

# Commander's Intent

By Lance Corporal Brendan B. McBreen

**Poor Captain Kevin L. Jones!** (*Marine Corps Gazette*, July 1989, page 12). The *Gazette* has published dozens of articles explaining the commander's intent in mission orders. Books are available, new manuals incorporate these ideas into our doctrine, and yet he obviously isn't getting it.

"Take that hill!" is not a mission order. It is not his commander's intent, it contains no hint of his commander's intent.

If the good captain and his company did take that hill some morning would his mission be complete?

Would it be complete if the battalion commander's purpose in taking the hill was to observe enemy emplacements on a distant hill? The enemy has withdrawn and new positions cannot be seen from the current hill. What now, Sir?

Would it be complete if the battalion commander's purpose in taking the hill was to interdict enemy supply columns using the road in the next valley? The hill is fogged in, the road cannot be seen. What now, Sir?

Would it be complete if the battalion commander's purpose in taking the hill was to locate an enemy line of retreat and block it? The retreat does not occur until after dark? What now, Sir?

In all of the above situations, the captain would be unable to seize

the initiative and quickly react to a changing situation because he is unaware of his battalion commander's intent, of what his commander is really trying to do.

**Tactics**  
**Commander's Intent**  
By LCpl Brendan B. McBreen, USMC

...the commander's purpose in taking the hill was to locate an enemy line of retreat and block it? The retreat does not occur until after dark. What now, Sir?

In all of the above situations, the captain would be unable to seize the initiative and quickly react to a changing situation because he is unaware of his battalion commander's intent, of what his commander is really trying to do.

The term "mission orders" is not a fad or a catchword. It is a method of instruction that guarantees tactical flexibility and responsiveness in a fluid situation.

To issue a mission order, you must specify your intent with regard to the enemy, not terrain, your main effort, which subunit in the focus of the action, and a mission for the subordinate unit that supports both the intent and the main effort.

Using the game of football, a mission order is analogous to a play: "The intent: What do you intend to do to the enemy?" "I want to move them to the left and make them go to a pass defense." "The mission: What tasks must be done?" "After I fake the pass, Bronski will take it over the right tackle." "Notice that the intent is not to wait a fast down. The focus should not be on terrain, but on the enemy's task: supports both the intent and the mission. The main effort is clear: the center team. If Bronski trips, another player in the backfield can salvage the play; they play and accomplish the mission. The battalion commander's mission order could be expressed like this: "My intent is to destroy the enemy force in the valley. My main effort is

Company A's attack. Capt Jones, your Company B will take that hill and use it as a base from which to block enemy reinforcements and prevent enemy retreat." Now Capt Jones has a far clearer picture of what is expected of him, and far more information with which to recover from any breakdown or respond to any changing circumstances.

Company A's commander then issues his mission order: His intent is to take the hill in order to observe the enemy. His subordinate platoons are given missions to support this intent. Squad leaders are given mission orders to support their platoon leader's intent. When some part of the plan fails, when communication is down or someone is injured, when a platoon attacks up the wrong drive, or anyone on the hill has an idea of the company goal and can react correctly to get the job done.

Another misconception that the good captain labors under is that mission orders are somehow not specific. Mission orders are more than specific. They contain accurate descriptions of tasks to be done and their approximate relationships with which a subordinate unit can modify the mission to react correctly. Every mission order should be described using a mission order. The words "take... just too simple... down... orders." The five-paragraph order is only a template, a format. Mission orders are a concept. Mission orders can be issued in the five-paragraph format, if required.

The term "mission orders" is not a fad or a catchword. It is a method of instruction that guarantees tactical flexibility and responsiveness in a fluid situation. Our organization demands accurate, coordinated, and intelligent, delegating leaders in order to fight smart, fight coordinated, and win on the battlefield.

USMC  
LCpl McBreen, a reserve aviator, serves with Marine Air GTC-4 at Naval Air Station South Weymouth, MA.

*Marine Corps Gazette*  
October 1989, page 63.

To issue a mission order, you must specify your *intent* with regard to the enemy, not terrain, your *main effort*, which subunit is the focus of the action—and a *mission* for the subordinate unit that supports both the intent and the main effort.

Using the game of football, a mission order is analogous to a *play*:

*The intent.* What do you intend to do to the enemy? "I want to draw them left and make them go to a pass defense."

*The mission and the tasks that must be done.* "Leary, you're in motion to the left. Run a deep post pattern."

*The main effort.* Who carries the ball? "After I fake the pass, Bronski will take it over the right tackle."

Notice that the intent is not "I want a first down." The focus should not be on terrain, but on the enemy. Leary's task supports both the intent and the mission. The main effort is clear to the entire team. If Bronski trips, another player in the backfield can salvage the broken play and accomplish the mission.

The battalion commander's mission order could be expressed like this: "My intent is to destroy the enemy forces in the valley. May main effort is Company B's attack. Captain Jones, your Company A will take that hill in order to block enemy reinforcements and prevent enemy retreat."

Now Captain Jones has a far clearer picture of what is expected of him, and far more information with which to recover from any breakdowns or respond to any changing circumstances.

Company A's commander then issues his mission order. His mission and intent is to take the hill in order to observe the enemy. His subordinate platoons are given missions to support his intent. Squad leaders are given mission orders to support their platoon leader's intent. When some part of the plan fails, when communications are down or someone is injured, when a platoon

attacks up the wrong draw, everyone on the hill has an idea of the company goal and can react correctly to get the job done.

Another misconception that the good Captain labors under is that mission orders are somehow not specific. Mission orders are *more* than specific. They contain accurate descriptions of tasks to be done and then supplementary information with which a subordinate can modify the mission to react correctly. Every task can and should be described using a mission order.

The Captain writes, “let’s...just issue simple...five-paragraph...orders.”

The five-paragraph order is only a template, a format. Mission orders are a concept. Mission orders can be issued in the five-paragraph format if required.



The term “mission-orders” is not a fad or a catchword. It is a method of communication that guarantees tactical flexibility and responsiveness in a fluid situation.

Our organization demands decentralized command and intelligent, delegating leaders in order to fight smart, fight outnumbered, and win on the battlefield.

*Lance Corporal McBreen, a software engineer, is a reservist serving with MASS-6 in South Weymouth, Massachusetts.*