

Managing Strategic and Tactical Uncertainty: Mission Command in the Third Generation Army

by CPT Alvin Chan

Abstract:

This essay examines the role of mission command in managing strategic and tactical uncertainty as the Army transforms into a Third Generation force. Mission command represents a decentralized command philosophy whereby superiors communicate their intent effectively and permit subordinates to crystallize their operational plans independently. This essay revisits the origins of the philosophy and assesses its relevance in the current strategic landscape. It continues to suggest key initiatives for the proliferation of the philosophy in the Third Generation Army before concluding that the adoption of mission command, though challenging, enables the Army to successfully transform into an integrated and networked force and remain relevant in an increasingly unpredictable environment.

Keywords: Military Strategy; Maneuver Warfare; Mission Command; Third Generation SAF

INTRODUCTION

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 on orders at times when no orders can be given. Most productive are his actions when he acts within the framework of his senior commander's intent.

– Field Marshal Helmut von Moltke¹

The Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) has been prominently featured in recent years, with the main concepts revolving around information dominance, disengaged battle, synergy and civilianization of conflict.² The culmination of these concepts is an exponential rise in scope and complexity of military operations, leading to the dispersion of forces and expansion of the physical battlefield. In response, modern militaries in the information age have transformed to become highly integrated and networked forces in order to conduct a wider

spectrum of operations. Information-based networked structures undoubtedly facilitate dispersed and diverse forces operating seamlessly and synergistically across vast distances. However, to support these complex networked systems, militaries are compelled to enhance command and control methodologies that increase autonomy at the lower rungs of the command structure.³ The desire for greater leader initiative and impetus for decentralization of decision making have never been greater due to the increased tempo and uncertainty of future warfare.

As the Army embarks on its journey to become an integrated and network-centric force, the continued development of command and control methodologies is paramount. Mission command represents a decentralized command philosophy whereby superiors communicate their intent effectively and permit thinking subordinates to exercise initiative and derive tactical decisions of their own accord.⁴ This

allows the Army to be a flexible and agile force that empowers its people to operate efficiently in an environment of continuous flux. This essay examines the role of mission command in managing strategic and tactical uncertainty as the Army transforms into a Third Generation force. The essay traces the origins of mission command and assesses its relevance in the current strategic landscape. It continues to suggest key thrusts to proliferate the philosophy in the Army before concluding that the adoption of mission command, though challenging, enables the Army to transform into a networked force successfully and remain relevant in an increasingly unpredictable environment.

ORIGINS OF MISSION COMMAND

Mission command provides a framework for freedom of action and thereby fosters initiative by subordinate commanders during the execution of their assigned missions.⁵ The Prussian Army noticed during the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 that the improved lethality of weapons induced greater dispersion of forces in the battlefield. Commanders realized that they could no longer observe or control their forces as effectively as before and junior commanders were forced to make decisions in the absence of specific instructions from superiors. This drove the development of initiative in leaders at all echelons through mission command, which became the new culture in the Prussian Army. The decentralization of decision making to subordinate commanders at lower levels was the logical solution, whereby junior commanders would have to make independent decisions and execute them based on the astute interpretation of their commander's intent.⁶

In World War I, the Germans enjoyed success at the tactical level owing to the development of elastic defense and assault tactics that paved the way for greater initiative and creativity in leaders amidst fluid situations. The German Army eventually institutionalized the development of leaders who were willing and able to take prudent, independent action

to handle the unexpected.⁷ This evolved to become *Auftragstaktik*, which is most commonly translated as mission command. Mission command is widely considered to be the premier command philosophy of maneuver warfare and is extremely crucial to the practice of maneuver warfare. Maneuver warfare arose as a direct response to increases in battlefield firepower. With a weaker industrial base as a consequence of World War I, the Germans formulated tactics based on maneuver rather than attrition, creating the first truly non-linear tactics that sought to bypass and dislocate the enemy at his centre of gravity.⁸ Maneuver warfare as a war fighting philosophy was further validated in World War II, where the Germans applied it to great effect in *Blitzkrieg*.⁹ Maneuver warfare is characterized by movement, craft and the human dimension of war.¹⁰ It actively seeks to pre-empt, dislocate and disrupt the enemy in order to defeat his will to fight and render defense untenable. Above all, psychology forms the basis of all concepts of the maneuver theory, which capitalizes on the strengths and weaknesses of the human will.

RELEVANCE OF MISSION COMMAND IN THE EVOLVING STRATEGIC LANDSCAPE

Fourth-Generation Warfare (4GW), which is characterized by the complex mix of political, economic, social and military realms, has contributed greatly to the evolving strategic environment.¹¹ The asymmetric nature of recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan has largely supported this notion and reinforced the *Clausewitzian* dictum that uncertainty is an inherent part of warfare.¹² Fluid scenarios, fleeting targets and chaotic environments requiring rapid decision making under a veil of unpredictability is evident today and would only be accentuated in future. The speed of decisive action, the fundamental rationale for mission command, is integral to mission success on the contemporary battlefield.¹³ In Operation Iraqi Freedom, the application of mission command and maneuver warfare was apparent in the deep armored penetrations towards the centre of gravity in



An Officer Cadet Platoon Commander and Platoon Sergeant discussing strategies.

Baghdad. These “Thunder Runs” validated the doctrine of speed and maneuver by exploiting “surfaces and gaps” in the area of operations, leading to a swift and decisive victory with minimal attrition.¹⁴ Maneuver warfare was also demonstrated in the Yom Kippur War, where outnumbered Israeli forces initiated a counterattack deep behind the Syrian defensive lines that caught their adversaries off guard and shook their will to fight.¹⁵

Maneuver warfare and its command philosophy are especially relevant to the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and will serve the organization well in its Third Generation transformation. The SAF has adopted maneuver warfare as a war fighting philosophy because it overcomes several constraints unique to Singapore.¹⁶ In geographical terms, Singapore lacks strategic depth and the SAF is required to defend potential aggressors within a complex geographic architecture. Coupled with population and budgetary

constraints, the SAF is compelled to conduct a short decisive war while being outnumbered and outgunned. With limited resources and time at hand, the SAF needs to generate a streamlined force and a fighting concept that empowers it to punch above its weight and muster effects that are highly disproportionate to the sum of its size and capabilities. Maneuver warfare as a war fighting philosophy provides an effective framework to defeat the enemy rapidly with minimal attrition. The military agility that maneuver warfare provides is articulated succinctly in the United States Department of the Army Field Manual:

Agility—the ability of friendly forces to act faster than the enemy—is the first prerequisite for seizing and holding the initiative. Such greater quickness permits the rapid concentration of friendly strength against enemy vulnerabilities. This must be done repeatedly so that by the time the enemy reacts to one action, another has already taken its place, disrupting his plans and leading to late, uncoordinated, and piecemeal enemy responses.

It is this process of successive concentration against locally weaker or unprepared enemy forces which enables smaller forces to disorient, fragment and eventually defeat much larger opposing formations.¹⁷

The approach for mission command is based on the realization that “no plan survives first contact with the enemy,” and therefore a good plan encapsulates a central idea that allows maximum freedom to decide and act according to the emerging situation and changing circumstances.¹⁸ As such, mission command has remained relevant despite sweeping changes to military warfare over the past decades and will continue to be congruent to future modes of warfare.

FRAMEWORK FOR PROLIFERATION OF MISSION COMMAND IN THE ARMY

The proliferation of mission command must be deliberate and institutionalized as part of a comprehensive framework for the Third Generation Army to become a network-centric force that is competent, confident, cohesive and committed to the cause. Four key initiatives have been identified for executing the framework:

- Decentralization of Decision Making
- Inculcating a Culture of Boldness
- Effective Communication of Intent
- Forging Superior-Subordinate Relationships

DECENTRALIZATION OF DECISION MAKING

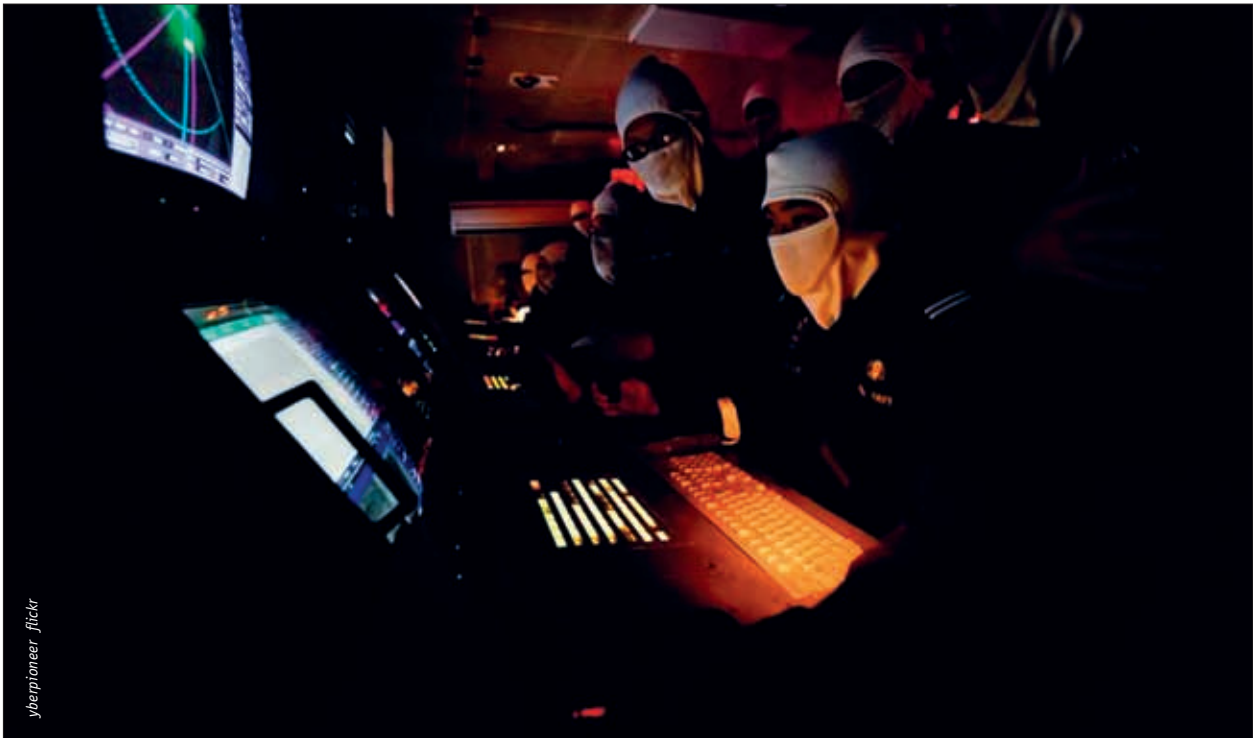
The changing security landscape has seen a widened spectrum of threats that are transnational and non-conventional in nature. At the strategic level, governments have recognized the need to strengthen their defense architecture and network amongst nations to address this paradigm shift. Militaries operating in coalition with allies as well as other non-military agencies in a whole-of-government approach will become increasingly prevalent. Intrinsic to coalitions and joint efforts are the wide ranging nationalities, cultures, doctrines, agendas and goals

of various players. Imposing a rigid and centralized command style in a multicultural or multi-discipline environment will inevitably induce friction and cause a factious atmosphere that hinders command and control. Instead, these variables imply the need for a decentralized framework for command and control that would facilitate the accomplishment of overarching objectives. Decentralization of decision making allows for effective integration and provides competent sub-organizations the freedom and flexibility to operate without unnecessary constraints.

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In the information age, large organizations are flattening their rigid hierarchy into looser con-glomerates of subordinate offices that are bound by a unifying vision of success.¹⁹ Likewise, the Army faces an evolving and increasingly complex mix of joint and integrated warfare that necessitates the decentralization of decision making. As organizations strive to become leaner and more efficient, flattening a hierarchy leads to economy in operations by removing superfluous echelons of authority which cannot be afforded in modern military operations. More importantly, precious time is saved by dispensing with the inefficient referral of decision making up and down the hierarchy.

Mission command has gained greater traction since the introduction of new digital command and control (C2) systems to mitigate the effects of



A midshipman (second from right) firing the 76mm Oto Melara gun under the watchful eyes of the seasoned RSS Endurance crew in the Combat Information Centre.

micromanagement.²⁰ Senior commanders may have a propensity to micromanage as it is now technically feasible to monitor and direct low-level activities at the frontlines. However, as conflicts grow in intensity and complexity, the ability to divide one's attention across many fronts diminishes. The chaos associated with modern warfare has to be ameliorated by technology and transfer of authority to the lower echelons. A coordinated information flow made possible by advanced information systems enables decisions to be made at the appropriate level. This empowers lower levels of authority to make informed decisions rapidly. William Lind, who helped develop the maneuver theory, advocated the psychological benefits of "creating an unexpected and unfavorable operational strategic condition, not to kill enemy

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troops or destroy their equipment."²¹ Effective fighting in the midst of a chaotic battle requires combatants to be consistently faster than their adversaries in the decision making process through the Observation-Orientation-Deciding-Acting (OODA) loop.²² This cycle enables a force to evaluate and determine actions rapidly, causing the adversary to make decisions based on circumstances that have changed.²³ In a dynamic environment where the enemy's strong and weak points cannot be accurately predetermined, authority must be delegated down so that commanders are able to find gaps and exploit them without delay.²⁴

INCULCATING A CULTURE OF BOLDNESS

Boldness and willingness to take risks are attributes that are highly valued in mission command. Mission command is not simply a technique of issuing

orders, but a type of leadership.²⁵ Subordinates must not be relegated to just followers, but be regarded as leaders in their own right who are able to make independent judgments and influence the battlefield. Under conditions of uncertainty, there is no perfect solution. Boldness and willingness of the commander to take action in the absence of specific orders must be encouraged. In maneuver theory, speed outweighs precision. A quick and fundamentally sound plan that is executed decisively at an opportune moment is superior to an immaculate plan that is performed much later.²⁶ Sun Tzu captured the essence of this idea when he wrote, "what is of greatest importance in war is extraordinary speed; one can-not afford to neglect opportunity ... An attack may lack ingenuity, but it must be delivered with supernatural speed."²⁷

In order to inculcate boldness and enterprise in our leaders, they should be given the latitude to make decisions, especially in the context of mission-based exercises. In fact, inactivity in situations should

be denounced and considered worse than judgment errors made in the right spirit of taking the initiative. Inaction is equivalent to yielding the initiative to the enemy. The maxim, "initiative disrupts synchronization and obedience preserves order," is a traditional mental model that retains little validity today. Given the current strategic environment, preservation of order in an inherently disordered and chaotic environment is futile. Thus, prudent risk-taking by a thinking soldier in appropriate situations should be encouraged and be incorporated as a cultural norm in the Army. Junior commanders should be granted scope for initiative to cultivate a will to action. The widespread exercise of initiative by leaders will help carry the battle and win the war in the face of confusion and ambiguity.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION OF INTENT

Communication of intent plays an important role in the eventual implementation of assigned tasks. The commander should articulate what is to be accomplished but not how to accomplish them.



80/10 Officer Cadet Course Commissioning Parade: Cadets from the Artillery in a march-past at the parade.

Adequate resources must be provided for mission success with constraints explicitly stated. The desired outcome is to provide subordinates the freedom of action as the situation demands.

The ideal effect of the commander's intent is a concise expression of the commander's vision of the operation that focuses subordinates on a common goal. In the process of issuing orders, the intent gives context to the mission and provides a vision of the desired endstate. The commander's intent provides unity of purpose and effort in dynamic situations which deviate from plans and expectations. Effective communication of intent should fulfill the following criteria:²⁸

- Clear, to avoid misinterpretation and be easily comprehensible two levels lower on the command chain.
- Concise, to eliminate ambiguity and ensure priorities are defined.
- Compelling, to provide impetus for subordinate leaders to act when the opportunity arises.
- Complete, to inform subordinates on the task and purpose (what and why).

Freedom of action empowers the subordinate, allowing him to be a leader and take ownership for his actions. Empowered subordinates derive greater pride and satisfaction in performing their duties and show greater determination in completing them. Independent leaders are better equipped to handle confusion in battle, where swift and decisive action must be taken to capitalize on small windows of opportunity. The collective alignment of intent in a unit results in unity of purpose and effort, which is crucial in modern operations where war fighting resources are scarce.

FORGING SUPERIOR-SUBORDINATE RELATIONSHIPS

Trust between superior and subordinate is the cornerstone of mission command. A superior who

trusts his subordinate empowers him to exercise his judgment and act as the situation dictates while achieving the desired endstate.²⁹ The subordinate executes in faith that his actions will contribute to the mission and will be supported by his superior. The amount of confidence placed in the subordinate stems from the intimate relationship between superior and subordinate. A relationship built on trust is crucial to the implementation of mission command.

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Through quality relationships between the superior and subordinate, the concept of imparting presence can be achieved. Imparting presence is the process of developing subordinates' decision making frameworks so that they respond the same way the senior commanders would if they were able to view the situation through their own eyes.³⁰ Imparting presence is a tall order for a conscript army due to the amount of training time available but establishing a healthy command structure can help to overcome this limitation. Commanders should seek to impart presence from the day they assume command and explicitly state their *modus operandi*. Superiors should constantly instruct their subordinates on what and not how to do tasks. Certain boundaries must be established up front to provide subordinates with the freedom to act and the knowledge of what is acceptable and what is not. This is particularly applicable to ensuring peacetime training safety. In addition, unit integrity must be maintained as much as possible to facilitate the forging of superior-subordinate relationships. The importance of unit integrity is amplified in a conscript Army, where valuable training opportunities

are limited for the operationally ready force. The synergy between superior and subordinate must be built on a strong foundation and would be a prized attribute in operations.

CONCLUSION

This essay has argued for the requirement to incorporate mission command as the pre-eminent command and control principle in the Army. Mission command has proved elusive in practice even in established militaries due to doctrinal and cultural dimensions that stem from national character and organizational traditions.³¹ Hence, mission command must be built upon the values and principles that the Army has cultivated over the course of its history. It is not easily quantified and institutionalized but four initiatives have been suggested to aid the adoption of the philosophy. As our operating environment evolves into a more complex and uncertain state, it is imperative to develop thinking soldiers who are able to cope with variables to respond to unanticipated situations and endeavor to achieve their commander's intent under the proverbial "fog of war." Grooming such leaders under the philosophy of mission command drives soldier development, doctrinal development and improves battlefield effectiveness. Mission command seeks to maximize the potential of every soldier, which could be an effective conduit to enhance "Last-Mile Leadership" and instill the culture of "Every Soldier a Leader." The emphasis on mission command galvanizes the Third Generation Army by developing people with steadfast dedication and commitment to the cause. The leadership initiative exemplified by mission command translates intent into reality and engenders an enduring leadership that will carry the Army to the next generation. 🌐

ENDNOTES

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