

MISSION COMMAND – AN ESSENTIAL REQUIREMENT TO ACCOMPLISH THE MISSION

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Abstract: *Today’s conflicts generate a complexity of requirements including command and control challenges, deployment and maneuver issues, delivering superior firepower, ensuring appropriate sustainment and protection and others. Present battlefields as much as in the past impose a different philosophy of command. Uncertainty, ambiguity and frictions are inherent in combat and commanders have to express their initiative in order to exploit fleeting opportunities and strike enemy’s vulnerabilities. Therefore, an effective command way of thinking is needed. Mission command is the philosophy of command that gives commanders the authority to manifest and exercise their initiative in conducting military operations. The key in mission command philosophy is commanders’ clear intent and subordinate commanders’ willing to act.*

Keywords: *mission command; initiative; commanders’ intent; enemy’s vulnerabilities; will to fight; trust.*

“Gentlemen, I demand that your divisions completely cross the German borders, completely cross the Belgian borders and completely cross the river Meuse. I don’t care how you do it, that’s completely up to you.”

Oberst Kurt Zeitzler,
Chief of Staff Panzergruppe Kleist, 13 May 1940

Introduction

The maneuverist approach¹ to operations emphasizes the reality of the modern warfare where the enemy’s defeat only by seizing terrain or destruction of its forces is not enough anymore. This approach to operation is a philosophical one, that accentuated the importance of understanding and striking enemy’s vulnerabilities while protecting the own ones. It is based on the integrated actions in order to pre-empt, dislocate and disrupt enemy’s activities. The main purpose is to shatter enemy’s cohesion, affecting its understanding and will to fight. Therefore, friendly forces need to attack the opponent psychological dimension than attacking physical capabilities. However, by concerted actions both in physical domain and psychological one, the behavior and enemy’s capabilities are affected, establishing in this way, the premises for a successful and rapid victory.

The present conflict, including asymmetrical, hybrid and irregular ones, requires projecting multi-domain operations in order to prevail and to obtain the desired end-state. Engaging enemy in multiple domains need synergic actions and constant efforts both in the physical and moral domain. Current approaches to operations generate appropriate instruments to give commanders the ability to pursuit his objectives and accomplish the received mission. The key in exploiting those instruments is commanders’ initiative. Seizing and maintaining initiative in operation is not simple and subordinate commanders have to be properly empowered to gain the authority to exercise it. As I said before, mission command, the philosophy of command adopted by NATO, provides commanders with the authority to express their initiative in order to exploit opportunities on the battlefield.

Even if mission command is NATO’s assumed philosophy of command, there is enough room for debate about the effectiveness of implementing and exercising it. The reticence and hesitation in exercising mission command could have various reasons, including accountability

¹ ***, ATP-3.2.1., *Allied Land Tactics*, Edition B Version, 1 August 2018, p. 1-16.

for unsuccessful initiatives of subordinate commanders, or fear of higher commanders to lose strict control of their subordinate units.

Therefore, a short analysis about the importance and the benefits of the mission command could be relevant for commanders at all levels. Without the intention to be exhaustive or to give advice, I will try to outline both the advantages and the drawbacks in implementing and exercising mission command, as an imperative for accomplishing missions in military operations. Consequently, a hypothetical idea is the foundation of this analysis: “is mission command to operation empowering subordinate commanders to accomplish their missions?”

In order to focus this analysis, the following questions might be useful:

- Which are the roots of the mission command concept?
- How do the new requirements of the actual conflicts and battlefields shape the command philosophies?
- Which are the means of implementation and the mission command’s principles?
- How could mission command empower commanders prevail on the battlefield?
- Which are the risks in exercising mission command?

Regarding the research methods that were used in my analysis, by studying the national and allied documents related with the subject, an honest image about mission command could be delivered. On the other hand, a short analytical comparison between command’s principles issued by NATO, US and UK doctrines brings important input about mission command reasoning. A simple exemplification regarding the manner in which mission command empowers subordinate commanders gives substance to the present analysis.

Historical background

“Diverse are the situations under which an officer has to act on the basis of his own view of the situation. It would be wrong if he had to wait for orders at times when no orders can be given. But most productive are his actions when he acts within the framework of his senior commander’s intent.”

**Marshall Helmuth von Moltke the Elder,
Prussian Army Chief of Staff, (1800-1891)**

Mission command has its roots back in the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the Prussian Army was defeated by Napoleon in the twin battle of Auerstedt and Jena (1806). The aftermath of the battle convinced Prussian generals that the way in which military operations have to be conducted needed to be adapted. They realized the importance of maneuver and taking initiative to effectively react to the enemy’s actions. Centralized command and control of the operations was not an option anymore. Therefore, doctrines and tactics of Prussian’s Army started to change since then.

Marshall Helmuth von Moltke (the Elder), Prussian Army’s Chief of Staff between 1857 and 1888, was the one who theorized for the first time the concept called today mission command. Moltke’s approach to command was named *Auftragstaktik*² and it was in complete opposition to the *Normaltaktik* which was based on the centralized command.

Even if, there were many times when the concept was not clearly understood the need for freedom of action in military operations remains the same. Maybe the static warfare of the 1st World War was not a proper battlefield to exercise mission command at large scale. However, starting with 2nd World War, due to the German Blitzkrieg, based on joint operation and maneuver, mission command gained a permanent place on the stage of military art and science.

² The term comes from German language and it stands for the *tactics of command*. Today, German Army replaced *Auftragstaktik* term with *Führen mit Auftrag* motivating that the previous one is not comprehensive anymore.

German general, Erich von Manstein in his memories, written in *Lost Victories*, tried in an unconvincing way to justify the disaster of the 6th German Army encircled at Stalingrad. In this regard, he emphasized the core of German Army command and control function: “we guided our actions based on the well-known German command principles: I. Conducting military operation in a flexible and innovative way; II. Encouraging initiative of the subordinate commanders and their freedom of action. Subordinate commanders’ freedom of action has always been an advantage of the German command and control system. They received missions and it is their problem how to accomplish them”.³

Although, at the tactical and operational level, German divisions and corps’ commanders exercised mission command successfully, the reality was different at the strategic level. Hitler’s constant interferences in the operation planning process at tactical and operational level rendered ineffective subordinate commanders’ initiative.⁴ Frustration and confusion in understanding higher commander’s intent was provoked. There were other clues and situations in which commanders’ initiative in German operations during 2nd World War was rather an act of insubordination than an expression of the mission command concept, as Germans claimed. Guderian and Rommel used to conduct their operations very often, exploiting the momentum and striking enemy’s rear, ignoring the higher authority’s orders. They were successful, at least for the beginning of the war. It is also true that German tactics were compatible with this manner of commanding and their opponents were mentally unable to respond in the same way.

Another example of intrinsic exercising of mission command brings to bear the conflict between Soviet Union and Finland, at the beginning of the 2nd World War. The conflict is also called Winter War and it took place in late November 1939 and ended in March 1940. Finland’s Army, by using guerrilla tactics, decentralized execution of the operations, allowing initiative, and thus managed to stop for a while a superior army in number and capabilities. Unfortunately, for Russian soldiers the commanding officers were not even equal with the Finns. Undoubtedly, Finnish Army had not described, implemented or exercised mission command as a doctrinal direction. However, the battlefield requirements and the existence of a superior opponent in respect of fighting power forced them to adapt. Striking the enemy’s vulnerabilities using raids, ambushes and *motti* tactics⁵, the Finns gained a great chance to resist and to multiply their strength.

After the war’s end the concept was constantly developed and implemented by many modern armies all over the world, at least theoretically. Commanders oriented their commanding styles relying more or less on centralized command or a strict control of the operations or, on the contrary, allowing freedom of action and less control. British Army conceptualized the concept due to a natural need emerged from its reasoning regarding force projection. Initiative of the subordinate commanders was mandatory in overseas operations, where centralized control is almost impossible. Even the Soviet Unit contingent deployed in Afghanistan needed to adapt not only tactics, but also the way in which command was exercised. US forces strived to implement the same philosophy of command. In the beginning, the Army’s publication regarding mission command outlined the importance of exercising this type of command, but also the difficulties in doing it.⁶ Finally, nowadays mission command becomes NATO assumed philosophy of command. Romania’s Army adopted it, too.

The importance of exercising this type of command in present conflicts and the extensions and the principles of the concept will be developed in the next chapter. However, by

³ Erich von Manstein, *Victorii pierdute*, Editura Elit, Iași, 1982, p. 76, author’s translation.

⁴ ***, *Mission Command in the 21st Century – Empowering to Win in a Complex World*, The Army Press Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2016, p. 2.

⁵ *Motti* tactics refers to a guerrilla tactic used in mountainous terrain and consisting in three main activities: locating the enemy, blocking and isolating the enemy armored and mechanized forces in difficult terrain and fraction in parts enemy’s disposal then destroying by parts.

⁶ ADP-6.0, *Army Doctrine Publication – Mission Command*, July 2019, Headquarters, Department of the Army, USA, p. 1.

taking in consideration the concept's evolution throughout history, one general conclusion could be drawn: the need to adapt command and control of the operations remains constant and leaders will always try to enhance their philosophy of command to prevail on the battlefield.

Mission command in modern warfare acceptance

Over the centuries, commanders have exercised different types of command. Some of the encouraged detailed command, but others mission command philosophy. Even detailed command seems to be the solution for conducting the military operations, the inherent frictions and chaos from the battlefield have demonstrated contrary.

NATO doctrine for command and control of land forces defines command as “the authority vested in an individual of the armed forces for the direction, coordination, and control of military forces.”⁷ After a short analysis of the definition it could be observed that the keyword is *authority*. Yet, the conflicts' lesson learned outlined that only the authority resulted from ranking and official position is not enough. Detailed command provides commanders with authority, too. Therefore, an instrument to empower subordinate commanders to exercise their initiative in order to accomplish their missions was necessary. And here is the point where mission command interferes.

Mission command is defined as “an approach to command and control that empowers subordinate decision making and decentralized execution appropriate to the situation”⁸. This philosophy of command relies “on the principle of centralized planning and decentralized execution that promotes maximum freedom of action and initiative”⁹. Mission command implies conducting military operations “through decentralized execution based on mission-type orders for effective mission accomplishment”¹⁰.

The most common definitions, including NATO and modern armies which embraced mission command, emphasize the central role of decentralized execution of the operation. Yet, the definitions are not very clear, so they might lead to confusion. Unfortunately, many junior leaders misunderstand this concept and give it a wrong interpretation. Mission command is not about “doing whatever a commander wants to do, without any restrictions.” Furthermore, most of the definitions speak about initiative and decision making, but specific steps to fulfill these requirements are not issued. Probably, it is normal and further developments of the concept must be studied, beyond the limitations of definitions.

Mission command is not only a definition or an army's declared philosophy of command. It emerges from the commanders' reasoning and capacity to understand the complexity of the environment, visualize the end state and the ways and means to achieve it. To exercise mission command, a commander must act pragmatically and abide by principles not necessarily by regulations. The commander has to be able to take calculated risks. Moreover, a commander has to allow subordinate commanders to take calculated risk in order to fulfill their missions.

Of about the same importance is the commanders' willingness to act separately from the duty to accomplish their mission. They need to act according to their superior commander's intent. Control measures, restrictions and constraints are inherent to military operation. Thus, mission command does not forbid those coordination measures regulations needed for synchronization, avoiding friendly fire or ensuring synergic and joint actions. Command and control as a combat function does not restrain mission command. It is necessary and mandatory for the implementation and directing of the operational process, forces' command and operation control. The following figure could be relevant in this regard.

⁷ ***, ATP-3.2.2., *Command and Control of Allied Land Forces*, Edition B Version 1, December 2016, p. 2-1.

⁸ ***, ADP-6.0, *Army Doctrine Publication – Mission Command*, July 2019, Headquarters, Department of the Army, USA, p. 1-3.

⁹ ***, AJP-3.2., *Allied Joint Procedures for Land Operations*, Edition A Version 1, March 2016, p. 2-5.

¹⁰ ***, ATP-3.2.2., *Command and Control of Allied Land Forces*, Edition B Version 1, December 2016, p. 1-7.

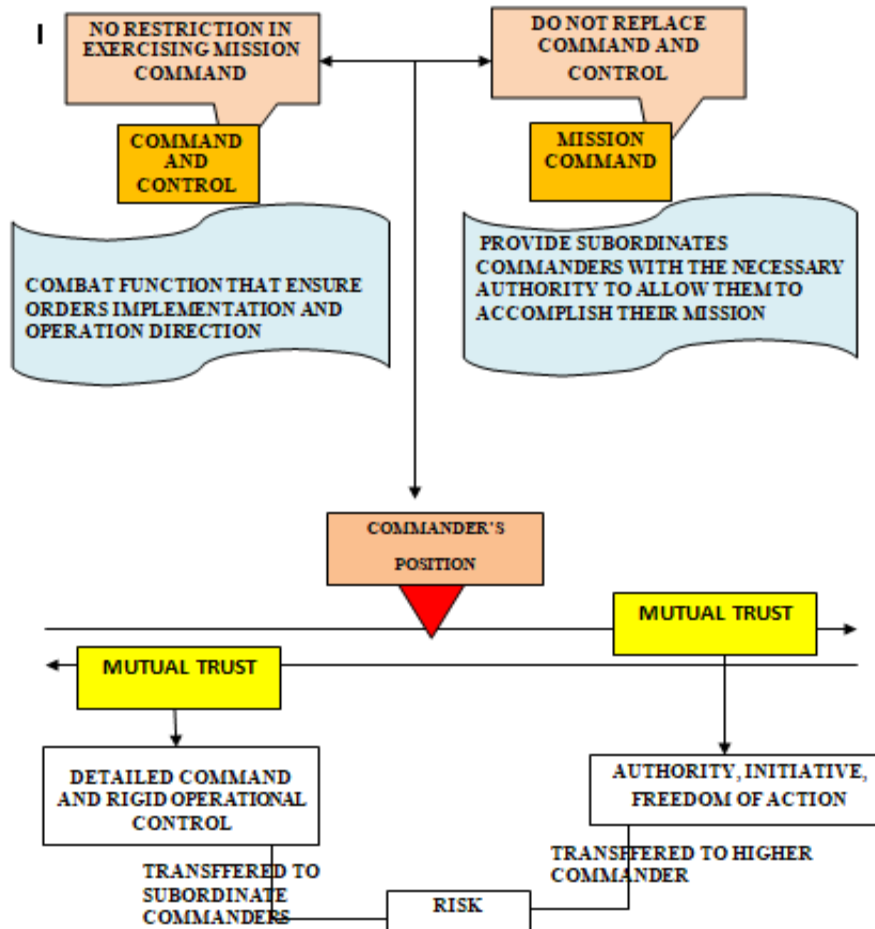


Figure 1 – Risk transfer in mission command

Perhaps, there is too much emphasis on mission command today. I want to draw attention to an inherent reluctant tendency to reject mission command. Theoretically speaking, mission command exercising with its advantages and extensions sounds great. Unfortunately, many times commanders fail in implementing and exercising mission command. Why? Most of the time, subordinate commanders are afraid. Not afraid to take risks, but to be held accountable for their unsuccessful actions as a direct result of their initiative. On the other hand, higher commanders are not comfortable with the loss of control. They need to know and control everything, anytime. Moreover, they need to bias their subordinates' plan with their own approach. And, last but not least, usually commanders are aware of the influence of their subordinates' action on their career evolution. Thus, a permanent tendency to control and influence their activities is unavoidable.

The key for effectively exercising mission command is mutual trust along the chain of command. Trust is the instrument that allows commanders to build and internalize the others' principles of mission command. Trust is the milestone for commanders to assume their subordinates' risk of failure. Only by doing this could they truly empower them to exercise initiative.

The present conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq or Syria highlight the necessity to empower junior leaders to win small, asymmetrical and ambiguous battles. Rarely could a three-star general be on the battlefield simultaneously in all hot spots of the corps' area of operations. Definitely, it is not his job to be over there. The need to make a rapid decision in order to save lives or to exploit an opportunity determines young officers to act according to their perception and understanding. Also, they need support for their decisions. Mission command seems to generate this kind of support.

Mission command - principles and means of implementation

Principles

The principles of mission command are based on the application of war principles in military operation. Unity and economy of effort, concentration of force or definition of objectives are fundamentals for the elaboration of commander's intent. On the other hand, freedom of action, flexibility and offensive spirit requested for operations are the milestone for mission command's demand for subordinate commanders' initiative.

USA Army identifies the following principles which are governing mission command: competence, mutual trust, shared understanding, commander's intent, mission orders, disciplined initiative and risk acceptance.¹¹

UK Army doctrine for land operations identifies as a fundamental principle in mission command the duty of the subordinate commanders to act so as to fulfill the commander's intent. In addition, other five principles are relevant: unity of effort, freedom of action, trust, shared understanding, timely decision-making.¹²

On the other hand, NATO doctrine for command and control of land forces outlines the next principles: unity of effort, decentralized execution, trust, shared common understanding and timely decision-making.¹³

It is not difficult to observe the existing connection between the principles outlined before. However, there are a few things that I would like to underline. In this idea the following should be of interest:

- mutual trust is a common principle for the approaches outlined above; as I said before trust is not only a principle; it is the necessary condition for expressing the tenets of mission command; in other words, in my personal opinion, trust is *primum inter pares* with respect to the mission command principles;

- shared understanding is another common principle and refers to that common awareness of the operational environment necessary to ensure the same premises and hypothesis to develop further actions;

- initiative, freedom of action, decentralized execution refers to commander's prerogatives and duty to act in order to fulfill his commander's intent;

- timely-decision making derives from the clear formulation of the intent;

- mission-type orders fulfill the need for simplicity in plans and orders and also are an instrument that enables execution of decision; mission-type orders mitigate time wasting and allow rapid actions in order to exploit opportunities.

There are more things to take into consideration for analyzing these principles. However, I want to emphasize again the importance of the existence of a relation between commanders, along the chain of command. Command is a human endeavor, and many factors could alter the manner in which command is exercised. Subordinate commanders have the duty to act, in a disciplined way, but the higher command has obligations too. Resources for the accomplishing of subordinates' missions ought to be allocated. I am referring to time, forces, logistics and, last but not least, guidance. Unfortunately, many times the higher commander's guidance becomes a restriction or strict direction in which to do things. Definitely, the commanders have to avoid this and start giving their subordinates no more directions than are essential.

¹¹ ***, *Army Doctrine Publication – ADP 6.0 – Mission Command*, March, 2012, p. 1-6.

¹² ***, *UK ADP-Land Operations*, 2017, Capitolul 6, p. 93-94.

¹³ ***, ATP-3.2.2., *Command and Control of Allied Land Forces*, Edition B Version 1, DECEMBER 2016, Capitolul 2/ Secțiunea 1, p. 2-9.

Means of implementation

The references to mission command means of implementation do not necessarily make up a complete and detailed list. I would like to express my own view about a few means used in the implementation of this philosophy of command. The list is by no means complete, but I want to highlight the following:

- the maneuverist approach to operation;
- creating a trust based-on climate;
- encouraging juniors leaders in exercising mission command;
- training in proper conditions;
- offensive spirit promotion.

In my opinion the key in mission command implementation is the type of approach to operations used. Therefore, mission command is best exercised in conjunction with the maneuverist approach. The fundamental principle of the maneuverist approach refers to the importance of exploiting any fleeting opportunity in order to strike enemy's vulnerabilities. Consequently, for exploiting those opportunities, flexibility, timely decisions and proper command are needed on the battlefield. Other fundamentals of maneuverist approach are also related with the mission command concept and features: acting boldly and decisively, agility, mission-type orders.

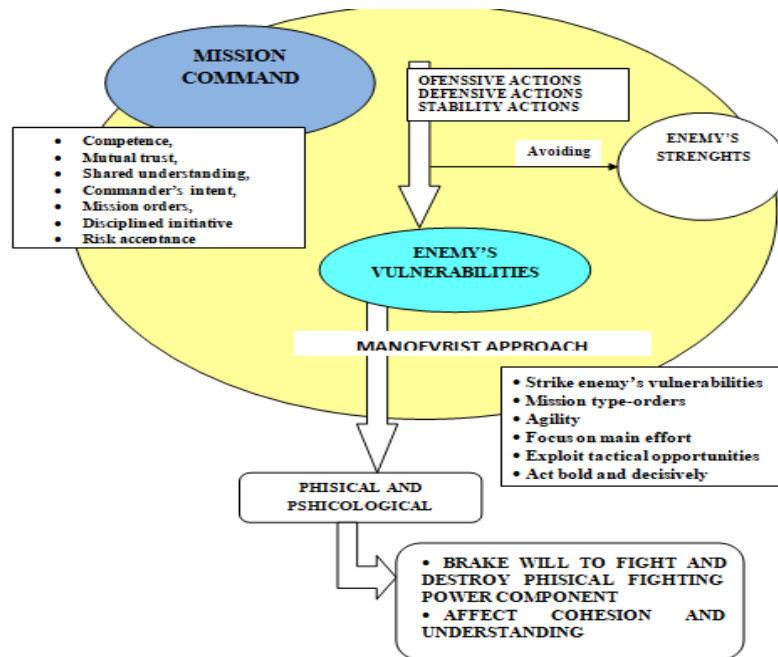


Figure 1 – Mission command and maneuverist approach relation

Creating a trust based-on climate depends largely on the commander's will to realize it. As I said before, it takes time to achieve this kind of climate. And there are risks, too. Anyway, trust is a specific dimension of the military organization and mission command just outlines again its importance. Closely related with obtaining and maintaining a trust based-on climate is the permanent encouraging of the junior leaders to exercise mission command; it is based on trust and assuming risks, too. Moreover, to obtain good results in exercising mission command, proper training is requested. Junior leaders and soldiers need to train in close conditions with the real battlefields.

Only by permanent strife for implementation and exercising mission command could relevant outcomes and, consequently, successful operations be achieved. Therefore, commanders need to explore and find out proper means to implement this type of command, according to their unit's particularity, mission and personnel available.

Conclusions

Following my intention to achieve the objectives of this study, I have tried to follow a deductive reasoning in order to highlight the importance of exercising mission command. On the other hand, examples reveal the necessity of implementing this type of command philosophy. Therefore, thorough and elaborate research could be realized using inductive reasoning in a case-study analysis. However, there are a few ideas that arise and deserve to be drawn to your attention:

- The permanent evolution of the international environment generates new security challenges and consequently the need to reconfigure and adapt military capabilities, including exercised philosophy of command;

- Mission command is enabling the maneuverist approach and their synergic dimensions provide commanders with a versatile instrument for managing future conflicts; all together facilitate operation designed to strike enemy's center of gravity and its vulnerabilities;

- Mission command does not exclusively rely on commander's instinct; the higher commander's intent has the same importance, as much as the duty and willingness to act of the subordinate commanders;

- Reality proves that the philosophy of command is not easy to exercise; commanders need to learn about the best way to implement it; its principles have to be internalized by the unit staff and soldiers and therefore, junior leaders need to be encouraged to exercise it;

- Usually, a commander does not solely rely on mission command tenets; the proportion in which mission commands principles are exercised depends on the staff's and troops training level, unit's cohesion and mutual trust along the chain of command and enemy's activities;

- The risk to fail in exercising mission command permanently exists; the unit's personnel, especially commanding officers have to be mentally prepared to effectively exert this kind of command; moreover, commanders ought to learn how to live and mitigate the risk caused by the subordinate commanders' failure probability;

- Mission command could be a force multiplier on the battlefield if is used properly; particular operating environments, unavoidable force commanders to adopt a command style based on decentralized execution;

As a final thought, I want to draw attention again upon the mission command's inherent adherence to planning, preparing and execution of the military operations. Operations of the encircled forces, turning movements in mountainous terrain, air assault or airmobile operations, urban operations ought to be provided with a flexible commanding manner. Therefore, commanders need to be empowered to realize their objective in order to fulfill their commander's intent and consequently accomplishing their mission. Mission command offers opportunities for "empowering to win in a complex world"¹⁴.

¹⁴ ***, *Mission Command in the 21st Century – Empowering to Win in a Complex World*, The Army Press Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2016, p. 2.

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