

# Compendium on Mission Tactics and Commander's Intent

## How We Got Here—the World According to LtGen Van Riper:

### Intent.

Although there is no clear linkage to the writings of either Clausewitz or Sun Tzu with the concept of “intent” or “commander’s intent,” scholars often infer the connection. For example, Martin Samuels, after tracing the concept of center of gravity from Clausewitz to the German Army of World War II states, “A central feature of the *Schwerpunkt* was the *Absicht* (higher intent).”<sup>1</sup> This meant that commanders first provided the intent and then assigned tasks to subordinate unit commanders. If the situation remained unchanged, senior commanders expected their subordinate commanders to focus on accomplishing the task. However, when the situation changed, as it often did, the subordinate commanders were to take the initiative in order to achieve the intent, either modifying or abandoning the task. Samuels maintains that this system of “[d]irective command first entered official German usage in the Prussian *Exerier-Reglement* of 1806 . . . was extended in 1813 . . . [and] had become firmly rooted by the mid-19th century.”<sup>2</sup> He also contends that it “was established as a coherent theory” and “enforced as official doctrine” under Helmuth von Moltke (the elder) during his 30 years as Chief of the General Staff.<sup>3</sup>

Many students of military operations attribute the operational and tactical successes of the German Army in World War II to its use of *Auftragstaktik*, or mission-type orders. Trevor Dupuy, for example, writes that Germans believe this “concept pioneered by Scharnhorst, fostered by his successors, and brought to perfection by Moltke” was the major factor in their exceptional combat performance over the years.<sup>4</sup>

Fundamentally, the concept of intent rests on the notion that the *reason* a commander assigns a task, that is, its *purpose*, is more important than the task. The idea is to provide the *why* of a mission. If circumstances dictate, subordinate commanders may disregard the assigned task so long as they focus on accomplishing the purpose. Many scholars and theorists urged the American military to adopt mission-type orders during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Service leaders heeded this appeal and directed incorporation of the concept into doctrinal manuals as well as the curricula of professional military schools, but with some confusion.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Samuels, *Command or Control? Command, Training and Tactics in the British and German Armies, 1888-1918*, London: Frank Cass, 1995, p.10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Trevor N. Dupuy, *A Genius for War: The German Army and the General Staff, 1807-1945*, London: MacDonald and Janes, 1977, p. 307.

Doctrine writers questioned where in an operations plan or order to place the reference to intent. For reasons unknown, writers at the time apparently failed to recognize that existing formats for orders and plans placed intent as the second of two parts of the mission statement. Since mission statements as early as 1940 contained a task with an associated purpose or intent, we can easily make the argument that the U.S. military in the 1970s simply rediscovered the term and its great utility. Current joint doctrine confirms this definition of a mission, “The task, together with the purpose, that clearly indicates the action to be taken and the reason therefore.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, proponents advertised intent—in the sense of purpose or reason—as a central part of the new thoughts introduced into operational doctrine in the 1980s and 1990s.

In practice, users often displace the correct meaning of intent with “intention,” that is, a design or determination to act in a certain way. Consequently, users regularly express intent as something a commander plans to do to an enemy rather than *why* he or she intends to take an action. For example, “Commander’s intent is the commander’s personnel verbal and graphic summary of the unit mission and concept of operation that establishes a description of the mission objective and method . . . .”<sup>6</sup> Less frequently, but no less erroneously, users describe intent as the *result* desired. This is illustrated in the words of an advocate of the concept who wrote that a mission-type order “involves telling a subordinate what result he is to obtain, usually defined in terms of effect on enemy, then leaving him to determine how best to get it.”<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, *intent* is not defined in joint doctrine, but *intention* is—“An aim or design (as distinct from capability) to execute a specified course of action”—confirming the explanation above.<sup>8</sup>

### **Commander’s Intent.**

At about the same time as the U.S. military began reintroducing the term intent into its lexicon, the U.S. Army revised the format of its operations plans and orders adding a paragraph titled *commander’s intent*. This paragraph was to capture the commander’s thinking behind the concept of operations. Doctrine developers at the time believed that too often a commander’s reasoning, assessments, and guidance were lost when reduced to a few sentences in the

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<sup>5</sup> On line version of Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, available at [www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/m/03426.html](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/m/03426.html).

<sup>6</sup> David A. Fastabend, “The Application of the Commander’s Intent,” *Military Review*, August 1987, p. 62.

<sup>7</sup> William S. Lind, “The Theory and Practice of Maneuver Warfare,” Richard D. Hooker, Jr., ed., *Maneuver Warfare: An Anthology*, Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> On line version of Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, available at [www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/i/02699.html](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/i/02699.html).

“concept of operations” paragraph.<sup>9</sup> In addition, they felt that subordinate commanders should not have to divine their senior’s intentions. Doctrine writers eventually added the paragraph to the formats of joint orders and plans as subparagraph (1) under paragraph “3. Execution, a. Concept of Operations.”<sup>10</sup> The official definition for the term states:

A concise expression of the purpose of the operation and the desired end state that serves as the initial impetus for the planning process. It may also include the commander’s assessment of the adversary commander’s intent and an assessment of where and how much risk is acceptable during the operation.<sup>11</sup>

The purpose or intent in the commander’s intent paragraph obviously should mirror the intent contained in the mission statement.

Today, in some plans and orders, the paragraph often becomes an unfocused discussion of many unrelated items and can run to many pages. Moreover, some commanders and staff erroneously assume this paragraph is the heart of a mission-type order, which, of course, it is not. That distinction rests with the intent or purpose declared in the mission statement in a plan or order’s paragraph 2.

## **Mission.**

Although military staffs have existed in some form since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it was not until the post-Jena Prussian reforms that staffs consisted of well-schooled officers. Only after the reforms inspired by Elihu Root and the mandates of the Congressional General Staff Act of 1903 began to take effect did the U.S. military create professional staffs. The bureaucracies surrounding these staffs soon produced standard and approved methods for accomplishing planning, many of them borrowed from European nations. Mission statements were often at the center of these methods.

A mission statement tells subordinate commanders what the higher commander wants them to do, the task, and why they are to do it, the purpose or intent. Though there are several definitions in joint doctrine, it is the first one that interests us:

1. The task, together with the purpose, that clearly indicates the action to be taken and the reason therefore.

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<sup>9</sup> Conversation between Paul K. Van Riper and Richard Sinnreich, February 4-5, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Joint Publication 5-00.1, *Joint Doctrine for Campaign Planning*, Washington, DC: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, January 25, 2002, p. C-5.

<sup>11</sup> On line version of Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms.*, available at [www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/c/01102.html](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/c/01102.html).

2. In common usage, especially when applied to lower military units, a duty assigned to an individual or unit; a task.
3. The dispatching of one or more aircraft to accomplish one particular task.<sup>12</sup>

### **End-State.**

During the intellectual renaissance of the 1970s and 1980s, officers became interested in defining how things would look after military forces secured an objective or accomplished a mission. The term decided upon was *end-state*. It does not refer to the actual securing of an objective or to the accomplishment of a mission, but to the general conditions desired to be in place when these events happen. The joint definition for the term is, "The set of required conditions that defines achievement of the commander's objectives."<sup>13</sup>

Extracted from Paul K. Van Riper, "Planning For and Applying Military Force: An Examination of Terms" (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, March 2006), pp. 10-14.

### **Wyly on Mission Tactics:**

The concept of mission tactics, like surfaces and gaps, must always be at work in battle. The name is derived from the German *Auftragstaktik*, which means, literally, mission tactics. It is no accident that the name includes the words "tactics." Assigning a mission and depending on subordinates to carry it out constitutes the tactic. To allow the subordinate to decide on his own initiative what to do is the means of getting the most appropriate decisions made on the spot and acted on more rapidly than the enemy can respond to your actions.

The subordinate often selects his own objectives or "aiming points." He often has the latitude to decide whether to attack, defend, or withdraw. What he must be assigned is the intent or—in John Boyd's words---the "output" desired by the commander and a mission.

It is the high degree of initiative allowed the subordinate that gives operations the rapid tempo needed to stay one step ahead of the enemy. When you outpace the enemy in this way, his every decision, by the time he is able to turn it into action, is irrelevant to your action. By the time he reacts, you are already doing something else, something he did not expect.

No course in mission tactics would be complete without related Moltke's favorite story, told repeatedly in the era of the 1870 war, and recounted most recently by Trevor Dupuy in his book, *A Genius For War*. This is the account of Prince Frederick Charles, who was giving a tongue lashing to one of his majors

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

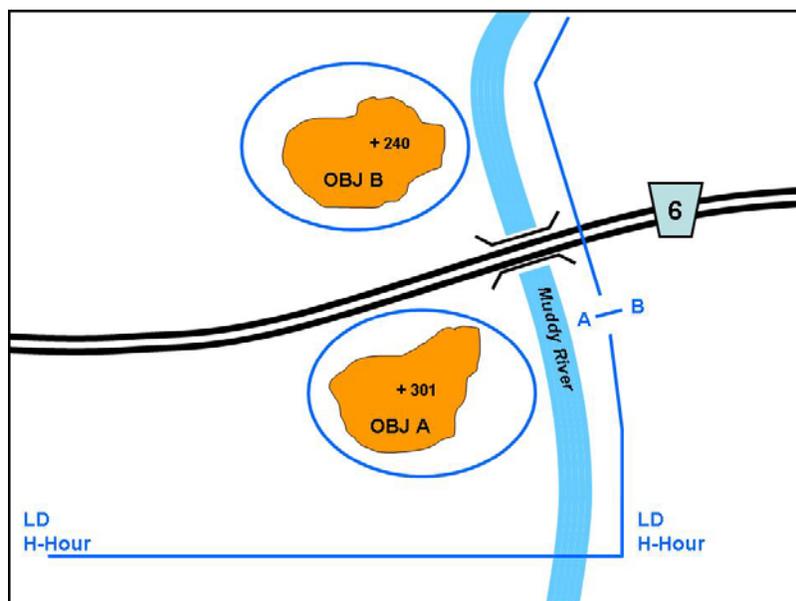
<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

for committing a tactical blunder. In defense of his actions, the major explained that he was only following orders. In the Prussian Army, the major reminded the prince, an order from a senior officer was tantamount to an order from the king. The prince was unimpressed. His reply to the major was, "The King made you a major because he thought you were smart enough to know when not to obey orders."

And that is the essence of mission tactics. The subordinate decides what to do even if it means the order issued by his senior now should be changed or adjusted. The mission assigned is sacred. The mission is the output that the commander wants. That does not change. But how that output is to be achieved may change, and it is up to the intelligent subordinate to decide whether or not it has.

There is a classic example used time and time again in introducing the student to mission tactics. It is simple and of value, so it will be used again here. The subordinate is given the mission of getting the unit across the river. Getting his unit across the river is the output the senior desires. The route that he has been given crosses the nearest bridge. The junior commander arrives at the site to find that the bridge has been destroyed. He does not stop. He does not wait for new orders. He does not request permission to change his route. He goes to the nearest ford several kilometers distant and he crosses there. He informs the senior, of course, as soon as he can. But he does not wait. Remember: Mission orders are necessary to give the tempo of operations the rapidity that it must have if we are to keep the enemy off balance.

It may be useful at this point to compare a mission order against the order that is more typical of slower moving forms of combat. Let us take a situation discussed in the below figure:



Notice the line of departure. Notice a boundary with Company A on the left and Company B on the right. Our battalion is to cross from the south of the line of departure proceeding north into the zone of action. It is to cross at H hour. Note Objectives A and B on hills 301 and 240, respectively. Let us first take an example from the slower moving form of combat. You are commanding officer, Company A. The battalion's mission is to deny the enemy the use of Route 6, West of the Muddy River. This order is assigned to Company A and it will sound familiar to you, if you have experienced operating in the slower moving form of combat. This order is given to Company A:

“(1) At H-Hour, attack and seize Objective A.”

“(2) On order, continue the attack and seize Objective B.”

“(3) Establish blocking positions to deny the enemy the use of Route 6 West of the Muddy River.”

Now consider this order for a moment. You are going to have to attack Objective A where there is any enemy on the hill or not. You have been ordered to do so. Maybe when the order was issued there was an enemy unit on Objective A. But when you cross the line of departure that may have been changed. In other words, the older style order does not really take into consideration the undeniable fact that the enemy situation is always changing. It does not stay the same. Then, on order, you are to continue the attack and seize Objective B. And, after you do that, then you establish your blocking position. Now that might exactly what you want to do: proceed in that order. But it might not be, and whether or not it will be the better course of action is entirely unpredictable at the time the order is issued. The enemy will do what he wants to do, not what you want him to do. Unlike an engineer who begins building a bridge, knowing full well that when he finishes the bridge the opposite bank of the river will still be in the position where it was when he began, your situation, as a soldier, is quite different. The only thing you can be certain of is that the opposite bank will not be as it was when you began.

Now look at a mission order. The situation is the same. The adjoining figure still applies. The enemy may or may not be on objectives A or B when the order is issued. Let us say that he has a platoon on each. But, because I, your commander, know that the situation will have changed by the time you cross the line of departure, and because I know that you are smart and you can make your own determination of what to do in order to carry out the assigned mission, I tell you, the commander of Company A, this:

“Seize control of Route 6 West of the Muddy River, in order to destroy enemy forces attempting to escape from Company B's zone of action.”

This allows you to proceed at your pace. Naturally, you are going to proceed at as rapid a pace as you possibly can. You make the determination of what is possible. You are not going to throw your forces away. But, if you find

Objectives A and B are clear or that you can suppress the enemy on them you may want to bypass them. You know that you are there to destroy enemy forces attempting to escape from Company B's zone of action. Maybe you can do that best on the road. Maybe you discover that there is ford across the Muddy River and the road becomes meaningless. You know why you are there.

Notice in the mission order the phrase, "in order to." That is a very important phrase and usually ought to go in the mission order. There is no rule that every mission order contain the phrase, "in order to." If you were told, "attack that enemy company that you see in front of you," it would probably be highly superfluous to tell you why. They are there, they are a threat, why waste the breath? But usually your mission order will have the ability to endure time better if you explain to your subordinate why he is carrying the mission out: "In order to--." This gives the order the quality that Erich von Manstein called "long-term." It can endure the test of time. Your commander can lose communication with you yet you can still carry out his intent because you know what he wanted and you can continue to act within his intent for a long time without checking back.

Before leaving the subject of whether or not the phrase, "in order to" should be in every mission order, it is appropriate to dwell for a moment on the subject of formats and content. "In order to" is handy, but it would be awkward to establish a rule requiring the phrase's constant use. It has been said, "the art of war has no traffic with rules," and this is very valid. Especially when we are dealing with professionals, well schooled in the art of war, there is all the less reason to make them follow fixed rules. Fixed rules are not appropriate in instructing how to assign missions. Too often, students reject good ideas about tactics because they cannot get their thoughts to fit the format of the operation order that is being demanded. The important thing is that the mission be clear. Compared to clarity, format is of little to no consequence.

FMFM 3-1, the Marine Corps Manual on Command Staff Action, says at one point that the mission assigned must contain the "who, where, when and so much of the why as necessary for intelligent coordination and cooperation." Even this rule is too structured. Take, for instance, the requirement to specify the when of a mission. If you are told the time to attack, constraints have been placed on you. Sometimes a time schedule is convenient in combat for the sake of coordination. Often, however, a time schedule builds rigidity into your operations. Your operations cannot be based on a clock. They must be based on the enemy. The enemy will never comply with your time schedule. This is just one example of why it is awkward and even sometimes dangerous to be too stringent about formats in the giving of orders.

Another guideline for using mission orders is to give orders by word of mouth whenever possible. Do not depend on written orders. At one time, General Hermann Balck, Commander of the German 11<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division in

World War II, strictly forbade written orders in his division. His instructions were, "All orders will be verbal!" He probably gave this instruction out of frustration over the clumsiness of too many written orders. It became the German practice to issue orders by word of mouth execute the operations, and later on, when there was time, write the orders down for the record. They recognized that written orders are slow and cumbersome.

Balck's practice when preparing for a dawn attack was to assemble his subordinate commanders the evening before and give detailed orders verbally and personally. It was important that he have face to face contact when he issued these initial orders to avoid any possible misunderstanding. Then after his subordinates returned to their units, when the time came to move out, General Balck would pass by radio or telephone the message, "no change to orders," unless the enemy situation developed in such a way that there should be a change. Then he would pass by radio or telephone the change only.

In this way, he kept his orders brief and the tempo of his operations fast. One of General Balck's favorite sayings was, "Don't work hard, work fast." So you can see the extreme importance that this great commander attached to speed. After the initial order, based upon which his forces went into action, all subsequent orders could be extremely brief.

Sometimes the initial order can be brief. In fact, contrary to what is often believed, initial orders at small unit levels must be longer and more detailed than those at division, corps, and army levels. How often we take the opposite approach! Once these initial lengthier orders are issued, however, if they are well formed, all subsequent orders in the course of combat can be extremely brief. And there will be little need for many subsequent orders, if they are required at all.

At first glance this may look very simple. It may look as if it relieves the senior commander of the burdens of responsibility. Much of the decision-making will be done by subordinates. But on studying the concept more closely, you will find that it requires more skill, more talent, and more professionalism on the part of any command to operate with mission orders. The commander must be better able to articulate what is to be the output. As you begin to do exercises you will find how difficult it can be to express exactly what you want done. But the accomplished commander can do this well and it comes through practice. You will have the opportunity to practice this in the exercises....In classroom exercises you should constantly be asked, "What orders do you give now?" Through practice you will learn to respond quickly and clearly.

The other side of the coin is that the subordinate receiving the order must be more talented. Amateur troops, awkward, clumsy, untrained troops, cannot be expected to carry out mission orders. Why? Because as a result of their lack of experience they must be told what to do. Only the professional, the

experienced leader, can know what to do without being told. Because we in the marine Corps set our standards high, we expect that our subordinates will train until they can perform under mission orders. We will set our standard and work up to it.

Burdens of responsibility increase on both sides; on the part of the senior commander and on the part of the subordinate. Look first at the senior commander. Operating with mission orders, his orders must be perfectly clear. The onus is on the senior to define to the junior what must be accomplished without telling him how to do it. The onus is not on the junior to ferret out what his commander wants. The senior must state what he wants. Otherwise, he should not expect to get it.

In the early 1960s at The Basic School when lieutenants were instructed in the five-paragraph order and how to carry it out, great emphasis was placed on having received the mission, deciding what was the specified mission or missions, and what were implied missions.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the junior was expected to ferret out what the senior wanted. This should not be necessary. The senior should make it perfectly clear what is wanted.

An additional burden of responsibility on the senior is that he must train his subordinates and his unit to operate as a team. They are not going to be able to perform mission orders without training.

Another new burden of responsibility is that he must expect his subordinates to make mistakes; he may not expect “zero defects.” Wars are won by people, not machines. People make mistakes. If people are more afraid of making mistakes than they are of exercising initiative now and then, they will not take risks and they will not exercise initiative. Furthermore, they will not win in war.

Perhaps the most important new responsibility that is placed on the commander who gives the mission orders is that he must trust his subordinates. If trust breaks down the whole system breaks down.

This even provides some insight into the question that recurs; Why did the Germans lose World War II? After 1942, after Stalingrad, Hitler relieved talented generals, actually taking personal command, himself, of a field army group. In other words, trust broke down, and this was felt through the chain of command so that finally the smooth, well-oiled machine stopped working. Adolph Hitler in World War II is a good example of one who stopped trusting his commanders. So trust broke down.

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<sup>14</sup> This is still mandated by the Marine Corps Planning Process. See the Mission Analysis step in MCWP 5-1, page 2-5.

You can see a similar phenomenon under Napoleon. In the earlier days his tactics were very fluid. The Grande Armee worked as a team. But after it got into Russia it began to get sticky. It no longer worked smoothly. Trust broke down. Napoleon stopped trusting his marshals. (Well he should have, some were plotting his assassination).

So trust is extremely important. Trust up and trust down. In order to operate with mission order tactics, the commander must be sure that he informs his subordinates not only of their mission but of his mission and the mission next above him. This is known as the “two echelons up rule.” Each commander must be fully aware of the mission two echelons up.

Now look at the new responsibility that the subordinate incurs with mission orders. The “two echelon up” rule is a good place to start. The platoon commander cannot run his platoon without knowing full well what the battalion commander is trying to do. Likewise, of course, he must know what the company commander is trying to do. If he is ignorant of the desired outputs of the two commanders above him, there will be times when he will have to ask what to do, or guess what to do, or wait for orders, all of which will slow down the process which is tactics. The company commander must think into the mind not only of his battalion commander but the regimental commander. The battalion commander must be read into the thoughts and desires of the division commander.

Above all else, with mission orders, junior officers, non-commissioned officers, and troops must use initiative. Once the subordinate receives his mission he takes it from there. He does not wait for orders. And he must not lose sight of the main effort. He must be well aware of what the main effort is.

Extracted from Colonel M. D. Wyly, USMC in William S. Lind, *Maneuver Warfare Handbook*, pp. 91-97:

### **The Spice Girls on Commander’s Intent:**

“Tell me what you want, what you really, really want. I’ll tell you what I want, what I really, really want.”

### **A Good Intent: General Grant to General Sherman:**

“It is my design to work all parts of the Army together, and, somewhat towards a common center . . . You, I propose to move against Johnston’s Army, to break it up and to get into the interior of the enemy’s country as far as you can, inflicting all the damage you can against their war resources.”

-- Horace Porter. *Campaigning With Grant*.

## Intent is not “Winging It”

“A feeling had engulfed the command post that through previous good planning and adaptability the division had turned a potential crisis into a decisive opportunity. Of course, Gorman mused, an awful lot of things had to happen to make adaptability during execution possible. *It’s amazing how much preparation is required to provide flexibility in execution.* A division contained an awful lot of independent parts that needed to be working toward the same goal. The intelligence collection plan would have to be reoriented to the new axis of advance, as would the fire support planning and the logistics effort. Potential enemy countermoves would have to be considered, as well as possible ways to deal with them. *One good thing that doesn’t have to change is the commander’s intent and its end state.* The force would have to be reorganized to support the new taskings. Fragmentary orders would have to be issued. Necessary coordination would have to be effected above, below, and laterally—especially with the wing since all the aviation support requirements had changed. The light armor battalion would have to be redeployed to continue the counter-reconnaissance battle. With Task Force Hammer as well as all the forward units committed to the exploitation, a new reserve would have to be constituted somehow, but not immediately. Thought would have to be given to protecting the lengthening lines of communications as the pursuit continued. The general’s concept for a regimental helicopterborne attack into the enemy rear would have to be worked out—a major evolution in itself (although most of the planning and coordination would be done by the regiment). Landing zones and helicopter lanes would have to be reconnoitered, air defenses located and targeted for suppression . . .

‘Last chance,’ Bishop was saying. ‘No saved rounds?’

‘You want this by when exactly, general?’ a voice from the back of the tent asked. Laughter broke out, and Bishop smiled but did not bother to answer. The general’s obsession with tempo was legendary.

‘Look, people, don’t worry about trying to control every moving piece in this monster. It’s not gonna happen. I can tell you it’s gonna be chaos for the next few days at least. Maybe longer. The battalions and regiments are already starting to do what we need them to do, so let’s not try to overcontrol this thing. I just want you to make sure that all the chaos and mayhem are flowing in the same general direction and that we keep it going. Coordinate what absolutely needs to be coordinated and don’t try to coordinate what doesn’t. Keep this thing pointed straight, but let it go. Remember, the sign of a good plan is that it gives you both direction and flexibility.’

‘All right,’ the general concluded, ‘I think everybody knows where we stand and what needs to be done. Let’s get at it.’

--MCDP 6 *Command and Control*, pp. 22-23

“In mission tactics, subordinates are not free-wheeling agents, running around the battlefield without guidance. They are expected to execute the commander’s scheme of maneuver and his branch plans on order. If the situation changes, and the plan no longer applies due to unforeseen circumstances, then the subordinate is expected to continue in the correct direction to secure the commander’s intent. The subordinate’s responsibility to execute the commander’s will is ironclad; only the “how” in these emergency situations is missing. Thus a force can continue to act even after positive control is lost, such as during radio jamming or when the command group is destroyed or knocked out of action.”

-- COL John Antal, “Thoughts About Maneuver Warfare”

### **The C2 Problem:**

“The truth is that, given the nature of war, it is a delusion to think that we can be in control with any sort of certitude or precision. And the further removed commanders are from the Marines actually engaging the enemy, the less direct control they have over their actions. We must keep in mind that war is at base a human endeavor. In war, unlike in chess, “pieces” consist of human beings, all reacting to the situation as it pertains to each one separately, each trying to survive, each prone to making mistakes, and each subject to the vagaries of human nature. We could not get people to act like mindless robots, even if we wanted to.

Given the nature of war, the remarkable thing is not that commanders cannot be thoroughly in control but rather that they can achieve much influence at all. We should accept that the proper object of command and control is not to be thoroughly and precisely in control. The turbulence of modern war suggests a need for a looser form of influence—something that is more akin to the willing cooperation of a basketball team than to the omnipotent direction of the chess player—that provides the necessary guidance in an uncertain, disorderly, time-competitive environment without stifling the initiative of subordinates.”

-- MCDP 6 *Command and Control*, p. 43.

### **The C2 Solution:**

“In a decentralized command and control system, without a common vision there can be no unity of effort; the various actions will lack cohesion. Without a commander’s intent to express that common vision, there simply can be no mission command and control. There are two parts to any mission: the task to be accomplished and the reason, or intent. The task describes the action to be taken while the intent describes the desired result of the action. Of the two, the intent is predominant. While a situation may change, making the task

obsolete, the intent is more enduring and continues to guide our actions. Understanding our commander's intent allows us to exercise initiative in harmony with the commander's desires. The commander's intent should thus pull the various separate actions of the force together, establishing an underlying purpose and focus. It should provide topsight. In so doing, it should provide the logic that allows subordinates each to act according to their unique circumstances while maintaining harmony with one another and the higher commander's aim. While assigned tasks may be overcome by events, the commander's intent should allow subordinates to act with initiative even in the face of disorder and change. In a system based on mission command and control, providing intent is a prime responsibility of command and an essential means of leading the organization."

-- MCDP 6 *Command and Control*, pp. 112-113.

"We achieve this harmonious initiative in large part through the use of the commander's *intent*, a device designed to help subordinates understand the larger context of their actions. The purpose of providing intent is to allow subordinates to exercise judgment and initiative—to depart from the original plan when the unforeseen occurs—in a way that is consistent with higher commanders' aims.

There are two parts to any *mission*: the task to be accomplished and the reason or intent behind it. The intent is thus a part of every mission. The task describes the action to be taken while the intent describes the *purpose* of the action. The task denotes *what* is to be done, and sometimes *when* and *where*; the intent explains *why*. Of the two, the intent is predominant. While a situation may change, making the task obsolete, the intent is more lasting and continues to guide our actions. Understanding the intent of our commander allows us to exercise initiative in harmony with the commander's desires.

The intent for a unit is established by the commander assigning that unit's mission—usually the next higher commander, although not always. A commander normally provides intent as part of the mission statement assigned to a subordinate. A subordinate commander who is not given a clear purpose for the assigned mission should ask for one. Based on the mission, the commander then develops a concept of operations, which explains *how* the unit will accomplish the mission, and assigns missions to subordinates. Each subordinate mission statement includes an intent for that subordinate. The intent provided to each subordinate should contribute to the accomplishment of the intent a commander has received from above. This top-down flow of intent provides consistency and continuity to our actions and establishes the context that is essential for the proper bottom-up exercise of initiative.

It is often possible to capture intent in a simple ". . . in order to . . ." phrase following the assigned task. To maintain our focus on the enemy, we can often

express intent in terms of the enemy. For example: “Control the bridge in order to prevent the enemy from escaping across the river.” Sometimes it may be necessary to provide amplifying guidance in addition to an “. . . in order to . . .” statement. In any event, a commander’s statement of intent should be brief and compelling—the more concise, the better. A subordinate should be ever conscious of a senior’s intent so that it guides every decision. An intent that is involved or complicated will fail to accomplish this purpose.

A clear expression and understanding of intent is essential to unity of effort. The burden of understanding falls on senior and subordinate alike. The seniors must make their purposes perfectly clear but in a way that does not inhibit initiative. Subordinates must have a clear understanding of what their commander expects. Further, they should understand the intent of the commander at least two levels up.”

--MCDP 1 *Warfighting*, pp. 89-91.

“The *commander’s intent* provides the overall purpose for accomplishing the task assigned through mission tactics. Although the situation may change, subordinates who clearly understand the purpose and act to accomplish that purpose can adapt to changing circumstances on their own without risking diffusion of effort or loss of tempo. Subordinate commanders will be able to carry on this mission on their own initiative and through lateral coordination with other subunits, rather than running every decision through the higher commander for approval.”

-- MCDP 1-3 *Tactics*, pp. 73-74.

“A useful way to think of mission-type orders is in terms of contracts between superior and subordinate. There are two contracts. One is long-term. It is based on what we call the commander’s intent. This is the commander’s long-term vision of what he wants to have happen to the enemy, of the final result he wants. The subordinate needs to understand this two levels up. If he is a platoon commander, he needs to know the battalion commander’s intent. If he is a company commander, he needs to know the brigade commander’s intent, and so on. The “contract” is simple: the subordinate contracts to make his actions serve his superior’s intent—what is to be accomplished—and the superior contracts to allow the subordinate great freedom of action in terms of how his intent is realized.”

-- William S. Lind, *Maneuver Warfare Handbook*, p. 13.

## Intent Saves Time:

“Mission tactics is the preferred method of waging maneuver warfare. This is accomplished largely by verbal, mission-type orders issued by the senior commander overlooking the terrain where the battle will be fought. Subordinates are expected to make decisions within the guidelines established by the commander’s intent. When decisions are made at the point of execution, advantage can be taken of battle opportunities as they occur, without loss of time. Time is always critical and mission-type orders save time. The command style and staff functioning that contribute most to maneuver warfare is characterized by the application of mission orders.”

-- COL John Antal, “Thoughts about Maneuver Warfare”

“I suppose dozens of operation orders have gone out in my name, but I never, throughout the war, actually wrote one myself . . . **One part of the order I did, however, draft myself—the intention** . . . It is the one overriding expression of will by which everything in the order and every action by every commander and soldier in the army must be dominated.”

-- Field Marshal William Slim

## Intent as seen in *Marine Corps Gazette* Tactical Decision Games:

“**Commander’s intent still a problem.** As solutions and letters to the editor have demonstrated, there has not been a uniform improvement in the quality of commander’s intent statements either in the scenarios or the solutions. Some readers do better than others. A commander’s intent, which provides direction without being restrictive, is essential to harmonious initiative..., but by its nature is a very difficult thing to put across. The lesson is that issuing a good commander’s intent is something that requires a lot of practice.”

-- Maj John F. Schmitt, USMCR. “Observations on Four Years of TDGs” in *Marine Corps Gazette*, June 1994, p. 51.

“**An intent.** 47% of the orders included an intent in some part of the order. However, some of these intent statements added no value to the order. Weak intent should be cause for concern. In reading hundreds of intent sentences, my sense is that many leaders understand the concept, but few have experience with expressing solid intent. Intent should be *why*, not *how*. Some intent was nothing more than “I intend...” followed by the scheme of maneuver: “*I intend to encircle his forces north of Balzar and attack along two axis from east of the river.*” Other weak examples equated the intent with the mission: “*Attack*”

*Objective A in order to seize Objective A.*” Your intent should justify your mission. Ask yourself, *Why* is this important? *Why* are we doing this?

**A series of subordinate tasks and intents.** 46% of the orders used the good practice of linking each task with a corresponding intent or purpose. Since each task becomes a mission statement for your subordinate, each task is best understood when phrased as a mission statement with an accompanying intent. The most concise technique is to link the mission and the intent with “In-Order-To”: *“Seize the tower IOT prevent its use as an enemy OP.”*

More than half of the task statements contained no intent. Many of the poorer tasks were “puppet orders,” physically placing units on the deck, but communicating no hint of what was expected of them: *“Move to Checkpoint One. Orient east.”* Other weak tasks were nothing more than detailed movement orders: *“Move south between Route 5 inclusive and Route 10 exclusive. At RP, follow river, stay in trees, cross east of bridge. Enter treeline north of creek, and establish position there.”* Defensive tasks, especially, need to avoid the “puppet” tendency: *“Occupy and defend BP 10.”* A better example is *“Defend BP 10 IOT prevent enemy fire on our MSR.”* Defensive tasks that include only targeting information: *“Lead four vehicles are yours,”* are especially weak. Defensive orders need a clear intent to encourage subordinates to conduct an active, aggressive defense.”

-- Major Brendan McBreen. “Ten Years of TDGs”

### **One Example of a Bad Commander’s Intent:**

“I intend to destroy forces in Engagement Area FORD. We will do that by killing his recon well forward, killing and attriting him and his infantry in restrictive terrain with massive fires of the artillery and TOWs on critical points on the battlefield. Success is preventing any penetration beyond PL GREEN and not allowing the enemy to escape.”

-- MAJ Greg Pickell, ARNG. “The Defeat of Task Force Smith, 20 October, 1993” Unpublished article.

### **And another:**

“Sometime between 1630 and 1700 Lee sent Colonel Walter M. Taylor of his staff to suggest to Ewell that he push the enemy and seize Cemetery Hill. Taylor’s recollection of the order, which was verbal and not written, was as follows: “He then directed me to go to General Ewell and to say to him that, from the position which he occupied, he could see the enemy retreating over those hills, without organization and in great confusion; that it was only necessary to

press 'those people' in order to secure possession of the heights, and that, if possible, he wished him to do this."

-- David G. Martin. *Gettysburg: July 1 (Completely Revised Edition)*. p. 504.

**And another:**

"My commander's intent? Kill the enemy. Just kill him."

-- One (unnamed) Commanding General's response to a question about his intent during a MEFEX CBAE briefing.