

THE BRITISH ARMY

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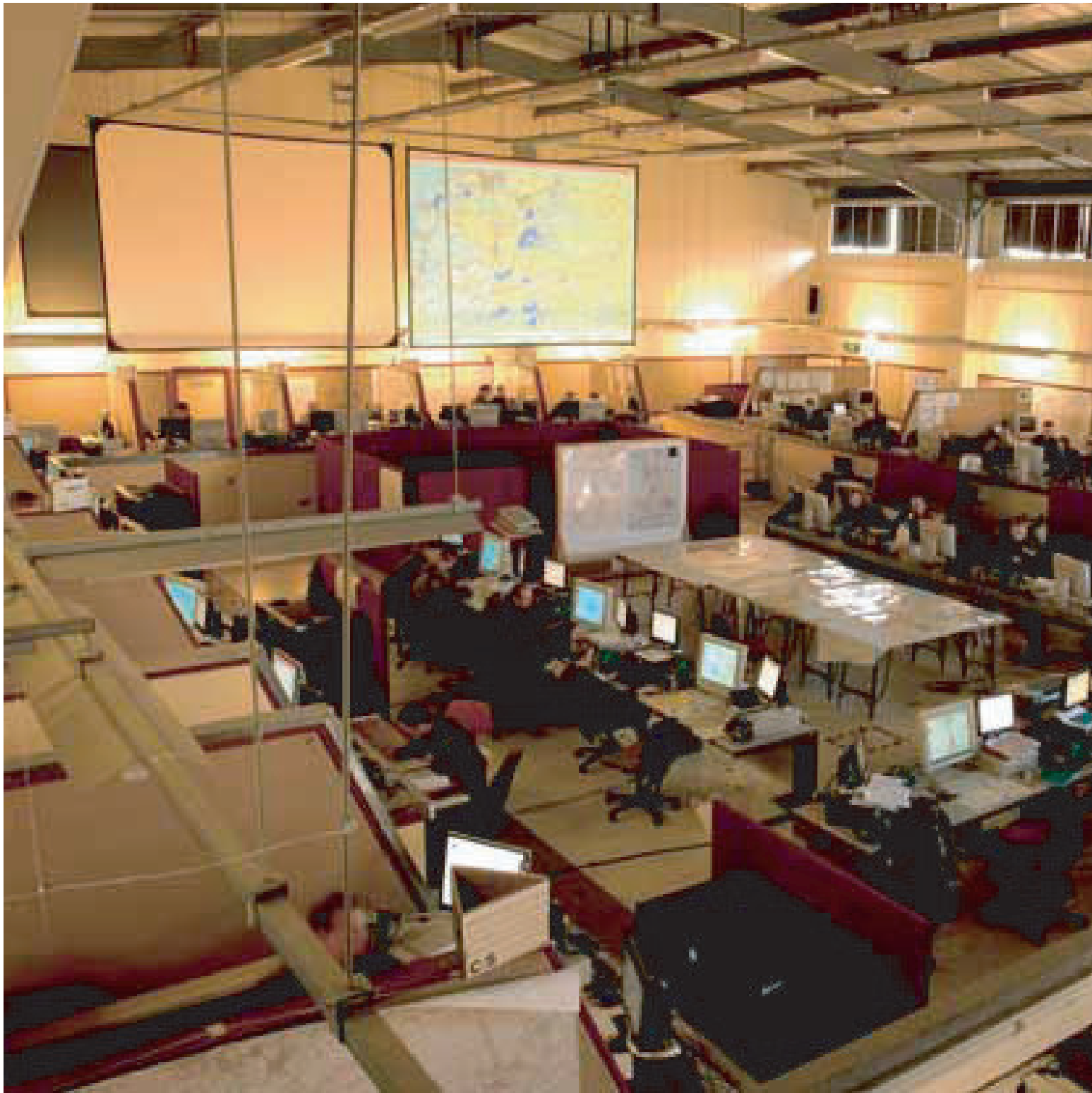


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# COMMAND AND CONTROL ON THE MODERN BATTLEFIELD

By Jonathon Riley, Lieutenant-General,  
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a Lieutenant Colonel as long ago as 1995 in Goražde, I found myself not only commanding the Task Force – with my immediate superior being a Lieutenant General – but also heavily engaged in brokering inter-factional meetings to resolve disputes, UN civil affairs, humanitarian aid; and then switching to commanding combat operations with close air support.

Despite changing expectations, some things do not change. In my opinion, command as a personal exercise is timeless, unrelated to one era or another. This is because, although technology changes, the human condition does not. In terms of the way our brains work, we are no different from our remote ancestors who lived in the depths of the Old Stone Age. The way we analyse situations, relate to other people, exercise leadership and make decisions is the same now as it was then. General Rupert Smith has said that the commander has to be the man – or woman – who can recognise a problem in its entirety, define what is decisive (and very rarely is that one event or action only), and then change the situation to advantage in order to win. So, let us look briefly at what has and has not changed in the business of operational command.

#### LEADERSHIP

Leadership in its pure sense has been defined rather well by Field Marshal Montgomery as: “The will to dominate, together with the character which inspires confidence. A leader has got to learn to dominate the events which surround him; he must never allow these events to get the better of him...” This is true at every level of command, but I do think that the lower down the ladder of command one goes, the more command and leadership are synonymous. There comes a point – somewhere

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Field Marshal Montgomery

between company and battalion – above which command ceases to be primarily leadership driven, although leadership never disappears as an essential attribute of command, and is balanced by the other two elements of decision-making and management.

Leadership is, in my personal view, an instinctive quality, and always best when it is exercised instinctively. Let me explain what I mean because there is a debate over whether leaders are born or made. The answer is a bit of both, but more of the former. We are all born with our instincts, and these come from our genetic inheritance. Leadership, like followership, or aggression, or self preservation, is instinctive. Therefore, most people have some of it, some have a great deal, some have none at all – but in those people who have it, it can be developed. It is not, by the way, to be confused with intuition. Military

Since the fall of Communism, there is no doubt that we have expected more and more from our soldiers, our non-commissioned officers and our young officers. But at the same time, a great deal more has been – and is – expected of our senior officers, from battalion to corps commanders. *The Washington Post* recently quoted one senior US official describing General David Petraeus: “[Petraeus] redefined during his tour in Iraq what it means to be a commanding general. He broke the mould. The traditional responsibilities were not enough anymore. You had to be adroit at international politics. You had to be a skilled diplomat. You had to be savvy with the press, and you had to be a really sophisticated leader of a large organization.” That is all true, but it could have been written about any of a dozen US or British generals that I could name. Nor is this confined to Generals. As

Command and staff training interiors and exercising Battalion HQ



of decision or command: they implement agreed measures, or they control manpower and resources, in order to carry out the commander's plan. The plan belongs to the commander – not the staff. He will have led its development; he must lead its implementation. This is the same in peace or in war.

Therefore, the commander alone holds responsibility, and the staff must be absolutely clear on those decisions that must be referred to him, and him alone; on which decisions can be taken by subordinates; which must be referred to a superior authority; and which are really decisions relating to control measures and can be taken by the appropriate staff officer. If commanders do not obey this philosophy, then the personal factor in command is lost, and the staff system takes over. This is not to say that staff action should be regarded as somehow unsavoury. It is the commander who will contribute to success by a timely decision; and the staff which will first inform and then implement that decision. Success comes from the correct engagement of both.

**DECISION MAKING**

Decision making for a commander on operations is very frequently all about seizing and maintaining the initiative. It is, by definition, a cognitive process, whether conscious or unconscious. The conscious method is through process; the unconscious is intuitive. Some people are strong at one, and some at the other. Rarely are people good at both and when forced to do the one they are least good at – usually when this requires an intuitive leap with

little help at hand – there are difficulties. Both methods have their place: process before a battle; intuition during it. But intuitive decisions always need the reality check of being tested against time and space, resources and the environment. This is particularly true in a place like Afghanistan where the environment is harsh, the supply line long and the communications tenuous. But it was equally true in Sierra Leone where resources were far more restricted and the pressures of the political environment were felt right down to the lowest level.

There are those who say that because of the sort of complexity encountered in modern conflict, intuitive decision-making is no longer possible: that the commander is faced with so many facets of a campaign, that he will be forced to rely on some formal process of evaluation in order to be able to make rational decisions. I believe, however, that the converse is true, especially if one accepts the contention that war and conflict are not rational. The commander who surrenders himself wholly to process, or who allows himself to be deluged by the massive amounts of data available from modern command systems, and who abandons intuition, becomes the prisoner of that process and therefore of predictability. Defeating an agile insurgent or terrorist, or dealing with a complex dispute in a peace support operation, requires a clear head and the ability to see the essentials.

This raises the age-old question of the position of the commander during operations. The commander must be in a position constantly to review the situation, making fresh estimates in the light of events, and changing

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Planning operations against the Taliban at the Army headquarters in Lashkar Gah, Helmand Province, Afghanistan, July 2008

the plan as required – since as any soldier knows, no plan survives contact with the photocopier, never mind the enemy. Agility of thought, decision, and action are essential. Only by this means will risks be calculated and the initiative be maintained. There is not, and never will be, a hard and fast answer to this question. It is situational awareness that drives this: where is the information best focused? Is it in the main headquarters? Or is it in the field?

The Generals of the Great War come in for a good deal of criticism for remaining behind the line once battle was joined but the fact is that without radio, the nearer they got to the front line, the less they could command. It is different now. I well recall Brigadier Andrew Mackay facing this question during the operation to recapture Musa Qualeh in Afghanistan in December 2007 and arriving, correctly, at the decision to leave his main headquarters and take to his Warrior armoured vehicle just before the main assault was launched. Intuitive, rapid, decision making without situational awareness is

dangerous – it merely gets one into trouble faster than might otherwise have been the case.

But generally, it is hard to be in the forefront of battle when the modern General's area of responsibility may be huge, the troops dispersed and co-located with civilians. The troops are likely to come from more than one nation, and more than one culture with all the considerations of what may be acceptable to political and public opinion back home. In such a situation, the first challenge of leadership is to gain the trust, confidence and respect of the troops through frequent – but not too frequent – personal contact; to instil discipline; and to bring subordinate commanders and senior staffs routinely into one's confidence. Regular command calls, VTCs and visits are essential – as is a culture of plain speaking.

Morale must be maintained, whether in the headquarters or in remote detachments. National caveats, different military cultures and political considerations will bear on the mission; and these factors test professional competence as much as any challenge



Afghanistan, I found that I had to modify that view. When fighting Al Qaeda, the Taliban and others, we face many asymmetries – the greatest of which lie in culture. These people’s culture is not to opt for a quick victory, but to take the long view, to ride out Western intervention, take military defeat in the short term in order to survive in the long term trusting that Westerners will not stick with it.

They will do all they can to inflict casualties in order to attack opinion at home while being unmindful of their own or those of the local people – save where these can be exploited in the virtual realm or by using international, humanitarian law against us. So when targeting such an enemy we have to make certain that the target is the right one and that its destruction justifies the possible fall-out. We have to be certain that civilian casualties are avoided if humanly possible and minimised if they cannot be avoided. Thus we are obliged to quest for certainty.

In a modern theatre of operations, the commander, and especially the general, may be dealing with war-fighting, counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism, peace-keeping, humanitarian relief, and the reform of local institutions simultaneously, within the same battlespace. Military factors may well be less important than economics, politics, or social needs; and the successful completion of one part of the campaign may obstruct the execution of its later stages. Those who were involved in rebuilding the infrastructure of the former Yugoslavia, or Afghanistan, or Iraq after it had been comprehensively bombed by the Allied air forces; or anyone involved in trying to re-raise the Iraqi Army after its disbandment, will know this. This is the General as virtuoso, not just as competent military professional.

Then we must consider the legal and media factors of modern war. These mean that a fourth essential function of command must be added to the three

“Plain speaking extends to giving honest military advice to policy makers, no matter how inconvenient or uncomfortable”

in any major war in history. Plain speaking extends to giving honest military advice to policy makers, no matter how inconvenient or uncomfortable that advice may be.

#### CERTAINTY AND UNCERTAINTY

For many years we have all been schooled in the belief that whoever makes and implements a decision faster than his opponent gains a tremendous, decisive, advantage. Seeking vainly for certainty in the uncertain field of combat, we all learned, will result only in being made to react to a more agile enemy.

Certainly, in Goražde and in Sierra Leone, most of my decisions were based on very partial information, 90 per cent of which later turned out to be rubbish – but I moved faster and therefore gained the upper hand. It led me to the view that in any contest between two opponents, one of whom relies heavily on process and technology, and one who relies on intuition, the latter is more likely to triumph if all other things are equal. In Iraq, and later

identified by Julian Thompson<sup>1</sup>. As well as finding out what is going on, communicating with his staff to solve problems, and communicating his intentions to his subordinates, the commander must also be prepared to explain his actions – to his own people, to the enemy, and to the uncommitted through the exploitation of the virtual realm of communication, faced with a media that is, generally, at best indifferent and usually seeking to apply different, far higher, standards of behaviour to us than to the enemy. Time and again I have found myself asking a question to journalists, editors and media owners, a question that all of us should ask them: “What is it about these barbarians we are fighting that is so admirable, that you are determined to broadcast their propaganda, anxious to undermine all we do, and willing to see them and all their works succeed?”

<sup>1</sup> Three essential functions of command identified by Julian Thompson:

1. To find out what is going on
2. To communicate his intentions to his subordinates and his superiors
3. To communicate with the staff so that they can solve problems