



D-Day, 6 June 1944, by Leslie Arthur Wilcox, n.d., oil on canvas, 71 x 98 cm. On D-Day, 6 June 1944, the 1st Battalion, Hampshire Regiment led 231 Brigade ashore on Gold Beach as the spearhead of the invasion of Normandy. (Artwork courtesy of the Royal Hampshire Regiment Museum)

The True Test of Mission Command



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Military professionals often study historical leaders whose interventions and decisions at a critical moment have turned the course of a battle. Of course, these case studies yield many valuable lessons to developing leaders. However, there are many other great lessons to be learned from less obvious, less celebrated leaders. The

mark of true mission command can be seen in an organization that achieves greatness with no intervention from the commander. Leaders who prepare their organization for success in their absence are those who develop their subordinates, foster a learning organization, and encourage adaptability. These leaders prepare their unit for operations by clearly

communicating a simple and flexible plan and by nurturing trust across the force.

Military professionals should also study the leadership within an organization that achieves success without intervention or supervision from their commander. In the future, mastering the art of good mission command will be more important than ever. Commanders will get targeted and killed with greater frequency. Therefore, our organizations must be able to succeed in their commander's absence.

Students of the Command and General Staff Officers' Course will be familiar with Brig. Gen. Norman D. Cota's exploits on D-Day. At 0730 on 6 June 1944, Cota landed on Omaha Beach with his "Bastard Brigade."¹ From this time until dusk, Cota's direct leadership at critical points and his disregard for his own personal safety helped to prevent a potential disaster from unfolding in that sector of the D-Day landings.² Cota was awarded the British Distinguished Service Order and the U.S. Distinguished Service Cross for his actions that day.³ Aspiring leaders today rightly study his actions to learn from his example. However, the fact that the attack stalled and Cota had to become so directly involved at the coalface is a possible symptom of inadequate preparation prior to the landings. At the same time Cota was landing, a British officer was wading ashore who was far less likely to be remembered for his actions on D-Day because he had very little direct impact on the how the battle unfolded. However, his leadership prior to the landings and his good use of mission command enabled his unit to achieve success in the most extreme circumstances.

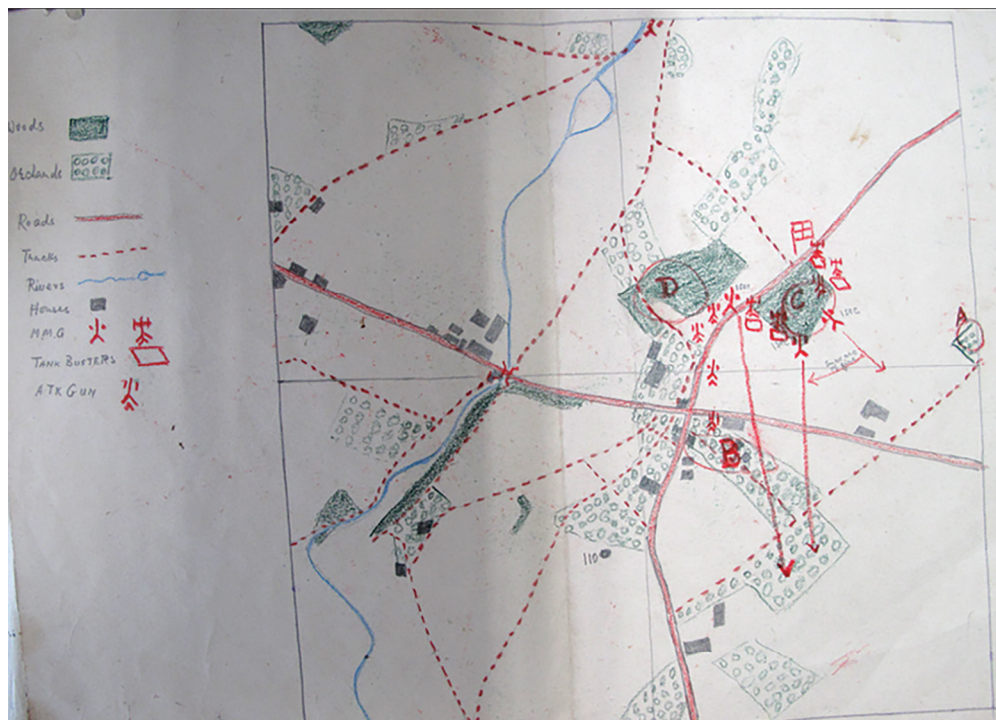
On D-Day, Lt. Col. H. D. Nelson-Smith, MC, was the battalion commander of the 1st Battalion, Hampshire Regiment (1 HAMPS), which made up the right flank of 231st Brigade, 50th (UK) Infantry Division. The 1 HAMPS landed on the Jig Green sector of Gold Beach at 0730 as the first British troops ashore. The battalion ran into fierce resistance and shortly after landing, Nelson-Smith was wounded and evacuated to the regimental aid post, never to return to lead the battalion.⁴ To make matters worse, the battalion second-in-command landed at 0930 and was killed by a sniper as he left the landing craft.⁵ The commander of A Company and several platoon commanders were also killed or wounded on the beach.⁶ The battalion had

landed further east than they planned and most of the radio sets had been destroyed by enemy fire or saltwater.⁷ Maj. Richard "Dick" Gosling, the battalion's artillery battery commander, who had also been wounded, was unable to call for fire support that day.⁸ In the opening hours of D-Day, the 1 HAMPS faced utter chaos on Gold Beach. Yet despite this, the battalion was one of the few units that day to achieve almost all of its day one objectives before nightfall. This achievement is a symptom of good preparation and mission command. How was this possible? To answer this question, one must examine Nelson-Smith and the battalion's preparations in the months and years leading up to D-Day.

Nelson-Smith served with the battalion continuously from 1936 to 1944. During this time the battalion was constantly overseas, from the North West Frontier in India 1936, Palestine in 1938, the Western Desert in 1940, and the Siege of Malta in 1942 to the invasion of Sicily and the Salerno landings in 1943.⁹ In October 1943, Nelson-Smith took the battalion back to a sealed camp in the New Forest, England, to prepare it for Operation Overlord.¹⁰ This was the first time the battalion had been home in twenty-three years, and it would only be there for eight months.¹¹ The battalion would become like a family to Nelson-Smith. He cared deeply about his soldiers and subordinate development. This was evident in the three "A Basis for Training" documents the battalion used to prepare for D-Day.¹² Emphasis was placed on leader selection and mission command.

Within "A Basis for Training – II," the paragraph on fatigue emphasizes the importance of having energetic leaders to combat the inevitable apathy that sets in due

Maj. Will Happel, a student at the Command and General Staff School, has been an infantry officer in the British Army for eleven years, working most recently (2020–2023) in combat training centers (CTCs) in both the UK and United States. He has developed a keen interest for mission command during his career and has witnessed many different styles of it through first-hand experience at CTCs and through historical analysis. Happel had an article published in the Wavell Room in 2017 that had a similar thesis on mission command and being able to prepare organizations for success with minimal commander input.



From the 1st Battalion, Hampshire Regiment's *Battalion War Diary*, a sketch from a patrol report made after a night patrol from one of the nights following D-Day. (Photo courtesy of the Royal Hampshire Regiment Museum)

to the weariness that combat causes.¹³ Nelson-Smith also directed that soldiers must support their commanders in physical and administrative tasks to enable their commanders' better decision-making. In "A Basis for Training – III," the paragraph on bravado explains the required temperament traits for good leaders and how brash and bravado in peace time does not often equal bravery in combat.¹⁴ These paragraphs show the consideration that Nelson-Smith was giving to selecting and developing his subordinates. Nelson-Smith placed high importance on his subordinates' abilities to make decisions.

During training, Nelson-Smith helped to enforce good mission command in his subordinate leaders. More recently, the British Army describes mission command as a philosophy that empowers subordinates and encourages freedom and speed of action.¹⁵ By using mission orders to empower subordinates to generate agility and tempo, units can prevail in the most chaotic and demanding situations.¹⁶

The paragraph on rigidity in "A Basis for Training – III" summarizes the attitude at the time toward mission command. The paragraph said platoon leaders must act on their own judgment without waiting for orders from

higher.¹⁷ Especially during the early stages of an operation, the platoon commanders would have the most accurate picture of the battle and are best placed to make decisions to adapt to chaotic situations. Therefore, in training, platoon commanders were encouraged to act first and report the outcomes afterward. This encouragement placed higher levels of trust in subordinate commanders. One of the tenets of mission command is trust as it speeds up decision-making and generates tempo.¹⁸

Under Nelson-Smith,

the 1 HAMPS fostered high levels of trust and developed a good sense of mission command.

Through these documents, Nelson-Smith made an effort to simplify the orders process as much as possible. He made it the responsibility of every subordinate to know at least four bits of information before setting off on a task. The information subordinates must know was "Where am I going? What am I doing when I get there? Which way am I going? When am I going?"¹⁹ Nelson-Smith was reinforcing mission command within the unit by simplifying orders and making it a subordinate's responsibility to figure out what basics were required of them.

The existence and use of these training documents show that, under Nelson-Smith, the 1 HAMPS were a learning organization. The structure for "A Basis for Training – I" was a two-column table with observations in the left-hand column and recommendations in the right-hand column.²⁰ This structure is not dissimilar to the one the British Army still uses when learning from experience today. The 1 HAMPS's ability to make candid observations on their own performance and on the enemy's tactics to develop recommendations

enabled them to learn quickly and adapt to a changing situation.

The battalion's patrol reports are evidence of this learning cycle in action. The training documents dedicate several pages to patrols, observation posts, and reconnaissance.²¹ The reports and sketches that patrol commanders produced during the days and nights following D-Day show the high level of proficiency the battalion had for these activities.²²

In his operations order for D-Day, Nelson-Smith managed to simplify the complex task ahead of them. He clearly and succinctly articulates the higher intent, scheme of maneuver, and the phases of the flanking forces.²³ Nelson-Smith also managed to distill the battalion's task into a pithy, one-sentence intent statement, "1 HAMPS will land on JIG GREEN BEACH WESTERN and clear enemy coastal 'crust' from LE HAMEL to MANVIEUX 8286."²⁴ This intent statement is reminiscent of Adm. Horatio Nelson's signal, "Engage the enemy more closely"; one of only three tactical signals flown by Nelson throughout the Battle of Trafalgar.²⁵ Nelson-Smith's simple plan was backed up with sufficiently detailed annexes that equipped his subordinates with every known fact about the "coastal crust." This combination of a simple plan and detailed coordinating instructions empowered Nelson-Smith's subordinates to make their own decisions and seize the initiative within his intent.



The 50th (Northumbrian) Division, 1944, by Anthony Imre Alexander Gross, 1944, ink, 392 mm x 573 mm. This full-length portrait features the three British battalion commanders of the 231 (Malta) Brigade (from left): Lt.-Col. H. D. Nelson-Smith, MC, 1st Battalion, Hampshire Regiment; Lt.-Col. A. W. Valentine, DSO, OBE, 2nd Battalion, Devonshire Regiment; and Lt.-Col. W. H. B. Ray, DSO, 1st Battalion, Dorset Regiment. (Artwork courtesy of the Imperial War Museums)

1 HAMPS's battle did not go according to plan. The battalion landed on Jig Green East instead of West, whereas the Duplex Drive (DD) tanks landed in the West, the commander was wounded and the second-in-command killed, the artillery and air force bombardments had been ineffective, the radios were inoperable, most of the AVRE (Armoured Vehicle Royal Engineers) tanks were jammed in their landing craft, and one of the flail tanks exploded in the minefield.²⁶ Some of the leaders had the situational awareness to realize they were landing in the wrong place. Lt. Alan Norman of A Company recalled looking through the slit in the landing craft's ramp with his binoculars and noticing that they were too far to the east.²⁷

The battalion landed in Jig Green East (not West) with A Company on the right and B Company on the left. A Company landed opposite WN36 (a platoon-sized defensive bunker) and B Company landed opposite the strongpoint Les Roquettes, both WN36 and Les Roquettes were originally objectives for the 1st Battalion, Dorsetshire Regiment.²⁸ Both A and B

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FIELD RETURN OF OFFICERS

Serial No. 16

Unit: 1st Bn. PART D OFFICERS

OFFICERS QUITTED DURING WEEK

No.	Rank + Name	Corps	Date	Cause.
69156	MAJ. MARTIN J.S.	AEW.	6 June	Killed E.A.
62620	" BRINES	R.G.T	"	-do-
253674	LT. WILLIAMSON, MC.	C.Y.	"	-do-
288933	" BARNES	L.A.	"	-do-
180302	" WESTLEY	G.N.	"	-do-
62621	LT. COL. SMITH, MC	H.D.N.	"	Wounded E.A.
195359	CAPT. ARNETT	J.A.	"	-do-
261945	LT. LAUDER	J.E.F.	"	-do-
207701	" BOYS	J.N.	"	-do-
134345	CAPT. EDKINS	D.R.J.	"	-do-
121452	" HUGHES	P.A.E.	"	-do-
247055	LT. MILLER	K.C.	"	-do-
268027	" ELLIOTT	G.M.	"	-do-
281977	" NORMAN	A.G.	"	-do-
212361	" JARVIS-LUNGLEY	G	"	-do-
302138	" LATTON	G.F.B.	"	-do-

(ii) OFFICERS ATTACHED IN EXCESS OF W.E. LESS 1st RFTS.

Name and Initials	Regt. or Corps	Date of attachment	Nature of attachment

6 June 44 (Date of Dispatch)

LEUT. COLONEL
COMD. 1ST BN. THE HAMPSHIRE REGIMENT
231 Fth. Bde.
(Bde. Dwn., Area, etc., with which Unit is serving.)

This page from the 1st Battalion, Hampshire Regiment's *Battalion War Diary* features "Officers Quitted during Week," which shows the amount of leadership (not just the command and second in command) who were put out of action on D-Day. (Photo courtesy of the Royal Hampshire Regiment Museum)

Companies were able to clear these objectives, orient themselves and move west toward their original objectives. Helpfully, the intelligence annex of Nelson-Smith's operations order contained detailed paragraphs on the strong point at Les Roquettes.²⁹ Around this time, C and D Companies also landed on Jig Green East. Maj. David Warren MC, C Company commander, took over command of the battalion and directed them through the strong enemy positions at Le

Hamel.³⁰ It was 1700 before Le Hamel was cleared.³¹ D Company then cleared the radar station on the cliffs at Arromanches and B and C Companies went on to clear the town. Here the battalion reorganized and conducted patrols to Tracy-sur-Mer and made their report to the brigade commander.³²

The story of the 1 HAMPS on D-Day is one of an adaptable organization that was well prepared, well briefed, and trusted to carry out their work. They passed the true test of mission command by gaining and maintaining the initiative, in the face of extreme adversity, with minimal supervision. This success was in no small part down to the leadership of Nelson-Smith, though he may not receive much credit for it.

In conclusion, a leader who passes the true test of mission command is one who prepares their organization for success in their absence. Nelson-Smith achieved this by developing his subordinates to adapt to

chaotic situations and empowering and trusting them to make decisions. Nelson-Smith nurtured a learning organization that was able to adapt quickly and flexibly. For D-Day, the operations order that Nelson-Smith delivered to the battalion outlined a simple and flexible plan. He did not try to forecast events but balanced his force so that they could respond effectively to a changing and chaotic situation. All of these factors combined created a recipe for success for the 1 HAMPS

on D-Day. The die was already cast once the ramps dropped on D-Day. No intervention from the battalion commander or the second-in-command was required or occurred. Chaos ensued, yet the battalion went on to succeed that day. While the heroics of the Cota often attract the study of military professionals, perhaps also more notice should be taken of the Nelson-Smiths who, without much credit, prepared their units for war so

effectively that their intervention during the battle was not required.

In late 1944, Nelson-Smith returned to command 1st Battalion, 5th Welch Regiment, 53rd Division, in Holland and the Ardennes where he was again wounded and evacuated. He ended the war as a staff officer in 30 Corps headquarters and was awarded the Belgian Order of Leopold II and the Belgian Croix de Guerre.³³ ■

Notes

1. Thomas G. Bradbeer, "Major General Cota and the Battle of the Hürtgen Forest: A Failure Battle Command?" (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Command and General Staff College, Department of Military Leadership, 2023), 3, https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/documents/cace/DCL/DCL_MGCTota.pdf.

2. *Ibid.*, 3–5.

3. *Ibid.*, 5.

4. Max Hastings, *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2019), 106; Harold Nelson-Smith, "Oral History," recorded by Conrad Wood, Imperial War Museums, Catalogue Number 12959, 1993, 9:00–11:00, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80012687>; C. H. R. Howie, *Battalion War Diary* (Winchester, UK: Royal Hampshire Regiment Museum, 6 June 1944). Lt. Col. C. H. R. Howie served as commanding officer for 1st Battalion, Hampshire Regiment.

5. Andrew Holborn, *The D-Day Landing on Gold Beach: 6 June 1944* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 127.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. Hastings, *Overlord*, 106.

9. "Brigadier H. D. Nelson-Smith MC Obituary," Royal Hampshire Regiment Museum, n.d.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. "A Basis for Training – I" (Winchester, UK: Royal Hampshire Regiment Museum, n.d.); "A Basis for Training – II" (Winchester, UK: Royal Hampshire Regiment Museum, n.d.); "A Basis for Training – III" (Winchester, UK: Royal Hampshire Regiment Museum, n.d.).

13. "A Basis for Training – II," sheet 6.

14. "A Basis for Training – III," sheet 2.

15. Army Doctrine Publication AC 71940, *Land Operations* (Andover, UK: Headquarters, Field Army, 2017), 6–4.

16. *Ibid.*

17. "A Basis for Training – III," sheet 3.

18. AC 71940, *Land Operations*, 6–6.

19. "A Basis for Training – II," sheet 3.

20. "A Basis for Training – I," sheets 1–6.

21. *Ibid.*, sheet 2; "A Basis for Training – II," sheet 3.

22. Howie, *Battalion War Diary*.

23. H. D. Smith, "Hamps Operations Order for Operation Overlord," in *Battalion War Diary* (Winchester, UK: Royal Hampshire Regiment Museum, 27 May 1944), sheet 1.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Andrew Gordon, *The Rules of the Game: Jutland and British Naval Command* (Bungay, UK: Penguin Books, 2015), 159.

26. Nelson-Smith, "Oral History," 2:00; Holborn, *D-Day Landing on Gold Beach*, 120.

27. Holborn, *D-Day Landing on Gold Beach*, 125.

28. *Ibid.*, 124.

29. Smith, "Appendix A to Hamps Operations Order for Operation Overlord – Intelligence Summary," *Battalion War Diary*, sheets 4 and 5.

30. "D Day – 6th June 1944," Royal Hampshire Regiment Museum, accessed 13 June 2024, <https://www.royalhampshireregiment.org/about-the-museum/timeline/d-day-1944/>.

31. Holborn, *D-Day Landing on Gold Beach*, 158.

32. *Ibid.*, 159.

33. "Brigadier H.D. Nelson-Smith MC Obituary."