



M1A1 Abrams of the 3rd Armored Division move out on a mission during Operation Desert Storm. The Iraqi Republican Guard and their T-72s were no match for the superior firepower of the M1A1 Abrams. (U.S. Navy photo by Phc. D.W. Holmes II)

Mission Command at the Battle of 73 Easting

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On February 26, 1991, Iraqi tanks and armored personnel carriers heavily outnumbered Eagle Troop, Second Squadron, Second Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) as the two forces met at the Battle of 73 Easting (Guardia, 2015). Eagle Troop's use of the principles of mission command and effective command and control directly attributed to its decisive victory against overwhelming odds. Furthermore, Eagle Troop successfully conducted unified land operations to seize, retain, and exploit the initiative. This article will examine mission command principles, the elements of command and control, and the warfighting functions used at the Battle of 73 Easting.

Mission Command

The U.S. Army (DA, 2019a) defines mission command as “the Army’s approach to command and control that empowers subordinate decision making and centralized execution appropriate to the situation” (p. 15). In essence, commanders ensure their intent is fully understood, allowing subordinates to act without waiting on permission from higher echelons. Overall, mission command follows seven principles (competence, mutual trust, shared understanding, commander’s intent, mission orders, disciplined initiative, and risk acceptance) which allow Soldiers to make decisions at the point of execution to take advantage of opportunities or mitigate

risks. This article analyzes competence and risk acceptance and how each were applied during the battle against a numerically superior force.

Competence

A Soldier's competence level is vital to every mission command principle. A competent Soldier has the confidence to take the initiative and seize opportunities or mitigate risks. To develop this high level of competence, Capt. H.R. McMaster, Eagle Troop's Commander, demanded his troop execute challenging and realistic training in Germany before deploying to the Middle East (Guardia, 2015). McMaster continued the demanding training regimen to prepare this unit for the fight he believed was ahead. This training developed competence in every Soldier, down to the junior ranks, as pointed out in *Warrior's rage: The Great Tank Battle of 73 Easting* (Macgregor, 2009).

During the battle, Spc. Christopher "Skog" Hedenskog, one of McMaster's tank drivers, took the initiative to maneuver his tank through a minefield to achieve a 45-degree angle to the enemy (Guardia, 2015). The other drivers followed Hedenskog's lead, which allowed the entire troop to engage enemy targets effectively while maintaining a protective posture (McMaster, 2016). Hedenskog's knowledge of movement and maneuver as well as his tank's capabilities and limitations allowed him to make a competent decision that positively contributed to his unit's lethality. Training provided by Eagle Troop's leaders ensured the young Soldier understood that the most significant risk to the troop was giving the enemy time to regain any advantage, not the mines buried in the sand.

Risk Acceptance

One of the Army's most significant advantages is its leaders' ability to take risks. DA (2019a) states, "risk is part of every operation, it cannot be avoided" (p. 25). Furthermore, it goes on to say, "an unrealistic expectation of avoiding all risk is detrimental to mission accomplishment" (pp. 25-26). Soldiers accept risk levels that correspond to their authority level and the situation. Leaders who can analyze available intelligence to determine acceptable risk have the advantage over those who wait for intelligence to remove all risk.

During the Battle of 73 Easting, Eagle Troop had a limit of advance (LOA), a line used to control an attack's forward progress, of the 70 Easting (Guardia, 2015). Higher echelons use LOAs as control measures to manage forces. Moving beyond a control measure presents a significant risk because friendly fire becomes a possibility. However, McMaster found his troop heavily engaged as they reached the LOA (McMaster,



A view of the barrel of the 120mm gun on an M-1A1 Abrams main battle tank at the new location of the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment during Operation Desert Storm, 2/12/1991. (Photo courtesy of the National Archives)

2005). He decided to notify higher command they were in contact and needed to move beyond the LOA. He used the information available to assess the risk of not pressing the attack or moving beyond the LOA. Based on the immediate risks, he decided to continue the fight and advance to a different position.

Command and Control

Command and control allows Army leaders to manage forces and resources in a unified effort to apply desired effects to the enemy. DA (2019a) states, "Command and control (also known as C2) is fundamental to the art and science of warfare" (p. 1-16). The commander is most important person within the command and control structure. Overall, the commander is responsible for everything that happens or fails to happen within a unit. The commander employs the art of command and the science of control to accomplish the mission.

The elements of command are authority, responsibility, decision-making, and leadership (DA, 2019a). Additionally, the elements of control are direction, feedback, information, and communication (DA, 2019a). Eagle Troop's leaders leveraged decision-making and communication to increase the unit's combat effectiveness in battle.

Decision-Making

Commanders must make combat decisions quickly. McMaster made several decisions as the company commander leading up to and during the battle of 73 Easting that allowed his troops to succeed. One important decision was employing a diamond formation instead of a box formation (Guardia, 2015). He believed this formation allowed his troop to deploy its combat power better while maintaining flank and rear security. This change in the formation allowed his tanks and Bradley Fighting Vehicles positioned on the flanks to engage forward



Center, now retired Lt. Gen. Nadja West is shown during Operation Desert Storm treating a wounded Iraqi soldier. (US. Army photo)

without fear of hitting friendly vehicles.

McMaster also decided to place his tank elements ahead of his other vehicles. This move placed the tank's heavier armor and firepower up front. The tanks were able to move through minefields quickly and safely, allowing other vehicles to follow in their tracks (McMaster, 2016). McMaster's decision enabled the troop to avoid casualties while using the tanks' main guns to inflict maximum damage on enemy armor.

Communication

McMaster used communication as a tool to manage Eagle Troop forces and to ensure mutual understanding. DA (2019a) describes communication as "an activity that allows commanders, subordinates, and unified action partners to create shared understanding that supports action" (p. 30). Communication allows leaders to gather intelligence, coordinate efforts, and maintain situational awareness for themselves and all involved. Eagle Troop's communication ability allowed them to maintain advantage and speed throughout the battle.

Eagle Troop's radios were busy as reports and directions came rapidly over the network. They engaged the enemy concealed in a village while simultaneously receiving clearance to move to the 70 Easting. Staff Sgt. David Lawrence, a Bradley commander, engaged the village with a TOW missile while McMaster ordered them to move forward. However, Lawrence then communicated they were in contact with a tank from the east (McMaster, 2016). Lawrence's rapid and accurate communication allowed the troop to have situational awareness. Eagle

Troop's effective communication allowed them to quickly adapt and overcome situations as they arose.

Warfighting Functions

DA (2019b) states, "warfighting function is a group of tasks and systems united by a common purpose that commanders use to accomplish missions" (p. 5-2). There are six warfighting functions: Command and control, movement and maneuver, intelligence, fires, sustainment, and protection. This article will examine movement and maneuver and intelligence and how Eagle Troop used each of these to overcome the enemy.

Movement and Maneuver

DA (2019b) defines movement and maneuver as "related tasks and systems that move and employ forces to achieve a position of relative advantage over the enemy" (p. 5-3). McMaster moved his element in a diamond formation, with significant spacing to limit the tanks' exposure while maximizing their forward firepower. The troop maneuvered quickly and crested a small hill catching the Iraqi Republican Guard's command post entirely by surprise (McMaster, 2005). The Eagle Troop's tanks employed direct fires to destroy remaining enemy forces.

Intelligence

Intelligence reports of the enemy's location allowed McMaster to engage the Iraqi unit on his terms. DA (2019b) says, "the intelligence warfighting function is the related tasks and systems that facilitate understanding

the enemy" (p. 5-4). U.S. aircraft conducted information collection and identified enemy locations (Guardia, 2015). This intelligence provided McMaster with a situational understanding the enemy lacked.

Throughout the war, U.S. forces continuously caught the Iraqis by surprise. Iraqi forces lacked sufficient or reliable intelligence assets. An Iraqi officer told American forces he did not know the Americans were close until he heard the tanks firing within their assembly area (Guardia, 2015). This lack of intelligence left the Iraqi Army at a disadvantage, while the American intelligence allowed them to maintain an edge throughout the battle.

Conclusion

Leaders must make decisions quickly during combat based on available information to maintain momentum throughout a battle. Using mission command, command and control, and warfighting functions, McMaster was able to make rapid decisions that were carried out by his troops with his commander's intent as their foundation. This allowed them to operate with a speed and precision the enemy could not counter. The McMaster's standards and accomplishments during the Battle of 73 Easting serve as a great teaching tool for Soldiers to prepare for the future fight. ■

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