

Effective Mission Command:

COL Paul Freeman and the Battle of Chipyong-ni

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Exercising command and control is often a critical factor for combat success. However, with immoderation, centralized command and excessive control create heavy reliance on command nodes. This elongates decision-making and discourages initiative on the rapidly evolving battlefield — leaving exploitable vulnerabilities. For success and efficiency in combat, command and control must therefore empower “subordinate decision-making and decentralized execution appropriate to the situation” — simply put, one must exercise mission command.¹ One example of effective mission command is COL Paul Freeman during the Korean War’s Battle of Chipyong-ni. In February 1951, the Communist Chinese Forces (CCF) continued to push back the United Nation (UN) forces. This left COL Freeman’s 23rd Regimental Combat Team (RCT) of 5,000 Soldiers behind enemy lines and encircled at Chipyong-ni by five CCF divisions with an estimated 25,000 troops.² Despite facing an overwhelming enemy force, COL Freeman successfully employed the mission command principles of mutual trust, commander’s intent, competence, and risk acceptance in his 23rd RCT, emphatically defeating the CCF during the battle.

Mutual Trust

Mission command is only effective when there is mutual trust among commanders, subordinates, and partners.³ Personal relationships and shared hardship often build this trust, a bedrock of teamwork that one another can be relied upon. COL Freeman effectively developed mutual trust within his unit through his charisma and emotional intelligence. He fostered interpersonal relationships by “communicating with his Soldiers on their terms in places like the mess hall” and going wherever “he needed to go where his men would see him,” which built cohesion.⁴⁻⁵ By being relatable and approachable, COL Freeman’s presence instilled confidence in his team. His genuine care for the 23rd RCT was on display during his frequent and numerous interactions with his Soldiers, establishing trust and buy-in of his teammates.



COL Paul Freeman (center), French Lt. Col. Ralph Monclar, and other members of the 23rd Regimental Combat Team meet with MG Edward M. Almond, X Corps commanding general, at the 23rd’s command post prior to the Battle of Chipyong-ni. (Photo from U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center collection)

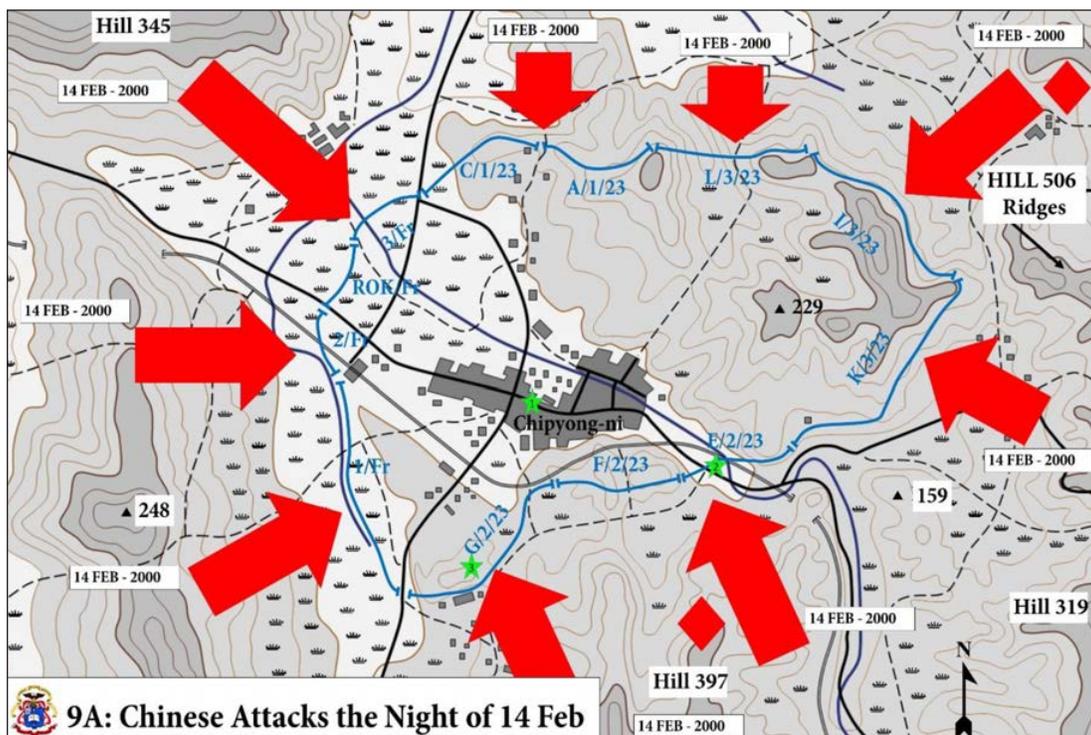
Additionally, COL Freeman and his team successfully integrated a French battalion through shared hardship to the point where the French unit was considered “just another battalion in the regiment... [U.S. forces] intermingled often with the French troops, and sometimes they would share their daily ration.”⁶ The 23rd RCT and the French battalion forged a close relationship during the hard fighting at the Battle of the Twin Tunnels. The mutual trust gained from the shared hardship there paid dividends when the fighting broke out at Chipyong-ni two weeks later. The 23rd RCT’s oval defensive formation at Chipyong-ni required each element to hold up its sector; if penetrated, it spelled doom for the regiment. The mutual trust within the 23rd RCT formation was strong, and “the confidence between the U.S. and French armies paid off as the French soldiers were able to hold key terrain along the southwest perimeter.”⁷

After being wounded by shrapnel during the battle, COL Freeman further amplified the established mutual trust among commanders, subordinates, and teammates when he “refused evacuation and hobbled around the area to review the situation and urge his troops to continue to fight.”⁸ Although such heroic gestures do not necessarily earn trust, they were impactful in maintaining the trust that COL Freeman had already built.⁹ His inspirational actions cemented 23rd RCT’s trust that Freeman was a genuine leader who put the mission and his Soldiers first before his own safety. COL Freeman’s actions, thus, strengthened mutual trust and boosted the morale and “will to fight” in his men, leading to an effective defense of Chipyong-ni.

Commander’s Intent

In addition to mutual trust, a clear desired end state is also essential to effective mission command. Having a clear commander’s intent — or expression of purpose of operation and the desired military end state — levels communication and establishes a common goal that a subordinate can pursue without direct supervision.¹⁰ COL Freeman established a clear and concise commander’s intent of “stay and fight,” and he communicated this to not only his commanders but to individual Soldiers as well.¹¹ Such communication is evident as 23rd RCT Soldiers recalled, “it was clear that every Soldier knew their mission and individual purpose.”¹² COL Freeman also flattened any misunderstanding by visiting “his subordinate leaders and answer[ing] their questions.”¹³

Map — Battle of Chipyong-ni (Chipyong-ni Staff Ride, Combat Studies Institute)



With a direct and perspicuous commander's intent of "stay and fight," the lowest echelon of Soldiers understood the defensive undertaking at Chipyeong-ni. This understanding of the intent established expectations for COL Freeman's 23rd RCT and enabled his Soldiers to take part in any necessary actions to accomplish the defense, which became critical when the CCF briefly broke through the line. COL Freeman's subordinate commanders sent "reinforcements from F and K company and an artillery battalion... [to] stop the Chinese advance and re-established the defensive line," demonstrating comprehension of Freeman's intent.¹⁴ Commanders, without COL Freeman's direct orders or supervision, took immediate action by shortening the decision-making process and facilitating initiatives in support of the mission. This rapid reaction by subordinate leaders negated exploitation opportunities for the CCF, thwarting the enemy from its offensive gains. Clear, concise, and compelling, COL Freeman's intent of "stay and fight" was effective and essential in the successful defense of Chipyeong-ni.

Competence

Competence is another mission command principle that influenced the outcome of the Battle of Chipyeong-ni. "Commanders and subordinates achieve the level of competence to perform assigned tasks to standard through training, education, assignment experience, and professional development."¹⁵ Much of COL Freeman's success in Korea was due to his experience as a language student and military attaché in China. Notably, he "worked with the British and their long-range Chinese patrols behind the Japanese lines," becoming an expert in Chinese language, culture, and doctrine.¹⁶ Using these experiences, COL Freeman deduced that the Chinese would engage in "three days of reconnaissance, probing attacks, and engaging with civilians for intelligence."¹⁷ He correctly assumed that the Chinese would push and probe the high ground around Chipyeong-ni, which he countered with constant patrols that seized surrounding hills. Weary of hills offering the potential for reconnaissance and indirect fire positions, 23rd RCT elements countered the CCF prior to the breakout of the battle. When the French battalion was attempting to seize Hill 583, "Freeman sent two platoons and three tanks from Lory's E Company to assist..."¹⁸ Such denial of reconnaissance on higher grounds impacted the CCF's avenues of approach to the predictable roads of Chipyeong-ni, creating an exploitable advantage for the 23rd RCT.

Furthermore, COL Freeman understood how the Chinese fought after his experience during the Battle of Twin Tunnels where the CCF engaged in waves of attacks. The CCF's "human swarm" attack style was a highly complex offensive scheme of maneuver that involved penetration of enemy lines. By continuously assaulting through the created gaps and simultaneous flanking maneuvers, these waves of attacks confused adversarial forces. This led to delayed reinforcements from the reserve force and often resulted in defensive failure for CCF's adversaries.¹⁹ COL Freeman concluded he could only repel the overwhelming CCF waves with artillery-supported defensive positions that controlled avenues of approaches, much like the positions in the Battle of Twin Tunnels. He therefore instructed construction of numerous fighting positions and enabled his commanders to the point where "the defenses at Chip'yeong-ni were as good as any regimental-sized perimeter had ever been in the Korean War."²⁰ Such defensive positions hardened the defense and were later critical in repelling penetration by "placing heavy fire on an enemy concentration trying to advance along the road into Chipyeong-ni west of the tunnel and railroad trestle."²¹ COL Freeman's competence, drawn from previous military experiences with the Chinese forces, undoubtedly influenced the employment of his assets, which set conditions for a successful defense of Chipyeong-ni.

Risk Acceptance

Although there are inherent risks in combat, commanders must balance the tension between protecting the force and accomplishing the mission.²² COL Freeman understood this, especially when faced with the outnumbering, overwhelming, and rapidly advancing Chinese forces. He accepted calculated risks such as yielding key terrain to solidify the defensive posture of his forces. COL Freeman was "originally directed to occupy the hills that surrounded Chipyeong-ni, as it was thought that this would be safest way to secure the village."²³ However, with limited troop numbers, he deduced that dispersing his forces at the



Department of the Army Poster 21-47, Breakthrough at Chipyeong-ni, illustrates when an American armored unit broke through from the south. The valiant 23rd Regimental Combat Team smashed out of the perimeter to break the encirclement and rejoin the Eighth Army.

periphery along numerous hills, rather than concentrating them along the perimeter, would spell defeat.²⁴ COL Freeman, thus, chose to “give up the surrounding hills so that his outmanned troops could focus on a tight perimeter.”²⁵ He notably placed his troops near the roads to deny the enemy avenues of approach from these hills. With a combination of close air support and tight perimeter security from well-positioned troops, the risk of yielding higher grounds were well mitigated.²⁶ This tactical risk assumption paid off, as the CCF took control of some hills surrounding Chipyeong-ni but could not effectively penetrate the village due to the heavily fortified roads.

COL Freeman also assumed tactical risk by delaying the employment of his reserves. Knowing the CCF’s waves of attacks would not cease easily, he understood he could not commit his reserve elements too early or his defensive lines would be overrun. COL Freeman, therefore, “did not utilize his reserve until near the end of the battle when it was absolutely necessary.”²⁷ Despite multiple penetrations by CCF elements and heavy fighting along the defensive lines, the delayed insertion of his reserve forces enabled COL Freeman to maintain combat power. This preservation of combat power set conditions for a key counterattack that proved decisive. Notably, his reserve force (B Company) “rose up, firing into the retreating forces, then advancing and regaining some of the lost positions... the hill was now back under the 23rd’s control and the entire perimeter was secured.”²⁸ By yielding the use of some key terrain and delaying the employment of his reserve forces, COL Freeman gained consolidation of combat power — combat power that was critical to the Battle of Chipyeong-ni against an overwhelming enemy.

Conclusion

It is without a doubt that COL Freeman’s successful use of the mission command principles of mutual trust, commander’s intent, competence, and risk assumption played a critical role in defeating the CCF during the Battle of Chipyeong-ni. Mutual trust developed by his personal relationships, concern for his

unit over personal safety, and his team's shared hardships were essential to the oval defense that required reliance on one another. The clear communication and leveling of any misunderstanding of COL Freeman's intent to "stay and fight" fostered a will to fight and established a common understanding among the 23rd RCT to defend Chipyeong-ni. COL Freeman's competence, drawn from his experience with Chinese forces, enabled active patrolling and construction of hardened defensive positions that set advantageous conditions. Furthermore, his assumption of tactical risk to yield key terrain and delay the use of his reserve force to consolidate the defense in a smaller perimeter established a foundation for an effective defense and counterattack opportunities. Therefore, COL Freeman's mission command employment in the Battle of Chipyeong-ni was masterful and its impact is beyond the success of the battle. It boosted the morale of UN forces, enabled offensive operations in Korea, and initiated peace talks among the belligerents — simply put, the Battle of Chipyeong-ni was a decisive point of that conflict and is now well known as the "Gettysburg of the Korean War."²⁹ Although its strategic and operational outcome was substantial, COL Freeman and his 23rd RCT made a larger impact in military history: a compelling argument for effective mission command for years to come.

Notes

¹ Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command and Control of the Army Forces*, July 2019, x.

² LTC Roy E. Appleman, *Ridgway Duels for Korea* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1990), 255-257.

³ ADP 6-0, 1-7.

⁴ Jamie I. Hickman, "Turning Korea Around: An Analysis of Mission Command at Chipyeong-Ni," *Journal of Defense Management* (June 2018): 174.

⁵ Kenneth E. Hamburger, *Leadership in the Crucible* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 68.

⁶ LTC Sherman W. Pratt, *Decisive Battles of the Korean War* (NY: Vantage Press, Inc., 1992), 165.

⁷ CPT Andrew Lightsey IV, "A Master Class in Mission Command: LTG Matthew B. Ridgway's Leadership at Chipyeong-ni," *Infantry* (Fall 2022), 51-53.

⁸ Spencer C. Tucker and Paul G. Pierpaoli Jr. (eds.), *Encyclopedia of the Korean War: A Political, Social, and Military History* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, April 2000).

⁹ Daniel P. Michalski, "Mission Command Principles in the Battle of Chipyeong-ni," *Safety & Defense* (2017): 38.

¹⁰ ADP 6-0, 1-10.

¹¹ Hamburger, *Leadership in the Crucible*, 57.

¹² Ansil Walker, "Recalls the Battle of Chipyeong-Ni during the Korean War," Historynet, <https://www.historynet.com/ansil-walker-recalls-the-battle-of-chipyong-ni-during-the-korean-war/> (accessed 26 August 2023).

¹³ Michalski, "Mission Command Principles," 39.

¹⁴ Louis Riedmann Jr, "Lory's Story: The Korean War – In the Footsteps of Lawrence J. Riedmann," 19, accessed from <https://riedmannfamily.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Lorys-Story-2022.pdf>.

¹⁵ ADP 6-0, 1-7.

¹⁶ Hamburger, *Leadership in the Crucible*, 20.

¹⁷ Todd Qiu, "Red Hordes: American Perception of Chinese Troops During the Korean War," *Intercollegiate U.S.-China Journal* (IUCJ) (Winter 2022), 29.

¹⁸ Riedmann, "Lory's Story," 16.

¹⁹ Qiu, "Red Hordes," 29-30.

²⁰ J.D. Coleman, *Wonju: The Gettysburg of the Korean War* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2000), 181.

²¹ Appleman, *Ridgway Duels for Korea*, 266.

²² ADP 6-0, 1-13.

²³ George F. Hofmann, "Tanks and the Korean War: A Study of Unpreparedness," *Armor* (September-October 2000), 7.

²⁴ David Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter: American and the Korean War*, (New York, NY: Hachette Books, 2007), 512-513.

²⁵ Hickman, "Turning Korea Around," 173.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Riedmann, "Lory's Story," 22.

²⁹ Coleman, *Wonju*, xi.

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