vignette, which would then be posted online in a simple slide presentation or more elaborately via audio or visual files.[3] The vignettes could also be used in the schoolhouses and on other professional forums to enhance professional education, facilitate knowledge exchange, and foster leader development.

In sum, the BCKS Command Net online professional forum encourages the building and transfer of knowledge by saving members time as they go about solving problems, by fostering collaboration among experts, by socializing new members into the community's belief system, and most importantly, by serving as the focal group for the community's passion for the art and science of command. *MR*

NOTES

1. "Battle Command Knowledge System (BCKS) Mission and Objectives," Combined Arms Center, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

2. "Tacit Knowledge for Military Leaders: Battalion Commander Questionnaire," U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, Fort Leavenworth Research Unit, 1999, A4.

3. The vignette is considered collaborative because the brief incident or scene used in the case study is developed through the interactions of the discussion participants.