

# Beyond the Line of Departure: *A Battalion Commander's Task and Purpose*

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A recent RAND report entitled “Reducing the Time Burdens of Army Company Leaders” offers thoughtful recommendations to consider in the pursuit of effective time management. Perhaps most notably, it underscores the need for “clarity of purpose and task” in order to “define and concentrate effort” for company-level leaders.<sup>1</sup> This is a well-founded recommendation and one that applies to leaders at all levels and in all environments. For those in positions of battalion command, the delicate balance of managing the myriad daily tasks that consume time with those personal responsibilities that are essential to organizational success exists just the same. To be sure, devoting time and attention to the latter can be difficult, as the pressures associated with the former can often rule the day. This article broadly asserts that battalion commanders must prioritize those responsibilities that are critical to mission accomplishment in training and combat. More specifically, battalion commanders should devote concentration and thought to their personal tasks that are essential to unit success beyond the line of departure.

Army doctrine effectively outlines a battalion commander's responsibility during the planning process; however, after the line of departure is crossed, that role is open to much more interpretation. On this score, history can be instructive. In the classic work *Men Against Fire*, S.L.A. Marshall asked commanders to think about their role with respect to influencing Soldiers once a battle is joined. More recently, LTG (Retired) Hal Moore offered his thoughts on a commander's mindset in a 2010 interview, stating that “it's incumbent upon any commander leading men into harm's way to beat his brains out, ahead of time, to figure out that one thing — and every other element he can come up with, too. I instinctively think ahead. I run scenarios before things happen. I plan ahead for things I know are coming — and, more important, for what I don't know is coming.”<sup>2</sup> Moore's vivid introspection provides the contextual basis for those in battalion command to consider in assessing their own critical responsibilities once



Soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 66th Armor Regiment, 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, plan for a defense during decisive action rotation 15-02 at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, CA, on 16 November 2014.

(Photo by SPC Randis Moore)

a scheme of maneuver is initiated. Commanders appropriately have license to define their role on the battlefield in accordance with their training, experience, and philosophy. With this in mind and based on personal experience, I offer perspective on what could, and perhaps should, be the focus of a battalion commander once the line of departure is crossed.

**Actively Monitor Intelligence:** The idea that the enemy gets a vote in battle is axiomatic, a notion that manifests in the often-repeated guidance to “fight the enemy and not your plan.” Faced with innumerable tasks associated with decisive action operations, however, commanders may find it difficult to focus on this central task. Monitoring an enemy’s reaction to friendly force activity is essential though and constitutes a “big rock” in the battalion commander’s proverbial rucksack. A battalion commander’s staff most certainly plays a vital role in tracking intelligence developments, confirming or denying templated enemy actions and drawing conclusions about what it all means; yet only the commander can issue guidance and adjust the overall scheme of maneuver. Moreover, the battalion commander possesses the experience and intuition necessary to place enemy activity within the larger context of higher headquarter and adjacent unit missions. As such, he or she is uniquely positioned to influence friendly activity based on his or her perception of enemy behavior. Without question, the tenets of mission command — whereby subordinate leaders are empowered to make decisions based on enemy action and in accordance with the commander’s intent — will guide effective units as well as enable subordinate commanders to react decisively to a thinking enemy. Nevertheless, the battalion commander’s role in evaluating and interpreting intelligence developments, and subsequently adjusting a unit’s tactical plan, is central to success.

**Revisit Assumptions and Adjust Restraints/Constraints:** Assumptions are a material component to any plan, and indeed, are reserved for battalion commander approval at the outset of any planning process. Despite our desire to affirm the assumptions we make through friendly courses of action, enemy action often confirms or denies their validity. Indeed, Combat Training Centers (CTCs) are effective in training battalions in part because of their complex environments — in which a creative enemy force tests the soundest of assumptions. In my experience at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Polk, LA, my assumptions were often invalidated by events that I least foresaw and when I least expected them. What do you do if another unit does not progress in accordance with the published timeline, the aviation task force is delayed during force insertion, or the logistics battalion does not deliver fuel at the expected time? Without question, preparing for these contingencies must occur as part of the planning process — yet a battalion commander or staff cannot prepare for every possible eventuality. Thus, once the line of departure is crossed, the commander must constantly review those assumptions that are essential to mission success, hedge against potential failure if certain assumptions do not materialize, and of course, react decisively to meet the brigade commander’s intent. In a similar vein, battalion commanders must keep self-imposed restraints and higher headquarters constraints at the forefront of their mind. Given the opposition force’s creative nature, commanders should regularly re-visit those tactical moves that their units must do and cannot do.

**Dialogue with Subordinate Commanders:** Commander-to-commander dialogue is crucial to mutual understanding — a truism firmly established within the doctrine of mission command. Without question, providing subordinate commanders the time and space to develop the situation is essential — yet battalion commanders must prioritize regular communication to preserve their own space to make decisions. Oftentimes, commanders feel compelled to report when they are in direct contact with the enemy but not necessarily when they are out of contact. Yet for the battalion commander, a report that indicates a lack of enemy presence or activity is often just as important as a report from a unit in contact, as it may confirm or deny a specific enemy course of action. Commander-to-commander dialogue is a cornerstone of the Army profession, thus putting this particular recommendation in the common-sense category. Nevertheless, a battalion commander with the wherewithal to facilitate regular and meaningful dialogue with subordinate commanders beyond the line of departure will inevitably see the battlefield more clearly.

**Track the Adjacent Unit and Higher Headquarter Fights:** As a general rule, a battalion commander’s focus is 90 percent down and 10 percent up. Said another way, battalion commanders spend the majority of their time on their organization and devote a lesser degree of attention on the business of their higher headquarters. After the line of departure, this dynamic should invariably change. Successful battalion commanders actively track the progress of their higher headquarters and adjacent units with energy and attention, motivated by the brigade commander’s overall intent for a given operation. To be sure, brigade commanders manage their fight in a similar



LTC Dennis Rohler, commander of the 529th Support Battalion, talks with a forward arming and refueling point team in Iraq on 28 May 2019. (Photo by SGT Roger Jackson)

manner to battalion commanders — but with a higher degree of complexity. As such, brigade commanders likely view their subordinate commanders' perspective as critically important, for it facilitates their own visualization. Incumbent to a battalion commander's responsibilities then is applying attention to the brigade's fight as well as communicating the battalion's situation. A battalion commander who can translate his or her battlefield perspective into tactical deductions for the brigade commander truly enables success and represents the highest degree of performance. In the end, understanding how the enemy reacts to a battalion commander's plan is critical to the brigade commander's understanding of his or her own scheme of maneuver. The commander who understands this will be able to effectively make recommendations, and perhaps, preserve the brigade commander's flexibility and decision space.

**Weigh the Reserve:** In battle, and specifically when one loses the advantage of initiative, battalion commanders can put their unit at an advantage over the enemy with "fires, reserves, placement of key leaders, and [the expenditure] of Soldiers' lives."<sup>3</sup> Since the employment of the reserve is solely within battalion commanders' purview, visualizing its role at a battlefield inflection point or as "insurance against stagnation" must be at the forefront of their mind.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, battalion commanders must ensure that planning priorities for the reserve are specific and achievable, and that they remain valid after the line of departure. As Moore indicated in his 2010 interview, the ability to respond to unforeseen and unlikely scenarios is a critical commander responsibility, and the reserve represents an asset that enables effective action in the face of uncertainty or a determined enemy. In addition to ensuring that the staff adequately forecasts reserve contingencies and validating reserve force readiness during rehearsals, battalion commanders must think about the conditions that would lead to the employment of this force. To be sure, this constitutes a specific battalion commander responsibility that requires regular attention after the line of departure.

**Practice Sensible Skepticism:** Above all else, battalion commanders must exercise what former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff GEN Martin Dempsey refers to as "sensible skepticism."<sup>5</sup> Whether at a CTC or in combat, battalion commanders find themselves awash with information — radio reports, personal observation, intelligence feeds, real-time surveillance, and the like. While many argue that the character of warfare has changed in recent years, all agree that the time-tested Clausewitzian concept of fog will always remain. As such, commanders must inject their personal experience and intuition — their sensible skepticism — in situations where information may

be unreliable or incorrect. This, according to GEN Dempsey, enables units to stay ahead of a thinking enemy and facilitates effective decision making by the commander.

In *Men Against Fire*, Marshall summarized his view of command by writing that “60 percent of the art of command is the ability to anticipate; 40 percent of the art of command is the ability to improvise... to rule by action instead of acting by rules.”<sup>6</sup> While the above-mentioned recommendations most certainly do not constitute a comprehensive list, they aim to address the sentiment that Marshall expressed more than 70 years ago. Moreover, they seek to provide battalion commanders the clarity of task and purpose that the aforementioned RAND report calls for. In the end, a battalion commander’s time and focus are combat multipliers for an organization in battle; therefore, it is imperative to define those tasks that only a battalion commander can accomplish in the heat of battle. Battalion commanders who devote time and attention to this endeavor will wisely embrace history’s call for those in command to think carefully about their role beyond the line of departure.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lisa Saum-Manning, et al., *Reducing the Time Burdens of Army Company Leaders* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), 5.

<sup>2</sup> “General Hal Moore,” Steven Pressfield’s personal website, accessed 19 March 2020 from <https://stevenpressfield.com/2010/07/general-hal-moore/>.

<sup>3</sup> Scott Shaw, “2 Years of Lessons from Battalion Command,” *The Military Leader*, accessed 16 March 2020 from <https://www.themilitaryleader.com/lessons-battalion-command/>.

<sup>4</sup> S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command* (NY: William Morrow & Company, 1947), 188.

<sup>5</sup> GEN Martin Dempsey discussed this concept in a 13 April 2020 interview with *War on the Rocks*. Interview subject matter is Dempsey’s book *No Time for Spectators: The Lessons that Mattered Most from West Point to the West Wing*.

<sup>6</sup> Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, 108.

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