



FOB PROSPERITY, Iraq – Cpl. John Peters and Pvt. Allen Patz, radio transmissions operators, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, talk to Soldiers at 4th Inf. Div. headquarters from the 4th BCT Tactical Operations Center in 2006. (Photo by Pfc. Jason Dangel, 4th BCT PAO, 4th Inf. Div.)

NCOs Have Important Roles in Mission Command

By Jonathan (Jay) Koester

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Mission command: The words alone can cause an NCO to tune out. Often, as soon as the word “command” is heard, NCOs think of “commander” and decide that’s officer business and outside their lane.

But mission command in the Army of today is no longer the “command and control” of the past. The role of noncommissioned officers in mission command is critical but often misunderstood, said Sgt. Maj. Dennis Eger, the senior enlisted advisor at the Mission Command Center of Excellence at Fort Leavenworth, Kan.

“Mission command is derived from the old command and control, the old battle command, and typically those were very commander-centric, top-down-driven sys-

tems,” Eger said. “So that’s why a lot NCOs believe that’s ‘commander stuff.’ When I started talking about mission command, everybody said the same thing. Senior NCOs, NCOs at all levels said, ‘Hey, sergeant major, that’s commander business. That’s officer business.’”

“What I would submit to them is, it’s not officer business, it’s leader business,” Eger said. “And I would explain to them that noncommissioned officers absolutely have a role inside of mission command. Yes, we all understand the commander is in charge. We got it. The commander issues their orders and their intent, and we operate within those orders and that intent. But it was lost in translation what the NCO piece of that was.”

Understanding Mission Command

There are three parts to mission command, and the NCO's role is important in each. The three parts are mission command philosophy, mission command warfighting function and mission command systems.

According to Army Doctrine Publication 6-0, Mission Command, mission command philosophy is the “exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander’s intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land operations.”

Command Sgt. Maj. Paul Hutchings, command sergeant major of the 3rd Battalion, 158th Aviation Regiment, 12th Combat Aviation Brigade, in Ansbach, Germany, first received an in-depth view of the NCO's role in mission command when he read ADP 6-0 and Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-0, Mission Command, during his long flight from Germany to Fort Leavenworth for the Pre-Command Course, or PCC. He said the mission command philosophy — calling for agile and adaptive leaders — reinforced how he wants to train young Soldiers and NCOs.

“As I read these two manuals, the mission command concept really resonated with me,” Hutchings said. “Most of my career had been spent with the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne), and this was how I was raised. We were given an intent, and then it was up to us to make things happen. And when we did make it happen, we were given another challenge. Independent thought and initiative were encouraged and expected. We all loved and thrived in that environment,

and those that couldn't, didn't make it. Basically, [ADP 6-0 and ADRP 6-0] validated how I was raised and how I deeply believe we need our Soldiers, and therein our future leaders, to be trained.”

The mission command warfighting function is “the related tasks and systems that develop and integrate those activities enabling a commander to balance the art of command and the science of control in order to integrate the other warfighting functions.”

What sergeants major are told when they attend the PCC at Fort Leavenworth is that they have an important role in all three of the main commander tasks under the mission command warfighting function, Eger said. Those tasks are to drive the operations process, to develop teams — both inside and outside the organization — and to inform and influence people inside and outside the organization. But all of those tasks require the involvement of the entire command team, not just the commander.

“What Lt. Gen. David Perkins (commanding general of the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth) will tell the PCC folks when they come through is, ‘You see these commander tasks? These are command team tasks. It is the commander and the sergeant major who execute these tasks,’” Eger said. “Yes, we know that the commander is in charge, but it is through the sergeant major that we help to execute all these tasks.”

The mission command system is “the arrangement of personnel, networks, information systems, processes, facilities, procedures and equipment that enable commanders to conduct operations.”



Soldiers from the 2nd Brigade, 1st Armored Division collaborate using Mission Command applications inside a Tactical Operations Center (TOC) at NIE 12.1 in 2011. (U.S. Army photo)

NCOs are an important part of the mission command system, as well, Eger wrote in an essay in “From One Leader to Another,” a book of leadership lessons from senior NCOs recently published by the Combined Arms Center.

“The noncommissioned officer is the direct voice in reporting to the commander what procedures do or do not work, issues with networks, what network would make mission success a reality, what equipment problems exist or would be better, what facilities would be best and the best use of personnel,” Eger wrote. “That direct input allows the commander to make better decisions in regards to mission command in order to enable success and also helps to identify areas where NCOs might better train and prepare their subordinates.”

Examples and Advice

Most NCOs are probably already playing an important role in mission command, they just don’t realize it yet, Eger said. As an example, Eger spoke of a scene he saw many times while deployed to Afghanistan.

“My brigade commander would stand up and say, ‘OK, this is the mission,’ Eger said. “There are all these maps and TVs on, and he’s going back and forth: ‘Your part is this and your part is this.’ And everybody is like, ‘Got it, sir. Got it, sir. No problem.’ And he says, ‘I want to make sure everybody understands so that this mission is a success. It has to be down to the lowest leader. We’re going to run into things out there on the battlefield that may cause us to have to act on our own, so I want to make sure everybody understands.’ Everybody is giving the north-south to the boss, ‘We got it.’ The minute he walks out of the [tactical operations center], everybody looks at me and says, ‘What did the boss mean?’ I say, ‘What are you talking about? He just asked. That was your opportunity.’ He was trying to create that shared understanding. ‘Well, we don’t really understand.’ So that’s where the NCO and the sergeant major come in to help create that shared understanding. ‘OK, look, this is what the boss meant. This is what he expects of you and you and you.’ That’s what the NCO can absolutely do in their role in mission command.”

NCOs who understand mission command philosophy and their role in it are able to increase their effectiveness and influence, Eger said.

“When they make that link between themselves and mission command, they make the commander more effective, they make the organization more effective, they make their Soldiers more effective,” Eger said. “If they can’t make that link that they are a part of mission command, and they don’t have an understanding of it, then they may not be really exercising it. They may not be building teams through trust, allowing their Soldiers to take disciplined initiative, creating a shared understanding, that whole philosophy piece. If they are not doing any of those things, then they are probably not exercising

mission command, and they’re not building leaders that we want — agile and adaptive leaders.”

As NCOs begin to learn about their role in mission command and want to make sure they participate to their full potential, Eger tells them to start at the beginning: doctrine.

“The first thing I always tell them is read ADP 6-0,” Eger said. “You have to read ADP 6-0 and ADRP 6-0 to get a full flavor of mission command. That’s the first thing you have to do. The second thing you have to do is understand what your commander’s priorities are and how you fit into those priorities. Because that helps to make that link and that jump into mission command.”

Of course, mission command starts with the commander. So Eger often talks with officers about the role of NCOs in mission command. When he does, Eger emphasizes the need to see mission command as “leader business.”

“You are the commander and have the authority,” Eger said. “We understand that, and that you make those decisions. But it’s leader business in that the decisions you make will be influenced by the things that we do or fail to do. The officers I have talked to said the same thing, ‘Hey, sergeant major, you really hit the nail on the head when you said that mission command is leader business. It’s not just about us. What you guys do impacts the decisions we make, and Soldiers need to understand that.”

But those officers need to allow for some mistakes from their NCOs, Hutchings added.

“The greatest way to impart mission command can be best explained by (Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, chief of staff of the Army) who said, ‘Encourage initiative and underwrite failure,’” Hutchings said. “The best lessons are learned through our mistakes, and Soldiers have to be allowed to make honest mistakes. Short-sighted commanders don’t tolerate mistakes and don’t understand the value of scar-tissue experience. A commander with an eye to the future understands the ‘process’ of the mission command philosophy.”

Education

To participate fully in mission command, NCOs have to understand the warfighting functions and the NCOs’ affect on all of them, Eger said.

“Every action you make down here leads to a reaction that the commander will take,” Eger said. “That’s why it’s absolutely critical that noncommissioned officers understand sustainment, intelligence, fires, all of the warfighting functions. They need to understand how they interact, because they could run into a situation on the battlefield where they have to implement any one of those. They need to understand those warfighting functions, because it could change the way the commander sees and visualizes the mission. So they have a crucial role in mission command, in making sure the commander is making the right decisions.”

Just as most senior NCOs are already participating in mission command in ways they don't always realize, they also already have the education needed for that role, Eger said.

"I absolutely believe that noncommissioned officers have that knowledge, especially after 12 years of war," Eger said. "A lot of guys have been out there on the ground, so they absolutely understand intel, fires, sustainment. The Sergeants Major Academy does an absolutely great job of teaching mission command and teaching the warfighting functions. They do a great job of it, and at that level, they certainly need to do that. At lower levels we talk about it, we educate on it, but we're actually moving a lot further forward on mission command as a whole being put into (professional military education).

"We're beginning to introduce at least the terminology into the Warrior Leader Course and the Senior Leader Course," Eger said. "They do things in WLC like troop-leading procedures. So now what will happen is that, as they are going through their troop-leading procedures and getting trained on that, the instructor will link it to mission command using mission command terminology. I think that's the starting point. We have to get Soldiers at the lower level to link that term, 'mission command,' to what they are already doing."

And senior NCOs, like Hutchings, are making sure the tenets of mission command philosophy are passed down to their lower enlisted charges. Creating adaptive and agile leaders starts there.

"Being a new CSM, my challenge is implementing the mission command philosophy," Hutchings said. "The best advice given to me at the Pre-Command Course is to only focus on a few lasting effects during your time as a CSM. Well, I want to create adaptive and reactive leaders that will take our Army into the future. If I do that, what else do I need to do? The challenge is how to do it. ... Just because the Army says we want adaptive and reactive leaders doesn't mean we wave a magic wand and it happens. It has to be inculcated at the lowest level, and the crawl, walk, run method is the best. But, because I'm trying to introduce this into my battalion, I've got to 'walk, run' with my NCOs. So, with my NCOs, I'm explaining the concept and getting their buy-in."

In-garrison

Many of the roles NCOs play in mission command came naturally while deployed to war zones. But now, noncommissioned officers will need to keep playing those important roles while in-garrison.

"Your challenge is going to be how do you institute mission command in a garrison environment," Eger said. "That's the challenge. Because in combat, aspects of mission command can be a daily norm. ... The battlefield is ever-changing. We go out and find ourselves in a situation and, suddenly, we have to make quick decisions; we have to be agile and adaptive. We've built and trained a force on that for the past 12 years. In combat, certain things like disciplined initiative, thinking on your feet, being agile and adaptive, come second nature to some folks. But only if that trust has been built and the intent has been understood.

"In-garrison, that's one of the biggest complaints of Soldiers," Eger said. "Soldiers say, 'I was allowed to have — I don't want to say 'freedom' — but my lens was a lot wider when I was in Afghanistan, because we weren't together. So we were allowed to make decisions and do things. Now we're back here, we're at home station, we're all together, and it seems like you're micromanaging me.'"

"So I spend a lot of time talking to sergeants major about how they will absolutely affect how this turns out in-garrison. You have to look at, in-garrison, how you're going to train your Soldiers to be agile and adaptive."

Buying into the mission command philosophy leads to trust, adaptive leaders and a better Army, Eger said.

"When NCOs begin to understand their role in mission command, it opens up their eyes, and it opens up trust," Eger said. "They realize, 'OK, if I do these things, and I understand what I am providing the commander, then the commander will trust me, and I will trust the commander. I am able to take disciplined initiative. I don't need to be so rigid. I'm allowed to make decisions on my own. I'm important as a noncommissioned officer. These things that I do really affect the greater good of the organization and the commander.'" ■



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