



The Soldiers of B Company, 113th Special Troops Battalion, form up for an awards ceremony to recognize the high performers of their unit. Col. Douglas McBride, the commander of the 593rd Sustainment Brigade, U.S. Central Command Materiel Retrograde Element, speaks about the battalion's accomplishments and wishes the Soldiers a safe journey home. (Photo by Spc. Isaac Adams)

Applying Mission Command to Overcome Challenges

The way a joint task force approached its mission to retrograde materiel in Afghanistan is an example of the practical application of mission command principles.

■ By Col. Douglas M. McBride Jr. and Reginald L. Snell, Ph.D.

Sustainment commanders use mission command to create a balance between the art of command and the science of control as they integrate the sustainment warfighting function with the other warfighting functions to achieve objectives. Joint doctrine and Army doctrine have different definitions for the term mission command.

Joint Publication 3-31, Command and Control for Joint Land Operations, defines mission command as “the conduct of military operations through decentralized execution based upon mission-type orders.”

Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, Mission Command, defines mission command as “the exercise of authority and direction by the com-

mander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land operations.”

For the sake of clarity and to provide context, this article uses the Army doctrinal definition of mission command and the principles of mission command established in ADP 6-0.

Given that the national strategic guidance, joint concepts, and Army concepts assert that the force will deploy into austere environments, achieve national objectives, and re-deploy, it is imperative that the lessons gained during recent contingency operations be captured and implemented.

This article describes the challenges a sustainment brigade-led joint task

The JTF consisted of nearly 4,500 personnel from the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Department of Defense, and Department of State who had never worked together in a single organization.

The JTF was breaking ground on a new concept of using a sustainment brigade as a JTF headquarters and using downtrace units as enablers to conduct a nontraditional and non-

zational, and multinational partners).

Trust is an imperative for accepting calculated risk and for exercising disciplined initiative without fear of reprisal. Effective mission command also requires mission orders that create a shared understanding of the commander's intent and the objectives to be accomplished. Mission command principles assist commanders and staffs in blending the art of command and the science of control.

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force (JTF), called the U.S. Central Command Materiel Recovery Element, faced in the initial stages of the drawdown in Afghanistan. It also addresses how using the interdependent principles of mission command facilitated the brigade's ability to overcome those challenges.

Challenges

The JTF's mission was to retrograde materiel and simultaneously conduct base camp closures in order to meet the president's mandate to withdraw the bulk of U.S. forces from Afghanistan within two years. Conducting retrograde operations for materiel that had accumulated in the theater of operations for 12 years and transitioning hundreds of base camps was a monumental challenge that was further complicated by significant competing demands.

For example, U.S. forces were still engaged in major combat operations throughout the theater. The JTF had the obstacle of convincing brigade combat teams (BCTs) engaged in combat that retrograde operations and base camp transitions would not affect their missions.

Another significant challenge was the hasty establishment of the JTF.

doctrinal mission. The JTF entered the theater on short notice with less than 50 percent of its manpower and equipment. It had neither predeployment training nor a validating exercise prior to deployment.

Yet another challenge the JTF had to overcome was identifying the scope of the problem. It needed to determine the organizational structure and capabilities of the unified action partners and to establish an operations process that was synchronized with the regional commands dispersed throughout the theater. The most logical approach to overcoming the complex and uncertain variables in the area was the application of mission command principles.

Mission Command Principles

The philosophy of mission command is guided by six interdependent principles: build cohesive teams through mutual trust, create shared understanding, provide a clear commander's intent, exercise disciplined initiative, use mission orders, and accept prudent risk.

Effective mission command requires mutual trust between the unified action partners (the commander, subordinates, and joint, interorgani-

Build Teams Through Trust

Developing trusting, cohesive teams that are capable of operating effectively together can be a significant leadership challenge. Gaining the trust of the BCTs requires a deliberate approach.

BCT commanders wanted the flexibility provided by having stockpiles of materiel and multiple base camps. The JTF had to convince the BCT commanders that the JTF would enable them and not distract from the mission.

To overcome this challenge, the JTF commander used a collaborative approach and worked to build a cohesive team by conducting frequent on-site visits, establishing interpersonal relationships, and placing senior-ranking liaison officers (LNOs) in the supported units. The LNOs gave the supported commanders a level of comfort and trust because they showed that the JTF was committed to the team.

Creating trust within the newly formed JTF also required a deliberate approach. The on-site visits gave the JTF commander, subordinates, and partners the ability to determine not only the tasks that had to be accomplished to meet the president's mandate but also the capabilities and organizational structure that would be required.

The JTF commander, staff, and key leaders collaborated to develop several courses of action. They established procedures for the operations process that was synchronized with the regional commands throughout

the theater. The JTF commander garnered the mutual trust of team members by assigning responsibilities based on the strengths and recent experiences of each service's representative.

For example the staff and functional lead for base camp closure was the Marine Corps contingent of the JTF. The Air Force led the contracting efforts, while the Navy assumed the lead for customs. Other organizations in the JTF were also tasked based on strengths and functional capabilities.

Create Shared Understanding

According to Field Manual 6-22, Leader Development, creating a shared understanding is the most important step in developing a team. Understanding what is to be accomplished and why gives the team a purpose that enables unity of effort.

The JTF commander continuously collaborated with the unified action partners to create a shared understanding of the mission and developed lines of effort (LOEs) to show what the task force must accomplish to achieve the desired end state. Five LOEs were used to create a shared understanding:

- LOE 1: Recover, redistribute, retrograde, and dispose of materiel.
- LOE 2: Enable base camp transitions (closures or transfers).
- LOE 3: Execute mission command.
- LOE 4: Train, maintain, and sustain.
- LOE 5: Build resiliency.

The JTF commander used a collaborative approach to create metrics for the LOEs to assess unit progress toward mission accomplishment. Other control measures that facilitated progress assessment and enabled the continued understanding of the JTF's mission included the use of structured functional boards, panels, and control teams.

The boards, panels, and teams used terrain walks, rehearsal of concept drills, and automated mission command systems both to track progress

and to ensure continued understanding. Metrics included speed of operations, volume of materiel processed, and percentage of base camps transitioned, among others.

The JTF captured best practices during operations and developed documents (standard operating procedures and multiple handbooks) to provide continuity and a shared understanding of processes and procedures.

Provide a Clear Intent

The commander's intent statement describes what constitutes success for an operation. Joint Publication 3-0, Joint Operations, says, "The commander's intent is a clear and concise expression of the purpose of the operation and the desired military end state that supports mission command, provides focus to the staff, and helps subordinate and supporting commanders act to achieve the commander's desired results without further orders, even when the operation does not unfold as planned."

The JTF commander's intent was clearly articulated at the onset. The JTF was to achieve full integration into the theater of operations and conduct recovery, redistribution, retrograde, disposal, and base camp transitions.

It would be postured to enable the transition to long-term stability operations. The JTF commander's use of LOEs to articulate intent provided unified action partners with the information needed to act in the absence of further orders. Nested within each LOE were the key tasks that had to be performed and the objectives for each task.

The objectives were to achieve reduction requirements (LOE 1), transition base camps in support of regional commands' operational priorities (LOE 2), achieve situational understanding to facilitate the forecasting of support requirements (LOE 3), resource capable and responsive formations (LOE 4), and have strong personnel and families postured to accomplish any mission (LOE 5).

Exercise Disciplined Initiative

The exercise of disciplined initiative within the commander's intent is a critical component of successful mission command. Leaders at the point of action must assess the situation, make timely decisions in response to changes in the operational environment, and take actions aligned with achieving the desired end state provided in the commander's intent statement.

The JTF commander made it clear to the force that subordinates were authorized to exercise disciplined initiative within the limits of his intent statement. Continuous collaboration with JTF leaders and subordinates throughout the operation created a climate that encouraged initiative. The climate made the JTF members feel empowered to seize, retain, or exploit the initiative.

Use Mission Orders

The focus of mission command is the outcome of the operation. According to ADP 6-0, the commander uses mission orders to provide "directives that emphasize to subordinates the results to be attained, not how they are to achieve them."

The JTF supplemented the standard five-paragraph operations order with additional annexes specific to the nontraditional mission it was conducting. Subordinates were given specific tasks and were provided the freedom to determine how they would accomplish those assigned tasks.

The mission orders provided direction and guidance that focused the forces' activities on achieving the main objective. The mission orders also provided the commander's priorities and allocated resources.

The subordinate commanders used the JTF commander's intent and the LOEs to develop their operations orders. Control measures for tracking operations and accomplishments were emplaced. The measures included daily fragmentary orders, twice daily battle update briefs, and twice daily shift change briefings.

The frequency and quality of the information exchanges influenced the situation and further enabled disciplined initiative.

Accept Prudent Risk

Making reasonable estimates and intentionally accepting prudent risk are fundamental to mission command. Commanders must continually conduct risk assessments to determine risks and implement solutions to mitigate them.

The commander cannot eliminate all risks, and accepting prudent risk may be required. Prudent risk is the deliberate exposure to potential injury or loss when the commander judges the outcome in terms of mission accomplishment as worth the cost.

The JTF commander ordered that every mission have a concept of operation that included a risk assessment. Risks assessed as low were approved at the company level. Medium risks were approved at the battalion level. High risks were ap-

proved at the brigade level.

Risk is traditionally viewed in relation to the enemy and the potential for injury or loss. The JTF commander conducted an assessment using traditional and nontraditional approaches. The prudent risk that the commander accepted was associated with pulling high-ranking task force members out of the sustainment brigade headquarters and assigning them as LNOs on the staffs of the unified action partners.

This technique generated a high risk to the overall mission, but it proved to be worth the cost. Placing LNOs in the unified action partner headquarters not only facilitated a cohesive team but also enabled the synchronization of priorities with supported commanders and ensured the JTF remained integrated into the supported commander's military decisionmaking process.

Mission command works when its guiding principles are followed. The use of mission command principles

as a framework facilitated the JTF's ability to build a cohesive team that had a shared understanding of the commander's intent and what needed to be accomplished. Continuous collaboration with unified action partners, the exercise of disciplined initiative, the use of mission orders, and the JTF commander's willingness to accept prudent risk enhanced the JTF's ability to overcome challenges.

Over the course of nine months, the JTF retrograded tons of excess materiel and transitioned 180 base camps. The JTF also developed multiple handbooks that codified the processes and procedures it used for drawdown, retrograde, and base camp transitioning. The framework developed by the JTF is still being followed by subsequent units in multiple areas of responsibility today.

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Col. Douglas McBride, commander of the 593rd Sustainment Brigade, explains to Gen. William M. Fraser III how items flow through the Kandahar Airfield retro-sort yard along with 18th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion officers and Soldiers who operate the facility. (Photo by 2nd Lt. Henry Chan)