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## Leader Presence in Future Warfare

By Captain T. Jordan Terry, U.S. Army

*Direct and organizational leaders cannot remain in safe headquarters designing complex plans without examining what their subordinates are experiencing. They must go to where the action is, whether the battlefield or shop floor... Seeing the plan transform into action empowers the leader to better assess the situation and influence the execution by their immediate presence. Leaders who stay a safe distance from risk destroy their subordinates' trust and confidence.*

–Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership*<sup>1</sup>

Military history, both distant and recent, lends diverse examples of how, when and where commanders presented themselves in order to exact a maximum advantage. Effective commander presence depended on a plethora of factors: martial traditions and culture, the size, echelon and mission of the force involved, the ability of a commander to receive information and communicate orders, and the perceived aptitude of a commander's subordinate leaders. In the classical and medieval eras, combat leaders took up swords, spears and shields in the ranks with their comrades – direct presence and leadership from the front were paramount in the maintenance of morale and cohesion. The advent of gunpowder weapons, the increasing size and professionalism of armies, and improvements in communications technology led some commanders during the Ages of Enlightenment and Industrialization to withdraw from the fighting front. Still, other leaders were willing to forsake protective distance to facilitate communications, decision-making, motivation or unity of effort.<sup>2</sup>

'Modern' warfare utilizing machine guns, mechanized forces and the combined arms integration of fires and air assets again necessitated a reconsideration of optimal placement and presence of commanders and leaders at all echelons. This reconsideration noted the effectiveness of decentralized, small unit infiltration-style tactics led by company grade officers and non-commissioned officers, rather than large formations led by field grade or general officers. All evolutions of warfare incur an examination, often through trial and error in training and combat, as to the leader characteristics which will enhance an era's particular developments and advances.

Amidst the current transformational efforts toward an organization which can fight and win in a complex, uncertain environment, Army professionals again must examine battlefield command and leader presence. This analysis should be guided by the



question: What do presence and leadership by example look like in 'Information Age' warfare, and how can senior officers and NCOs best apply that presence toward effective outcomes?

The Army expects its leaders to possess three attributes (Character, Presence and Intellect) and to demonstrate three competencies (Leads, Develops and Achieves). The attributes facilitate the competencies. Generally, there is little room for debate as to the Army's intent regarding a leader's intellect, his or her ability to develop the members of the unit, or to achieve mission accomplishment. And stalwart character indisputably serves as the bedrock for the profession's trust and teamwork. The concept of 'Presence,' however, is more complex than simply possessing character and intellect. The Army outlines the subcomponents of 'Presence' as military bearing, fitness, confidence and resilience. These are characteristics a leader has, not actions a leader *does*. To find the physical expression of 'Presence,' we must look to the 'Leads' subcomponent "Leads by Example. The expectations of a leader, particularly the commander, to maintain a relevant presence and to lead by example, more so than the other attributes and competencies, are nebulous and dependent on the situations in which leaders find themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Operational leadership at the company-level and below has generally remained constant in the modern era – officers and NCOs are, and will be, expected to remain continuously immersed in the tactical fight and common hardships of their Soldiers. However, combat leadership at the battalion-level and higher possesses more potential for variation, especially with regard to cyber warfare and a 'Seventh Warfighting Function' encompassing stability operations, counterinsurgency (COIN), Train-Advise-Assist (TAA), Military Information Support Operations (MISO), Civil Affairs (CA) and Inform-Influence Activities (IIA).<sup>4</sup> While the assertions and observations in this article represent the perceptions of higher-level leadership from the viewpoint of a company-grade officer, it is often such a bottom-up perspective which serves as the most apt evaluation of a leader's methodologies.

### **The Current Culture of Combat Leader Presence**

During the Second World War, most American commanders were content to manage the fight from the rear of their formations, while front line leadership for *Wehrmacht* officers was the expectation and the norm.<sup>5</sup> Popular American interpretations of German battlefield leadership took on an almost mythical air, possibly in admiration of the *Wehrmacht's* shocking successes early in the conflict, or in deference to the Germans' stout resistance in the war's closing chapters. Perhaps, American preoccupation with the *Wehrmacht's* leadership models was a rationalization of why Allied successes in Europe proved so costly. The efficacy of German



technology and tactics, combined with the adept leadership of Rommel, Guderian, Manstein and other villainous legends, demanded analysis and examination.

The American Army's attempt to interpret and implement the lessons of WWII, combined with the realities of an antagonistic Soviet Union, inspired generations of introspection and reform. With an obvious opponent possessing well-understood capabilities and composition, Army leaders focused on the technological tools to level the scales against the numerically-superior threat posed by the Eastern Bloc. This post-WWII, Cold War period of transformation culminated with major research, development and procurement successes as well as the AirLand Battle operational concept. The implementation of the Mission Command model (in words and doctrine, if not yet in action) and improvements to the leader professional education systems were generally focused on the methodical, systematic employment of doctrine and technology against a known adversary.<sup>6</sup> By the end of the Cold War, the American Army was, after decades of change and preparation, able and ready to fight the Cold War.

The breakup of the Soviet Union, however, upended the relative comfort and familiarity of the NATO vs. Warsaw Pact problem set. Nevertheless, the flux and uncertainty of the post-Soviet era provided opportunities and demands for progress and evolution within the Army. Post-Cold War evolutions toward 'Full Spectrum Operations,' force structure reforms and the Brigade Combat Team, expeditionary capability and digitization continued a steady, gradual advance even through the War on Terror.<sup>7</sup> These developments are only recently reaching a relative plateau of maturity and synergy.

Army transformations between the First and Second World Wars centered on integrating tanks, mechanization, aircraft and automatic weapons into an effective operational construct. Evolutions in the early Cold War served as a response to supersonic jet fighters, tactical nuclear weapons and the massive scale of a potential NATO vs. Warsaw Pact clash. Technology also served as the nexus of the late Cold War and post-Soviet Army transformations described above. In contrast to previous developments which centered on major advances in materiel and equipment, the current chain of progress largely focuses on a re-visioning of how the Army thinks and fights.

Anchored by 'Unified Land Operations,' Doctrine 2015, leader development initiatives and the U.S. Army Operating Concept: *Win in a Complex World*, these developments fundamentally target the human factors of warfare. Such uniquely human facets of warfare center on how Soldiers visualize operational challenges, interact and cooperate with combined, joint and interagency partners, make



decisions, and lead. The puzzle is not completely pieced together. Regarding leader presence, it is not enough to envision the next fight, revise doctrine or update terminologies without first adequately describing and understanding the current state of command culture.

As an aeroscout platoon leader in Afghanistan, I conducted a radio check-in overhead of a fifty vehicle convoy moving en masse to cordon off the mouth of a restive valley. I was greeted on the ground unit command net not by a company commander, platoon leader or fire support NCO, but by the battalion commander himself, calling from the lead vehicle. His presence served as a personal endorsement of the importance of the mission and as a model of the aggressive determination with which he desired to imbue his Soldiers. The operation, planned to last forty-eight hours, continued over several days, with the senior commander remaining on station to provide on-hand direction and motivation.

Perhaps his subordinate leaders could have just as well accomplished the mission with the battalion commander observing and 'leading' from the distant operations center. However, his personal presence enabled his subordinate units, as well as other units supporting the operation, to operate with initiative, precluding the possible need to call 'higher' for guidance or permission. My own squadron commander regularly led combat missions as an Air Mission Commander and Pilot-in-Command and often placed himself in the jump seat of a CH-47 during air assaults, not to micro-manage the flight, but to endorse with his presence the mission's significance and to reinforce the confidence with which his subordinates could make rapid decisions. His habitual cockpit presence served to solidify his legitimacy as a combat leader.

The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan provide numerous examples of senior officers and NCOs joining their formations to personally take the fight to the enemy. Mission requirements and operating environments may not always necessitate or facilitate such direct engagement by senior leaders. And direct senior leader combat involvement, when executed recklessly, irregularly or without the requisite level of competence, could degrade leader legitimacy. The benefits of an engaged, competent and present leader are undeniable, but a present leader does not necessarily yield effective leader presence.

#### **Battlefield Circulation vs. Mission-Immersed Presence**

During my second tour in Afghanistan as the aviation current operations Battle Captain for Regional Command – East (RC-E), my roles and responsibilities included prioritizing VIP and key leader air mission requests and allocating rotary wing assets to fulfil



supported requests within both RC-E and Kabul City's sector, Regional Command-Capital. Given the geographic and force protection considerations at that juncture in the operating environment, movement by helicopter often served as the only viable transportation option and was in high demand. On an average day, available assets could support approximately sixty percent of the demand for air movement – I had to understand the purpose and intent for a key leader's movement in order to properly prioritize that request. My familiarization with these key leader movements now informs this reflection.

The volume of movement requests is instructive – senior leaders had an understandably voracious appetite to escape their offices and operations centers to visit outstation bases and Soldiers. Granted, some of the requests were for extremely short flights for high-ranking officers, staff and officials to attend routine meetings in person.<sup>8</sup> However, most air movement requests facilitated a senior leader's battlefield circulation. My headquarters also tried to maximize leader circulation by providing air assets in a direct support role for use by brigade and battalion leadership. While virtual teleconference, digital and over-the-horizon communication resources existed, senior commanders and staff often preferred to eschew technology in favor of face-to-face interactions. Senior leaders aspired to continually refine their understanding of the battlespace as well as physically present themselves before and amongst their subordinates.

The Army's 1941 publication of FM 100-5, *Field Service Regulations--Operations* stresses the importance of leaders' understanding the plight of the Soldiers in their care, and battlefield circulation via helicopter facilitates the outcomes of leader movements outlined in that regulation.<sup>9</sup> But the air requests I facilitated usually had a same-day return leg, which highlighted the short-term character of the visits. This is the nature of the battlefield circulation trend. There are, of course, costs associated with battlefield circulation, especially in the nonlinear, dispersed operating environments in which we now find ourselves.

My second tour saw the number of bases, facilities and Soldiers dwindle, with operations shifting from unpartnered, offensive operations to a purely TAA focus. While the coalition operational and geographic footprints shrank, senior leaders' appetites for battlefield circulation, however, were slow to acclimate to the realities of the retrograde.

Some operating bases and units saw visits from their two-, three- and four-star superior commanders in the span of a week. Often, senior NCOs would circulate separately from their commander counterparts, and legislators and senior administrators from the U.S. also increased the number and visibility of visits. Units had to shift limited manpower, resources and focus from their primary missions to facilitate the numerous visits and the associated briefing and force protection requirements.



This 'burden of presence' became debilitating to such an extent that subordinate commands explicitly requested relief from the inundation of leadership and units struggled to spread the burden evenly across the declining number of formations. Thus while senior leaders were demonstrably eager to engage with their subordinates, their presence was not always convenient or conducive to operations.

The 'burden of presence,' when too heavy, can also exacerbate many common occurrences of subordinate disillusionment. Battlefield circulation may tend to tie up enabling assets, particularly aircraft and force protection manpower – the allocation of assets against leader movement missions could frustrate operational units also competing for those assets. Subordinate cynicism citing 'battlefield tourism,' 'dog-and-pony shows,' and the 'VIP entitlement' mentality can stem from battlefield circulation and may serve to seriously undermine a leader's authenticity, specifically his or her character and legitimacy to lead.

Where battlefield circulation encompasses temporary leader involvement focused on visualizing the battlefield and familiarization with the current situation of subordinates, mission-immersed presence entails a deeper, longer-lasting participation in the operations process. German division commanders in WWII were expected to place themselves with their lead regiments and battalions. Likewise, *Wehrmacht* regimental and battalion commanders positioned themselves even closer to the front lines. The intent was to immerse, not familiarize, a leader in the operational realities at the decisive point on the battlefield.<sup>10</sup>

During the initial phases of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, commanders immersed themselves in kinetic, aggressive operations, moving and leading with the main effort and allowing their staffs to manage from the rear. But as the conflicts progressed, the offense nature of missions transitioned into COIN, support of security and governance and TAA, and senior leaders adjusted their focus to a blend of battlefield circulation, crisis management, key leader engagement and planning oversight. These activities, focused chiefly on maintaining situational awareness and driving the operations process, all clearly fall within a senior leader's purview – leaders neglecting these roles and responsibilities would surely face criticism. Capable leaders driving the operations process and managing their battlespace nonetheless enjoyed markedly less opportunity for sustained, mission-immersed leader presence.

### **The Challenges of Leader Presence in a Complex World**

The current Army Operating Concept (AOC), *Winning in a Complex World*, serves as "the intellectual foundation" for the Army's transformation toward *Force 2025*. The AOC illuminates how the future battlefield will impose complex difficulties upon many of



the discussed critical leader responsibilities, specifically those related to mission-immersed presence. These potential challenges bring to light several questions and concerns which must be offered up for open discussion in order to drive concrete progress in the realms of training and leader development.

**Considering Leadership Culture:**

- 1) How does physical presence fit into the current cultural aversion to battlefield casualties?
- 2) Is 'Lead from the Front' a valid mantra and expectation for current senior level leaders?
- 3) Must senior leaders begin to buck the trends of the latest stages of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and take on more opportunities for mission-immersed presence?
- 4) To what extent do foreign military forces, allied, neutral, or enemy, state or non-state, value and employ mission-immersed leader presence? To what effect?

**Reflections on the 'Seventh Warfighting Function':**

- 5) Must senior leaders sustain a legitimate, mission-immersed presence in cyber warfare, special operations, MISO and IIA?
- 6) If so, how can senior command teams lead by example to foster trust in highly technical or specialized fields and are they fully qualified to do so?

**Concerning Command Post Operations:**

- 7) Advances in battle command systems technology and digital, over-the-horizon communications will offer continually improving leader visualization, understanding, information transfer and assessment. So is physical, mission-immersed senior leader presence worth the potential burdens to the subordinate unit?
- 8) Is technologically-supported, remote situational awareness or intermittent battlefield circulation sufficient to enable senior commanders to fully anticipate operational opportunities, understand mission complexities or accurately assess and mitigate risk?



- 9) Can senior leaders truly share common hardships from a distant command post or operations center? And if they cannot personally experience the adversities of their Soldiers, will that negatively impact overall trust, cohesion, morale and mission accomplishment?

**On Wide-Area Security Operations:**

- 10) In stability operations and COIN, the decisive point of an operation or campaign may be elusive and could involve personal engagement, economic development, a computer network or cultural reconciliation in addition to purely concrete and geographic objectives. How will leaders position themselves at the optimal location and time to influence such decisive points and enable initiative for subordinates?
- 11) How will leaders address the geographic, logistical and force protection complications which accompany leader presence in directing wide-area security operations to support of stability and TAA missions?

Soldiers and junior leaders often have very passionate answers to these questions, in all likelihood informed more by their negative experiences than by positive examples. While not necessarily informed by years of experience, these candid, often blunt opinions reflect the thinking of the subordinate ranks, and are thus invaluable. As professionals, Army leaders at all levels must be prepared to boldly state truths concerning leader effectiveness. We must also humbly accept those truths (even if negative) toward the betterment of the Army. Open discussion regarding leader presence is essential in the effort to drive progress across the entirety of the training, personnel management and leader development enterprises.

This discussion must involve senior leaders evaluating themselves (particularly the level of expertise required to maintain legitimacy), junior leaders providing honest feedback regarding leader presence (including the 'burden of presence'), and objective commentary on the leadership component to operational outcomes.



## Conclusion

Senior command teams are now leading in scenarios echoing the operational environments described in the AOC. Jörg Muth's exemplary combat leader fighting at the front is perhaps only partially valid for an Army attempting to operate and win on these complex, constantly changing battlefields. ADRP 6-22, Chapter 9 (titled 'Leadership in Practice') merely calls leaders to understand the operational environment, guard against combat and operational stress and to enable adaptability in their formations – 'Leadership in Practice' does not elaborate on leader presence in practice. While, emerging Army leaders do not require a set strict, dictated instructions to be effective, tangible, recent anecdotes of leader presence in action and the associated challenges would certainly be welcome and useful.

Thus, this essay serves not to answer as such the question of effective next-generation leader presence, but to call forward those senior leaders to generate a useful dialogue regarding their challenges and the means through which they ensured success or met failure. This dialogue must offer concrete feedback and actionable recommendations for leader development, professional military education curriculum and doctrine. Army professionals must collectively and iteratively measure current experiences against the conceptualized ideologies which guide the Army's transformation in preparation for future wars.

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## NOTES

1. US, Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-22, *Army Leadership* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office [GPO], 2012), 49.
2. The anecdotes of King Gustav II Adolf of Sweden at Lutzen, General Wolfe at Quebec, General Arnold at Saratoga and General Reynolds at Gettysburg recount leader presence at the fighting front, with often unfortunate consequences for the commander.
3. ADRP 6-22, 15-16.
4. US, Department of the Army, Training and Doctrine Command [TRADOC] Pamphlet 525-3-0, *Army Capstone Concept* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2012), 31.



5. Jörg Muth, *Command Culture* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2011), 195-196. Here, Muth fittingly compares the prominence of the word *manage* in U.S. Army manuals, regulations and personal correspondence, with the word *führen* (lead) in comparable *Wehrmacht* documents.
6. Brian McAllister Linn, *The Echo of Battle* (Harvard University Press, 2007). Linn outlines the internal dialogue regarding the U.S. Army's way of war from the early 1800s to the present. Linn's Chapter 7, titled 'From Reformation to Reaction,' provides an excellent review of the ideological stimuli and professional dialogue that spurred the major Army transformation which spanned the generation between Vietnam and the War on Terror.
7. John Sloan Brown, *Kevlar Legions* (Center of Military History Press, 2011). Brown argues that the Army transformation from 1989-2005 was a centrally-driven effort which culminated in a digitized, expeditionary-minded force capable of responding to crises and contingencies across the globe. Whether we agree with Brown's top-down assertions, there is no doubt that the Army of the War on Terror was much changed from Army of the Fulda Gap. US, Department of the Army, TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1, *The U.S. Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2014), 20.
8. For example, the straight-line distance from Kabul International Airport to ISAF HQ was less than two miles; helicopters ferried senior leaders and officials between these locations daily to eliminate potential traffic delays and for force protection considerations.
9. US, War Department, Field Manual 100-5, *Field Service Regulations—Operations* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1941), 18-21.
10. Frieser, Karl-Heinz. *The Blitzkrieg Legend* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2005), 337-339. Here, Frieser recounts the *führen von vorn* (leading from up front) which characterized the senior leader presence during the *Wehrmacht's* 1940 campaign against France.