



Army Staff Sergeant briefs Army Chief of Staff, General George W. Casey, Jr., about new technologies used in war against terrorism (U.S. Army/D. Myles Cullen)

The Role of Professional Military Education in Mission Command

By Nicholas Murray

The debate about the quality and role of professional military education (PME) has been much written about across the Armed Forces and the blogosphere. However, one area that has received scant attention in the debate is the role of education in the

Dr. Nicholas Murray is an Associate Professor in the Department of Military History at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

military's new system of command—that is, mission command. This is the case despite its proclaimed importance to the future vision of the Service environment. In his Mission Command white paper, General Martin Dempsey outlined mission command's criticality to the concept of Joint Force 2020.¹ To better understand the context of this article, it is helpful to provide the definition of *mission command* used by the Armed Forces: “the conduct of military operations through decentral-

ized execution based upon mission type orders. Successful mission command demands that subordinate leaders at all echelons exercise disciplined initiative and act aggressively and independently to accomplish the mission.”²

To prepare the forces for that concept, General Dempsey states that mission command “must be institutionalized” throughout the military, with explicit reference to the education system; that is, “[j]oint and service doctrine, education and training are keys to achieving

the habit of mission command . . . our schools must teach it, and we must train individually and collectively to it.” He goes on, “the education of our officer corps—joint and service—must begin at the start of service to instill the cognitive capability to understand, to receive and express intent, to take decisive initiative within intent, and to trust.”³

For mission command to work, understanding and clarity of purpose are the two key components. Without an understanding of what is required to meet the endstate of a mission, it is unlikely that a commander can create an order (intent) that gets to the problem at hand. Likewise, without clarity, it is unlikely anyone will understand the commander’s intent. So how do we provide understanding and clarity of purpose to our officers? We do it through better education.

In his white paper on Joint Education, General Dempsey requires joint PME to develop the “habits of mind essential to our profession”—that is, critical thinking.⁴ A recent brief relating to leader development and education, however, states that the first core competency of the Combined Arms Center (CAC), which is the overseer and guide to joint PME, is “inculcating leaders with a mastery in the art and science of war.”⁵ The problem with this competency is that *inculcation* is simply rote learning under the guise of a fancy name. Rote learning is sometimes a valuable tool for training, but it does not clearly fit the commander’s intent relating to critical thinking.

General Dempsey identifies the development of critical thinking as the key ingredient to the future of PME: “to fully realize the potential of mission command, our joint education efforts must effectively instill the cognitive capability to understand, receive, and clearly express intent, to take decisive initiative within intent, accept prudent risk, and build trust within the force.”⁶ Thus, we have a conundrum. While General Dempsey is calling for critical thinking, CAC is calling for inculcation. How do we get to effective mission command from there? Moreover, General Dempsey’s call is not new. In 1934, Lieutenant General

James Breckenridge, commander of the Marine schools at Quantico, wrote, “It is my constant ambition to see the Marine officers filled with ambition, initiative, and originality; and they can get these attributes only by liberality of thought,—broad thought,—thought that differs from precedent and the compulsory imprint of others. I want them to originate,—not to copy.”⁷

Similar calls have been made by senior leaders for years. Why then has it proved so difficult to achieve? This is where military culture comes in. There is a fear of white space on the calendar. It suggests “idleness on the part of soldiers,” as my former regimental sergeant major might have put it, *idle* being the insult of choice, aimed at anyone who did not look physically busy. Now, that might well relate to my experience as a recruit in the British army, but it is equally applicable in the U.S. military. In addition, effective training can more easily be judged. To that end, the amount of time devoted to a particular subject often seems to be the main metric of measurement.

For example, the Command and General Staff Officer Course (CGSOC) currently devotes roughly 250 school hours of study to mission command, directly or indirectly. This number comes from a total of about 700 hours of core and advanced instruction, going by the 2013–2014 academic year. That looks impressive on paper. However, only around 100 of the teaching hours truly involve critical thinking as it would be understood outside of PME. Additionally, the amount of time devoted to critical thinking has hardly changed despite the emphasis on a command system that is absolutely dependent upon it. This is despite the addition of more hours of instruction into the curriculum at the staff school. This has meant that students, whose critical thinking skills we need to develop, have even less time to think and study than before.

For mission command to work effectively, this cannot be the case. When the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff provides guidance through his white papers, and a key PME institution appears to do the exact opposite, what message is

sent to the PME community and to the Armed Forces writ large?

If the military is to integrate mission command into its way of doing things, it must create a culture within PME that facilitates it. The emphasis should be placed on education rather than training. The tension between these two ideas has provided much fuel to the fire of the regular bashing of PME. The routine lack of understanding of the difference between the two was also unfortunately emphasized in the CAC brief. To get the best out of the personnel passing through PME, both the students and staff must value attendance. In addition, PME culture should promote critical thinking so this is not only an add-on to other parts of the curriculum. How should PME go about achieving this?

The Armed Forces must first ensure that the best officers attend PME institutions. Continuing with CGSOC as our example, the move toward merit-based selection is already on the way, and there have been encouraging signals that this will continue. However, details are scarce, and it is essential that PME institutions do more than shave off the bottom few students. PME needs something more radical. Close to universal attendance has meant there are some students who are not ready for, or capable of, high-level critical thinking. This is not to say there are no bright “go get ’em” types. There certainly are. But there is a larger issue at hand, one that is frustrating both to those officers who really do want to challenge themselves and to their instructors. With universal, or near universal attendance, we really cannot expect much in the way of challenging critical thinking skills from all PME students, and this has a direct effect on the ability of the Armed Forces to implement mission command because effective critical thinking is one of the key components.

Compounding this situation is the fear that officers’ attendance in a PME school harms their chances of promotion. Indeed, some officers choose not to attend resident PME. Moreover, if they do choose to attend CGSOC, they sometimes do not choose to go to the follow-on year at the School of Advanced



Afghan air force officer Niloofar Rhmani, accompanied by USAF 438th Air Expeditionary Advisory Group executive officer and AAF pilot advisor, deplanes Cessna 208 becoming first Afghan woman to fly fixed-wing combat mission (U.S. Air Force/Ben Bloker)

Military Studies because of the risks to their careers from an extra year in PME. This fear is not confined to students. The difficulty of getting the best and brightest officers to instruct PME is often criticized for much the same reason. Largely, this is the case because officers need Key Development (KD) jobs as well as time in operations and in command to progress in their careers. Currently, rightly or wrongly neither attendance nor instruction in a PME school is classed a KD assignment. Thus, in many ways, the perception that involvement in PME might be a real hindrance to career progress is all too real. Again, the effect on mission command is a reduction in the level of critical thinking, which can go on in an environment lacking some of the best and brightest instructors and students.

To encourage the best serving of officers, the Services should make teaching in a PME institution a KD job, which would be a quantum shift in military culture. By doing so, the Services could avoid the current scramble for KD postings, which often comes at the expense of its personnel attending or teaching at PME institutions. It would also provide a strong incentive for the best and brightest to teach in the PME system, which does not always happen (despite many excellent serving instructors). This would also have the benefit of helping improve critical thinking in the classroom, thus facilitating the use of mission command.

For officers to teach PME (if it becomes a KD position), they should have attended the relevant course and perhaps completed a Master's degree there in a topic relevant to the area in which they wish to teach (in the case of CGSOC, this would be the Master of Military Art and Science). It might also be sensible to require that PME instructors possess a relevant skill identifier in addition to their degrees. This is already the case for history, and there is no reason why it should not also be the case for leadership, tactics, jointness, and logistics.

More officers completing degrees would increase the breadth and depth of the faculty's knowledge as well as provide the results of such research to the wider military community. It would

both improve and expand the intellectual core of the Army (in this case). It would also encourage students, many of whom currently go to online degree Web sites to prepare (while they are attending PME and with an often deleterious effect on their military studies) for their post-Army careers, to focus on more directly relevant topics. Providing a link between PME and military career growth would have the added benefit of more clearly meeting General Dempsey's intent as well as General Breckenridge's ideal from 80 years ago. The infrastructure for much of this is already in place.

Of course, high-quality candidates with at least a Master's degree (related to the subject area in which they are to teach) from other institutions should not be barred from teaching in PME institutions if they are excellent teachers. It should not be enough for someone to check the box of PME attendance to gain a teaching job. Teaching is the main focus of the institutions, and that should remain the case. But too often the criticism has been leveled that many of the teaching staff use PME institutions as a pre-retirement step, and they are accepted as instructors because of the lack of viable alternatives. Whether this is true across PME institutions is subject to debate and beyond the scope of this article. However, encouraging the best to teach through incentives (KD jobs) would help alleviate some of that criticism by encouraging a higher proportion of our best officers to consider attending and teaching PME.

So how would all of this actually help meet General Dempsey's guidance? Selecting the best and brightest for attendance in PME should be a given. Combine this process with high-quality instructors, both outside civilians and officers working in PME as a key part of their career development, and in theory the pieces would fall in place for much-improved critical thinking in the classroom. Civilians would provide a needed break from military culture (something called for in the Skelton Report), assuming they are not all retired military and can teach effectively.

This last point is important. Research, particularly that of Eric Hanushek, a

senior fellow in the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, has shown the strong link between teacher effectiveness and student learning. Much of his research focuses on the K-12 school system and the huge gap in learning outcomes for students, depending on whether they are taught by excellent or poor teachers: "The *difference* in student performance in a single academic year from having a good as opposed to a bad teacher can be more than one full year of standardized achievement."⁸ Although the focus of his article is on K-12, there is no reason to suppose that the educational outcomes for students in PME are fundamentally different. If that is correct, and this author sees no legitimate reason to doubt it, getting the best people to teach, both military and civilian, is of paramount importance to the mission. This is particularly so if we are to achieve what General Dempsey outlined in his white papers.

To that end, credentialing is important, and it is one method for identifying people with the requisite level of knowledge. However, it does not identify an excellent instructor, who, with a relevant Master's degree, is worth far more to the institution of PME than a bunch of bad instructors who have doctorates. This is not to say that PME does not need instructors with doctorates—quite the opposite. Proper credentialing is vital to make sure that curricula and proper academic standards are maintained, but if PME is to achieve the goals outlined for it, then well-qualified instructors who are also good teachers must be hired and retained. Bad instructors, whatever their credentials, are a liability in the classroom.

So where does this leave us? If the concept of mission command is to succeed, PME needs to change both what it is doing and how it is doing it. The culture of PME has to learn to accept blank space on the calendar. Just because someone is not physically occupied does not mean he is mentally idle. Build in research time for the students and identify it as such. Get them regularly writing: an operations order a week would be an effective means of doing this, and it would also get them thinking and allow them to practice a key part of what they

are likely to be doing when they leave. This is where civilians come in. They should have the experience of a civilian graduate program, and they will be more accepting of this scenario. Furthermore, PME must make sure it employs the best serving officers and civilians—not only in terms of qualifications, but also in terms of their teaching skills. Therefore, we must provide instructors with the incentives to make teaching in PME institutions a key part of their careers. Although training remains an essential part of PME, it should not dominate the schedule. There has to be time for officers to *think* about what they have learned. Only that will allow us to excel at the critical thinking required by the Armed Forces of the future.

To end, I can do no better than use the words of Lieutenant General Breckenridge: "If we can stimulate our officers to work as hard and intelligently in an academic sense as they always do in a physical and mental sense when confronted by things 'that can't be done,' then we will open the door for the great man (or men) I hope to see produced."⁹ JFQ

Notes

¹ Martin E. Dempsey, Mission Command White Paper, April 3, 2012, available at <www.jcs.mil/content/files/2012-04/042312114128_CJCS_Mission_Command_White_Paper_2012_a.pdf>.

² Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, August 11, 2011), II-2.

³ Dempsey, Mission Command.

⁴ Martin E. Dempsey, Joint Education White Paper, July 16, 2012, available at <www.jcs.mil/content/files/2012-07/071812110954_CJCS_Joint_Education_White_Paper.pdf>.

⁵ "What CAC Does," Leader Development and Education Slide Brief, August 7, 2012.

⁶ Dempsey, Joint Education.

⁷ Letter from Lieutenant General Breckenridge to Colonel Smith, November 21, 1934, Julian C. Smith Papers, Marine Corps Archives, Private Papers Collection 188, Box 34.

⁸ Eric A. Hanushek, "The Trade-off between Child Quantity and Quality," *The Journal of Political Economy* 100, no. 1 (February 1992), 84–117. Italics in original.

⁹ Letter from Lieutenant General Breckenridge.