



(U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Steven Lewis taken March 30, 2020) A U.S. Army team leader with the Michigan National Guard takes notes during a pre-mission briefing during a training exercise at Camp McGregor, New Mexico, March 30, 2020.

Mission Command: The NCO's Role in the Evolving Battlefield

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“Now is the time to reinvigorate our approach to mission command by evolving our doctrine, adapting leader development, and refining our training. It must be clear and convincing that the Army’s approach to command and control is mission command—as it is the only approach to leading a winning Army.”

—Gen. Stephen Townsend (Townsend et al., 2019, para. 1)

Noncommissioned officers (NCOs) are the backbone of the U.S. Army and their knowledge and expertise guide units towards mission success and accomplishing the commander’s intent. It is necessary for today’s NCO to master modern operational theory in order to lead their units to success. This article focuses on the NCO’s role in mission command philosophy and highlights the need to be well-trained, highly-educated, and able to think critically to prevail on the future battlefield.

Mission Command

Army Doctrine Publication 6-0: Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces describes mission command as how “...commanders, supported by their staffs, combine the art and science of command and control to understand situations, make decisions, direct actions, and lead forces toward mission accomplishment” (Department of the Army, 2019b, p. iii). It involves the use of command and control and several key principles: Building cohesive teams, mutual trust, understanding of



U.S. Army Paratroopers with the 173rd Airborne Brigade fire an 120mm mortar illumination round during a field training exercise at Grafenwoehr, Germany, July 23, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. John Yountz)

the commander's intent, exercising disciplined initiative, using mission orders, and accepting risk. It is important to earn the commander's trust and operate with sound judgement and experience, especially because tomorrow's battlefield may not include technology or reliable communications with other units or elements (Morris, 2018).

Warfighting Functions

Utilizing mission command, commanders entrust NCOs to carry out their intent throughout operations influenced by U.S. Army warfighting functions. "A warfighting function is a group of tasks and systems united by a common purpose that commanders use to accomplish missions and training objectives" (Department of the Army, 2019a, p. 5-2). Understanding these functions enables NCOs to comprehend more of the battlespace and their unit's impact on the mission.

The six warfighting functions are:

1. *Command and Control*: The synchronization and integration of all other functions into operations.
2. *Movement and Maneuver*: Gaining relative advantage over the enemy, to include direct fire, close combat, and force projection.
3. *Intelligence*: Using information collection to understand the enemy, terrain, weather, and operational environment (OE).
4. *Fires*: Lethal and non-lethal effects delivered from Army, joint, or partner forces that include all five domains and the information environment.
5. *Sustainment*: Operations to ensure long-term success and duration of Army operations.
6. *Protection*: Understanding threats and hazards in the OE to safeguard bases, secure routes, and protect assets and forces (Department of the Army, 2019a).

Situational Understanding

Multiple factors and variables play a significant role in mission success. Before commanders can form an

action plan to pass down, they must have situational understanding, which is the result of both operational and mission variables that must be identified and relayed up the chain of command. The condition of each of the following operational variables should be considered before formulating a mission strategy:

Political: Distribution of responsibility and power at all levels of governance—formally constituted authorities, as well as informal or covert political powers. *Who is the tribal leader in the village?*

Military: Military and paramilitary capabilities of relevant actors (enemy, friendly, and neutral) in a given OE. *Does the enemy in this particular neighborhood have antitank missiles?*

Economic: Individual and group behaviors related to producing, distributing, and consuming resources. *Does the village have a high unemployment rate?*

Social: Cultural, religious, and ethnic makeup within an OE and the beliefs, values, customs, and behaviors of society members. *Who are the influential people in the village – for example, religious leaders, tribal leaders, warlords, criminal bosses, or prominent families?*

Information: Nature, scope, characteristics, and effects of individuals, organizations, and systems that collect, process, disseminate, or act on information. *How much access does the local population have to news media or the Internet?*

Infrastructure: Basic facilities, services, and installations needed for the functioning of a community or society. *Is the electrical generator in the village working?*

Physical Environment: Geography and man-made structures, as well as the climate and weather in the area of operations. *What types of terrain or weather conditions in this area of operations favor enemy operations?*

Time: Timing and duration of activities, events, or conditions within an OE, as well as how they're perceived by various actors. *For example, at what times are people likely to congest roads or conduct activities that provide a cover for hostile operations?* (Department of the Army, 2016, p. A-1).



U.S. Army Soldiers, operating M1126 Stryker Combat Vehicles, maneuver during convoy operations as part of the Scout Leader Course conducted by the 316th Cavalry Brigade at Fort Benning, Georgia, Sept. 2, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by Patrick A. Albright)

Commanders often use operational variables in conjunction with mission variables (mission, enemy, terrain and weather, troops and support, time, and civil considerations) to build an accurate situational understanding. For example, throughout the Global War on Terrorism, not only were direct action missions taking place, but also stability operations, while also being cognizant of cultural traditions, structures, practices, and the violence against civilians from multiple sides/groups.

The Modern NCO

With the threat of a rapidly evolving battlefield, today's NCO must be highly-trained, educated, and

capable of critical thinking in order to carry out the commander's intent utilizing multiple domains (Brutus, 2019; Crozier, 2018). Once given the intent, influenced by warfighting functions, and having assessed mission and operational variables, NCOs then use sound judgement and experience to complete their tasks and contribute to the U.S. Army's mission.

It is imperative, now more than ever, that U.S. Army NCOs study operational doctrine and master its methodologies in order to be successful in the future fight against near-peer rivals (Asymmetric Warfare Group, 2020). This will ensure success and reinforce the commander's trust necessary for successful mission command. ■

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