

The Aerospace Advantage Podcast – Ep. 197 – Mission Command: Leveraging the American Cognitive Advantage – Transcript

Heather "Lucky" Penney: [00:00:00] Welcome to the Aerospace Advantage Podcast, brought to you by PenFed. I'm your host, Heather "Lucky" Penney. Here on the Aerospace Advantage, we speak with leaders in the DOD, industry, and other subject matter experts to explore the intersection of strategy, operational concepts, technology, and policy when it comes to air and space power.

So, if you like learning about aerospace power, you're in the right place. To our regular listeners, welcome back. And if it's your first time here, thank you so much for joining us. As a reminder, if you like what you're hearing today, do us a favor and follow our show. Please give us a "like" and leave a comment so that we can keep charting the trajectories that matter the most to you.

We talk about it all the time on the Aerospace Advantage. The Chinese Communist Party and Xi Jinping are clear about their intention to absorb Taiwan into the People's Republic of China. The People's Liberation Army, Navy, their so-called Coast Guard, they've expanded their reach throughout the South China Sea in an attempt to control contested islands and even build new military bases on reefs and [00:01:00] shoals that they've built these islands up, literally out of the ocean.

The People's Liberation Army Air Force, has dramatically increased incursions into Taiwan's airspace, and they've conducted dangerous intercepts of US and coalition aircraft. China is increasing both the quantity and the quality of its forces in every domain from subsurface all the way to space, while Xi targets readiness for a Taiwan invasion in this decade.

We must recognize the imperative for deterring Chinese aggression, denying China regional hegemony in the Western Pacific, and potentially defending Taiwan from invasion. If deterrence fails and there's a conflict in the Western Pacific, every domain will be contested. But air and space superiority will still be essential precursors to any joint operation.

The Pacific theater presents paradoxes that will expose difficulties in meeting this challenge. Namely, that the Pacific theater is huge! It has finite options, limited options for air bases, yet disaggregating forces and dispersing [00:02:00] operations using concepts like Agile Combat Employment, will be necessary.

And, despite the necessity of these dispersed operations for survivability against the Chinese threat, the Joint Force will still need to aggregate at specific times and places to synchronize their mass and concentrate joint firepower to inflict high losses on the enemy. The dispersion, logistical support, and then mission integration will take a lot of coordination.

Commanding and controlling forces, disperse across the gigantic theater, while contested in every domain presents an enormous challenge for Air Force and DoD leadership from all levels. From combatant commanders all the way down to mission commanders of force packages and even further down to NCO and airmen generating air power and defending contingency locations on a western Pacific island.

Despite significant effort, and advancement in combined Joint All Domain Command and Control, or JADC2 for short, or the contributing service programs like the Advanced Battle Management System, ABMS, Project Overmatch, Project Convergence, [00:03:00] the Chinese Communist Party and the People's Liberation Army will use every trick in the book to exploit the electromagnetic spectrum to contest, degrade, and deny communication.

If the balloon goes up tonight, we'll go to war with the platforms, the communication systems, and the airmen we have, not the ones we wish we had. So, while we often talk about operational concepts or the technology inherent to Air Force platforms, we also need to focus on the airmen who generate the air power that secure American's global interests.

Our airmen will assume physical and professional risk to generate and operate Air Force weapon systems in conflict. Those airmen will be on the ground or in the air with a forward perspective, but they'll experience periods of limited or even no communication at all. They'll have to rely on their understanding of their mission and their commander's intent, together with their ability to synthesize problems, think critically, and problem solve faster than the enemy.

This idea of decentralized execution by delegating authority and empowering [00:04:00] subordinates to make decisions is called mission command. It's a philosophy of leadership that is a core tenet of airpower, and it's far from new. But, as we focus westward towards the Pacific, the Air Force must exploit every opportunity to enable flexibility, initiative, and responsiveness in order to accomplish the commander's intent.

The potential consequences of over relying on centralized command and control are devastating. Inaction, paralysis, misunderstood intent, lack of initiative, or

risk aversion could drive the Air Force to lose air engagements and air campaigns. So, here to discuss mission command and how airmen can get comfortable making decisions and operating based on commander's intent, is Lieutenant Colonel "Plugger" Glojek, one of our Mitchell Institute Air Force Fellows.

Plugger is an experienced fighter pilot and graduated fighter squadron commander. Besides having spent two assignments in INDOPACOM, he's also led his squadron through extensive agile combat employment training. And also with us today, is Lieutenant Colonel Badger Underwood from the LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and [00:05:00] Education.

Besides being an experienced AFSOC U 28 pilot and weapons officer, Badger has been front and center for the development of Air Force Doctrine Publication 1-1 on Mission Command, which was released last summer. And it dramatically increases and clarifies the airmen's perspective on Mission Command.

So Plugger, welcome back to the Aerospace Advantage.

Lt Col Gary Glojek: Thanks Lucky. Awesome to be back. And as the active duty Air Force fellow here at Mitchell, I'll remind everybody that these thoughts are my own and don't necessarily reflect the position of the DoD or the Air Force.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: And Badger, welcome to the Aerospace Advantage, and thanks for taking the time to share your expertise with our audience.

Lt Col Nicholas Underwood: Hey, happy to be here. Hopefully I can help.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Oh, absolutely. So, Badger, if you don't mind, would you please get us started, big picture, with what is this concept of mission command?

Lt Col Nicholas Underwood: Yeah, that's a big question. So, mission command, fairly new in Air Force lexicon, but been around a long time. Dates back even before the German army, although we see it comes to light or it comes into its own as we, as a... [00:06:00] towards World War Two, and we start to see these concepts of mission command. The Army eventually develops starts to use the terms "decentralized execution," in the late 60s, and then the Air Force starts using the term "decentralized execution" around 1970s. And eventually these kind of grow into what we now call mission command, and the

Army starts at some time in the 1990s, early 2000s and we have just recently developed, or adopted the term mission command, but what it really focuses on are these ideas of pushing authority down to the most prudent level or to the individual that has the ability to make decisions.

And what's important when you think about mission command, though, is it's not just the colloquial term "command of a mission" or "mission command." I think a lot of times it gets misinterpreted that way. What mission command really is, it's this huge umbrella term that really is a philosophy. It has both cultural elements. It has real world, literal app, literal application in terms of given [00:07:00] authority to commanders at a specific level in order to react to situations. So, there's a big picture that goes into all of that. And it's best to think of it as a philosophy. So, when we think about mission command in the Air Force, it's going to be a little bit different than our Army brothers.

But it ultimately circles around that ability to decentralize our command and control function and give authority to those at the front line that can make decisions quickly and effectively.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: That sounds really important, especially in a highly contested environment where we have to be able to scale our operations well beyond what we've seen within the Middle East. And be able to continue to operate even when the spectrum is denied or contested.

So, Plugger, from someone who spent most of your career in a fighter squadron, can you give us that operational perspective on why you think the concept of mission command is so important? I mean, so we've talked about the Western Pacific command and control challenges and some of the difficulties we'd expect, but what have you seen?

I mean, why do you think that the emphasis on mission command has [00:08:00] increased?

Lt Col Gary Glojek: Yes, I think the Air Force has been great at decentralized execution in the air or what I think of as tactical mission command. In planning, we find the commander's intent in the air operations directive, and we lead large force packages airborne, and we're constantly making decisions.

We have captains and majors who have TACON or tactical control of air power force packages and their tasks in the air tasking order, and they lead hundreds of airmen and just billions of dollars worth of assets, and they do a great job. And

our mission commanders applied the joint forces air component commanders, the JFACCs, acceptable level of risk that we call ALR.

They applied that on every mission. And it's usually clearly defined in a joint mission planning publication. What the definition of those different levels are.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: So, what is an acceptable level of risk? Could you go into that concept a little bit more for our listeners?

Lt Col Gary Glojek: Yeah. So, often you'll talk about like, everywhere from extreme which would be like, you can go out on this mission and it doesn't matter if your jet or your body comes back. It is so important that we go and attempt to strike [00:09:00] this target. So, if you need to go and run out of fuel to make it to your target, you need to go do that.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: That's a Doolittle raider type situation.

Lt Col Gary Glojek: Exactly. That's the best example, there is the Doolittle Raiders who, you know, launched probably beyond ALR extremes, if that's even possibly. But a normal one is moderate. So you need to go out and yes, it's important that you hit your targets today, but there's a specific loss ratio that is defined by that. So, you know, we're expecting some normal attrition that we are not going to go into a threat without at least mitigating that threat.

So think, I'm not going to send my A 10 directly against the SA 15 without some sort of SEAD or suppression or, you know, something like that.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: And what that allows commanders to do is manage the urgency of the target, the level of threat, as well as manage their resources at war so they can continue to prosecute the war the next day.

Lt Col Gary Glojek: Exactly. And then airborne, those tactical mission commanders, can think about their decision making processes and constantly be keeping the commander's acceptable level of risk in mind. And, you know, a lot of us have probably been in one of those large force engagements [00:10:00] where a mission commander calls back and asks for an ALR increase for a specific package for a specific task. If we're actually going to meet the commander's intent for that day.

There's also other things that JFACCs publish, like the commander's critical information requirements and intelligence collection priorities. And I think

those allow those officers who are airborne to actually make timely and informed decisions in combat.

And, you know, I'm sure you felt this on 9/11 when you launched after flight 93, you're extrapolating well outside any mission you've ever considered, but still a hundred percent clear on your commander's intent and your flight leads intent. So, outside of tactical flying operations, at least in my experience I think we've not been focused on the mission command concepts or using effective mission orders.

Back in 2013, when I was a squadron officer school at Maxwell as a young captain, a few of us got the opportunity to go over and do a short exchange at the Army's captains career course, which was at Fort Benning, which I think we call Fort Moore now. So, we got to go over there for the day and, you know, as the A [00:11:00] 10 guy, I think people figured I could speak a little bit better than average Army and a little bit better than average aviation.

So, I got chopped off to the Army aviation section, and there are captains there planning missions. And they're planning the operations, the tactics for, you know, a simulated mission. They're forming the commander's intent. They're writing these five paragraph mission orders and they're, explaining the execution of the commander's intent and how to apply logistics and define command and control.

And, you know, up to that point at SOS, we've been mostly talking about conceptual forms of leadership and how to counsel people. But these army captains were no kidding talking about commander's intent, how to assess risk, how to identify opportunities, use discipline initiative. And I actually spent the rest of my time at SOS wishing I could go do what the Army aviation officers were doing like that one day at the captain's career course.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: So, they were actually working on the skills and tasks that they would need to execute combat operations. Could you go into more detail regarding mission command orders and what those were structured like and what those different phases and paragraphs were intended to do and [00:12:00] how they were intended to empower those officers?

Lt Col Gary Glojek: For sure. I'll give you the ops perspective and then Badger, you can grade my homework. So, my understanding is that mission orders, you know, you can give them verbally or written, but it does help to have a format that you are used to giving a mission order in. And then also that

you're receiving a mission or order in. But they should state the mission, the task organization, the concept of the operation.

And then we break that down usually with an orientation around a map, which is kind of the, you know, in parentheses step. Okay. And then the situation, the mission, the execution, the force sustainment, and then the command and controller, the command signal and communications. And there's a couple of ways that I think these are important to apply.

And the first is that if it's on paper and it's written, we probably have a pretty good shared mental model of what this mission is, but the second, and I think where this is going to become important in the future is that it's like your contingency plan, right? So in case you lose the command and control or the connectivity to your higher tiers of leadership.

You can look back at that and say, well, the commander's intent was this. [00:13:00] My acceptable level of risk was this and then you can use that knowledge to inform your decision closer to the front line. And I think, you know, as close air support pilots, probably all three of us have flown close air support missions downrange.

We've spent, couple of decades in combat, and we're, we've even been talking to the Joint Terminal Attack Controllers on SATCOM. And they are sitting next to a JAG and they're sitting next to the general officers, the target engagement authority. We've probably heard things like CFACCs directs on the radio, meaning that we're getting direct guidance from that Three Star who's a couple of countries away. So, I think as a force, we've become accustomed to a lot of, you know, even, centralized control and centralized execution.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Absolutely. I mean, that thousand miles screwdriver where the CFACC is buying your bombs, not the pilot in the cockpit. So, Badger to back up to Plugger's description of how he experienced mission command orders, how to write them and how young army officers were intended to execute based off of that intent. How has the Air Force adapted mission command orders? [00:14:00]

Lt Col Nicholas Underwood: That's a tough question, because we're still working through it. We do have a document coming out where we've written a AFDP, Air Force Doctrine Publication 5-0 which talks about orders production, and we do use the five paragraph order as a suggested template, like Plugger said.

Um, but it's important we use the term mission type orders and MTOs is to understand that really is just a technique or a way of writing orders. The 5 paragraph order that Plugger mentioned, that's just a format. You know, the ATO is a format of orders. The AOD is a format for orders, and any of those could be written under an MTO technique and MTO simply meaning that we give less detail and more, general, broad guidance and intent that allows the subordinate to act more freely within it.

If you think of it in terms of telling the subordinate everything they can't figure out on their own. And so, it really is a way to write that. And [00:15:00] so, the example that Plugger gave there, I think, is, it's important for folks to understand, especially in the Air Force, that we didn't get to the centralized template just because our generals wanted to have more power.

There's a lot more to it. When we deal with the Air Force or Air Force resources, they're high demand low density assets. There is a huge benefit to being as centralized as we can, especially when we start talking about aircraft allocation, resource allocation. All of these have very important.

They were all done for very important reasons. And so, do I think that we're going to be down to mission type orders and a very focused way, the way the Army does where I can send a platoon or a company out with a very specific mission and a very specific bowling alley in which they're operating.

I don't think we are. I think the way in which the Air Force will use it will be much, much different. And that's how we ended up with, instead of just focused on decentralized [00:16:00] execution. When we came out with mission command, we actually modified our previous centralized control, decentralized execution template, to include a new term called "distributed control."

And so, we have now, the backbone is centralized command, meaning airmen work for airmen and the senior airman is the COMMAFOR or the commander air forces, who reports directly to the joint force commander. You have distributed control now, which focuses on delegating authority down to commanders and then decentralized execution, which Plugger described very well, which is the guys in the cockpit or the guys in the front line, making real time decisions. And I, I think if I can break that out a little bit that may help exactly where we're going to use, MTOs but I don't want to go too far here. If you're interested in hearing a little more about CCDCDE can go into that, but you don't want to keep my responses short.

Lt Col Gary Glojek: So, Badger, this probably really started in, like, [00:17:00] 2018, right?

When the National Defense Strategy starts discussing how the US's primary concern is transitioning to the interstate strategic competition and we're looking at adversaries like China and Russia instead of violent extremist organizations. The NDS at the time talked about the new or really resurrected concept of agile combat employment that they called, you know, agile, resilient, adaptive basing at the time.

I think that really started helping us realize that this concept is going to be important in preparing and evolving ACE concepts. And you may have a young team lead who needs to have a really good understanding of both the commander's intent tactically. Then that would come from the JFACC, but also operationally from maybe a fighter squadron commander or the fighter wing commander.

And I think that's where you're talking distributed control. And, you know, when we started talking about this in 2018, we had never had any formal training on how to write mission orders or, you know, probably even really receive or break them down. And I know we in my squadron started reading the Army's Battle Staff Handbook in the Joint Pub 5-0 and just tried to learn it ourselves.

[00:18:00] So, this is also something that when I got to Command my own fighter squadron. One of the priorities was to teach our captains, our flight commanders, our team leads, how to execute mission command, how to understand commander's intent, how to give commanders intent, and then how to identify those opportunities and take the discipline initiative, but also how to Assess and then accept prudent risk.

So, I think part of that is also knowing what and when to communicate up and down the chain.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Absolutely. And this has been a journey for the Air Force, especially after the last 20 years, 20, you know, 25 or 30 years of the operations we've had in the Middle East. And Badger to your point, I mean, airpower is a theater asset and actually a global asset as well, just simply because of the range, the speeds and the effects that airpower is able to provide. That a platoon in the Army just simply can't because they travel at the speed of feet, right? So Plugger, you were learning about the necessity of mission command in real time over the last decade as you were playing with these

concepts and the larger Air Forces clearly realized they need to expand the concept.

So Badger, can you talk to us more about the doctrine that we [00:19:00] had before 2023 and how and why the Air Force went about revising it and the role that you've played there?

Lt Col Nicholas Underwood: Yeah, absolutely. Um, I should mention the ideas that distributed control, a lot of these ideas have actually been around a lot sooner than 2017 and 2018.

It became a political focus point, but the Air Force has long been trying to adapt how we operate. So, as I mentioned earlier, the idea of mission command, although new and Air Force lexicon, the central idea of decentralized execution, which is the hallmark of mission command has been around since our inception. It doesn't find its way into doctrine until the 1970s. But the basic ideas of mission command have been around since the very beginning.

Unfortunately, due to a lot of resource constraints throughout the two thou throughout the last 20 years consolidations of AOCs, the downsizing that happened after the Gulf War, after the Cold War, a lot of [00:20:00] resources, constraints, we became much more centralized.

And so our doctrine actually exposed an idea of centralized control. Meaning, that all airmen work for airmen. Centralized control didn't actually mean that all authority was retained under by JFACC or by the COMMAFFOR. It actually emphasized pushing authority down, so it is always emphasize mission command.

We didn't use the term, obviously, um, so, but what we found is over 20 years over the last 20 years, with the resource constraints, what had actually happened is we had started thinking that meant okay the JFACC retains all the authority. And so what we did when we changed the doctrine was to change the way in which it was perceived, although we didn't want to change, we didn't change its actual precepts.

So, the way you think of it is centralized control actually what meant centralized control, which was airmen work for airmen, we just changed that word. So, we went from centralized control to centralized command, meaning all airmen work for one airman. [00:21:00] And then, the idea of decentralized execution, which always meant push authority down to the lowest prudent level.

That didn't really focus a lot on commanders. It wasn't interpreted as a, we need to push authority down to other commanders. So decentralized execution under the previous centralized control, decentralized execution template split. So, decentralized execution became distributed control and decentralized execution.

Distributed control now emphasizes the idea of pushing authority down to commanders in order to command and control as necessary. Decentralized execution became focused on the front-line airmen, the guys in the cockpit, the guys on the front lines able to adapt as necessary. And with those 2 terms, we have a document coming out AFTP 3-0.1 command and control, that really explains this in much more detail. Meaning the idea behind distributed control now [00:22:00] and what we need to do to meet challenges in the Pacific is actually decentralize our command and control function. And what we're doing is decentralizing that by enabling commanders at lower echelons to make decisions and to command and control forces. So, how we used to the typical way we think about command and control under the very centralized methods we've done over the last 20 years is you have a centralized AOC. That puts out an order, and then that centralized AOC is also responsible for the controlling of aircraft, moving them around theater, task them, et cetera.

But if you think in terms of distributed control, what we're actually talking about is, the publishing of the order, the giving of the tasks, may still be a centralized entity, but the ability to move aircraft around can fall at a lower level. And so distributed control is also ultimately about the ability for echelons between the squadron and in [00:23:00] between the wing and the theater AOC, having authority to command and control and push aircraft around as necessary or to retask as necessary. And that's what we mean. We say distributed control.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: And so this really allows the JFACC to be able to have an integrated air campaign, a vision for the theater through his centralized command, and then push the distributed control, push that piece down to the regions where they're able to still synchronize and support each other's maneuvers and capabilities and effects, even though they're not necessarily being fully coordinated and tightly controlled through the AOC, correct?

Lt Col Nicholas Underwood: That's exactly correct. And one of the obviously that's incredibly complicated to do because it, the centralized AOC will still have a, will likely still have a role for that synchronization, because we do have to synchronize air power. It's not it's, it hasn't got any less complex.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Especially as you move into family of systems and we have CCAs and we're no longer just sending out [00:24:00] two ships of a fighter aircraft to execute a mission.

This is going to be an integrated air campaign. So, you're right this is going to be much more complex.

Lt Col Nicholas Underwood: Yeah, absolutely. And I think that's where you see a lot of the technology developments. You know, we haven't talked to about ABMS and all those, but a lot of those come down to really enabling what we talk about when we say mission command.

So, that shared understanding that mutual trust, all that happens because of the what the technology, these systems are being developed to allow to share that information across the echelons and across the different command and control nodes. It's not just a simple it doctrinally, it's as simple as saying, okay, we have to give them authority, but to actually execute it, sharing of that information, becomes very critical.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: And that mission command is the thread, the intent that gets pushed down from the centralized command through the distributed control and into the decentralized execution where individuals in crewed aircraft and in other capabilities are actually [00:25:00] maneuvering in, with that intent. And that's what provides the overall integration across that air campaign.

Lt Col Nicholas Underwood: It decentralizes the command and control function is how we say it in doctrine.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: So, can you talk to us a little bit about the notion of disciplined initiative and prudent risk? We talked about acceptable levels of risk earlier, but what is prudent risk and disciplined initiative and how does that tie into the execution?

Lt Col Nicholas Underwood: So, we travel around a lot a briefing AFTP 1-1, which is the mission command. And I think it's very easy for folks to understand this at the very tactical level. For somebody in aircraft they go, okay you know, Gulf War, I dropped my bombs. I came by, I happened to see a highway full of Iraqi soldiers.

I'm going to drop whatever bombs I have left that's discipline initiative. That's really not what we're talking about, um, especially in the AFTP 1-1, which

focuses much more on the operational level. We're really focused on commanders being able to make decisions [00:26:00] in command and control.

It's much less focused on the tactical level. As Plugger said, we do feel that airmen are very good at adapting to the situation. I think that's very much in our DNA, but to create a command and control system that is decentralized, that allows commanders at various echelons to be able to exploit opportunities. That's really where we want to focus when we say discipline initiative.

If I'm the commander and I'm in charge of the marshaling and the retrograde of a particular force package going in and out. And I don't mean the mission commander in the air. I mean, a C2 node that has given, has been given the responsibility for vectoring aircraft in and out under an ACE construct, either headed to a target or heading to a new location.

Well, that's likely to be some kind of C2 node that's handling that well, if they receive updated information that there's a threat or updated information that there's a better target that [00:27:00] commander there, being able to take discipline initiative and re vector the force as necessary. That's really where we want to be. That's really a command and control form of discipline initiative.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: They're not out there just looking for targets of opportunity. They actually understand the broader intention of the command. And then they're executing in order, in accordance with that command, it's not just a target of opportunity.

Lt Col Nicholas Underwood: Yeah. And I think that's the biggest change to for airmen that, that commander at an echelon below the JFACC making real time decisions over the command and control of the aircraft. Not so much just a, an airman who's executing a task and sees a better way to execute that task.

Lt Col Gary Glojek: And the simple way that I explained it Lucky when I was a commander to my flight commanders and to my team leads was.

I need you to know the commander's intent so well that when you're out there and you see an opportunity that I couldn't have possibly imagined, but you think is good and you know, fits within the commander's intent and within the, you know, the acceptable level of [00:28:00] risk. I want you to jump on that opportunity.

I want you to go do that thing.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: And it moves the entire force towards the broader objective of the campaign of that particular push or of that particular mission.

Lt Col Gary Glojek: Exactly.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: So, what about prudent risk?

Lt Col Nicholas Underwood: Yeah, so prudent risk was probably the most difficult portion of the doctrine. Um, we had a lot of discussions.

We felt as a writing team that the Air Force had a lot of methods for analyzing risk, a lot of methods for understanding, you know, what is risk? We could go everything from ORM sheets to the ALR and the IP, like a Plugger said, but we really didn't have a definition for prudent risk. And we tried multiple definitions to say, what does prudent mean?

And we looked at a lot of the Army documents and what we actually discovered is that prudent risk has to be defined by the commander. The commander has to go, okay, what is prudent to me? [00:29:00] What does it mean? Um, as and it would have to be something that's defined in the order how the commander does it.

And so, one of the ways is we've worked with folks trying to write this. One of the ideas that I've given them to help them write it is to think, how do I accept the risk for what might happen to avoid what will happen?

Lt Col Gary Glojek: So lucky, I think outside the tactical flying community, defining risk is still a little bit vague.

If you're leading a large force package of airpower, kind of like we talked about, it's easier to think about the risks to force, the risks to mission, and then utilize that JFACC's ALR, the acceptable level of risk. And you use tactics to keep your team within that. But, you know, we discuss threats and hazards along with the probability of an event and we compare those to the potential level of consequence.

I think, though, it's saying, you know, accurately or effectively or shared understanding is where Badger was talking about, you know, maybe the common lexicon isn't there. And if it's up to the commander to define what prudent means, and I don't even think prudent is a word that most people in [00:30:00] 2024 even use.

I think we could do more to define how commanders define that, if that makes sense.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: I think it comes down to that acceptable level of risk and that notion of level of risk of how urgent the target is and the objective is for that particular mission or that particular push what the threats are.

So, that could be the consequences to blue forces and then managing your blue forces, your war reserve materiel, men, aircraft weapons, so that you can continue to fight for the next day. Is it really worth dying on that hill proverbially?

Lt Col Gary Glojek: And I think that the Air Force can proliferate that concept of ALR beyond tactical mission planning and execution.

I think they can expand that ALR framework into AFDP 1-1 or maybe into the, you know, the further follow on documents that I know Badger is working on. And on top of that, if we have commissioning sources like the Academy and ROTC and OTS as well as Air University and the developmental education through SOS, ACSE, Air War College. If they can incorporate more mission command instruction into the curriculum there and specifically develop leaders who have a shared [00:31:00] understanding of what prudent risk means, or how to define prudent risk in their orders, then that would, you know, be able to empower the lower echelons with an active and effective lexicon that helps to define it.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Well, it sounds like prudent risk ultimately is that balance between risk to mission, which is connected to disciplined initiative, right?

If you're not disciplined in the operational initiative or the tactical initiative, you are incurring risk to mission. And balancing that against risk to force, which is really about the ALR. We really need to understand as we are distributing that control and yeah, as we were distributing that control, how mission command, and the commander's intent, and the overall strategic campaign has to incorporate those kinds of strategic and political type considerations as commanders are often doing what they're doing within discipline initiative.

And so I see what you're saying that these are other facets that need to be incorporated. So, how do mission orders or mission type orders [00:32:00] tie into the concept of mission command? So, when is it appropriate, for example,

for a fighter squadron or flight or even a SOF unit or mobility crew to operate on mission type orders?

Lt Col Nicholas Underwood: Yeah, so when we published AFTP 5-0 or excuse me, when we set it out for initial cord, the number one question that came back, specifically that, was where, what is the lowest level in which you see a, what we for shorthand call an MTO, an MTO actually being written? And the answer we give is, I don't know, but it is not likely that you will see a squadron commander writing MTOs to a flight.

I don't think that would ever be necessary to put that much work into given a specific task to a flight going out. It is likely that you may see an MTL written to a wing commander if they are in charge of a command and control concept. So, where would an MTL be used? An MTO would be written to any entity which would be doing the full [00:33:00] level of command and control.

So, we define command and control as five basic activities, design, plan, prepare, execute, and assess. So, if a commander has the ability to do command and control holistically, and it may be all the way down to a wing level who's in charge of executing, the marshalling and the reconstitution for an entire package going in and out it may be at a higher level where you know, similar to World War II and Kenny's forces, whether in charge of entire mission or an entire geographic section command and controlling forces going in and out of a geographic area.

So, we would imagine an MTO or in 5 paragraph order being given to a commander from the senior commander, if that subordinate commander is given command and control responsibilities over an entire mission, meaning the full design, plan, execute, and assess. That's where we would see it used. Now, the MTO techniques, the idea of giving broad guidance, even in a verbal order, that could be used all the way down to the flight level.[00:34:00]

But we don't imagine full 5 paragraph orders with a bunch of annexes being used much below the wing and probably rarely at the wing. It's probably going to be at an echelon between the wing and the theater JFACC

Lt Col Gary Glojek: Badger, one place that I'll push back a little bit on that is like, with agile combat employment, I can see a small flight. Maybe it's a four-ship. Maybe it's a six-ship. Maybe it's a two-ship that goes somewhere. And in the absence of connectivity, when our command and control is contested and degraded. That's where I could see whether it's verbal or, you know, a short maybe minus a bunch of the annexes, but a short like page or two mission order

to a captain or a senior NCO going, "Hey, if you get cut off, here's my intent and here's how you're going to execute for the next, defined time period."

Heather "Lucky" Penney: So, this, you know, really brings up the question of when do we begin educating? Our airmen both at the NCO level and officers, how to understand and execute mission command type orders. So, Badger, are there any air education training [00:35:00] command efforts to teach these young officers about mission command, either at SOS or the Air Command and Staff College?

Lt Col Nicholas Underwood: Yes, I know as early as OTS, some of the new initiatives happen at OTS, even right here at Maxwell. Mission command and planning and wargaming, all these elements being pushed all the way to the, down to the commissioning sources. To start getting these ideas into airmen from the very beginning.

Right now is a heavy focus not just on mission command, but on all the command and control activities, especially planning. And I'll plug that we do have a, with the AFTP 5-0 coming out, we do have an Air Force planning process, which is really just the JPP. Simplified into, um, echelon agnostic language that allows airmen to better understand that combining is a command and control activity. And so, by teaching these type of things much, much earlier, what happens is, as airmen come up there, instead [00:36:00] of always being very tactically focused, as we always have, we've introduced these ideas much earlier.

And so by expanding the way in which they view things, so I wouldn't just view the through the Air Force through a U 28 lens, but I can start to see the whole picture. We actually enforce mission command through that shared understanding right from the very beginning.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: That's so important to begin building this into the culture of our young airmen, whether or not they're in the enlisted ranks or the officer ranks.

So, they can understand, they feel empowered to take that discipline initiative. Understand prudent risk and execute on mission command or mission type orders. Plugger, you had mentioned, agile combat employment and the need for mission type orders to be able to execute that. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Because how does this kind of maneuver provide us an operational advantage, even though we don't have and won't have a numerical advantage and we might not have a technological advantage? So, this kind of persistent maneuver, dispersed operations, how does [00:37:00] all of this come in together regarding mission command?

And how does that bring us closer to winning solution?

Lt Col Gary Glojek: So Lucky, you don't get me wrong. I think we just to start, we need the mass so that we can generate and concentrate the high tempo air power that can earn us air superiority. And that's how we're going to allow the whole joint force to then threaten, you know, whether it's the CCP or anybody else threaten their core interest enough to deter, deny their aggression.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Can I get an amen?

Lt Col Gary Glojek: Amen. So, in that vein, every B 21, F 35, F 22, NGAD, you know, certainly CCA, all of those fighters and assets and bombers and everybody that supports them will make a big difference in this fight. Especially, when you have the sensors and data links infusion that can make 2 plus 2 more than 4. But, I think the more mass, the more autonomy, the more dispersion we add, the more critical American airmen's decisions and that command philosophy will be to realize in the force packages that can actually exploit the adversary's weaknesses. They need to do that in real time and inflict a higher rate of enemy losses.

All those fighters in CCA, they all need fuel, they all need weapons, [00:38:00] and they need maintenance, or at least, you know, to be turned at dozens of different bases that'll be all under attack. So, it is airmen who are going to get those weapon systems in the air where the sensors and the missiles are effective.

It's not just the comm denial that we need to prepare for, but also just general missions control. That MCON that's going to keep our airmen survivable so that they're targeted less frequently and then that'll allow them to generate our power under attack with that desegregated force.

And I think specifically, I really believe that Americans and our democratic allies have a cognitive advantage in problem solving and critical thinking and decision making. Because our airmen grew up in a democratic society that values initiative and critical thinking, and I don't think that's the case in communist societies.

You know, we're loyal to the Constitution. We're not loyal to a single leader that has ultimate authority like Xi or Putin.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: I absolutely agree. I mean, I think human cognition is going to be our asymmetric advantage as a blue force, as an American force with our democratic coalition and allies. Um, because [00:39:00] we will then have the ability to operate, to use mission command to chunk the rock and take the disciplined initiative, even through uncertainty, even through spectrum contested operations.

It's that human cognition that is going to provide us that advantage. And I've done a lot of work with CCAs and autonomy. And there's only so much that they can do within the scope of their software there and their training. But humans can innovate, humans can improvise and we're very creative.

And so I agree with you that. The crewed aircraft and the human cognition in the forward edge of the battle space will be crucial.

Lt Col Gary Glojek: Yeah. And since we're talking about human cognition immediately makes me think of John Boyd, you know, wars are one of the loss in the minds of men and women. And if you consider John Boyd's concept of synthesis or what he called, you know, building snowmobiles. Great speech, YouTube that if you haven't seen it.

But if our airmen have experience breaking down and then solving smaller problems, it prepares them to solve the problems that they've never seen before. Those, you know, unimagined circumstances where they're gonna have to make a tough choice. So, airmen are gonna have to [00:40:00] problem solve. They're gonna have to think critically. They're gonna have to make decisions based on you know, all on a solid understanding of what their mission is and why it's important.

So, as we go forward over the next couple of years, I think training and practicing mission command decision making is going to mean accepting some risk in peacetime. Commanders should allow and then debrief some good faith mistakes. We can't expect those commanders and team leads who grow up and advance by making conservative calls constantly and have constant oversight to then someday be bold leaders who bias action on day one of a pure conflict.

So, I think we can train this into our Air Force culture, you know, as a Badger said in the beginning, like mission command is, it has a cultural aspect, but we

can train that into our culture deliberately starting maybe at the junior NCO level all the way up.

And that does take time. It takes effort, probably take a little bit of risk, but I think mission command is the critical layer of resilience that we need in our command and control structure.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: So, it's time to stop talking and start taking action. I know that the CSAF, he's got his own reading list.

What's the kind of reading list that you gentlemen put together? I [00:41:00] mean, clearly besides Air Force Doctrine Publication 1-1, which I'm sure is riveting. That's the kind of book that's going to keep you awake all night, right? But uh, do you have any book recommendations or other things that can help folks get more of an idea of how to execute commander's intent, lead, and ambiguity?

Lt Col Gary Glojek: Anybody who knows me knows this answer I read can end up being a long answer, but a couple of things. L. David Marques, Turn the Ship Around is an awesome book just for any leader. That's probably my number one recommendation. His other book, Leadership is Language, I also like. But also Pete Blaber's The Mission, The Men and Me, or uh, even Secretary Mattis Call Sign Chaos was an awesome book, too.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: Badger, how about you?

Lt Col Nicholas Underwood: Doctrine is not fun to read. I'll give you that. One thing I will point out though, is the importance of doctrine, although it has been pushed has been pushed kind of the wayside over the last 20 years, especially with the COIN operations. I'll reemphasize the importance of reading AFTP 1, AFTP 3-0, which is coming out with a revision AFTP 3-0.1, Command and Control on AFTP 5-0.

And the reason I'm pushing on [00:42:00] the doctrine is that we share a hallway with lessons learned. And I see lessons learned coming out every single day that talks about the inability or the stagnation that happens in our innovation because we are using simple terms incorrectly. We just got a huge lessons learned report back from XAB and they're having difficulty in acting the concept simply because we're not using terms correctly.

I started this out by saying mission command is more than just the colloquial term, command of a mission. And so I strongly recommend that folks go out

and read the doctrine. Maybe you don't read it cover to cover. That would certainly put you to sleep, but utilizing these as references very frequently and having it as part of something that you routinely reference, is going to help us innovate because we'll all start using the same language. And if it's wrong, then we'll update it. But right now we have one of the difficulties in innovating and enacting some of these new [00:43:00] concepts is simply that we're all using the same term to mean different things.

But for my personal, I'll also add in one book most people have read Command and War by Martin Vandervelde, but I'd also add in a book by Anthony King called Command the 21st Century General.

The book is fantastic. He talks about collective command. We would simply call it distributed control in the Air Force. It gives you a better idea of what we're trying to do. We're not trying to distribute command. We're not trying to make everybody a commander, but we're trying to decentralize the command control function, which he does a great job of talking about.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: I really am going to endorse your recommendation that folks read their doctrine and know their doctrine and I'll say it for this reason. It's not because we want to be automatons. It's because like a jazz band, if we're going to improvise, if we are going to take that discipline initiative, we need to be singing off the same sheet of music.

So gentlemen, it's been a fascinating conversation especially given your perspectives on why mission command is an essential part of [00:44:00] winning the fight in the Western Pacific. You know, at this rate, we're not going to have a numerical advantage and we might not have a technological advantage. So, we're going to need every kind of cognitive advantage possible.

And we hope that our young officers are embracing Air Force mission command. And that our squadron group and wing commanders are teaching it and practicing it in peacetime because we need to practice it now before we need it in conflict.

Lt Col Gary Glojek: Thanks lucky. It's always awesome to be here and Badger good working with you.

We you and the LeMay Center do.

Lt Col Nicholas Underwood: Absolutely. I'm happy to be here. And you'll allow me, I have one more plug at the Air Force Doctrine Center, we run a

podcast as well. Where we go into in depth into these various, doctrinal concepts. It's called the Air Force Doctrine Podcasts, it's available Apple, Spotify, and anywhere you get podcasts.

Heather "Lucky" Penney: And I'm actually a follower. All right. Excellent. Thank you, gentlemen. We appreciate your wisdom.

With that, I'd like to extend a big thank you to our guests for joining in today's discussion. I'd also like to [00:45:00] extend a big thank you to you, our listeners for your continued support and for tuning into today's show.

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