

Mission Command and the RCAF: Considerations for the Employment of Air Power in Joint Operations

Article #4 in a series on command and control and the Royal Canadian Air Force ¹

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During discussions of the various command-and-control (C2) methods, the topic of “mission command” often arises. Mission command is seemingly everywhere of late, and just about everybody is using it in their doctrine or in orders and directives for force-employment operations. Admittedly, for an Air Force that has learned the undisputed value of the fundamental tenet of air power, that of *centralized control and decentralized execution*,² the idea of mission command can seem a bit confusing, eliciting some fair questions. What is mission command? How does it fit into air operations? What is a commander’s role in mission command? By taking a closer look at the concept of mission command, one can make the case that not only is it entirely compatible with air operations but also its key facets are already woven into the way that air power’s missions are centrally controlled and decentrally executed.

What is “mission command”?

Searching both the B-GA-400-000/FP-000, *Canadian Forces Aerospace Doctrine* and the B-GA-401-000/FP-001, *Canadian Forces Aerospace Command Doctrine*, one will not find a discussion of mission command. Similarly, the C2 doctrine of the air forces of our key allies do not discuss mission command, including United States (US) Joint Publication (JP) 3-30, *Command and Control of Joint Air Operations*; United States Air Force Volume 3, *Command*; and the Royal Australian Air Force’s Australian Air Publication 1000-D, *Air Power Manual*. The Royal Air Force’s Air Publication 3000, *British Air and Space Power Doctrine* only mentions mission command in passing. While none of these manuals addresses mission command in detail, they all emphasize the importance of centralized control and decentralized execution in joint air operations.

Canadian joint doctrine and mission command. The concept of mission command is highlighted in Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) doctrine as a fundamental principle in the command and control of military operations. Canadian Forces Joint Publication, CFJP 01, *Canadian Military Doctrine* states that: “The CF culture emphasizes mission command and empowers all commanders with the authority to execute their mission while holding them accountable for the actions of the forces under their command. Commanders at all levels require boldness, initiative, strength of will, and imagination and must be highly skilled in their profession, determined and success-oriented.”³ Although this statement is succinct enough, it does little to define what mission command is and how it is to be practised.

US joint doctrine and mission command. US JP 3-0, *Joint Operations* offers the following definition: “*Mission command* ... is the conduct of military operations through decentralized execution based upon mission-type orders. Successful mission command demands

that subordinate leaders at all echelons exercise disciplined initiative and act aggressively and independently to accomplish the mission.”⁴ [emphasis in original] Further, in a white paper entitled “Mission Command,” the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin E. Dempsey, emphasized that simply understanding the basic principles of command was not enough and that the “[c]onduct of mission command requires adaptable leaders at every echelon.”⁵ The white paper, written in 2012, was meant to foster the view that mission command is a critical component of leadership in an increasingly complex and uncertain operating environment.

NATO doctrine and mission command. Perhaps the best reference to use as a starting point for a discussion on mission command is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Allied Joint Publication-01D (AJP-01[D]), *Allied Joint Doctrine*, which provides this somewhat more detailed description: “Through mission command, commanders generate the freedom of action for subordinates to act purposefully when unforeseen developments arise, and exploit favorable opportunities. Mission command encourages the use of initiative and promotes timely decision-making.”⁶ AJP-01 also describes “[a] commander’s responsibility for mission accomplishment [as] total, but” that in the delegation of authority to subordinates, commanders can include the principle of decentralization.⁷

The approach by both US and NATO joint doctrine helps to bridge the philosophy of mission command with that of air power’s general need to centralize the control and decentralize the execution of air operations. It is through this lens that we can begin to answer some of our questions about mission command and Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) C2.

How does mission command fit into air operations?

Mission command and decentralized execution. In its most basic form, mission command equates to the fundamental tenet’s prescription for decentralized execution. When teaching C2 doctrine during the RCAF’s Operations Command and Control Seminar (OCCS),⁸ we often describe decentralized execution as “decentralized command” to better illustrate that while air operations can be effectively controlled at the theatre level, they are very difficult to command. Command positions—such as the joint force air component commander (JFACC)—require commanders at lower echelons (wings, units/squadrons and detachments) to effectively make command decisions in order to “fly the frag”⁹ and execute assigned missions. It is well understood that in order to operate with a theatre-level perspective and ensure the efficient use of limited air assets, one commander exercising a minimum of operational control (OPCON) must centrally control air power. Normally, this is the role of the air component commander (ACC).

What mission command helps airmen and airwomen understand more fully is that by delegating authority downwards to commanders in the field at the tactical level (see Figure 1), theatre-level commanders, as NATO doctrine puts it, “generate the freedom of action for subordinates to act purposefully when unforeseen developments arise, and exploit favourable opportunities.”¹⁰ Simply put, in air force language, when the tactical-level wing commanders (W Comds), air expeditionary wing commanders (AEW Comd) and unit/squadron or detachment commanders are delegated command authority over the people and equipment assigned to them, these commanders can be left to take care of the myriad details associated with executing air operations. Think back to your tactical-level experiences and consider the potential complexity

of ensuring assigned missions were executed. Depending upon what role you played in air operations, you had to master the operations-support and mission-support issues related to sustainment, logistics, maintenance, feeding, lodging, force protection, transportation, supply, finance, intelligence, airspace management and control services, meteorology ... and the list goes on.¹¹

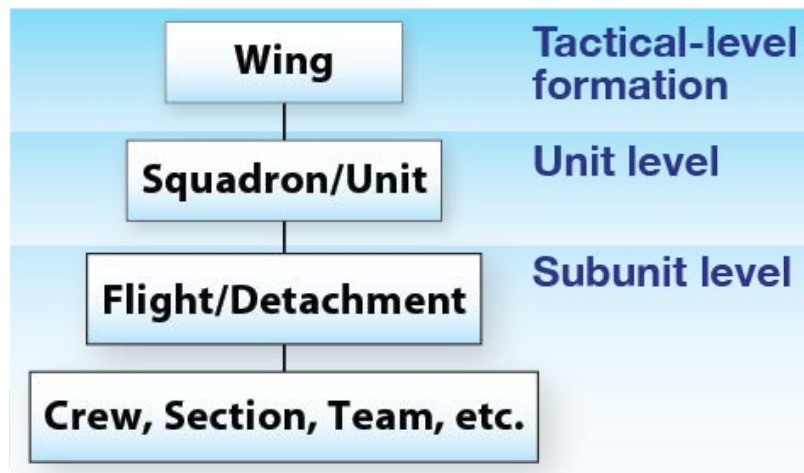


Figure 1. Tactical-level organization of the RCAF

Since tactical-level considerations such as these are outside the span of control of theatre-level commanders, mission command offers a way to fulfill the fundamental tenet’s need for decentralization of mission execution. Starting to like the concept of mission command in air operations yet?

Mission command: Every commander plays a key role

Ensuring the success of mission command is ultimately the responsibility of the commander of an operation. Generally speaking, this means that whichever officer has been delegated operational command (OPCOM) of an operation is responsible to determine how much command authority should be delegated to subordinate commanders. For domestic and fairly simple expeditionary CAF air operations, the Commander of Canadian Forces Joint Operations Command (Comd CJOC) normally delegates OPCOM of RCAF resources assigned to an operation to the JFACC. If a CAF joint task force is deployed, then the Comd CJOC would normally delegate OPCOM to the joint task force commander (JTF Comd). These delegations normally make sense, as the day-to-day details of such operations can easily exceed the span of control of the Comd CJOC, given that they can occur at great distance.

Command is delegated, not “given away.” Does this delegation mean that Comd CJOC has “given away” command of an operation to a subordinate? Not at all ... Comd CJOC has practised the first step of effective mission command, all the while retaining responsibility for the operation. Put simply, commanders can delegate command authority, but they cannot delegate their responsibility for an operation. In order for the concept of mission command to be effective, commanders at all levels must consider how much of their command authority can reasonably be delegated without causing confusion at lower levels. With this delegation goes the

responsibility to set up subordinate commanders for success. Consider the “Anderson Waterfall” model of C2 authority delegation in Figure 2.



Figure 2. The “Anderson Waterfall” model of C2 authority delegation¹²

Commander’s intent. To return to NATO’s AJP-01, “Commanders who delegate authority to subordinate commanders need to state clearly their intentions, freedoms and constraints, designate the objectives to be achieved and provide sufficient forces, resources and authority required to accomplish their assigned tasks.”¹³ While these specifics can be transmitted verbally, they must be backed up in writing in either mission-type orders—such as an air tasking order (ATO)—or in a transfer of command authority (TOCA) or transfer of authority (TOA). When written down in precise language, these statements provide unambiguous direction to commanders and their staffs and can greatly reduce confusion in operations.

When mission command is practised through all levels of an operation, commander’s intent becomes increasingly more important, as the further down command authority is passed, the clearer things need to be. The individual crew, section or team commander, way down at the tactical end of an operation, must understand the intent of their commander as the mission is being executed. This permits them to use their initiative and knowledge of the local environment to achieve mission success within the freedoms and limitations imposed by their commander.

Staffs have responsibilities in mission command. Commanders at all levels rely upon their staffs to provide them with situational awareness and a means of executing commander’s guidance and intent. Staffs must also understand what command authority has been delegated to which commander if they are to ensure that information and staffing activity are effectively carried out. By intentionally ignoring or unintentionally “working around” established delegated command relationships, staffs can subvert and confuse operations.

The “speed of trust.”¹⁴ In order for mission command to work effectively in air operations, commanders must establish the speed of trust between one another. Trust, the “total confidence in the integrity, ability, and good character,”¹⁵ is based on the mutual confidence between commanders at all levels. Further, when commanders trust each other, a situation arises called the speed of trust that greatly enhances options and flexibility within military operations. When commanders have taken the time to develop trust with subordinate commanders, the result

can be the freedom to use initiative and achieve success, all the while knowing your boss will back you up. The speed of trust is a two-way street of course, and commanders know that their subordinate commanders will, without fail, execute their duties within the latitude of guidance and direction. Once the speed of trust is established by commanders, it can act as a significant force multiplier, permitting mission command to be effectively exercised at all levels of an operation.

For air operations, the JFACC must trust their W Comds and AEW Comds to execute assigned missions regardless of the challenges that any number of factors present at each location. W Comds must, in turn, trust their squadron and unit commanders, as an AEW Comd must trust their detachment commanders (DETCOs). Before deployment, the commanding officer of a unit/squadron must emphatically trust that their DETCOs will command effectively while deployed. DETCOs, in turn, must develop trust with the commanders of the crews, sections and teams assigned to them. That trust must run from “the bottom up” as well. Few things can strengthen the concept of mission command like trust.

Summary

No matter the size or complexity of an air operation, at some point, activity will be beyond the commander’s span of control. This is the genesis of mission command. By ensuring that subordinate commanders are given sufficient command authority at their level, commanders can create an environment where initiative and expertise can be exploited to achieve mission success. The good news here for airmen and airwomen is that we are already doing this within the construct of the first tenet, centralized control and decentralized execution. In effect, the philosophy of mission command fits well into the way in which air power is exercised. The RCAF can easily embrace the concept of mission command as it pursues the integration of air effects into joint operations.

Abbreviations

AEW Comd	air expeditionary wing commander
C2	command and control
CAF	Canadian Armed Forces
Comd CJOC	Command, Canadian Joint Operations Command
DETCO	detachment commander
JFACC	joint force air component commander
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OPCOM	operational command
RCAF	Royal Canadian Air Force
US	United States
W Comd	wing commander

Notes

1. This is the fourth in a series of short articles on the subject of command and control in the RCAF. For more detailed information, consult B-GA-401-000/FP-001, *Canadian Forces Aerospace Command Doctrine*, found on the Internet at <http://www.rcaf-arc.forces.gc.ca/en/cf-aerospace-warfare-centre/aerospace-doctrine.page> and the Defence Wide Area Network at http://trenton.mil.ca/lodger/CFAWC/CDD/Doctrine_e.asp (both sites accessed April 10, 2014).

2. See article #1 in this series for more on centralized control and decentralized execution. Command and Control and the Royal Canadian Air Force, Major Pux Barnes, “Command or Control? Considerations for the Employment of Air Power in Joint Operations,” Canadian Forces Aerospace Warfare Centre, both sites accessed June 11, 2014, <http://www.rcaf-arc.forces.gc.ca/en/cf-aerospace-warfare-centre/command-and-control.page> (Internet) and http://trenton.mil.ca/lodger/cfawc/CDD/C2_e.asp (Defence Wide Area Network).

3. Canada, Department of National Defence, Canadian Forces Joint Publication, CFJP 01, *Canadian Military Doctrine* (Ottawa: Canadian Forces Experimentation Centre, 2011-09), 5-1, accessed April 10, 2014, <http://cfd.mil.ca/sites/page-eng.asp?page=3560>.

4. United States, Department of Defense, Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Virginia: Department of Defense, 11 August 2011), II-2, accessed April 10, 2014, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jointpub_operations.htm.

5. Martin E. Dempsey, “Mission Command, White Paper,” 3 April, 2014.

6. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, AJP-01(D), *Allied Joint Doctrine* (Brussels: NATO Standardization Agency, December 2010), 6-3, accessed April 10, 2014, [http://nsa.nato.int/nsa/zPublic/ap/ajp-01\(d\).pdf](http://nsa.nato.int/nsa/zPublic/ap/ajp-01(d).pdf).

7. Ibid.

8. The RCAF Operations Command and Control Seminar was formerly known as the RCAF Air Component Coordination Element Seminar.

9. “Flying the frag” is a term that dates back to the Vietnam War where complex flying orders were promulgated from a centralized location, being distributed to subordinate headquarters and flying units, expanding downward and outward in a fragmenting method. The “fragmentary flying order” was the forerunner of the modern ATO.

10. AJP-01(D), *Allied Joint Doctrine*, 6-3.

11. For a detailed discussion on air activities, see B-GA-401-000/FP-001, *Canadian Forces Aerospace Command Doctrine*, 14–18.

12. Developed at the Canadian Forces Aerospace Warfare Centre during 2013 by LCol John Anderson. The model was so-named by the author of this article.

13. AJP-01(D), *Allied Joint Doctrine*, 6-3.

14. Credit where credit is due ... the “speed of trust” was a tenet of the command philosophy of Brigadier General Jack L. Briggs (United States Air Force), former Deputy Commander Canadian NORAD Region (2011–2013).

15. AJP-01(D), *Allied Joint Doctrine* 6-4.