



# INDEPENDENCE ON THE MODERN BATTLEFIELD

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In the Army's manuals and in some current futuristic fiction as well, the next war is described as one in which independent, small-unit operations will be inevitable. General Sir John Hackett's novel *The Third World War*, for example, portrays a modern war with weapons of mass destruction, an overwhelming enemy, and poor communications. And Field Manual 100-5, the Army's operations manual, says that "the fluid nature of modern war will place a premium on leadership, unit cohesion, and effective independent operations. The manual goes on to say that commanders will find it difficult to determine what is happening, that small units will often have to fight without sure knowledge about their force as a whole, and that subordinates must therefore "exploit successes boldly and take advantage of unforeseen opportunities." To do these things, the manual says, "improvisation, initiative, and aggressiveness — the traits that have historically distinguished the American soldier — must be particularly strong in our leaders."

From the early days of the American Revolution to the

"Grey Fox" of the Civil War to Vietnam, our history has recorded incidents in which American leaders had to operate autonomously because of unexpected developments. If the ability to act independently was desirable in the past, in the future it will be not only desirable but necessary.

To prepare today's small unit leaders to meet the demands of future battles, we should deliberately plan to instill in them the leadership skills that history has shown to be essential for independent small-unit operations. We can start by describing the ideal independent battle leader:

He is creative and innovative — he always looks for better ways of doing things and is not afraid of new ideas. He is flexible — if something does not work one way, he tries another approach. He does not hesitate to alter a course of action when the resources suddenly change.

He is decisive and has some simple but effective guiding principles that help his decision-making process. Once he has identified a problem, assessed the alterna-



The ideal independent battle leader is committed to the unit mission.

tives, and made a decision, then he acts. He is not a procrastinator.

He is self-confident. He exemplifies strength under fire. He knows how to gain trust as a battle leader. He understands motivation, unit morale, and the esprit of the unit.

He is comfortable with autonomy. He likes to be the boss. He does not feel the need to confirm his decisions constantly with a higher authority.

He is aggressive. He takes charge and leads his unit to accomplish its mission. He understands the principles of war and uses the right combination to fit the situation.

He knows his people and understands their strengths and weaknesses, what motivates them, and who can do what. He knows his equipment and his weapons, too, and is not afraid of new systems. Technology does not scare him; it challenges him.

He is a master of small-unit tactics and knows the field manuals. He always uses terrain boards and poncho terrain models — he keeps a cigar box full of mud-caked miniature combat vehicles for impromptu terrain discussions. In fact, he can make a boring tactical exercise come to life using a makeshift terrain model of four rocks and three handfuls of mud.

He knows how to study a map, identify the enemy's likely avenue of approach, and alter his portion of the

plan if the situation warrants it.

He knows the enemy beyond the simple identification of vehicle exteriors and the tactical formations of the first echelon. He understands the depth and the purpose of how he will fight. He knows that victory belongs to the side that knows the most about itself and the other side as well.

He makes sure his standard operating procedures are useful and well understood. They are not lock-step procedures, just good battle drills. His people don't have to be briefed on what actions they should take upon contact, when crossing danger areas, or when attacked by chemical agents. These are second nature to his soldiers.

He understands his role in the broad scheme of things and understands the importance of his independence on the modern battlefield.

He knows how to cope with stress because he knows it can be just as debilitating as a gunshot wound or a shrapnel fragment. He understands that battle stress parallels the intensity of the battle; that for every ten soldiers killed or wounded in action he can expect up to eight stress casualties. He prepares his soldier to cope with this reality, too, and treats these psychological casualties much the same as he treats his externally wounded soldiers.

He prepares his soldiers to cope, too, *before* the battle

begins. He understands that morale, cohesion, and esprit significantly affect the unit's ability to manage stress on the battlefield. He also understands that his self-confidence (the trust he generates) is important to that process. (He is a proactive leader.)

He can deal with the ambiguous situations on the battlefield, process bits and pieces of information, make sound judgments, and act correctly. He's great with puzzles and good at painting a mental picture around an idea.

He learns from his mistakes. (He does make mistakes, but is not terrified by failure. He thrives on the challenge and understands that setbacks are to be capitalized upon.)

In short, this ideal independent battle leader is a model soldier, a soldier's soldier. His soldiers look upon him as the example. He's mentally tough and physically fit. He goes where his soldiers go, eats what they eat, and expects no more from them than he expects of himself.

He is committed to the unit mission. He has captured the aggressiveness Civil War Admiral David Farragut showed in his famous "Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead!" As far as he is concerned, the war will be won or lost on the basis of how well his unit fulfills its assigned missions.

The leader who fits this description is a tough guy to beat. But how does a commander go about instilling in his junior leaders the characteristics that will turn them into confident, decisive, creative, aggressive, and independent leaders such as this? The following is my advice:

First, keep your goal in mind and find a way to make things happen that will lead to building independence in small-unit leaders. Then, adopt a philosophy that will show these leaders that you are serious about it.

Do not clutter your thinking with the many reasons why you can't do training that builds skill in autonomy. Rather, focus your attention on that goal and begin to look for opportunities to achieve it. Stay open-minded, too. Don't restrict yourself to conventional approaches; some of the most outlandish ideas can lead to exciting and effective training in independence. Focus outwardly as you search for such ideas and training opportunities.

If you really look, you will find that there are many opportunities to build the skills that are critical for independent small-unit operations.

- Track swimming.
- Border augmentation.
- Survival training.
- Escape and evasion training.
- River crossing exercises.
- Combat in cities (including subterranean operations).

The second part of my advice — adopting an "independent leader" philosophy — includes making sure your subordinates understand that you expect them to take the initiative and to be aggressive and creative. Reward them when they do.

This means also providing them with the resources they will need to support independent operations. Budget these resources and force the issue with your staff if you have to.

Avoid centralized training, but check on the appropriate tasks, conditions, and standards. Establish training priorities based on your mission and the critical tasks. Although centralized training is often the best way to use resources, it is generally not the best way to build independence. But remember: If you do focus on your objective of building independence, you may find your unit stretched in twice as many directions as it is now. This is not necessarily bad, if you are getting the right kind of results. And if you reward independence, that's what you will get.

Keep things as simple as possible. Focus on doing the manageable rather than the cumbersome. Although independent operations can become complex, they usually succeed if the basics are done well. Any time you see that your guidance is not being followed, find out why it is not.

Stabilize small units as much as you can; this will facilitate your training efforts and will protect the foundation of your independence-building process. And make your training tough and challenging — your soldiers deserve (and want) the kind of tough training that stretches and prepares them for active combat.

Make certain your unit does not lack the fabric of discipline, because its survival on a future battlefield may well depend on a mature degree of individual and group discipline.

Strongly encourage the direction and momentum of efforts that should lead to the desired result, and keep your junior leaders headed in that direction. Keep pumping clear direction and energy into the unit.

Finally, emphasize the development of loyalty and trust up and down the chain of command. Always set the example and insist that your subordinate leaders reciprocate in kind. After all, this is our profession's lifeblood.

Not just commanders, but all of us throughout the Army should encourage our small-unit leaders to find new ways of building independence. We should be instrumental in getting them out of garrison into the field to learn to know themselves, to face the challenge of thinking for themselves, and to expand their horizons beyond the unit's borders. In short, we must teach them resourcefulness.

Once we begin to do these things we will build morale, cohesion, and esprit in our units and confidence in our junior leaders. All these qualities lead to successful autonomous operations on the modern battlefield.



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