

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 second vignette is a series 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.

If you did not read the introduction and [vignette one](#), we would encourage you to do so. Vignette number two follows:

Vignette 2: Mission Orders & Shared Understanding

A decade after his experience in Afghanistan, MAJ John Miller, battalion XO for 4-23

Infantry Battalion, was planning for battalion reconstitution operations at the battalion main command post towards the end of a Joint Readiness Training Center rotation. The command team was forward at the brigade command post, planning details for the brigade's final offensive operation, so MAJ Miller would need to move the battalion to an objective rally point to position it for the final assault. However, getting into position would require careful timing, coordination with adjacent units, and shared understanding of his commander's intent.

Joint Readiness Training Center

4-23 Infantry Main Command Post

Fort Polk, LA

"NET CALL...NET CALL...NET CALL" The brigade command net crackled over the speaker in MAJ John Miller's Stryker. He had spent the last eight hours planning reconstitution operations for his battalion.

John looked over at the assistant S-3 Captain Emmanuel Cruz, "Here we go."

The movement order was playing out as John expected - long, tedious, and with minimal relevancy. Situation, mission, intent, concept of operations were all in line with the previous warning order - battalions would relocate to objective rally points (ORPs) for the final attack. Then came the coordinating instructions, "...Tomahawk X-Ray, conduct movement to Objective Rally Point Alpha no later than 1500 hours...Regulars X-Ray conducts movement to Objective Rally Point Bravo no later than 1500 hours...Command teams will rejoin their units at designated ORPs with follow-on orders..."

Captain Cruz grabbed the map and started tracing out routes for the battalion. His finger stopped on Dara Lam. After a brief pause he whispered to John "We've got to move through

Dara Lam to get to ORP Alpha.”

John looked over at the map, “That will add some time to movement. Where are the other battalions going to be?”

Captain Cruz ran between his notebook and the map, making tick marks of current locations and ORPs. As Captain Cruz handed the map over to John, he said, “I’m pretty sure Regulars have to go through Dara Lam too.”

Grabbing the map, John looked it over and started to reach for his hand mic. “I’ll get a hold of Major Han (Regulars 5), 5-20th XO, and see if we can coordinate SP times so we don’t hit the town at the same time.”

—

“Mark, it’s John. I was taking a look at our movement orders...” John started to say.

XO for 5-20 INF BN, Major Mark Han jumped right in, “Yeah it’s going to be a cluster...”

“How about we stagger movement to avoid that?” John replied.

“Sounds good. Age before beauty?” Mark offered.

“You’re closer to Dara Lam. It’ll be easier for you to go first. Is an hour enough time for you to make it through the village?”

“As long as there is no contact - yes. We can SP at 1330. Will that work?”

“Yeah. I believe the chance of enemy contact in that area is low. Brigade’s current enemy situation template, which we concur with, has most of the enemy past the ORP - where our

next mission will take place.”

“Makes sense. See you on the objective.” Mark dropped the line.

John put the hand mic down and looked over to CPT Cruz. “Regulars will move out at 1330. We’ll start movement at 1430. This should give us enough time to make it through the town without getting bogged down. Should save us a couple of hours.”

—

At 1515 the brigade net crackled on. “Tomahawk 5, this is Lancer 6.”

John caught his breath and toggled the mic. “Lancer Six, this is Tomahawk 5.”

“What’s your timeline?”

“The battalion’s front line trace is MG 456843. We just cleared Dara Lam. ETA ORP Alpha six-zero minutes.” John knew something was wrong. The brigade commander doesn’t just talk to battalion XOs about out of contact movements. His stomach was starting to turn.

“Tomahawk 5. What was your hard time at ORP A?”

The pit in John’s stomach dropped. He didn’t know the hard time for arrival. He grabbed his green book and flipped it open. He had circled ‘depart NLT 1500.’ “Tracking departure no later than 1500.”

“Negative. Arrival was no later than 1500. See Tomahawk Six on arrival. Out.”

The net was quiet for the remainder of the movement. John continuously played out the movement order, his conversation with CPT Cruz, his coordination with MAJ Han, and the

final conversation with his brigade commander. He thought that he had done the right thing. Now it was clear, poor assumptions were made and the brigade's plan was de-synchronized for the final attack. How was he going to get the battalion back on course?

Questions for Discussion:

1. What was the root cause of the confusion between the battalions and brigade?
2. Was this a case of issuing orders without the right level of detail? What constitutes a clear and simple order?
3. What would have been an effective means to ensure shared understanding?
4. In austere environments with disparate communications, how can mission orders be used effectively to create shared understanding?

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