"Führen mit Auftrag"[1]

Mission Command from a German Point of View

By Lt. Col. Jens Küster, German Army

10 May 1940, 04:30 am, Cologne, Germany; Assault Group Granite one of three assault groups led by 1st Lt. Rudolf Witzig and his airborne engineers, boarded their nine glider aircrafts. Their target: Fort Eben Emael,[2] Belgium, some 60 miles west. Their task and the intent of the higher echelon: Seize the Eben Emael fortress, which secured three vital bridges over the river Meuse and the Albert Canal, as a prerequisite to ensure the Wehrmacht's rapid advance across the Meuse River through Belgium and into France.

A thoroughly planned attack was about to begin. Seven months previously the force comprising 493 German soldiers had been assembled and a period of intensive training began. A detailed study of the fort, the bridges and the surrounding was made, and a replica of the area was constructed for the airborne troops to train in. Joint exercises between the parachutists and the glider pilots were carried out in the early spring of 1940, and a number of refinements were made to the equipment and tactics to be used.

Everything was set in the early morning hours in May 1940 … when Clausewitzian friction[3] began. Shortly after departure the glider in which 1st Lt. Witzig sat had to carry out an emergency landing in a field just outside Cologne. Immediately Staff Sergeant Meier assumed leadership, took decisive action, led "his" force to and into the fortress, successfully destroyed and disabled casemates and artillery pieces in time for 1st Lt. Witzig to join the fight hours later, by landing his glider on top of the Fort to destroy the primary targets. At 12:30 the next day the fortress surrendered. 60 Belgian soldiers were killed and 40 wounded. The Germans took more than a thousand Belgian soldiers into captivity. Group Granite suffered six killed and nineteen wounded.

This is just one historic example which displays mission command in an exemplary way, a leadership principle that German Armed Forces have practiced for more than 200 years and that is THE pre-eminent command and control principle in the German Army today.[4] Interestingly, it took a long time for mission command or "Auftragstaktik" to find its way into German military doctrine. And it wasn't until 1953 that mission command was first officially recognized as part of the even more complex concept of "Innere Führung"[5] and included into the newly developing Bundeswehr doctrine. German Armed Forces practiced a leadership principle before it was institutionalized and subsequently taught and trained.

Where does mission command come from? What is the German Bundeswehr's understanding of mission command in the context of "Innere Führung"? Where are the differences – from German point of view – between the U.S. understanding of mission command (as written down in Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0) and the German doctrine? And finally: How can I "live" mission command every day?

Where does mission command come from?

Mission command wasn't an idea that was introduced into German military thinking by decree. Its implementation was a difficult and long-running process that actually started in 1806 following a disastrous defeat of the Prussians against Napoleon's army in the battles of Jena and Auerstedt. German military thinkers realized the main reason for the defeat were overly cautious, risk-averse and indecisive leadership on the Prussian-Saxonian side and courage and determination on the French side.[6] Another reason was the fact that "friction" in war will cause leadership decisions to be based mostly on incomplete information. With that in mind, by 1812, at least for the higher levels of leadership, initiative, independent thought and action – today being integral parts of mission command – became important factors in German military thinking.

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Another refinement of mission command (as is ever so often in military history) was dictated by technological progress in armament. The introduction of the breech-loading rifle in the mid-19th century allowed for a much more flexible maneuver. Field Marshal Moltke in the late-19th century consequently stated in his writings that it would be wrong if he [the officer] had to wait for orders at times when no orders can be given. But most productive are his actions when he acts within the framework of his senior commander's intent.[7] Another fundamental puzzle-piece of mission command was born.

Still, it wasn't until 1890 that "Auftragstaktik" first surfaced in military doctrine … to show disdain as it was considered a threat to military discipline. It wasn't until the early 20th century that the term itself found its way into military doctrine. In particular in World War II, and the example at the beginning is just one of many examples, initiative, determination, surprise and flexibility down to company level achieved small victories against an enemy that all too often outnumbered own forces. Mission Command finally had a firm place in German Army's command and control philosophy.

What is the German understanding of mission command in the context of "Innere Führung"?

It was in 1950 when Germany – in close coordination with the United States of America, Great Britain and France – began to think about rearmament. For Germany and its particular experience of two World Wars this question was more than anything else a question of legitimacy of the new German Armed Forces. These would have to be strictly controlled by the democratic parliament of the Federal Republic of Germany without any special status whatsoever. At the same time it was deemed sensible not to discard leadership principles proven to be valuable and successful. The concept that did the trick was the concept of "Innere Führung" that – written from 1951 to 1953 and valid ever since – consists of the following eight pillars:[8]

- Integration [of the military] into the state and society.
- The guiding principle of the [soldier being] "citizen in uniform."
- Ethical, legal and political legitimacy of the [military] mission.
- The realization of fundamental constitutional and social values in the armed forces.
- The limits of order and obedience.
- The application of the principle of mission command.[9]
- The observance of the statutory participation rights of soldiers.
- The observance of the freedom of association guaranteed in the constitution.

Going through all the eight pillars in detail now would be interesting but unnecessarily breach the limits of this article. The takeaway here merely is that a) mission command is one of only a few principles carried over from previous German armed forces and b) mission command from a German point of view isn't a stand-alone principle but always seen and applied by German leadership in combination with the other pillars of "Innere Führung."

Where are the differences – from a German point of view – between the U.S. understanding of mission command and the German parent concept?

Comparing a foreign philosophy with another nation's version of the concept is a difficult endeavor. Every person is culturally imprinted through the environment he or she was brought up in, the education and training he or she received. This is even more valid for soldiers as their environment influences them more than any other civil environment. And it is true for me and my 14 years of civil and 27 years of German military training and education. Still I give it a hopefully sensible try.

Studying ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, and comparing this document with the German parent paper (at least) two things caught my eye:

U.S. mission command is tightly linked to the concept of unified land operations. Mission command is therefore one of the foundations and serves as a technique to support the Army's central idea to "seize, retain, and exploit the initiative to gain a position of relative advantage over the enemy. This is accomplished through decisive action."[10]

German mission command on the other hand is linked to "Innere Führung" thus ultimately and invariably to the German "constitution" (Basic Law). Also, because mission command in Germany isn't a stand-alone concept but one of eight pillars of "Innere Führung" and due to the challenging historical context in which the German concept was developed, it reflects much more on ethical, legal, political and social foundations than the U.S. approach.[11]

ADP 6-0 principles of mission command[12] are:

- Build cohesive teams through mutual trust.
- Create shared understanding.
- Provide a clear commander's intent.
- Exercise disciplined initiative.
- Use mission orders.
- Accept prudent risk.

Those principles are widely known and both well described and well defined.[13] As a German officer I would happily and without any hesitation sign them all (save the "disciplined" perhaps). Still, with doctrine being "spot on" and the "team-of-teams" concept being ever-present, my experience speaking speaking and working with American Army soldiers with American Army soldiers often shows that on tactical level dialogue and collaboration aimed at creating a shared understanding is sometimes considered "weak leadership," control, though being integral part of the German military decision making process, too, is used extensively this side of the pond. Mission Orders in general are very detailed in U.S. Army operations. The emphasis is set on discipline rather than initiative. Freedom of action more often than not creates some discomfort because of a perceived or real lack of reassurance, *Am I doing the right thing?* being felt by the soldier.

The part where the U.S. Army seems to struggle seems to be to implement doctrine into daily work life,[14] where mission orders are issued top-down but executed bottom-up[15] in an environment, where common mission command supporting behavioral attributes are displayed by leadership, officers and Noncommissioned Officers alike,[16] almost subconsciously based on a uniform understanding of mission command. Or in other words:

How can I "live" mission command every day? How do I make mission command a natural part of what I do as a military leader?

German Army Regulation C1-100/0-1001 "Truppenführung von Landstreitkräften"[17] and its description of the seven German principles of mission command provide practical guidance to answer those critical questions.

Trust

Mission command can only become a reality in a work environment where superiors fully trust their subordinates and vice versa. That trust is not trust that soldiers won't make mistakes. They will always do so, involuntarily. What is meant is that both officers and NCO's and enlisted in general trust in each other's ability to fully apprehend their respective profession. And as some are better than others, this trust comes with a thorough knowledge of the limits and boundaries of colleagues and comrades. And that deep feeling of trust amongst each other shan't go away when mistakes are made.

Accept mistakes

Mission command is linked to initiative geared towards fulfilling a commander's intent. And initiative is something that has to be applied quickly in order to be able to swiftly and violently exploit a situation that suddenly is favorable for me. The motto would be that "a good plan, violently executed now, is better than a perfect plan next week."[18] However, quick actions often in situations where information is incomplete and reality is obscured will lead to mistakes. Mission command savvy leaders accept mistakes and the risk that come with it. Which is why military leaders learned to mitigate risks, which keeps them from "sheer gambling."[19] They do that so that subordinates will show more initiative, which they will do the more they trust their superior to accept mistakes. And think about this: How many serious and irreversible mistakes are done in your normal, routine work environment? Very little, I suggest.

Reachable objectives

Soldiers are able to accomplish great things, if they fully understand their commander's intent and his main effort. Both should lead to objectives that are reasonably accomplishable. If the end-state is way out of bounds from the very beginning, both trust and initiative decreases dramatically.

Freedom of Maneuver

All of what's been said so far should ultimately lead to the fact that both leaders and subordinates enjoy a certain freedom in what they do. Why? Assuming they know *what* to do, subordinates will know *how* to get there. No need to write detailed orders which direct the "How?" Professional soldiers rarely need details. They should know more and innovative ways to reach the goal than their commander.

Pleasure in Taking over Responsibility

That should be an easy one. Leader's love taking over responsibility. That is what they do. That is, amongst many attributes, what they were selected for. Well, let's be honest: some more, some less so. Those that do don't necessarily all do it with pleasure and those that don't may be reluctant because they are afraid of mistakes. Accepting responsibility ultimately *needs* courage. Sometimes more, sometimes less. Or as Clausewitz stated: "This rarified warrior had the temperament to act with physical and moral courage to inspire others. This included the ability to face danger personally and the courage to accept responsibility."[20] Young officers, especially, should be given challenging tasks thus being encouraged to take over responsibility … and should be ensured by their commander's that mistakes are part of the equation. They should be given room for new ideas and innovative ways to reach their commander's goal. And they should be taught to not ask the question "Can I decide that myself?" but rather "What would my superior decide right now if he would know what I know?"

There can only be one leader!

Who is the commander? The one that carefully and aptly formulated his or her intent and main effort. And that is where he or she can be found: where the main effort is. That is where the commander is needed most because that is where goals are reached … or not. A commander that has the courage to take on responsibility won't even think about where his place is. Subconsciously he'll be there, clearly visible and trusting, that those that do not fight in the center of gravity, fully support the main effort without direct supervision.

Unified action based on common, values-based processes and TTP's

As said before mission command for German soldiers isn't a stand-alone principle but one of eight principles of "Innere Führung." These represent the common values that good leadership in the German Armed Forces is based on and that therefore are both taught and experienced from day one as a soldier onwards. The outcome ideally is what Moltke described as "Getrennt marschieren, gemeinsam schlagen!"[21] (lit. "March divided, strike as one!"). And here is where interoperability between nations comes into play. Different nations with different

processes and values will certainly "strike" differently. And that is why unified actions e.g. in a NATO framework require a lot of coordination and are often perceived as demanding or tiring.

To that end this quote from German Joint Service Regulation A-2600/1 fits when saying:

> Leadership must allow freedom of action, active participation and shared responsibility. For this reason, superiors must give top priority to mission command. In doing so, they must sometimes accept solutions that differ from their own. Superiors who are faced with important decisions should involve the soldiers concerned whenever possible. This increases their motivation and is an important factor in occupational satisfaction and operational readiness.[22]

To summarize, mission command ultimately relies on superiors[23] that a) briefly and clearly formulate their intent and the desired end-state, b) provide all the necessary resources to allow success, c) fully trust their subordinates to act independently towards that given end-state, d) feel comfortable delegating and controlling tasks, and e) are willing to accept a certain amount of mistakes and in doing so provide as much flexibility as possible for their subordinates to allow effective and efficient and not at least innovative problem solving.

Mission command relies on subordinates that know their trade, understand the intent of their commander, are trained to think two command levels up, that feel comfortable taking on responsibility (not seldom above their own rank and pay grade) seeing and exploiting opportunities to take decisive action often without being able to back-check with higher echelon.

As the historical example also shows: Mission command is far from being free play or posing a threat to military discipline. And it does not fill in or substitute for poor planning. The contrary is true: Good mission command is only possible after a thorough planning process which ideally involves subordinates and was conducted prior to execution. Mission command to me is a culture, an art even, that has to be learned and most importantly demands a high degree of discipline by commander's and subordinates … and for sure an even higher degree of trust and initiative. Trust in particular is key. Without trust control prevails and with control all too often and sadly comes a too-detailed order which kills initiative by subordinates.

In conclusion mission command violently executed will add so much value both in everyday military routine and in combat, in particular in the complex and ever changing battlefields where the unknown and the unknowable reigns. It is in those scenarios where leadership can only be successful when delegating tasks and trusting subordinates to know their profession inside out. This was true in 1940 and will be even truer in the future in a more complex environment where initiative, flexibility out-of-the-box thinking and interoperability will gain importance.

Lt. Col. Jens Küster is a combat engineer and currently serves as German Army Liason Officer to the U.S. Army Manuever Support Center of Excellence. In previous assignments he served as Battalion Commander, with NATO as Executive Officer at Allied Command Operations/S.H.A.P.E. in Belgium, as Chief Engineer RC North in Afghanistan and as G3 Army Engineer Development. During his 27 years of service, he served in direct leadership positions for close to 10 years. He holds a master's degree in sport sciences from the University of the German Armed Forces in Munich.

NOTES

1. In history as well as in this text the terms "Führen mit Auftrag", "Auftragstaktik" and "mission command" are used alternately. "Führen mit Auftrag" (lit. leading by tasks) is the correct term as per German doctrine. "Auftragstaktik" is the more commonly known term albeit a misleading one as it implies that this principle is a tactics which it is not. "Mission

command" merely is the common and well known translation and consequently the term used in all English speaking nations and in NATO. I use "mission command" for practical purposes.

2. Sperr-Fort Eben Emael, Retrieved March 29, 2016, from Web site: http://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Zusatz/Luftwaffe/EbenEmael-R.html.

3. Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege* (e-artnow, 2014), Chapter VII, Friktion im Kriege.

4. German Army Regulation C1-100/0-1001, "Truppenführung von Landstreitkräften" (Bonn: Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, 05 November 2007), chapter 2, # 2002.

5. German Joint Service Regulation A-2600/1 "Innere Führung" (Bonn: Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, 25 Jul 2008), officially translates "Innere Führung" (lit. inner leadership) as "leadership development and civic education".

6. Johann von Borcke, *Kriegerleben, 1806-1815* (Berlin: Mittler, 1888); Col. Thomas M. Hall Jr., *Napoleon's Jena Campaign: A Critical Analysis* (U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, VA, 1992), 24; Col. Trevor N. Dupuy, *A Genius for War - The German Army and General Staff 1807 – 1945* (Falls Church, VA: Nova Publications, 1984), 35.

7. Colonel R. R. (Dicky) Davis, British Army, "Helmuth von Moltke and the Prussian-German Development of a Decentralised Style of Command: Metz and Sedan 1870," *Defence Studies* 5(1) (2005), 83-95.

8. German Joint Service Regulation A-2600/1, # 316.

9. "Führen mit Auftrag."

10. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Goverment Printing Office [GPO], 17 May 2012), 1.

11. Lt. Col. (GS) Sonneberger, *Initiative within the Philosophy of Auftragstaktik, Determining Factors of the Understanding of Initiative of the German Army, 1806 – 1955*, Art of War Papers (Fort Leavenworth: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, 2013), chapter 5, p. 61.

12. ADP 6-0, 2.

13. Paul R. Sanders, "Mission Command in Education," *Army Press Online Journal* 16-10 (4 Mar 16), http://armypress.dodlive.mil/mission-command-in-education/.

14. "Person-Organization Fit and Mission Command," Human Dimension Capabilities Development Task Force white paper (Mission Command Center of Excellence, September 2015), 8.

15. David Shunk, "German Mission Orders--Their Doctrinal and Operational Development from 1866-1940 and Mission Order Combat Illustrations from the 1870-71, 1914-18 and 1939-45 Wars," *Army Press Online Journal* 16-12 (18 Mar 16), 1, http://armypress.dodlive.mil/german-mission-orders-their-doctrinal-and-operational-development-from-1866-1940-and-mission-order-combat-illustrations-from-the-1870-1871-1914-1918-and-1939-1945-wars/.

16. Sgt. Maj. Dennis Eger, "Noncommissioned Officers and Mission Command" *Military Review* (September- October 2014), 6. "Mission command, that's an officer thing," or "That's officer business." This way of thinking can be no further from the truth. My response is always the same, "No, mission command is leader business."

17. German Army Regulation C1-100/0-1001, 39 - 42.

18. George S. Patton, *BrainyQuote.com,* accessed 13 January 2016, http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/g/georgespa138200.html.

19. Sanders, "Mission Command in Education," 5.

20. Carl von Clausewitz, Vom Kriege, 145.

21."Helmuth Graf von Moltke über Strategie," *Gutzitiert*, accessed 14 January 2016,

http://www.gutzitiert.de/zitat_autor_helmuth_graf_von_moltke_thema_strategie_zitat_19699.html.

22. German Joint Service Regulation A-2600/1, # 612.

23. Although stating the obvious it is worth mentioning that in a military hierarchy superiors are at the same time subordinates and vice versa.