

Mission Command Through the Eyes of Wanat

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Mission command regarding how we fight and win wars has always been a function and philosophy essential for success in conflicts. The defining principles of mission command have changed over time from the 1800s' Prussian doctrine, and they continue to be modernized through lessons learned. Still, it wasn't until GEN Martin E. Dempsey, the 18th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, published the Mission Command White Paper in 2012 that three fundamental principles involving the execution of mission command were established with the intent to be immediately implemented across the force.¹ The release of Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*, in May 2012 further expanded upon these, identifying six principles of mission command. The updated 2019 version now includes seven.

It is common knowledge that the Battle of Wanat, which occurred on 13 July 2008, is one of the most scrutinized and studied within the Army and its institutional learning environments due to the events that occurred and the decisions which led up to them. Ripples from this battle may have even inspired the modern-day principles of mission command. These seven principles — *competence, mutual trust, shared understanding, commander's intent, mission orders, disciplined initiative, and risk acceptance* — can be better understood by analyzing the Battle of Wanat through the lens of the Army's vision of modern mission command.

All seven principles of mission command are important to technically and tactically achieving an objective, but the basic principle to accomplish it is *competence*. ADP 6-0 states that education provided as part of institutional and unit exercises utilizing repetitive, realistic, and challenging training aids in the development of teamwork, trust among the organization, and a mutual understanding of expectations from commanders to the lowest level of personnel, which reinforce the unity of effort to develop the *competence* required for mission success.²



Pictured is the northern fighting position of Observation Post Topside at Vehicle Patrol Base Kahler in July 2008. (U.S. Army photo)

There is no doubt that the Soldiers of Chosen Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment, were prepared to implement their skills competently throughout their 15-month deployment and during the Battle of Wanat. At their combat outpost (COP), some factors helped Chosen Soldiers successfully hold their position and prevent further loss of life when the insurgent attacks ensued. The days leading up to the firefight were crucial in their defense against the insurgents as they overcame multiple hindrances to construct a perimeter using concertina wire obstacles, sandbags, and HESCO barriers while lacking proper equipment and supplies, including drinking water, to continue to work in the over 100-degree temperatures. Utilizing their knowledge from training, their experience from fighting 48 engagements with the enemy, a strategically engineered COP design, and their direct leadership's common sense to ensure their Soldiers' overall well-being, the Soldiers were still able to create an impenetrable main perimeter and provide cover and concealment for key positions within the COP.³ The platoon leader and platoon sergeant ensured mounted weapon system locations had the maximum amount of munitions on hand, and their Soldiers were in a ready position before daybreak every morning. An analysis of the battle confirmed that joint efforts, bravery, and *disciplined initiative* by taking on roles or conducting operational needs prudent to survival or command amongst the paratroopers, engineers, Marines, and Afghan soldiers present were the essential ingredients to the successful defense of the COP.⁴ Even though dealing with the loss of life, injuries, and strategic issues with personnel placement, they could defend their position until reinforcements arrived.

Key tasks were required to meet the *commander's intent*, and upon receipt of the mission, the task force commander communicated conditions needed to complete *mission orders*. These tasks included separation of the anti-Afghanistan forces from their influence on the locals, which would allow Americans to build relationships with Afghan leaders, and stabilization of the area through coordinated efforts using lethal and nonlethal operations, which included reconstruction projects and engagements with the local populace to ensure healthy and continued mutual efforts.⁵ Outside of the COP, relations with the locals were strained and lacked *mutual trust* and *shared understanding*. The Afghans closely watched the Soldiers' activities as they attempted to fortify their area of operations, and local leaders would not entertain a meeting with the platoon leader. American forces were not invited to meetings, and women and children were nowhere to be found in the vicinity.⁶ These suspicious behaviors were reported, though not taken seriously. All personnel recognized a risk acceptance on the COP as the behaviors signaled a threat of attack, and their position in the valley left them vulnerable.

Though Chosen Soldiers trusted in their organic unit, there were many instances where trust was questionable both inside and outside the force. *Mutual trust* is essential to successful mission command, and *shared understanding* is supported and derived by the trust through effective communication at all levels.⁷ Chosen Company shared hardships and dangers, and the level of trust among the Soldiers was admirable. Regarding the higher echelons of command, they trusted in the capabilities of Chosen Company to accomplish the *commander's intent* of "gaining and maintaining the support of the Afghan population" due to the unit's past successes in contact scenarios and the significant amount of personnel assigned compared to other locations scattered throughout Afghanistan.⁹ However, erosion of trust in the higher command team from Chosen Company increased as basic needs like water were not met when initially relocating to the COP. Higher headquarters was supposed to provide intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets to monitor the region while Chosen Company established its presence for the first three days of arrival. As priorities shifted for the company's battalion and brigade headquarters, each of those three days went without the full monitoring of the Waygal Valley, and it is unknown whether the *risk acceptance* of not reassigning ISR assets would have detected the presence of enemy forces before the deadly engagement.

In conclusion, the seven principles of mission command are found when analyzing the Battle of Wanat through the Army's modern understanding of the principles. The *competence* of the Chosen Company



View of Wanat combat outpost looking east from mortar position on 9 July 2008. (Photo from *Wanat: Combat Action in Afghanistan, 2008*, Combat Studies Institute Press)

Soldiers and attached personnel is considered the most impactful reason they were successfully able to hold their position with proficiency and *disciplined initiative*, resulting in no loss of continuity through a single point of failure. It can be strongly surmised that this is why many survived the attack while waiting for reinforcements. They held a *shared understanding* of their *commander's intent* and attempted to follow *mission orders* in an environment where adversity and *risk acceptance* resided in almost every aspect of establishing the COP. Chosen Company struggled with gaining the trust of the Afghan nationals and with the ability to trust their higher echelons of command. However, they never wavered on the *mutual trust* they had between each other and their direct lines of leadership. The Battle of Wanat's lessons learned through the lens of the principles of mission command have only made the U.S. Army more prepared for the future.

Notes

¹ COL (Retired) James D. Sharpe Jr. and LTC Thomas E. Creviston, "Understanding Mission Command," *Army Sustainment* (July-September 2013): 11.

² Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*, July 2019, 1-7, https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN34403-ADP_6-0-000-WEB-3.pdf.

³ U.S. Army Combat Studies Institute (CSI) Staff, *Wanat: Combat Action in Afghanistan, 2008* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: CSI Press, 2010), 197.

⁴ *Ibid*, 198.

⁵ *Ibid*, 8.

⁶ *Ibid*, 211.

⁷ ADP 6-0, 1-9.

⁸ CSI Staff, *Wanat: Combat Action in Afghanistan*, 35.

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