

# An Operationalized Approach to Battalion Command

Reflections on Communications Training Battalion

by LtCol Arun Shankar

I had the great privilege of serving as the commander of the Communications Training Battalion in Twentynine Palms, CA, for the last eighteen months. During this time, I have been able to overlay my experience as a MAGTF planner with my time in command to portray lessons learned within the framework of the operations cycle. This process encompasses the sequential activities of planning, execution, and assessment, and loosely frames the actions of any military unit on a daily basis. In the subsequent sections, I describe what

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is science. Command involves seasoned judgment and experienced decision making, while control is a process that can be distilled into procedural steps and actioned by a staff. Control only encompasses planning (orders issuance) and assessment, implying that execu-

establishment of a command culture, as well as the input into operations planning. Moreover, the tenets of the Marine Corps Planning Process that demand planning be top-down, integrated, and within a single battle framework absolutely apply in this context as well.

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I have learned about battalion command across these three elements of the operations cycle.

The operations cycle is a subset of the greater warfighting function of command and control (C2), where command is the lawful authority and influence a commander has over his unit and control is the feedback loop that occurs between the issuance of the commander's orders and the assessment of their effect. Commanders C2 their organizations—this is their fundamental function. Command is art; control

tion is not a part of control, and then perhaps not a significant role for a commander. A deeper look at the relationship between C2 and the operations cycle follows.

## **Planning**

Planning includes all the actions a commander performs to set the conditions for successful execution within the unit. It is the most important element of command because it demands the unique experience and judgment of the commander. This includes the

## *Top-Down Planning*

The battalion commander, through the use of his senior-enlisted advisor and his subordinate commanders, drives the culture and the operational planning for the unit. This role is singularly owned by the battalion commander and cannot be delegated. Cultural norms are established by the commander, to include a warfighting mindset oriented on service and sacrifice. An enduring operational approach is also developed, providing subordinate commanders with lines of effort that clearly focus their daily actions. This mindset is not intended to stifle creativity or shut out subordinate input, but it does rightly give *teeth* to the commander's responsibility for the organization's success or failure. When commanders are formally charged with establishing an operational vector and setting the culture of the organization, the word "responsibility" is no longer nebulous.

### *Integrated Planning*

Climate and culture should be integrated across all the subordinate organizations within the battalion and presented by a common philosophy that is repeated and reminded regularly. This command philosophy is the guiding document that gives overall purpose, regardless of mission. Similarly, battalion commanders should ensure that operations planning is appropriately integrated with higher, lower, and adjacent commands through the issuance of planning guidance. This guidance is more specific and oriented on the mission, often within the confines of an operational approach defined by enduring lines of effort. Again, like top-down planning, the assurance of this integration is the responsibility of the commander. When this becomes habitual, these actions force the development of relationships that later reinforce trust, implicit communication, decentralized control, and tempo.

### *Single Battle Concept*

The battalion commander should always be keenly aware of the effects of changes in culture and operations planning across the entire unit. The interrelated, cascading effects that can occur when changes are not deliberate and thoughtful can have lasting damage to the effectiveness of the unit. This is especially common during periods of high personnel turnover, where decisive shifts in culture and daily operations will undoubtedly upset executors that do not fully understand the reasons for change. Consequently, the operations officer should be the clearinghouse for all operational planning in a battalion, ensuring a shared understanding across the unit. Similarly, the battalion senior enlisted advisor should serve the same purpose with respect to unit culture. In most cases, the single battle encourages incremental shifts in culture rather than swift, wholesale changes in an effort to keep the unit aligned and oriented at all times. Single battle fails most often when information management is not deliberate or centralized, resulting in uninformed, uncorrelated initiatives across the unit.



**Communications Training Bn focuses on training Marines at every level of the C2 community to operate in a denied and degraded environment against a strategic competitor. (Photo by PFC Ulises Salgado.)**

### **Execution**

Execution is the least important role of command because it almost solely depends on the actions of subordinates, not the actions of the commander. In general, a commander should not be in a close fight with daily tasks and staff roles where execution primarily resides. In fact, commanders should usually only play a role in execution during unplanned chaos, where unique wisdom and access to otherwise inaccessible resources are required to continue progress. If this is happening often, it is probably because the commander is not investing enough time in the planning stages of command and not setting conditions for success during execution. It also means that guidance and intent may not be calibrated optimally, restricting essential creativity or allowing reckless freedom.

Commanders also serve during execution when unique authority is needed, mainly in administrative functions. Examples include endorsements, awards, punishments, promotions, recommendations, and other approvals. However, if the staff and subordinate commanders fully understand how the battalion commander processes information and makes decisions, much of this administrative legwork can be boiled down to a

science, only requiring the commander's wisdom during atypical scenarios.

Execution should also be as decentralized as possible, in the spirit of Expeditionary Advanced Based Operations. This means commanders should minimize communication with subordinate commanders to only what is essential and train those commanders to distill the greater intent across the unit. This is in contrast to some legacy models of command, where large formations, boilerplate speeches, aimless meetings, and manifesto philosophies are commonplace traditions. Commanders that are often at the center of execution with these antics are misunderstanding the goal of developing and empowering subordinates to be leaders.

### **Assessment**

Assessment is the most ignored step of the operations cycle, and consequently, the most overlooked element of command. Planning and execution have little purpose without assessment. It is a crucial function because it assesses if a plan is achieving a given mission and endstate. It also closes the feedback loop of control, allowing planners to continually adjust and reframe the problem and the plan as circumstances change. Assessment fights tendencies to

remain stale and resist change. Instead, it encourages a culture of adaptation and flexibility that is in line with the intent of Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations.

Measures of Performance (MOP) are a common metric within an assessment plan. They assess the precision of execution and the success of completing tasks. These measurements can include test scores, climate surveys, or qualitative reports. Data collection and analysis are usually simple, straightforward, and objective. Moreover, MOPs are in the commander's control, so short-term adjustments can easily result in more favorable MOPs. For example, a commander can raise test scores by changing teaching methods or making tests easier. Climate survey results can be addressed similarly, with a deliberate focus on key elements of the survey results. Many commanders confuse MOPs with Measures of Effectiveness (MOE), incorrectly informing failure or success through only one of these metrics. When this happens, subordinates are often incentivized to improve MOPs, but usually at the cost of MOEs.

MOEs, on the other hand, assess the accuracy of execution. They are focused on purposes and endstates, not tasks, and are therefore difficult to establish and measure. MOEs can reveal if a plan's mission statement is not aligned with the endstate, or if the problem statement has changed because of dynamic circumstances. In the case of MOEs, data collection and analysis are usually qualitative and subjective, where the analytical rigor is often in question. For this reason, some commanders avoid collecting against this metric. In general, MOEs are not well studied and largely disregarded at the tactical level, but they are more important than any other measure of success in a command.

Those commanders that do measure effectiveness often rely on their judgment and experience to make these assessments, with little assistance from others. At the battalion level, this might make sense because the battalion commander (and his senior enlisted advisor) is likely much more experienced than anyone else in the command. If the

MOEs are qualitative, only a seasoned leader can understand the interaction between variables and determine the assessment. Data collection might also be reserved for the role of a senior leader, particularly if subordinates are unable to sort between bad and good data. Commanders that focus on MOEs usually do so with aggressive battlespace circulation efforts, both internal and external to their commands. This combination of observations allows a commander to understand if actions within the command are properly addressing higher and external intent.

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### *... decentralized control ruled the day ...*

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#### **Concluding Remarks**

The role of a commander can be operationalized in any environment, whether it be a headquarters, supporting establishment, or operational unit. This is because a commander's function is agnostic to the mission of the unit. No matter what the circumstances, commanders C2 their units across the operations cycle. They set culture and drive operational planning, perform essential roles during execution, and then assess success or failure through the use of MOPs and MOEs.

The act of setting conditions for the right culture during the planning phase differs between company commanders and battalion commanders. Though I am convinced that the majority of risk in our Corps is managed by O-5 level commanders, I also stand by my longstanding assertion that the toughest command job in our Corps is company command. This is because company commanders are at the point of friction, leading large populations of junior Marines and junior officers that have not crossed into a careerist mindset. They spend the majority of their time convincing this young population to buy into our culture, and this is no easy feat. In cases where the company commander is also part of this youthful population, the battalion commander's job may have an element of this responsibility as well.

Fortunately, in my position, all three of my company commanders are field-grade officers, so our relationship is far more collegiate than authoritative.

The pandemic provided me with an unsolicited set of MOEs that revealed opportunities for improvement and forced me to trust and decentralize far more than my initial comfort allowed. Social distancing, teleworking, and isolation protocols were just a few of the nonstandard circumstances that plagued my first year of command in this schoolhouse of more than 1,500 students. Initially, teleworking was unproductive, revealing a MOE that I was not running my organization in a way that promoted initiative and accepted risk instead of one where Marines were likely risk-averse and awaited tasking. It also highlighted flaws in my ability to decentralize control of the organization. This was not unique to my unit—much of the Corps initially struggled with this paradigm shift. However, in a short time, my instructors found creative ways to teach classes via online platforms, and my staff members began to have virtual touchpoints and progress updates, just as if they were at work in person. In most cases, productivity actually increased, since leaders began associating merit with achievements rather than just physical presence. Hungry prospects with imaginative minds emerged from the pack. Moreover, decentralized control ruled the day, allowing unprecedented freedom and creativity throughout the organization.

I conclude my time as a battalion commander with the fondest memories. Disciplinary issues are at a relative all-time low, and instructional efficiency has probably never been better. All credit goes to my fantastic staff and instructors who have been on a relentless pursuit to make our organization the finest schoolhouse in our Corps.

I will miss my Marines. Command is truly the greatest honor a Marine can have.

