Transforming Command, by Eitan Shamir: Stanford Security Studies, Stanford University Press, (Stanford, CA) 2011
Reviewed by John Callahan

In this work, Colonel Eitan Shamir, an Israeli Paratroop officer and Research Fellow at the Dado Center for Interdisciplinary Military Studies, Israeli Defense Forces, discusses the history and usage of Mission Command (Auftragstaktic in German). Mission Command has become one of the catch phrases of current military doctrinal thinking, but Shamir notes that in spite of high level claims to the contrary, efforts to implement Mission Command are, at best, only partly realised. The British Army, for many reasons detailed in the text, is judged to have most successfully incorporated and used the tenets of mission based operations. NOTE: The author made a deliberate but unexplained choice NOT to focus his case studies on the U.S. Marine Corps, which would have driven him to different conclusions.

To make his case, the author focuses on case studies of four different militaries. The first, by necessity, is the Prussian Army, from which the concept of Mission Command arose in the aftermath of Prussia's defeat in 1806, reform, and triumph against Napoleon from 1813-1815. The second is the U.S. Army. Third, and of primary interest, is the British Army. Fourth is the Israeli Defense Force. In each case, Shamir discusses the military culture and history of the army, how it came to develop a Mission Command philosophy, and the current trends in, and present status of, Mission Command.

An explanation is in order. Mission Command is described by the author as the practice and custom of commanders issuing intent or high level orders and allowing subordinates the flexibility to execute those orders as they see fit within the broad guidelines given. This is in contrast to other methods, which range from micromanagement to non-management. The critical element in Mission Command is an articulated Commander's Intent; or what the Commander wants to accomplish and why.

As Shamir ably notes, the Prussian concept of Mission Command matured, most notably under Helmuth von Moltke the Elder (1857-1888), arm in arm with the development of the Prussian General Staff. The Prussians emphasised high levels of education at all levels, and encouraged junior officers and NCO's to think and act independently, in a combination of bottom up and top down reform. All were inculcated with a bias toward aggressive, decisive action, and mistakes were addressed constructively and in an empowering fashion. Staffs were small, but superbly educated, and were expected to advise and advocate for alternative approaches rather than serve, as Napoleon's staff had, as a mere extension of the commander's will.

The first study for contrast is the U.S. Army.

Shamir notes the roots of the U.S. army as a volunteer militia force, whose military education was primarily focused on engineering. In response to mass warfare in the First World War, the U.S. imitated others, primarily the French, in terms of staff organization. Lessons learned, unfortunately, argued against task organisation and low level initiative, and emphasised a

separation of arms and a focus on the infantry attack. The U.S. saw warfare as something to be learned when needed, an ethos which persisted into the 1920s, when, in immitation of the Germans, staff schools were established. Things improved somewhat in the Second World War, but by and large the Americans remained an over managed force for whom the head on attack retained primacy. In response to the failures of the Vietnam era, Shamir notes the rise of Mission Command as embodied by an intense study of German doctrine culminating in the famous Air Land Battle Concept (1982), but notes that, in spite of the increasing use of the terminology of Mission Command by senior leaders, the Army has only imperfectly implemented the concepts, with a hyper expansion in technical and communications capability allowing commanders to interfere more than ever with subordinate decision making.

The IDF's founding ethos has also hindered the development of Mission Command in its fullest sense. With its origins in guerilla warfare, and a history of making due with little, the IDF grew disdainful of the idea of professional military education and good staff work, key factors in Mission Command. Indeed, the stratospheric orders given in some conflicts, which amounted to little more than saying "go", while allowing for flexibility, often costs commanders any control at all over developing campaigns. This, combined with shifting requirements and a need to use regular forces as police units, and an associated propensity for commanders to lead from behind, set the IDF up for failure in the 2006 Hezbollah War. Shamir notes with some relief that efforts to increase education, training, and confidence from the top down have borne fruit, describing the improvements just two years later in the 2008 Gaza struggle as promising, if nascent. Brigade commanders advanced with the troops and decision making was pushed down to low levels.

(Shamir mentions that some units of the U.S. Army and the IDF, such as the elite paratroopers in both armies, have customarily practiced the Mission Command, however, this has not translated into service wide reforms)

Of most import to the reader will be Colonel Shamir's assessment of the British Army, which he describes as the most imbued today with the spirit of Mission Command. It was not always so. On the down side are the obvious bad memories of the Flanders Front, with its Blackadderesque leaders dozens of miles from the front attempting to micromanage through inadequate radio technology. Commanders were either given minutely detailed orders or stratospheric suggestions by leaders who would venture near the front just long enough to request, rather than command, before retiring to their chateaus. The second time around, Montgomery showed far more flexibility, and had a better tool to work with, but British commanders by and large simply lacked the experience in commanding large manoeuvre forces that their German counterparts took for granted.

Of all the countries surveyed, the UK has the oldest military tradition, and it is the Regimental tradition which has been one factor in the success of Mission Command in the UK. Another was colonial detached service, in which commanders were often forced, and trusted, to make their own plans in support of overall objectives. Unlike either the U.S. Army or the IDF, the British Army has often been called upon to move rapidly between the roles of constabulary, counter terror, and regular combat. Most recent examples of this include operations in Northern Ireland and Basra, Iraq. In contrast to the U.S. Army's relative wealth, extreme austerity, forced the

British Army to push leadership and decision making ever downwards. The concurrent Bagnall reforms and lessons learned from the Falklands campaign led to a gradual reform of the command system with a focus on flexibility and doing more with less. Lack of communications assets and technical augmentation prevented British commanders from the type of over management common in the U.S. Army. As Shamir points out, leaner forces are forced to adapt quickly in battle and think for themselves. This was abjectly pointed out in Shamir's brief battle study of the conflict in Basra (2003).

Shamir closes this useful study with an examination of current trends. He notes that the Revolution in Military Affairs has set the U.S. back in its quest for Mission Command and decentralised operations, for reasons discussed earlier. Hordes of planners offering thousand page operations-orders for commanders to choose from are no substitute for competent, well trained subordinates who can be trusted to implement commander's intent with little or no interference, freeing those commanders to focus on campaign development. Shamir acknowledges that cultural differences may make a perfect adaptation of an Imperial German Concept problematic, but lauds the focus that the discussion of Mission Command has brought to bear on training and decentralization over the past three decades.

This book is a useful read for reformers attempting to chart a path for the armed forces in a time of extreme austerity on both sides of the Atlantic. Cogently written, with an introduction by leading U.S. thinker Brigadier General H.R. McMaster, this study is highly recommended.

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