



By Ryan Kranc

In my 2 years at the National Training Center two things separated good rotational units from great rotational units and opposing forces focused on these differences to achieve the upper hand. Whether mission rehearsal exercise or Decisive Action Training Environment (DA), units distinguished themselves best in the areas of sustainment and in how they anticipated opportunities and made decisions. Units able to sustain themselves for the duration of the rotation by incorporating risk mitigation measures to enable sustainability were heads and shoulders above units that did not. Secondly, units able to identify decisions and information requirements leading to timely decision making excelled in seizing, retaining, and exploiting the initiative. This essay focuses on the second of these discriminators and how four imperatives proposed over 20 years ago in a professional journal continue to lend to mission accomplishment at echelon.

In 2011, as the US Army approached embracing Decisive Action (DA) as the scenario of choice to test our formations in unified land operations, the opposing forces in 11th ACR, 1-509th IN, and 1-4 IN were researching and studying. We went back to old Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) handbooks, doctrine, and professional journal articles for guidance

on how to prepare a professional opposing force while maintaining a legacy and reputation as formidable foes and “the toughest enemy our Army will face.” One article of focus was *Decision Point Tactics* ([CTC Quarterly Bulletin 97-4](#)) by LTC Pete Palmer, then the squadron commander of 2/11 ACR, and CPT Jim Crider, then commander of G Troop, 2/11ACR. LTC Palmer and CPT Crider proposed four imperatives for successful execution of decision point tactics:

- Battlefield Vision
- Successful Reconnaissance and Counter-Reconnaissance Operations
- Well-Trained Crews and Platoons
- Effective Deception Operations

These four imperatives remain important 20 years after their introduction and the six principles of Mission Command philosophy play heavily into each of them. The point of Decision Point Tactics is to posture your unit with the tools necessary to make decisions more rapidly than the enemy. This creates a series of opportunities providing commanders multiple options to retain positions of relative advantage and presents the enemy with multiple dilemmas in multiple domains with few options.

Battlefield Vision

Battlefield vision begins with mission analysis and the Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB) process. Mission Command philosophy prescribes commanders and staffs *create a shared understanding* and that *commanders provide clear intent*. Commanders drive the operations process by conducting six activities; *understanding, visualizing, describing, directing, leading, and assessing* (for more on this see “[Of Leadership, Sailboats, and Mission Command](#)”) Commanders who describe their intent to create a shared understanding and then drive the operations process to identify gaps and information voids better posture their staffs to identify, create, and exploit opportunities. Organizations who identify decisions that need to be made (or the decisions the commander wants to make) and the precursor information and intelligence necessary to facilitate a timely decision have superior information collection plans. Information collection plans must properly outline the linkage between priority intelligence requirements, information requirements, indicators, and decisions in relation to named areas of interest, targeted areas of interest, objectives, and decision points. Those units that take the time to plan experience success in the reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance fights and are, thus, better suited to take advantage of the situation.

Successful Reconnaissance and Counter-Reconnaissance Operations

Field Manual 3-98, Reconnaissance and Security Operations, states “reconnaissance and security operations are essential to successful operations” (FM 3-98, Para 1-6).

Commanders and staffs who *understand* and *visualize* the battlefield in relation to enemy, terrain, friendly forces, and the civilian population and develop information collection plans of value are better postured to succeed in reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance operations. This is where we are currently weakest. Few organizations understand how to properly employ reconnaissance and cavalry assets after years of using cavalry formations as additional maneuver formations. Consequently, reconnaissance and security skills (and planning) has atrophied. Trends from the Combat Training Centers over the past 5 years have changed very little. Units fail to identify information requirements necessary to provide commanders with enough information to *assess* and make a decision before it is too late (or identify that a decision needs to be made). Even worse, units who do not properly account for enemy reconnaissance assets and seek to destroy or disrupt enemy reconnaissance elements risk key friendly forces (i.e. mission command nodes, logistics throughput, retrans sites, planned artillery areas, and their own reconnaissance elements).

Commanders who *describe and direct clear intent* through *mission orders* within an environment of *shared understanding* maintain tempo and seize initiative. It is foolish to walk into a dark room blindfolded knowing someone in there with a flashlight is ready to beat you up. It’s just as foolish to start an operation where reconnaissance assets are not used to identify and either defeat, destroy, or neutralize enemy reconnaissance formations and deny the enemy positions of relative advantage.

Well-Trained Crews and Platoons

My commander in Fox Troop, 2/3 ACR in 2003, CPT Joshua T. Byers (God rest his soul) had a four-word command philosophy - “Battle Drills and Balls.” While CPT Byers’ philosophy would likely require rephrasing today the intent and spirit of what he desired remains; *well-trained teams built upon a foundation of trust*, highly competent in the basics and fundamentals of maneuver warfare and able to execute rapidly while exercising judgement to *accept prudent risk*. Small units who react to contact, rapidly assess the situation, mass effects upon their enemy, and quickly transition to offensive operations to deny the enemy positions of relative advantage forge disciplined and effective teams. Crews and platoons competent in their tasks are the building block for effective troops, companies, batteries, battalions, squadrons, brigades, and regiments. Highly proficient units enabling their higher unit’s success are better equipped to rapidly seize, retain, and exploit initiative and gain the upper hand on their enemy. By exercising initiative rapidly with well-trained forces we allow opportunities to be seized and exploited to maintain positions of relative advantage over adversaries.

Effective Deception Operations

NBA Hall of Famer Allen Iverson was the king of the deception operation. Iverson could cross up the best players of his era by convincingly dipping a shoulder, alternate his dribble hand, then agilely crossing back to the other side often leaving the defender off balance or on their back. Part of the beauty of the AI Crossover was his ability to sell it and cause his opponent to commit to a specific course of action. Most Army units don't sell the deception operation and fail to provide their opponent with enough information to commit precious resources. The result is a smaller force committed to the decisive effort with supporting efforts out of position or inadequately postured to deliver supporting or massed effects.

These forces fail to cause the enemy to commit in such a way that it proves advantageous to the friendly effort. Commanders and staffs often do not weigh the risks involved in planning and resourcing deception operations whether through demonstration, display, feint, or ruse. Consequently, they either under-resource the deception operation or do not identify the branches or sequels required of successful deception operations. Even when units experience success in deception they interpret perceived success as exploitable, abandon their base plan, and then fight haphazardly using the deception as the main effort. This often leads to catastrophe.

The demands of current operations and anticipation of future requirements demonstrate the necessity for agile and adaptive units to thrive in uncertain conditions. Well-trained and cohesive units able to identify, seize, and exploit opportunities to gain positions of relative advantage fight and win our nations battles, assure partners, and deter conflict. Small units able to implement the four imperatives described above are better suited to maintaining momentum and initiative, present multiple dilemmas in multiple domains, and deny adversaries options. More importantly, they represent the epitome of the principles of mission command that we desire in all our formations.

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