

MISSION COMMAND:  
STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

## Mission Command in the Australian Army: A Contrast in Detail

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explains the importance of mission command to joint operational effectiveness through the experiences of the Australian and American armies. Guidance is also given regarding the caveats of subordinate competencies and experiences, which affect the appropriate application of the leadership practice.

Military operations—whether combat, peacekeeping, or humanitarian, whether single-country or multinational—are complex and unpredictable. Intelligence, understanding one’s own capabilities and limitations, and carefully crafted command guidance at best lend limited insight into how to confront what lies ahead. Adversaries seek to deceive and surprise. Environmental conditions change. Leaders’ understanding of circumstances at the sharp end increasingly dims the further up the chain of command one goes, even in an era of communications capabilities undreamed of a generation ago. The sergeant leading his squad sees what his platoon leader cannot. Those at battalion, brigade, and higher know little of what confronts their trusts below. The wise military leader recognizes unforeseeable events always lie ahead. Those commanders, therefore, require subordinates be ready to adapt to the unexpected.

Mission command—the practice of assigning a subordinate commander a mission without specifying how the mission is to be achieved—provides a means of addressing this challenge.<sup>1</sup> The United States is not the only country committed to practicing mission command. Armies in Australia, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Singapore, and the United Kingdom have adopted the familiar approach. Centuries old in concept and decades aged in military doctrines, effective implementation has nonetheless proven elusive.

The following paragraphs focus on the Australian approach to mission command. Australia and the United States have a long historical partnership. The two countries’ soldiers served side by side in East Timor, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Vietnam; on World War II battlefields; and elsewhere. There is great value in learning from such allies and colleagues akin to but different from ourselves.

This article presents mission command practices during recent operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, major predecessor conflicts from World War I on, and in today’s Australian Army brigade. The events

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Army, *The Fundamentals of Land Power*, Land Warfare Doctrine (LWD) 1 (Canberra, ACT: Australian Army, 2014), 45.

include both confrontations with armed foes distant from Australian shores and disasters on the island continent itself.

### US and Australian Perspectives

American and Australian views on mission command are similar both in concept and in terms of the two countries' expectations regarding what the philosophy requires of senior and subordinate leaders. Seniors must cultivate "implicit trust between and across all elements of the land force" in such a way that subordinates develop situational awareness that prepares them to exercise sound judgment in support of the commander's intent.<sup>2</sup> In this manner, US Army General Ulysses S. Grant conveyed he would not dictate a plan to Major General William T. Sherman in 1864, but admonished him to "execute [work] in your own way."<sup>3</sup> This exchange makes it clear the mission command concept has long been with America's army even though the term was not introduced in the doctrine until 2003.<sup>4</sup>

America's joint and army definitions of mission command are common in spirit but different in detail. Mission command in joint doctrine is "the conduct of military operations through decentralized execution based upon mission-type orders, [which direct] a unit to perform a mission without specifying how it is to be accomplished."<sup>5</sup> The US Army defines the approach as

the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land operations. . . . [It] emphasizes centralized intent and dispersed execution.<sup>6</sup>

This disciplined initiative is "action in the absence of orders, when existing orders no longer fit the situation, or when unforeseen opportunities or threats arise."<sup>7</sup> More verbose than the joint guidance, there is little difference between the two definitions. The Army guidance correctly observes that mission command is not the responsibility of the senior alone. Subordinate leaders in staff and command positions support their seniors by showing initiative and otherwise acting within the dictates of higher echelon intent.

Consistent employment of mission command continues to prove elusive in both the US and Australian armed forces. Clear communication of a commander's intent is fundamental to subordinate understanding of what underlies an assigned mission. Intent—"a clear and concise expression of the purpose of the operation and the desired military end state helps subordinate and supporting commanders to act . . . even

2 Ibid.

3 Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of General Ulysses S. Grant* (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 278.

4 John Case, "The Exigency for Mission Command: A Comparison of World War II Command Cultures," *Small Wars Journal*, November 4, 2014.

5 US Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Publication 1-02, (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 2015), 158.

6 Headquarters, US Department of the Army (HQDA), *Mission Command*, Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-0 (Washington, DC: HQDA, 2012), 1-1. "Mission orders" are defined as "directives that emphasize to subordinates the results to be attained, not how they are to achieve them" (Ibid., Glossary-3).

7 Ibid., 2-4.

when the operation does not unfold as planned”—allows junior leaders to make appropriate decisions when confronted by the unforeseen.<sup>8</sup>

An omniscient commander could provide precise instructions and the resources necessary for accomplishing every assigned task. No such commander has yet graced history; thus, leaders need to provide subordinates with an intent to guide judgment when conditions vary from those envisioned. Simply stated, an effective intent conveys what the commander wants his leaders and staff to remember when they face the unanticipated.<sup>9</sup>

Clarity of orders and intent, decentralized decision-making, and trust are the underpinnings that bring about unity of effort through the exercise of mission command in Australia's ground force as in the US Army.<sup>10</sup> Exercising mission command while avoiding unnecessary risk receives explicit notice in Australian joint doctrine just as in the American, the objective being flexibility and adaptability to respond more effectively to the unexpected.<sup>11</sup>

Where US and Australian approaches diverge is in the amount of doctrinal guidance provided. Australian doctrine tends to appreciate mission command's inherent simplicity of character better without ignoring the difficulty of its proselytization. The desired end is no different; the underlying wisdom is the same. But the Australian Army seems satisfied with avoiding verbiage that obscures rather than illuminates the philosophy. Offered in the spirit of multinational cooperation (and simplicity), we will use its definition from here on:

Mission command is the practice of assigning a subordinate commander a mission without specifying how the mission is to be achieved.<sup>12</sup>

We will see, however, that these few words demand much from senior and subordinate alike.

### Influences on Application

After the Roman commander Vespasian became the fourth emperor during 69 AD, he chose his son Titus to complete the empire's suppression of a first century uprising in Galilee, Samaria, and Judea. Vespasian's choice was founded on more than nepotism. Titus had demonstrated his expertise as a commander and experience relevant to the tasks while campaigning alongside Vespasian in the preceding years and while commanding away from his father's direct oversight. These and other factors caused Vespasian to trust Titus. Such trust must obviously underlie decentralization. Commanders must trust subordinates' judgment and, in turn, subordinates must trust their commander will back their decisions when their judgments have been made in faith with seniors' intentions.

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8 Ibid, 2-3.

9 Russell W. Glenn, "The Commander's Intent: Keep It Short," *Military Review* 67, no. 8 (August 1987): 51.

10 Australian Department of Defence (ADoD), *Campaigns and Operations*, Australian Defence Doctrine Publication (ADDP) 3.0 (Canberra, ACT: ADoD, July 12, 2012), 2-3.

11 ADoD, *Command and Control*, ADDP 00.1 (Canberra, ACT: ADoD, 2009), 2-11.

12 Australian Army, LWD 1, 45

Familiarity, which was obvious in the father-son relationship of Vespasian and Titus, will also play a significant role in determining the extent of operational freedom. That scope will differ from individual to individual. The well-known junior commander with demonstrated ability to function without close supervision merits less oversight than one less familiar or proven; close supervision, less freedom of action, and more specific guidance will be given to unproven leaders. A commander accounts for his own ignorance by exercising greater control: the less familiar he is with subordinates' capabilities, the greater the need for him to ensure his guidance is clear and followed. Time together before pending operations and nature of the mission will influence the scope of leeway bestowed—time as it may reassure the commander of new subordinates' abilities, mission because the most brilliant leader might require increased supervision when pursuing objectives with which he or she has less experience.

Greater familiarity and trust combined with a high level of subordinate expertise would tend to result in less risk of decentralization. Granting the same responsibility to a less proven or well-known individual would qualify as imprudence. During World War II, German General Friedrich-Wilhelm von Mellenthin drew on his considerable experience when similarly noting “commanders and subordinates start to understand each other during war. The better they know each other, the shorter and less detailed the orders can be.”<sup>13</sup>

Subordinates' experience and expertise, their demonstrated ability to exercise good judgment under relevant operational conditions, a commander's familiarity with those individuals, the extent of trust that senior leader imbues given these and other considerations are all factors influencing the nature of guidance given to and freedom of action bestowed upon each subordinate. There must be understanding of why one individual receives more detailed guidance and closer supervision than another. Trust will play a part, but trust has many components. Lesser trust by no means need imply a senior questions the judgment or reliability of a junior, but rather that those qualities are yet unmeasured. Trust—from above to below and vice versa—comes only with demonstrated performance, validation, and the passage of time. Even the most dependable subordinate will find the diligent commander occasionally ensuring his or her actions fall within bounds of the senior's intent. Subordinates have a responsibility to operate within those bounds, to educate senior commanders when their unit is less familiar to those above them in the chain of command, and to understand that good commander's check on performance.

Mission command in which both seniors and subordinates understand their responsibilities is cultivated via training, including instruction in military schoolhouses where junior noncommissioned and commissioned officers learn their trade, where midgrade leaders acquire staff and command tradecraft, and where seniors prepare for the pinnacles of responsibility. Training incorporates instruction during exercises that force decision-makers to deal with the unexpected and that allow senior commanders to demonstrate well-intentioned even if less-than-perfect

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13 As quoted in Eitan Shamir, *Transforming Command: The Pursuit of Mission Command in the U.S., British, and Israeli Armies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 106.

judgments are not only allowable but demanded. Training encompasses self-education guided by mentors and ensures subordinates read Grant, British Field Marshal William Slim, and others whose command styles demonstrate mission command at its best. And there is training through one-on-one evaluations when the overly conservative and risk-averse leader is told that his or hers is not an acceptable form of leadership. Trust, familiarity, and expertise gained in training provide cornerstones for applying mission command during operations whether the force hails from the northern or southern hemisphere.

This discussion clearly establishes the application of mission command should be conditional rather than absolute. One size does not fit all. We have noted even familiar, completely trusted, and very experienced subordinates require more command guidance under some circumstances. Resource availability further influences the extent of decentralization. Freedom of action when employing one's own forces will logically be greater than that involving allocation of low-density assets on which multiple commands rely.<sup>14</sup>

A military's culture also influences the nature of mission command. The US resurrection of the practice during the last decade of the Cold War was partially due to perceptions that fighting a larger Warsaw Pact foe on Western Europe's compartmented terrain meant leaders would be unable to personally direct all their command elements. The agility inherent in mission command practice was seen as an advantage over those opponents, adversaries for whom extensive variation from plans was antithetical.<sup>15</sup> The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) were similarly thought to favor highly decentralized tactical operations. Yet IDF leaders proved uncomfortable with their military's presumed extent of decentralization. Those leaders instead opted for "selective control" in which those exercising higher-echelon oversight provided mission-type orders and expected initiative even as they tracked operations in detail, remaining ever prepared to intervene should a situation appear to be beyond a subordinate's capabilities or should an opportunity arise that otherwise might be lost.<sup>16</sup>

Israeli control has apparently become even further centralized in succeeding years. While ground force units were assigned increased numbers of air support liaison personnel during Operation Protective Edge (2014) in Gaza, those at the sharp end had to request clearance for danger close strikes from a centralized authority remote from the battlefield.<sup>17</sup> Some contrast British command approaches (and presumably those of the Australian and other militaries with similar cultural and historical ties) with those of America; the former rely on assigned objectives communicated in quite general terms while US leaders provide more detailed guidance in their orders. This greater

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14 Ministry of Defence of the Netherlands, *Command and Control*, Joint Doctrine Publication 5 (The Hague: Doctrine Branch, Netherlands Defence Staff, 2012), 59.

15 Douglas A. Pryer, "Growing Leaders Who Practice Mission Command and Win the Peace," *Military Review* 93, no. 6 (November-December 2013): 32.

16 David S. Alberts and Richard E. Hayes, "Command Arrangements for Peace Operations" (Washington, DC: Command and Control Research Program, 1995), 69. Alberts and Hayes' work is summarized in Keith G. Stewart, "Mission Command: Problem Bounding or Problem Solving?" *Canadian Military Journal* 9, no. 4 (2009).

17 Russell W. Glenn, *Short War in a Perpetual Conflict: Implications of Israel's 2014 Operation Protective Edge for the Australian Army*, Army Research Paper 9 (Canberra, ACT: Australian Army, 2016), 93.

specificity is thought to dictate more regarding how objectives are to be accomplished, resulting in less freedom of action by commanders on the receiving end.<sup>18</sup>

Variations in application are not limited to those between national militaries. Other-than-armed forces organizations have in recent years recognized value in adopting a mission command-type philosophy. The Australian Fire and Emergency Services Council finds the approach beneficial during its geographically-dispersed operations. Similar to military conceptions of mission command, the council's leaders communicate a commander's intent and ensure subordinates receive the resources necessary to achieve both mission-specified ends and those implied by the intent.<sup>19</sup>

### The Australian Army's Path

The moniker "mission command" originated nearly one hundred years after the Australian Army first applied the practice on battlefields dispersed across the globe. While soldiers fought at Gallipoli, Europe's Western Front, Palestine, and the Pacific Islands north of Australia, the country's leaders came to realize success required trust, decentralized decision-making, guidance tailored to a man's capabilities, and checking to ensure subordinates acted within the constraints of that guidance. Australia's most senior commanders first fought as subordinates to the British during the First World War and later to Americans during the Second. That role did not preclude their adoption of what would later become the core content of mission command.

Writing on World War I, Peter Pedersen observed that by 1918 Australian "divisional commanders were now proven . . . that allowed higher commanders to apply a light touch to the tiller."<sup>20</sup> At times Australia's senior alliance partners in these conflicts must have provided insights on command worthy of emulation. Unfortunately, they most assuredly supplied negative examples. American General Douglas MacArthur and his staff made little attempt to decentralize decision-making in his Southwest Pacific Area, an approach that while contrary to British Field Service Regulations referenced by the Australian Army at the time, was in keeping with the 1939 edition of US Army Field Service Regulations stipulating "so long as a commander can exercise effective control he does not decentralize."<sup>21</sup> Such tension would characterize Australian-US Army relations for the duration of fighting in the Southwest Pacific as MacArthur and his staff believed the failure of Australian Army commanders to provide detailed guidance to subordinates demonstrated faulty planning while the Australians were irritated consequently by the demonstrable lack of trust.

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18 Alberts and Hayes, "Command Arrangements," 70.

19 Euan Ferguson, "Mission Command for Fire and Emergency Managers: A Discussion Paper," Australian Fire and Emergency Services Council (AFAC), May 2014, [http://www.cfabellarine.com/uploads/1/3/0/0/13001256/mission\\_command\\_discussion\\_paper\\_may\\_2014.pdf](http://www.cfabellarine.com/uploads/1/3/0/0/13001256/mission_command_discussion_paper_may_2014.pdf).

20 Peter Pedersen, "Mission command and the Australian Imperial Force," in *Trust and Leadership: The Australian Army Approach to Mission Command* (working title), ed. Russell W. Glenn (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, forthcoming).

21 US War Department, *Operations*, Tentative Field Service Regulations FM 100-5 (Washington, DC: War Department, 1939), 34, as quoted in Peter Dean, "Mission Command in World War II: Australia, MacArthur's General HQ and the Southwest Pacific Area," in *Trust and Leadership*.

The passage of time did not heal all wounds. Antipathies would arise anew when Australian soldiers served under American commanders in Vietnam. The friction between Australian and US commanders tended to occur at upper echelons. Australian doctrine emphasized population security based on earlier counterinsurgency operations in Malaya and North Borneo. Initial tensions arose due to General William Westmoreland's given priority, the destruction of the North Vietnamese army and Viet Cong enemies. Though that emphasis underwent a degree of modification with the promotion of Creighton W. Abrams upon Westmoreland's departure, Australia's senior in-country leaders found themselves caught between what they thought was Abrams' move away from a priority of force-on-force operations and the dictates of the II Field Force Vietnam Commanding General Lieutenant General Julian J. Ewell (April 1969–April 1970).

Australian Major General Robert Hay, commander, Australian Force Vietnam, found Ewell's guidance not only contradictory to both Australia's preferred approach and Abrams' intent but also unnecessarily detailed. Historian Bob Hall noted,

“Ewell's directives show[ed] a commander intent on directing his subordinates in detail, instructing them to increase enemy casualties via more ‘company days in the field’ with ‘30 to 40% of company effort’ on night offensive operations and ambushes. Directives further dictated policies regarding zeroing of rifles, marksmanship training, ambush techniques and patrolling, and how best to integrate new reinforcements. A later memorandum urged subordinate commanders not to employ their troops on population security tasks ‘unless it's quite clear that the hamlet will be lost unless we step in.’”<sup>22</sup>

The result presented a dichotomy for Australian forces. While reliance on often highly dispersed small unit tactics meant mission command-type approaches were characteristic of battalion and below operations, the country's military leaders serving above that echelon frequently found themselves working around the dictates of US commanders to shield subordinates from what they thought were inappropriate and overly detailed orders.

Subsequent Australian contingencies provided repeated opportunities for refining command approaches suitable to leaders operating distant from their senior commanders, not infrequently in environments lacking reliable communications. Australian soldiers found themselves in Somalia, East Timor, the Solomon Islands, and with the arrival of the new millennium, Afghanistan and Iraq. The challenges associated with successfully practicing mission command during these more recent contingencies were less multinational in nature than internal. Such was particularly the case with subordinate interpretations of the meaning of mission command. Senior and subordinate alike understood the need for decentralized decision-making within the constraints of a mission and commander's intent. Some senior commanders were surprised by subordinates' perspectives on those seniors' visits to check that performance reflected higher-level guidance.

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22 Headquarters, Australian Forces Vietnam, “Memorandum to HQ II Field Force Vietnam,” April 16, 1969, AWM98, R569-1-196, Operations-General-II Field Force Vietnam Operational Directives, Australian War Memorial. Quoted in Bob Hall, “A Long Bridge in Time: The 1st Australian Task Force in Vietnam via Malaya and Borneo,” in *Trust and Leadership*.

Lieutenant Colonel Chris Smith was among those taken aback during his battle group (battalion task force-equivalent) command tour in Afghanistan. Investigating a report of a negligent discharge, Smith determined that a round from an unauthorized AK-47 had nearly struck an Australian soldier. The weapon had been stored behind the driver's seat of a vehicle for a period of weeks if not months. When Smith questioned the responsible section commander (equivalent to a US Army squad leader) regarding whether he inspected his drivers' vehicles, the junior leader stated he did not, believing it to be a breach of the trust between himself and his subordinates. The section commander also made it clear that he considered Smith's checks a breach of trust. Further discussion failed to convince the section commander of his responsibility to ensure both his and his seniors' guidance was followed; rather than a breach of trust, not checking was a failure of leadership that reflected a deeply flawed understanding of the responsibilities inherent in mission command. Recalling the incident, Smith observed such practices led to "shoddy practices and casual attitudes."<sup>23</sup>

Understanding what mission command requires from senior and subordinate alike continues to challenge Australia's professional army no less than America's primary ground force. The definitions might seem clear. Yet too many leaders find the courage to exercise the full spectrum of mission command responsibilities overly daunting. Too many subordinates also cease listening upon hearing mission command encourages decentralization of decision-making; they choose to ignore the responsibility to check that decisions and behaviors are in keeping with the commander's guidance. Rooted in distant history, its value already repeatedly proven in twenty-first century operations, full understanding and effective practice of mission command remain elusive.

### **Concluding Observations**

Australia's and America's armies face similar challenges in employing mission command. While many leaders have the courage to trust and decentralize, too many remain committed to hypercontrol, the antithesis of effective application. Of notable significance given Australian commanders' experiences and American commanders' comments, subordinates recognize the two-way nature of mission command: it is not "fire and forget." Rather, senior commanders have the responsibility to confirm those more junior understand and operate within the constraints of higher-echelon intent and mission. These are not the only similarities between the two professional armies, however. Americans and Australians operating together find more in common than otherwise. Historians, politicians, and soldiers tend to emphasize the differences and resulting frictions that arise during coalition operations. Mission command instead offers a common foundation on which to build multinational cooperation.

The paragraphs above establish a conditional nature of mission command is needed to adapt guidance and supervision in light of subordinates' abilities. What should be unconditional, however, is the approach's application throughout an army. Fear of a subordinate

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23 Chris Smith, "Mission Command and the 2RAR Battle Group in Afghanistan: A Case Study in the Relationship between Mission Command and Responsibility," in *Trust and Leadership*.

making a mistake that might threaten a senior leader's career tightens centralization.<sup>24</sup> Enhanced communications technologies become implements of intrusion on junior leaders' decision-making. Those in helicopters overhead during operations in Vietnam at least realized that jungle foliage or elephant grass blocked much of their vision. There are no such obvious filters when looking at a computer screen's false clarity. "Train to trust" and "train to take appropriate risk" must be building blocks for propagating mission command. The commander who tolerates otherwise is an obstacle to that nurturing.

Operations in the opening years of the twenty-first century increasingly demand a comprehensive approach involving all services, multiple nations with several government agencies from each, and capabilities only other-than-government organizations such as nongovernmental organizations, intergovernmental associations, and commercial enterprises can bring to the table. Decentralization is a given; such operations will never see unity of command. Unity of effort is perhaps an achievable goal with various organizations' efforts orchestrated via a commonly agreed upon general intent. Mission command's cornerstones—clear intent, trust, initiative, understanding of context and objectives sought, familiarity with subordinates, decentralization, and the courage to accept risk—are attainable regardless of background. Leaders, military and civilian alike, recognize the need to employ comprehensive approaches better. Mission command offers a means of achieving the orchestration essential to success whichever nation or organization is in charge.

Common understanding of the approach similarly offers opportunities to share concerns and insights in its application. Increasingly sophisticated communications technologies, for example, should reinforce calls for better inculcation of mission command throughout a military. Subordinates will have to turn to the commander's intent when communications fail due to either enemy antipathy or nature's hand. Organizations unable to practice effective mission command will find themselves at a disadvantage when facing commanders who "receive general operating guidelines but have significant autonomy to run their own operations" as do those in the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.<sup>25</sup>

What does this mean for the American commander fortunate enough to have an Australian unit under command?<sup>26</sup> That those partners would be no less professional than their own soldiers is a given as is the reality that doctrinal, leadership, and other differences will merit recognition and respect by all parties involved. There will almost certainly be constraints under which the commanders of Australian units operate differently than those imposed by America's political or higher-echelon military leaders. Mission command in a multinational environment may be better practiced in an inquisitive rather than directive mode. Clear statement of the higher echelon's mission and

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24 Gary Luck, *Mission Command and Cross-Domain Synergy*, Insights and Best Practices Focus Paper (Suffolk, VA: Joint Chiefs of Staff J7 Deployable Training Division, 2013), 4.

25 Eric Schmitt and Ben Hubbard, "ISIS Leader Takes Steps to Ensure Group's Survival," *New York Times*, July 20, 2015.

26 The Australian Army currently has three maneuver brigades, which are the largest units an American commander might find in partnership. Battle groups or regiments (respectively equivalent to US battalion task forces or battalions) are the more likely. Australia deployed battle groups to Iraq and Afghanistan during the first decade of this century.

intent will be no less crucial. Savvy commanders have realized, however, that determining how a multinational partner will support said mission and intent may require an approach significantly different than one with US subordinates.

Directing specific actions to be taken by partners can cross “no go” lines established by their seniors, leaving them no other option than refusing to comply. No less than adapting the extent of guidance given to a subordinate depending on the individual’s capabilities, a senior commander must mold his mission command approach to multinational conditions. Stating the higher echelon mission and intent, then asking how a multinational partner might best support establishes a basis for successful coalition operations and avoids straying into red card territory.

Consideration of the Australian Army’s approach to mission command provides an opportunity to draw on the experiences of an able ally. Australian leaders’ experiences reveal challenges inherent in mission command span national boundaries. They include not only the necessity of understanding and adhering to the concept’s tenets but also the ever-present challenge of persuading over-controlling leaders to adapt their ways. So too, experiences in both countries bring to the forefront the less recognized requirement to convince leaders and subordinates alike that, properly applied, mission command reinforces rather than replaces the age-old dictum that soldiers do well what leaders check.