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Rediscover the Art of Command and Control

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By Vice Admiral Robert F. Willard, USN

The root tenets of command and control are timeless—but they have been lost in the chase for new technologies. Commanders must exert exacting control over their forces to advance their plans if they are to defeat that future adversary who is multidimensional, well equipped, well trained, willing to fight, and intending to win.

We in the U.S. military made a mistake when we combined *command and control* with *communications and computers* to yield the C4 acronym. Following that initiative, the acquisition of and training on command and control (C2) tools—computers, radios, and software—became confused with the requirement for continuous training in the operational art of and methods for effective control of forces. Frequently these days, commanders tinker with new technologies such as chat rooms, three-dimensional graphics, and web sites and call that command and control. The immense power of all those tools will go to waste until we master the whole of C2 and understand precisely where and when the tools play in the commander's decisions and responsibility to control the fight. We have lost sight of a fundamentally operational duty.

Command and control is a lost operational art that has been swept into cyberspace by a whirlwind of technologies, made less significant by weak doctrine and misunderstood terms, and put off by future visions of every war fighter possessing relevant information. We continually misuse phrases such as "command by negation" and "centralized command, decentralized control" to infer that we no longer require, or desire, knowledgeable and action-oriented control nodes above the tactical or unit level. Sometimes, we act as though we are afraid of our superiors knowing too much of our tactical business for fear of being micromanaged.

For purposes of this discussion, consider this to be command and control from a Navy task group commander's perspective—the first operational-level commander, as opposed to the tactical level below or the more strategic level above. Think of the subordinate commanders as Navy warfare commanders, including the air defense, strike warfare, and sea combat commander, and so forth. These subordinate commanders are tactical-level commanders with their own focused command-and-control centers, and they are linked to their on-scene commanders during a battle.

Command is the doctrinal assignment of authority. Possessing a measure of command is a prerequisite to exerting control. *Control* is defined as guiding the operation. When a commander redirects uncommitted forces to exploit an enemy mistake, he is guiding the operation—controlling it. The action presumed the senior commander knew something the tactical-level commanders did not. This leads us to a basic rule of effective C2: The basis for a commander exercising control should be better insight into what is required to win the day than is evidenced by the subordinate commander's actions.

That is a tall order. Both commanders generally possess a good deal of tactical information. The key is whether the operational commander is armed with something new or different that can help.

Control of forces consumes time and may disrupt the continuity of the plan being executed, so generally the less control that is required the better. But a desire to minimize control actions does not obviate the commander's responsibility to guide the operation. The commander must stay fully informed by every possible means, so that control actions help and do not hinder—every time. The commander's sources of insight into what is required to win the day include knowledge of strategic and operational goals, overall awareness of the tactical situation, knowledge of the tactical plan, familiarity with tactical procedures, awareness of actions of enemy forces, and the status of own forces. It is worthwhile to examine where these sources of insight might come from, as they provide the basis for the commander's decision making and, ultimately, the choice to control or guide the operation:

- Strategic/operational goals—mission statement, commander's intent, daily intentions
- Tactical picture—common operational picture, communications, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
- Tactical plan—deliberate or crisis action plans
- Tactical procedure—special instructions, standard operating procedures, operational taskings, intentions
- Enemy forces—intelligence preparation of the battlefield, course of action assumptions, threat warning/intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
- Own forces—apportionment guidance, tracking of one's own forces

If the objective of effective control is to contribute and not interfere, consider what contribution to the fight the commander might make by possessing new information or insight in one or more of these areas. In other words, how can the commander help? Here's how:

- Strategic/operational goals—maintain alignment
- Tactical picture—provide situational awareness
- Tactical plan—advance the plan
- Tactical procedure—comply with procedure
- Enemy forces—counter the enemy
- Own forces—adjust apportionment

The commander's up-to-date and in-depth knowledge in each of these areas is crucial to guiding the operation effectively. Let us examine contributions the commander can make in each category:

- *Maintain alignment* . The commander's task is to ensure that all execution decisions and apportionment requests remain aligned with the operation's mission statement and commander's intent (purpose, sequence, end state, and priorities). There must be a direct correlation between the commander's guidance and the plan formulated to accomplish the mission, and all direction during plan execution should support the mission statement and commander's intent.
- *Provide situational awareness* . The commander must assess the status of plan execution constantly. Using the available common operational picture, communications, and intelligence, the commander must determine whether friendly force disposition is in accordance with the plan, whether enemy force disposition is in accordance with expectations, and whether forces are executing according to the plan and procedures. The common operational picture is not a particular system, but the agreed on frame of reference, which generally includes common computer

graphics, links, symbology, and descriptive rule sets between operators. If the favored computer system is not available at all command-and-control nodes, agreements must be reached regarding alternate methods of sharing information to help build the situational awareness of lesser-equipped partners.

- *Advance the plan* . The commander must monitor all aspects of plan execution against the timeline. This infers detailed knowledge of all elements of the plan (enemy and own force disposition, passive plan, active plan, and contingencies). Rarely are plans executed without deviation. When an unanticipated condition is encountered, the tactical or on-scene commander must adjust the plan correspondingly. The goal is to have every decision and every direction move the plan forward, on the timeline, toward the desired end state; the commander is responsible for attaining this goal.
- *Comply with procedure* . In monitoring execution, the commander oversees compliance with warfighting procedures (published in special instructions, standard operating procedures, operational taskings, and intentions) to avoid blue-on-blue engagements and achieve efficiencies in plan execution.
- *Counter the enemy* . Intelligence preparation of the battle space and knowledge of enemy capabilities result in assumptions regarding probable enemy courses of action. The commander must be responsive to emerging intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance information that differ significantly from expectations and be prepared to adjust the execution plan. Knowing what the enemy is doing at all times and being quick to countermove on receipt of reliable information is perhaps the number one goal in command and control.
- *Adjust apportionment* . Ground forces; ships; aircraft; air space; command, control, communications, and computer infrastructure; and time—all are apportioned. Any changes in asset availability, attrition, on-scene requirements, priorities, enemy disposition, or enemy tactics may trigger a need for reapportionment. The commander must monitor for those changes, anticipate requests, and be prepared to adjust as necessary to advance the plan. Of all the apportionment factors, the one most frequently adjusted is time. It is almost inevitable that the commander will be faced with several decisions regarding allotting more time to accomplish the plan. Very often the operational commander, who knows what is occurring in all warfare areas and can judge the consequence of a change in timing in one element, is in the best position to make the call.

Control actions by the commander usually result from unplanned deviations in the operation during which the subordinate commander's counteractions are questionable, or when the commander is in possession of time-critical intelligence that might be useful on-scene. A control action might be simply alerting the subordinate commander of the issue and determining intent or, if necessary, preempting actions or directing new ones.

The commander's level of knowledge is the basis for control actions. If he lacks knowledge in any area, his control actions in that area become suspect. Keeping up with the operation in all six areas can be extremely challenging depending on the complexity of the plan. Consider the dynamics involved: the only area that is relatively static is "maintain alignment," because the mission statement and commander's intent should be relatively fixed frames of reference. In contrast, situational awareness, plan execution, procedures, enemy actions, and apportionment are exceedingly dynamic.

Now imagine the challenge in keeping up with multiple plans being executed concurrently. In naval operations, it is possible that plans for air defense, surface defense, undersea warfare, strike, information operations, special operations, and amphibious operations all will be executed at the same time. Commanders must organize their command centers to be able to handle oversight of multiple warfare area plans at once or to prioritize the plans and exert control over the most critical ones.

These root tenets of command and control are timeless, and must be better understood now that warfare has become faster and more complex. Our commanders must be better trained and equipped to assimilate the status of the six areas of control at high speed, especially when multiple warfare area plans are executing concurrently. They then must compare their situation awareness and assessments of what is required to advance the plan with the actions of their subordinate commanders and act—remembering always that their goal is to contribute information and perspective that are not already evidenced.

We must rediscover the lost art of command and control. Our training and developmental emphasis in the Navy and joint forces needs to embrace command and control as a fundamental operational task, with priority on schooling our commanders in what they must know, where to access that information, and how to act on it once they have it to guide the operation more effectively. We must better understand what the common picture is, what it is not, how to make it available to all levels of the command-and-control hierarchy, and how to use emerging technologies to exchange relevant, timely information and guidance. Finally, we must school commanders on the challenges of controlling more than one dynamic operation at once, how to recognize when their ability to guide effectively is being overcome, and what actions they might take to ensure that on-scene commanders continue to receive the assistance they need to advance their plans.

Ultimately, command and control is the commander's contribution to winning the fight. One day, the U.S. military is going to encounter an enemy who is multidimensional, well equipped, well trained, willing to fight, and intending to win. When that day comes, the commanders who are best trained to exert exacting control over their forces to relentlessly advance their plans will win the day—every time.

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