



U.S. Soldiers, including Jake McNiece, right, assigned to the 101st Airborne Division apply war paint to each other's face in England June 5, 1944, in preparation for the invasion of Normandy, France, the next day. The morning of June 6, 1944, Allied forces conducted a massive airborne assault and amphibious landing in the Normandy region of France. The invasion marked the beginning of the final phase of World War II in Europe, which ended with the surrender of Germany the following May. McNiece led a demolition group called the Filthy 13, whose exploits inspired the film "The Dirty Dozen." (U.S. Army photo)

The Filthy 13

Exploring the Principles of Mission Command

By Robert Shawlinski (Sgt. Maj.-R), Sgt. Maj. John Enstrom, Thomas Gibbons (Sgt. Maj.-R), Cregg Cannon (Sgt. Maj.-R), and James Perdue (Sgt. Maj.-R)

NCO Leadership Center of Excellence

In 1967, the film *The Dirty Dozen* showed moviegoers a highly unorthodox United States Army demolition unit made up of 13 enlisted Soldiers assigned to the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division during WWII. Although Hollywood's character and mission adaptation deviated slightly from actual events, a group of U.S. Soldiers known as *The Filthy 13* actually existed. This article examines their leader, several historical battles, and

how these Soldiers exercised mission command before it was officially *mission command*.

The Filthy 13

Pvt. Jake McNiece enlisted in the Paratroopers on Sept. 1, 1942. In the book, *The Filthy Thirteen: From the Dustbowl to Hitler's Eagle's Nest: The 101st Airborne's Most Legendary Squad of Combat Paratroopers*, McNiece details a wide variety of seemingly unbelievable events. From

the formation of the demolition squad in Camp Toccoa, Georgia, to missions from Normandy to the Eagles Nest during WWII (Killblane & McNiece, 2003).

The "Filthy 13" got their nickname while training in England where they washed and shaved only once a week. They were everything you could want from a demolition squad on the front lines. However, they were arguably among the most difficult, insubordinate, and undisciplined individuals in the U.S. Army while in garrison. From today's perspective, McNiece and his gang of delinquents were out of control and lacked the discipline ingrained, required, and expected of individuals belonging to the profession of arms.

Although heroic in battle, commanders and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) in today's Armed Forces would not tolerate the undisciplined behavior displayed by the Filthy 13 in the garrison environment. The type of behavior highlighted in the book would likely result in a court-martial and chapter from the Army. Nonetheless, for reasons not explained, that rowdy bunch of demolition Soldiers not only participated in the war effort, they also demonstrated ingenuity, innovation, and quick decision-making skills. These are all fundamental principles of mission command, even though mission command wasn't formally named and officially adopted into military doctrine until 2003 (Ancker, 2013).

Although only a private (he struggled to keep any rank due to his antics in garrison), McNiece was in leadership roles throughout the war and usually without the presence of officers. This article is not meant to glorify or condone undisciplined behavior, instead, it highlights the successful application of mission command principles during WWII from what would appear to an outsider as a less than stellar squad of demolition Soldiers.

Mission Command

Active participation, competence, decisionmaking, embracing opportunities, exercising initiative, and risk-taking are characteristics the U.S. Army actively promotes through the principles of mission command.

Army doctrine defines mission command as "the Army's approach to command and control that empowers subordinate decision making and decentralized execution appropriate to the situation" (Department of the Army, 2019, p. 1-3). The principles of mission command consist of competence, mutual trust, shared understanding, commander's intent, mission orders, disciplined initiative, and risk acceptance to enable mission success. The Filthy 13 exhibited these principles during every combat jump and major operation in which they participated. The following operations highlight examples of mission command principles related to McNiece and his units.

Operation Overlord

On June 6, 1944, Operation Overlord, also known as "D-Day," began. More than a thousand C-47s carried



U.S. Soldiers disembark a landing craft at Normandy, France, June 6, 1944. By the end of the day, some 150,000 Allied troops had landed on five Normandy beaches and three airborne drop zones. The invasion marked the beginning of the final phase of World War II in Europe, which ended with the surrender of Germany the following May. (DOD photo courtesy of the National Infantry Museum)

paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne and 101st Airborne Divisions to their specific missions. McNiece and the Filthy 13 were to land in enemy territory, destroy two bridges, and secure another leading to Carrington to deny the German army reinforcements in Normandy (Killblane & McNiece, 2003). Unfortunately, enemy fire struck their plane causing McNiece's team to land approximately eight miles from their objective. Although McNiece landed safe-

ly, he was unable find anyone from his team.

Commander's Intent

McNiece's demolition squad mission would not have been successful without understanding the purpose. According to the Department of the Army (2019), "The commander's intent is a clear and concise expression of the purpose of the operation and the desired military end state that supports mission command" (p. 1-10). McNiece understood the mission and the commander's intent. As he proceeded to the objective, he picked up several displaced Soldiers along the way, essentially assembling a new squad. McNiece knew how important it was to secure the bridges near Carrington and his newly formed squad met the commander's end state.

Competence

McNiece was assigned his critical mission because he was competent. The Department of the Army (2019) states, "An organization's ability to operate using mission command relates directly to the competence of its Soldiers" (p. 1-7). Col. Robert F. Sink, commander of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, tasked McNiece with destroying the bridges because he trusted his competence. His trust allowed McNiece to choose whom he wanted and needed for his demolitions squad to execute the mission (Killblane & McNiece, 2003). This is an example of how several interrelated principles complement each other.

Operation Market Garden

Operation Market Garden was the WWII Allied military operation that took place from Sept. 17 to 25, 1944. It was the largest airborne operation of the war as thousands of Allied paratroopers invaded German-occupied Netherlands. Their mission was to establish an invasion route to facilitate Allied movement from the Belgian border to Nijmegen, Holland, via Eindhoven. Operation Market Garden, dubbed a "Bridge too Far," was the Allies' most significant WWII setback. The operation was a two-pronged process: Market was the airborne assault by British and American (101st and 82nd) airborne paratroopers, and Garden was the ground assault made up of mainly of British Forces. Although Market Garden was a significant setback, it was partially successful thanks to the Filthy 13's heroic efforts. A significant point to remember is that for most of Operation Market Garden and throughout Holland, McNiece and the demolition squad operated without a platoon leader or platoon sergeant (Killblane & McNiece, 2003).

For the operation to be successful, the airborne



Waves of U.S. paratroopers land near Grave, Holland, during Operation Market Garden on Sept. 17, 1944, while livestock graze peacefully near gliders that landed earlier. (U.S. Army photo)

element had to capture bridges from the Belgium border to the city of Arnhem. The initial objective was to secure the waterways and bridges and capture the city of Eindhoven. Although their mission was to complete this task in six days, the 506th (along with the 501st and 502nd Regiments) secured the waterways, bridges, and captured Eindhoven in 36 hours (Killblane & McNiece, 2003).

Shared Understanding

At the onset of Operation Market Garden, while on-board a C-47 near Jersey and Guernsey Islands, McNiece talked the execution plan through with his demolition section to ensure a shared understanding of the situation and the mission. According to the Department of the Army (2019), "It is this shared understanding that allows even hastily task-organized units to operate effectively" (p. 1-8). According to McNiece, during their flight:

We just exchanged messages and went over the plans of exactly what we would do when we got on the ground. I kept instructing them on how to jump, how to assemble quickly and then just as soon as we located our objective, well, we would go work on it. (p. 75)

McNiece's actions created the shared understanding critical to his team's communication. Aligning the shared understanding between Soldiers enables them to execute disciplined initiative and continue the mission if something fails to go as planned.

Competence

According to the Department of the Army (2019), "Commanders and subordinates achieve the level of competence to perform assigned tasks to standard through training, education, assignment experience, and professional development. Commanders continually assess the competence of their subordinates and their organizations" (p. 1-7). Although McNiece and the Filthy 13 earned a reputation for getting into trouble, they also earned respect from superiors by demonstrating tactical and technical competence.

For example, after the 101st Airborne Division cleared a highway from Eindhoven to Veghel, the 506th Parachute Infantry Regimental Command Post (CP) left McNiece and the demolition platoon in Eindhoven to guard three critical bridges on the Eindhoven Canal. The fact that the regimental commander tasked the Filthy 13 to guard three critical bridges on the Eindhoven Canal also demonstrated the mission command principle of "mutual trust." According to the Department

of the Army (2019), "Mutual trust is shared confidence between commanders, subordinates, and partners that they can be relied on and are competent in performing their assigned tasks" (p. 1-7).

Parachute Pathfinding Service

In Dec. 1944, McNiece was asked to volunteer for parachute pathfinding service. Being a pathfinder was considered a suicide mission. A pathfinder team consisted of a stick of ten men, and they were expected to lose 80% of the team on every mission. The two men who survived were expected to complete the mission. Paratroopers had to volunteer to be pathfinders because it was considered so dangerous. McNiece had such a positive influence over the men he led, that when they saw him packing his bags, they volunteered as well (Killblane & McNiece, 2003).

All pathfinder volunteers transferred to the 9th Troop Carrier Command Pathfinders Chagrove, England. When they arrived, McNiece reported to the company commander Capt. Frank Brown. Brown selected McNiece as the acting first sergeant because he had been in combat since Normandy, and had two previous combat jumps. Brown was confident McNiece could get them trained and ready for any future pathfinder missions (Killblane & McNiece, 2003).

Bastogne

On Dec. 23, 1944, Lt. Shrable Williams approached McNiece and told him to have his stick ready for a combat jump that afternoon. He said the 101st was cut off in Bastogne and unable to resupply food, medicine, and ammunition (Killblane & McNiece, 2003). Therefore, he would make his third combat jump and conduct a resupply mission as a pathfinder.

Competence

According to the Department of the Army (2019), "tactically and technically competent commanders, subordinates, and teams are the basis of effective mission command" (p. 1-7). Brown selected McNiece to be acting first sergeant because he proved to be tactically and technically competent since landing in Normandy. He demonstrated his competence by forming highly-trained and competent pathfinder sticks within ten days of arriving in Chalgrove, England. McNiece personally selected his pathfinder team based on their competence and proven effectiveness in combat.

Mission Orders

In a best-case scenario, subordinates will receive a five-paragraph operation order detailing the situation, mission, intent, and tasks. "Mission orders are directives that emphasize to subordinates the results to be attained, not how they are to achieve them"

(Department of the Army, 2019, p. 1-11). For example, McNiece's team received a brief on the tarmac minutes before takeoff. The flight commander pulled out a map and pointed to Bastogne. The order went something like this:

That's Bastogne. Your division is cut off and completely surrounded. At least they were the last time we heard from them. We haven't heard from them in two days. Whether they're still there or not, I don't know. All indications are they still are. You're going to jump in there on a resupply mission. They are out of ammunition, medicine, and food. They have nothing left but a handful of men. We have to maintain and control Bastogne to prevent the blitzkrieg from succeeding. (Killblane & McNiece, 2003, p. 162)

McNiece's team boarded the aircraft with a limited understanding of their operational environment, friendly, and enemy situation.

Disciplined Initiative

McNiece recommended sending two pathfinder teams instead of one to Bastogne. If one aircraft was shot down, the other could achieve its objective. The commander's intent "gives subordinates the confidence to apply their judgment in ambiguous situations because they know the mission's purpose and desired end state" (Department of the Army, 2019, p. 1-12). McNiece was in the lead aircraft and responsible for using orange smoke to signal the trail aircraft if it was safe to drop the second stick. When they landed, McNiece tossed several orange smoke grenades to signal it was clear to drop the trail the second stick, which landed directly on top of his team.

Risk Acceptance

The death ratio was 80% per mission when McNiece volunteered for pathfinder duty. "Mission command requires that commanders and subordinates manage accepted risk, exercise initiative, and act decisively, even when the outcome is uncertain" (Department of the Army, 2019, p. 1-14). On the mission to Bastogne, McNiece led two pathfinder sticks made up of 20 men. He exercised disciplined initiative and acted decisively throughout the operation. Although he lost one Soldier, he completely reversed the pathfinder survival odds.

Shared Understanding

Before the mission, higher headquarters did not provide McNiece or his team with aerial photography of Bastogne or potential enemy positions. Neither was he in radio communication with the commander on the ground. "Shared understanding of the situation, along with the

flow of information to the lowest possible level, forms the basis for the unity of effort and subordinates' initiative" (Department of the Army, 2019, p. 1-8). Nevertheless, he demonstrated initiative with the information available. In five days, because of McNiece's efforts and success, the Air Corps was able to drop more than six hundred planeloads of ammunition, gas, food, and medical supplies into Bastogne (Killblane & McNiece, 2003).

Conclusion

Mission command was not in the U.S. Army doctrine in WWII. However, looking at today's doctrine and analyzing the principles of mission command, with the historical memories shared by Pvt. Jake McNiece and the Filthy 13, it shows the importance of mission command to make timely decisions, understand the situation, and direct actions on the battlefield. All Soldiers, regardless of era, are key enablers on the ground by building cohesive teams, reinforcing standards, exercising initiative, and enabling mission success. ■

References

- Ancker, C. J. (2013). *The evolution of mission command into U.S. Army doctrine, 1905 to the present*. Military Review. <https://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p124201coll1/id/1197/>
- Department of the Army. (2019). *Mission command: Command and control of Army forces (ADP 6-0)*. https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN34403-ADP_6-0-000-WEB-3.pdf
- Edgar, G. L. (2020). *Crossing the Rhine at Remagen*. The National WWII Museum. <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/crossing-rhine-remagen>
- Killblane, R., & McNiece, J. (2003). *The filthy thirteen: From the dustbowl to Hitler's Eagle's Nest: The 101st Airborne's most legendary squad of combat paratroopers*. Casemate
-

Mr. Robert Shawlinski (SGM-R) is currently an Assistant Professor at the Sergeants Major Academy in the Department of Army Operations. He served 24 years in U.S. Army. He holds a M.Ed. in Education from Trident University in California.

Sgt. Maj. John T. Enstrom is currently an Instructor at the Sergeants Major Academy in the Department of Army Operations. He holds a M.Ed. in Education from Pennsylvania State University.

Mr. James Perdue (SGM-R) is currently an Instructor at the Sergeants Major Academy in the Department of Army Operations. He served 27 years in the U.S. Army Special Forces. He holds a Master's Degree in Human Resources and Development, a Master's Degree in Organizational Leadership, and a Master's Degree in Public Administration.

Mr. Cregg Cannon (SGM-R) is currently an Assistant Professor at the United States Sergeants Major Academy in the Department of Army Operations. He served 31 years in the U.S. Army. He holds a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies from Excelsior College.



<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

