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**MISSION COMMAND DURING LOW INTENSITY BATTLES AND  
STABILIZING OPERATIONS. ARE WE PREPARED?**

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**Abstract:**

Concept of Mission Command is not new, however, dynamics of present and requirements of future battle fields have further enhanced the relevance and importance of its right adaptation and execution. With mixed results of low intensity battles and stabilizing operations as a result of Armed conflicts during last two decades or so, this paper explores aspects in addition to the debate of mere centralized and decentralized control normally linked with Mission Command concept. Previous researches have correctly identified training aspects required in a Military set up during peace time to bleed less during operations under Mission Command environment. This paper inquires whether we are ready to accept our vulnerabilities and preparing towards a directional training while keeping in view various myths as a case in point. Through results of recent conflicts and experience of officers involved in such operations, this paper identifies a gap in previous researches pertaining to importance of International Relations knowledge and aspects of Psychological domain for officers, especially during low intensity battles and stabilizing operations in the twenty first century Battlefield environment. This paper concludes by identifying that transformation of Commanders at Strategic, Operational and Tactical level coupled with threat spectrum at Strategic/ Operational level if identified correctly will have a trickle down effect for Tactical level commanders being good students of International Relations. This will increase the Morale and Motivation level of subordinates enabling them to assess Political sensitivities, understand and address the complexities involved in low intensity battles and stabilizing operations and value the conflict in today's environment of continuous chaos.

*Key words: Mission Command; Directional Training; Myths, Centralized; De-centralized; Low Intensity Battles; Stabilizing Operations; International Relations; Morale and Motivation.*

## **1. Introduction**

As Helmut Moltke said, plan of a battle becomes the first attrition as a result of enemy contact. Ever since the term Mission Command was coined in United States guide book in 1821[1], gradually it has been a part of thought process of operational policies of contemporary militaries [2]. Manuals are saturated with Mission Command concept which is decentralized implementation of centralized plans [3] varying from kinetic, non-kinetic, low intensity battles and stabilizing operations [4]. However, diverse opinions about the efficacy of Mission command during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan are a case in point. The sensitivities attached with operations in such an environment at the Government and Military level have made Mission Command at times too high a risk to be implemented [5]. Some comment that technological advancements in current operational atmosphere especially communications have raised a question about the relevancy of this concept and made adoption of this strategy less effective [6]. Moreover, turbulence of post war scenarios make the setting of objectives ambiguous which are against the true essence of Mission Command. Ironically, attributes of flexibility, freedom of action and swift manoeuvres at subordinate level are required while operating under the concept of Mission Command [7].



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Performances as a result of Mission Command concept during operations OIF/ OEF are attributable not only to the underlying weaknesses in Mission Command as a theoretical idea, or to its lack of suitability to low intensity battles and stabilizing operations, but also to a failure to meet fully the training prerequisites so critical to the concept. The enduring nature of low intensity battles and stabilizing operations as an inevitable consequence of armed conflict, and the prevalence of such operations in the post–Cold War environment, are impossible to ignore.

Simultaneously, with progress in Communication on one hand, modern disruption technologies like electronic warfare systems, underscores the vulnerability of Command structures that rely on constant access to Communications and on-ground intelligence. All of these factors speak to the importance of developing units that can fight independently in a complex, dynamic environment, with limited direction from higher levels of command when required; possible through the competent utilization of Mission Command. In turn, this requires decentralized leadership based on mission-type orders rather than a strict centralized control, which defines the mission; the commander’s desire and what is to be achieved, but leaving decisions on how to execute the mission to subordinate commanders [8].

Low intensity battles and stabilizing operations as a consequence of armed conflict put an even greater emphasis on the importance of the Militaries proficiency in Mission Command and manoeuvre warfare, through the competence and training of its officers. Drawing on existing scholarly literature, this paper identifies a set of central preconditions, or enablers, that need to be present in a military organization keeping in view various Myths in order to counter our vulnerabilities and practice Mission Command efficiently. These include shared understanding and trust; initiative; a tolerant approach to failure, learning; and the acceptance of Mission Command as an all-encompassing practice.

This paper through recent conflicts and the experience of officers involved in such operations, identifies a Gap in previous researches pertaining transformation of senior Commanders, knowledge of International Relations especially for subordinates as well as Psychological Domain to include Morale and Motivation to achieve desired results in a twenty first century Battle field environment. This paper assesses current preconditions for a successful practice of Mission Command. Knowledge of International Relations and Psychological domain have been a prominent feature during Mission Command operations in recent conflicts especially low intensity battles and stabilizing operations. If the officers with low Morale and Motivation also lack understanding of International affairs, the complexities of low intensity battles and stabilizing operations will be difficult to handle. The article concludes that the increasing complexity of the tasks performed by officers during low intensity and stabilizing operations demands correct threat spectrum at the higher level and its alignment with understanding of junior level officers skilled in the knowledge of International Relations will have an effect on Morale and Motivation. This will enable them to understand Political sensitivities, value the conflict to achieve better results in a persistently troublesome environment.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Historical Perspective**

The experiences gained from losses of Napoleonic battles forced the Prussian Army to evaluate concept of Mission Command for the first time only to be incorporated later in the doctrine of German Army in 1917 and Blitzkrieg operation during World War II [9]. Field Marshal Helmuth Von Moltke was instrumental in introducing the concept in German Army during his tenure from 1857 to 1888 as a result of experiences gained through defeats at Jena and Auerstädt in 1806 [10].



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Initially termed ‘Auftragstaktik’, the concept provided freedom of action to junior leaders under the overall intent of senior leaders [11]. Post World War II, strategy of Germans based on the concept of Mission Command formed the basis of Military planners especially in the West. Such was the impact of Mission Command that it became an essential element of combat manoeuvres in times to come [12].

With the advent of Cold War threat, United States gave a serious thought towards Mission Command concept for the first time. Before that, despite theoretical acceptance of the concept as a result of Germans creativity during World War II [13] and an understandable focus towards a Centralized Command and Control operation in Vietnam [14], United States serious efforts came only after being challenged by a serious Soviet hazard [15]. Mission Command allows a decentralized implementation of a mission by junior leaders based on mission oriented instructions under the overall ambit of Commanders resolve on what is to be accomplished but not the way to achieve it (how), which is left for junior leaders to decide [16].

## **2.2 Recent Conflicts**

United States has conducted Stabilizing operations as a result of Armed conflicts every eighteen to twenty four months since the culmination of the Soviet threat, with the duration of each operation from five to eight years [17]. During last two decades or so, Low Intensity Battles and Stabilizing Operations mainly Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) have been in the lime light and most talked about. However, previous stabilizing Operations in the Horn of Africa and Philippines as well as actions undertaken in areas of Georgia and Yemen are a strong proof of the importance of Low Intensity Battles and Stabilizing Operations in twenty first century Military tasks. Stabilizing operations have followed almost every Armed conflict by United States Military in the recent past. However, two operations having similarity to OEF and OIF stabilizing operations are those conducted during the Philippine-American in 1902 [18] and Vietnam wars in 1975 [19].

Outcome of OEF and OIF has been varied and gradual application of Mission Command during operations in Afghanistan and Iraq has raised concerns about its effectiveness especially in Low Intensity Battles and Stabilizing Operations. It has been argued that increasing number of stake holders to include different countries and organizations with different strategic and political sensitivities has made the application of Mission Command concept in such an environment a risky affair of high magnitude [20].

United States less success during OEF and OIF are attributable not to the limitations of Mission Command as a concept during Low Intensity Battles and Stabilizing Operations but to more evident aspects of failing to adopt enablers of Mission Command concept in their organization. During OEF and OIF, Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP) [21], which provided discretionary funds at lower levels for construction work and Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) [22] which functioned to create a link at the provincial level, both met with partial success due to wide scope of work, multiple asks and long duration of operations which led to uncertainty. On the other hand, Village Stability Operations (VSO) met with more success due to limited scope, few tasks and less duration of operations [23].

## **2.3 Directional Training**

With the importance of Low Intensity Battles and Stabilizing Operations during twenty first century, Mission command as an improved version of Military operations other than war gets more pronounced [24]. Earlier studies have termed Mission Command as a prerequisite of manoeuver warfare [25]. However, effectiveness cannot be achieved unless Mission Command



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concept is accepted by a complete Military organization to include the actions linked with it must saturate the entire set up, its educational priorities and grooming personality of all ranks serving in it [26].

As part of routine training, Armies should focus on junior ranks officers to create a culture of interaction necessary to adopt Mission Command concept. During initial part of twentieth century, Germans focused on socializing of Officers during training in order to create a specific leadership relationship in their Army [27]. The fundamental aspect of Mission Command concept is developing human affairs – pyramid of ranks within the organization, relationship between superiors and subordinates, providing independent thought process and space to other ranks [28].

During Military training, acceptance of errors by subordinates and risks linked with it should be accepted since same officers or troops will be involved in majority of actions involved in Low Intensity Battles and Stabilizing Operations of future. As it is said, acceptable Military risk depends on specific culture of a country, Military training during peacetime and type of operation participating in [29].

Too much interference in the work of subordinates is to be avoided during peacetime training. Although, advancement in technology has enabled Senior ranks to closely supervise situation in the Battle field. However, it can be counterproductive if used to interfere subordinates actions rather than to help spread intent of Senior Commander in order to assure correct understanding of a particular situation [30].

For any Military to perform well in the Battle field scenario, there should be no dearth of acceptance and confidence among seniors and junior level ranks during training [31]. Basis of this relationship should be built on professionalism rather than nepotism or friendship [32].

During training, initiative and independence of action should be practised. From a strategic to tactical level, this attribute is to be practised as an important catalyst of Mission Command concept [33].

In the twenty first century period, clear objectives with limited scope enhances the chances of operational success. Due to difficult and uncertain situations, decision making becomes difficult for Commanders making possibility of issuing clear orders a distinct possibility unless relying on de-centralized Command and Control concept. According to Storr, contemporary Armies despite accepting importance of Mission Command are not prepared to execute this concept fully [34].

Mission Command has to be part and parcel of daily routine from garrisons to combat [35]. Low Intensity Battles and Stabilizing Operations seldom give reaction time to shift between phases of operation, demanding quick transition from one mission to another and more often than not different phases at one time [36]. Contingencies must be practised by Militaries to take actions in coordination with any community or lower levels to be effective [37].

Mission command requires training comprising actions of small teams and all-inclusive solutions to problems. The presence of multiple stake holders with different culture, training and personalities warrants application of de-centralized Mission Command concept in operations of twenty first century [38].

Notwithstanding advancement in Technology which has made access to information more easy, still during Low Intensity Battles and Stabilizing Operations, Tactical commander on ground is the best judge. Moreover, information overload can make situation for higher Commanders uncertain. Therefore, Mission command is to be included in Doctrines of contemporary militaries as a fundamental Command and Control concept [39].

It has to be realized that conducting Low Intensity Battles and Stabilizing Operations as a result of armed conflicts requires more resources in terms of manpower, equipment, education as well as time. This aspects merits attention during planning and training phases of Militaries [40].



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Considering localized nature of present and future war scenarios, Mission Command can be the right strategy with necessary pre-conditions.

Mission Command is not fire and forget. It is not only a debate between centralized and de-centralized execution either. It is a mindset which has to be inculcated in your Military culture so as to further translate into right leadership qualities. Uncertain requirements of future battle field merits preparing for evolving war scenarios [41].

#### **2.4 Myths about Mission Command**

**Wehrmacht are credited with the introducing the concept of Mission Command and always employed it during World War II.** It has to be seen that they employed it while remaining within the confines of tactical limitations as per Fuehrer's directives during particular battles only. However, not every commander had the leverage to go as per his own desire without clear instructions from higher authorities. Wehrmacht were a politically enthusiastic force relying at times on penalties to ensure discipline in the Army.

**During World War II Allies focused towards Centralized control of the battle and never on Mission Command.** It has been seen that Allies did understand the importance of Mission Command, assigned their subordinates narrow zones which were carefully monitored but were less flexible since they kept resources at Army level unlike Wehrmacht who were more flexible by employing the resources at Combined Arms Teams level. Allies were more effective in battles requiring heavy build-up of forces than employing Mission Command.

**Mission Command concept is anti-centralized Command.** It has to be understood that Mission Command does not create hurdles for Centralized Command system. It is a blend of right combination of any Military with regards to their peacetime training, structure, particular situation of the battle and then leadership quality to assess the point at which authority has to be passed on to a junior level and to what extent [42].

**Employing the concept of Mission Command is a single decision of Commander.** It was more applicable in the past, however, still detailed planning and execution brought better results at that time. Particular decision of a Commander certainly impacts the very concept of Mission Command. It makes future assessment even more uncertain as to whether peace time training aspects will directed towards initiative of junior leaders or a Centralized control. Unless Commanders decision is institutionalized based on collective preparation and based on joint experience, it will be detrimental to Mission Command concept. Creativity is the hall mark of Military profession but practically, focus on superfluous arrangements and fear of unknown has brought creative ability towards a deadlock. Some comment that recent advancement in technology has made the practicality of employing Mission Command needless. However, on the contrary, despite robust military communication network, Battlefield environment is still turbulent. It creates difficulty for Commanders to identify clear objectives with limited scope and ensuring mutual understanding of multiple forces involved in the field [43].

**Preconditions for employing Mission Command concept in the past and today are same.** It has to be realized that scope of Military battles in past was restricted and decisions at subordinate level were not affecting multinational forces or organizations. Moreover, communication system was not robust at that time forcing Commanders to rely mostly on junior leaders. Today as Eitan Shamir mentioned, initiative in present environment requires coordination with different Armies and their structures. A case in point is Mission Command concept in the US, UK, and Israeli armies with different methods due to dissimilar cultures. Mission Command today is based more on collective professionalism, practice and training [44].



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### **2.5 Psychological Domain**

Previous studies have identified the myths related to Mission Command concept and training aspects required to prepare for the future. Twenty first century has added few dimensions to this old concept which are Informational, Civilian and Psychological. While Informational and Civilian aspects during Low Intensity Battles and Stabilizing Operations have been well discussed in the past, it is the aspect of Psychological domain which needs more deliberation in today's Battle field environment.

Morale and Motivation affect a soldier and those soldiers combined together affect Military Operations. Weapons, equipment and material resources are nothing without Soldiers. On the other hand, senior officers are responsible for setting the right priorities. Clausewitz mentioned that factors of Morale and Motivation combine the spirit that saturates complete war scenario. He described the major factors contributing towards Morale and Motivation are the professionalism of the commanders, the knowledge and bravery of soldiers, and their nationalistic approach [45].

Trauma and anxiety are permanent features of any Military action. Anthony Kellett includes exhaustion, long duration tenure, different cultures and areas, availability of food, refreshment opportunities, strategies used by different Armies, feeling of achievement under uncertain conditions, identifying friend or foe, political sensitivities attached with results (win or lose), are the attributes of war for any Military soldier [46].

Low-Intensity battles and stabilizing operations can be for prolonged durations with no clear end in sight. Compared to the conventional conflicts, soldiers are faced with a borderless, directionless and faceless enemy to cope with. Armies employed in such environment have to exercise constraint, remain neutral and still counter life threats. More often than not, such scenarios do not give reaction time to shift from defensive to aggressive posture or vice versa. Implications of Political decisions at times do not coincide with clear decision making required at the tactical level. Ironically, material and resources required for such operations are more as compared to conventional wars. Troops operating under such situations have to adopt the variations in tactics and cope with the concepts of other Command teams which has its own demerits and difficulties.

To operate successfully in today's environment, Armies have to identify the right threat spectrum through training of officers in International Affairs to maintain the required Morale and Motivation level of soldiers. Since a soldier of today is well aware and well informed, he needs to value the conflict he is participating in and should be able to link nationalistic or a patriotic approach with his or her military duty.

### **3. Research Findings and Opinions**

Human Mission Command does not exonerate senior Military Commanders from accepting responsibilities. Rather it brings an added task for any Army to train and develop Commanders with revolutionary and creative mindset who can understand political sensitivities, link it with Military requirements and achieve targets identified at the National level. Once existing orders for subordinates do not fit into overall situation, Commanders should allow juniors to exercise Mission Command concept.

Mission Command gives onus of responsibility to junior Commanders by providing them freedom of manoeuvre while remaining within confines. However, it has to be observed that a junior officer of today is suffering from Information Overload or is really well informed. In such a scenario, being a good student of International Relations becomes imperative to acquaint oneself with history, current crisis and way forward.



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Military training needs to inculcate Critical thinking ability among senior and junior leaders alike. Commanders having Critical thinking ability will have necessary negotiation and consensus building skills to agree or disagree which can serve as a right combination in a cross cultural diverse situation. United States Army depends on exhaustive orders and British Army give orders in general terms.

Mission Command of twenty first century environment is different from the past. Due to Globalization, interdependency and fight for natural resources will be more evident. Effects of your right or wrong decision are not restricted to your own country. Future Battlefield environment warrants leaders with combined war fighting capabilities so as to understand dynamics of internationally integrated Battlefield scenarios. Training needs to develop those attributes useful to align National priorities with Military partners in order to tackle the complexities involved in dealing with dissimilar organizations. For Militaries around the world, twenty first century is likely to be a period of continuous conflict. With sophisticated weapons and dispersed Battle formations, importance of Mission Command increases. Need of the hour is the understanding that at times it is more easy to spend on production and acquisition but it will be a race against time.

The advancement in Technology is advantageous both for own and enemy forces. While own Commanders have the advantage of robust communication network, a well-planned Cyber-attack by the enemy can also disrupt key areas of any country. Moreover, wide spread dispersion of forces brings more uncertainty for Commanders despite technology highlighting the importance of Mission Command.

Myth of Civil Military conflict needs to be tackled with appropriate understanding of using force, its limitations and inherent risks involved in it. Senior Military Commanders need to have requisite Communication skills to proffer advice at the political level as well as pass the right perspective at the subordinate level. Strategic, Operational and Tactical level commanders must understand the authority of Government decisions over Military requirements.

Armies should be prepared to accept risk and errors made by subordinate Commanders. Although acceptability level of risk depends on type of operation and decisions made at the strategic level while maintaining equilibrium of Military requirements.

Identify strong areas of juniors to raise their Morale and Motivation level. Career of officers should not replace the Mission Command concept where juniors are likely commit blunders at times. During recent examples, Islamic State in Iraq, Syria and Taliban in Afghanistan operate on instructions.

There is no doubt that present era is different from the past. Now a wrong decision at lower level can affect not only your own forces but various Command teams operating side by side. Range and scope of operations have expanded making it difficult for Commanders to set clear objectives and accept risks attached with Mission Command operations all the time. However, considering the advancement in technology and accessibility, junior leaders must be good students of Geo Politics to understand not only the current scenario but also the back ground of issue at hand to identify the correct threat spectrum and sensitivities at the national and political level.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Mission Command is still a relevant concept of twenty first century and has to be seen holistically. Mission Command is not a tussle between De-centralized and Centralized control but a combination of way of Military life and mind set adopted during peace time to bear the fruits during Battle field scenarios. One shoe fits all is not likely to provide results over night but rather through standardization, mutual trust, risk acceptance and freedom of action in the Army. Question of why



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and what should be the hall mark of senior level but how should be delegated to lower level Commanders only after detailed analysis, deliberation, assessment, understanding of context and situation on ground by Commanders. Even if decentralized execution has to be adopted, it should be within tactical limitations provided by a Senior Commander.

Mission Command can be a right tool to link strategic planning rationalism with Military conservatism among own, international forces and various other Organization. In today's Battlefield environment, humans will decide battles and outcome. Victory may have to be re-defined in today's war as compared to the past experiences.

Combining hard and soft power is the need of the hour. Its understanding is possible with right understanding of Geo Politics not only by senior ranks but also by the junior level. We should make an endeavour to learn lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq since no stability is possible under fire. To overcome hostile and rogue elements, need is to inculcate interpersonal communications and negotiation skills in Commanders to understand environment of interagency and multinational forces where there will be no clear lines of Authority in order to reach to a logical conclusions under the ambit of Mission Command concept.

Future Battle field will certainly be intense, fluid and stressful. Despite advancement in technology, commanders will still remain uncertain about next course of action and right decision. This paper endeavours to contribute to the existing literature by highlighting the importance of Geo Politics for all Commanders and role of psychological factors like Morale and Motivation for subordinates to achieve desired results. The paper is likely to create an impact that no Military solution is likely to provide long term answers to conflicts unless it is integrated with National decision making. Creating value of conflict and addressing psychological domain for all ranks operating under Mission Command is need of the hour.

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