



U.S. Army General Dwight D. Eisenhower gives the order of the day to paratroopers in England, just before they board their airplanes to participate in the first assault in the invasion of the continent of Europe, June 5, 1944. (Photo courtesy of U.S. National Archives)

# Mission Command: A Senior Enlisted Leader's Perspective

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**A**t the 2010 Joint Warfighting Conference, then-commander of U.S. Joint Forces Command, retired Marine Corps Gen. James Mattis, caught the attention of senior-level leaders by saying, “I don’t care how tactically or operationally brilliant you are, if you cannot create harmony on the battlefield based on trust across joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational lines, you need to go home, because your leadership is obsolete” (Luck, 2013, p. 10). Mattis was clear that military leaders should not base leadership proficiency solely on tactics and personal experience, but also on the ability to relay tactics and orders accurately to subordinates to be executed properly. This builds trust that the commander’s intent will be executed properly down the chain of command. The Army-wide

philosophy of command and control is known as *mission command*. This article analyzes the concepts of mission command and uses contextual examples from the perspective of a senior leader.

## Mission Command Defined

The Department of the Army (2019b) defines mission command as “the Army’s approach to command and control that empowers subordinate decision-making and decentralized execution appropriate to the situation” (p. 1-3). Successful leaders understand the trust necessary for mission command to take place. They balance command and control by synchronizing processes and developing plans with subordinates, allowing them to foster disciplined initiative (Department of the Army, 2019a).



(U.S. Air Force photo by Master Sgt. Andy M. Kin taken June 4, 2019)  
A U.S. Army Ranger assigned to the 75th Ranger Regiment, conducts a mission brief prior to climbing the cliffs at Pointe du Hoc, Cricqueville en Bessin, France, June 4, 2019.

For this to take place, senior leaders must communicate clear intent down to the lowest level to allow a *decentralized* execution of operations.

## Principles of Mission Command

Commanders rely on the innovation and decisive action of subordinates to meet their intent in a complex operating environment. Commanders must be comfortable accepting the inherent risks of operating in this manner (Department of the Army, 2019b). According to *Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*, commanders and subordinates must build a relationship centered upon the seven principles of mission command: *Competence, mutual trust, shared understanding, commander's intent, mission orders, disciplined initiative, and risk acceptance* (Department of the Army, 2019b, p. 1-7).

### Competence

Soldiers should continually develop competence through institutional education, realistic training, and self-development. Organizations must also develop competence through realistic and complex collective unit training. Mutual trust and shared understanding between leaders and subordinates will grow once competence is established (Department of the Army, 2019b).

In November 1950 of the Korean War, the Eighth Army Rangers embodied this principle by trusting in one another and their training as they defended six consecutive attacks from Chinese forces on Hill 205. The Rangers, led by 1st Lt. Ralph Puckett, trusted in the specific and realistic training they received (Piasecki, 2010). When asked about that night, now retired Col. Puckett said, “we had the confidence that came from believing that we were the best that the United States of America could produce” (Piasecki, 2010, para. 14).

### Mutual Trust

According to *ADP 6-0*, “Mutual trust is shared confidence between commanders, subordinates, and partners that they can be relied upon and are competent in performing their assigned tasks” (Department of the Army, 2019b, p.1-7). Trust allows leaders to focus on the big picture instead of individual units or Soldiers.

The 75th Ranger Regiment is a prime example of mutual trust. New Rangers arrive at the organization with a foundation of tactical and technical competence and team leaders trust the assessment and selection process (Department of the Army, n.d.). This builds a shared trust as new Rangers arrive and develop within the unit.

### Shared Understanding

The foundation for creating shared understanding is built into Army doctrine, institutional training, Army culture, and a professional lexicon (Department of the Army, 2019b). This foundation promotes shared understanding by keeping Soldiers informed throughout the operations process and collaborating whenever possible. Whether in garrison, or preparing for combat, the Army presents opportunities for leaders to practice effective communication and increase overall participation. This solidifies shared understanding of unit vision, values, commander's intent, and mission orders.

In 2014, the 1st Infantry Division (1ID) learned firsthand the challenges in creating shared understanding without a foundation. Working with Iraqi and coalition partners introduced challenges in language, communication systems, and collaboration. The 1ID overcame these obstacles by establishing a Combined Operations Center to alleviate the strain of incompatible communications systems. This resulted in increased collaboration between forces and 1ID conducting hundreds of successful coalition and joint strikes in support of Iraqi operations (Lemay, 2016).

### Commander's Intent

The commander is responsible for clearly communicating his or her intent down to the lowest level. The intent must articulate the purpose of the mission and desired end state (Department of the Army, 2019b). A common saying in the military is that no plan survives first contact with the enemy (Oxford University Press, n.d.). A clearly articulated commander's intent allows leaders at all levels to continually adjust plans after first contact because every Soldier understands why they are doing the mission and what the commander expects.

From personal experience, as a reconnaissance team sergeant, every contingency plan has to align with the commander's intent. Reconnaissance teams experience a wide array of challenges and obstacles during every operation. With few teammates, and hundreds of kilometers

between the team and friendly forces, the commander's intent keeps the team grounded in achieving the mission end state, regardless of the situation.

### Mission Orders

The unit staff should construct mission orders describing the situation, commander's intent, desired results, and required subordinate tasks. The commander's intent and mission orders serve as the guide for subordinates to execute disciplined initiative. The staff must take care not to specify exactly how subordinates are to accomplish the tasks. This maximizes their freedom of action and creativity (Department of the Army, 2019b).

Former Gen. of the Army Dwight Eisenhower's plan for *Operation Overlord* (the successful invasion of Normandy during World War II) is a prime example of a well-crafted commander's intent and mission order. Authors Stephen Seitz et al., (2002) stated, "Despite the magnitude of *Overlord* and the numerous tactical operations required, the commander's intent was clear, simple, and succinct. Understanding conveyed to subordinates enabled confidence, encouraged freedom of maneuver, and was the key to both operational and tactical success" (p. 4).



(U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Connor Mendez taken Sept. 12, 2016) A U.S. Soldier with Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan, sets fire to an illegal crop, found outside of a compound housing a drug lab, during an operation in the Ghorak District, Helmand Province, Afghanistan, Sept. 12, 2016.

### Disciplined Initiative

According to the Department of the Army (2019b), there are two considerations subordinate leaders must evaluate before deciding to execute disciplined initiative: "whether the benefits of the action outweigh the risk of desynchronizing the overall operation and whether the action will further the commander's intent" (p. 1-12). Experienced leaders understand the importance of exercising disciplined initiative because failing to do so can be fatal.

In 2005, a team of Navy SEALs realized the seriousness of their decisions while conducting a recon-

naissance mission in support of *Operation Red Wings* in eastern Afghanistan. The team experienced a soft compromise from local goat herders after insertion but did not move from their surveillance positions. This decision, which risked desynchronizing the operation before the assault force conducted the infiltration, failed to further the commander's intent. However, any other decision may have also failed to further the commander's intent. The following is the impossible decision laid out before the SEAL team when deciding what to do with the unarmed civilians:

☞ Shoot them, get heard, have the villagers come to search for them, and face the wrath of the media and potential murder charges/jail; tie them up and leave them to die; or let them go and risk 'military suicide' as the goatherders alerted Ahmad Shah of their presence. They attempted to radio for advice, but comms were down. They decided to turn them loose. (Kessler, 2014, para. 17) ☞

All military operations have a certain amount of risk associated with them and leaders will inevitably face ethical dilemmas throughout their career. While killing the unarmed civilians during *Operation Red Wings* would have been the easy choice for mission success, it was also an illegal choice under the rules of engagement. There was no choice that didn't end in someone's death. The result of their decision was the death of 19 Americans, the destruction of a Chinook, and a failed mission to capture the intended target (Sof, 2017). But the result of illegally killing unarmed civilians could also have been a court martial, jail time, and the loss of trust between joint forces, possibly resulting in more deaths.

### Risk Acceptance

A commander must assess the risk to mission, and risk to force, while mitigating risks with control measures. Much like with *Operation Red Wings*, it should be assumed unit communications with higher echelons will go down. Commanders must trust their intent has been relayed and every decision made by subordinates is based upon that intent.

### Senior Enlisted Leader Influence

#### Shaping Organizational Culture

One of the most significant contributions a senior enlisted leader can have within an organization is their influence over the culture within that organization. Senior enlisted leaders have the power to redirect the focus away from the inefficient structures of overcontrol and its abundance of policies, rules, and regulations that detract from the strategy, concepts, and intent of mission command.



In 2019, authors Doug Orsi and Bobby Mundell analyzed over 50 strategy research projects related to mission command from the U.S. Army War College and found that leaders often view mission command as only being applicable in combat and not in garrison, in part because of “overly bureaucratic garrison processes” (para. 1). However, an organization will never build the necessary competence, mutual trust, shared understanding, and acceptance of risk without implementing mission command both on and off the battlefield.

Army Gen. Stephen J. Townsend, former commanding general of U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, stated:

“Developing leaders, Soldiers, and units capable of operating this way in combat requires living and training for mission command every day. The object of training for mission command is to instill and empower disciplined initiative in every member of the team. (Townsend et al., 2019, para. 2)”

### A Flat Organization

Senior enlisted leaders can also positively influence the communication flow and hierarchical structure within a unit by flattening the organization. A flat organization emphasizes both vertical and lateral communication and information sharing. A flattened organization structure benefits from improved situational awareness, collaboration, and increased production of disciplined initiative (Clark et al., n.d.).

According to Emmanuel Sioson (2019), in 2017, Special Operations Task Force (SOTF) 511 implemented the flattened organizational structure during operations in the Philippines. SOTF 511 placed liaison officers within every interagency and multinational element to



From left, U.S. Navy SEALs Petty Officer 2nd Class Matthew G. Axelson, Senior Chief Daniel R. Healy, Petty Officer 2nd Class James Suh, Petty Officer 2nd Class Marcus Luttrell, Petty Officer 2nd Class Eric S. Patton and Lt. Michael P. Murphy, operating in Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, 2005. Except for Luttrell, all were killed in action by enemy forces while supporting Operation Red Wings, June 28, 2005. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Navy)

improve lateral communication flow and facilitate rapid decision-making at all levels. Their efforts enhanced vertical communication and increased mission buy-in at all levels. SOTF 511 used this mission command model to defeat the Islamic State (IS) during the battle of Marawi, capturing 30 IS leaders and killing over 1,000 IS fighters. This example highlights the importance of trust and effective communication between units, resulting in increased efficiency and the use of mission command between two different countries to achieve a common goal.

### Conclusion

Mission command does not happen by accident. Like any other skill, it has to be practiced consistently and often. Focusing on the *seven principles of mission command* builds trust between leaders and teams. Through *trust*, *initiative*, and *rapid-decision making* at all echelons, the U.S. Army will be better prepared for the future fight. ■

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