



## ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP:

### The Creative Application of Battle Command

CAPTAIN DAVID VOORHIES

*This article was written in response to an article published in July 2004, by the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College. The article, titled "Developing Adaptive Leaders: The Crucible Experience of Operation Iraqi Freedom," was written by Dr. Leonard Wong, an associate research professor of military strategy at the institute. (This article can be viewed online at [www.http://carlisle-www.army.mil/ssi/pubs/display.cfm/hurl/PubID=411](http://carlisle-www.army.mil/ssi/pubs/display.cfm/hurl/PubID=411).)*

Adaptability is forged in the crucible of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Mr. Leonard Wong first proposed this notion in a 2004 article on adaptive leadership. Wong suggests that when "confronted with complexity, unpredictability, and ambiguity, junior officers are learning to adapt, to innovate, and to operate with minimal guidance" in the "crucibles" of OIF and OEF. Wong further indicates that institutionalized senior officers and the doctrinal aspects of Troop Leading Procedures and the military decision-making process (MDMP) merely hinder the adaptability of these junior officer combat veterans. These and other "bureaucratic forces gradually whittle away and wear down these young warriors with SOPs, TTPs, MREs, and strict adherence to the MDMP. Moreover, Wong argues for training and doctrine to focus on "execution-centric" methodology rather than its traditional "plan-centric" dogma. Wong provides an interesting article that invites needed debate on the subject of combat leadership. By harnessing the experiences of these recent combat veterans, Wong stresses that the Army could only hope to foster a new way of thinking to prepare and fight the new threat encountered in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, when analyzing how we train and prepare our junior officers for combat, military professionals should use his article as a point of departure, not as the approved solution.

Unfortunately for Wong, adaptive leadership is not a new concept. It has not been created by the complexities of fighting in Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, nor have junior officers fighting in those combat experiences exclusively produced it. Adaptability is the current "buzz-word" for leaders that can effectively use a cognitive process to solve problems, take risks, and operate within the confines of their higher commander's intent. Adaptive leadership is, and has always been, the application of

doctrine in terms of visualization, description, and direction of a plan given a violent, ambiguous, and fluid combat environment: it is the creative application of battle command.

#### Doctrine Revisited

Combat veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan are still using a cognitive process to solve problems. Battle Command is the Army's description of a combat leader's ability "that is principally an art employing skills developed by professional study, constant practice and considered judgment that entail visualizing the operation, describing it in terms of intent and guidance, and directing actions of subordinates within that intent" (FM 3-0,5-1). A leader first visualizes himself, his mission, his capabilities, and his constraints. A leader must then be able to visualize the terrain and deduce from it certain applications that enable the projection of combat power. Finally, a leader visualizes the enemy in terms of order of battle, pattern or trend analysis to understand threat capabilities and determine probable courses of action that the threat might employ. The threat may entail not merely an angry insurgent toting RPG-29s, but factors in the other 11 critical variables that current contemporary operating environment (COE) doctrine affords such as information (media), economy, and politics that cause instability.

In short, the mission analysis process is just the first step in a leader's ability to make a tentative plan according to the troop leading procedures. This is Army doctrine. A leader may have a lot of time to plan, or as most accounts from OIF suggest, merely minutes before execution may be required. However, whether a leader is tasked to fix a water well, hold a town meeting, or pass out handbills while attempting to destroy a threat, adaptive leaders are still using a cognitive process to arrive at sound conclusions for mission execution. Whether they're aware of this or not, these young officers are using doctrine.

Many junior officers interviewed by Wong indicated a lack of doctrine applicability in OIF. Perhaps they stated this because they do not in fact know, nor understand their own doctrine. These same officers executing urban operations, seemingly overwhelmed by the numerous types of tasks assigned them, executed missions "by-the-seat-of-their-pants" with mixed results. In lieu of any plan, these officers merely executed operations with limited understanding

of what they were doing, sometimes taking unnecessary gambles and naturally became frustrated as a consequence.

Perhaps many lieutenants and junior captains should read FM 3-06.11, the Army's 2001 Urban Operations manual, before deploying to an environment principally defined by urban landscape. The manual is principle based, not all encompassing, but at least affords explanations of combat applications that may help a tank officer understand that he may in fact have to dismount a portion of his crew to ensure his tank's security. If he understood the doctrine, it might not also be such a shock to that tank platoon leader to detach individual tanks in support of infantry when conducting offensive operations in urban terrain. It may also help the combat service support officer understand that security isn't an option and assist officers of all branches ignorant of the basics to train their outfits to conduct combined arms operations when fighting in densely populated urban areas. To operate as an "infantryman first" mentality ought to be the warrior ethos of all Soldiers in the Army. Understood doctrinal principles only enhances an officer's adaptability, it doesn't hinder it. For as Colonel Kurt Fuller, commander of the 2nd Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division recently commented after serving 15 months in Iraq, "you cannot effectively abbreviate a process you do not comprehend, nor can you deviate from a doctrine you haven't read."

### Inconclusive Analysis

Wong made an incomplete analysis of the Army's ability to train and prepare junior officers for combat. He made reference to Captains Career Courses and Basic Courses that are inadequate and do not "fully leverage the knowledge gained" by our veteran junior officers. He suggests ignoring lessons learned by these young warriors in lieu of stovepipe dogma dictated by mentally rigid instructors. Perhaps he ought to take a trip to Fort Benning and visit the seminars there. He may surprise himself to know that recent combat vets (both instructor and student alike) actively share their knowledge and TTPs in a manner that reinforces the doctrine that enabled them. It may also surprise him to understand that the COE Enemy Threat doctrine long replaced Krasnovian Tactics



years ago, both at the schoolhouses and the combat training centers.

Civil Military Operations (CMO), though not a focus of study (and never should be), is incorporated into the instruction as a dynamic that shapes the battlefield and local perceptions. CMO in and of itself is important, but only as important as it can be executed within the parameters of combat operations that remain the focus of any competent combat leader. The POI of the ICC has in fact changed to better reflect the contemporary operational environments of Iraq and Afghanistan. Instructors still teach students "how to think", not "what to think." The assertion that the Army is not paying attention to its "crucible officers" is one that reflects a myopic view of reality from an authority far removed from the company-grade level.

Junior officers are not the only officers forced to adjust the principles of doctrine to form tactics, techniques, and procedures. Many senior field grade officers, from battalion S3 to brigade commander realize that plans never survive in tact after first contact with a hostile force. Wong makes a false assumption when he ignores that battalion and brigade commanders have also gained knowledge and experience in the "transformational experiences – crucible experiences to achieve adaptive capacity." After all, it was brigade commanders in OIF, like Colonel Joe Anderson of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) that understood the need to

embed robust information operations with maneuver operations and trust that development to be executed at the company level.

It also appears that Wong may be hinting that effective leadership is a learned trait and not one that may already be present in the personality of the unit commander. In this line of logic, it would seem that officers with no OIF crucible building experiences could not in fact be adaptive, hence effective. Wong describes an adaptive leader as having the "ability to switch your focus" and "be flexible as with a water faucet and turn on hot and then cold water" depending upon the situation. Officers at all levels in OIF are in fact effective and efficient leaders not merely because they can execute multiple things, simultaneously to standard by rapidly switching focus. Rather, they can take risks with their Soldiers because of demonstrated maturity, competence and confidence and are trusted to execute by their higher headquarters. It isn't the situation that forms the leader, as Wong advocates. It is in large part the leader's natural ability to use a cognitive process to analyze the situation, generate options, apply combat power and overcome threats to instability while imbuing in his/her Soldiers rationality for doing so. This is adaptive leadership. It matters not whether that leader must cordon off a city block to search for contraband or meet with the local Mullah to discuss the pleasantries of sewage repair. OIF has not changed the ingredients for good leadership: it has in fact demanded more from leadership at the junior officer level than is already present there.

### Wong's Positive Assertions

Wong's article concerning adaptive leadership does reinforce age-old principles. His research reinforces how leadership is affected by the ever-changing scope of threat, culture, and mission. His premises that combat stresses naturally create better leaders overall based upon their experience alone are valid. He is also correct that the lessons learned by these seasoned veterans need to be harnessed and applied to current doctrine. Wong may be correct that many company-grade officers are operating autonomously and decisively in OIF with the maturity of field grade

officers. Moreover, some brigade and battalion level commanders may in fact stifle the “maneuver space” of their subordinate leaders with rigid adherence to outdated checklists and policies. Arguably, the initiative of company grade officers may in fact be second-guessed, overruled, and micromanaged both in combat and during home station training. Wong’s argument does provide senior leaders within the profession of arms with a much-needed analysis of how we view and trust our junior officers. However, to conclude that adaptive leadership is in fact “a transformational leadership” trait only gained through combat experience, while categorically ignoring cognitive processes to achieve results is a fallacy.

Adaptive leadership is the creative application of doctrine. It is the art of employing battle command in a given COE. It is through this cognitive process that officers incorporate a fundamental understanding of the terrain, enemy, and the higher unit commander’s mission to achieve measurable results in a stressful, violent, fluid contemporary operational environment. The adaptive leader is the risk taker that fully understands security, fire and maneuver and the cultural aspects of the civilian population in which his unit operates. Adaptive leaders can execute mission-type orders in Iraq and Afghanistan because they have an essential understanding of combat operations as their focus. They thrive at executing civil military operations because they use the same cognitive process, called troop leading procedures, to arrive at ad-hoc plans that get results. The Army’s career courses and combat training centers have changed their construct to harness lessons learned and apply them in training young officers for their next fight. The level of adaptability may be tied to the parameters set by higher headquarters, but the environments of OIF and OEF did not create the phenomenon of adaptability. Adaptability has always been present and has recently been underscored in current operations by junior officers that demonstrate great leadership.

---

**Captain David Voorhies** currently serves as small group instructor at the Infantry Career Captains Course on Fort Benning. He graduated from West Point in 1995. His past assignments include serving with the 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry, 25th Infantry Division (Light) and 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, where he served as both rifle and HHC company commanders.

---

# AIR ASSAULT EXPEDITIONARY FORCE: THE FUTURE FORCE OF THE ARMY

The Army began its first spiral of live force-on-force experiments in September 2004 to test leading edge technologies for Future Combat Systems.

“Future Combat Systems (FCS) will replace the current legacy force, and Fort Benning is the catalyst for these experiments,” said Bob Kruger, Fort Benning’s lead Project Officer for the Soldier Battle Lab.

“In the future, there will be radical changes as how pertinent information is obtained and disseminated to combat leaders and their subordinates. The Air Assault Expeditionary Force (AAEF) spirals are a series of experiments to help us get there,” said Kruger. With the support of the Experimental Force (EXFOR) Company of 1st Battalion, 29th Infantry Regiment, AAEF will help transition the current force into the future force. The focus of the first experiment is to test how the latest technologies can increase the lethality and survivability of a small mobile combat unit.

Beginning in September 2004, the EXFOR Company conducted a series of missions consisting of raids and attacks with basic combat loads, weapons, and RFI equipment. Information was gathered by data collectors on the current lethality of a small combat unit utilizing contemporary platoon and company-level assets.

The second set of live experiments during Spiral One included testing a variety of equipment developed by various government agencies to include

Defense Advance Research Projects Agency and the Communication-Electronics Command’s Research Development and Engineering Center as well as several defense industry leaders. Some of the equipment tested by the EXFOR included: Class I Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV), Cost Effective Targeting Systems (CETS), Airborne Retransmission Platforms, Unmanned Ground Systems, dismounted Soldier communications/GPS tracking, and Mobile Command and Control (MC2) software.

These technologies changed the way the platoon planned, gained intelligence, and fought the opposing force (OPFOR) during their missions. It streamlined the planning process and shaped the objective in favor of the attacking element. By receiving real-time data

from the platoon’s sensor technology, the platoon’s leadership was able to position elements and quickly destroy the enemy. Beyond-line-of-site (BLOS) capabilities coupled with current and new tactics developed during AAEF drastically increased situational awareness, lethality, agility, and survivability of the platoon.

Subsequent experiments will take place over the next three years, integrating improvements in C4ISR technology and incorporating recommendations of the EXFOR users. AAEF will continue to experiment with future technologies as well as some used by the conventional Army.

