

Mission command in the battle of Ia drang



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The efficiency of mission command makes it a preferred concept in the military because it enhances the capacity to accomplish assigned missions. Mission command guides the human factor to adopt a set of actions and behaviors to make independent decisions, exploit the created opportunities, address the prevailing risks, and achieve the desired end state. ¹ Mission command ensures that commanders collaborate with the rest of the force to integrate and synchronize operations. In addition, the application of mission command is dependent on six principles that include the need to build cohesive teams through mutual trust, creating shared understanding, providing clear commander's intent, exercising disciplined initiative, using mission orders, and accepting prudent risk. ²

The Battle of Ia Drang initiated military revolution that caused a significant shift in how armies conducted their warfare. The use of air mobility to transport soldiers on a surprised enemy, enhanced the efficiency of the US Army and eliminated the challenges and pitfalls associated with terrain. Additionally, they offered lessons that would shape the future utilization of mission command in complex environments. Consequently, it emphasized the need of well-intended commanders to utilize the principles of mission command and enhance the Army to deriving their operational goals. In order to understand the implications of mission command on the Battle of Ia Drang, it is important to examine the decisions and actions undertaken by both the commanders and personnel. However, this report will only focus on three principles that include providing a clear commander's intent, exercising disciplined initiative, and the acceptance of prudent risk. Lastly,

the information will determine whether the commander applied the principles of mission command to achieve the operation's goals.

Provide a Clear Commander's Intent

A commander's intent is clear, precise, and concise. It articulates the goal, purpose, and the desired outcome of the operation. The purpose is to guide and unify the actions of the staff, subordinates, and the supporting commanders to attain the commander's desired outcome even in the absence of orders. The commander should convey the reasons behind the operation, the key tasks to be undertaken, and their intended outcome.³ The efficiency of this principle relies on the existence of a clear communication approach between the commander and his/ her Soldiers prior to the operation.⁴ It is important that the commander communicates with his/ her Soldiers to raise their awareness and comprehension of expectations, tasks, and boundaries for conducting such roles.

Clear evidence of compliance with the principle in the battle is evident. The commander's intent had clear and well-defined orders that were to guide the operations of the US Army in Vietnam. The mission orders focused on weakening the Viet Cong and its allies by curtailing their influence, eliminating the local support intended at facilitating their operations, and enhancing the capacity of the local villagers to defend themselves. In order to accomplish these goals, the Special Forces and the Army conducted successive small counterinsurgency throughout the country targeting the Viet Cong and its allies.⁵ In addition, the orders prioritized the establishment of measures that were to repulse any retaliatory offensive attacks by the

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Viet Cong and its allies targeting the Special Forces Camps in Plei Me, Dak Sut, and Duc. The approach is evident in the orders issued by General William C. Westmoreland who was the Commander of US Forces in South Vietnam. The strategy led to the deployment of a battalion of Marines to guard the airbase at Pleiku as a means of avoiding a repeat of the offensive attack by the Viet Cong at the base that resulted in eight fatalities and over hundred wounded. ⁶ Consequently, it ensured that the Army was prepared for any future attacks on the base. Furthermore, compliance with this order led to the successful repulsion of a repeat offensive attack by the Viet Cong and its allies. Led by General Chu Huy Man, who was the Commander of the Western Field Front Headquarters, forced them to withdraw towards the Cambodian border. The commander's orders and intent that shaped the engagement of the US Forces in Vietnam focused on weakening the will of the North Vietnamese to fight. Subsequently, the initial objective was to repeatedly engage and destroy them to maintain a resemblance of a political order in Saigon that could actualize the interests of the US in the region.

The shift of the initial operations targeting the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regiments is a clear illustration. Prior ground combat operations targeting the Viet Cong and its allies rendered ineffective by the terrain of their new location that made it inaccessible. Therefore, it ushered a new and reactive approach by the US Army that involved the deployment of the airmobile assault. ⁷ The decision of this new approach was facilitated by intelligence source that revealed the location of the NVA regiments that were 5 km northwest of landing zone (LZ) X-Ray, south of LZ X-Ray, and 3 km to the northwest of LZ X-Ray. ⁸ As a result, Colonel Brown ordered his 1st Battalion

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Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Harold G. Moore to prepare and execute an airmobile assault into the la Drang Valley.⁹ The successful execution of the airmobile assault required the coordination of varying tasks that could facilitate the acquisition, safe landing, and the protection of the helicopters.

Exercise Disciplined Initiative

Disciplined initiative are actions undertaken by the supporting commanders and Soldiers when the prevailing situation renders the commander's orders irrelevant or when they face unpredicted opportunities or threats. The supporting commanders use their judgment to initiate actions to adapt to the prevailing situation. However, they are required to adhere to the limits set by the commander's intent.¹⁰ For example, supporting commanders and subordinates can initiate alternative actions to derive the intended outcome. They can engage in actions that strive to solve the prevailing unanticipated threats and problems. In addition, the supporting commanders can defy the commander's orders if they are unlawful and expose the force to needless risk.¹¹ Adhering to lawful orders strives to ensure that the disciplined initiatives are legitimate and credible. Trust is a fundamental principle within the exercising disciplined initiative principle. Leaders and subordinates need to know each other's limits to make the right choices within the parameters of the commander's intent.

The preparations that facilitated the execution of the airmobile assaults highlight the compliance with the principle. The opportunity to exert maximum damage on the NVA regiments through aerial bombardment meant that the US Army's adaptive approach placed them at an

advantageous position to accomplish the commander's initial order of weakening the NVA. Consequently, coordinated preparation efforts undertook suitable landing zones and provided artillery support at strategic positions to protect the helicopters from attack by the NVA regiments. In addition, implemented strategies ensured that the Army assumed a defensive posture that could successfully resist any attacks by the NVA. The strategies involved superior fire support and the timely deployment of additional units from the 1st Cavalry Division to assist the existing forces to repulse the possible attacks by the NVA. Finally, in order to exercise disciplined initiative, subordinates must trust that their leaders will take ownership

of their mistakes, which includes not leaving them unsupported on the battlefield or in their career. ¹²

Accept Prudent Risks

The uncertainty that is prevalent in military operations compels commanders to make decisions that limit the force's exposure to potential risks, injury, and loss while accomplishing the operation's goal. The principle recognizes that each opportunity comes with its set of risks and opportunities.

Subsequently, the commander needs to determine, analyze, and instigate efforts to address the risks, assess the viability of the opportunities, and initiate appropriate actions that exploit the opportunities. ¹³ The principle prioritizes the element of surprise and mobility when seeking to exploit the presented opportunities. Any actions intended to exploit the opportunities

should be undertaken in a location that the enemy does not expect and should deprive them of any knowledge.

While the intended aerial bombardment ensured that the US Army altered their initial approach to accomplish the operation's intended mission, it failed to account for the varying options that the NVA had to counter their attacks. Specifically, it signifies the inefficient undertaking of the principle because it only focused on the logistics and terrain-based concerns. It neglected the need to limit the force's exposure to potential risks, injury, and loss by assuming that the NVA regiments lacked the capacity to interfere with the new plan. ¹⁴ For instance, Lieutenant Colonel Harold G. Moore failed to consider a scenario where the actions of the NVA deviated from his expectations. In addition, failure to articulate the remedial responses that could neutralize the unexpected actions of the NVA regiments threatened the successful accomplishment of the operation's objectives. Moreover, the inability of Lieutenant Colonel Moore to consider the possible unexpected events while planning the aerial bombardment exposed them to potential failure, injuries, and casualties. The inadequate planning of the aerial bombardment attributed to the damage and the subsequent destruction of Lieutenant Herrick's platoon caused by the surprise attack from the NVA regiments. Not able to connect with Lieutenant Devney's platoon, Lieutenant Herrick exposed himself to enemy fire that ultimately led to his death. Lastly, it led to a prolonged engagement that exposed the other platoons and segments of the US Army to surprise attacks by the NVA.

Conclusion

Mission command is a tactical approach utilized by commanders to conduct military operation. The approach focuses on the decentralization of military decision-making that empowers commanders and armies to undertake unified and discipline military operations. Ultimately, accomplishing the commander's intent and goals of the operation. The efficiency of this approach relies on the capacity to adhere to the provisions articulated by its six guiding principles. While the battle revealed the successful application of the principles of "exercise disciplined initiative" and "provide a clear commander's intent", the inefficient application of the "accept prudent risks", threatened to derail the accomplishment of the operation's goals. The failure to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the risks associated with the aerial bombardment exposed the US Army to surprise enemy fire.

Notes

1. U. S. Department of the Army. *ADP 6-0 Mission Command* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, March 2014), 2.
2. Ibid., 2.
3. Ibid., 4.
4. Ibid., 8.
5. Peter Schifferle, *The Ia Drang Campaign 1965: A Successful Operational Campaign or Mere Tactical Failure*. (Monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, 1994), 36.

6. Carl Builder, Steven Bankes and Richard Nordin, *Command Concepts: A Theory Derived from the Practice of Command and Control* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1999), 89.
7. Thomas Graves, *Transforming the Force: The 11th Air Assault Division (Test) from 1963 to 1965*. (Strategic Studies Institute and US Army War College Press, 2017), 20.
8. Builder et al., 94.
9. Ibid., 94.
10. Nathan Finney and Jonathan Klug, *Mission Command in the 21st Century: Empowering to Win in a Complex World*. (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: The Army Press, 2016), 43.
11. Ibid., 85.
12. Ibid., x.
13. U. S. Department of the Army. *ADP 6-0 Mission Command* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, March 2014), 5.
14. Builder et al., 101.

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