An Airman's Perspective on Mission Command

Col Dale S. Shoupe, USAF, Retired

This article represents one Airman's view of the benefits of mission command. It explains the author's long-held view of that concept, detailing the validity of current joint doctrine and mission command's potential for enhancing the tactical-level planning and execution of joint airpower missions in support of the joint commander. The article clearly explains operational-level command and control (C2) processes that allow the joint force commander's (JFC) premier force multiplier (airpower) to remain as flexible and effective as possible in these austere times.[1] As is always the case, an understanding of validated operational-level doctrine better enables mission command at the tactical level.

The past eight years have seen a drive to establish doctrine specific to counterinsurgency (COIN). Some COIN-centric practitioners now argue that by providing the command authorities of operational or tactical control to tactical-level commanders, the US military can efficiently and effectively attain strategic ends through tactical means.[2] This article argues, however, that the reality is quite different. In point of fact, we need a clear understanding of current operational doctrine and the critical role spelled out for operational-level headquarters in Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations*: "The operational level links the tactical employment of forces to national and military strategic objectives."[3] Current tactical-level doctrine for COIN—spelled out in joint, service, and multiservice tactics, techniques, and procedures—works well with today's operational-level doctrine as long as the required tactical control authorities and systems are in place to support the complex COIN effort.[4] As outlined in the Mission Command White Paper by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, delegated and spe-

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cific control authorities to "qualified" mission commanders at the tactical level can improve the effectiveness of tactical operations.[5]

To be clear, operational-level headquarters are the combatant command (COCOM) headquarters and the headquarters of the combatant commander's subordinate joint task force (JTF), service, and functional commanders. Corps, division, brigade, battalion, wing, and squadron headquarters are not operational-level headquarters. (The numbered army—the US Army's operational-level headquarters element—serves as the Army component to COCOMs.) Rather, they are tactical-level headquarters, and personnel at that level and below need to understand the COCOM-established command relationships for JTFs, services, functional components, and operational-level processes.[6] Tactical-level C2 nodes must be in place, robust enough to support complex COIN operations and utilized according to operational and tactical doctrine. All operational-level commanders must determine what control authorities they need to delegate to mission commanders at the tactical level. Mission commanders must arm themselves with an understanding of the operational-level theaterwide plan and the operational intent of the operational-level commander. Given specific control authorities, the personal qualities necessary to execute mission command, and the operational/tactical C2 elements required to conduct complex operations, tactical commanders (including joint air mission commanders and brigade combat team leadership) can plan and execute tactical actions that may result in operational success and the desired strategic outcome sought by national leadership.

Utilizing validated lessons learned, the joint force has developed a sound body of doctrine. Tactical-level mission command—which involves knowledge of the flexibility inherent in that doctrine and tactical leaders who possess the required training, C2 elements, and control authorities (not command authorities)—will help tactical commanders efficiently and effectively plan and execute tactical actions that should realize operational-level objectives and secure the desired strategic end state.

Mission Command Defined

In 1985 as a young captain, I attended the US Central Command Air Forces (CENTAF) (now US Air Forces Central) Mission Commander Course at Shaw AFB, South Carolina. The week-long course included classroom lectures on all Air Force aircraft types, missions, employment concepts, tactics, and C2 of the entire operational effort (centralized control and decentralized execution). It focused on our ability to understand the commander's intent and carry out his or her (mission type) orders. Once we arrived in the target area (area of operations [AO]), we were expected to exercise initiative and act aggressively to accomplish the tasking. Several weeks later, I served as mission commander for a package of more than 40 aircraft conducting training exercises on the Wildcat ranges in Utah. A successful mission and rigorous debriefing resulted in designation as a qualified CENTAF mission commander. Not a new concept in the Air Force, mission command has been and continues to be exactly what the white paper by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff describes: "The conduct of military operations through decentralized execution based upon mission-type orders. Successful mission command demands that subordinate leaders at all echelons exercise disciplined initiative and act aggressively and independently to accomplish the mission."[7]

Note that this description specifies execution based on mission type orders, which, according to JP 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, are those "issued to a lower unit that [include] the accomplishment of the total mission assigned to the higher headquarters [as well as those issued] . . . to a unit to perform a mission without specifying how it is to be accomplished."[8] Three different documents published to lower Air Force and joint air units result in the mission type orders for Airmen: (1) the joint air operations plan (JAOP) contains the commander's intent for each phase of the operation, and (2) the air operations directive (AOD) includes the joint force air component commander's (JFACC) intent for a specific (3) air tasking order (ATO) or period of time. Hence the commander's intent ar-

ticulates a desired set of conditions for a given point in time and the purpose that those conditions will support. The AOD and ATO typically convey the commander's intent for a single 24-hour period.

The JAOP can lead to publication of a joint air operations order or may become part of the JFC's operation order. The air plan, completely nested within the JFC's operation plan (OPLAN), reflects a connected series of joint air operations that meet the JFC's objectives within a given time and joint operational area. The transition from the operational order to daily tasking order begins with formulation of the AOD. After consulting with other component commanders, the JFACC presents the air apportionment recommendation to the JFC. Ideally, guidance and apportionment input will be reflected in the JFC's instructions, making preparation of the AOD more timely and efficient. The JFC's apportionment decision and intent for the 24-hour period covered by the AOD and subsequent ATO enable tactical-level planning and execution, utilizing the mission command concept.[9] The ATO is the "method used to task and disseminate to components, subordinate units, and command and control agencies projected sorties, capabilities and/or forces to targets and specific missions. [It normally] provides specific instructions to include call signs, targets, controlling agencies, etc., as well as general instructions."[10] It does not dictate tactics, techniques, and procedures to mission commanders.

Mission command is the control authority delegated to a tactical-level commander by a superior commander (for the Airman, normally the JFACC or JFC). The mission commander uses that authority, together with his or her understanding of air warfare in the context of the current situation, to act independently of any further guidance from higher headquarters, carrying out the mission specified in the AOD and ATO. Sometimes the mission commander receives updated guidance en route from some other control agency with higher authority (e.g., an air support operations center [ASOC], an Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft, or a control and reporting center). Not a panacea for complex integration problems observed during the last decade of war, mission command is one essential element that can en-

able the attainment of operational objectives through tactical actions. Only when US forces execute mission command in concert with other nested operational and tactical actions that directly support the JFC's objectives will they bring about the desired strategic end state.

Operational Lessons of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom

Reports on lessons learned from Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom highlight the ability of air operations centers (AOC) to offer robust, flexible C2 capabilities at the operational and upper tactical level. However, "key portions of the theater air control system (TACS) must continue to be reinvigorated to improve the vertical and horizontal integration required in any modern conflict. The TACS needs to be viewed in its entirety, for it is the entire system, not simply the AOC that provides robust and flexible capabilities to the joint force commander (JFC). The depth and flexibility of the USAF system grows when combined with sister service capabilities allowing for a robust and flexible TACS."[11] Although the current operational-level command structure gives the JFC flexible airpower, the entire TACS still needs improved training, manning, and equipping.

According to joint doctrine, the JFACC's staff (including the joint air operations center) works to integrate the joint airpower effort with the JFC's intent. The JAOP, developed in concert with the JFC and all other components, serves as a supporting plan to the JFC's OPLAN. Not designed to be put on a shelf, the plan is worked each day, informing the daily planning and execution procedures not well understood by individuals outside the process. The JAOP contains the JFC's and JFACC's intent for each phase of the operation, whereas the AODs include the JFACC's intent for a specific ATO or period of time. According to JP 3-30, *Command and Control for Joint Air Operations*, "the JFACC should provide objectives and guidance to the staff for joint air operations to achieve the JFC's intent, recommend an air scheme of maneuver, review joint force

capabilities and forces available to achieve assigned tasks, refine requirements for capabilities and forces from other components, and, in consultation with other component commanders, formulate an air apportionment recommendation for presentation to the JFC."[12]

Oftentimes people fail to understand the fact that plans, the JAOP, the AOD, and the ATO change frequently during execution. Moreover, most of them do not know that one joint air component has supported US Central Command (CENTCOM) and multiple JTFs for the past 10 years. Developing a single JAOP to support a single JFC is difficult, as is developing several disparate JAOPs to support CENTCOM and multiple JTFs. Furthermore, plans cannot remain static because the constant planning process enables flexibility. Near-constant changes to battlespace awareness, informed by all-source intelligence, constantly drive updates to the plan. The very adaptable ATO planning cycle allows the fluidity necessary for successful implementation of airpower across the spectrum of warfare. Supported units or customers of airpower need to understand the process and the need for inputs that will effect necessary changes as planning efforts advance through the production and publishing of the ATO. They must also know that the ATO itself is a living document and that *changes can be made until completion of its period of execution*. As a joint force, we must comprehend our planning processes, the purposes they serve, and the way they enable support of the JFC and mission accomplishment. We must work with all components to help them understand how to obtain our best support and how they can best support us when the JFC calls on them to do so. We must learn the right lessons from the current conflicts and not attempt to solve tactical-level planning problems by discarding proven operational-level planning processes.[13]

To enable the most successful execution of plans that achieve operational objectives, we must continue to make improvements at the tactical level of operations. Mission command plays its most significant role at this level, demanding the empowerment of tactical-level commanders with delegated authorities (*not* operational or tactical control) required to accomplish their mission. For Airmen these authorities

could include launch or takeoff, weapons employment, abort, or the authority to engage targets below published minimum altitudes or to engage in higher-threat environments when the mission commander thinks that mission accomplishment requires such action. For a land force supported by air, direct liaison authority should be the norm since the synchronization of actions requires great effort.

A Scenario from Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom

During Enduring Freedom / Iraqi Freedom, the commander of CENTCOM (a JFC) decided to establish a JFACC and retain all nonorganic air assets at the operational theater level. In conjunction with the president and secretary of defense, the JFC also decided to create multiple JTFs in his area of responsibility and directed the JFACC to support them. The JFACC had an OPLAN that supported the combatant commander (JFC), and the JTF commanders had developed plans that supported their assigned missions. In this example, the JTF commands and their supporting tactical units rotated into and out of the theater every 12 to 18 months. The JTFs developed their concept of operations (CONOPS) as they went through spin-up training back in the United States. Their plans emphasized their AO, but they also had to support the combatant commander's plans for his entire area of responsibility. The JTFs had no attached air assets, no attached air component, and a limited number of air planners to help develop the CONOPS or resultant OPLAN. Tactical elements supporting the JTF, perhaps several brigade combat teams, developed their CONOPS based on guidance from the JTF. The OPLANs lacked input from Airmen, as did operational and tactical concepts at the design and development stages.

The creation of multiple JTFs without attached air components, established coordination mechanisms, and mutual trust produced an operational-level planning seam between the staffs of the functional air component and JTF commander in Afghanistan and Iraq. JFCs and

their staffs must remain aware of the higher-level objectives as well as the associated desired and undesired effects that influence planning at every juncture. Failure to link operational objectives to strategic goals can break the inherent linkage or nesting, and tactical considerations can eventually begin to drive the overall strategy at cross-purposes. If a CONOPS does not include a coherent air scheme of maneuver, then issues will arise during execution of the CONOPS-turned-OPLAN. The need for planners to continue daily horizontal and vertical integration will not diminish; in fact, given the growth of subtheater JFCs and COIN operations in recent years, the requirement has increased. Robust, scalable structures—including tailored ASOCs, control and reporting centers, air component coordination elements (ACCE), subordinate air and space expeditionary task forces (AETF), and reinvigoration of the mission commander's role—could prevent the breakdown in coordination and trust at the subtheater operational level.[14]

Realizing the necessity of robust horizontal and vertical integration, the Air Force first implemented the concept of the ACCE in 2002 after hurried establishment of Combined Joint Task Force–Mountain to take charge in Afghanistan. The service then increased manpower in the ASOCs, tailoring the Air Force specialty codes assigned to each unit based on the supported mission. In 2011 the Air Force codified the concept of establishing subordinate AETFs to help support the JTFs in Iraq and Afghanistan. These institutional changes have improved support to tactical-level planning and execution, but we must ensure that subordinate AETFs or ACCEs are established early enough to become involved in the design and CONOPS-development phase of a JTF's operational-level planning. The Air Force can improve support to joint partners and cultivate general officers oriented toward mission command by emphasizing that concept of command.

Although produced at the operational-level headquarters (the AOC), the ATO is not an operational-level plan. Instead, it translates the OPLAN into tactical taskings for a specific day. Air Force Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures 3-3.AOC, *Operational Employment—Air Operations Center*,

codifies the processes to effect coordination among all JFC components and supported JTFs—a procedure poorly understood by the vast majority of people who complain about airpower support to ground commanders. The next section, however, explains not only the allocation, command, and control of close air support but also the means by which that process can benefit from the concept of mission command.

An Example of Mission Command

Each day, the JFACC gathers inputs from the components and JTFs and recommends an apportionment to the JFC. In CENTCOM, that apportionment decision rests with the CENTCOM commander or his or her delegated representative—not the individual JTF commanders. (They have neither air assets attached nor air components/JFACCs.) During the COIN fight of the last several years, the apportionment decision has proven fairly easy. Fighter aircraft in one AO support that AO (Iraq or Afghanistan), and the long-range assets flow to support the AO (sometimes including support to and from US European Command and US Africa Command), as determined by the CENTCOM commander. The apportionment decision is based on CENTCOM and JTF priorities for that day.

Subject-matter experts at the ASOCs assist the ground commanders and their planners in determining the support they need. That information is coordinated with the Army's battlefield coordination detachment and other component, allied, and supporting planning teams inside the AOC. After the JFC makes the apportionment decision, the apportioned air support is allotted and detailed in the ATO. We need a designated mission commander to pull together the entire air effort: intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; cyber; space; armed overwatch; and other air missions as assigned. That commander should coordinate tactical-level planning with the supported commander and all other units supporting the effort. Further, although the mission commander will need connectivity to all of the tactical-level participants in order to conduct tactical planning before carrying out the mission, he or she need not be colocated with the supported tactical-level ground commander.

Making This Concept Better Support Counterinsurgency

COIN is a not a lesser form of warfare; indeed, formal lessons learned have observed and codified the complexity of such operations. If anything, COIN requires greater horizontal and vertical integration than do conventional operations. It is completely irrational to attach or assign a four-ship of fighters, remotely piloted vehicles, and the inherent C2 systems necessary to employ such assets to each brigade combat team; however, the joint team must train, plan, and then execute tactical operations together. Currently available assets and facilities allow us to address this issue of training together.

Facilities at Nellis AFB, Nevada, and the National Training Center in California can support the joint training of today's mission commanders. Airmen attending the Weapons School and various flag exercises at Nellis undergo most of the required training. We can place US land component commanders in advanced joint scenarios (both conventional and COIN) and establish a training program to build the future leaders that the chairman mentions in his Mission Command White Paper. Airmen must become a larger part of the training program at the National Training Center, and even though they will never be ground experts (just as ground officers will never be air experts), these leaders must come to a better understanding of their sister service's capabilities. These training events not only allow them to do just that but also give US forces the opportunity to continue to learn and develop new tactics and operational doctrine should our wartime operations become a thing of the past. We can even improve our joint understanding of the two services' planning requirements and methodologies that best support efforts in their respective domains.

Over the last several years, great improvements have occurred in operational-level planning. The complexity of the COIN environment, coupled with the methodologies that JTF commanders decided to employ to secure tactical objectives, has driven a need for more integrated tactical-level planning. The training program for mission commanders must include such planning—training that teaches how each service

plans its tactical operations (one method will not serve the best interests of the separate services). We must have one final plan that supports accomplishment of the tasked mission—a plan practiced by each prospective mission commander. The overall mission commander, in concert with the supporting mission commanders, develops the tactical concept and plan for execution. All of them then conduct the mission and debrief it to garner both positive and negative lessons learned. This is a joint version of the 30-year-old CENTAF Mission Commander Course that led to the Air Force's dominance in executing more than 3,000 sorties a day during Operation Desert Storm in 1991. Mission commanders were spread all over the theater then, as is the case with aircraft because of support requirements and their ability to range thousands of miles in a matter of hours. Rudimentary virtual means permitted the Desert Storm mission commanders to plan and execute, and nothing prevents us from making plans with the virtual means available to us today. Granted, every service will pay the costs of fielding the robust communications equipment that allows virtual tactical-level planning with such detail. Regardless, before any of this will work under the stress of combat, all planners must receive training in understanding what the other joint units can do and what they expect us to do during the operation—something possible only through joint execution training.

Such training—undergone by members of the entire joint force, not just mission commander trainees—is mandatory if we intend to conduct COIN operations as outlined in current tactics, techniques, and procedures. This approach will require additional funds for the training budget and probably an increase in the Air Force's force structure. (The Army and Marines are currently drawing down from the surge of 100,000 troops in Enduring Freedom / Iraqi Freedom, but the Air Force has steadily drawn down since 1991 and does not have the manning to support such a level of joint execution training.) At least as complex as conventional war, COIN is not a lesser operation, mentioned previously; as such, it can demand even more manpower and other resources. *If we choose the methods currently proposed as the best way to*

prosecute COIN and if we wish to have any realistic chance of succeeding in our operations, then we need to grasp the total costs involved.

Conclusion

Almost 60 years passed before we developed an understanding of the operational level now enjoyed by US forces. We should discount out of hand the current arguments to ignore codified joint operational doctrine because disaster follows those who cannot learn and implement validated lessons. We must concentrate our efforts on better vertical/horizontal planning and execution at the tactical level—where gains can be made over the next decade. The improvement of tactical planning and execution, of course, relies on sound operational-level practices—not the elimination of those practices. The tactics, techniques, and procedures that we developed over the past 10 years have intensified our need for seamless vertical and horizontal integration of all available assets. As resources become scarcer (and they certainly will), we will soon have to make some hard decisions about defending this nation throughout the twenty-first century.

The joint force must make a priority of the joint training of tactical-level mission commanders. We must not reduce service-specific training, however, because we will continue to rely heavily on subject-matter experts. The bill will include the cost of establishing the training programs, of sending prospective mission commanders to that training, and, naturally, of conducting the exercise. We must also equip tactical-level units with the required communications systems and ensure that the theater air control system / theater air-ground system are robust enough to support tactical flexibility in complex environments. Discarding today's doctrine or viewing lessons learned through a single myopic lens will not improve our joint force's ability to utilize mission command. Training is the key to developing and implementing mission commanders; it worked in the past and will continue to work in the future. ✪

Notes

1. Command and control is "the exercise of authority and direction by a properly designated commander over assigned and attached forces in the accomplishment of the mission. Command and control functions are performed through an arrangement of personnel, equipment, communications, facilities, and procedures employed by a commander in planning, directing, coordinating, and controlling forces and operations in the accomplishment of the mission." JP 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 8 November 2010 (as amended through 15 July 2012), 56, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf.

2. Operational control is the "command authority that may be exercised by commanders at any echelon at or below the level of combatant command. Operational control is inherent in combatant command (command authority) and may be delegated within the command. Operational control is the authority to perform those functions of command over subordinate forces involving organizing and employing commands and forces, assigning tasks, designating objectives, and giving authoritative direction necessary to accomplish the mission. Operational control includes authoritative direction over all aspects of military operations and joint training necessary to accomplish missions assigned to the command. Operational control should be exercised through the commanders of subordinate organizations. Normally this authority is exercised through subordinate joint force commanders and Service and/or functional component commanders. Operational control normally provides full authority to organize commands and forces and to employ those forces as the commander in operational control considers necessary to accomplish assigned missions; it does not, in and of itself, include authoritative direction for logistics or matters of administration, discipline, internal organization, or unit training." Ibid., 233.

Tactical control is the "command authority over assigned or attached forces or commands, or military capability or forces made available for tasking, that is limited to the detailed direction and control of movements or maneuvers within the operational area necessary to accomplish missions or tasks assigned. Tactical control is inherent in operational control. Tactical control may be delegated to, and exercised at any level at or below the level of combatant command. Tactical control provides sufficient authority for controlling and directing the application of force or tactical use of combat support assets within the assigned mission or task." Ibid., 308.

3. Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations*, 11 August 2011, I-13, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_0.pdf.

4. Control is the "authority that may be less than full command exercised by a commander over part of the activities of subordinate or other organizations." JP 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary*, 69.

5. Gen Martin E. Dempsey, chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mission Command White Paper, 3 April 2012, 7, http://www.jcs.mil/content/files/2012-04/041312163814_CJCS_Mission_Command_White_Paper_2012_a.pdf.

6. Lt Gen Ricardo S. Sanchez with Donald T. Phillips, *Wiser in Battle: A Soldier's Story* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 437–40.

7. Dempsey, Mission Command White Paper, [1].

8. JP 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary*, 208.

9. JP 3-30, *Command and Control for Joint Air Operations*, 12 January 2010, chap. III, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_30.pdf.
10. JP 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary*, 14.
11. Col Dale S. Shoupe, USAF, Retired, briefing, AETC Symposium, San Antonio, TX, subject: Enduring Lessons from OEF/OIF: Adapting to Evolving Combat Realities, January 2012.
12. JP 3-30, *Command and Control*, III-23.
13. Dale Shoupe, "Clearing the Air," *Wright Stuff*, 2009, 4.
14. Shoupe, briefing.

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