

# Observations of Distribution Company Decisive Action Operations at the NTC

In a decisive action environment, distribution company commanders should exercise mission command by developing commander's intent and distributing it in operation orders.

■ By Capt. Michael J. Watkins

Serving as a distribution company observer-coach/trainer (OC/T) for brigade support battalions (BSBs) at the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, California, gave me a clear perspective of company-level leadership and distribution operations in a decisive action training environment.

During my tenure as an OC/T, I completed 18 decisive action training rotations. I observed how company commanders exercise mission command and how distribution companies execute tactical distribution operations at the NTC.

Mission command is a leadership tool that company commanders can use to posture their organizations for success. Distribution company commanders who do not understand their organization's role in the brigade combat team (BCT) distribution network will fail to exercise mission command.

They also will struggle in distributing classes I (subsistence), II (clothing and individual equipment), III (petroleum, oils, and lubricants), IV (construction and barrier materials), V (ammunition), and IX (repair parts) forward on the battlefield. As the NTC transitions from counterinsurgency to decisive action rotations, the sustainment function most critical to the warfighter is distribution and the functions most expected of a company commander are mission command and leadership.

In this article, I will discuss company-

level leadership and the distribution company commander's ability to exercise mission command by providing a clear commander's intent and communicating it through an operation order. I will also discuss distribution company operations, including tactical convoy operations (TCO).

## Mission Command

Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-0, Mission Command, defines mission command as "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."

A company commander's ability to exercise mission command and the company's organizational performance are inextricably linked.

It is my observation that most distribution company commanders struggle to determine what constitutes mission command and what does not. Many company commanders fail to embrace mission command as a tool for empowerment and perceive mission command as a justification to micromanage subordinates.

Company commanders who fail to exercise mission command do so primarily because they do not employ the following two of the six principles of mission command: provide a clear commander's intent and use operations orders to communicate

the commander's intent. These two mission command principles give the company commander the ability to lead, visualize, describe, direct, and assess.

## A Clear Commander's Intent

The commander's intent is a clear and concise expression of the purpose of the operation and the desired end state. Many distribution company commanders who deploy to the NTC are negligent in providing commander's intent to their organizations. I have observed many commanders who are focused more on current execution than on posturing their organizations for future operations.

In a high-tempo decisive action conflict, failure to plan and focus on future contingencies often results in organizations becoming reactionary. Reactionary units fail to conduct precombat checks and inspections and rehearsals and take unnecessary tactical risk.

I have seen a few distribution company commanders struggle with integrating their first sergeants, platoon leaders, and platoon sergeants into planning company operations. Company commanders who fail to empower their subordinates and whose subordinates fail to exercise disciplined initiative cannot take the time to conceptualize the battle, process and analyze higher headquarters' intent, and develop their own commander's intent.

Often company commanders do not understand their higher headquarters' intent and desired end state or are unable to visualize the company's role on the battlefield. When subordinates do not receive or understand their commander's intent, command and control dissipate and subordinates typically lack the necessary confidence to execute their missions. Subordinates are hesitant to make decisions because they do not have the commander's intent as a guide, and therefore, organizations become reactionary instead of proactive.

To measure the effectiveness of a commander's intent, the commander should assess how well subordinates execute their missions when faced with ambiguous situations. The multiple problem sets subordinates will encounter have no textbook answer. The common trend I have observed is that a personally prepared, well-crafted commander's intent includes the following:

- A clear image of the operation's purpose.
- The key tasks of specific personnel and platoons.
- The desired outcome and definition of success.

### Communicating Commander's Intent

ADRP 5-0, The Operations Process, identifies the operations process, which is used to develop an operation order, as the Army's framework for exercising mission command. A well-crafted commander's intent expressed in an operation order gives subordinates the ability to prioritize their efforts and exercise disciplined initiative.

I have observed that many distribution commanders avoid producing operation orders and are uncomfortable conducting operation order briefs. Commanders are intimidated by the operations process because they lack practice and leadership emphasis on it during garrison operations.

One of my goals as a primary OC/T was to have distribution company commanders do the following:

- Develop their own commander's intent.
- Produce three or more operation orders.
- Present operation order briefs to their platoon leaders.
- Conduct back briefs and confirmation briefs.

**Operation order.** An operation order assists the commander in managing and maximizing Soldiers' time. It provides a company commander with the opportunity to creatively conceptualize the operation, integrate noncommissioned officers into the operation, and empower subordinates to execute the mission within the commander's intent.

When company commanders fail to provide their intent through operation orders, subordinates struggle with exercising disciplined initiative, their companies lack shared understanding of the mission set, and the definition of mission success is unclear. Many distribution companies cannot anticipate requirements or provide predictability for their subordinate units in order to maximize Soldiers' time.

The inability to anticipate and the failure to enforce the principle of spending no more than one-third of the mission execution time on planning hinders execution at the platoon level. As a result, commanders provide their subordinates with a list of assigned tasks or a concept of operations (CONOPS) rather than focus on developing an operation order. An overreliance on CONOPS and failure to produce an operation order limit a commander's ability to understand, visualize, describe, direct, lead, and assess operations.

**Back brief.** One of the many leadership failures I have observed at NTC is company commanders failing to conduct back briefs and confirmation briefs with their platoon leaders. Back briefs and confirma-

tion briefs are critical in validating shared understanding and providing platoon leaders with the confidence they need to execute the eight troop leading procedures.

Conducting back briefs and confirmation briefs gives commanders the ability to gauge their platoon leaders' understanding of the commander's intent and gain confidence in their platoon leaders' ability to execute troop leading procedures.

### Distribution Company Operations

The BCT must be able to execute efficient distribution operations in order to provide the maneuver commander with prolonged endurance, freedom of action, and extended operational reach. The BSB's distribution company is the critical link between echelons above brigade and maneuver battalions to ensure the continuous flow of sustainment.

## The Six Principles of Mission Command

- Build cohesive teams through mutual trust.
- Create shared understanding.
- Provide a clear commander's intent.
- Exercise disciplined initiative.
- Use mission orders.
- Accept prudent risk.

—Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-0, Mission Command

## Troop Leading Procedures

- Receive the mission.
- Issue a warning order.
- Make a tentative plan.
- Initiate movement.
- Conduct reconnaissance.
- Complete the plan.
- Issue the order.
- Supervise and refine.

—Field Manual 6–0, Commander and Staff Organization and Operations

To optimize the BCT distribution network, the BSB must aggressively employ the distribution company if the assets and personnel are available.

Distribution companies deploy to the NTC with the technical proficiency to execute distribution operations but struggle with tactical execution. Most of these companies lack the tactical proficiency and tactical discipline to defeat the enemy.

The leadership failures I observed were obvious when companies defended their perimeters within the brigade support area and when they executed TCOs. Many of the companies failed to train and qualify their Soldiers on crew-served weapon systems. Gun truck crews and Soldiers

manning fighting positions continually failed to engage the enemy because of weapon system malfunctions, improper firing techniques, and a lack of tactical discipline.

However, distribution companies are proficient at receiving commodity resupply, establishing supply support activity operations, and rapidly processing class IX (repair parts) in order to assist in generating combat power, managing commodities, and reporting commodity statuses. Many companies do an excellent job of maximizing road networks within the brigade support area in order to establish water resupply points, retail fuel points, bulk water storage points, and supply support activity class IX pick up and issue points.

Distribution company Soldiers consistently display the technical knowledge to operate equipment authorized on their unit's modified table of organization and equipment. They are also competent in executing refueling operations from the different types of vehicles used for refueling operations.

### TCO Operations

The common method of distribution during decisive action rotations is through TCOs. The distribution company traditionally does not deploy to the NTC with all of its authorized sustainment platforms. However, most possess the technical proficiency to execute TCOs across the battlefield.

Soldiers within the company can safely drive and operate light, medium, and heavy trucks. Soldiers can also secure complex loads and transport heavy equipment. Typically, platoon leaders and junior noncommissioned officers serve as the convoy commanders and assistant convoy commanders.

In the early stages of the rotation, the convoy leaders struggle with conducting the eight troop leading procedures before TCO execution. The main areas they struggle with are conducting effective TCO briefings and precombat checks and inspec-

tions. TCO execution significantly improves as the company practices including TCO briefs, rehearsals, and precombat checks and inspections in the TCO time line.

The distribution company has a distinct role in sustaining its supported BCT. The company consists of a headquarters section and three platoons that have unique skill sets that enable it to execute tactical distribution operations.

The distribution company commander's ability to exercise mission command directly affects the organization's ability to execute tactical distribution operations. The commander must understand the higher headquarters commander's intent, visualize his organization's role on the battlefield, and communicate the definition of success to subordinate leaders.

Mission command is the Army's preferred style of exercising command. Company commanders who understand that mission command is not an abdication of authority but a tool to develop and empower adaptive leaders can better posture their organizations for success.

Combat training centers provide company commanders with a valuable opportunity to exercise mission command in a decisive action training environment. Commanders who maximize this training will notice conspicuous improvement in their subordinate leaders' development and their organizations' performance.

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