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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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**The Commander's Role in the Operational Art:  
Sustaining Adequate Intimacy with the Changing Character of War**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**AUTHOR:**  
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AY 2020-21

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## Executive Summary

**Title:** The Commander's Role in the Operational Art: Sustaining Adequate Intimacy with the Changing Character of War

**Author:** Major Will Riordon, United States Marine Corps

**Thesis:** Current US doctrine in planning designed to optimize the use of the operational art overly relies on the influence, experience, and wisdom of the commander. As the US military prepares to face the challenges in the changing characteristics of war in the 21st century, conflicts will require alternate leadership frameworks and extensive forms of mission command often overruling centralized decision making and influence.

**Discussion:** Since the inception of military formations, the commander has been the focal point that equates to success or failure on the battlefield. A combination of their judgement, experience, and position shapes the way their command thinks, decides, and acts. This imperative rewards the military force with better leaders, the optimal standard a genius. To achieve this end drove warfighting. But what occurs when an organization does not know how to operate without their commander's genius? Successful operational art can be orchestrated through alternate methods. Napoleon Bonaparte sequenced success through his genius, while Helmoth von Moltke (the elder) cultivated an organizational culture rooted in education, planning, and trust—so an intentional push toward collective genius. With this historical context, current US doctrine, contemporary operational art analysis and the last 20 years of conflict reflects that a Napoleonic rationale of thinking still persists all while giving tribute to Moltke's lasting impacts. With the character of war ever-changing, the commander's role inside the operational art must evolve from less of a chess player to more of a gardener, one that is a cultivator of organizational culture that promotes dialogue, collaboration, learning and a bias for action premised more on one key individual. A small group of professionals have illuminated that leadership approaches inside the modern military must alter in an effort to cope with complexity. Applying this rationale to the commander's role inside the operational art is the next step and supporting this change is the chief importance of this paper.

**Conclusion:** To put an old idea out of the military is difficult, but it begins with education. Examining the role of the commander within the operational art is no different. Education in the form of what organizational culture is and how it affects the potential and resilience of an outfit is a key step to take, as is education in terms of welcoming and exploring new leadership theories that are applicable to modern landscapes. Related is education with a return to understanding the cognitive fighting philosophy of the USMC in the form of MCDP 1 *Warfighting*. Institutionally this needed change is within reach over time, but the short-term approach can be unlocked through individual humility and accepting other's ideas and perspectives as learning opportunities.

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## *Preface*

The leader of a group, team, or organization has always intrigued me. The influence that one individual can cast across a gathering of humans is powerful; for better or for worse. The military has and will continue to develop tremendous leaders who will make the difference in success or failure. The way in which that leader achieves either end is what sparked my interest to pursue and discuss the commander's role in the operational art. Our 38<sup>th</sup> Commandant has pressed the collective to question every assumption that has been made concerning this profession, this is my formal start.

I would like to thank a few individuals who aided in this journey. First, to my wife Brittany whose encouragement and devotion to our family has helped me throughout my career and during this process. To Dr. Flynn who aggressively pushed me to pursue my initial thoughts and helped tailor my writing to achieve a worthy thesis. To my peers in conference group 9 who patiently listened to my ideas and lastly Sam Ryder who provided feedback along the way. Thank you.

## Introduction:

“The real challenge is not to put a new idea into the military mind but to put the old one out.”<sup>1</sup>

Since the inception of military formations, the commander has been the focal point that equates to success or failure on the battlefield. A combination of their judgement, experience, and position shapes the way their command thinks, decides, and acts. What happens when the commander is not the smartest person in the room and the organization does not know how to operate without their military genius?

Napoleon Bonaparte and Helmoth von Moltke (the elder) are known as great, historic operational artists. Serving as both the commander and chief of the army and the nation's emperor, Napoleon's ability to organize, mobilize, and orchestrate decisive victories born from his personal genius yielded a large empire and enduring legacy. Moltke accomplished similar feats, but galvanized political ends via alternate methods. His operational approach was not centered around his personal *coup d'oleil*, but rather institutionalized through education, planning, and trust.<sup>2</sup> These two great leaders, while divergent in ways to meet ends, Napoleon with 'great man' thinking and Moltke through instilled organizational culture, left their mark on how best to plan for and wage warfare.

Reflecting these past great leaders, current US doctrine in planning designed to optimize the use of the operational art overly relies on the influence, experience, and wisdom of the commander. As the US military prepares to face the challenges in the changing characteristics of war in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, conflicts will require alternate leadership frameworks and extensive forms of mission command often overruling centralized decision making and influence. Organizations will need to embody characteristics of Moltke and the famed Prussian General Staff---critical thinking, process, candor; rather than that of a commander-centric, Napoleonic

unit. Doctrine concerning operational art should be revisited to emphasize the importance of organizational culture effects rather than the reliance on the commander's input. A unit's culture can prevail when the commander is not a Napoleon. Similarly, embracing Moltke as a means to an organizational end merits consideration, but should be treated with as much caution. A decentralized command structure taking the US military into the future will embark on something new while still reflecting the old. This step forward is worth a close look.

In this monograph, operational art (both the plan and execution) will be examined from multiple perspectives: first, a brief reference to its historical leadership roots; next, a contemporary analysis of operational art to include what doctrine and scholars/experts pronounce. Examples from the last twenty years of conflict will illustrate a too centralized, commander-monopolized system predicated on technology, risk, uncertainty, and personality. New approaches to leadership that can be inserted inside contemporary operational art coupled with recommendations to optimize the commander-command relationship for the future operating environment will be explored, all without losing focus on what matters most: winning the next conflict.

## **Historical Context**

When studying operational art, one must acknowledge the enduring contributions of Napoleon and Moltke. Organizationally each evolved and adapted their nation's approach for planning and waging wars. Both recognized that a nation's ability to conscript, train, organize, and mobilize an army enhanced its probability of military success in achieving political ends. Though very similar in some respects, these two brilliant figures achieved success through two divergent methods. Napoleon orchestrated his ways and means centered around *his* genius, whereas Moltke cultivated an organizational culture around education, initiative, candor, and

process. Within contemporary operational art, a Napoleon rationale of thinking still persists all the while giving tribute to Moltke's lasting impacts. This balance is useful, even needed, but can too easily get things out of balance when too much emphasis is placed on the commander's role.

One of Napoleon's contributions to a revolution of military affairs (RMA) was one of task organization. As historian David Chandler notes in his essay, *Napoleon, Operational Art, and the Jena Campaign*, "the building block for operational utilization was the *corps d'armee*," a self-contained fighting formation of infantry, cavalry, and artillery that could fight for 24 hours before needing reinforcement.<sup>3</sup> The composition of the corps allowed Napoleon to field larger armies organized to achieve decisive victories in support of his campaign objectives. Noted in Martin Van Crevald's, *Command in War*, though the organization of Napoleon's command was built to be decentralized, execution of affairs remained extremely centralized. Van Crevald states: "Napoleon neither wanted independent subordinates nor tried to educate them."<sup>4</sup> Fear of being overtaken and deposed politically by another general due to that individual's success on the battlefield factored into this calculus, but his centralization of matters yielded internal, systemic effects. This outcome is best exemplified during the successful Jena campaign of October 1806 when a commander requested intentions on the movement of his own command by stating, "I dare not assume responsibility of ordering such a move in case Your Majesty may have some other destination for me."<sup>5</sup> The reliance of subordinate commanders on Napoleon can be contributed to the organizational culture that existed within the empire, epitomized by a lack of training and trust for subordinate commanders and operational planning only conducted by Napoleon himself. Combine these two factors, the product is a leader-centric organization, an ingrained artifact that still at times epitomizes contemporary, military formations.

Moltke too contributed to the RMA associated with what must be labeled mass national warfare.<sup>6</sup> Like Napoleon, he addressed changes within the nation's military formations that proved vital to strategic success, specifically through centralized, yet collaborative planning and the creation of the Prussian General Staff. Where he differed from Napoleon was the organizational culture that he instilled. As Michael Krause states in his essay, *Moltke and the Origins of the Operational Level of War*, "he established campaign planning—or—the imagination of future war—as a field of military specialization in its own right."<sup>7</sup> He used planning as a vehicle for education as well as a method to practice collaboration and decentralization with subordinates. The General Staff too benefited from educational reforms, but as Gunther Rothenberg states in his essay, *Moltke, Schlieffen, and the Doctrine of Strategic Envelopment*, the modern General Staff system and introduction of *Auftragstaktik*, or mission tactics, a command method stressing decentralized initiative within an overall strategic design allowed Moltke to guide the sequence of tactical events vice control.<sup>8</sup>

In understanding the command roots within Napoleon and Moltke's approach to operational art, one can recognize an old tension that still exists within contemporary military formations, the preverbal lean in favor of great commanders driving the operational art process. It is evident to see the differences between these two iconic figures from a command perspective, but Rothenberg best summarizes the byproduct of Moltke's organizational approach when he states:

Its [General Staff] decentralized functions were handled by the staff officers, the *Truppen Generalstab*, assigned at the division, corps, and army levels. Although in other contemporary armies these men were mere technical advisors, in Germany they became junior partners in command. The commander retained ultimate authority, but was expected to make operational decisions jointly with his chief of staff, who had the right, indeed the duty, to protest what he regarded as unsound operational judgments. At its best, the Prussian General Staff system institutionalized combat efficiency by ensuring that in a given situation different staff officers, educated to a common fighting doctrine, would arrive at approximately the same solution for making the most effective employment of available forces.<sup>9</sup>

In Moltke's case, he instilled a bias of action that created a sense of mutual ownership and responsibility, vice Napoleon who birthed a timid initiative due to his need to control. The Napoleonic approach can offer strengths and benefits, but it can also foster the pitfall where leaders can enhance their commands, but also cripple their thinking and decisions depending on the culture they create. Certainly, the need exists to get past these two dominating figures and better frame a contemporary discussion of leadership and how it is applied within the operational art.

## **Doctrine**

Having established a historic context of operational art, it is imperative to turn to what grounds military professionals thinking and that is approved military doctrine. Joint Publication (JP)-3, *Operations*, is a key starting text. As joint doctrine, it serves as a governing and authoritative document for the total force. Updated in 2018, it attempts to frame how a joint force will analytically approach planning and operations. Here, operational art is defined as “the cognitive approach by commanders and staffs—supported by their skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, and judgment – to develop strategies, campaigns, and operations to organize and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways, and means.”<sup>10</sup> The created, shared vision by the commander and the staff is stressed to allow the “art” to be accomplished in support of the planning process and execution. JP-3, similar to other foundational operational art texts, places the commander as the focal point in the process.

*The Marine Corps Planning Process* (MCP) presents a Marine Corps effort to capture the planning process, a means of waging a campaign; the ideas of operational art are central here as well. Recently updated in 2020, this publication remains proven in application due to its

systematic simplicity, but struggles with problems on the higher end of the Cynefin Model.<sup>11</sup> The six-step process structured to solve a problem and produce a detailed plan, MCPP mandates the need for the commander to drive the process. The recent addition of design to MCPP has enhanced its utility for the operational artist, specifically highlighting group dialogue as, “when conducted within the proper command climate, [dialogue] can foster a collective level of understanding not attainable by any individual within the group.”<sup>12</sup> Similar to JP-3, Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 5, *Planning*, emphasizes that “Commanders are probably the most important factor in effective planning.”<sup>13</sup> With all its effectiveness, MCPP, however, does not resolve the operational art issue of commander versus process.

The other services have similar approaches. The US Army (USA) adopts a JP-3 definition of operational art, but expounds on its use. Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 3-0 states: “the operational art is the pursuit of strategic objectives, in whole or in part, through the arrangement of tactical actions in time, space, and purpose.”<sup>14</sup> For the USA, operational art is not contained just to the operational level, but stretches the continuum of strategic direction to tactical actions. Additionally, it recognizes that commanders “determine the most effective and efficient methods for applying decisive action,” but also notes that operational art begins with candid, continuous collaboration and discourse between commanders at various echelons of command.<sup>15</sup>

The US Air Force (USAF), similar to the USA, institutionalizes the JP-3 definition of operational art, but turns to operational design vice dwelling on a unique, service perspective for the use of operational art.<sup>16</sup> When discussing the USAF and operational art, Col John Boyd, USAF (retired) must be acknowledged even though the USMC has adopted more of Boyd’s Theory within its Maneuver Warfare philosophy than the USAF. In Boyd’s *Patterns of Conflict*

presentation, he highlights that each level from tactical to theater commander has its own observe, orient, decide, act (OODA) loop. Boyd stresses decentralized execution in an effort to harmonize disparate rhythms across the multiple levels of command. He stresses more intent from the commander than anything else.<sup>17</sup>

The US Navy is largely in the minority among the services, it does not embody an operational art definition anywhere in its doctrinal publications. Its Composite Warfare doctrine is a method to apply mission tactics to the execution side of operational art, but isn't formally associated with any operational art approach. This simple statement is discouraging due to the use jointness that the next large-scale conflict will require.

Marine Air Ground Task Force Staff Training Program (MTSP) 5-0.1 *Marine Corps Design Methodology* enhances the MCPP with specific, proven techniques and procedures. In addition to building on the use of design in support of the operational art, it also mentions the positive influence that leadership can have on the process. Updated in 2017 it states, "Commanders establish a command climate where collaboration and discourse routinely occur throughout the organization through personal example, coaching, and mentorship."<sup>18</sup> This pamphlet is in the minority of suggesting that the importance of culture may be on the level of that of commander within the context of operational art. Similar to MTSP 5-0.1 as a non-doctrinal publication, the *Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning* (JCIC) released in 2018, offers a fresh approach to the current and future operational art landscape. Instead of the framework being either peace or war, the JCIC offers professionals an approach for the competition continuum, what many see as the current and future defining characteristic of warfare. When staking out this ground, the commander is still responsible for the output of the organization, but the JCIC mentions the commander and staff largely as a collective inside this

approach. One can conclude that this concept is beginning to acknowledge that the competition arena is beyond one, great-man thinking approach.

Regardless of the publisher, the consensus amongst military doctrine is that the commander is relied heavily upon in operational art due to their experience, judgement, and wisdom. Commanders should be central, but they should not be the start and stop of the process. One can also conclude collaboration and dialogue are largely viewed as being inclusive at the beginning of the planning phase, but not necessarily carried forward throughout planning and into execution. Lastly, minimal doctrine speaks to the importance that organizational culture can have across the spectrum of problem solving; it merely comes back to the traits the commander *will* have.

### **Contemporary Operational Art Analysis**

Current analysis and discourse on operational art varies on multiple fronts. Some advocate that the operational level of war and corresponding art have distanced strategy and politics from how war is waged. Others demand that design theory and its associative approach should largely engulf operational art because it aides in coping with complexity and fosters collaboration. As is seen in what follows, the inclusion of information as a joint warfighting function has also stimulated discussion with its insertion into the operational art portfolio. Regardless of these assessments, perspectives are predominately focused on the commander, as is similar to doctrinal treatment, being the most significant figure in the process.

Dr. Milan Vego, a professor at the US Naval War College, has written extensively on the operational level of war. In his 2015 article in *Joint Force Quarterly* titled, “On Operational Leadership,” he focuses on operational leadership, a term that encompasses the commander and

his staff. He supports a timeless stance that success of any military organization depends on the experience and good judgement of its leaders.<sup>19</sup> Successful operational commanders will possess a variety of personality traits that then feed operational thinking. Vego's operational thinking is described as, "an uncanny ability to know and understand all military and nonmilitary aspects of the situation in a theater, reduce complexities of the situation to their essentials by properly differentiating between important and less important or trivial elements, link disparate events ("connect the dots"), deduce patterns, and envisage future trends in the situation for several weeks or even months."<sup>20</sup> Using Vego's own words that operational commanders usually do not have some unborn qualities that set them apart from tactical commanders, he is placing a massive amount of stock in the ability of one person to ensure success. He expounds on attributes that create sound operational thinking, one being that the operational commander should not meddle in a tactical commander's responsibilities. He also offers tenets of operational art, two that should be embodied for future success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. First, operational art must accomplish the required military objective and second, the utilization of mission command must allow freedom of action.<sup>21</sup> Vego's assessment on operational art from a leadership perspective echoes joint doctrine in that he invests entirely in the assumption that the commander's experience, education, and judgement will carry the day for the organization. His stance on mission tactics and that operational commanders must not consistently meddle in tactical leaders' business is something that will be carried forward in the discussion and reach toward organizational change.

Proponents of the use of design to practice operational art share a common viewpoint very similar to Vego. Colonel Alex Vohr, a former Director of the USMC School of Advanced Warfare, wrote a *Gazette* article in 2010 titled, "Design in the Context of Operational Art." Here, Vohr describes operational art as merely a reconciliation of the oft used 'ends, ways, and means.'

Arthur Lykee, a retired USA Colonel, is renowned for defining military strategy as ends, ways, means, the simple approach to getting results from battlefield success. Perhaps this is too simple. Still, Vohr is not alone in using Lykke's approach to framing the mechanics of a campaign; doctrine does the same thing. Vohr states that design is based "upon an existing parallel to or outside the theory of warfare."<sup>22</sup> He recognizes that design, to be truly useful to the problem set, must not merely be a leading step, but a stand-alone approach to the planning process. The use of design advocates testing the understanding of a problem with reality and adjusting understanding throughout in an effort to ensure accomplishment, thus an adaptative learning model. Vohr, mirroring Vego, sets the commander as the focal point. He notes, "since operational art activities revolve around the commander, it makes sense to employ an approach that best suites the decision-making process for that particular commander."<sup>23</sup> A staff adopting a learning method solely in support of an individual creates a potential gap in an organization's analysis, one that may already exist between strategy and tactics. Where Vohr falls short in his explanation is the lack of discussion on collaboration during the test of understanding the problem with reality. The adaptive learning model can support the commander's decision cycle, but can also capitalize on the expertise and creative thinking of the staff and subordinates within the process through feedback and dialogue; this specifically is needed as problems increase in complexity. As it pertains to the execution portion of the operational art, MCDP 6 *Command and Control* sees 'control' inside mission tactics as feedback.

An additional supporter of operational design within the context of operational art is Brigadier General Huba Wass de Czege, USA (retired). Wass de Czege, a military thinking-pioneer over the last 20 years, challenged how US military professionals frame problems. In his 2011 article, *Operational Art: Continuously Making Two Kinds of Choices While Learning and*

*Adapting*, he highlights a few shortcomings of the traditional approaches to operational art; two that are very prevalent in modern application. He notes that approaches “do not take the inherent complexity or dynamism of most mission situations sufficiently into account, and they apply a linear planning logic to situations when such logic does not apply—reasoning from ends to ways to means. Second, they do not emphasize the importance of differentiating between tactics and strategy.”<sup>24</sup> He dissects both with the intent of illuminating the utility of operational design inquiry. By using design to clearly identify the problem cluster, the logic of planning and tactics is used to think backward from a desired concrete end state, while strategy and design are used to think progressively to find a rationale that leads to a current understanding of “better” vice completely solving the problem.<sup>25</sup> In essence, his interpretation of operational art is like others, “translating the conceptual (strategy) to the concrete (tactics),” but the vehicle of design is utilized differently. It differs in that it is used as an adaptive model to support complexity, a concept that was labeled “adaptive campaigning” by Australian Defense Forces beginning in 2007.<sup>26</sup> The application of adaptive campaigning is arguably a better approach for planning inside the competition continuum short of armed conflict. Still, at the center of his point, he sees the commander needing to be the centerpiece throughout the process as he labels them as a tactician, an operational artist and a strategist—a tall order for a single figure.<sup>27</sup>

A similar but unique perspective for design is LtCol Trent Scott from the Australian Defense Forces (ADF). His stance aligns largely with Wass de Czege as he is proposing a reinvigoration of campaigning inside his national army, specifically acknowledging all elements of national power to achieve political ends. Where Scott differs from the majority of experts mentioned is, he is the only advocate in the context of operational art that is outspoken about the importance of organizational culture and the role the commander has in that framework.

Acknowledging the need for the ADF to become more of a learning organization, he notes, “learning organizations routinely overcome the impediment of centralized responsibility by instilling within the organization a thirst for creativity and a hunger for challenge.”<sup>28</sup> The decision authority or commander must embrace and cultivate this type of culture. The best result possible, “depends on the commander’s willingness to entertain and consider challenges to his or her understanding and therefore depends on a climate of trust and acceptance.”<sup>29</sup> Although not directly citing or mentioning Moltke, Scott’s perspective reflects his [Moltke] foundational beliefs.

Others focus less on design and more on the gap created by operational art. Mike Brennan and Justin Kelly in their 2009 monograph, *Alien: How Operational Art Devoured Strategy*, traced the evolution of operational art from its roots in the industrial and political revolutions of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to the present. They offer that operational art is the “sequencing of tactical actions to achieve objectives provided by the campaign plan.”<sup>30</sup> Operational art was born as the industrial revolution expanded the battlefield resulting in strategy being unable to sustain adequate intimacy in its conversation with tactics.<sup>31</sup> In its traditional model, the objectives prescribed were that of the national leader, not the military commander; this framework ensured that strategy at the political-national level stayed connected with the tactical action.<sup>32</sup> This model is sufficient when annihilation of the enemy is the sole focus. Brennan and Kelly recognize that this theory is not applicable in a modern conflict where annihilation of the enemy is not the starting point for the ends in strategy. Leveraging the works of two Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Colonels, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, in their analysis, *Unrestricted Warfare*, Brennan and Kelly note that “conceptual boundaries that we have customarily used to aid our understanding and conduct of warfare” are no longer

applicable.<sup>33</sup> The conclusion that there is no distinction (everything is in play) on the battlefield in contemporary conflict, that the operational level of war was solely birthed by the industrial revolution, and that everything is a competition space in unrestricted warfare, reinforces the limits of the current interpretation of operational art. With all this said, to achieve the level of national and international coordination that is described in current doctrine, these authors ask if the operational commander and corresponding art are sufficient for the task? If it is going to be, Brennan and Kelley offer that the campaign planning be a “bureaucracy-centric rather than commander-centric activity, and therefore rests on influence and peer leadership more than it does on command authority or direction.”<sup>34</sup> Influence and peer leadership are impacts of organizational culture and so a commander centric model takes a direct hit. This needed insight has the benefit of driving home the point that operational art is more than good military action i.e., joint; it remains a pursuit of whole of government purpose to wield all instruments of national power to achieve a desired end.

To supplement the contemporary discussion on operational art, OIE cannot be omitted. A Department of Defense (DoD) strategy on OIE was released in 2016, and the services quickly followed with their own concepts acknowledging the importance. Scott K. Thomson and Christopher E. Paul in their 2018 *Joint Force Quarterly* article, “Paradigm Change Operational Art and the Information Joint Function,” emphasized the necessity for inclusion of OIE into operational art. They note, “If implemented boldly and thoughtfully, the new function (joint OIE) will cause military commanders, strategists, and planners to revisit and revise their understanding of military operations and operational art.”<sup>35</sup> The control and use of information provide an advantage to the military that can best use it to achieve strategic ends. The inclusion of OIE into the operational art discussion leverages developing concepts such as JCIC, specifically in the

competition arena. Since competition tends to focus on influence more than conflict, OIE can support achieving objectives for the commander in a complex, ever-changing environment. Thomson and Paul conclude, “It is imperative that we reorient our approach to operational art toward influencing relevant actor perceptions, behavior, action, or inaction in order to address this complexity.”<sup>36</sup> The focus is more on the inclusion of OIE as a major player in modern operational art and less on the commander as the driving force. But the emphasis and need for inclusion of OIE into the planning approach and execution assessment support the requirement for the commander to be more of a central figure in a network rather than one on top of a commander pyramid.<sup>37</sup>

Contemporary operational art analysis differs in varying ways and methods. A common theme is the dependency on the commander, either driving the process or the process being tailored for them. Design offers a vehicle for the commander and the staff to collaborate as the problem is navigated throughout planning and into execution, not merely just during problem framing. As a problem set increases in complexity such as with the addition of OIE and competition short of armed conflict, the commander should consider adjusting their leadership approach, from less of a relied upon knowledge base at the top of a hierarchy structure and more of a central node within a network of contributors. The commander must become more of a cultivator of culture that enables critical dissent, learning, and initiative-based action. Examining the last 20 years, its apparent this is a difficult organizational barrier to overcome.

### **The Last 20 Years-Commander Centric**

While operational art is largely viewed and discussed as the planning effort, as previously highlighted, it includes the execution phase as well. The commander’s role inside the preparation phase has been discussed, but execution has not been analyzed in detail. Unfortunately, across

the US joint force, implementation over the last two decades of war reflect that of the planning phase of operational art, commander monopolized. There are three main factors that have largely contributed to this contemporary norm: the continued proliferation of information technology (IT), risk coupled with uncertainty, and the variable associated with the commander's personality. In analyzing the execution portion of contemporary operational art, it too suffers from the same influence of the commander. A change in approach will circle back to something of old, mission tactics.

In 2012, General Dempsey as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) released a white letter to the joint force titled, "Mission Command." Here the chairman explained the importance of instilling and continuing to cultivate a mission command-mindset within the joint force. He notes, "in a network-enabled force, a commander can penetrate to the lowest level of the command and take over the fight...this is dangerous for a number of reasons."<sup>38</sup> This white letter is just one example of recognizing that commanders were employing tactically what the military practiced organizationally. In addition to the CJCS white letter was the *Journal of Strategic Studies* article in 2015 entitled, "Mission Command in the Information Age: A Normal Accidents Perspective on Networked Military Operations." The authors Bart Van Bezooijen and Eric Hans Kramer explore the effects of IT on command approaches. They conclude network military operations (enabled by IT) require a decentralized command structure, but that IT can also "offer excellent possibilities to centralize C2 as well."<sup>39</sup> Examples discussed include the campaigns in Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan where operational commanders not only observed tactical activities, but also influenced and dictated such actions. IT provides a great opportunity for shared situational awareness, collaboration, and for the commander to apply their judgement to the situation, but as Vego argues, "the greatest threat to freedom of action at the operational

level is the capability, through IT, to overcentralize operations by the strategic level of command.”<sup>40</sup> The thirst and appetite for control is wired into the majority of contemporary military commanders because the environment, systems structure, and organizational culture enable it.

Commanders are responsible for everything their command does or fails to do. The amount of risk that an operational commander is willing to assume is influenced by the level of certainty they have about the situation. IT not only facilitates decision making from afar, but it has also brought war’s ugly side to the fingertips of global society. The pressure to avoid a tactical action that could render negative, strategic consequences is at the forefront of a commander’s conscious. Regardless, centralizing decisions is still tied to the commander’s judgement and experience, something that is not as applicable with uncertainty as it is with risk. There is no perfect solution here, but the practice of decentralized repetitions in peace time across various levels of chains of command is a start. When IT solutions for C2 are unavailable, as the future operating environment foreshadows, trust to execute from intent will have to carry the day.

J. Peter Scoblic, a fellow at the International Security Program at New America, wrote in a 2009 *Harvard Business Review* article that, “uncertainty stems from our inability to compare the present to anything we’ve previously experienced.”<sup>41</sup> If this is the case, one can argue that experience is not as applicable and needed for the commander when coping with uncertainty. Personalities vary and at times yield a self-necessity to apply experience, even though in times of uncertainty, experience has limits. Utilizing additional perspectives within the group can help better inform decisions when uncertainty is high.

In a 2009 *Brookings* article, “The Tactical General,” Peter Singer opens with:

The four-star general proudly recounts how he spent “two hours watching footage” beamed to his headquarters. Sitting behind a live video feed from a Predator unmanned aircraft system (UAS), he saw two insurgent leaders sneak into a compound of houses. He waited as other insurgents entered and exited the compound, openly carrying weapons. Now, he was certain. The compound was a legitimate target, and any civilians in the houses had to know that it was being used for war, what with all the armed men moving about. Having personally checked the situation, he gave the order to strike. But his role in the operation didn’t end there; the general proudly tells how he even decided what size bomb his pilots should drop on the compound.<sup>42</sup>

In this brief example all three factors are illustrated. Technology provides the operational commander the ability to decide, communicate, and act on his decision. The commander gains certainty of the situation and therefore has minimized the risk spanning from strategic to tactical (in his mind). And since he is able to make the decision and it be the “right decision,” his personal requirement is satisfied. Singer’s simple account epitomizes what the operational commander of the last 20 years has been enabled to do. It also demonstrates that a Napoleon rationale of thinking still persists all the while giving lip service to Moltke’s legacy of intent, candor, and trust. The operational ground commander is the focus of Singer’s article, but centralization also occurs across naval and air commands.

The US Navy has long boasted centralized command and decentralized execution. The conception of Composite Warfare is the US Navy’s implementation of mission tactics. Due to increased technology and digital techniques, the autonomy that once existed for US naval commanders has been replaced by an “integrated command construct in which relations between commanders at each level have been intensified and deepened.”<sup>43</sup> The current requirement to make the command network effective is for the operational commander to interact with subordinates daily, thus leaving many leaders to fear that extreme centralized control is a mandate.<sup>44</sup> Recognizing the necessity to ensure tactical actions align across all levels of war is acknowledged, but at the expense of local initiative, that poses a friendly risk in the future, uncertain environment. IT can enable unity of effort across the chain of command, but it must be

balanced in a manner that allows subordinates to act with initiative while concurrently educating them for a future, degraded communication setting.

A similar theme exists within the US Air Force. As Alan Stephens, a retired Royal Australian Air Force pilot and current fellow at the Australian Defense Force Academy, notes in *Air Power Leadership: theory and practice*, “subordinate air commanders no longer have the freedom simply to execute the mission given...they themselves are monitored and supervised.”<sup>45</sup> A simple account of Central Command (CENTCOM), located in Tampa, Florida, controlling aircraft in operations in Afghanistan, validates this statement. The commander of CENTCOM would rely more on his staff than that of the local, deployed air commander.<sup>46</sup> A balance has to be found, if not, the control mechanism of feedback will potentially lose its utility.

Recognizing that centralization of C2 dominates the contemporary armed forces, it is understandable that the commander’s role inside the operational art suffers not only from historic roots, but also from a mirrored, accepted organizational culture. Much like other RMAs, an alternate leadership framework inside operational art can exploit the potential that contemporary military formations possess.

### **A Different View on Leadership**

The complexity of the operating environment is requiring military organizations to adjust how they prepare for and wage war, but none attempt to question the variable of reliance on leadership of the commander. A small group of current officers, retired officers, and scholars acknowledge that the role of the commander needs to and has changed, understanding their perspective and then applying it is the next step in modernizing the commander’s role within operational art.

In his 2017 *Small Wars Journal* article, “Overcoming Complexity Through Collaboration and Follower-Based Leadership,” Gary Klein, a rising field grade officer in the USA, claims commanders must alter their leadership methods from leader-centric to follower-centric in order to thrive in complex environments. He notes the USA’s current leadership paradigm and doctrine encourage Soldiers to view leadership through a leader-centric, hierarchical lens. This approach creates a mentality that the leader is the smartest person in the room due to their experience and thus promotes conformity and group think within the organization.<sup>47</sup> The leader-centric mentality will continue to exist within military organizations until there is a cultural shift that enables new methods that deemphasize top-down leadership. Klein acknowledges that the current ATP 5-0.1: *Army Design Methodology (ADM)*, directs the commander to establish a culture of collaboration and dialogue in the organization, but that it has not taken form yet. Outside of adjusting an organization’s structure (from a hierarchical to a flatter organization) and educating personnel on critical thinking and collaboration, one can conclude that without addressing the culture of an organization, maximizing potential for actions inside a complex arena will fail. Klein’s effort puts him in a small minority of professionals that allude to the commander potentially not being the most important factor in a military outfits’ success.

Others also acknowledge that leadership frameworks have evolved. British political scientist, Anthony King, in his recent book, *Command: The Twenty-First Century General*, offers a refreshing perspective for the operational commander in the contemporary and future environment. King studies four different division commanders spanning from World War I to the Gulf War. He concludes that all four commanders, although exercising unique operational command philosophies, commanded through centralized decision making and control. King argues that the enhanced complexity, evolving character of warfare will require something

different. He states, “command collectives, consisting of commanders, their deputies, subordinates and staff bound together in dense, professionalized, decision-making communities, has displaced previously more individualized, intuitive systems.”<sup>48</sup> The risk he concludes is that if a senior, operational commander insists on being part of the decision-making in every operational event, the process becomes much slower without becoming better.<sup>49</sup> Former International Security Assistance Force Commander in Afghanistan, British General David Richards states, “the modern commander must be an entrepreneurial networker and communicator rather than a dictator.”<sup>50</sup> Similar to Klein’s perspective, complexity within the current operating environment is the driving factor to evolve the commander’s role.

Other highly respected, retired US generals agree. In his 2015 book, *Team of Teams*, General Stanley McCrystal, USA (Ret) explains how the complexity he faced as a commander in Afghanistan caused him to change his approach to leadership. He recognized that the role of senior leadership had changed from commanding to cultivating the culture of the organization. Along the same lines as McCrystal, General Anthony Zinni, USMC (Ret) acknowledges the transition that command has undertaken. In his 2009 book, *Leading the Charge*, he describes multiple leadership styles, most notably what he coins “participatory.” Participatory leaders recognize that knowledge is not limited to the top of the leadership element and understand that they must tap into the wisdom and talents of those led. Zinni argues that because the world has changed, and with it the nature of those led, the participatory approach is normally best for today. Great trust and clear intent are required for this style. Mirroring McCrystal, Zinni notes, “we no longer build a leadership hierarchy in cutting edge modern organizations. Instead, we build leadership networks that make the business of leading institutionalized and multidirectional...It is distributed, pervasive, invited from all members, and instilled in the

culture of successful enterprises.”<sup>51</sup> The leader is still the decision maker with the final authority, but sharing and more delegating of supporting decision making occurs.

There are significant takeaways when analyzing these new approaches to leadership. First, the commander is being asked to adjust their traditional role. Second, the collectives’ input is valued at or more than that of the commander’s. Lastly, an organizational culture that embodies collaboration and feedback is paramount to cope with complexity. Applying these within the operational art context gets after Wass de Czege’s alluded to as simply ‘better.’

## **Recommendations**

This monograph is not attempting to claim that the operational commander is not the authority, is not the decision maker, or is not responsible for the success or failure of their organizations. It is merely illuminating that the commander is still seen as the most important figure within the context of operational art; this should not be an assumed rationale within the current and future military landscape. The recognition that leadership frameworks need to evolve is a starting point for success. While a few recommendations will be provided, there also exists considerations that hinder implementation.

First, limited education exists in critical areas. Formal instruction in organizational culture and ‘red teaming’ is scarce. For most, the first occasion where a formal period of instruction on these topics is presented is in resident, intermediate level school, roughly 10-15 years into service and post company command tenures. Grasping the academic terminology of behavior and artifacts, values, and assumptions and beliefs establishes a foundational understanding of how to approach organizational culture.<sup>52</sup> Gaining an appreciation of ‘red teaming’ tools such as group dynamics and group think mitigation will facilitate future

commanders in helping their organizations overcome “the human affinity for grouping and hierarchy.”<sup>53</sup> The importance within the operational art is nicely summarized by LtCol Scott, ADF, when he says, “the right command and leadership culture is fundamental if we are going to be successful in incorporating operational design into campaign planning in order to solve complex operational problems. Establishing a ‘design team’ where the commander is a central but not dominating figure is paramount.”<sup>54</sup> Exposing these concepts earlier in the professional military education (PME) continuum as well as including them within the operational art doctrine portfolio can yield benefits to the operational commander in the future.

Second, institutionally (specifically the USMC) there must be a return to the cognitive use of MCDP 1 *Warfighting* within operational art. When utilizing mission command, commanders must communicate guidance of what is needed to be accomplished, and then afford subordinates the ability to determine how to accomplish the commander’s intent. Successively, each subordinate executes to achieve the commander’s intent. This contract between leaders enables subordinates to exercise initiative in execution, resulting in what Boyd called ‘variety’ based on the subordinate’s individual decisions and harmony of action toward a commander’s intent.<sup>55</sup> Harmony is achieved through feedback loops which facilitates collaboration and also serves as a form of control. All this is predicated on mutual trust and the acceptance of risk at the commander level. This must be practiced routinely. It should be done during planning, allowing subordinates to arrive at alternate hypotheses without being limited by a single figure’s opinion. Scott, an active-duty Australian officer who has studied operational art extensively, reinforces this point when saying, “A mission command culture, one that relies on implicit trust between superior and subordinate, and one that promotes learning from mistakes and trial and error is

exactly the type of command climate required.”<sup>56</sup> To achieve these ways, an institutional obstacle must be highlighted.

The personnel management system hinders a commander’s ability to build cohesion and trust. Typical command tenures are 18 to 24 months across the joint force. Within this span, multiple levels of leadership cycle through the organization regardless of the echelon (tactical, operational, strategic). Relationships within a leadership framework require time to form. If that time is not provided, centralization naturally occurs to mitigate risk. Longer command tenures that align key subordinate positions with the commander’s timeline is one mitigation that could be applied.

Third, building on the work of King, Klein, McCrystal, and Zinni, an understanding of situational and authentic leadership theory is applicable in today’s operational art. Multiple models contribute to the situational theory, but its core theme is, “while some situations may require an autocratic style, others may need a more participative approach.”<sup>57</sup> For the right situation, a touch of Napoleon is still applicable. Although time is a variable, Klien points out, “Leaders usually have the time to allow more collaboration when making strategic, operational, and even some tactical decisions.”<sup>58</sup> Fusing situational with authentic leadership theory, organizational culture is addressed. Authentic leadership is the “transparent and ethical leader behavior that encourages openness in sharing information needed to make decisions while accepting followers’ inputs.”<sup>59</sup> Introducing these leadership theories instep with operational art applies something new, while reflecting some old.

Lastly, commanders need to embody humility and place the organization before themselves. As discussed, today’s military operating environment has increased in complexity and changed drastically. The commander should no longer be looked to as the all-knowing,

godly military genius, but rather as a beacon within an organization that facilitates a culture of learning; this begins with humility to accept change. In a recent *Gazette* article, LtCol Salcido, USMC, notes that humility is acknowledging what you can and cannot control, a willingness to listen to new ideas, a willingness to learn from others, and as the opposite of arrogance.<sup>60</sup> If the military institution does not recognize the need for the commander's role to change, the individual commander must. Embodying humility through example unlocks the changes proposed.

All recommendations are in the grasp of contemporary military institutions, specifically the USMC. Updates to educational curriculums routinely occur. Training evolves to cope with the known, while education changes to aid with tackling the unknown. By investing in operational leadership education, potential exists for concepts to be diffused into unit levels. Revisiting and practicing *Warfighting* tenets will enhance the utility within operational art due to the collaboration and culture it requires. Lastly, the practice of humility starts with the individual, but is a leadership trait that should be institutionalized as a desired leadership attribute.

Western military formations are still influenced by ideology, doctrine, and philosophies that were birthed decades and centuries ago. The longevity of these rationales reflects the essence that the nature of war truly does not change, yet its character is ever changing. The role of the commander within operational art continues to follow the trend of the nature of war as unchanging, unable to evolve. Although Moltke demonstrated that the culture that a commander creates can have greater effects than one's genius, contemporary military organizations still rely on Napoleonic ways.

The role of the commander can evolve and change; it must for future conflict. King acknowledged that the 20<sup>th</sup> century operational commander was individualistic and monopolized decision making. War was less complex and military genius was coveted in this era. US commanders over the last two decades have not had to be as good as their 20<sup>th</sup> century counterparts. They have never feared adversarial competition in any domain, yet they display Napoleonic traits. Leadership methods have to alter in order to compete with the changing character of war, or else the military instrument inside operational art runs the risk of not achieving the desired end, winning the next conflict.

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- <sup>3</sup> David G. Chandler, "Napoleon, Operational Art, and the Jena Campaign," *Historical Perspectives of the Operational Art*, Michael D. Krause and R. Cody Phillips, eds., (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 2005), 33.
- <sup>4</sup> Martin Van Crevald, *Command in War* (Harvard University Press Cambridge, MA 1985), 98.
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- <sup>8</sup> Gunther E. Rothenberg, "Moltke, Schlieffen and the Doctrine of Strategic Envelopment," *Makers of Modern Strategy*, Peter Paret, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 296.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., 301.
- <sup>10</sup> US Department of Defense, *Joint Operations*, JP-3 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, January 17, 2017 (incorporating Change 1, October 22, 2018)), xii.
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- <sup>19</sup> Milan Vego, "Operational Leadership," *Joint Force Quarterly* 77 (2d Quarter 2015): 66.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 62.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., 66.
- <sup>22</sup> Alex Vohr, "Design in the Context of Operational Art," *Marine Corps Gazette* 94, 10 (October, 2010): 18.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., 18.
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- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 54.
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- <sup>57</sup> R. Bolden, Gosling, J., Marturano, A. and Dennison, P., *A Review of Leadership Theory and Competency Framework*, Centre for Leadership Studies, (United Kingdom: University of Exeter, 2003), 6.
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