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Guest Contribution

The Changing Character of Command

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Between 2009 and 2021 an informal survey of about 60 senior army officers found unanimous agreement with three contentions: that land force headquarters (HQs) are too big; the orders they produce are too long; and those HQs take too long to produce those orders. To repeat: the officers agreed *unanimously*. Put differently, modern, western land force command systems are not fit for purpose. Alternatively: there is something rotten with the command of land forces.[1]

The officers questioned were mostly British, with a few from other NATO countries. Many, and probably most, had worked (or did work) in major NATO headquarters, at up to 4* rank. So this is not a uniquely British problem. Subsequent conversations with dozens of officers from other NATO armies point to exactly the same thing. Western land force command systems are not fit for purpose. There is something rotten with the command of land forces.

This paper discusses the main aspects of the problem. It then considers what we know about the core of the problem, which is: how real human beings do, or should best, make decisions and plan. Finally, it proposes a way forward.

In this paper the term 'command system' describes the totality of process, product, people, structure and technical systems involved in the command of land forces when deployed in operations.

The Problem

The answers to those three contentions suggest serious operational consequences. If HQs are too big, they are easy to find, immobile and vulnerable. They will not survive. If orders are too long, the plans they describe are too complex. They will not survive first contact with the enemy. NATO forces will place themselves at a systematic disadvantage from Day 1. If it takes to too long to produce those orders, a mediocre but moderately agile enemy will decide and act faster. Once again, NATO forces will be at a systematic disadvantage.

The problem is generally located within deployable land HQs. There will always be a need for long, detailed analysis at grand strategic levels, and to some extent also down into the operational level. However, in due course we might also question whether some of the solutions that we can identify for implementation at lower levels also have utility at higher echelons.

The core of this issue lies in the processes used and the products (orders) generated. If those are reduced, the number of staff (that is, people and structures) can be reduced. The technical systems can also be slimmed down. Command posts can become smaller, hence more survivable.

1 This paper is based on Jim Storr, *Something Rotten. Land Command in the 21st Century*. Havant, Hampshire: Howgate Publishing Company, 2022.

Historic Background

This problem is relatively new. During the Cold War, a well-trained British brigade HQ could plan and write orders within 40 minutes of receiving a new mission. British formations were considered somewhat 'pedestrian' by their German and American peers. German (Bundeswehr) brigade headquarters were appreciably faster. US Army formations were also quick; until the 1970s at least. Orders were typically very short: a few pages at most.

Several factors conspired to make things worse. After 1989, the absence of a major peer enemy created two perceptions. One, that HQs could get bigger at no risk. (During the Cold War they were tiny, by modern standards). The other perception was that timeliness – not least, speed of decision making and planning – was not particularly important. Achieved tempo slowed markedly.

There was then an influx of staff. Under NATO's 'Partnership for Peace', newly-joined nations wanted to post staff to NATO HQs to gain experience. Additionally, operations of choice meant that nations could afford more generous staff establishments. (Conversely, for example, during the Cold War *every single* British Army officer had a war role. There was literally no-one left to augment HQs).[2] As a result, staff numbers grew slowly but steadily.

Decades of peace support and counter-insurgency operations, conducted at relatively low tempo then reinforced those trends. It didn't seem to matter if HQs took longer to produce orders. It didn't seem to matter if orders got longer and longer. In fact, given so many staff officers, that activity gave them all something to do. Furthermore, it gave them something to be reported on.

Doctrine-producing authorities and staff colleges also contributed to the problem. There has long been a perception that a good order is a complete order. That is, a long order. Doctrine writers and staff colleges focussed on producing such long, complete orders.[3] Well, there is a time and a place for long, comprehensive orders. But, in general, land forces' time and effort would be better spent in reaching the point where they can operate efficiently with short orders. That has implications for organisations and training, considered below. So we should not think that a good order is a long order. Instead, we should consider that a well-trained force does not need long orders.

Political and social pressures reinforced the trend. Highly visible operations in the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan all contributed to the perception that commanders and staff had to be seen to be diligent. That is, that they could demonstrate that they had considered every factor in planning, and described the results in orders.

That, however, is counterproductive. Firstly, conflict is astonishingly complex and fundamentally unpredictable. It is physically impossible to consider every factor and every interaction explicitly and in detail.[4] To that extent, commanders and staff deluded themselves. However they did, perhaps, create a perception of diligence. That may have been appropriate at the

2 Under the Redistribution of Regular Manpower Upon Mobilisation ('REDRUM').

3 The author wrote, and commented on, high-level land force doctrine for the British Army, NATO land forces and ABCA Armies from 2002 to 2006.

4 A simple calculation of the number of factors, the number of pairwise comparisons needed to consider them, and a reasonable amount of time required to consider them and make deductions indicates that in practice staffs simply do not do that. So, to that extent, considerable short-cutting always takes place. See also the discussion of naturalistic decision making below.

time. However, such conditions no longer apply. Secondly, many issues do not change, or do not change rapidly, through a campaign or major operation. Repeating the relevant detail in every order simply conceals the essential details of the underlying plan. There have been well-documented cases where a long, 'complete' order has been totally misinterpreted by the receiving formation. Removing extraneous repetition of detail from an order often reduces its length by 80% or more.

That suggests a further issue. There has been a perception that new NATO members, or forces from another country joining a given operation, do not understand how things are done; so orders must be 'comprehensive'. Well, re-read the above paragraph. Newcomers *do* need to be properly integrated into the force and the operation. They need that *once*, on joining. That is no excuse for orders which are routinely too long.

It's Not About Complexity

But, war is more complex now. Orders must be comprehensive to manage that complexity. Or do they?

Conflict has long been unutterably complex. Soldiers have long known that. The real problem with our understanding of complexity is simple. Academics from backgrounds in the humanities have no theoretical understanding of complexity, nor how to manage it. They have now taught a generation of officers two things. Firstly, that complexity is a problem. Secondly, that dealing with complexity requires it to be described and then managed in detail.

That is flawed. The best way to manage highly complex and particularly dynamic problems is to delegate management to those closest to the seat of the complexity. Over decades, and in some cases centuries, armies learnt that that required decentralisation; trusting subordinates; empowering (and indeed requiring) those subordinates to act decisively; informing them of the overall intention; and even tolerating well-intentioned mistake in pursuit of the greater good. That is: mission command. That means, not least, short orders. Over a century ago the German Colonel Helmuth von Spohn wrote that every instruction in an order is a constraint on a subordinate's freedom of action. Orders should therefore be very short.

Comprehensive approaches to planning, involving Civil-Military Interaction (CMI), should not be allowed to cloud the issue. The chief ingredients of complexity are the number of elements, the number and variety of interactions between those elements, and the dynamism which the system contains. Dynamism normally contributes far more to the overall complexity of the system than the number and possible types of interaction. Even that might be misleading. CMI might include a large number, and number of types, of interaction. However we typically overlook the numbers and types of interaction involved in combat; possibly because we think we are familiar with them. (Familiarity tends to reduce perceptions of complexity. Indeed familiarity is one of the major tools with which to deal with complexity.) And see the comments above regarding diligence.

Collective Processes

Command systems are not fit for purpose largely because they use collective planning processes. In practice, modern HQs involve large numbers of staff officers involved in meetings, or conversations, for hours at a time. The commander's involvement in that work is largely peripheral. That is not what happened in the Cold War.

There are actually *two* major characteristics to those processes, and three major drawbacks. The characteristics are that they are collective and explicit. They are collective largely because armies have taught themselves that they should be. (Individual, as opposed to collective, processes are discussed below.) So doctrine goes to great length to describe which staff meetings should take place, who should attend them, and so on. In the existing paradigm, that is necessary. Objectively, it need not be.

Existing processes are also explicit. There are two main reasons for that. The first is, again, that armies have taught themselves that they should be. Again, objectively (and as discussed below) they need not be. The second reason is that collective processes must be explicit so that staff leaders can coordinate the large numbers of people involved as they step through the various elements of process. So, for example, there is often a 'receipt of orders briefing' at which the staff are briefed on the content of the incoming order, and instructed as to what to do next. That simply did not exist in (for example) British doctrine in the 1990s.

The three drawbacks to those collective and explicit processes are: that they are time-consuming; that they result in poor plans; and that they generate unnecessarily long orders.

Figures vary, but doctrine seems to think it normal and necessary that, say, a brigade HQ should take 10-12 hours to produce an order on receipt of a new mission. That compares with an hour or so during the Cold War (and 40 minutes or so for a British brigade mentioned above). As another measure, consider the staff effort involved. To do so, we can compare two British brigades observed in 2021[5] with a British brigade in which the author served in 1986-7.[6] If we multiply the number of staff involved by the time they were involved, we find that (by the standards of the 1980s) brigade HQs today are about two per cent efficient.

Scientists in several disciplines related to human behaviour have long recognised that teams or groups tend to agree on what they can agree on. In military planning, social agreement is now integrated through several dozen steps of explicit process[7] and many years of practice. The resulting plans are in practice a result of consensus. They reflect the lowest common denominator of whatever the people involved can agree on. Consensus and quality are not the same thing. Plans produced this way tend to be objectively poor.

The resulting orders tend to be long for several reasons. Firstly, the staff have done a lot of work. They feel that that work should be captured. Secondly, doctrine tells them that that is correct. Thirdly, staff leaders feel that individual contributions should be recognised in the eventual product. Lastly, responsibility for the eventual order is, to some extent, diffuse. It is rare for any individual to take personal responsibility for the overall order to the extent of reducing it radically. Instead, the perception that a good order is a long order prevails.

5 Exercise URBAN LION. British Army's Command and Staff Trainer (South), 23-25 March 2021.

6 This author was an assistant to the G3 staff. However, in 2021 he interviewed two chiefs of staff of that brigade from that period.

7 The current British Army Planning and Exploitation Handbook is an A4-sized document. Its main process for the tactical estimate runs to 77 stages over 74 pages.

Human Decision Making

Many of these problems could be avoided if armies used individual (rather than collective) processes, and processes which are implicit rather than explicit. Individual and implicit processes are largely what armies used to employ, up to the Cold War (although they generally did not know that). Human factors experts have known for decades how those individual and implicit processes actually work.

In the 1980s, American psychologist Gary Klein studied how expert decision makers operated in real-life (that is, 'naturalistic') conditions. He explored such 'naturalistic decision making', and identified a process of 'recognition-primed decision making'. We now use the terms 'naturalistic' and 'recognitional' to describe those processes. Klein's findings reflect how experienced commanders, and skilled planners, actually decide very well. That is very different from the way that doctrine, or practice in western armies, suggests.

Real life is unutterably complex. Human beings have evolved over millennia to be able to make good, workable decisions in complex, dynamic situations (such as driving a car) very quickly. In most fields of work, experts make extremely good decisions. They can do so almost instantaneously. They are often not even aware that they have done so. That is because the mental processes which they use have become instinctive and, in practice, intuitive. This is not mumbo-jumbo or black magic. It is how the human brain works.

Experts typically recognise a given situation as being similar to one with which they are broadly familiar, and to which they can identify a workable solution. Hence the term 'recognitional'. They then consider the actual situation and modify the initial, workable solution accordingly. That may be largely instinctive. It sometimes involves conscious thought, or discussion with colleagues, or both. All these aspects can be observed at times in working military headquarters.[8]

During this process, the brain presents the solution to the expert's conscious awareness. In practice, she or he simply 'knows what to do'. That appears to be intuition. It is *not* guesswork. For genuine experts, such apparent intuition reflects both considerable real knowledge and years (or even decades) of experience. The American General Jim Mattis once said that it took him 30 years to be able to make a decision in 30 seconds.[9] That describes naturalistic and, more importantly, recognitional decision making very well.

Formal experiments show that plans and orders created this way by individuals who have some credible expertise are routinely far better than those made by teams. By 'better', we mean both objectively and subjectively. That is, both when run through computer simulations and when marked 'blind' by senior mentors. Expert decision makers can do this largely because they do not suffer from the problem of 'lowest common denominator', consensual plans described above. There is also a realistic possibility of genuinely novel and creative solutions emerging.

8 The author has observed dozens of HQs over dozens of exercise, both formally and informally, since at least 1999. They have belonged to the armed forces of several different nations.

9 Major Cole F Petersen, *The Plan and First Contact: Command in the 1st Marine Division, Iraq 2003*. MMS dissertation, Marine Corps University 2017, 30.

There are normally several workable solutions to every military situation.[10] Some of them may be similar. Some may be identical except in small detail. Therefore it is entirely reasonable to accept that expert military decision makers can identify a candidate solution to most military problems with which they are broadly familiar, and then rapidly adapt it to the situation at hand.

Intuition is no excuse for not checking. A plan in which the planner 'just knows what to do' will generally be workable, but may not be the best. Furthermore, all planners need input from other staff branches. So, at battlegroup level and above, it is unlikely that one planner can work *entirely* alone. It is also likely that talking through the outline of a candidate plan, albeit briefly, will improve it. In most HQs that would occur naturally, when (for example) the planner briefs the commander on his proposal. Alternatively (and preferably), it may be the commander who recognises the basis of the solution and directs a planner to draft the orders accordingly. In that case the writer should be able to suggest clarifications or modifications to the outline plan.

In almost every case there will need to be specialist input from other staff. That might include (say) the fireplan or a road movement order. But one of the major advantages of having one person create the plan and write the order is that she (or he) can do so using remarkably few words. It should not be unusual to be able to produce such an order on one side of one piece of paper.

There is one other major caveat to the use of naturalistic, recognitional processes. They only work if the planner is generally familiar with the situation and the kind of problem. Overall, that requires familiarity with the theatre (more broadly, the particular operational environment), the task at hand, and the team (the other key staff).[11] That requires several related measures which are beyond the scope of this paper.

The Way Ahead

In summary, and to repeat: modern, deployable western land force command systems are not fit for purpose. Doing nothing is simply not an option. Some armies are aware of this. In the last year every battlegroup and every formation in the Australian Army has 'culled' its organisation and its processes.[12]

The way ahead is to adopt individual planning and decision-making methodologies. Such processes have very little explicit process. There is typically just enough process to describe the subject and to allow discussion and comparison. When you have learned to tie your shoelaces, you do not need to step through explicit process. Decision making is a far more natural process than tying shoelaces.

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10 *M.I D. Report, GERMANY (Combat), Subject: The German General Staff School (Kriegsakademie)*, Record Group 165, Records of the WDGS, Military Intelligence Division. In Jörg Muth, *Command Culture. Officer Education in the U.S. Army and the German Armed Forces, 1901-1940, and the Consequences for World War II*. (Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press, 2011), 176.

11 I am particularly grateful to Major (now Lieutenant Colonel) Tom Bright of the British Army for that formulation.

12 Feedback from an online presentation to the staff of the Australian Army's Combat Training Centre at 150800 – 0900 A Aug 23.

After the initial orders for a campaign or a major operation, a long order is not a good order. From then on, a good order is concise and succinct. It delegates execution, as far as possible, to subordinates.

Armies should revise their high-level processes to generate and maintain familiarity with theatre, task and team. Once they have done so, all orders except those which initiate a major operation should be very short. Methods for generating that familiarity have been described several times.[13] If individual planning methods are adopted, staffs can be much smaller. HQs can also become much smaller.

Changes to planning processes should also aim to build up individual expertise throughout an exercise, an operation, a campaign, and a career. Much the same also applies to the execution of operations.

There are in practice effective, organisational and procedural barriers to the implementation of such changes. One is that units and formations are typically, in practice, certified as being fit for operations on the basis of their ability to follow explicit process. That must change.

Such certification should require HQs to generate orders much faster. It should encourage them to abandon explicit process and involve as few people as possible in planning and execution. Ideally, just one individual should be involved in each case; with expert assistance only if (and when) required.

This discussion relates to deployable land force HQs. We might well consider whether similar considerations should apply to higher-level HQs.

You may disagree with much of the contents of this paper. But, to repeat: modern, western land force command systems are not fit for purpose. Doing nothing is simply not an option.

13 See Storr, Jim. *Something Rotten. Land Command in the 21st Century*. Havant, Hampshire: Howgate Publishing Ltd, 2022, p94.

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