

# Simple Orders in Complex Warfare

Use of simple priorities

by Cpts Alexander Irion & Robert Callison

During an October 2019 Lecture Series entitled *Developing Leaders for Maneuver Warfare* at Marine Corps University, former Secretary of Defense, James N. Mattis, was asked what he thought was the biggest threat to the preservation of democracy in the United States.<sup>1</sup> His response included a thoughtful analysis of likely threats to democracy at home and abroad and how they would be mitigated—through vicious harmony enabled by the human interface at all levels of command.<sup>2</sup> He described the human interface as a system of feedback loops informed by intent and capable of learning and adapting.<sup>3</sup> Echoing pages of *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, Secretary Mattis' sentiments demonstrate how, through the integration of commander's intent and the human interface, leaders can build trust, open lines of communication within their organization, and promote concepts of maneuver warfare—like mission command.

Threats to the United States' command and control architecture reinforce an important principle regarding the effective application of commander's intent: the greater the probability of conducting operations in distributed or communications-degraded environments, the greater the responsibility of our Nation's commanders to skillfully issue clear and concise intent.<sup>4</sup> The ability of our naval forces to persistently operate in contested, anti-access environments will require simple commander's intent to promote intelligent initiative.<sup>5</sup> Simplicity in orders and intent will clarify end states, increase speed in decision making, and generate trust in subor-

**Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity.**

**—GEN George S. Patton**

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**ADM Horatio Nelson.** (Portrait by Lemuel Francis Abbott (1760-1802).)

ordinate execution of operations in an anticipated communications-degraded environment.<sup>6</sup>

As LtGen Steven Boutelle points out in *The Art of Command*, "The effectiveness of today's armed forces leadership will define the future of the nation."<sup>7</sup>

To emphasize the importance of simple commander's intent supporting future U.S. naval operations, this article examines ADM Lord Viscount Horatio Nelson's use of commander's intent at The Battle of Trafalgar and Field Marshal William Slim's use of simple orders to unify the British 14th Army during World War II.

## Commander's Intent and the Human Interface

Emphasizing the role of individual behavior within the naval Services through organizing principles like commander's intent can foster a culture of intelligent initiative. Studies of multi-domain battles throughout history highlight the importance of incorporating simple commander's intent in future concepts of operations.<sup>8</sup> The tactical art of ADM Nelson sheds light on the effectiveness of simple commander's intent when combating a numerically superior naval force.

On 21 October 1805, ADM Nelson defeated the combined fleets of the French and Spanish navies during the Battle of Trafalgar off the coast of Spain.<sup>9</sup> The victory concluded with all British vessels intact, 22 ships from the combined French and Spanish fleets destroyed, and French ADM Pierre-Charles Villeneuve taken prisoner aboard his flagship. It was described as, "The most decisive naval battle of the

[Napoleonic Wars], conclusively ending French plans to invade England.”<sup>10</sup> The victory was achieved through ADM Nelson’s belief in the value of commander’s intent and his deviation from formal ship-of-the-line warfare typical to 18th century fighting sail tactics.<sup>11</sup>

At the time, the British practice was for commanders to centralize control of the fleet under a single commander using line-ahead battle formations.<sup>12</sup> Conventional line-ahead battle formations organized fleets in parallel lines that were good for communication but limited their dispersion.<sup>13</sup> At the Battle of Trafalgar, ADM Nelson arranged his ships in columns, directing, “The Order of Sailing is to be the Order of Battle.”<sup>14</sup> His unconventional use of column formations facilitated speed and independent maneuver of British ships—and allowed his fleet to approach ADM Villeneuve’s linear formation perpendicularly. Shaping actions afforded by his maneuvers created additional fields of fire for his broadside-mounted 24-pounder long guns, which supported feints and ultimately broke ADM Villeneuve’s lines.<sup>15</sup>

ADM Nelson unified the actions of his captains through commander’s intent, effectively overcoming anticipated degradations in communications through his use of a column formation.<sup>16</sup> In his personal journal, ADM Nelson referred to his unorthodox methods of decentralizing authority as “the Nelson touch,” writing, “I am anxious to join the Fleet, for it would add to my grief if any other man was to give them the Nelson touch, which we say is warranted never to fail.”<sup>17</sup> Prior to the battle, he created a common understanding of his objectives, enabling decisive actions at the captain level.

ADM Nelson organized the actions of his subordinates through simple guiding principles like, “No captain can do very wrong if he places his ship alongside that of an enemy.” He decentralized authority to open fire down to his fleet’s captains and emphasized the importance of attacking effectively first.<sup>18</sup> One recollection said, “If signals could not be seen from the flagship, [captains] had complete autonomy to engage the enemy as they saw fit.”<sup>19</sup> On

the morning of battle, ADM Nelson signaled to his captains: “Engage the enemy more closely.”<sup>20</sup> The control of the battle was effectively handed off to his captains, bringing unmatched speed

value ADM Nelson placed on intent by allowing decentralized operations to thrive in distributed and communications-degraded environments.

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and decisiveness to the fight. ADM Nelson’s use of commander’s intent built trust and unleashed intelligent initiative by emphasizing short and concise guidance.

Modern applications of commander’s intent—shaped by LtGen John A. Lejeune’s 1920 philosophy of the relationship between officers and men, Gen Alfred M. Gray’s 1989 model of teacher-student relationships, and Gen David H. Berger’s 2019 emphasis on measuring the effectiveness of planning processes by the quality of their intent—continue to demonstrate the importance of enabling vicious harmony by promoting subordinate initiative.<sup>21</sup> Through simple guidance based on a common understanding of objectives and decentralized decision making, our naval forces will continue to confirm the

**Defeating the Undefeated**

Enhancing the lethality of the U.S. naval Services through proposed complex force packages will require organizing principles to endow a shared sense of responsibility across a large number of distributed military platforms.<sup>22</sup> Harmonizing the actions of a large number of distributed military platforms can be accomplished through simple unified intent, as demonstrated by historical examples such as then-LTG Slim in his defeat of the Japanese 15th Army during World War II.<sup>23</sup>

In his memoir, *Defeat into Victory*, Field Marshal Slim highlighted the effectiveness of commander’s intent in leading the British 14th Army to victory over formidable Japanese forces during World War II.<sup>24</sup> From 1942 to 1943, LTG Slim commanded the Burma



***Engage more closely.*** (Painting by J.M.W. Turner, 1775-1851.)

Corps and the XV Corps, both of which faced critical defeats against Japanese forces during the Burma Campaign.<sup>25</sup> Widely renowned in the Asiatic-Pacific theater for their training and discipline, LTG Ren'ya Mutaguchi's Japanese 15th Army prioritized speed in tactics to exploit gaps in allied defensive positions, allowing them to beat back the British forces from Burma into India during the Arakan Campaign in 1943.<sup>26</sup>

Following the 1943 Japanese defeat of the British XV Corps in the Arakan Campaign, LTG Slim was assigned to command the British 14th Army and

and [explaining] to them how each man's contribution [to his priorities] played an important part in the overall result."<sup>31</sup> He regularly visited the front lines and delivered intent to his subordinate commanders in their own language, using interpreters when he was unable to do it himself. He decentralized control of his distribution network to ground maneuver forces to keep supply lines moving during Japanese attacks.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, considering the feedback he received regarding the needs of his troops, LTG Slim exploited his robust logistical network to provide culturally

manding Chindit forces, the Allied forces disrupted Japanese supply lines, limited Japanese freedom of maneuver, and stunted Mutaguchi's ability to reinforce the Japanese 15th Army. Accordingly, "in March 1945, the British 14th Army took Mandalay and the Japanese stronghold of Meiktila."<sup>37</sup> By May 1945, the remaining Japanese 15th Army forces were successfully repelled from Burma and unable to seize British India, allowing Allied forces to establish critical supply lines into China.<sup>38</sup>

LTG Slim understood that true leaders do not inspire through writing or dictating their orders, but through leading their people and being with them.<sup>39</sup> He built a leadership team where his army operated more from his commander's intent than written orders, and he developed strong relationships that imparted trust in his leaders and earned trust in return. In a post-career analysis of his application of orders to his maneuver warfare mindset which contributed to victory in Burma, Field Marshal Slim notes:

I suppose dozens of operation orders have gone out in my name, but I never actually wrote one myself. I always had someone who could do that better than I could. One part of the order I did, however, draft myself—the intention ... it is always the most important."<sup>40</sup>

LTG Slim's use of simple priorities provides a relevant example of how to establish command and control systems that are flexible, adaptable, and resilient.<sup>41</sup> The anticipated speed of a future conflict reinforces the importance of decentralizing authority to the lowest competent authority.<sup>42</sup> Emphasizing speed in decision making through simple priorities promotes certainty in uncertain environments and generates the bottom-up initiative necessary to maintain tempo in the absence of direct communications.<sup>43</sup> Simple priorities nested in every level of command exploit the full potential of the U.S. naval Services' junior enlisted and officers, and will no doubt enable success in a future contested environment.

### **Unleashing Intelligent Initiative**

Maintaining the United States' strategic advantage in the emerging

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given orders to prevent Japanese seizure of British India.<sup>27</sup> Upon assuming command, he identified many struggles his soldiers would have to overcome—from correcting a notably poor supply chain to altering his troop's mindset that Mutaguchi's forces were unable to be beaten. Most important to LTG Slim was his need to organize the British 14th Army—which comprised British, Gurkha, Burmese, African, American, and Chinese troops—into simple chains of command.<sup>28</sup>

Soldiers from the British 14th Army were collectively characterized by a vast medley of cultures, languages, and religions. LTG Slim unified this disparate force by establishing three transparent priorities for the British 14th Army which he nested in subordinate priorities in every level of his command: build a cohesive army, prioritize small-unit defeats of Japanese forces, and leverage coalition force capabilities.<sup>29</sup> LTG Slim emphasized the importance of his priorities at the tactical level to support the achievement of his strategic objectives in Burma.<sup>30</sup>

To build a cohesive army, he reinforced the three aforementioned priorities by "speaking tirelessly to his men

appropriate meals to his troops with religious dietary restrictions."<sup>33</sup>

Transparency in goals and decentralization of authority to competent subordinates generated quick wins at the small-unit level, allowing the British 14th Army to overcome the mindset that the Japanese were supermen and unbeatable. Deliberately limiting the size and scope of his tactical objectives, he emphasized the conduct of small patrols to build confidence in his troops' abilities to move and fight in the Burmese jungle.<sup>34</sup> The success of the British 14th Army from 1943-1945 during the Burma Campaign was the result of LTG Slim's simple orders and organizing principles, ability to transform the army into a winning team, and unifying principles around a common cause.<sup>35</sup> Utilizing the momentum of small-unit victories, LTG Slim adhered to the leadership advice he received as a young cadet: "Hit the other fellow, as quick as you can, and as hard as you can, where it hurts him the most, when he ain't lookin!"<sup>36</sup>

With coalition support from American LTG Joseph Stilwell, USA, commanding Chinese forces and British American GEN Orde Wingate com-



operational environment will require tactical decision makers to intelligently respond to evolving threats impacting the U.S. naval forces' operational and strategic objectives.<sup>44</sup> Historical military operations during the Napoleonic Wars and World War II, modern guidance like Gen Berger's *Commandant's Planning Guidance*, and even industry best-practices highlight the effective use of commander's intent as an asymmetric advantage critical to supporting distributed and complex force packages.

FedEx chief executive officer and Marine veteran Fred Smith's simple guidance to his employees integrates speed with control for a complex and distributed organization responsible for more than fifteen million shipments per day: "Get all packages to their destination free of damage, in a cost-effective manner, and within the shipment period specified by the customer."<sup>45</sup> Smith's use of simple intent promotes intelligent initiative for more than 450,000 FedEx employees worldwide and harmonizes subordinate execution of the FedEx mission in line with his priorities.

The gradual erosion of American technological advantages demonstrates the need to emphasize commander's intent at the tactical level, in order to increase effectiveness during distributed operations.<sup>46</sup> *A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority, Version 2.0*, highlights the importance of decentralized authority as a priority to maintain strategic advantage within a contested maritime domain.<sup>47</sup> Achieving strategic victories in the emerging operational environment will require execution of intelligent tactical initiatives through quality commander's intent because as Alfred Mahan noted, "[Subordinate] action by the various great divisions of the fleet [have their] own part contributory to the general whole."<sup>48</sup>

As anticipated in Gen Berger's planning guidance, the application of maneuver warfare philosophy will increase as we divest of legacy systems that no longer support the speed of our operational requirements.<sup>49</sup> Leadership in the high speed and distributed operations of a future contested environment will require skillful judgement in the application of maneuver warfare through



**Field Marshal The Viscount Slim.** (Photo by Robert Scarth.) (File licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 general license. No changes were made to the image.)

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the use of succinct, effective, and easily-disseminated commander's intent to promote the same intelligent initiative demonstrated by ADM Nelson off the coast of Spain and by LTG Slim in Burma.

**Notes**

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