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Urban Battle Command in the 21st Century

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Summary

Leaders of America's ground forces recognize the importance of putting themselves at the most critical point on a battlefield, for it is there that their experience, judgment, and demonstration of physical courage can best influence the outcome of deadly combat. Yet being forward has its costs. The tactical command posts (TOCs) that a commander establishes are hubs of information, intelligence, specialized insight, and communications. Leaving a TOC involves a level of trust: trust that subordinates and staff will inform the commander of important events by exception, that is, the commander is not informed of all events, but will be informed when something of sufficient importance takes place to warrant doing so. If the commander has left the TOC, it means that his ability to receive those messages is less consistent. A leader on the road or in the air has fewer means to send or receive information, and those messages have more chances to fall prey to the vagaries of geography or the myriad other demons that plague military communications. Even reaching the forward position does not resolve the dilemma. The commander is in one sense as well informed as is possible. The situation at his location is described by those most familiar with it. He sees the faces and senses the attitudes of his soldiers or marines. He surveys the ground with his own practiced eye. But the leader knows that he sees and understands but one part of his command. The cost of intimacy at one point is lesser understanding of all others.

Positioning oneself becomes a matter of judgment, risk, necessity, and gut feel. The same savvy that allows a leader to understand a

situation while subordinates are overwhelmed provides a commander a sense of where he is most needed. The conundrum comes when the advantages of any given location still fall far short of a leader's needs, when he finds that none singly provides even the minimum acceptable level of awareness but moving to others does nothing to improve the situation. World War I commanders, so long (and sometimes justifiably) reviled for "hiding" in their distant headquarters, probably felt the pains of this quandary. They were torn between staying in the one place that provided them some understanding of the many miles of front for which they were responsible and a more forward location that gave them their only chance to directly influence events once a battle began. To move forward took them hours, left them virtually without communications, and permitted interaction with only a few handfuls of men at any one stop. Were something to occur elsewhere, the fate of their other soldiers was then in the hands of those less experienced, less in control of the implements of war.

The urban environment is not unlike World War I's Western Front in some regards. Though the distances between TOCs are far less and the dispersion of a command likely much reduced, buildings contrive to interfere with communications and limit line-of-sight so that visiting forward positions can enlighten a leader on only a small portion of the whole for which he is responsible. However, the complexity of the environment multiplies the challenges. The commander's World War I counterpart generally had little reason to worry about the welfare of multitudes of civilians or the condition of the battlefield when combat was over. He was fortunate in at least one way: he could focus almost exclusively on the conduct of battle with few distractions. How much different it is when one's actions influence the safety and survival of tens, hundreds, or even tens of thousands of noncombatants while the enemy is no less malevolent in his intentions.

In some ways the modern commander is fortunate. He is a member of a superior profession of arms, one now better informed by the lessons of history and better provided guidance by carefully considered doctrine. He himself is far better educated, as are those serving under him. Unfortunately, leaders remain less well prepared for

urban contingencies despite the notable advances. Doctrine lags in its provision; in too many cases it actually works against proper conceptualization of the challenges inherent in urban operations. Even such basic concepts as “battle command” and “center of gravity” are inadequate to the task. Traditional thinking on task organizing units and providing them support to some extent breaks down. Tanks and infantry will still work side-by-side, but instead of three companies of one supporting another, it is more likely that a single armored vehicle works with a squad or platoon of foot soldiers. The resultant increase in the number of separate elements that commanders must oversee, support, and lead increases several fold, as do the complications in commanding them.

The original tasking that motivated this study asked that the authors consider the topic of “urban battle command.” Unfortunately the current doctrine pertaining to battle command was found wanting. There are lessons to be taken from its deficiencies, however, and viewing the task from the perspective of command and leadership; control; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); and communications allowed the authors to address the sponsor’s concerns with no loss in resolution. The task was further eased in that the team of which the authors are a part had already investigated urban reconnaissance and communications in previous work, permitting them to focus on the elements of command, leadership, and control more specifically. Each of these areas, and still to a lesser extent ISR and communications, find treatment in the body of this analysis. It was found that providing the results of the examination via seven primary recommendations helps in managing the many components such an undertaking demands. The seven are

- Look deeper in time and beyond military considerations during the backward planning process.
- Consider second- and higher-order effects during planning and war gaming.
- Doctrine asks lower-echelon leaders to look two levels up. Higher-echelon commanders need to consider the limits and

perspectives of same nation and other subordinate headquarters and units. Commanders at every echelon need to be conscious of the situation as it affects those at higher, lower, adjacent, joint, multinational, and interagency levels.

- Account for the language, cultural, procedural, and other differences that will impede the tempo and level of understanding when dealing with some coalition member units and other agencies.
- Be aware that urban densities compress the operational area and can result in more incidents of fratricide.
- Get the ROE right as quickly as possible.
- See the forest *and* selected trees.

The following simple examples illustrate some of the main concerns in each of these areas:

Look deeper in time and beyond military considerations during the backward planning process.

The density of responsibilities during urban operations means that backward planning from actions on the objective or a similar combat end state might be inadequate. The commander who today is victorious in urban combat tomorrow finds himself tasked with rebuilding the damage wrought. As such, it will stand that commander in good stead if he ensures that his force avoids damaging or destroying those elements of urban infrastructure that will help restore the city to postcombat normalcy. This requires identifying such assets before fighting starts (ideally). Therefore, determining what the city will have to look like after it is restored to normalcy is a better point from which to begin backward planning. Combat will require damage and destruction, but a leader will benefit if he can minimize the extent to which it interferes with his longer-term missions.

Consider second- and higher-order effects during planning and war gaming.

Urban areas have more physical, social, and other infrastructure per unit of space than do other environments. It then stands to reason

that in an urban area, a change to one part of an infrastructure will be faster to affect its other parts. Commanders need to consider the residual impact of their actions several iterations removed from the primary effect sought. To provide a simplistic example, cutting off the water supply to a portion of a city occupied by the enemy with the intention of causing his surrender (the primary effect sought) could be effective. If the same area houses several thousand noncombatants, however, it is likely that the enemy will seize what little potable water there is for his own use. The civilians will be forced to seek other sources of fluids for consumption (a second-order effect) that may be unclean. This may in turn result in an outbreak of cholera (third-order effect) that, once the enemy surrenders, results in the friendly-force military commander having to provide medical care for the noncombatants (fourth-order effect).

Doctrine asks lower-echelon leaders to look two levels up. Higher-echelon commanders need to consider the limits and perspectives of same nation and other subordinate headquarters and units.

The complexity of the urban environment translates to greater demands on intelligence collection, processing, and dissemination as well as complicating other staff processes. The tempo of operations can be very high when measured in terms of the number of activities per unit time. The lower the echelon, the less likely it is to be manned with the numbers and expertise to handle these greater demands. Leaders at higher echelons may have to assume responsibility for some of the tasks normally handled at lower levels, or they should consider otherwise reducing the burden on those at subordinate echelons by better screening the intelligence or other products sent to them.

Account for the language, cultural, procedural, and other differences that will impede the tempo and level of understanding when dealing with some coalition member units and other agencies.

Australians operating in Dili, East Timor found that working with coalition members offers both benefits and challenges, much as did the Americans in Mogadishu in 1993. Traditional staff proce-

dures might well require modification in the interest of greater efficiency and effectiveness. Units from various militaries that might work together should not find that their first experience of doing so is when they are under fire. The types of barriers to smooth operations that the United States experienced over many years when transitioning to greater jointness still influence multinational and interagency undertakings.

Be aware that urban densities compress the operational area and can result in more incidents of fratricide.

During tactical movements, factors such as noise, interruptions of lines of sight, extremely short decision times, and the multiplicity of alleys, corridors, and streets make control very difficult. Similar challenges exist during virtually any operation in a built-up area and influence the operational as well as the tactical level of war. Training and rules of engagement (ROE) will help to reduce the incidence of accidentally engaging friendly forces and noncombatants, but modifications of control methods and development of junior leaders before deployment to such contingencies will also be essential.

Get the ROE right as quickly as possible.

The same ROE that help to save fellow soldiers' and civilians' lives can act to endanger those of the men and women restrained by them. History offers repeated examples of ROE designed to reduce the damage caused to buildings and human life that have the unfortunate consequence of costing soldiers' lives because they too greatly interfere with actions essential to survival in combat. The longer the period of adjustment, the greater is the risk for those in contact with the enemy. There is a need to carefully design and thereafter monitor ROE such that an appropriate balance is found quickly.

See the forest *and* selected trees.

The complexity of urban operations as demonstrated, to some extent, by the above examples can overwhelm the individual rifleman, his commander, and all others between and in support. There is a need to focus both on individual points of particular mission importance and the bigger picture. The individual points can be physical (a

sniper, particular building, or element of infrastructure), social (a particularly influential individual or important link between groups), political, economic, or otherwise. Because it seems that the individual parts are inevitably intermeshed (as already highlighted above), focusing on the points to the exclusion of how they fit into one or more greater wholes can be counterproductive to mission accomplishment. Avoiding being overwhelmed and retaining a macro perspective do not come naturally. Most individuals are more comfortable “in the weeds” than they are assuming a perspective requiring a more comprehensive scope of understanding. Recognizing how to maintain a balance between the detailed and general and doing so in practice require training and application. It is an area that receives too little attention.

Urban operations make extraordinary demands on those undertaking military actions in today’s towns and cities. Those demands encompass virtually every aspect of a mission, reaching across arms, services, and agencies. The responsibility for establishing the conditions for success and then overseeing them through to accomplishment lies with commanders and their staffs. This report considers how this might best be done.