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Practicing mission command for future battlefield challenges: the case of the Swedish army

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ABSTRACT

As armies across Europe are currently developing capabilities to fight a high-intensity conventional war against a peer adversary, these armies will have to develop units that can fight independently in a complex environment, with limited direction from higher levels of command. Integral to this process is the need for a competent practice of mission command, viewed as a key component of maneuver warfare. The article identifies a set of enablers that need to be present in a military organization in order to practice mission command efficiently, including shared understanding and trust; initiative; a tolerant approach to failure, success, and learning; and the acceptance of mission command as an all-encompassing practice. The article then presents data from interviews with Swedish army officers focusing on the presence and significance of these enablers in their professional context. The article concludes that the increasing complexity of the peacetime tasks performed by military officers give rise to conflicting leadership demands. Consequently, exercising mission command and socializing younger colleagues into the practice is a far from straightforward process, which frequently competes with other demands placed on officers by their colleagues, the organization that they are part of, or the broader societal context.

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Introduction

Many small-state armies in Europe are currently in the process of developing capabilities to fight a high-intensity conventional war against a high-technology peer adversary. This prospect will require these armies to improve their ability for protection and to fight dispersed in the face of efficient target location, air attack, and missile technology. Simultaneously, modern disruption technology, e.g. 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, high-intensity environment, with limited direction from higher levels of command; i.e. through the competent utilization of mission command. This article focuses on the contemporary practice of mission command in the Swedish Army. The question addressed is how the broad context of the officer profession, including war and peacetime tasks, combat exercises

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as well as administration and unit production, affect the ability of army officers to practice mission command.

Military studies literature commonly elevates mission command as a supreme leadership philosophy and command method in battle, underscoring that mission command is one central precondition for the effective execution of maneuver warfare (Lind 1985; Biddle 2006; Friedman 2017). However, for a military organization to effectively employ mission command, the practices associated with it must permeate the entire organization, its education system and the identities and behavior of officers and soldiers serving in it (van Creveld 1982; Labarbera 2018; Vandergriff 2019). As Eitan Shamir has shown, the implementation and practice of mission command in different militaries is far from straightforward. Rather, mission command in the US, UK, and Israeli armies has taken quite different expressions, relating in particular to their disparate military cultures. Moreover, stating adherence to mission command at the doctrinal level is one thing; comprehensive practice is quite another. Military culture, civil–military relations, the particular demands of the counterinsurgency wars of the 2000s, traditions in education, training and human resources policies, and technological development are all factors that affect the practice of mission command in any particular national setting (Shamir 2011).

Thus, the preconditions for practicing mission command in modern armies are increasingly broad in scope. Despite some scholarly attention to the subject in a historical, doctrinal, or philosophical perspective, the experiences and perspectives of contemporary practitioners in relation to mission command remain underexplored in military studies. This article addresses this gap by assessing current preconditions for the practice of mission command, as viewed by members of the Swedish Army officer corps. In the context of the Swedish Army, the importance of proficiency in mission command is likely even higher than in comparably sized small-state armies. Given Sweden's policy of military non-alignment, and the consequent absence of external security guarantees enjoyed by NATO members, Sweden can only count on its national-armed forces in the case of a military conflict erupting in its neighborhood. In addition, Sweden's armed forces are decidedly smaller than those of neighboring and fellow non-NATO member Finland. Although the Swedish Army is envisioned to grow in coming decades, it must always realistically expect to be numerically inferior in terms of manpower and operational combat systems to a potential adversary. This fact puts an even greater emphasis on the importance of the army's proficiency in mission command and maneuver warfare, through the competence and training of its officers.

Drawing on existing scholarly literature, the article identifies a set of central preconditions, or enablers, that need to be present in a military organization in order to practice mission command efficiently. These include shared understanding and trust; initiative; a tolerant approach to failure, success, and learning; and the acceptance of mission command as an all-encompassing practice. The article then presents data from interviews with Swedish army officers, asked to elaborate on the presence and significance of these enablers in their daily work. The article concludes that whereas the competent practice of mission command should be considered a precondition for efficient modern land forces; the increasing complexity of the tasks performed by military officers gives rise to conflicting demands for leadership. Therefore, exercising mission command and socializing younger colleagues into the practice is far from straightforward process, which frequently competes with other demands placed on officers by their colleagues, the organization that they are part of, or society at large.

Mission command in a contemporary context

The concept of mission command evolved through Prussian experiences in the Napoleonic wars and was later developed and refined through German tactical innovations, including doctrinal changes in the German imperial army in 1917, including infiltration tactics and flexible deep defense, as well as the *Wehrmacht's* highly successful *blitzkrieg* during WWII (Gudmundsson 1995; Condell and Zabecki 2008; Frieser 2013; Samuels 1995). These innovations built on and were preconditioned by German officer training, which in the first half of the 20th century emphasized the socialization of its officer corps into a specific command culture (Muth 2011). In the aftermath of WWII, German tactics and most of all the philosophy of mission command, indeed had an enduring impact on military thinking throughout the Western world. German experiences and innovations were thoroughly analyzed in the post-war period and the leadership philosophy of mission command is integral to the concept of maneuver warfare (Leonhard 1994; Biddle 2006; Storr 2009; Friedman 2017). According to Lind, achieving the speed in decision and action required to outmaneuver the opponent require all four steps in Boyd's OODA-loop (*Observe, Orient, Decide, Act*) to be conducted at a level of decision-making that is in direct contact with developments on the ground. In turn, this requires decentralized leadership based on "mission-type orders," which define the mission; the commander's intent and what is to be achieved, but leaving decisions on how to execute the mission to subordinate commanders (Boyd 2018; Lind 1985).

Yet, mission command is much more than a means to execute a decision-cycle faster than the opponent; it simultaneously refers to a culture, a leadership philosophy, a concept that facilitates operating in complex and chaotic environments, and a means of facilitating emergent practices of warfighting (Vagnjel 2018). Thus, mission command denotes core preconditions and principles of command, as well as concrete methods to translate them into practice, which are well in tune with the increasing complexity and uncertainty of the tasks that military forces are facing or will face in the future. The notion of mission command as a culture and a philosophy also underline that at its core are human relationships – particularly in relation to the hierarchy within the organization, between superiors and subordinates, emphasizing the capability for decision-making and initiative and the avoidance of micro-management, favoring autonomy and flexibility (Labarbera 2018).

Mission command does not preclude detailed command. Indeed, a high degree of coordination is often necessary in order to achieve the desired effects. And since the appropriate balance is determined by the properties of the organization, situational requirements, and context, a critical feature of command is deciding what can be delegated to subordinates and what degree of control to impose on them (Grauer 2016; Flynn and Schrankel 2013; Martin 2017). However, a fundamental principle is that command and orders should not contain more detailed instructions than necessary to perform the task at hand – the ideal should be to always decentralize and delegate decision-making to the extent possible.

These principles are, however, not always easy to follow. The strategic context of military operations in recent decades, as well as technological innovations, have not always been in synch with the exercise of mission command in modern armies, and may

even have countered it. Indeed, in the low-intensity counterinsurgency wars of the last decades, most engagements have been performed at the lowest tactical levels (and have thus been possible to monitor at higher levels of command). Moreover, their outcomes have potentially had substantial strategic implications; and the propensity to accept risk and casualties has been very low. This has implied an increased tendency towards centralized and detailed command. Moreover, new technology, especially in information and communication systems, has provided senior commanders with tools enabling close monitoring of events on the ground. In theory, these systems can serve in favor of mission command if used primarily as a means to facilitate communication of the higher commander's intent and for promoting a widely shared understanding of the operational situation and objectives. However, they also facilitate interference with the work of subordinates, potentially a tempting prospect during low-intensity operations but impossible in high-intensity conflict. Thus, advanced command systems may invite micro-management (Storr 2003; Vogelaar and Kramer 2004; Finkel 2011; Shamir 2011).

In order to assess the contemporary preconditions for practicing mission command, a logical starting point is the central aspects of military culture present in an organization, which translates into observable features of this culture that officers can relate to in their daily work. These cultural features are henceforth referred to as enablers of mission command and draw on existing research and literature on the subject.

Enablers of mission command

Shared understanding and trust

A fundamental feature of an organizational environment conducive to mission command is that its members share common points of reference regarding the higher purpose of their activities, the contextual preconditions under which these can be achieved, and mutual confidence that fellow members are both capable and willing to act in pursuit of common objectives. Thus, the notions of shared understanding and trust are central preconditions for the ability of military organizations to exercise mission command. These preconditions are interlinked – shared understanding denotes a commonality of knowledge, perceptions, values, practices, and purpose, which military officers ideally adopt, or become socialized into, through education and training. In turn, trust denotes confidence that military personnel can depend on each other's ability to act with sufficient determination and competence in accordance with this shared understanding (Ploumis 2020). These preconditions form the basic elements of a culture of cohesion, implying the development of shared understanding and mutual trust between and among commanders and subordinates at all levels (Labarbera 2017; Wilson 2018). Indeed, the simultaneous existence of shared understanding and trust enable subordinate commanders to assume responsibility for carrying out missions in line with the commander's intent with a significant freedom of action, and commanders to rely on subordinates' capabilities. Trust should stem primarily from the degree of professional competence among military personnel, rather than from interpersonal acquaintances or relationships (Shamir 2011). Professional competence can be assessed and perceived from the perspective of reputation – a proven record of competence and capability in authentic situations. It can also be understood as a property imbued in a certain military

rank or position. For example, it may be assumed that an officer of a certain rank has the knowledge and training to perform certain tasks. In turn, the former assessment of trust focuses on the individual, whereas the latter rather depends on perceptions of the quality and evenness of the system for military education, training, and promotion.

Initiative

One of the most essential preconditions for mission command is the ability and willingness of military personnel, at all levels from soldier to general, to practice autonomy and act on their own initiative (Shamir 2011; Ploumis and Pilalis 2018). This implies the adoption of an active, problem-solving approach at all tiers of the organization, which should ideally be encouraged and exercised from the very beginning of soldier training. Indeed, individual initiative is key to devising flexible solutions to the fundamental challenges of war, such as surprise on the battlefield. Finkel describes the ability to achieve flexibility by exercising initiative as a combination of command and cognitive flexibility, where the former denotes the degree to which a commander is mandated to make decisions without asking permission from superiors, as regulated by the C2 system and doctrine. The effective exercise of this freedom of action, however, requires cognitive flexibility on the part of the commander, denoting the ability to respond to unexpected events through improvisation and creative thinking. Whether the C2 system and doctrine allow for flexibility in these domains is decided by the degree to which they “emphasize independence and initiative on the part of junior commanders; the tendency towards a decentralized or centralized C2 doctrine; and the attitude towards commanders who take the initiative and improvise on the battlefield” (Finkel 2011). Mission command also relies on allowing scope for initiative, in that plans and mission-type orders should not contain any more guidance or information than necessary for devising a solution in line with the commander’s intent. Thus, excessive planning and overly detailed orders limit the scope for initiative by confining the room for possible solutions at lower levels of command. Moreover, due to increasingly complex decision processes and the growing number of C2 functions, the production of orders has become increasingly time-consuming. According to Storr, this is one reason why modern militaries, although they generally embrace the concept of mission command, are not organized to practice it (Storr 2009).

Failure, success and learning

The practice of mission command requires creative thinking at all levels of command. This also entails an emphasis on learning and encouraging a propensity to experiment by trying new solutions to new problems (Shamir 2011). Fostering such an environment depends on how the organization handles failures and successes, especially during education and training (Vandergriff 2019). The practice of mission command unavoidably entails a risk of mistakes, and this needs to be understood and accepted by the organization (Lind 1985). This is of course not applicable to any type of failure or mistake; for example, due to negligence or poor judgment. There are certain limitations to the scope for experimentation and the circumstances under which it can be allowed, not least for safety reasons. However, failure as an effect of creative exploration should be

considered an important aspect of the learning process and be subject to evaluation and information-sharing. Thus, experimental learning should be viewed as an intrinsic aspect of leader development (Ghikas 2013). Allowing soldiers and junior officers to devise and test their own solutions to the problems they confront is essential for training them in decision-making and in order to foster confidence, propensity to initiative, and acceptance of risk (Brender 2018). This is valid even if their solutions are suboptimal or even wrong and was an important feature of German officer training in the interwar period (Shamir 2011). Moreover, failure should be accepted as a natural aspect of creative training and learning, and should not be allowed to impede an officer's career opportunities or standing within the unit. Indeed, a learning culture ideally encourages officers to acknowledge successes as well as failures, without the threat of repercussions, providing opportunities to learn from experience that should be communicated within the organization (Finkel 2011). The purpose is to breed a culture that encourages officers to "think outside the box," to accept the risks involved in creative thinking and experimenting rather than sticking to procedures and methods that may not be optimized for the task at hand, but that are at least commonly accepted as legitimate (Shamir 2011).

All-encompassing practice

In theory, mission command requires that the principles and attitudes associated with it permeate all aspects of the military profession, from day-to-day management at garrison, to training, to combat (Shamir 2011; Flynn and Schrankel 2013; Vandergriff 2019). The confined setting of a regiment may encourage control, simply because it is possible. However, micromanagement in daily tasks risks creating a discrepancy between the autonomy that a subcommander is expected to perform during training or in combat. Instead, mission command should be practiced wherever possible, in order to develop leadership and creative thinking. The ability of commanders to delegate administrative tasks, and to accept the risk of failure in doing so, is an important factor in building trust between levels of command, as well as a sense of responsibility and capability for initiative (Fawley 2017). Thus, it becomes problematic for the practice of mission command if, for instance, the performance of administrative tasks is highly regulated in detail, whereas officers are expected to display initiative and creative thinking during combat training.

These four themes summarize a set of key enablers of mission command that may be more or less present in a military organization. With these enablers as a point of departure, we now turn to their role in the Swedish Army, from the perspective of active practitioners.

Mission command in the Swedish army

Many Swedish army officers consider the practice of mission command to be an essential part of their profession. Indeed, much more than a decentralized command model, mission command is an expression of the culture of a military organization as well as the self-identification of the people working in it. As put in Sweden's military-strategic doctrine, "mission command is the command philosophy of the Armed Forces ... Mission command utilizes central Swedish qualities, such as initiative, autonomy and

the habit of coordination in flat organizations” (Swedish Armed Forces 2016). Moreover, all Swedish command manuals underscore the centrality of leadership through mission command. Sweden is not unique in this respect; most Western (and other) modern armies have, at least in theory, embraced mission command as a guiding leadership principle.

Yet while adherence to mission command as a fundamental philosophy or principle of leadership is fully embraced in Swedish doctrine and by the officer corps, there is far less agreement as to what exactly mission command should entail, or to what degree the contemporary working conditions for Swedish army officers allow for its comprehensive practice.¹

The following sections present unique empirical data from 11 semi-structured interviews with company commanders from various branches of the Swedish Army. As company commanders, these officers perform duties at a mid-level between higher and lower commands and have been expected to exercise mission command as both superiors and subordinates. Moreover, they have long experience of planning and implementing training of soldiers, NCOs, and junior officers. The respondents were anonymized for confidentiality purposes. The interviews focused on how these officers viewed the relationship between mission and detailed command, and on how they experienced the prevalence of the mission command enablers presented above, namely shared understanding and trust, initiative, attitudes toward failure, success and learning, and mission command as an all-encompassing practice, in their own professional working environments. The officers were asked to elaborate on how these enablers precondition their ability to practice mission command, during combat training as well as peacetime activities and administrative work.

Mission and detailed command

When asked about the relationship between mission command and detailed command, the respondents argued that the two forms of command are indeed complementary and do not see a contradiction in principle between them. In this view, mission command forms the overarching philosophy of leadership, which nevertheless does not preclude detailed command.² The respondents also consider mission command to be exercised more consistently now comparing to the beginning of their careers, with many higher commanders actively promoting its implementation.³ At the same time, this implementation has not been seamless, and respondents testify to the sometimes-confusing experience of resolving tasks decided, often in extensive detail, through the chain of command, while they are expected to exercise autonomy in solving them. One respondent considered detailed command to be employed excessively, and to constitute an excuse for the fear of losing control.⁴

The respondents were also asked to elaborate on situations where the respective forms of command were more appropriate. They argued that their use varies between peacetime and wartime activity,⁵ where administrative tasks require detailed command, whereas mission command is primarily exercised during combat training.⁶ Since in mechanized units, tempo and methods for coordinating fire and maneuver are prioritized over decentralized decision-making, detailed command was considered more prevalent when implementing offensive tasks, whereas there is greater room for mission

command when conducting defensive tasks.⁷ There was also a difference in perspective between officers from maneuver units and function units, in which the former perceived a greater room for decentralized leadership. This is a logical effect of the different tasks of these unit types; maneuver units are tasked with direct combat whereas function units have a supporting role. Therefore, the activities of, for example, artillery, air defense, engineers, and logistics are subordinated to the brigade and follow the dynamics of the battle, and thus need to be closely coordinated.⁸

Given the ongoing process of reforming the Army into a force geared towards territorial defense, with smaller C2 functions and increased dispersion, mission command is expected to grow increasingly important, especially compared to the previous decade when Swedish forces were primarily deployed in faraway COIN and/or peace operations. Therefore, mission command needs to be “recaptured,” and seriously considered in exercises as well as in the education of officers.⁹

Shared understanding and trust

All respondents underlined the centrality of trust, based on shared understanding, for the practice of mission command. They argued that there are two sides to the issue of trust: the individual characteristics of the commander (i.e. the commanders’ need for control) and the competence and reliability of subordinates. Indeed, how a commander chooses to lead depends to a great degree on the commander’s personality. Practicing mission command requires commanders to accept the uncertainty and risk implied by not monitoring the responsibility areas of their subordinates closely. This is not always the case – many commanders are deeply uncomfortable with this uncertainty and strive to exercise a high degree of control even of minor details.¹⁰

The respondents testified both to this tendency in their superiors and as an issue they struggled with in their own leadership.¹¹ The commander has great liberty in deciding how to lead, and “the question is if you have the courage to let go of control as a commander.”¹² In this regard, practicing face-to-face, personal leadership may have a double-sided effect. Since it is considered at least as important to develop a shared understanding of the situation two levels down as two levels up, the commander should show a presence by visiting subordinated units. However, this is difficult to do without interfering with their activities. Therefore, while personal presence is considered a mission command virtue, it can easily transform into detailed command.¹³ The respondents also stated that their ability to practice mission command, by allowing subordinates freedom of action, depended to a large degree on the extent to which their superiors were willing to grant space for initiative.¹⁴ Thus, one commander’s propensity for micromanagement can have serious effects on the behavior of the subordinated unit, whereby commanders who exercise detailed control train units to be careful and await direct orders.¹⁵ On the other hand, it was also noted that mission command can be abused and utilized as an excuse to avoid responsibility.¹⁶

The competence and reliability of subordinates also has both a professional and a personal dimension. The respondents unanimously agreed that their ability to practice mission command is contingent on shared understanding with their subordinates and trust in their capabilities, which in turn depends on their experience and level of training, as well as interpersonal relations. In theory, a certain rank or level of training should

signify a professional competence that takes precedence over personal qualities as a qualification for a mission or task. This certainly has validity, according to the respondents, but is complicated by the fact that the contents of the new Officer Program (OP), which has a much stronger academic and theoretical emphasis than previously, are not well known and understood in the Army at large. Fresh graduates from OP will have a different set of skills than their superiors, making it difficult to assess what they are qualified to do.¹⁷ This complicates the ability to develop shared understanding and makes it problematic to endow trust in subordinates based solely on their level of training. On the one hand, these younger officers were described as perceptive and highly capable of learning new skills, on the other hand, as difficult to integrate in the organization since they require more supervision and training during their first years.¹⁸

When it comes to personal qualities and interpersonal trust, the respondents highlighted proven experience as a key factor of their trust in subordinates. They also acknowledged that missions are distributed based on both experience and personal characteristics, when appropriate, and that the degree of control exercised relates directly to the level of trust in individual subordinates.¹⁹

A particular problem highlighted by several respondents is the limited time spent on different commander positions – the normal posting time of company and battalion commanders being 2 years. This was considered too short a time to both learn the job and develop a sufficient personal relationship with subordinates to build mutual trust. The respondents considered this as an important impediment to the exercise of mission command, especially since they did not consider rank or training to provide a sufficient marker of competence.²⁰

Initiative

A vital aspect of developing the capability for initiative and autonomous decision-making in officers as well as soldiers is to conduct exercises and training with this capability in mind. The respondents highlighted the importance of applying mission command principles from the earliest stages of soldier training, and to implement these throughout the service.²¹ In this regard, the aim should be to only communicate intent and objectives, and to involve subordinates in the decision process in order to foster ownership of the task. This generates trust and facilitates cooperation between subordinates, while allowing the commander to assume a monitoring role.²² One respondent promoted the view that in training, all initiatives should be encouraged in principle, even ones that seem suboptimal from the commander's perspective, in order to promote self-confidence and autonomy.²³

The respondents underscored that the scope for the initiative during combat training varied greatly depending on the type of unit they belonged to. In this regard, there were (unsurprisingly) clear differences between maneuver units and functional units. Respondents belonging to maneuver units highlighted initiative and the will to win as central in mechanized combat.²⁴ They argued that mission command is practiced in relation to the mode of fighting. Short decision processes and quick decisions necessitate endowing commanders with freedom, but they still need coordination to deliver the effect.²⁵ Given that a commander cannot keep a detailed view of all subunits under his command, subordinate commanders need to act on their own initiative, based on a shared understanding of higher intent and objectives.

Respondents belonging to function units, however, saw a much smaller scope for initiative and more detailed command in order to support the activities of maneuver units (in the case of artillery and engineers) or the Air Force (air defense). Moreover, function units are rarely the main focus of the exercise and are given tasks in line with the overall battle plan of the brigade. Yet, since the brigade command will typically have limited knowledge of the activities of, for example, an air defense or engineer unit, these units must still be commanded through missions, rather than details.²⁶ The technology and weapons systems operated also affect the ability to practice mission command, in quite diverse ways. For example, operating the short-range IRIS-T (Robot 98) air defense system awards more flexibility than the new long-range Patriot system, in terms of how and from where to operate it.²⁷ Moreover, it was argued that the Archer self-propelled artillery system in fact provides much more room for mission command and initiative than previous systems, given its ability to move and operate dispersed.²⁸

Another aspect of the preconditions for training initiative is the type of unit under one's command and the soldiers' level of experience. This issue is particularly relevant in light of the 2018 reintroduction of conscription in Sweden. Indeed, this signifies a change from the professional army of the last decade, exclusively consisting of full-time and part-time soldiers. The respondents were divided on what effects conscription will have for their ability to train soldiers in accordance with mission command, with a focus on developing the capability for initiative. On the one hand, it may be challenging for commanders to lead units consisting of different types of soldiers.²⁹ A number of soldiers and NCOs will be conscripted, lacking the training and experience of their contract counterparts and therefore possessing a more limited level of shared understanding. This may delimit the degree of responsibility that can be placed upon them and therefore the scope for initiative.³⁰

On the other hand, conscription will imply that units can be properly staffed over longer periods of time, in contrast to the constant problem of recruitment and early departure of professional soldiers, giving rise to large vacancies in contract units. While conscripts may need time to learn basic soldier skills, they will learn over time, and mission command can be practiced to a greater degree as they gain more experience.³¹ Moreover, conscription will allow for appointing recruits as section leaders, and training them to exercise leadership and autonomous initiative from the start of their service.³² Thus, conscription may actually offer even greater opportunities to train soldiers in mission command.³³

In sum, the respondents considered training initiative in accordance with mission command at the soldier level to be very important, and that these abilities must be cultivated from the very beginning in order to saturate the organization as a whole.³⁴

Finally, the encouragement of initiative again harks back to the commander's personality and leadership style. As put by one respondent, it is not certain that all commanders appreciate initiatives, even if they produce positive results. Some commanders may feel threatened by initiatives and see them as a challenge to his/her authority.³⁵

Failure, success and learning

An important marker of the extent to which an organization fosters learning and creativity is how it handles failure and success. The military-strategic doctrine also explicitly states that the Armed Forces should be a "learning organization," with

a culture promoting open discussion on successes and failures, as well as experience sharing (Swedish Armed Forces 2016). The respondents were asked to elaborate on their perspectives on failure and mistakes, and their personal experience of how they are handled. They argued that failure needs to be judged depending on the context and underlying reasons. There are certainly circumstances where no mistakes can be allowed, in order to avoid damage to people or materiel.³⁶ Moreover, one respondent argued that failure is not acceptable if a commander is provided with sufficient time and resources to complete a task but understandable if these preconditions are not met.³⁷ Others stated that negligence or lack of foresight can never be an acceptable reason for failure; that failure due to active decisions (e.g. to attack) is more acceptable than failure due to passivity; and that self-inflicted failure is less acceptable than failure caused by circumstances outside one's control.³⁸

Views were mixed regarding how failure is handled in the respondents' professional context. While they considered failure unavoidable to a degree, it may be met with "understanding but not always acceptance."³⁹ Some respondents described an open and forgiving culture, where failure is generally accepted; others stated that failure is frequently handled in an unproductive way, due to an overall conception of success as essential at all times, and of failure as overly problematic.⁴⁰ This contributes to a tendency not to acknowledge failure, and thereby avoiding systematic learning from it through processes of evaluation and experience sharing.⁴¹ Also, one respondent noted a tendency especially among higher commanders not to allow failure, even though they claim to do so, since they attach higher importance to displaying a positive outward image of activities performed under their command.⁴² It was also argued that failure spurs the identification of scapegoats, which can be subject to indirect retribution through denied access to training and promotion.⁴³ Acceptance of failures may vary depending on the person responsible – "failure is allowed for some but not everyone," which leads to a confirmation bias.⁴⁴ A commander who has a reputation for skill and experience and is trusted by superiors is allowed more leeway in testing new approaches even though they imply a risk of failure.⁴⁵ When discussing the culture of feedback and evaluation, it was argued that there is a tendency to avoid criticism of higher commanders, and that these are in turn frequently uninterested in feedback.⁴⁶ Moreover, the process for documenting experiences at the lower levels of command, both positive and negative, was described as insufficiently structured and long term.⁴⁷

In their assessment of the preconditions for a creative environment, implying an atmosphere that encourages experimentation and testing, the respondents saw most potential in lower-level within-unit tactical exercises. Experiments and development could take the form of e.g. different unit compositions or modes of maneuver in the training ground, or new uses of existing technology.⁴⁸ However, they also highlighted that creativity and experimentation does not extend "outside the box" of their mandate as company commanders and is frequently limited through the authority of higher command.⁴⁹ In this regard, experimentation is sometimes interpreted as disloyalty to higher commanders and is therefore not appreciated.⁵⁰ One respondent explained that new ideas were frequently met with resistance and needed to be defended and motivated, which in turn required high self-esteem on the part of the proponent as well as being comfortable in the working environment.⁵¹ Also, the psychological dimension of success was highlighted and it was considered important that participants finish exercises with a "positive image" of what they accomplished.⁵²

Several respondents argued that the importance to higher commanders of displaying positive results, especially with a view to future career opportunities, has a negative impact on creativity. Especially in larger combat exercises, commanders tend to “play it safe” in order to avoid failure.⁵³ Again, the short time spent in positions as company or battalion commander creates incentives to go with tested solutions prescribed in doctrine and manuals, which “may not be optimal, but are at least not wrong.”⁵⁴ It was also argued that there is a reluctance to test the “worst-case scenario” during exercises. The reasons for this were identified as limitations in training grounds, economy, and time, as well as a general tendency to exercise established methods rather than tactical decision-making. However, the same tendency can be seen in simulated exercises, where the room for experimentation should be much greater. Several respondents had witnessed a general reluctance to challenge higher commanders by subjecting them to surprise, and that the successful implementation of the commander’s battle plan often takes precedence over exercising decision-making in unexpected tactical situations.⁵⁵

In this regard, the encouragement of creativity also depends on how exercises are designed. The fact that exercises, particularly at the higher tactical levels (battalion and brigade) are frequently “scripted” limits the scope for experimentation and creativity and creates “mental frames.”⁵⁶ Exercises are scripted for the purpose of practicing specific methods and procedures, or for allowing the brigade command to exercise planning and execution, rather than managing unexpected situations and frictions.⁵⁷ Naturally, this minimizes the likelihood of failure, but also limits the possibility of subjecting those trained to unexpected scenarios requiring risk-taking.⁵⁸ Other problems identified include the limited time and resources spent on exercises in general – the scope for creativity strongly relates to the level of training since devising new solutions requires a solid knowledge of basic skills and an ability to take calculated risks.⁵⁹ Physical limitations, particularly the limited size of training grounds, limit the range of possibilities during exercises. Moreover, the steadily increasing number and complexity of planning processes and checklists introduced as an effect of demands for NATO interoperability has reinforced the tendency to exercise methodological, rather than tactical skill. These processes also tend to increase the timeframe of higher-level decision-making, produce overly extensive brigade orders, and shrink the room for mission command.⁶⁰

All-encompassing practice

In a discussion on preconditions for practicing mission command for contemporary Swedish army officers, it needs to be pointed out that a large share of their everyday work consists of administrative tasks – i.e. bureaucratic desk work that is far removed from exercising tactics in the field. While it is important in theory to cultivate a culture where the philosophy of mission command permeates all aspects of military life, this is not always easily accomplished in practice. Since much administrative work is both centrally decided and heavily regulated by law, this tends to create a discrepancy between how officers can run a day-to-day business at the regiment, and how they are expected to act during combat. Indeed, virtually all respondents testified to the tight regulation of administrative duties, in which a very large amount of time is spent on reporting and follow-up based on measurable control functions. Several respondents argued that administration and production take up 70–80% of their time, requiring them to comport

themselves in a radically different way than during exercises and making the practice of mission command highly inconsistent.⁶¹ To varying degrees, however, the respondents saw possibilities of exercising mission command also when executing administrative tasks. Within the limits defined by legislation and procedures, there may still be some room for allowing subordinates to decide how things should be done and it was argued that these opportunities should be exploited to the extent possible.⁶² Yet others saw administration and mission command as a contradiction in terms, which could not easily be unified.⁶³

Opinions varied, however, on the extent to which this was a problem. Indeed, some respondents argued that whereas mission command is to be encouraged in exercises, it does not necessarily belong in administration and production.⁶⁴ In this view, administration and combat exercise need to be separated, since the latter is governed by law and regulations and therefore not applicable to mission command.⁶⁵ However, other respondents argued that whereas mission command can indeed be problematic when performing administrative tasks, it must still be encouraged and practiced in peacetime activities in order to be functional in war. Indeed, the practices associated with administration were described as risking offsetting mission command – “we must live mission command. It then becomes natural to practice it.”⁶⁶ Therefore, it is important to find and exploit opportunities to train individuals in autonomous decision-making also in the realities of everyday work.⁶⁷ Administration, it was argued, “kills the willingness to take initiatives,”⁶⁸ which extends to the conduct of many commanders also during exercises.⁶⁹ Finally, one respondent raised concern that the dominance of administration, relative to other tasks, provides the wrong incentives for leadership and career development. There is a risk that the conception of being a good officer is equated with administrative rather than tactical skills, and that promotions are therefore based on successful paperwork rather than the ability to lead and fight.⁷⁰

Conclusions

This article has explored contemporary preconditions for practicing mission command in a small-state army, through the perspectives of Swedish company commanders. While the interviews have prioritized quality rather than quantity, and therefore cannot be taken as a generalized view from the Swedish Army officer corps as a whole, they do indicate the complexity of practicing mission command in a contemporary military environment. The interviews demonstrate how the core enablers of mission command: building trust, promoting initiative and autonomy, learning from successes and failures, and practicing mission-oriented leadership in all aspects of the profession, are affected – positively and negatively – by a number of factors. These range from the personality traits of individual commanders; to the Army’s organization of exercises, planning procedures and methods; to factors external to the Army as an organization, including legislation and national security policy.

It should be noted that all respondents who have been deployed overseas, and thus have experience of corresponding practices in peer armies, were of the impression that the practice of mission command in the Swedish Army compares well internationally, and is more true than most others to its German origins. The self-perception among the respondents is that Swedish officers and soldiers display an unusually high degree of

shared understanding and trust in their superiors and subordinates and are prone to delegation, initiative, and autonomous problem-solving.

Nevertheless, the results also reveal several discrepancies in this narrative, suggesting that the unanimously promoted ambition to practice mission command to the extent possible competes with several other factors, which may impede this practice. First, the importance attached to the personality of the commander, which seems to be a decisive factor in determining whether or not mission command is employed, contradicts the conception of mission command as an overarching leadership philosophy. Indeed, if mission command is to be the cornerstone of command, it logically cannot be up to individual commanders whether to practice it. Second, there is a seeming confusion regarding whether the training of future subordinates, including junior officers as well as conscripts, will be geared towards initiative and autonomy, rather than detailed regulation. Given the fundamental importance of this competency at all levels as a precondition for the effective exercise of mission command, and the necessity of socializing younger colleagues into this mindset from the early, formative stages of their careers, the Army's ability to find the ways and means for this will be of central importance. Third, whereas the Army was described as having a relatively open climate with regard to failure, the respondents also indicate that the threat of indirect retribution or the importance of outward appearance tends to stymie creativity and that the mechanisms for learning from experimentation, failure, and success have room for improvement. Finally, it appears difficult to lead in accordance with mission command principles when performing administrative and bureaucratic tasks, which actually take up the vast majority of an officer's time. While these tasks are in large part regulated high up in the organization or externally to it, and often for good reasons, it still gives rise to divergent expectations for methods of leadership as well as professional competencies in different areas of the officer's work, which may impede the practice of mission command.

Indeed, the preconditions for the contemporary practice of mission command are far more complex than regularly described in doctrine, manuals, or research. These preconditions range from, among others, the traits of individuals that compose the officer corps, the design and focus of military education, the balance between different tasks, e.g. combat exercises and administration, the regulations surrounding these tasks, and the overall organizational culture surrounding learning and creativity. Building an Army able to effectively exercise mission command at war therefore requires taking a holistic peacetime view of the interconnected enablers of mission command, as well as the various factors that work in a different direction.

Notes

1. This observation draws on conversations with a large number of Swedish Army officers.
2. Interview 7.
3. Interview 11.
4. Interview 2.
5. Interview 1.
6. Interview 10.
7. Interview 11.
8. Interview 3.
9. Interview 7.
10. Interviews 1, 2, 6.

11. Interview 1.
12. Interview 6.
13. Interviews 3, 9.
14. Interview 6.
15. Interview 11.
16. Interview 1.
17. Interview 5.
18. Interview 6, 8, 9.
19. Interviews 3, 7, 9, 11.
20. Interview 5.
21. Interview 2.
22. Interview 6.
23. Interview 11.
24. Interview 4.
25. Interviews 4, 7.
26. Interviews 5, 10.
27. Interview 11.
28. Interview 3.
29. Interview 1.
30. Interviews 1, 5, 7, 9.
31. Interviews 6, 8, 11.
32. Interview 8.
33. Interviews 3, 4, 9.
34. Interview 2.
35. Interview 9.
36. Interviews 4, 5, 9.
37. Interview 3.
38. Interviews 3, 8, 9, 10.
39. Interview 1.
40. Interviews 2, 5, 7, 8, 11.
41. Interviews 6, 11.
42. Interview 2.
43. Interview 9.
44. Interview 8.
45. Interview 9.
46. Interview 10.
47. Interview 7.
48. Interviews 4, 10, 8.
49. Interviews 10, 2.
50. Interview 2.
51. Interview 6.
52. Interviews 4, 10.
53. Interview 6.
54. Interview 11.
55. Interview 1.
56. Interviews 5, 3, 7.
57. Interview 8.
58. Interview 10.
59. Interviews 7, 8.
60. Interviews 3, 8.
61. Interviews 7, 6.
62. Interviews 6, 10, 11, 8.
63. Interviews 4, 2.
64. Interview 1.

- 65. Interview 5.
- 66. Interview 7.
- 67. Interview 10.
- 68. Interview 2.
- 69. Interview 1.
- 70. Interview 7.

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