

Mission Command of Highly Synchronized Operations at NTC

CPT JARED HIRSCHKORN

The brigade combat team (BCT) staff officers I had the opportunity to observe, coach, and train at the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, CA, had a thorough understanding of both the definition and the importance of mission command. It is safe to say that most of our tactical leaders well understand this doctrine. However, in the following paragraphs, I will argue that we have developed a habit of rigid adherence to this doctrine of flexibility. This one-dimensional understanding and practice of mission command contributes to significant challenges in the execution of the defense and the combined arms breach — two operations that typically require a high degree of synchronization and detailed planning.

The BCT combined arms breach, as envisioned by Army doctrine and as practiced at NTC, is a task that requires highly synchronized actions across multiple battalions. It is a symphony of maneuver and destruction. At various times and places in just the breach operation alone, the BCT synchronizes fires for effective obscuration and suppression, maneuvers multiple battalions, reduces obstacles, coordinates rotary and fixed wing effects, and synchronizes the delivery of cyber and electronic warfare effects, while simultaneously executing protection, intelligence, and sustainment functions. Within this symphony, when single players deviate from the sheet music, they can quickly unravel the entire operation. For example, if the reduction element commits to the breach before the support by fire is set or the suppression and obscuration delivered, they are likely to see losses approaching 100 percent. In this situation, independent initiative that is asynchronous to the planned operation is quite risky.



Soldiers assigned to the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division conduct a combined arms breach at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, on 18 April 2018. (Photo by SPC Daniel Parrott)

This is a common occurrence during rotations at NTC and often results in the BCT getting another chance at the breach the following day.

During rehearsals and operations order briefs, I often hear Army leaders say that we need to get everyone on the same sheet of music. After hearing a leader say this, the question in my mind is often, “what music are we trying to play?” If we’re playing classical music, then being on the same sheet of music means we’re conducting an operation in which every single note is dictated and synchronized across all the other functions (instruments), and there is very minimal room for individual initiative. If we’re playing jazz, then there is room for improvisation as long as the soloists know how to respect the harmonic progression and rhythm of the backup. If we’re playing postmodern music, then we can have 200 people sit in a room and scream for five minutes and call it music. My point is that “being on the same sheet of music” in some cases contradicts the philosophy of broad intent and disciplined initiative. The “what music” question can be properly translated as “what mission are we trying to accomplish?” Some operations require more control than others.

Brigade defensive operations are an area where the philosophy of flexibility embodied by mission command has contributed to leaders avoiding aspects of the detailed coordination required of such an operation. This, in combination with a lack of repetitions in the defense, has led to challenges in our execution at the BCT level. Army doctrine states that in the defense the BCT designates obstacle intent in belts or groups and assigns this area and effect to subordinate battalions.¹ That’s all well and good until the subordinate battalions try to achieve a fix effect without any dozers or concertina wire. No amount of disciplined initiative is going to make the D7 bulldozers suddenly appear in the engagement area or get the minefield approved by division. In order to accurately assess, integrate, and synchronize the dig assets, class IV, volcanos, division-approved minefields, and situational obstacles in the time and resource-constrained environment of NTC, the BCT planners must basically design a complete defensive plan.

Furthermore, once the BCT assigns blade assets to a certain battalion, the distance between engagement areas often eliminates the ability to shift these assets to other areas of the battlefield. Once these things are taken into consideration, the best course of action is often for the BCT to dictate to battalions what obstacles to emplace. The battalions will deviate and refine from that order in the interest of common sense and other factors (mission, enemy, terrain and weather, troops and support available, time available, and civil considerations [METT-TC]). However, dictating which specific obstacles to build also makes battle tracking easier, since it’s much harder to calculate what percentage of a block a unit has achieved versus what percentage of a 1,000-meter anti-vehicle ditch is complete with already understood start and end points. Our current approach, shaped by an emphasis on flexibility and disciplined initiative, often fails to fully synchronize and integrate the necessary elements for a successful defense.

By most accounts, in the 1980s the Army practiced a rigid system of command and control exemplified by the war plans for Soviet invasion into Western Germany. The Army practiced the execution of these plans ceaselessly, and the plans were quite detailed. However, the current generation of battalion commanders have conducted counterinsurgency operations for most of their careers. Counterinsurgency operations inherently require significant flexibility and wide-ranging initiative. Presently, the Army doesn’t have the same fluency with decisive action operations as maybe it once did in the 1980s and 1990s. The pendulum has swung to the other side. Maybe, to get somewhere back to the middle, we should assess whether our philosophy of mission command — embodied by mission orders, intent, and disciplined initiative — has perhaps blinded us to the reality that some operations necessarily require tightly controlled synchronization and highly detailed plans. Then, let us do the detailed staff work and planning with the understanding that even operations designed for maximum control will likely require some degree of independent initiative. However, our increased focus on the details of the plan will pay dividends in execution, even if the plan changes.

Notes

¹ Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3.90-8, *Countermobility*, 2014, paragraph 2-7.

CPT Jared Hirschhorn is currently a student at the Command and General Staff School (CGSS), Fort Leavenworth, KS. Prior to attending CGSS, he served as an observer-coach-trainer (OCT) at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, for two years. He served on both the Bronco Team Brigade Staff Trainers and as the senior tactical analyst for the Sidewinder Brigade Engineer Battalion Trainers.