The Fighting Platoon Sergeant Concept:

Leveraging the Experience of a Platoon's Senior NCO to Control the Assault Element

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Current U.S. Army infantry platoon methodology places platoon leaders (PLs) at the decisive point (DP) and in control of their assault element, particularly in the offense. In my opinion, this methodology, which is introduced and reinforced during an officer's professional military education (including the Infantry Basic Officer Leaders Course [IBOLC] and U.S. Army Ranger School), is inefficient and ill-suited to the tempo of multi-domain operations (MDO), where young officers realistically have a larger span of control than in past operating concepts. While currently valid within the framework of tactical doctrine, overloading the intellectual bandwidth of PLs with subordinate units and processes increases the fragility of the formation by reducing PLs' situational awareness, limiting their ability to capitalize on opportunity and anticipate contingencies. Furthermore, placing platoon sergeants (PSGs) in a supporting role such as an outer cordon or support-by-fire (SBF) location inhibits their ability to move to and reduce friction points, a primary task of an NCO.

The fighting PSG concept, a more coherent approach in line with the principles of mission command as outlined in Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command*, leverages the experience of the platoon's senior NCO to control the assault element. In turn, PLs seek the position of highest relative influence in their area of operations (AO) in order to set conditions

Photo by LTC John Hall

A platoon sergeant with the 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, guides his Paratroopers on 26 September 2017.

More control	Considerations	Less control
• Predictable • Known	Situation	• Unpredictable • Unknown
• Inexperienced • New team	Unit Cohesion	• Experienced • Mature team
• Untrained or needs practice	Level of Training	• Trained in tasks to be performed
• Being developed	Level of Trust	• Established
• Top down • Explicit communications • Vertical communications	Shared Understanding	• Reciprocal information • Implicit communications • Vertical and horizontal communications
• Restrictive	Rules of Engagement	• Permissive
• Optimal decisions later	Required Decision	• Acceptable decisions sooner
• Science of war • Synchronization	Appropriate To	• Art of war • Orchestration

Figure 1 — Levels of Control (ADP 6-0)

for subsequent phases of the operation and react to the evolving operational environment. This change increases the "antifragility" of platoons by balancing leaders' span of control and improving their posture in preparation to respond to stressors. The validity of this concept spans all brigade combat team (BCT) variations, constrained only by the individual competency and experience of tactical formations and the willingness of commanders to implement it.

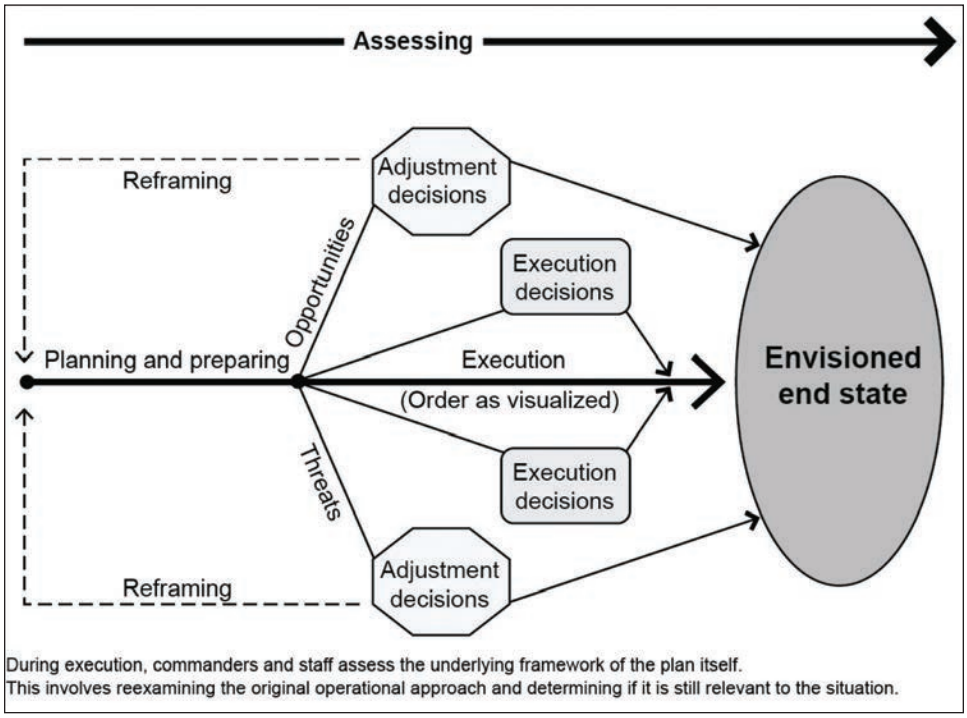
Combat within the MDO concept is inherently intense, rigorous, and complex.[1] Tactical units at all levels will encounter evolving dilemmas against several forms of contact in multiple domains. Compounded with efforts to modernize formations and generate the ability to maneuver across domains, platoon-level leaders will face increasing numbers of subordinate units and activities for which they are responsible. Through the lens of MDO, one can visualize a mechanized platoon maneuvering to seize a foothold following a multi-national combined arms breach while engaged in multiple forms of contact.[2] It is extremely likely FM communications will be jammed and their Global Positioning Systems (GPS) will be spoofed.[3] This platoon may also be responsible to synchronize the effects of attached enablers such as electronic warfare specialists and air defense assets in an effort to achieve convergence. While future PLs may not have a large number of traditional assets such as Army attack aviation (AAA) and close air support (CAS), the danger of exceeding their span of control remains.

Mission command is the Army's approach to command and control that empowers subordinate decision making and decentralized execution appropriate to the situation.[4] ADP 6-0 directly addresses subordinate decision making as well as the span of control commanders exercise over their formations. Whenever possible, commanders focus on developing branches and sequels, leaving execution of current operations to their subordinates.[5] The level of control commanders exercise over their formation serves as a function of several considerations highlighted in Figure 1.

Span of control refers to the number of subordinates or activities under the control of a single commander.[6] Commanders balance width (their span of control) and depth (the layers of command in an organization) to achieve flexibility and responsiveness.[7] While PLs are not commanders, they do enable subordinate decision making and possess a span of control at the platoon level. PLs' span of control has direct causation with the fragility of their platoon and the tempo at which they can operate.

One can define fragility as "an accelerating sensitivity to a harmful stressor: This response plots as a concave curve and mathematically culminates in more harm than benefit from random events."[8] In contrast, antifragility "produces a convex

Figure 2 — Decision Making During Execution (ADP 5-0)



response that leads to more benefit than harm."[9] Simply put, fragile systems or organizations respond poorly to stressors while performance of antifragile systems improves when exposed to stress.[10]

Applied to the context of the tactical employment of an infantry platoon in the offense, we can consider variances as stressors. According to doctrine, variances are "a difference between the actual situation during an operation and the forecasted plan for the situation at that time or event."[11] Variances present as opportunities, which enable the accomplishment of the mission more effectively, or threats, which endanger the accomplishment of the mission or the preservation of the force.[12] The ability to identify and exploit both opportunities and threats serves as the litmus test of the tactical unit's antifragility. For example, within current enemy threat doctrine, an enemy subordinate element facing loss of key terrain to U.S. ground assault would likely trigger reinforcement by an enabler, such as an armored reserve. Post assault, a fragile U.S. platoon would likely not be in an appropriate force posture to repel such an element and would require additional resources to resolve the situation. Alternatively, an antifragile U.S. platoon sees the threat as an appropriate time to remove a key element of the enemy's tactical plan from the battlefield, inhibiting the enemy commander's tactical flexibility and disrupting his decision cycle. The U.S. Army benefits from antifragile PLs who can exploit variances and think through branch plans.

The Army defines tempo as "the relative speed and rhythm of military operations over time with respect to the enemy."[13] Commanders enable independent subordinate action and initiative through mission command to maintain a tempo appropriate to meet the desired end state.[14] GEN Martin E. Dempsey, the 18th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and 37th Chief of Staff of the Army, stressed the role subordinate understanding, visualization, and decision making play in recognizing and responding to variances to maintain tempo. He said, "To gain and maintain advantageous tempo, our leaders must be able to see, understand, and rapidly exploit opportunities in both time and space, guided by their understanding of intent, their mission, environment, and the capability of their force."[15] To apply the critical thinking necessary to identify and exploit opportunities on the battlefield, leaders — specifically junior officers — must retain the requisite intellectual bandwidth required to recognize these brief windows. By overloading

Photo by SGT Liane Hatch

A platoon leader (right) and radio-telephone operator with the 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, send up a report during training at Camp Buehring, Kuwait, on 24 July 2019.

PLs' span of control, tactical formations risk the inability to capitalize on fleeting opportunities.

As a recently commissioned first lieutenant and Ranger School graduate, I immediately found myself serving as a mechanized infantry PL during my first platoon live-fire exercise (LFX). During platoon troop leading procedures (TLPs), my PSG and I worked out the distribution of tasks and leader placement during the operation. I would dismount and move to the DP, with one rifle squad entering a trench. My PSG would co-locate with my weapons squad leader (WSL) at the SBF location. Once on the objective, I would send up key calls to the company commander through my radio-telephone operator (RTO). Additionally, I would coordinate the shift and lift fires between the support and assault element with both visual and radio signals, echoed in return by my PSG and WSL. I was responsible for indirect fire targets to prepare for the impending enemy counterattack, and my PSG handled the adjustment of our mounted force posture for the next phase of the operation. Lastly, I was also responsible for timing each rifle squad's flow onto the objective to maintain tempo. My PSG would handle the reporting and evacuation of any casualties through the NCO support channel.

At the height of the operation, my span of control consisted of three subordinate units and five activities: two rifle squads, a sapper squad, reporting key calls to my company commander, shifting and lifting direct fires, objective exploitation, and control of two indirect fire targets. In contrast, my PSG's span of control consisted of two units and three activities: two mechanized sections, the redundant check of the lift and shift of our SBF element, coordination of medical evacuation (MEDEVAC), and his role as an M2A3 Bradley Fighting Vehicle (BFV) commander.

A year later, I found myself observing Ranger platoon live fires. Substitute trench line for a military operations on urban terrain (MOUT) compound and BFVs for CH-47 Chinooks as methods of infiltration, and the scenarios were rather similar. The execution, however, could not have been more different. As I observed from the SBF location, I noticed the PL move onto the berm with several enablers. The PSG moved with the assault element to its last covered and concealed position outside the compound. The PL adhered to the fundamentals of a raid, initiating the attack with the most casualty-producing weapon systems and echeloning fires appropriately. However, rather than focusing on the execution of tactical tasks by his weapons squad, he issued curt, frank guidance on when to shift and lift fires based on the posture of the assault position and effects on the enemy. The WSL did not need a double check to ensure he executed to standard; a high degree of mutual trust within the formation allowed an acknowledgement to suffice. The PL remained focused on the broader tactical fight, controlling assets and sensors through his attachments. As contingencies arose, he proved able to allocate various assets based on lethality and responsiveness to deal with the threat. The co-location of the PL at the SBF enabled the WSL to keep better situational awareness of assets influencing the objective and adjust his weapons control status and rate of fire accordingly. As such, the responsiveness of enablers such as AAA increased due to direct communication. The result was more timely and lethal effects on the battlefield. On the objective, the PSG made intuitive decisions based on his experience gained through years of training cycles and deployments. The PL kept him abreast of pertinent information to his tactical decision-making cycle, such as enemy reinforcements, time of suppression remaining, and enabler playtime. His direct control of the medic on target expedited triage and treatment, and the PL proved capable of facilitating MEDEVAC from his position.

Through this training event, it was clear this platoon retained several tactical advantages that I had previously forfeited by placing myself at the DP during my own LFX. Despite significantly more assets and enablers, the Ranger PL's span of control did not exceed my own. In this specific training event, the PL's placement at the SBF location provided him the maximum influence over his formation. The organizational flexibility inherent in his leader placement and balanced assignment of tasks enabled platoon-level leaders to shape the next phase of their operation prior to the completion of their actions on the objective. Furthermore, they retained the requisite situational awareness to exploit an unforeseen threat manifested as an enemy quick reaction force (QRF). Their organization passed the litmus test and proved antifragile. My platoon, on the other hand, would have been hard pressed to repel or defeat an enemy counterattack; my lack of tactical bandwidth prevented my looking beyond the trench I found myself in.

Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-21.8, *The Infantry Platoon and Squad*, deliberately does not dictate the exact location of the PL during offensive operations. It does specify, however, that: "The PL places himself where he is most needed to accomplish the mission," and "[t]he PL maneuvers/controls squads and fighting elements."[16] (See Figure 3 for the complete list of duties and responsibilities based on BCT type.) This ambiguity provides platoons the flexibility to determine leader placement based on operational variables but dictates that PLs personally maneuver squads. Additionally, the duty description for both mechanized and Stryker PLs explicitly mentions that the PL "usually dismounts with the dismounted element."[17]

While a core competency of small unit infantry formations remains operating in complex terrain such as urban environments, the dismounted assault element often ends up as the decisive element for both enemy and terrain-based tactical tasks. Furthermore, institutional norms reinforce to young lieutenants that the PL maneuvers with and controls the assault element. Both IBOLC and Ranger School instruct the PL to move with the assault element, the nested decisive operation, as a best practice. The Ranger Handbook does not specify PL placement during a deliberate attack. However, it does dictate that during a platoon attack battle drill the PL maneuvers with the assaulting element.[18] In

Figure 3 — Duties and Responsibilities of the Platoon Leader Versus the Platoon Sergeant (ATP 3-21.8)

Tasks common to all BCTs	**Tasks unique to ABCT IN PLTs**	Tasks unique to SBCT IN PLTs
Platoon Leader	**Platoon Sergeant**	
• Leads the platoon. • Conducts troop leading procedures. • Maneuvers squads and fighting elements. • Synchronizes the efforts of squads. • Looks ahead to the next "move" of the platoon. • Requests, controls, and synchronizes supporting assets. • Employs mission command systems available to the squads and platoon. • Checks with squad leaders ensuring 360-degree, three-dimensional security is maintained. • Checks with weapons squad leader controlling the emplacement of key weapon systems. • Issues accurate and timely reports. • Places himself where he is most needed to accomplish the mission. • Assigns clear tasks and purposes to the squads. • Understands the mission and commander's intent two levels up. • Receives on-hand status reports from the PSG and squad leaders during planning. • Coordinates and assists in the development of the obstacle plan. • Oversees and is responsible for property management. **• Normally dismounts when the situation causes the platoon to dismount.** **• Serves as Bradley commander when mounted.** **• Develops the fires plan with the PSG, section leaders, and squad leaders.** • As leader of Section A, keeps his crew and wingman informed.	• Ensures the platoon is prepared to accomplish its mission. • Updates PL on appropriate reports. • Prepares to assume the role and responsibilities of the PL. • Takes charge of task-organized elements in the platoon during tactical operations, which may include but is not limited to, quartering parties, support elements in raids or attacks, and security patrols. • Monitors the morale, discipline, and health of the platoon. • Positions where best needed to help the engagement (either in the base of fire or with the assault element). • Receives squad leaders' administrative, logistical, and maintenance reports, and requests rations, water, fuel, and ammunition. • Requests logistical support from the higher headquarters and usually coordinates with the company's first sergeant or executive officer. • Ensures Soldiers maintain all equipment. • Ensures ammunition and supplies are properly and evenly distributed after the platoon consolidates on the objective and while the platoon reorganizes. • Manages the unit's combat load prior to operations and monitors logistical status during operations. • Establishes and operates the unit's casualty collection point (CCP). This includes directing the platoon medic and aid/litter teams in moving casualties, maintains platoon strength level information, consolidates and forwards the platoon's casualty reports, and receives and orients replacements. • Employs the available digital mission command systems to the squads and platoon. • Ensures Soldiers distribute supplies according to the PL's guidance and direction. • Accounts for Soldiers, equipment, and supplies. • Coaches, counsels, and mentors Soldiers. • Upholds standards and platoon discipline. • Understands the mission and commander's intent two levels up. **• Controls the mounted element when the PL dismounts; or dismounts with, commands, and controls the platoon when necessary (mission, enemy, terrain and weather, troops and support available, time available and civil considerations [METT-TC] dependent).** **• Serves as a Bradley commander when the platoon operates mounted.** **• Directs the platoon's casualty evacuation process during mounted or dismounted operations.**	

that specific case, however, the lack of a deliberate planning process associated with battle drills may justify the increased control of the PL in that context due to the inherent increased risk of fratricide in a battle drill without pre-determined direct fire control measures.

Additionally, the role reversal between PLs and PSGs better aligns with an officer development model established in mission command. GEN Dempsey also stressed the need to instill the tenets of mission command into officers as early as possible through all three domains: institutional, operational, and self-development.[19] Officers are encouraged to prepare for higher levels of command by exercising organizational leadership over direct leadership when applicable in subordinate commands.[20] The fighting PSG concept serves as the manifestation of the principles of disciplined initiative within intent and mutual trust in the operational domain. Implementing this structure ingrains in young officers that their position belongs at the point on the battlefield where they have the greatest influence over their formation and all associated elements, whether that is at the last covered and concealed position, SBF position, the turret of a Bradley, or the hull of a Stryker. Lieutenants must learn to delegate authority to lower levels to complete their mission. Such conditioning precludes the micromanaging tendencies that often grip Infantry commanders. As their rank and subsequent span of control increases, Infantry officers must become comfortable with empowering other leaders in their formations. Where better to start teaching these lessons than in their first platoon?

As in all decisions, implementation of the fighting PSG concept entails an opportunity cost of its own. Eventual first sergeants tasked with coordinating MEDEVAC and logistical resupply at the company level would lack the focused experience of routinely doing so at the platoon level prior to assuming that responsibility. While critical, labor-intensive, and often complicated, these sustaining tasks are not beyond the skill level of a senior NCO selected to serve as a first sergeant. Furthermore, the ability of the PSG to immediately respond to casualties at the most likely point of injury and provide direction to the platoon medic poses the unit to immediately respond to and reduce a common point of friction inherent to combat operations.

Ingrained institutional norms serve as a barrier to application of a force-wide implementation of the fighting PSG concept. Maneuver leaders at all levels draw on their experience in the existing institutional pipeline such as Ranger School and IBOLC as the foundation of small unit tactics, as they well should. However, through candid cross-examination of mission variables against subordinate leader talent force-wide, leaders at echelon should encourage non-traditional task delegation within their platoons in maneuver training. Recent updates to mission command doctrine include competence as a principle of mission command.[21] If an individual lacks the requisite competence to lead a maneuver element, it is the responsibility of higher headquarters to make necessary adjustments. Commanders are inherently responsible for the assessment of their subordinates to discern their tactical capabilities.[22] This includes the delegation of authority to a PSG to control a platoon assault element. If unsuccessful, the worst case scenario results in a failed platoon field training exercise (FTX) or LFX lane and valuable "leader down" repetitions for the platoon's senior NCO. Traditional LFX risk-mitigation procedures serve to prevent a catastrophic accident resulting in injury or death to Soldiers. Successful execution, however, holds the potential to increase the lethality of even the best tactical units.

Regardless of BCT type — mounted or dismounted — the fighting PSG concept remains a viable alternative for infantry formations to increase their lethality on the battlefield through a more efficient delineation of tasks. Leveraging the experience of our senior NCOs in the offense bears significant potential to increase flexibility and responsiveness in our rifle platoons and decrease fragility. In preparation for the complexity and tempo of MDO and in line with the tenets of mission command, leaders at echelon should exercise mutual trust and maximize the effectiveness of their organization.

Notes

[1] Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Pamphlet 525-3-1, *The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028*, 30 November 2018, XI.
[2] Ibid, 9.
[3] Ibid, 12.
[4] Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command*, 31 July 2019, 1-3.
[5] Ibid, 1-4.
[6] Ibid, 4-14.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Nassim N. Taleb, "'Antifragility' as a Mathematical Idea," *Nature*, 28 February 2013. Accessed 8 July 2019 from https://www.nature.com/articles/494430e.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Antifragile* (NY: Random House, 2012), 3.
[11] ADP 5-0, *The Operations Process*, 31 July 2019, 4-5.
[12] Ibid.
[13] ADP 3-0, *Operations*, 31 July 2019, 2-8.
[14] Ibid.
[15] GEN Martin Dempsey, "Mission Command White Paper," 3 April 2012, 4.
[16] Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-21.8, *The Infantry Platoon and Squad*, 23 August 2016, 1-46.
[17] Ibid, 1-86.
[18] Training Circular (TC) 3-21.76, *The Ranger Handbook*, 26 April 2017, 8-6.
[19] GEN Dempsey, "Mission Command," 7-8.
[20] ADP 6-0, 2-1.
[21] Ibid, 1-7.
[22] Ibid, 2-23.

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