

THE BATTLE OF IA DRANG VALLEY

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Mission Command in the Ia Drang Valley

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In today's Army, successful mission command relies on a commander's ability to properly apply, assess, and adjust mission command principles to achieve the required command and control to accomplish a mission and preserve the force. The war in Vietnam challenged Army commanders for more than a decade, and the Battle of Ia Drang Valley provides a critical case study to understand the relationship between mission command, mission success, and force preservation. The book "We Were Soldiers Once...And Young: Ia Drang-The Battle That Changed the War in Vietnam," written by retired Lt. Gen. Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway, and the 2002 movie "We Were Soldiers," starring Mel Gibson, are based on this engagement.

The Battle of Ia Drang

In November 1965, then Lt. Col. Moore commanded the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry

Division (Airmobile), on an air assault mission to secure the Ia Drang Valley and defeat enemy forces in the area before they could cross over the Cambodian border (Moore & Galloway, 1992). Moore's superiors assumed he had the ability and support to easily eliminate North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces without difficulty. However, the area along the Ia Drang River remained heavily contested, with the enemy proving difficult to locate and good intel hard to obtain (Moore & Galloway, 1992).

In addition, higher headquarters provided information that inaccurately described a small NVA force with minimal willingness to engage in sustained direct contact with U.S. forces. Thus, when Moore's battalion made enemy contact, it fell under heavy fire from a significantly larger NVA force than expected, resulting in a high number of American casualties (Moore & Galloway, 1992). The battle lasted four days as American troops fought off repeated assaults from North Vietnamese forc-

es. The estimated American casualties during the battle were more than 300 killed in action and almost that same number wounded (McMahon, n.d.). This battle marked the first major encounter between U.S. troops and People's Army of Vietnam.

"The fighting at Ia Drang set the tone for the conflict as American forces continued to rely on air mobility and heavy fire support to achieve victory. Conversely, the North Vietnamese learned that the latter could be neutralized by quickly closing with the enemy and fighting at close range." (Hickman, 2020, para. 13)



Combat operations at Ia Drang Valley, Vietnam, November 1965. Maj. Bruce P. Crandall's UH-1D helicopter climbs skyward after discharging a load of infantrymen on a search and destroy mission. (U.S. Army photo)

Mission Command Principles

The Army uses mission command to empower subordinate leaders to exercise disciplined initiative while working within a commander's intent guidelines. In the Battle of Ia Drang, Moore instituted the five principles of mission command to adjust to the changing battlefield and prevent complete mission failure.

Competence

The Center for the Army Profession and Ethic (n.d.) defines competence as an "Army professional's demonstrated ability to successfully perform their duties and to accomplish the Mission with discipline and to standard" (p. 2). Because prior training and experience built their competence and technical proficiency, Moore and his Soldiers displayed a high level of tactical and technical competence throughout the battle. They were able to quickly adjust to unexpected battlefield conditions and establish a defensive posture to prevent the large NVA force from overwhelming the battalion (Moore & Galloway, 1992).

Shared Understanding and Mutual Trust

Mutual trust requires shared confidence between leaders and subordinates (Department of the Army, 2019). Shared understanding refers to the knowledge of the operational environment and doctrine required to complete the mission (Department of the Army, 2019). Moore had shared understanding with higher headquarters, but it relied heavily on inaccurate assumptions and faulty intelligence. Higher headquarters' operational objective was to inflict losses on a fleeing enemy about whom hard information was scarce and assumed that Moore, properly supported, could handle whatever he encountered. Their intent, not well expressed in the frag-

mentary order (FRAGO), was roughly: "Find the enemy wherever he is and engage and destroy him. You have the force, training, and support to do the job." (Moore & Galloway, 1992). On the other hand, Moore had a better shared understanding with his Soldiers.

The offensive nature of enemy troops forced Moore to rely heavily on mutual trust. During the battle, a platoon became separated from the forward line. The platoon lost its platoon leader, platoon sergeant, and weapons sergeant during the initial engagement. The remaining Soldiers displayed significant trust in Moore and continued to fight, understanding he would dispatch a recovery mission once the opportunity presented itself. Moore displayed substantial trust in the young sergeant who assumed responsibility for the platoon by supporting his leadership and not sacrificing the larger mission to dispatch a rescue team immediately (Moore, 1965).

Disciplined Initiative and Risk Acceptance

Disciplined initiative is the ability of subordinates to apply quick decisions to achieve the desired end state, and risk acceptance refers to the commander's ability to accept risk to achieve desirable outcomes despite potential danger (Department of the Army, 2019). Moore's subordinates exercised disciplined initiative shortly after receiving orders to establish a defensive posture. However, Moore lacked the ability to directly command all facets of the battle, forcing Soldiers on the ground to make quick decisions while remaining within the limits of their issued orders (Moore, 1965). An example of the initiative used by his subordinates was illustrated in Moore's after-action report:

"The surrounded platoon of B Company stood off numerous PAVN efforts to overrun it. Carrying their dead, their wounded, and their equipment the men of the platoon established a small 25 meter wide perimeter on a slight rise of ground and redistributed their ammunition under heavy enemy fire." (Moore, 1965)

Command and Control

The Battle of Ia Drang also presented Moore with numerous command and control challenges. *ADP 6-0* defines command and control as the authority to provide direction maintained by commanders to achieve the desired end state (Department of the Army, 2019). As the focal point of command and control, commanders assess the situation, issue orders, and provide the direction needed to accomplish a mission.

Command. This refers to the authority, responsibility, decision-making, and leadership provided by a commander to subordinates (Department of the Army, 2019). During the Battle of Ia Drang, the situation quickly deteriorated from the initial operational concept, but Moore displayed his authority by adapting his orders and making decisions to ensure the mission was not abandoned. His Soldiers showed respect for his authority and remained in the fight until he ordered a withdrawal. Moore also maintained responsibility for the situation on the ground and refrained from blaming their hardships on the intelligence or the actions of his Soldiers (Moore, 1965).

Control. *ADP 6-0* defines control as "the authority that a commander in the armed forces lawfully exercises over subordinates by virtue of rank or assignment" (Department of the Army, 2019, p. 1-17). Commanders exert control through the application of the critical elements of direction, feedback, information, and communication (Department

of the Army, 2019). Over the course of Moore's operation, several challenges created control issues. Intelligence failures and lack of adequate planning led to chaos on the battlefield. His initial direction appeared unfeasible once the enemy initiated direct contact. He also lacked command and control systems capable of rapidly communicating feedback to his subordinate commands.

Despite these challenges, Moore exercised control to save the operation and his Soldiers by using real-time feedback to establish a greater understanding of the enemy and conditions across the operational environment (Moore & Galloway, 1992). He did this by focusing radio communications for indirect fire, coordinating fields of fire, and casualty evacuations (Moore, 1965). Without adequate means to quickly communicate changing information, Moore continually moved around the battlefield to relay information and control his forces to prevent total mission failure.

Conclusion

An improper application of mission command or command and control leaves a unit vulnerable and compromises mission success. During the Battle of Ia Drang, Moore encountered numerous hurdles and failures stemming from faulty intelligence and enemy aggression, but he displayed a strong understanding of the mission command principles and control and command, thus maintaining control of the battlefield until reinforcements arrived (Moore & Galloway, 1992). The success of the battle of Ia Drang Valley can be attributed to his ability to properly apply, assess, and adjust mission command principles to achieve the required command and control to accomplish the mission and preserve the force. He also understood the importance of competence, shared understanding, trust, initiative, and risk acceptance and used them to his advantage. ■

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