

THE LEADERSHIP IMPERATIVE:

A CASE STUDY IN MISSION COMMAND

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As we transition from more than a decade of war to garrison training, we must identify and implement mission command (MC) into our fighting formations and training management in order to respond to a complex and evolving security threat. Through grounded experiences at the tactical level and academic study of organizational leadership theory, I seek to connect academic theory to Army doctrine and show the successes of MC in practice through a case study of the 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). The following issues discussed are from the point of view and perspective of an individual who has served under multiple chains of command in the positions of platoon leader, company executive officer, and company commander between May 2010 and April 2013.

Hypothetical Vignette

Afghanistan, Regional Command-South — As the battalion conducts air assault operations behind insurgent improvised explosive device (IED) belts, leaders are faced with an ambiguous and evolving operational environment (OE). The commanders of two companies within the battalion execute simultaneous operations, controlling their platoon leaders and maneuvering their units at the order of the battalion commander. A synchronized battalion operation combining assets from air assault capabilities to air-to-ground integration (AGI) is ongoing as companies push south of the primary insurgent IED belts and defensive zones, all driven by detailed command. The company conducting the battalion's decisive operation pushes south and clears through enemy

disruption zones, able to find, fix, and finish the enemy. These two company commanders now face the exploitation phase of their operation but are "off the page" — moving beyond the initial contact and explicit direction provided by the battalion operations order. Instead of understanding commander's intent, seizing the initiative, and exploiting the initiative (which leads to assessment and dissemination of gathered intelligence), these company commanders are hindered by the micromanagement of the command and control philosophy that results in detailed command.

The battalion ceases operations, and the companies strong-point their locations so these two company commanders can meet with the battalion commander and S3 operations officer. While company leadership is unable to perceive and execute the next step, platoon leaders are stifled and, as micromanaged cogs in the wheel, move with their respective company commanders back to the battalion command post (CP) to receive further detailed guidance. At the battalion CP, platoon leaders gather around imagery of the OE as the S3 and battalion commander brief the scheme of maneuver for this unexpected phase of the operation. As the S3 describes the scheme down to platoon movement techniques, company commanders stand behind their platoon leaders observing the concept of the operation in "receive mode" as they conceptualize the directed concept.

Following the brief, company commanders and platoon leaders move back to their individual locations and prepare to exploit their gains. This process gave the enemy 12 hours to consolidate and reorganize. Following the battalion-directed scheme of maneuver, the platoon leaders depart in the early morning hours and face an enemy, previously broken, in prepared defensive positions protected by various IEDs. Meanwhile, company commanders act as radio operators, relaying information to battalion while awaiting further guidance to maneuver their elements. The lack of MC in this situation created a unit devoid of shared understanding. In failing to know the expanded purpose of the operation, the commanders' ability to seize the initiative was limited, which allowed the insurgent force to consolidate forces, plan a counteroffensive, and emplace IEDs forward of coalition forces.

"Leadership is [...] influencing



Photos by 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division Public Affairs Office

Soldiers with A Company, 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, execute a deliberate attack of an enemy objective during a training exercise.