

*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

This vignette is the third 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. The 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](#) or [vignette two](#), we would encourage you to do so. Vignette number three follows.

### **Vignette 3: Mutual Trust & Competence**

COL John Miller's timeline for brigade command accelerated after his predecessor was relieved for a toxic command climate. His brigade was scheduled for an operational

deployment to Korea in nine months, but readiness figures across the board were sub-par. Additionally, his subordinate command teams had minimized their willingness to act without direct orders. To prepare his brigade for Korea, COL Miller will have to balance building his team and readiness.

## **2nd Brigade, 8th Division**

### **Brigade Headquarters**

End of the day commanders' calls were a sign of failure, and today was no exception. Colonel John Miller had just endured an uncomfortable encounter with the division commander after his first unit status report (USR) briefing.

COL Miller recalled MG Matt Johnston's comments, "I am getting raked across the coals by LTG August. I understand you didn't create this problem, but you need to fix it. You have two months to turn your readiness around. If you can't, first brigade will take the Korea deployment. No one is going to like that, especially you."

Korea was nine months out. He had to act now. With his battalion command teams at his conference table, John jumped straight into it. "Based on what I have observed over the last 45 days, the lack of trust in leadership is our greatest inhibitor."

The silence that followed from John's battalion command teams made him realize his approach may not have been the most artful. So he redirected, "I need you guys to prove me wrong and to give me the central problem we need to focus on."

LTC Cole Law spoke first, "I can't disagree with you Sir. We can't plan. We can't execute. We can't train. All we can do is react."

LTC Lamar Boot responded, "I think that was true under the old regime. Things have gotten

better. Our central problems are individual readiness, followed by equipment maintenance, and unit readiness. Increasing individual readiness will be at the cost of the others. It is those others, equipment maintenance and unit readiness, we need to focus on if we are going to be successful in Korea.”

“Individual readiness means more time in garrison,” LTC Boot’s Command Sergeant Major CSM Jackson jumped in, “Nothing undermines a warrior’s will to win than garrison. It is that desire to win that I think we are missing.”

“In garrison it isn’t just the next higher commander that makes things painful. It is garrison command, range control, IG inspections – the list goes on.” CSM Jerry Shortall, command sergeant major to LTC Law, started off like a tripwire had gone off. “In garrison we have procedures and regulations. In garrison the environment does not change – only the requirements...and those requirements only grow.”

Last to speak was LTC Robert Rivera, “This isn’t about trust. It is, but what it really is – it’s about leadership. What I get from my company commanders is an unwillingness to act because they feel a lack of support to execute their plan. From this, we are experiencing discipline and character issues.”

Frustrated silence ensued. Problems were on the table with no clear solutions. Brigade CSM Franklin Murray spoke up, “Discipline issues are a symptom. We have to get after the root causes. We have to build upon the positive character traits already present in our units, establish a culture of winning, and back this with presence. Leadership presence not just at training, it requires character and commitment that removes obstacles and enables subordinates to accomplish the mission.”

“Well said Sergeant Major,” John said while tapping the fresh ink in his green book. “To be blunt I am concerned over how the CG is going to treat this brigade moving forward. Not only do we have to stop the downward trend in readiness this month and start tracking

positive next month, but he wants weekly updates.”

The comment seemed to have deflated what had been positive momentum. In response, what had been brewing in the back of John’s mind came to the forefront.

“CSM Jackson, you mentioned that garrison undermines a warrior’s will.” John said with a measured cadence, “I want us to take that as a challenge. If we are to succeed as a unit, we have to do so together. The next two months will require a significant push. We have to start building up competence and trust, establishing shared understanding of mission orders that leads to a culture of disciplined initiative built around a clear understanding of commander’s intent.”

LTC Law chimed in, “Sir, while I understand your intent - how are we supposed to do that?”

John got up from the conference table and walked over to his desk. Picking up his phone, “Larry, grab Steven and get in here.”

Within a couple minutes the brigade S-3, MAJ Larry Coleman, and the brigade XO, MAJ Steven Goodwin, came into the office.

John started off, “Before the next USR our brigade will have rectified all major readiness deficiencies. I need your help to get to the details - but my priority for the next month will be individual readiness, equipment, and then unit readiness. Let’s meet tomorrow at 1000. Bring who you need. Be ready to talk specifics of where and why you need to focus. We are going to hash out a way forward. Consider it a board of director’s approach.”

CSM Murray gave John a look that relayed the need for additional guidance and clarity. “I want you all to sleep on what we’ve talked about. Come back to me with your concerns, opportunities, or recommended changes and way forward tomorrow. If you don’t agree with

my priorities, I want to know. Help me understand the why behind your logic. We will establish a culture built on competence, trust, and disciplined initiative; we will do this in garrison, the field, and Korea.”

CSM Murray exhaled. John continued “Brigade will do their part in arranging access to facilities and resources at battalion-level. I will spend my time and focus on the units who I assess need increased control and direction. I expect you all to do the same, and for your subordinate leaders to do the same. Ensure shared understanding of what we are trying to achieve. Enable those who are competent - those who you have established trust with. For those who don’t fall in that category, provide additional direction and control.”

CSM Murray offered a hand; John paused and nodded, “This brigade cannot swing from a climate of micromanagement to one of decentralization. There is significant risk here.”

“Absolutely Sergeant Major. There is risk - but the way I see it, there is no point in getting to Korea with a culture of micromanagement. I am underwriting the risk here. I want us to not just stop the downward spiral but show marked improvement. I believe we can get there if we empower those we trust and develop and direct those who need greater levels of control.”

As John laid out his case he started to realize the weight of his words and commitment. He would have done better to have thought and written this out first. Nonetheless, he knew the type of unit he wanted to be a part of. He was committed. He also knew he could fail, but there was comfort in knowing he would do so while swinging.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

1. How would you balance building a culture based on the principles of mission command when time-constraints and readiness demands reward a more direct control approach?

2. Which battalion command teams should COL John Miller apply greater control? Less control?
3. Was COL Miller's approach to solving the problem and guidance clear enough? Was the board of the director approach the right method?
4. What could COL Miller have done better, differently?
5. How can COL Miller's battalion and company commanders' best communicate COL Miller's new intent to subordinates? What steps should platoon and squad leadership take to achieve his guidance?

The author would like to thank COL Dan Rayca, COL Tim Hummel, COL Jason Slider, LTC Brandon Garner, LTC Tim Lawrence, and Robert Merkle for their collaboration and bringing realism to these stories.

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