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Typically the Services study historic leaders from their own particular domain of expertise (air, sea, land), and rarely do they venture beyond this. The Navy has figures like Mahan and Halsey. The Army: Grant and Patton. The Marine Corps: Lejeune and Puller. The Air Force: Mitchell and Boyd. This past year I came across a hero worthy of study by all the services.

A few months ago I read [21<sup>st</sup> Century Mahan: Sound Military Conclusions for the Modern Era by Benjamin Armstrong](#), a collection of Alfred Thayer Mahan's essays, and became particularly intrigued by one of the essays entitled *Strength of Nelson*. The short chapter introduced me to a military figure whom, in my opinion, exemplified the leadership traits and characteristics required to successfully implement the philosophy of mission command today: Admiral Lord Viscount Horatio Nelson.

Immediately after finishing Armstrong's book I wanted to know more, so I read [Nelson:](#)

[Britannia's God of War by Andrew Lambert](#). From that wonderfully written biography and Mahan's essay I observed five lessons that every military leader should consider in order to excel at mission command.

1) *Reward success and take the blame for failure.* Nelson's subordinates enjoyed working for him because they knew they would be able to contribute to the plan, as well as exercise initiative, aggression, and personal skill. They also found comfort in knowing that if things went wrong, Nelson would take the blame. However, if the mission was a success, Nelson ensured that his leaders received their proper reward and acknowledgment. Lambert wrote that "[Nelson] never overrode the judgment of those whom he had ordered to execute well-defined tasks. He always worked through the proper chain of command to avoid giving offense, or undermine the confidence of promising officers. If things went wrong, he was the first to leap to the defense of a bold and decisive subordinate."

2) *Remember that political courage is as important as battle courage.* Throughout his career he witnessed several of his commanders get bogged down in orders and rules, resulting in the loss of initiative or sailors in battle. He felt that leaders needed the "political courage" to sometimes disobey superiors to accomplish what was in the general interest of the cause. He once said to the Duke of Clarence: "To serve my king, and to destroy the French, I consider as the great order of all, from which little ones[subsequent orders] spring; and if one of these little ones militate against it...I go back and obey the great order and the object." His disobedience, or putting the mission before his career, avoided disaster or accomplished the overall intent on more than one occasion.

3) *Communicate clear and simple concepts. Reinforce with discussion.* In addition to producing memorandums that explained what his subordinates should do, he also brought them in for dinners and councils to discuss the greater picture and his intent so they could exercise proper judgment when required. On the eve of battle, Nelson penned his famous Trafalgar Memorandum, and wrote "something must be left to chance...in case signals can

neither be seen nor perfectly understood, no Captain can do very wrong if he places his ship alongside that of the enemy.”

4) *Lead by example.* Nelson understood the realities of combat, and he understood that when leaders set the example, their subordinates are more likely to rise to the challenge. Nelson’s sailors loved him, because he shared the dangers alongside them. In his final battle, The Battle of Trafalgar, Nelson put himself at the deadliest spot of the battle, the flagship *Victory*. This location allowed him to quickly modify battle plans as well as be with the ship that would take aim to destroy the enemy’s command and control ship. Even though his personal example on *Victory* ultimately cost him his life, it provided the fuel for those whom he commanded to eventually overcome the French and win one of the most famous battles in naval history.

5) *Trust is a powerful enabler.* Mahan wrote that Nelson’s trust in subordinates rested, “upon the presumption in others of that same devotion to duty, that same zeal to perform it...which he found himself.” Before the first shots of Trafalgar were fired, he sent a note to all his ships letting the men know, he trusted that they would do their duty. Nelson had absolute faith in those who followed him.

The Army’s definition of mission command can be found within the pages of [ADRP 6-0, \*Mission Command\*](#); it is the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander’s intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of Unified Land Operations. The philosophy of Mission Command is guided by six principles: build cohesive teams through mutual trust, create shared understanding, provide a clear commander’s intent, exercise disciplined initiative, use mission orders, and accept prudent risk. Adopting a philosophy of mission command allows units to take advantage of fleeting opportunities to seize, retain, and exploit the initiative in combat.

Throughout his career, Nelson *built cohesive teams based on trust*. He was able to develop a *shared understanding and a clear commander's intent* through constant conversation and interaction with subordinate leaders, along with *mission orders*, like the Trafalgar Memorandum. And it was through these mechanisms that he ensured his subordinates exercised *prudent risk and disciplined initiative*.

Napoleon Bonaparte once wrote, "Peruse again and again the campaigns of Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, Gustavus Adolphus, Turenne, Eugene, and Frederick. Model yourself upon them. This is the only means of becoming a great captain, and of acquiring the secret of the art of war. Your own genius will be enlightened and improved by this study, and you will learn to reject all maxims foreign to the principles of the great commanders." Today, as we operate with the leadership philosophy of mission command, Nelson should be one of those commanders. As his second in command, Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood, wrote of Nelson, "We must endeavor to follow his example, but it is the lot of very few to attain his perfection".

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