



3rd Place 2013 DePuy Contest Winner

(U.S. Navy photo by Chief Petty Officer Josh Ives)

Sgt. 1st Class Sal Somoza, security force team member for Provincial Reconstruction Team Farah, motions toward the Farah justice center building 4 May 2013 while maintaining security during a meeting with the Farah provincial chief justice in Farah City.

# The Path to Mission Command

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**L**eadership development is the fundamental basis for a U.S. Army that practices mission command in everything it does. Mission command and leader development are interdependent. Mission command is how we fight, and leader development is part of how we prepare to fight. Leader development that excludes the principles of mission command, or worse, that preaches mission command without putting it into practice, is missing out on the exploitation of human potential, knowledge, and experience that mission command allows. However, a U.S. Army that operates according to the principles of mission command does

not just happen naturally, especially in peacetime. How effectively the Army applies the principles of mission command will be the product of leader development in a peacetime environment.

Translating a vision of mission command into practice through leader development in the domains of education, training, and experience is a challenge because of the tension between the presence of uncertainty and the need for synchronization. Commanders need to balance the art of command with the science of control. Mission command has great potential to enable operational success under conditions of uncertainty.

However, commanders may be likely to try to manage uncertainty by exercising a greater degree of centralized control, counter to the philosophy of mission command. Even when synchronization is needed, commanders still must balance how they exercise control over their capabilities with the art of command. In this way, commanders can exploit opportunities brought about by local successes or enemy weaknesses.

The solution to how commanders and leaders can maximize synchronization and thrive despite uncertainty comes from the preparation that makes mission command possible. If leader development in education, training, and experience at all echelons builds a solid foundation of trust built on intent and shared understanding, then units will be able to accomplish their assigned missions at a lower cost than they would if forced to operate in a more directed manner.

## Development of the Army's Mission Command Philosophy

Mission command as described in Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-0, *Mission Command*, seems to have two historical sources of inspiration.<sup>1</sup> The first source is the German tradition of *Auftragstaktik*, or mission-oriented tactics, which broadly describes the German army's commitment to initiative, aggression, and judgment that was the root of their tactical excellence in the 19th and 20th centuries.<sup>2</sup> *Auftragstaktik* was embodied in XIX Panzer Corps' river crossing in Sedan in May 1940. The German army's practices allowed it to seize the initiative, even when outnumbered, and to succeed despite lapses in communications and other unexpected difficulties.<sup>3</sup>

The second source of mission command principles is the pragmatic and democratic traditions of the United States as it fielded armies to win wars as quickly as possible with the lowest loss of life.<sup>4</sup> Initiative in the Army's history is as much a bottom-up process as top-down, and mission command seeks to exploit this proud tradition. Certainly this was the case over the past 12 years where decentralized counterinsurgency and security force assistance were the norm for conventional Army units. Before 2003, operational plans had a traditional focus on relatively short-term operations with traditional military capabilities. Now battalions conduct stability operations, for instance, for a year or longer. Junior leaders

had to shape their operational environments not only through fires and obstacles but also through their interaction with the population and their assessment of pieces of infrastructure, social networks, and political alliances. These realities meant leaders at all levels would need to be able to manage uncertainty.

Given these realities, codifying mission command as the way the Army would conduct operations was a necessary and logical step. However, the development of leaders and units who can operate under this philosophy must be the product of conscious thought and effort, starting with education.

## Education for Mission Command

Army leadership schools, beginning with the Warrior Leader Course for noncommissioned officers and precommissioning training for officers, must stress the principles of mission command. A good place to start is with the study of successful leaders who executed and won in conditions of uncertainty. These case studies should be used to accentuate the critical thinking of leaders at all levels and should distinguish skilled execution from luck.

Leaders must confront the costs and risks of their choices. Sometimes, the way a commander chooses to accomplish the mission carries unintended long-term consequences. The emphasis on learning to balance initiative and risk will become even more important at the more senior levels of schooling as leaders must think in terms of operations and campaigns.

Army professional military education should continue to emphasize doctrine as the baseline for thinking about operations to ensure that all professionals have a shared language. This is essential for creating the shared understanding necessary for mission command.

As Michael Howard discussed in his seminal article, "The Use and Abuse of Military History," soldiering is the only profession where individuals do not practice against a live opponent for long periods. Education, particularly in history and leadership, can give insight into principles that training and experience can refine into useful practices.<sup>5</sup> Education provides insights into how others have solved military problems.

As the Army prepares to conduct operations in an increasingly interconnected and complex world, knowing about the world matters for both commanders and leaders as they must grapple with complexity





(Photo by Sgt. Mike Pryor, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division PAO)

Sgt. Jake Richardson, 1st Lt. Travis Atwood, and Staff Sgt. Michael Mullahy take cover while Mullahy prepares to fire an M136 AT4 rocket launcher at an insurgent position during a firefight in Baghdad's Adhamiyah neighborhood 16 June 2007.

in order to formulate clear intent. Self-education and unit programs are a vital part of ensuring all soldiers understand the complexities of the world in which they will fight. Commanders must imbue their subordinates with intellectual, social, and cultural understanding but must understand what their training has provided. They should study the work of researchers with different points of view, particularly in social sciences, where scholarly researchers do not always agree. For example, a unit that read one of Karen Armstrong's books to prepare for a deployment to the Middle East would have a very different understanding of the cultures and religions of that area than a unit that read from the works of Bernard Lewis.<sup>6</sup>

Looking to the Pacific, very different views on the growing power of China can be found in Henry Kissinger's *On China* versus Aaron L. Friedberg's *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*.<sup>7</sup> It is the job of commanders and leaders to consider a variety of viewpoints about the world to build the understanding

and empathy necessary to accomplish their mission. In this, mission command is rooted not just in formal leader preparation but also in self-study and reflection.

### Training for Mission Command

The changes to how the Army trained after the Vietnam War were revolutionary in character.<sup>8</sup> Tools such as task-condition-standard, the Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System, combat training centers, Mission Command Training Program, and the after action review fundamentally reshaped the Army after 1973. These changes have put meat on the bones of Rommel's dictum that "the best form of welfare for the troops is *first-class training*, for this saves unnecessary casualties."<sup>9</sup> Now, under the U.S. Army's mission command philosophy, training is where the preparation of education will bear its first fruit. However, emphasis on mission command in support of unified land operations dictates additional changes to how the Army trains.

The first change is that units must primarily focus on what the commander deems necessary. The process of the commander's dialogue, described in ADRP 7-0, *Training Units and Developing Leaders*, helps commanders select mission-essential tasks from their capabilities-based mission-essential task lists that they and their higher commanders deem most important to train.<sup>10</sup> In this way, commanders can focus the unit's individual, leader, and collective training. This dialogue must include an understanding of the unit's probable missions and threats, and the operational and mission variables the unit is most likely to encounter.

Within this dialogue, commanders will endeavor to hone their skills in both of the Army's core competencies: wide area security and combined arms maneuver. Each of these competencies contains elements of offense, defense, and stability as commanders attempt to impose their will and seize the initiative in a shifting environment of threats, challenges, and opportunities. To make matters even more challenging, units must swing between these two competencies with little or no warning.

A major challenge for commanders that empower their subordinates is understanding what their subordinates are doing and if they are transitioning operations properly. The difficulties of transition were evident in the summer of 2003 as the Army's and Marine Corps' offensive operations morphed into stability operations.<sup>11</sup> Commanders must train subordinates in how and when to adjust their execution to meet their higher command's intent and respond to what is happening in order to seize and retain the initiative in a chaotic environment. This means training not just for combined arms maneuver and wide area security but also for how to transition between them multiple times in the same exercise. A training environment that mixes live-fire with situational-training-exercise lanes in both built-up and rural areas would be ideal; but these transitions could also be a part of staff drills, fragmentary order drills for commanders and leaders, and sand-table exercises. While it might be easier for units to focus on one mission type, commanders must recognize a clear division between combined arms maneuver and wide area security does not exist. Commanders must learn to use the philosophy of mission command in training to prepare their subordinates for the uncertainties and rapid changes that are a part of operations.

A major part of training is using mission command to synchronize combined arms maneuver and wide area security. Given the relatively slower pace of wide area security, vertical and horizontal communication and cooperation generally are easier but still require the commitment of leaders to make their units learning organizations. However, the high threat and fast pace of combined arms maneuver is more demanding in terms of the need for synchronization. According to ADRP 6-0, the doctrinal solution for orders that can assure mission success is the principle "use mission orders."<sup>12</sup> However, ADRP 6-0's discussion of mission orders is underdeveloped regarding synchronization, especially if considered in isolation from the other principles of mission command and from additional doctrine on plans and orders. For example, ADRP 6-0 omits a detailed discussion of the enemy or terrain *from the situation* paragraph.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, for mission orders to work, commanders need to build cohesive teams and provide a clear intent. Commanders and staffs need to create shared understanding by articulating their understanding of operational and tactical factors. Without the staff or mission command information systems of a battalion, a company commander and subordinates might have to depend on their own limited resources (especially time) to perform the detailed analysis of terrain, enemy, and civilian considerations that are part of troop leading procedures.

In operations, the exercise of mission command requires the bare number of enabling and restrictive control measures both for execution of the current operation and the exploitation of success. A central principle of maneuver warfare is to reinforce success. The use of reserves, the commitment of resources, and the timely use of fragmentary orders should support both local success and give commanders and units the ability to respond rapidly to changes in the situation. Fragmentary orders, branch plans, and sequels must take into account both what the enemy is likely to do and what the unit's reconnaissance efforts determine the enemy is doing now.

Part of mission orders directs commanders to rely on "lateral coordination between units."<sup>14</sup> Mission command, therefore, dictates the higher command should authorize direct liaison between its subordinates and multiple other agencies and units. These other units

must understand that requests and coordination will come from multiple echelons, and higher commanders and staffs must clearly communicate their priorities to all elements in order to allow everyone to prioritize their efforts. This, in turn, will dictate developing either standard operating procedures based on the mission or more detailed orders at the brigade level or higher to determine the proper allocation of resources.

While training can never fully replicate the stress and demands of armed conflict, it must come as close as possible. However, in the era of declining budgets, leaders must also find ways to train that prepare soldiers while being good stewards of taxpayer dollars. As H. John Poole, a theorist of maneuver warfare, writes in a discussion of doing more with less in peacetime, “there is never ‘enough money’ to train.”<sup>15</sup> CTC rotations and major force-on-force exercises are expensive. At the soldier and squad level, teamwork can be built through daily physical conditioning and on small pieces of terrain. Similarly, at the staff and command levels, staff routines can put into practice the steps of the *military decisionmaking process* and other doctrinal tools for most planning. By using doctrinal tools in garrison, the split between garrison and field operations can be reduced.

## Experience for Mission Command

Finally, the art of mission command comes from intelligently applied experience. Until commanders can gain that experience, others must share their experiences, good and bad, with their subordinates as part education and training. If subordinates know why their superiors are stressing certain points, they are more likely to be able to function effectively within the commander’s intent. Commanders can teach the importance of all-around security or of boresighting in darkness by describing how success or failure rested on these practices in the past. Units can develop standard operating procedures based on practices the commander deems important. Commanders should ensure subordinates understand why certain tasks or drills are standardized and invite feedback on how to improve them.

One of the great challenges for commanders exercising mission command is to build combined arms teams at the lowest level while enabling training and mentorship that exploit the hard-won expertise of senior-level subject matter experts. The exercise of mission command is highly personal, and, as such, runs up against

the “plug-and-play” mentality. Capabilities attach quickly, but understanding takes time. Therefore, commanders must create combined arms teams as early as possible in the training cycle with as much stability as possible.

No part of the Army has experienced this challenge more keenly over the last decade than the fires community. The demand-driven Army force generation rotational cycle that builds teams quickly and the practice of assigning firing batteries and battalions nontraditional missions have led artillery units to lose proficiency in translating observation into fires as they have become trainers, route security teams, and area security experts. The reassignment of company-level forward observers to maneuver battalions was an immediate gain for their capabilities as they gained an “effects manager” at the company level. At the same time, it was a blow to the ability of brigades and above to mass lethal fires. The return of the division artillery has started to correct this deficiency. However, company teams still need a relationship with their observers. An observer must be able to maneuver dismounted with an infantry platoon or fight his Bradley alongside tanks if he is to be an integral part of the combined arms team.

A compromise is in order. Observers need to be sent back to the artillery battalion and placed in an observer battery, while battalion- and brigade-level fire support officers and noncommissioned officers remain at the maneuver headquarters. The planning and synchronization requirements of brigade and battalion headquarters demand dedicated fire supporters be present to make sure the efforts of the higher headquarters are synchronized, but the observers at the company or troop level need to go back to the artillery battalion to be mentored by the most experienced fire supporter in the brigade. This will enable artillery battalion commanders to develop their most inexperienced fire supporters, while giving battalion and brigade commanders the day-to-day expertise they need to integrate fires into all their operations. Company observers need to attend the training meetings of their maneuver companies and spend the maximum remaining amount of time training with them. The particulars of this relationship need to be clear to all the parties involved to prevent misunderstandings, mishandling, and misuse. Nothing is more frustrating than trying to reward good performance or improve poor performance and run up





(Photo Sgt. Andrew A. Reagan, 304th Public Affairs Detachment)

First Lt. Jerry M. Garner of Dearing, Georgia, a platoon leader in the Georgia National Guard's 48th Brigade, addresses members of his platoon, as well as members of the Vermont National Guard who are replacing his unit, prior to a logistics convoy 17 March 2010 from Forward Operating Base Lightning to Combat Outpost Herrera in Paktya Province, Afghanistan .

against misunderstanding related to the relationship between units.

In terms of preparation, mission command will not always feel like mission command as commanders make their vision, purpose, and priorities clear through exercises, professional development, and counseling. This preparation is where leaders will become acquainted with the strengths and weaknesses within their team. A model for this combination of training, professional development, and consultation is Horatio Nelson's group of Royal Navy captains in the years before Trafalgar. Self-styled as the "Band of Brothers," these captains met nightly with Nelson as they discussed how best to fight and destroy the French fleet. These highly personal consultations, combined with Nelson's good tactical sense and the high level of preparation within the Royal Navy, provided the British with a decisive advantage in 1805. Even though Nelson's fleet possessed a new state-of-the-art signaling system, his flagship did not need to

send any signals during the battle. Nelson's level of trust in his captains was so high because they understood his desire for them to be aggressive. Thus, Nelson and his commanders enjoyed a strong mutual trust and shared understanding of the expectations for aggressive offensive action, and thus were able to destroy Napoleon's combined fleet.<sup>16</sup>

The pursuit and practice of mission command may ultimately serve as a way to mitigate the rising cost of technology because it will allow trust to take the place of constant connectivity. The common understanding of intent built through training is far more reliable than any communications system.<sup>17</sup> This understanding will in turn facilitate commanders' freedom of action on the battlefield, as they will be free to place themselves where they deem most critical rather than where they can best link into the various networks. Knowing that the U.S. Army is dependent on technology, any future enemy will seek to disrupt it. Leaders must learn to act to achieve their

higher commander's intent in the absence of guidance, and only leaders trained, educated, and experienced working within the principles of mission command will be able to function in such a way.

Another challenge to the Army implementing mission command will be preserving its spirit in garrison. Without the challenge of deployment and without

the money or space to conduct extensive collective training in the field, units will face succumbing to the friction inherent in the Army's bureaucracy. Taskings will multiply. Training might become a method of evaluation rather than a chance to learn and improve. With these decreased opportunities for evaluation, commanders will be tempted to exercise ever-tighter control over subordinates during field exercises in order to achieve success. This is where the discipline of mission command must come into play. Leaders must not tolerate failures of standards but they also must design training events so soldiers may

learn from mistakes. This will require both the time and the resources for the unit to retrain in the task it is attempting to master. This means extra time built into field exercises to permit retraining, rather than keeping a tight schedule that forces units onto the next lane without the chance to retrain, improve, and win.

Additionally, in terms of experience, the Army must learn to do less. Taking soldiers and leaders away from their units in support of taskings that do not enhance combat effectiveness is contrary to the spirit of mission command. Effective combined arms teams do not come

from an environment where combat and winning do not have the highest priority. When protocol or ceremonial taskings matter more than preparation for war, the message is clear about what the local leadership values. This is a matter for senior leaders. This will mean commanders saying "no" to worthwhile but ultimately extraneous things. While something is lost when

soldiers are not sent to sing and dance, run in races, or stand in front of static displays, the result would be an Army more focused on winning and soldiers who know that commanders care about them, their time, and ultimately their lives.

The exercise of mission command may also face challenges in the ever-present realm of legal restrictions on actions. The rules of engagement are hard and fast, and therefore commanders at every level must ensure they are as minimally restrictive and as clearly understood as possible. Training events must have rules of engagement that are appropriate, and a discussion of how the

rules of engagement shaped the actions of commanders, leaders, and units needs to be part of every relevant after action review. Standard classroom training for the rules of engagement often degenerates into a series of increasingly outlandish and far-fetched "what-ifs," a process not assisted by the fact that what is permissible under the rules of engagement often depends on the perceptions of the individual soldier under stress and the later judgments of the investigators. By forcing soldiers and leaders to make hard, often difficult choices involving rapidly shifting threats and then examining those choices, practical and legal



(Photo by Dan Bohmer, Zabul Agribusiness Development Team)

Staff Sgt. Jon Hansen, a member of the Mississippi Army National Guard, and 1st Lt. Tara Robertson, a member of the Minnesota Army National Guard, look out over a valley during an area reconnaissance 4 July 2012 in Mizan District, southern Afghanistan.



techniques will become a part of how the unit operates under commander's intent.

## Conclusion

Mission command, despite its strengths and potential for bringing out the best in units and individual soldiers, is not a risk-free approach for the Army to adopt. Our enemies will still attempt to find weaknesses and exploit them. Our Army, and our country, must learn how to lead and inspire in a world where our traditional allies are reducing their military forces and where new nations and groups are increasing in power, influence, and desire to consume the world's resources. Our enemies may not feel bound by any recognizable legal or moral restrictions. Even if we

can disrupt their networks, they will fight on without guidance from higher. They may fight on in spite of orders to lay down their arms. Given these realities, leaders who can seize the initiative and win while understanding all the whys and who can effectively communicate those reasons to their subordinates are more important than ever.

Sound strategy, a responsive and fiscally responsible acquisition process, and a continued commitment to selfless service and sacrifice are all keys to the Army's future success. While no amount of mission command can overcome bad strategy, when the issue is in doubt, more autonomy built on trust, training, and shared understanding of a commander's intent will usually be the best way to proceed. ■

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## Notes

1. ADRP 6-0, *Mission Command* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], May 2012).

2. For more on the tactical excellence and strategic failures of the Germans in World War I, see Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (New York: Basic Books, 1999). For an analysis of the German Army's tactical excellence in World War II and how the Allies were able to overcome it, see Michael D. Doubler, *Closing with the Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944-1945* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994); and Kevin Farrell, "'Culture of Confidence': The Tactical Excellence of the German Army in the Second World War," *Leadership: The Warrior's Art*, ed. Christopher Kolenda (Carlisle, PA: Army War College Foundation Press, 2001), 177-204.

3. Robert A. Doughty, *The Breaking Point: Sedan and the Fall of France, 1940* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1990); Peter Mansoor, "The Second Battle of Sedan, May 1940," *Military Review* (June 1988): 64-75.

4. This argument about the American "way of war" finds its clearest articulation in Russell Weigley, *The American Way of War: a History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

5. Michael Howard, "The Use and Abuse of Military History," *The Causes of Wars and Other Essays*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 183-197.

6. Some representative works are Karen Armstrong, *Islam: a Short History* (New York: Modern Library, 2000); and Bernard

Lewis, *What Went Wrong?: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

7. Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2011); Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011).

8. James Kitfield, *Prodigal Soldiers* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1997).

9. Erwin Rommel, *The Rommel Papers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953), 226.

10. Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 7-0, *Training Units and Developing Leaders* (Washington, DC: U.S. [GPO] 2012), 3-4.

11. Michael R. Gordon, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq*, 1st ed (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006).

12. ADRP 6-0, 2-1.

13. *Ibid.*, 2-5. For sample order formats, see appendix C of FM 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, May 2014).

14. ADRP 6-0, 2-4.

15. H. John Poole, *One More Bridge to Cross: Lowering the Cost of War* (Emerald Isle, NC: Posterity Press, 1999).

16. Arthur Herman, *To Rule the Waves: How the British Navy Shaped the Modern World* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004).

17. Andrew Gordon, *The Rules of the Game Jutland and British Naval Command* (New York: Naval Institute Press, 2013).