



Every professional field relies on a specialized body of knowledge; in the military, this expertise is encapsulated in doctrine. Effectively applying and continuously improving doctrine depends on instructors who bridge the gap between classroom concepts and the dynamic realities of modern military operations. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Gower Lu) (Graphic by NCO Journal)

Bridging the Gap Between Doctrine Theory and Practice

By Brazilian Sgt. Maj. Antonio V. M. Pires

Sergeants Major Academy

Every professional field relies on a specialized body of knowledge. In the military, this expertise is encapsulated in its doctrine, which involves a set of fundamentals and principles designed to guide actions toward their objectives — including supporting tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) (Department of the Army [DA], 2019a).

Additionally, doctrine establishes a common language employed in operations, incorporating symbols, graphics, and terminology easily understood by Soldiers (even those from other branches or nations).

It is a dynamic collection of evolving documents.

Consequently, the Army must constantly review and update it based on current operational environment challenges, equipment modernization, and factors influencing military operations.

Effectively applying and continuously improving doctrine depends much on instructor expertise. Educators need to understand not just what the Army says in its doctrine but also how Soldiers apply those ideas in the field, and the best way to learn that is through field experience that allows them to bridge the gap between classroom concepts and the dynamic realities of modern military operations.

Doctrine Organization

The U.S. Army divides its doctrinal publications into three hierarchical levels. According to the Department of the Army (2019a), each publication type has a different purpose and supports the others. To understand how instructors can effectively apply military doctrine in real-world scenarios, it's essential first to examine the hierarchy of doctrinal publications that guide military actions at various levels.

Level 1 — Army Doctrine Publication (ADP)

ADPs hold the fundamental principles guiding military actions to support national objectives. Some examples are *Operations* (ADP 3-0) and *Mission Command* (ADP 6-0). These are authoritative publications, which means leaders in all echelons must use them while applying their best judgment (DA, 2019a, para. 2-19).

Level 2 — Field Manual (FM)

FMs present tactics for employing and organizing military forces. They also drive the Army and its organizations' training and operations. FMs contain prescriptive procedures, some with detailed steps for executing tasks (DA, 2019a, para. 2-20). Examples include *Operations* (FM 3-0) and *Planning and Orders Production* (FM 5-0).

Level 3 — Army Techniques Publication (ATP)

ATPs offer nonmandatory ways to accomplish

missions, complete functions, and perform tasks, allowing adjustments based on circumstances (DA, 2019a, para. 2-21). Examples include *Intelligence Preparation of the Operational Environment* (ATP 2-01.3) and *Army Design Methodology* (ATP 5-0.1).

Although doctrine allows deviations and adjustments, military academies typically teach it following each component's exact guidance. However, good instructors must know how doctrine is applied in operations. Equipped with this knowledge, they can instruct their students on how to adjust doctrine application when necessary and possible.

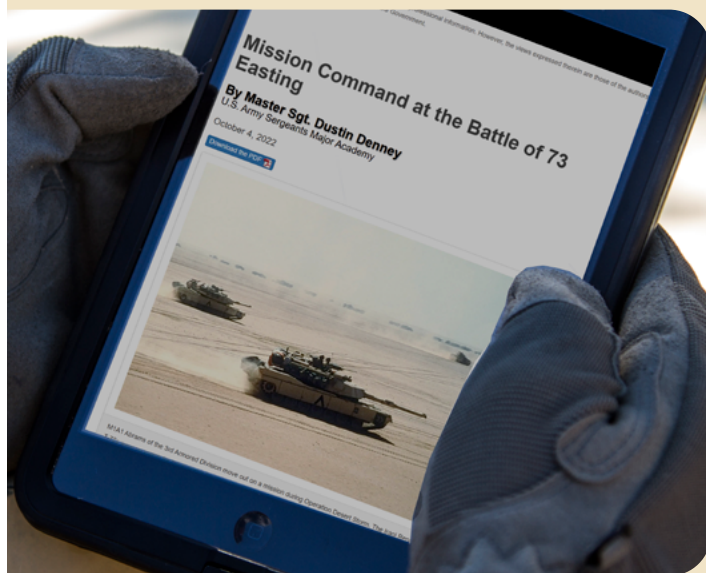
Instructors play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between theory and practice through this blend of doctrinal knowledge and instructional expertise. They ensure doctrine remains relevant and applicable across different operational contexts.

Improving Instructors

Military academies train future commanders at different levels, enabling them to interpret doctrine and apply the best of it to achieve military objectives. Instructors tasked with this responsibility must be subject matter experts and overcome the challenge of staying constantly updated to remain at the forefront of doctrinal knowledge.

The role of an instructor is vital in any army. Those who perform this critical role are, or usually become, experts in certain doctrinal areas. However, they still

READ + LISTEN: MISSION COMMAND & OPERATION DESERT STORM



(U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Krista Rayford, 367th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)
(Graphic by NCO Journal)

Mission Command's central idea is to empower subordinates to make decisions in decentralized operations or situations, following their commander's intent. One of our most popular articles on the subject was written in 2022 by Command Sgt. Maj. Dustin Denney (then a master sergeant and student at the Sergeants Major Academy).

His work focuses on an Operation Desert Storm battle, and he discussed his ideas on our *NCO Journal* podcast. Find the links below!

Mission Command at the Battle of 73 Easting
• <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2022/October/Mission-Command-at-the-Battle-of-73-Easting/>
NCO Journal Podcast Episode 34: Mission Command at the Battle of 73 Easting • <https://www.dvidshub.net/audio/70762/nco-journal-podcast-episode-34-mission-command-battle-73-easting>



Instructors are vital in any army. The U.S. Army created training programs that enable and encourage instructors' participation in different military exercises to help them improve and allow them to see how troops employ doctrine in the field. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. William A. Tanner)

face the challenge of keeping up with best practices in executing military operations, which can help improve their approach in the classroom (resulting in an essential harmony between theory and practice).

The U.S. Army, understanding this challenge, created training programs that enable and encourage instructors' participation in different military exercises. This approach helps them improve and allows them to see how troops employ doctrine in the field. Getting out of the classroom and seeing what is happening in practice can refresh the instructors' perspective.

I Corps Pacific Exchange Program

The I Corps Pacific Exchange Program, a U.S. Army Pacific Command (USARPAC) initiative, enables instructors from various Army institutions to observe and research one of six major annual exercises conducted by the organization (Bocanegra, 2024; Pargett, 2024).

As a Sergeants Major Academy (SGM-A) instructor at Fort Bliss, Texas, I participated in the program and observed the Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center (JPMRC) 25-01 exercise. This division-level training activity involved troops from nine countries.

During the exercise, I attended synchronization briefs conducted by the 25th Infantry Division and after-action

review (AAR) briefs conducted by subordinate brigade combat teams. Additionally, I interviewed command post personnel in various echelons. These experiences allowed me to compare how doctrine is applied in the field with how it is taught in SGM-A classrooms.

One notable observation involved a light infantry brigade prioritizing agility and rapid movement. To support this operational need, the brigade's command post relied heavily on digital systems, significantly reducing physical maps, analog systems, and other traditional tools normally used to maintain a common operating picture. This adaptation demonstrated how simple adjustments to doctrine (DA, 2024, para. 5-16) can enhance efficiency and support operational objectives.

Finally, I focused on understanding how troops applied two doctrines emphasized at SGM-A: *Mission Command* and the Military Decision-Making Process (MDMP). These insights are essential for identifying gaps and opportunities for enhancing classroom instruction.

Mission Command: Theory and Practice

One of the lessons I teach in class, which Soldiers actively apply in the field, is drawn from the *Mission Command* (ADP 6-0) manual — doctrine the Army has implemented for more than a decade. Its central

idea is to empower subordinates to make decisions in decentralized operations or situations, following their commander's intent (DA, 2019b).

Furthermore, leaders must develop seven principles to enable mission command in their teams: competence, mutual trust, shared understanding, commander's intent, mission orders, disciplined initiative, and risk acceptance. Being a level 1 manual, as described before, ADP 6-0 is an authoritative publication, which means commanders must use it, but — as highlighted — based on the leaders' best judgment.

During the JPMRC 25-01 exercise, I observed that the principles of mission command were most effectively practiced by senior leaders with extensive experience. For instance, brigade and battalion commanders actively empowered their command sergeants major to make decisions. These command sergeants major, in turn, relied on mutual trust to delegate responsibilities to their operations sergeants major.

All these senior leaders had more than 20 years of service, which likely contributed to their ability to implement the *art of command*. This approach involves using experience and judgment to assess situations, clearly communicate commander's intent, and trust subordinates to make decisions (while accepting responsibility for the outcomes).

In contrast, junior leaders — including captains, lieutenants, and young sergeants — tend to rely more heavily on the *science of control*. This method involves closely monitoring orders and execution to ensure strict compliance, which is required in some situations.

However, Army doctrine emphasizes that the art of command, consistent with mission command principles, be prioritized at all levels. The observed frequency of this approach among junior leaders indicates a potential area for further development in mission command elements. This observation is valuable in discussions with students training to become sergeants major.

Doctrine adjustments are a natural part of real-

world application, as commanders must tailor their approaches to achieve desired results. However, leaders must understand the fundamental concepts of doctrine to determine whether adjustments represent meaningful improvements or incorrect applications.

Improvements can inform future doctrine updates, while deviations may require leaders to intervene by teaching and mentoring their subordinates. One example of a successful doctrinal adjustment observed during JPMRC 25-01 was how MDMP was applied.

Military Decision-Making Process (MDMP): Theory and Practice

During the JPMRC 25-01 exercise, I observed how the military planning process — detailed in Chapter 5 of FM 5-0, *Planning and Orders Production* (DA, 2024) — is applied in the field. This process, known as MDMP, is

a key focus of instruction at the Sergeants Major Academy. However, students often find this lesson challenging due to the complexity of synchronizing warfighting functions in operational environments.

In the classroom, instructors present MDMP as a step-by-step procedure — which sometimes creates the misconception that it unfolds the same way in real-world operations. As noted by the Department of the Army (2024), the MDMP is designed to be flexible, with steps modified based on factors such as time constraints, situational demands, and team experience.

While visiting a brigade's and an infantry battalion's command posts, I interviewed staff members to understand their approach to MDMP. I observed that they often merged certain steps to streamline the process. For example, step 1, *Receipt of Mission*, and step 2, *Mission Analysis*, were combined into a single step. Additionally, some sub-steps were either condensed or omitted altogether, a practice made possible by the planners' extensive experience.

This practical adaptation highlights the importance



Soldiers and allies attend a combined arms rehearsal at Dillingham Airfield, Oahu, Hawaii. The I Corps Pacific Exchange Program enables instructors to observe major exercises and compare how doctrine is applied in the field with how it is taught in classrooms. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Abreanna Goodrich)

of flexibility in applying MDMP. Incorporating these field-based approaches into classroom instruction could help bridge the gap between theory and practice. By presenting students with real-world scenarios that illustrate how MDMP steps are modified, instructors can better prepare their students for the demands of operational environments.

Conclusion

The Army views doctrine as a living document, constantly reviewed and updated to stay relevant in dynamic operational environments. Instructors must remain at the cutting edge of doctrinal knowledge while staying grounded in the practical realities of military operations.

To do so effectively, they should leave the classroom, engage with troops in the field, and see firsthand how Soldiers apply doctrine in real situations. These experiences deepen their understanding and broaden their teaching perspectives, ensuring they impart lessons that are not only theoretical but also practical.

All military academies should adopt similar practices, encouraging instructor participation in real-world exercises. By doing so, instructors can enrich their professional development while bringing fresh, relevant insights into the classroom.

This approach strengthens them and ultimately enhances their students' readiness and effectiveness. It's time institutions prioritize these field experiences for



During training exercises, senior leaders implement the "art of command," which involves using experience and judgment to assess situations, clearly communicate commander's intent, and trust subordinates to make decisions. Army doctrine emphasizes the art of command, consistent with mission command principles, be prioritized at all levels. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Sean McCallon)

their instructors as a critical part of their professional growth and mission success. ■

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Brazilian Sgt. Maj. Antonio Vagner Machado Pires is a Brazilian soldier and an instructor at the Sergeants Major Academy (SGM-A), assigned to Department of Army Operations. He began his military career in February 1999, with his selection to the Brazilian Army's NCO Academy, where he graduated as a field artillery sergeant. He attended the SGM-A, Class 69.

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