

Editorial Note: This vignette is part of a four-part Mission Command series that will run every Tuesday for the next four weeks.



By Kelly McCoy

The following is the first vignette in a collection of four designed as a supplement to the 2019 series of mission command articles ([Part 1](#), [2](#), and [3](#)) led by General Stephen Townsend. These vignettes follow a fictional character, John Miller, through his career as an infantry officer. Each vignette is a stand-alone story reflecting the principles of mission command and how it is applied in terms of leadership. These vignettes, while purely fictional, are the result of collaboration from multiple officers - spanning years of service, command experience, and a desire to provide personable and realistic vignettes that can be used in leadership development. These vignettes will challenge your perspective and natural

inclinations for what it means to lead by mission command. In each scenario, you should ask yourself: What is the appropriate level of control required to ensure the best possible decision is made at the right level and at the right time given the circumstances and information available?

At the conclusion, you might ask – What’s the right answer? The truth is, there is no right answer – at best, it is finding the most optimal solution. But this is not the purpose. The purpose is to develop a dialogue with your teams and reinvigorate mission command in our Army.

Vignette 1: Accepting Risk and Disciplined Initiative

CPT John Miller transitioned from company XO to battalion battle captain while deployed to Afghanistan. After the firing of the two previous battle captains, the reputation for the job is one of caution and risk adversity. When it comes to making a time sensitive decision, how will CPT Miller respond?

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Advising Platform (AP) Lightning, Afghanistan

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“I get it. It’s tough to come out of a line company, during a deployment, and come into a staff job at battalion.” However, MAJ Ronny Donaldson’s face was as unsympathetic as any battalion S-3 could ever muster. “But, you need to understand that your impact as a company XO can pale in comparison to your impact as a battle captain.”

Newly promoted Captain John Miller was already apprehensive in going to battalion staff.

The conversation with MAJ Donaldson only increased the apprehension.

MAJ Donaldson continued, “You need to accept that your time between staff and command over your first 20 years will be split 75/25. That’s optimistically saying that only a quarter of your career will be in command. The best leaders I have known constantly developed their competence, built trust and understanding up and down, and they always took initiative in line with the intent they received—regardless of whether they were in command or on staff. I expect the same from you. Now John, I owe you clear guidance. Help me help you.”

While the 75/25 split was a gut punch, John started to feel optimistic. Maybe the rumors about MAJ Donaldson weren’t true. Sure, he had burned through a First Lieutenant and a Captain - both of whom had been sent up to brigade after being publicly relieved in the main command post. Maybe they just couldn’t handle the stress?

MAJ Donaldson had gone quiet, making John realize it was his turn to respond. “Sir, I appreciate that. Dedication and integrity are my cornerstones and what I believe made me a successful XO for Captain Slagle.”

“Good. You’ve got the day shift. You need to be present for the morning update brief. You will also be responsible for the commanders update brief. As the day battle captain, you will manage the implementation of the battalion commander’s guidance and orders.”

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AP Lightning, Afghanistan

21 0943Z JUN 19

Two months later, the Battle NCO, SFC Murray, stared angrily at the silver bullet percolating the morning's coffee. John saw it as a chance to get a read on his current situation. "Sergeant Murray, got a question for you."

"Shoot, sir." SFC Murray said, without taking his gaze off the coffee maker.

"I've been trying to get the S-3 portion of the commanders update brief in front of MAJ Donaldson to ensure he is good with it. But he seems to ignore it and then he counsels me whenever he can't answer the battalion commander's questions."

SFC Murray took his gaze off the coffee maker, pivoted his position to lean against the cabinet. "When do you see MAJ Donaldson?"

"I've been going to his office at least an hour before..."

"No," SFC Murray put a hand up, "when do you see him?"

John stopped and thought about it. Over the last six weeks he had been trying to get the S-3 to bless off on the commanders update brief. When he did find the S-3, MAJ Donaldson would redirect him to the Assistant S-3. "I see him in his office and sometimes in the main command post (CP)."

"Ok." SFC Murray was now staring angrily at the ground. "Do you ever notice when the S-3 cares more than other times?"

John started to realize that the often pensive, quiet, and angry SFC Murray was offering a developmental opportunity. John thought about the question and then offered, "He cares a lot when the battalion commander has questions. In fact, that seems to be the only time he gets involved in the main CP and my duties."

“What does that tell you?”

“It wasn’t totally the fault of previous battle captains on why they got fired and I am in a precarious situation?”

“Precarious. That’s an officer word.” SFC Murray pushed off the cabinet grabbing his coffee mug, now that the coffee was ready. “I call it a dumpster fire. Those who were here before you were competent. In both cases, however, no one gave them any real guidance, training, or development. It was sink or swim. I help where I can.”

“So, what should I do?”

“Sir, this is officer stuff. You’ve got to figure that out.” SFC Murray brought his fresh black coffee up to his face, blew on it, and said, “All I can say is do the right thing.”

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A couple weeks after his talk with SFC Murray, John felt he was hitting a good stride. He was anticipating issues and taking pre-emptive actions. Friction with MAJ Donaldson had dropped significantly. Then came a crisis.

The radio broke the silence. “Dragon X-Ray, this is Barbarian One-Six.”

“Barbarian One-Six, this is Dragon X-Ray. Send it.”

“Dragon X-Ray, we have a wounded local national minor. Requesting permission to bring him on post for care.”

“Barbarian One-Six - Standby.” The RTO, SGT Hanks, turned to CPT Miller. “What do you want us to do sir?”

John took the mic and through a confusing back and forth determined that the advising patrol had discovered an unresponsive minor with a gunshot wound to the leg. The medic on site was applying first aid, but the assessment was that the patient required immediate medical attention and was at risk of bleeding out.

Normally, the decision would fall to the company commander and battalion leadership, but they were unavailable. Barbarian Six, CPT Slagle, and the battalion command team were in the air headed back from a brigade OPORD briefing. Standing guidance from the brigade was that ‘if we didn’t cause it, it’s not our problem.’ However, the patrol had already given aid. John had three choices: wait, drop him off at the closest medical facility, or authorize the patrol to bring the kid to the battalion aid station. The latter seemed to be the only choice that would get the kid care in a timely manner.

As he weighed his response, he knew that MAJ Donaldson would key in on brigade policy. However, he also knew that his battalion commander had been reinforcing that they needed to build trust with the local populace. If they let the kid die now, they’d only be making more enemies.

As if reading his mind SFC Murray chimed in, “Sir, when it comes to an order, one can resist, comply, or commit with initiative. That’s the decision at hand.”

“Barbarian One-Six, you are cleared to bring the local national to battalion aid station.” John dropped the mic. The wheels were set in motion. John felt regret. SFC Murray looked angry.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Do you agree with CPT Miller's decision? What would you have done? Should he have delayed his decision and asked for more information?
2. Given the circumstance, who has the authority to make this decision? Does the battle captain have the authority?
3. What would be the best reaction from Major Donaldson?
4. What could Major Donaldson have done to better prepare and develop CPT Miller?
5. Between brigade policy and the battalion commander's focus on building trust with the local populace, do you think the commander's intent was clear? Was the patrol operating with disciplined initiative? Was CPT Miller?

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