Original Study **Open Access**

Niklas Nilsson*

Mission Command in a Modern Military Context

https://doi.org/10.2478/jobs-2021-0001
received December 10, 2020; accepted February 5, 2021.

Abstract: The development of capabilities for national defence among land forces in the Baltic region underscores the need for mission command as a guiding principle of leadership and command. However, the practice of mission command in the contemporary military context is far from straightforward. This article presents the results of a survey conducted with Swedish Army officers, examining their perspectives on positive as well as negative influences on their ability to utilize mission in their contemporary working environment. While mission command is envisioned to become increasingly important in the future, several obstacles are identified to its utilization and development.

Keywords: mission command; army; Sweden.

1 Introduction

Land forces in the Wider Baltic region are, especially since 2014, in the process of reorienting from a force structure and command methods designed primarily for expeditionary operations overseas, towards capabilities for national defence against a high-technological peer adversary. They thus need to develop the capacity for high-intensity warfare across wide stretches of territory. Moreover, technological developments, including long-distance precision fires and disruption capability, indicate a need for dispersion as well as the ability to function independently in a complex environment and to operate without immediate direction from higher levels of command. This underscores the need for mission command as a guiding principle of leadership and command, understood as a precondition for efficient force employment as well as the speed and flexibility required in modern manoeuvre warfare.

This article presents a survey-based study of the contemporary problems and prospects of mission command in the case of the Swedish Army. Sweden's military-strategic and joint operations doctrines explicitly state that mission command is the core leadership philosophy of the Swedish Armed Forces (Swedish Armed Forces 2016, 2020). However, although the doctrines present the utilisation of mission command as a cornerstone of leadership, the preconditions for practicing and utilising it in the professional environment of Swedish Army officers are far from straightforward. Numerous aspects of the reality in which these officers work and train present potential obstacles to the efficient practice of mission command. These factors include, for example, the integration and use of new technology, competing demands from tasks relating to combat training and administration, arduous C2 methods for planning and production of orders, and aspects of organisational culture and attitudes that do not always favour initiative and creativity.

Although the empirical results presented in the article derive from the context of the Swedish Army, the observations have a much wider applicability. Indeed, the identified preconditions and needs pertaining to the improved practice of mission command are relevant in other land forces across the Wider Baltic region and beyond. The article therefore aims to present experiences with mission command from the perspective of military practitioners in a manner that can provide general input to the discussion on principles and methods of command in land forces region-wide.

The article starts with an outline of the survey study that forms the empirical basis for the argument. It then presents the survey results regarding the prospects and problems of mission command, thematised as *theory and practice*, *organisation and command methods*, *equipment and technology*, *colleagues: personal and professional traits*, *the utility of mission command*, *dealing with failure, success and learning* and *current conditions for practicing mission command, and its present and future importance*. Finally, the article presents conclusions drawn from the survey results and some general observations for the development of mission command in land forces.

***Corresponding author: Niklas Nilsson,** Swedish Defence University: Forsvarshogskolan, Stockholm, Sweden, E-mail: niklas.nilsson@fhs.se

2 Methodology

This article expands on previous work that, based on qualitative interviews, mapped key challenges to the practice of mission command as perceived by Swedish Army officers (Nilsson 2020). To broaden the empirical scope for these observations, the article presents the results of a survey conducted with Swedish Army officers. The survey traces how the respondents view the contemporary conditions in the Armed Forces, as well as in their daily work, for practicing mission command. The survey was designed as a questionnaire containing 13 multiple-choice questions, which were answerable with a ranking scale between 1 and 5. It was sent out to students at the higher command and staff programme at the Swedish Defence University, representing majors and captains from different branches of the Army. From a total of 44 students, 39 responses were collected, representing a response frequency of 89 percent. Among the respondents, 20 were captains and 19 were majors. These responses, given their limited coverage, cannot be taken to represent the view of the Swedish Army as a whole. However, they still provide a valuable snapshot of the perspectives of officers of these ranks, who are of course part of a wider community of colleagues whose opinions and attitudes tend to be mutually reinforcing. Thus, although the article cannot assess the generalisability of the results with certainty, it can nevertheless be assumed that the perspectives conveyed through the results of the survey have similarities with the opinions held by those in the Swedish Army to whom the opportunity to participate in the survey was not made available. Moreover, the respondents are all selected for higher staff training and promotion and are designated to gradually acquire increasing responsibility for the development of tactics and command within the Army and to take up positions in which they can influence these processes. Therefore, their opinions on the subject of mission command should be considered particularly important.

Responses were collected during September and October 2020. Unless otherwise specified, responses were accounted for through the weighted average of responses to each question, providing a number between 1 and 5. After each question, the respondents were given the opportunity to provide free-text comments. The survey was concluded with four questions answerable with free-text comments pertaining to the present and future of mission command in the Swedish Army.

3 Prospects and Problems for Mission Command

3.1 Theory and practice

The question of theory versus practice is a central one in the discussion of mission command. Indeed, mission command is frequently and elegantly explained in military doctrine and manuals as well as in academic works which deal with the subject. Yet, translating these conceptual principles into the practice of command is rather more complicated (Shamir 2011). As expressed by the respondents in this study, several competing and contradictory demands placed on them in their professional roles as military officers imply that the mission command principles prescribed in doctrine are not always easy to follow.

The respondents were asked two questions, one regarding how they perceived the principal importance of various enablers of mission command, and another regarding the extent to which they deemed these enablers to be present in their own working environments. The enablers consisted of 1) culture and values in the Armed Forces, 2) prescriptions in doctrine and manuals, 3) personal characteristics of subordinates, 4) personal characteristics of superiors, 5) professional competency of subordinates, 6) professional competency of superiors, 7) opportunities available to members of the Armed Forces to conduct field exercises with their unit, 8) the organization of their unit, 9) their working practice and methods and 10) the working climate which prevails within their own unit or headquarters.

In responses to the first question, regarding the principal importance of these enablers, the general impression was that they were all deemed important to the practice of mission command (weighted average 3.11–4.68), although doctrinal prescriptions, as well as unit organisation, received lower scores than the rest (3.51 and 3.11, respectively). This can be taken to imply that the respondents view a wide range of preconditions as at least theoretically important for their ability to exercise mission command.

The picture was clearly different when the respondents were asked to assess the extent to which these preconditions were, in fact, present in their own working environments. Overall, all enablers received a much lower score on this question (2.49–3.62). Although the difference should not be exaggerated, the responses indicate a discrepancy between what the respondents view as important preconditions for practicing mission command and how they experience the reality of the environment in which they are supposed to exercise it.

3.2 Organisation and command methods

One important measure of how mission command is translated into practice in a military organisation is the design of command methods and communication within and between military units. In principle, higher commanders practicing mission command should focus their communication on providing a clear idea of their intent for the combat. Orders to sub-commanders should then contain no more guidance than is necessary to perform the task at hand (Lind 1985). At least, in theory, this should provide for a quick decision process and as far as possible decentralise decision-making to commanders at lower levels. However, as has been pointed out in recent research, trends in C2 and staff work in recent decades across the Western world have tended towards increasing complexity and centralisation. Military staffs have increased in size, adding additional functions and staff members. Decision-making methods have become increasingly complex and time-consuming, relying on set matrixes regulating the process as well as the output. The product of these procedures is frequently highly detailed orders that are time-consuming for subordinates to read and understand while they also regulate in detail how tasks are to be conducted, thus circumscribing the room for decision-making and initiative (Storr 2009).

The survey asked respondents to rank, from highly negative, to highly positive, how they evaluated the impact of various aspects of the decision and communication processes on their ability to practice mission command. The categories were the organisation of military staffs, the methods of staff work, planning methods, decision methods, the design of orders, methods to communicate orders, and communication between different levels of command.

The responses in all of these categories gravitated towards a neutral or negative evaluation. The most negative were the rankings of methods of staff work and the design of orders (2.57 and 2.62, respectively). Very few gave the highest score in any of the categories. Again, the negative impression should not be exaggerated, since a large number of responses given were neutral (neither positive nor negative). Yet, overall, given that quick decision-making and action are considered to be the main advantages of mission command, the responses give the impression that the respondents do not perceive the current organisation of command and format of staff work and orders as being optimal in this regard.

3.3 Equipment and technology

Technological innovations have always had an important relationship with the conduct of warfare. There are numerous hypothetical reasons as to why technology could potentially affect tactical as well as command practices. Specifically in relation to the practice of mission command, several technological developments could logically increase the importance of mission command on the future battlefield. Developments in weapons and sensor systems as well as vastly improved precision in long-distance fires suggest that the dispersion of land forces will become increasingly important to improve the chances of survival. Moreover, developments in UAV-technology, both for reconnaissance and for delivering lethal munitions, imply new challenges and vulnerabilities for land forces; these were most recently demonstrated during the fighting between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. This suggests an increasing need for independent manoeuvre and movement of individual units – not least since radio communication is an important giveaway and target for modern missile systems and artillery. Electronic Warfare systems have gained increased capacity for disturbing communication, underlining the importance for military units at all levels to be able to operate independently, without communication or direction from higher command.

Improved command and communications systems potentially provide the ability to improve situational awareness across command levels and to more effectively signal a higher commander's intent (Storr 2003). However, technological developments in all of these areas can also potentially counteract the practice of mission command. In general, the

increasing complexity, as well as interconnectivity of these systems, imply that the need for control, coordination and technical expertise of military units may increase accordingly, which may be valid for units that utilise these systems as well as those targeted by them. Particularly, systems providing improved capabilities for communication and coordination could have a double-sided effect on the practice of mission command.

On the one hand, it has been argued that the improved ability for comprehensive command associated with these innovations will reduce the perceived importance of mission command and the need for initiative among lower-level commanders. In this view, the ever-growing capacity for command, control and coordination could improve military efficiency and the capacity for delivering synergetic effects among networked units and systems (Leonhard 1995). Another potential consequence of these innovations is that systems allowing higher commanders to constantly communicate with and pinpoint the location of their subordinates, for example via blue force tracking, will enhance the temptation to interfere with their activities, simply because it is possible. There is thus a risk that C2 technology will invite unnecessary micro-management, which stands in direct contradiction to the principles of mission command.

This is also a logic that is imported from the expeditionary deployments of Swedish and other European forces in recent decades. In these missions, a deployed unit typically had few simultaneous combat engagements, making it possible for the higher command to pay full attention to the fighting in a specific location. Moreover, the strategic implications of even minor skirmishes were potentially significant, increasing the importance of detailed command and restrictive orders (Shamir 2011). While fit for the purpose during these expeditionary deployments, the same practices will not be suitable for the high-intensity fighting that can be envisioned during operations to defend territory against a peer adversary. In such a scenario, combat will likely consist of too many simultaneous engagements for any higher commander to monitor and regulate in detail, thus necessitating the reliance on individual subunits to pursue objectives in line with the higher commander's intent and on their own initiative (Vogelaar & Kramer 2004, Finkel 2011).

In the survey, respondents were asked to rank to what extent they perceived different categories of advancing technology to impact the need to practice mission command in their context (where 1 = the need decreases and 5 = the need increases). The specific categories of technology were broken down into communications technology, localisation technology (e.g. blue force tracking), weapons systems, sensors and long-distance fires. The respondents were also asked whether they believed that the importance of proficiency in mission command increased or decreased if they were technologically superior to the opponent, and vice versa.

The general responses disclose that the respondents believe that the practice of mission command will remain equally important or increase in the face of technological development in all of these categories (3.22–3.54). The most striking result, however, is that an overwhelming majority of the respondents believe that the importance of mission command will increase when facing a technologically superior adversary (4.30). This is perhaps the most important observation in this category – in the perspective of the respondents, the relationship between technological supremacy and mission command appears to be inversed, indicating that proficiency in mission command can, to a degree, compensate for deficiencies in technology.

3.4 Colleagues: professional and personal traits

Trust is probably the most fundamental cornerstone to the practice of mission command. Superiors are expected to trust their subordinates to devise solutions and accomplish objectives in line with the commander's intent, whereas subordinates are expected to trust their superior's judgement and ability to define an optimal and realistic purpose for their activities. A sufficient level of trust present within a military unit supposedly enables the coordinated action towards a common purpose that is the hallmark of mission command (Ploumis 2020, Labarbera 2017, Wilson 2018).

It is, however, more difficult to pinpoint in exact terms how to define the sources of trust and their presence or non-presence in any particular organisation. For the purposes of this study, trust is taken to stem from the reliance on the professional competence of colleagues, their personal traits (for example, propensity for judgement and initiative) and the amount of time spent together in a unit. The reason why these categories are treated separately is that previous research has shown how changes in the system for officer education and training has given rise to a generational gap. Officers who underwent basic officer training—for example in the early 2000s— (a circumstance which is valid for most of the respondents in this study) find it difficult to assess the level of professional competency among younger colleagues who graduated from the Officer Programme (OP) in recent years. Therefore, it has become increasingly

difficult for mid-level commanders to determine what junior commanders are qualified to do, based on their military rank. Instead, this puts a premium on interpersonal relations, meaning that personal knowledge becomes increasingly important, as well as reputation, implying a track record of positive performance (Nilsson 2020).

In this regard, the personal traits of subordinates potentially acquire outsized importance in comparison with their rank. Another important aspect is the personal traits of commanders. Although, as noted previously, Swedish doctrine and military handbooks prescribe that mission command is the key command philosophy in the Swedish Armed Forces, it is in practice very much up to individual commanders to decide what degree of delegated responsibility is appropriate. This is important since it implies that the extent to which mission command is employed in practice is not only tied to the requirements of the particular situation at hand (which is a logical call of judgement), but also to the personality and personal command style of any given commander. While a personal imprint and individual variations are perhaps unavoidable and warranted features of command, they also provide an interesting illustration of the discrepancy between doctrinal prescriptions and professional practice – if mission command is supposed to constitute the basic command philosophy, it logically cannot be up to individual commanders to decide whether or not to employ it.

A third issue is the duration of time spent in actual command postings in relation to the ability of commanders to develop sufficient rapport with their units to be able to exercise mission command effectively. The normal posting time for e.g. company and battalion commanders is two years, which respondents in a previous study deemed insufficient for this purpose (ibid.).

In the survey, respondents were asked to grade on a scale of 1–5 whether they agreed with a series of statements, of which 1 meant total disagreement and 5 total agreement.

A majority of the responses supported the statement that it is difficult to determine the competence of younger colleagues based on their rank, thus confirming the results from previous qualitative studies (3.73). The respondents also affirmed that they tended to distribute tasks based on the personal traits of subordinates, rather than their rank or formal competencies (4.08). However, they also claimed that they did not view it as problematic if subordinates resolved tasks differently from the manner in which they themselves would have – indicating a self-perception of openness to initiative and creative solutions (4.24). Moreover, a majority of the respondents fully or mostly agreed that commanders commonly exercise detailed control, and strongly agreed with the statement that the commander's personal need for control determines the room for exercising mission command (3.57 and 4.22). Most respondents expressed a neutral stance or disagreed with the statement that the time of service on different postings is sufficient to build common trust between commanders and subordinates. This indicates that opinions are split between those who found the rotation times acceptable and those who found them insufficient, while relatively few believe they are sufficient to establish the required level of trust (2.73).

Changes to the system for recruitment, however, do not appear to pose a challenge to the employment of mission command. A large majority disagreed with the statement that the reintroduction of conscription reduces the room for mission command on the soldier level, indicating that they see a potential in utilising mission command in a conscription army that is equal to or even higher than in a force consisting of professional soldiers (2.00).

3.5 The Utility of Mission Command

Although mission command is intended to constitute the command philosophy of the Armed Forces, this does not necessarily mean that this style of leadership permeates all activity at all times and in all parts of the organization. The survey sought to capture views on the extent to which mission command is suitable under different circumstances and at different levels, the benefits and potential backdrops of mission command, the importance of mission command in relation to different tasks performed by the officer and the extent to which mission command is utilised in different contexts.

To begin with, most respondents expressed a highly positive view of mission command and its potential, viewing mission command as generally preferable to detailed command (3.68). A large part of the respondents also believed that mission command should be employed to the extent possible in all sorts of situations and at all levels of command (4.03 and 3.46). Most also agreed that mission command allows for faster decisions and actions than detailed command (3.58). Conversely, most respondents disagreed with the proposition that the utilisation of mission command could imply a risk of higher losses or be a source of mistakes (2.05).

When asked to assess in what situations mission command is most important (on a scale from 1–5, where 1 = unimportant and 5 = very important), a very large majority of the respondents agreed that it is central in offensive and defensive combat (4.59 and 4.62), and during field exercises and exercises in a simulated environment (4.68 and 4.57). Mission command was considered less important, but still important, during joint exercises with foreign counterparts (4.14), during deployments overseas (3.84) and during peacetime activities, for example including administrative work and unit production (3.86).

A majority of the respondents also agreed that mission command has become more important as the Swedish Army transforms into national defensive tasks (3.06). In contrast, they considered mission command to have been less important in the expeditionary missions of the last decades (2.06). The responses also confirm that Swedish officers consider mission command to be an important aspect of self-identification for the profession, denoting what it means to be a Swedish officer. A large majority agreed that the practice of mission command is an important part of the officer's self-image (4.03) and a considerable share of the respondents believed that the Swedish Armed Forces exercise mission command to a greater degree than foreign counterparts (3.67).

Regarding the question of where and when mission command is actually exercised in practice, there is a clear discrepancy between different types of tasks that the officer is expected to resolve. Almost all respondents agreed that mission command is most clearly present in doctrine and handbooks (3.95). Among a slightly lower but still significant share of the respondents, mission command was also considered to be present in the war organisation (3.57). To a lesser extent, the respondents considered mission command to be exercised in their own working environment (3.27), whereas it was even less applicable to activities in the deployment area during missions overseas (3.14). However, in these areas, mission command was still considered to be exercised to a certain extent. In great contrast, mission command was considered to be virtually absent when performing administrative tasks (1.57). Although this is an expected result, since the administration of military units and military training is heavily regulated both within the organisation at large and by law, it should be kept in mind that it also corresponds to a very large share of the officer's time. Also, at least in theory, to foster an environment conducive to mission command, the organisation should seek to promote it in all areas, as an all-encompassing practice (Flynn & Shrankel 2013, Vandergriff 2019, Fawley 2017).

Regarding the utilisation of mission command at different levels of command, the responses describe a rising scale from lower to higher levels, where mission command was considered to be utilised least at the squad level (2.00) and most at the brigade level (3.47). Among the higher levels of command, a similar pattern can be identified, up to the supreme commander. While this result is unsurprising, it still provides a picture of where the practice of mission command is located in the structure of the organisation. It suggests that the need to lead through mission command increases with the size and complexity of subordinated units, which diminishes the utility and possibility for direct control. However, one additional observation is that the respondents did not perceive mission command to be a particularly dominant feature of leadership at either level – even at the brigade.

Among unit types, mission command was considered to be most comprehensively employed in ranger units (4.10), followed by manoeuvre units (3.49). Mission command was considered to be far less practiced in function units including artillery (2.34), air defence (2.28), engineers (2.87) and logistics units (2.77). While this difference is perhaps well-known to military practitioners, there is to my knowledge no previous mapping of the extent to which mission command is practiced in different unit-types or functions of the Army. A survey that highlights these differences is therefore warranted, especially since mission command is envisioned to be the overarching leadership philosophy of the Armed Forces at large.

3.6 Dealing with failure, success and learning

A precondition for the development of a military organisational environment which is conducive to a consistent practice of mission command, and by extension to the type of tactical developments and innovation that can sustain flexibility and adaptability on the battlefield, is to encourage creativity, critical thinking and experimentation among officers at all levels (Shamir 2011, Vandergriff 2019, Lind 1985, Ghikas 2013, Brender 2018, Finkel 2011). This certainly does not imply that established methods and tactical solutions are necessarily suboptimal for resolving problems on the future battlefield. Rather, the ability to be creative in a constructive sense should ideally rest on a solid knowledge of best practices and tested knowledge, as well as extensive practical experience. The notion of critical thinking and creativity

applied here denotes a sufficient knowledge of how things are supposed to be done to be able to ask whether there are ways to improve current practices, and occasionally whether new solutions are warranted to solve persistent problems.

This relates partly to the officer as an individual, having been exposed to prior formal training and education and possessing experience as well as cognitive ability and capacity to act in unexpected and uncertain situations. However, it is also a question of the organisational environment. Creativity implies experimentation and testing, which is always associated with risk-taking. Since previously untested solutions cannot be validated through previous experience, they imply a risk of failure that must be deemed acceptable within the organisational environment to encourage experimentation in the first place.

Another related question is how the organisation deals with failure as well as success. Ideally, both can constitute important sources of learning. However, this requires the absorption and communication of both positive and negative experiences widely within the organisation. Innovations stemming from a creative environment cannot be translated into consistent improvement of existing practice without systematic experience sharing.

In this light, the survey sought to establish how the respondents viewed their working environment in these respects. The respondents were asked whether failure and success, respectively, were utilised to develop and improve professional practices in their working environment. They were also asked whether positive and negative experiences were communicated outside their own working environment, to the organisation at large. The results in this regard were strikingly pessimistic. The weighted average (on a scale between 1 and 5) of responses to the question of whether failures were utilised to improve practices in their working environment was 2.59. The average for the corresponding question on successes was only slightly higher, 3.08. When asked whether negative and positive experiences were communicated to the organisation at large, the results were even lower, namely, 2.49 and 2.57 respectively. These results indicated that a large share of the respondents did not perceive that experiences were utilised to improve organisational capabilities to any significant extent.

Additional questions added to the picture of an environment that did not fully take advantage of the possibility to learn from experience. A majority (average 3.70) fully or mostly agreed that it was generally considered more important to present one's own environment as being successful than to acknowledge deficiencies therein, and a large share of the respondents considered failure to impact negatively on promotions and access to training (3.41). Most respondents disagreed or partly disagreed that failure was considered an important factor in the development of individuals as well as the organisation (2.54), and that their own environment had a tolerant attitude towards failure (2.89). In the experience of the respondents, the organisation seemingly does not view failure as an opportunity to learn and develop individuals, but rather as something that should be avoided, which does not indicate the propensity for risk-taking and experimentation that would be indicative of an environment fostering creativity.

The question of whether the Armed Forces was a learning organisation received an average of 2.95, and a majorty disagreed or partly disagreed that experimenting and testing new solutions were allowed in the profession (2.83). A majority agreed or mostly agreed that there is a strong preference for following established methods rather than trying new solutions, even if established methods are sub-optimal for the task at hand (3.92). A majority also believed that it was considered more important to exercise established methods than to train adaptation to unexpected situations (3.84). The question of whether individual initiatives were welcomed if they were geared towards accomplishing the overall purpose, even if they were not in line with the plan of their superiors, received an average of 3.05. Most disagreed or partly disagreed that tactical exercises generally encouraged creativity and new thinking (2.86), whereas the question of whether positive reinforcement was more common than negative criticism received an average of only 2.74.

In sum, the responses indicate that in the experience of the respondents, there is clear room for improvement in the Army's practices for learning from both positive and negative experience, and for promoting the creativity that is central to an environment conducive to the practice of mission command.

3.7 Current conditions and the present and future importance of mission command

The survey concluded with four open questions, allowing free-text answers regarding the present and future of mission command in the Swedish Armed Forces.

In responses to the question "How would you assess the current conditions for utilising mission command in your professional role?" the respondents provided a range of assessments, from largely positive to highly negative.

Among the positive evaluations, several relayed that they referred to the time spent exercising with their units, and not to administrative work. They also highlighted varying experiences depending on their posting and indicated that they had experienced environments where mission command was practiced comprehensively as well as the contrary, depending in large part on the individual commanders in charge. Other factors mentioned as important preconditions for developing mission command were the culture and stability within the unit, allocation of resources for conducting exercises and the ability to spend time at a posting and acquire a positive personal relationship with subordinates.

However, several respondents also stated that their working environment allowed virtually no room for mission command. Again, some respondents restated the decisive importance of individual commanders in establishing the necessary environment for mission command, whereby one respondent claimed that individual initiatives were actively counteracted by superiors. It was also pointed out that methods for planning and executing combat tasks were too rigid, leaving little room for initiative and creativity. However, the vast majority of responses viewed the administrative reality of the officer profession as having a decidedly negative impact on their ability to practice mission command. While heavily regulated, administrative work also takes up a large amount of the officers' time. Therefore, mission command does not apply to a large part of the work conducted by these officers. Some respondents argued that this is not a problem in principle, since it is possible to balance different modes of leadership when performing different tasks (e.g. administration and combat exercises). Others claimed that the regulated reality of administration actually transcended combat exercises, thus negatively influencing also the ability to practice mission command in the field.

The second question was "Do you see any need for improvements in your working environment to allow for a more comprehensive practice of mission command?"

Here, the question of administration surfaced again, and several comments suggested that the administrative workload needed to be eased in favour of opportunities to conduct field exercises and other work related to the task of combat training. Many administrative tasks can be performed by civilians, thus freeing up time for officers to spend more time doing things related to combat training. In fact, it was argued that the tendency to introduce control functions in every aspect of the work actually counteracts the development of trust among colleagues and across command levels – and thus undermines a core prerequisite of mission command.

Another suggested improvement was to readapt attitudes towards failure, which many found problematic. Instead of constantly seeking to avoid mistakes and failure, which several respondents viewed as being a common approach in their units as well as the organisation at large, they argued that training should involve complex, unexpected and overwhelming scenarios to a larger degree, as opposed to the frequently scripted scenarios along which exercises are at present conducted. They underlined that failure, as long as it did not result in damages to people or equipment, was to be considered an important part of learning, for example through consequence-based exercises. Concerning this, it was argued that current command methods are too restrictive and should allow for a wider application, the same argument can be applied to orders and missions. Moreover, it was argued that failures should not, as sometimes appears to be the case, be allowed to affect opportunities for future postings and access to training.

It was also pointed out that there is no common understanding of what mission command means or entails within the Army; that mission command is used as a buzzword that is hardly related to the everyday work. The definition and utilisation of the concept has fluctuated over the years, implying that different generations of officers, serving on different levels, operate with different conceptualisations and practices. Some therefore identified a common baseline definition as a necessary precondition for implementing and practicing mission command.

Regarding the current setup of officer training, views were mixed regarding the advantages of the academised officer education. The respondents argued that the creative and independent thinking that this reform was supposed to encourage should be embraced, but also that it could counteract the ability to make quick decisions and deliver results by slowing the ability of the officer corps to perform their main task: delivering services to the organisation.

The third question was "Considering the present situation in the SAF, Sweden and internationally, why would mission command become more important in the future?"

The respondents identified several reasons why mission command would become even more important to their future professional activities. They highlighted that a future perspective on warfare, where they would need to prepare for national defence against an opponent that would be numerically superior, would increase the demands for manoeuvrability, rapid decision-making and in particular highly competent and trained commanders at all levels. Particularly since the Army will in all likelihood be numerically inferior to the opponent, it will need to compensate for this through speed and skill. Moreover, mission command was described as a means to achieve flexibility and

unpredictability. Since the type of war envisioned will likely imply high-intensity fighting, it will not be possible to acquire situational awareness or exercise control across the battlefield at higher levels of command, implying that the ability to fight will to a large extent rely on the ability of sub-commanders to act on their own initiative. Another factor affecting the ability to overview the battlefield is the grey zone problem, which further underscores the importance of judgement and initiative on the part of commanders in direct contact with developments on the ground.

In this perspective, improved communications technology will improve the ability of these commanders to acquire a picture of the overall situation as it develops, and thus both develop a clearer understanding of and act in line with the higher commander's intent. Another feature of the future battlefield is the steadily improving electronic warfare capabilities, implying that units must be prepared to operate without contact with higher command. Moreover, the increasing risk of detection will force units to operate in radio silence, while evading destruction in the face of long-range precision munitions will require increased dispersion. These features of technological developments speak to the continued and increasing importance of mission command.

The fourth question was: "Considering the present situation in the Armed Forces, Sweden and internationally, what reasons do you see why mission command could become less important in the future?"

In general, the respondents were less inclined to identify reasons for a reduced importance of mission command. Nevertheless, they suggested a number of factors that in their view could compete with the practice of mission command or risk diminishing the ability to lead in line with the concept. Again, they brought up the risks associated with the continued dominance of administrative practices and their transplantation to other domains as potentially diminishing the ability to perform tactically. The demands for international cooperation and interoperability with NATO countries could require increasing adaptation to NATO doctrine, which was considered far less conducive to mission command than contemporary Swedish methods and practices. Moreover, technological innovations in sensors and communication could provide for exaggerated trust in these technologies to provide for situational awareness and C2 abilities, thus inviting temptations to centralise command. Indeed, this potential is the backdrop of the opportunities identified with these technologies concerning mission command – they could be utilised to either enable or constrain mission command, depending on how they are adopted and integrated with the command structure. In connection to this, it was argued that the increasing complexity of the battlefield, including multi-domain warfare, cyber warfare and advanced technology, including artificial intelligence, may require a higher degree of central coordination, thus reinforcing the perceived need for control at higher command levels in step with the progression in actual capacities.

4 Conclusion

The results of the survey add new perspectives on the current and future practice of mission command. Although the empirical data consists of survey responses from the Swedish Army, the conclusions speak to general problems and issues concerning the practice of mission command in contemporary land forces, which are common to Armies across the Wider Baltic region and beyond. First, there indeed seems to be a discrepancy between what officers view as being important conditions for practicing mission command, and the extent to which they perceive these conditions to be present in their daily work. Second, the responses indicate that the current organisation of C2 functions and communication of orders are not optimised for practicing mission command effectively. While it should be underlined that these responses were not overtly negative, the organisation and methods of command are central to mission command, and it is telling that they received only an average ranking. Third, the respondents did not appear to see any contradiction between developments in technology and the need for mission command. Rather, the responses indicate that they envision a growing need for mission command regardless of what new systems are introduced. However, there is apparently a strong view that there is a relationship between the relative technological level of their own side and the opponent on the one hand, and the practice of mission command on the other. In this view, expertise in mission command can partly compensate for technological inferiority vis-à-vis the opponent.

Fourth, responses to questions on professional and interpersonal relationships among commanders and subordinates provide some interesting perspectives on the issue of trust. Particularly concerning competence, a large share of the respondents state that it is difficult to judge the qualifications of subordinates based on their rank, and that personal knowledge is required to assess their suitability to perform a certain mission or task. Moreover, many respondents report experiences of unnecessarily controlling leadership on the part of superiors, suggesting that in practice, leadership through

mission command in the sense of decentralisation to the extent possible and avoidance of excessive micromanagement are in fact voluntary among military commanders. The respondents take a positive view of the reintroduction of conscription, which they think will present equal or better possibilities to practice mission command.

Fifth, there are clear differences regarding where mission command is exercised in different areas of the officers' work, where it is considered to apply most frequently to training and exercises in the war organisation, and to be virtually non-existent when performing administrative tasks. Since this work requires a very different mindset than the propensity for initiative and reliance on own judgement required in tactical situations, it risks impeding the overall ability to practice mission command. It is also telling that the respondents considered mission command most visible by far in doctrine and handbooks, in comparison with the context of their actual working environment, indicating a substantial discrepancy between theory and practice.

Sixth, in the view of the respondents, there is clearly room for improvement when it comes to the organisation's ability to learn from experience. Neither successful nor unsuccessful experiences are seemingly communicated systematically within the organisation, and it is frequently considered more important to guard the outward image of the unit than to acknowledge deficiencies. Moreover, they highlight a tendency to discourage initiative and experimentation and to perform exercises in accordance with established methods and scripted scenarios, rather than subjecting officers to complex and unexpected situations requiring creative thinking. While there are certainly good reasons why exercises are designed in this way, not least due to the limited time available, these observations suggest that the organisational environment does not unequivocally embrace or encourage the propensity for initiative and creativity required to foster a mentality conducive to mission command.

Finally, the respondents have provided several reasons why mission command will become increasingly important for the armed forces in the years to come. Overall, these reasons denote the prospect of executing high-intensity warfare from a position of numerical and technological inferiority. However, the respondents have also identified several obstacles to the continued practice and development of this leadership philosophy. These include an exaggerated emphasis on administrative tasks in direct contradiction to the mindset and expected conduct of mission command. Interoperability and cooperation may be a two-edged sword in this regard, if this implies the introduction of more rigid command methods as a consequence of adaptation to international partners. Moreover, the respondents have identified risks associated with new sensor and communications technology, which may provide a temptation to introduce increasingly centralised modes of command since these may be perceived as being necessary, but also simply because they become possible.

To sum up, it is obvious that the prescriptive declaration of mission command—as a leadership philosophy in doctrine and other steering documents—often stands in contrast to the realities and practices in the officer's working environment. Whereas the respondents view mission command as a key precondition for their ability to perform their most important task, to win tactical engagements on the battlefield, they also testify to several factors that actually counteract their ability to practice it. As the Swedish Army and other land forces continue to adapt their capabilities for efficient national defence, it has become evident that they should also take an active approach in identifying the ways and means by which to safeguard and improve the practice of mission command.

In this regard, it is possible based on the results presented in this article to provide some general observations regarding the continued development of mission command as a leadership philosophy for land forces. First, it must be recognised that mission command, to be practiced successfully, needs to be an ingrained part of the organisational culture and cannot be reduced to a method for command. It is insufficient to merely postulate the supremacy of mission command in military doctrine; the philosophy also needs to be meticulously and consistently operationalised in handbooks and C2 methods. Moreover, decisions to introduce new technology should be accompanied by a discussion on how they will affect command practices in general and mission command in particular, and how to safeguard and improve the practice of mission command in the process. Such a discussion is needed to ensure that the advantages which accrue from a technological edge are not circumscribed by adjacent disadvantages to flexibility and adaptability on the battlefield.

To foster a culture which is conducive to mission command, this command philosophy needs to become a consistent feature of the everyday working environment of officers and soldiers alike. The design of officer education and training plays a particularly important role in this respect, since both serve to socialise military practitioners into certain ways of thinking and acting. Indeed, this design should encourage creativity, independent thinking and initiative rather than rule-following, and should encourage a tolerant attitude to (safety-conscious) risk-taking and failure.

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