

Mission Command on the Move

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*“Commanders, assisted by their staffs, use the guiding principles of mission command to balance the art of command with the science of control. They use the art of command to exercise authority, to provide leadership and to make timely decisions. [They] use the science of control to regulate forces and direct the execution of operations to conform to their commander’s intent.” –Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-0, **Mission Command***

Mission command is both a philosophy (art) and a warfighting function (science), according to Army doctrine. As a philosophy, it is centered on a commander’s ability to enable the execution of “disciplined initiative within the commander’s intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders” through the creation of trust, shared understanding and the acceptance of prudent risk.¹ Understanding and implementing mission command during the current decisive-action (DA) rotations at the National Training Center (NTC) is essential to a successful training deployment. However, the level of implementation depends on the ability of commanders and their units to take a doctrinal concept and implement it into operations.

During NTC Rotation 14-10, from August to October 2014, 1-77 Armor Regiment, 4th Armor Brigade Combat Team (ABCT), 1st Armor Division, set conditions in garrison that resulted in the successful use of mission command.

NTC training objectives

One of the primary training objectives within a DA rotation at NTC is to stress every system and Soldier at each echelon. This goes from the brigade level all the way down to the team. One way to do this is to create a fast operational tempo through the execution of battalion operations every 48 hours for the first six days of the rotation and brigade-level operations every 48 hours for the rest. This timeline ensures planning is continuous, including during execution of operations.

When the operational timeline is overlaid with the brigade planning timeline and requirements, there is very little time for the battalion commander and S-3 to be present in the battalion command post (CP). In fact, during the 14-day rotation, there were only three full days when the battalion commander and operations officer (S-3) were present in the CP. Therefore, company commanders and battalion staff had to be empowered in a way that allowed the battalion to function appropriately before arrival at NTC. This required the battalion to maximize every opportunity in garrison to inculcate the philosophy of mission command into Task Force Steel Tigers.

This was no small challenge. The battalion had a complete turnover of field-grade officers between June and August 2014. The battalion commander took the colors in early June; the S-3 reported to the unit in the middle of the division validation exercise in July; and the battalion executive officer arrived three days before leaving for NTC at the end of August. The continuity of the unit was found at the command sergeant major and captain level. Every member of the staff had more time in the battalion than the field grades.

However, within the S-3 shop, there was more turmoil. The previous assistant S-3 was assigned as the rear-detachment commander; another member of the staff was medically non-deployable; and the task-force engineer and battalion fire-support officer (FSO) positions were unfilled. This resulted in the battalion plans officer assuming the roles of assistant S-3 and plans officer; the attached engineer-company commander filling a dual role as the task-force engineer; and a company FSO being pulled up to act as the battalion FSO.

This personnel shortage is not uncommon but can contribute to significant functionality issues if mission command based on trust is not implemented in such a time-constrained environment.

Sowing seeds

The initial seeds of the mission-command philosophy were sown during the division validation exercise conducted just before our NTC rotation. The one task-force operation, a battalion attack with an in-stride combined-arms breach, provided an opportunity for the battalion commander, with the support of staff, to set the mission-command philosophy by simplifying the orders process via using standing operating procedures (SOP). Each company within the task force had a previously specified task organization and task/purpose based on mission type (Figure 1). The battalion always moved in a diamond formation with our Charger Company (armor company

team) in the lead element as an “advance guard”; Able and Baker companies (mechanized company teams) on the flanks; and our Dog Company (armor company team) in the rear as shown in Figure 2. This standard formation was the basis for all our assembly area and maneuver operations. Tactically, Baker would be the support-by-fire (SBF) element; Charger was the breach element with habitually attached engineer assets; Able was the assault force; and Dog acted as the reserve/exploitation force if not detached through brigade orders.

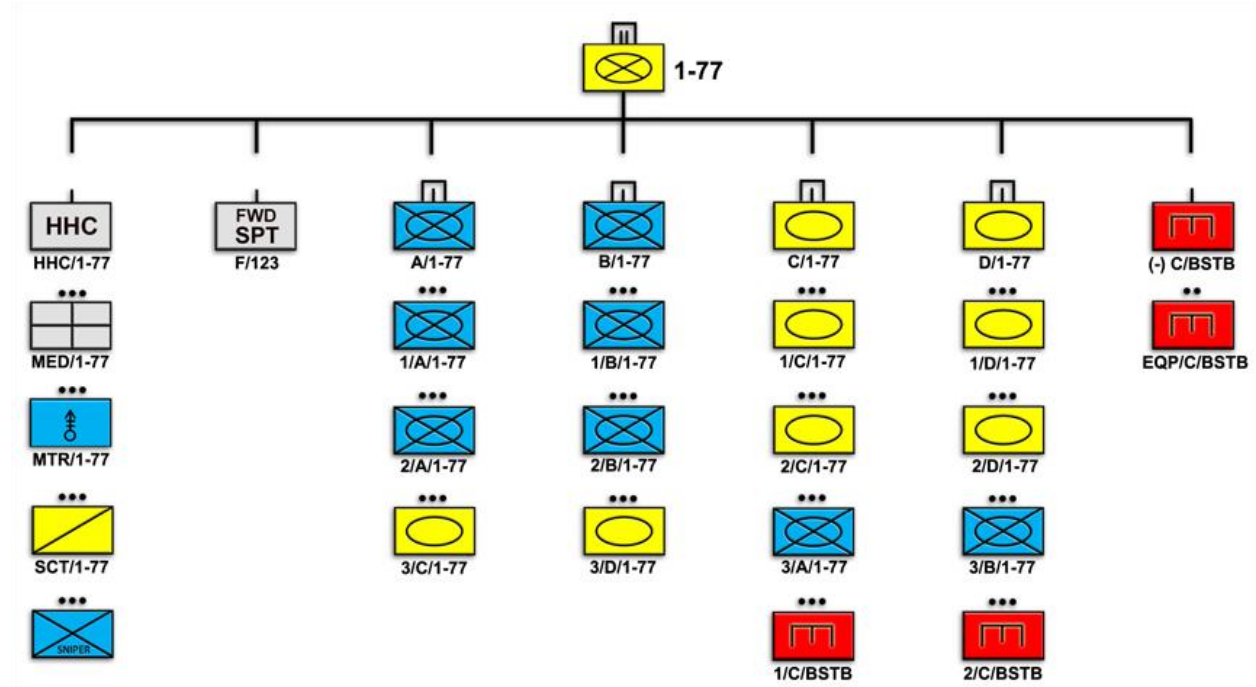


Figure 1. Task Force Steel Tiger standard task organization.

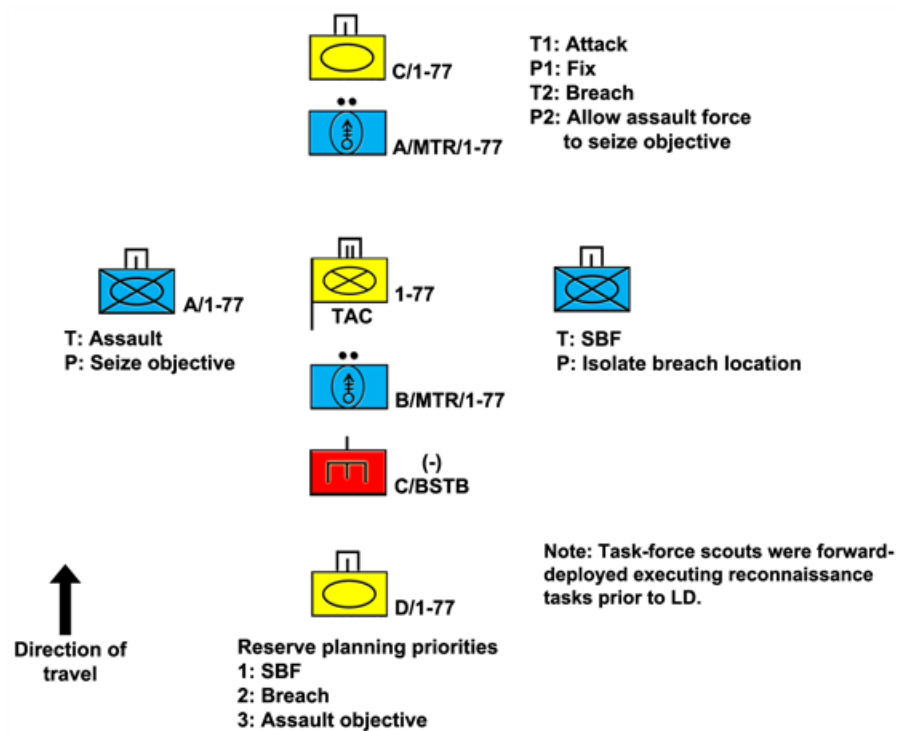


Figure 2. Task-force diamond formation – the standard formation for all battalion operations.

We created the battalion's tactical CP (TAC) during the same division validation exercise. According to Army Tactics, Techniques and Procedures Publication 5-0.1, a TAC contains "a tailored portion of a unit headquarters designed to control portions of an operation for a limited time." Our TAC consisted of the commander's M1A2SEPV2 or M998 humvee; the S-3's Bradley Fighting Vehicle; an M1068 CP vehicle with the assistant S-2 and a battle captain; a fires vehicle with the battalion FSO; and the attached Joint Terminal Attack Controller element in its own vehicle.

We attempted many configurations by using different vehicles, alternate capabilities and different personnel. However, given some constraints on communications capabilities, we settled on the configuration previously described. The M1068 was fitted with a mast antenna, allowing it to be raised when the vehicle was stationary. The increased height of the antenna provided significantly increased range for frequency-modulation communications. This vehicle and personnel package facilitated the battalion commander's role in the operations process while circulating around the battlefield (Figure 3). This package also provided the commander the ability to integrate fires and maneuver the element.

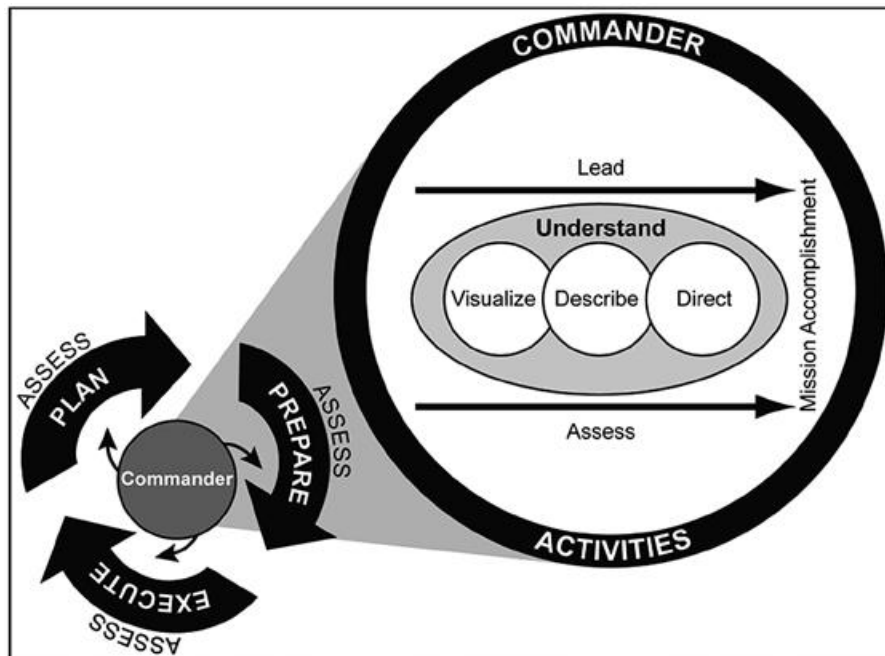


Figure 3. The commander's role in the operations process. (From Army Doctrinal Publication 6-0)

The TAC also supported the commander's ability to use mission command as a warfighting function for the battalion. In Task Force 1-77 Armor Regiment, the battalion commander empowered the operations officer to maneuver the battalion based on shared understanding, commander's intent and trust, which are key components within mission command. By removing the need to constantly talk on the radio to maneuver subordinate elements, the commander was able to monitor and digest the net traffic to "understand" the battlefield, maintain situational awareness through Blue Force Tracker and "visualize" by being at the front. This allowed the commander to better "direct" the battalion. This delineation of tasks created a form of mission command tailored for the team that had been built.

The battalion CP included the operations sergeant major, S-3 plans officer/assistant S-3, S-2 and S-6, and the rest of the fires personnel. The battalion executive officer then could oversee planning for the next operation while also supporting current operations the battalion TAC was controlling. Due to communication constraints inherent in operating across long distances, the battalion CP was also prepared to provide relay support from the TAC to the brigade CP.

Leader training

The brigade conducted its leader training program (LTP) without company commanders because the rail load was happening at the same time at home station. To compensate, the battalion conducted a very detailed brief to its company command teams and staff to highlight the intelligence preparation of the battlefield and enemy best practices. Also, the "situation" paragraph of the base operations order described the effects of terrain and enemy employment prior to deployment to NTC.

The battalion commander also developed the team through map drills with company commanders that covered expected operations and movement techniques through known enemy areas. Then the battalion conducted classes specifically focused on operations at NTC. These classes, given to platoon leadership and above, focused on taking away some of the mystery of an NTC rotation by providing the SOPs for conducting medical and casualty evacuations, vehicle and personnel regeneration, and maximizing the Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement Systems. This created a robust understanding and served as a way to "build a cohesive team built on mutual trust and shared understanding" two levels down.²

By creating a standard formation, laying out basic tactical responsibilities and briefing a detailed modified combined-obstacle overlay, the battalion commander created an environment where mission orders could be efficiently created based on a clear commander's intent and shared understanding while current operations were being conducted. This ensured subordinate leaders had as much time as possible to conduct troop-leading procedures (TLPs), resulting in a more efficient orders process during NTC's time-constrained environment.

Vignette

The first six days of NTC Rotation 14-10 involved battalion-level lanes consisting of offense, defense and live-fire operations. Operations were based on the battalion commander's training objectives and conversations with the observer/controller/trainer (O/C/T) lead and unit senior trainer. Our LTP did not involve conducting any planning directly applicable to our rotation, so we had to produce four battalion orders within a five-day period. In the case of our battalion, we executed task-force lanes in the following order: offense, live-fire and defense. To maximize our training opportunities, the O/C/T provided order shells that were about 50 percent to 60 percent complete. When combined with the tactical road-march order produced during the four-day reception, staging, onward movement and integration process, these battalion order shells ensured we had the opportunity to be successful and learn as a task force.

The compressed timeline of the NTC required the orders brief for the task-force offensive lane be conducted on the morning of Training Day (TD) 1 to ensure companies had adequate time to conduct their TLPs before the start of patrol the morning of TD 2. To execute the required dry runs for the task-force live fire on TD 3, the opord for the live fire was conducted the day before execution of the offensive lane on TD 2. This allowed the task force to conduct a combined-arms rehearsal about eight hours before line of departure (LD) for the live-fire dry run.

Once complete with the combined day/night dry run (attack and combined-arms breach during daylight, repel counterattack during darkness), the companies prepared their LD for the live run at 3 p.m. the following day (TD 4). At 7 a.m., eight hours before LD for the live run, the opord for the follow-on operation was given. This operation was planned with very little input from the battalion commander or S-3 due to the nearly continuous operations during the 48 hours prior. In fact, the first time the plan was briefed in its entirety to either leader was during the opord brief. Based on the shared understanding created during the one task-force attack executed prior to NTC; briefings and classes conducted with platoon leadership and above; and a clear intent provided early in the planning process, the battalion commander was able to influence the planning process while allowing the battalion staff to adhere to the one-thirds/two-thirds planning rule for subordinate units.

There is no doubt the training objective to stress every system within a unit was met during NTC Rotation 14-10. Every leader from team level through battalion level felt the impact of the time-constrained and complex environment created during the DA rotation. The methods used by Task Force Steel Tigers, and the opportunities provided by the O/C/T team at NTC, created a situation where the battalion was able to run continuous operations while providing an environment to empower agile and adaptive subordinate leaders to exercise disciplined initiative within the commander's intent. By taking advantage of every opportunity to implement mission command prior to our deployment to NTC, Task Force Steel Tigers were prepared for success during NTC Rotation 14-10.

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Notes

¹ ADP 6-0.

² Ibid.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armor brigade combat team

BOLC – basic officer leader's course

BSTB – brigade special troops battalion

CP – command post

DA – decisive action

EQP – equipment

FSO – fire-support officer

FWD SPT – forward support

HHC – headquarters and headquarters company

ILE – intermediate-level education

LD – line of departure

LTP – leader training program

MCCC – Maneuver Captain's Career Course

MED – medical

MTR – mortar

NTC – National Training Center

O/C/T – observer/controller/trainer

SBF – support-by-fire

SCT – scout

SOP – standard operating procedure

TD – training day

TLP – troop-leading procedures

TAC – tactical command post