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*Operation Anaconda: Analysis of 7 Mission Command* <sup>3</sup>Principles

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## ***Operation Anaconda: Analysis of 7 Mission Command Principles***

*Operation Anaconda*, a military operation conducted in the Shahikot Valley of Afghanistan, is a compelling case study for examining the application of mission command principles. Launched in March 2002, *Operation Anaconda* aimed to eliminate Taliban and Al Qaeda hiding in the rugged mountainous terrain. *Operation Anaconda* witnessed a complex and challenging battlefield where US and Allied forces encountered formidable opposition (Kugler, 2007). The operation's outcome hinged on the effective implementation of mission command principles, which enabled the troops to adapt, overcome obstacles, and ultimately achieve success. Evaluating the extent to which the principles of mission command were employed and upheld during the operation may reveal the strengths and areas for improvement in employing mission command in contemporary military operations. Therefore, this essay analyzes the operation through principles of competence, mutual trust, shared understanding, commander's intent, mission orders, disciplined initiative, and risk acceptance.

### **Competence:**

Competence, a fundamental principle of mission command, emphasizes the continuous development of individual and collective capabilities through institutional education, realistic training, and self-improvement (Department of the Army, 2019). In *Operation Anaconda*, competence played a vital role in enabling the US and allied forces to navigate the challenges of the rugged Afghan terrain and effectively engage the enemy. The soldiers' competence was evident in their ability to adapt and overcome unexpected obstacles. General Franks observed, "Operation Anaconda was a success... it achieved success by performing tactical adaptation under fire." This ability to adapt and make informed decisions in adversity showcased the soldiers' competence in improvisation and problem-solving. Furthermore, the competence of the

soldiers instilled confidence and trust within the ranks. The shared sense of competence and self-assurance bolstered the soldiers' morale and cohesion, enabling them to perform at their best in adversity.

### **Mutual Trust:**

Mutual trust is a crucial principle of mission command, fostering a relationship of confidence and reliability between leaders and subordinates, enabling effective coordination and collaboration between ground and air forces. *Operation Anaconda* emphasized mutual trust as the basis for successfully employing joint operations and modern information networks and adapting Air Forces and CAS to the rescue (Kugler, 2007). The operation started in mid-January 2002 when the US gained intelligence about enemy forces in the Shahikot Valley.

Despite the few underestimations, there was mutual trust in the human intelligence, communications intercepts, and overhead reconnaissance teams. Similarly, mutual trust was essential for the cooperation of US Central Command (CENTCOM), Coalition Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC), and Coalition Forces Air Component Command (CFACC). The success of the hammer and anvil approach also exhibited the trust that the three US Army battalions and infantry troops had in each other to execute their respective roles.

### **Shared Understanding:**

Shared understanding is crucial for effective communication, collaboration, and success among all stakeholders involved in an operation. The Department of the Army (2019) considers the Army doctrine, culture, training, professionalism, and communication essential for achieving a shared understanding. The principle of shared understanding was first applied in developing the Anaconda battle plan through a collaborative process involving multiple units and agencies,

including Task Force Mountain, CFLCC, and CFACC. This helped to ensure that all stakeholders understood the plan and its objectives.

The plan was also based on a proper understanding of the operational environment, terrain, enemy, and capabilities of friendly forces. The shared understanding between Task Force Hammer (hammer) and Task Force Rakkasans (anvil) was that both Task Forces needed to arrive simultaneously and coordinate their actions effectively to trap the enemy without risking friendly fire incidents. However, a shared understanding was insufficient in some areas, such as the unforeseen withdrawal of Zia's Afghan troops, representing the "hammer."

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### Commander's Intent:

The commander's intent provides the mission's direction and purpose. The commander must communicate the intention, plans, and objectives to all the subordinates (Department of the Army, 2019). In *Operation Anaconda*, the importance of unity of command was evident as multiple components were involved, resulting in command structure challenges. For instance, there were intents from CENTCOM led by General Franks, CFLCC led by Army LTG Paul Mikolashek, and CFACC led by US Air Force Lt Gen Michael Moseley, collectively commanding SOF units, battalions, and combat aircraft. On this note, the multi-headed command structure had challenges, but relevant adjustments were made to focus on the intent of the end rather than the means. But by October 19, CENTCOM had assumed central command of nearly 400 aircraft and 32 ships—such developments created a unity command streamlined intentions and orders, leading to the success.

### **Mission Orders:**

Mission orders entail clear and concise directives that allow subordinates to exercise initiative while understanding the boundaries of their responsibilities. Clear mission orders describe the situation, commander's intention, objectives, expected outcomes, and role of subordinates. CENTCOM gave orders to the special operation forces (SOF), who used lasers, global positioning systems (GPS), satellite radios, and Predator unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to locate airstrike targets (Kugler, 2007). After the first failure, the adjusted mission order was to execute the hammer and anvil plan whereby the hammer attacked Taliban and al Qaeda forces on the valley floor, while the anvil prevented them from fleeing so that they remain exposed to Zia's troops and close air strikes (CAS). The ability of ground units to request and receive emergency CAS within minutes exemplified the efficient flow of mission orders. However, delays in obtaining non-emergency strikes, limited communication capabilities, and coordinating requests highlighted improvement areas in implementing mission orders.

### **Disciplined Initiative:**

The disciplined initiative is a principle that requires troops to weigh the potential benefits against the risk of disrupting the whole operation and determine if their action aligns with the commander's intent. The Department of the Army emphasizes the significance of maintaining a balance between individual decision-making and the need for synchronization within the larger operational context. Effective subordinates understand when and how to exercise a disciplined initiative to advance the mission while staying aligned with the commander's intent and objectives. During *Operation Anaconda*, the ground forces and air components displayed a disciplined initiative in adapting their tactics and employing resources to succeed (Kugler, 2007). Ground troops demonstrated disciplined initiative by calling for air support while air forces

rapidly coordinated and executed strikes. The discipline of ground controllers, combat pilots, and Army infantry troops improved, leading to the operation's success.

### **Risk Acceptance:**

Risk acceptance involves identifying, assessing, acknowledging, and mitigating risks to achieve mission success. *Operation Anaconda* underscored the necessity of risk acceptance in complex operations. Using air forces as a substitute for unavailable artillery and heavy mortars exemplified a calculated risk. Despite encountering challenges and frictions, the willingness to accept these risks contributed to the mission's success. For instance, hammer and anvil planned to concurrently arrive, engage, and trap enemies without risking friendly fire against each other or being outnumbered. *Operation Anaconda* also exhibited risk acceptance when Zia's troops withdrew and left US <sup>1</sup>infantry troops exposed on the valley's eastern slopes (Kugler, 2007). Such risk was quickly mitigated by deploying Chinook helicopters and Apaches that moved swiftly to support US troops. The battlefield adaptation strategy worked effectively and led to the success of *Operation Anaconda* by March 12.

Conclusively, analyzing *Operation Anaconda* through the lens of core principles of mission command reveals the various success factors. The operation's success relied on the practical implementation of mission command, which allowed the troops to adapt, collaborate, and overcome obstacles in the rugged terrain of the Shahikot Valley. Thus the analysis provides valuable insights into the strengths and areas for improvement in employing mission command in current military operations.

## References

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