



Afghanistan: A Historical Analysis of Mission Command and its Effect on our Current Security Environment

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The successful use of such [small, mobile, self-contained] units will depend on giving great initiative to all leaders in actual command of men.

General George Patton¹

Introduction

This quotation from General Patton foreshadows what would become a fundamental tenet in the United States Army's warfighting doctrine. This tenet, now known as *mission command*, is an idea that was not Army doctrine when Patton spoke these words. Mission command has long been a part of U.S. military action, as its "principles have always been around," even prior to its officially being part of doctrine today.² The evolution of mission command stems from experiences in combined-arms warfare. The fundamental ideas of issuing mission orders and commander's intent and then leaving the manner in which these orders and intentions are carried out up to the discretion of subordinates "has been consistent throughout this evolution."³ This essay contrasts mission command through two different periods in Afghanistan, highlighting how these two perspectives have shaped both the current and future security environments.

Mission Command Defined

Army Doctrinal Reference Publication 6-0 defines *mission command* as "the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land operations."⁴ When implementing mission command during unified land operations, commanders are guided by six principles:

- build cohesive teams through mutual trust;
- create shared understanding;
- provide a clear commander's intent;

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- exercise disciplined initiative;
- use mission orders; and
- accept prudent risk.⁵

The definition above and subsequent principles will be used as the basis for the following analysis of two battles in Afghanistan—the first in 1986 and the second in 2002. In this analysis, the focus will be only on the aspects of mission command that serve as the most pertinent examples. The following battles were chosen due to a few factors: first and most important because there is detailed research and commentary available on both of them; and, because they happened in approximately the same location, a level of control is present in contextual conditions (i.e., weather, demographics, terrain, etc.).

Afghanistan in 1986

The Second Battle of Zhawar occurred in April 1986, toward the end of the 1979–1989 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. While it was technically a victory over the Mujahideen (Afghan freedom fighters), it came at great cost to the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) and to the Soviet Union.⁶ Zhawar, in the Paktia Province, has an intricately complex cave and tunnel system and was, at the time, a Mujahideen stronghold. The outcome of this particular battle was publicly touted as a great success despite the fact that the cave complex was only occupied for a total of five hours and then was subsequently reoccupied by Mujahideen only a few weeks later.⁷ The primary ground commander of the DRA, Lieutenant General Mohammad Nabi Azimi, had various issues understanding and carrying out his commanding officer’s intentions. These issues were exacerbated by communication obstacles and by a level of distrust between himself, his subordinates, his superiors and the Soviets. As demonstrated below, the misapplication of some aspects of mission command played directly into the outcome of the Second Battle of Zhawar.

Events of the Second Battle of Zhawar

At the First Battle of Zhawar in September 1985, the goal of the DRA and Soviets was retaliation against the Mujahideen’s attempted assault on the city of Khost through the Torgarh Mountains.⁸ Zhawar—a cave complex located on the Afghanistan–Pakistan border north of Khost and near the major Pakistani forward supply base at Miram Shah—was used by the Mujahideen both for training and as a logistical base. It was considered a focal point in the Afghanistan campaign and it was primarily commanded by Jalaluddin Haqani.⁹ The DRA and Soviet forces were unable to take Zhawar at the first battle and withdrew after roughly 42 days of fighting. This would factor into the results of the second battle, as the Mujahideen overestimated the defensibility of Zhawar and failed to improve fortifications, despite having bulldozers and explosives at their disposal. Improvements were made only in quality-of-life issues—such as obtaining adequate food, water and shelter—rather than in anticipation of another attack.

In early 1986, the Soviets began to plan phased withdrawal from Afghanistan. They encouraged the Afghan forces to take the lead in combat, urging them to attack Zhawar again. This led to the Second Battle of Zhawar, in which the DRA made up 75 percent of the fighting force.¹⁰ Their given objective was to destroy the guerrilla base infrastructure, occupy Zhawar and seal off the supply route. Written orders were generated by the Afghan Ministry of Defense (MoD), but the defection of DRA senior personnel guaranteed that the lack of trust between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union led to Soviet control of the process—the Soviets even went so far as to countersign every order that the Afghan MoD issued.¹¹

Lieutenant General Azimi was given overall command of the Afghan Group of Forces, consisting of four divisions from Kandahar and Kabul, DRA artillery and aviation, the 38th Commando Brigade and the 666th Air Assault Regiment. They were roughly of the same local Pashtun tribal backgrounds and their leadership was also almost all Pashtun as well. Ethnic differences came into play as he was also assisted by two Soviet battalions, the 1st and 3rd of the 191st Separate Motorized Rifle Regiment stationed in Gazni.¹² The Afghan Army massed their forces at Gardez prior to movement to battle, “impressing the Mujahideen and their

Pakistani advisers with this large scale and rapid organization.”¹³ This was a marked departure from the poor performance of the DRA forces at the beginning of the invasion in 1979. Despite this improvement, many senior commanders continued to distrust the others’ motives—did they support Afghanistan’s future, or were they more aligned with the Soviets? The Soviets saw the mass of forces as being necessary to intimidate the Mujahideen but they failed to consider the lack of trust among the DRA commanders, a contributing factor in the failure to incorporate mission command.

Without sufficient practice or rock drills, and scarcely heeding their commander’s intent, the Afghan government forces departed on 28 February 1986, moving into an area in the vicinity of the Matwarkh region northwest of the Zhawar cave complex; they remained there long enough for the Mujahideen to observe and engage them with indirect fires.¹⁴ Lieutenant General Azimi’s plan was to use the 38th Commandos to seize high ground adjacent to the Zhawar complex while his ground forces simultaneously initiated assault through the Dawri Ghar Mountains. But disaster struck on 2 April 1986 when the first component of the 38th Commandos was dropped off five kilometers inside Pakistan rather than in the intended landing zone. As a result, Azimi’s ground forces had no cover from the 38th Commandos—only from Soviet Air. They were forced to halt before pulling back to their starting positions. The air assault mission was made worse when Azimi decided to commit the rest of the 38th Commando Brigade to the low, open areas surrounding Zhawar; by nightfall a clear majority of the 38th Brigade’s commandos were either killed or captured. Azimi was subsequently called back to Kabul on “important business” and the Soviets took command of the operation. While Azimi may have made decisions based on conditions on the ground, it was clear from his swift removal that the Soviet military did not trust their DRA counterpart.

Because of this fiasco, several Soviet battalions reinforced the DRA, restructuring command and increasing air and artillery pressure on the Mujahideen’s defensive positions.¹⁵ The DRA and the Soviets launched an assault on Zhawar from 17–20 April, only managing to occupy the complex for five hours of that time. The sappers who were tasked to hastily mine cave entrances were the final troops to withdraw while still under fire from a small Mujahideen counterattack. Within 48 hours, the Mujahideen could access Zhawar again. In a few weeks, they had even rebuilt the base and improved the tunnels.

Zhawar Analysis

Lieutenant General Azimi and the Soviet leadership failed to accomplish their primary mission effectively—destroy the logistical depot at Zhawar and prevent the Mujahideen from utilizing it in the future. The Soviets also failed to ensure the legitimacy of the government forces they were leaving behind. By calling Azimi away in the middle of the battle, the Soviets reinforced the idea that the DRA was unable to take the lead in combat operations. The poor execution by Azimi’s Soviet counterpart was due to a lack of communication and mutual trust between the DRA and the Soviet forces. General Varenikov, the commanding officer of the Soviet leadership, complained that the Afghan forces failed to develop an accurate picture of the Mujahideen defense in Zhawar, despite having enough time to do so.¹⁶ Yet, even after the Soviets took the lead, their intelligence was incomplete; an entire Mujahideen regiment quietly avoided detection, slipping away from the fight without anyone noticing.¹⁷

Though the DRA could relatively quickly mass divisions from up to hundreds of miles away, they had no time to build cohesive teams. Also, as Azimi was seen as a Soviet stooge, he had difficulty in directing the DRA members under his command effectively. Following a slow departure from Gardez during some of the worst weather conditions, he was at a standstill in the Matwarkh region long enough to allow the Mujahideen to begin harassing his troops. Finally, he could not dispel the natural distrust that existed among his commanders who were from multiple different regions. These conditions steadily lowered morale, worsening to a point where operations appeared on the verge of breaking down.¹⁸

When the initial heliborne assault overshot its mark, Azimi, with his silo of understanding, attempted to counter the failure by committing the brigade to their demise. This effectively accomplished nothing and wasted the 7th and 14th Infantry Divisions’ resources.¹⁹ Azimi did not attempt to modify his plan following

the unexpected turn of events; this may have been due to a lack of initiative from his subordinates or a lack of mission orders from his Soviet counterparts, but most likely it was an unfortunate combination of the two. Neither Azimi nor the Soviets were able to gain sufficient shared understanding to modify the operation successfully and so destroy the cave complex. Although they were able to collapse the entrances to Zhawar, the strongpoints surrounding it—to which many Mujahideen forces withdrew—were never seized.

The original plan was to seal off the route for supplies, but the DRA and Soviet forces ended up having only five hours on the ground. In accepting risk that was neither predictive nor prudent, the engineer units knew that there was not enough time to destroy the caves. Instead, they focused their efforts and explosives on the entrances and mining the area to deter reoccupation. The Mujahideen, however, recognized the value of the weapons, equipment and supplies remaining inside the cave complexes and invested efforts to reclaim Zhawar despite the Soviet's blocking measures. The DRA publicly claimed a great victory and exaggerated their accomplishments, but in actuality the Mujahideen and their Pakistani counterparts rebuilt the base and continued to use Zhawar for the remaining years of Soviet occupation.²⁰

The Afghanistan security environment today is a direct reflection of the many mistakes at multiple levels made by a majority of the Afghan leadership in earlier decades. The cave complexes of Zhawar continue to be key terrain for the guerrilla forces of Afghanistan—whether they be Mujahideen, Taliban, Al Qaeda or possibly even the Islamic State (IS).

Afghanistan in 2002

Seventeen years after the Second Battle of Zhawar, another war erupted in Afghanistan. Zhawar is in the Paktia Province; less than 40 miles to the southeast, in the adjacent province of Khost, is the Shahikot Valley. Operation Anaconda unfolded in this valley in early March 2002, marking the official arrival of the United States Army's conventional forces into the Global War on Terror. Before 2 March, American involvement in Afghanistan had been limited to unconventional warfare (UW) and special mission unit (SMU) operations. The UW mission was spearheaded by several Special Forces teams with specialized augmentation from the U.S. government (USG). Together, they partnered with the Northern Alliance in an effort to drive the Taliban from their base of power in Kabul.

At the same time, SMUs conducted highly sensitive reconnaissance and direct-action missions across the country in an attempt to kill or capture high-value targets. One of these units, the Advanced Force Operations (AFO), was primarily comprised of the United States Army's special operations forces and USG advisors. In January 2002, the AFO was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Pete Blaber.²¹ By the end of Operation Anaconda, countless American Soldiers would owe their lives to the men of AFO and in particular to Lieutenant Colonel Blaber. Although the degree of Anaconda's overall success is a matter of some disagreement, Blaber's application of mission command in almost every facet of the planning and execution process ensured that, at a minimum, this would not be a loss comparable to Lieutenant General Azimi's in 1985.

The Shahikot Valley: Laying the Groundwork

Prior to Anaconda, the UW and SMU operations were enjoying relative success. However, in late 2001, U.S. and Afghan forces failed in their attempt to capture Osama bin Laden at the Battle of Tora Bora. It is widely believed that he escaped through a series of ratlines and mountain passes—including the Zhawar cave complex—and fled across the border into Pakistan.²² In January 2002, intelligence reported that a large group of enemy fighters was gathering in the villages and ridgelines of the Shahikot Valley, with senior-level Al Qaeda leadership believed to be present as well.²³ To prevent the enemy fighters from once again escaping through the mountains, a decision was made to insert American light infantry by helicopter drop onto the Valley floor and then to have them establish blocking positions on the Valley's eastern edge. Simultaneously, the Afghan Military Forces (AMF), under the guidance of American Special Forces, would push from the West to steer the enemy toward the U.S. troops as the enemy tried to withdraw into the mountains. The plan called for multiple units and task forces to be used, both from allied nations and the AMF. Although it was

Blaber's desire that the Task Force Dagger (TF-11) commander (at that time Colonel John Mulholland) oversee the operation, it was agreed that the scale of the operation and the diversity of units involved required a general officer.²⁴ It was decided that the operation was to be commanded by then Major General Franklin Hagenback, Commander of the 10th Mountain Division.

It should be noted that to keep the entire task organization of Operation Anaconda in one neat line would be an exercise in futility. However, while Major General Hagenbeck was the mission's commander, TF-11 operated unilaterally, answering instead to their commander, United States Air Force Brigadier General Gregory Trebon, who in turn reported to Major General Dell Dailey, the head of Joint Special Operations Command.²⁵ Neither of these men were fond of a plan to insert reconnaissance teams into the Shahikot Valley. They believed that AFO's sole purpose was to search for and kill/capture high-value targets (HVTs) and argued that committing teams to Anaconda was a waste of time and resources. While less enthused by the idea of inserting conventional forces via helicopter onto the Valley floor, Lieutenant Colonel Blaber was convinced that if properly planned and executed, it would be possible to insert small, three-to-five man teams over land and into observation positions along the Valley's eastern ridgeline. Generals Dailey and Trebon finally approved the plan to send Blaber's teams into the Shahikot Valley ahead of the main assault.

To plan and prepare for AFO's role in Anaconda, the leadership researched the history and terrain of the Shahikot and poured over Central Intelligence Agency reports, maps and imagery of the area to understand the intricacies of the environment. As various means of intelligence surfaced, the belief that information is "not reality unless it's shared" was pushed out to every unit involved in the operation.²⁶ This was markedly different from the preparation that Lieutenant General Azimi and his forces underwent in 1985.

The AFO team would often work for 20-hour-days as Blaber continued to challenge his operators to immerse themselves in the history of the Valley and to engage the Afghans about the potential and/or developing enemy situation. He told his Soldiers to constantly question themselves: "If I were the enemy, how would I defend this Valley?"²⁷ His desire was to gain as great an understanding of the operational environment as was possible. This understanding was fueled by the team's practice of mission command in an effort to comprehend the security environment.

Shahikot Analysis

Throughout these preparations, utilization of mission command through the creation of a shared understanding of the overall situation and purpose is readily apparent. Given mission intent, the teams were free to exercise the initiative required to see it through. Lieutenant Colonel Blaber stated that "my job as the leader wasn't to try to tell them how to do their jobs; rather, it was to provide an environment that fostered experimentation, followed by thoughtful and honest reflection on what we learned and how we could apply it."²⁸

The resulting plan consisted of inserting two five-man teams (Juliet and Mako 31) and one three-man team (India) on foot into the Shahikot to provide over-watch for the operation on the Valley floor. Accepting the risk involved, the three AFO teams set out to their observation posts by sundown on 27 February with a clear understanding of their commander's intent and with the necessary latitude to achieve it. The teams were given three primary tasks: confirm or deny the presence of enemy, check to ensure that the helicopter landing zones were clear and destroy or capture enemy targets.²⁹ Juliet team would infill on all-terrain vehicles from the North to occupy the high ground on the east side of the Valley; India team would walk in from the West, occupying the high ground to the Southwest; Mako 31 would move to a location called "the Finger," a ridge on the southern edge of the Valley that afforded unobstructed views of the entire operation. Within 36 hours, all three teams had established their positions.

Prior to the main assault, intelligence discovered that the enemy was dug-in to the high ground in well-fortified positions and in greater numbers than initially expected. The AFO teams verified this, being in their positions for a little over a day. After poor weather conditions delayed the air assault for another 24 hours, the

helicopters began their assault into the Shahikot in the early hours of 2 March. Just as Blaber warned, they came into contact immediately with a well-entrenched and unyielding enemy. Earlier, TF Hammer, comprised of American Special Forces led by their Afghan counterparts, had taken casualties under heavy enemy fire and were essentially non-mission capable. Both assaulting forces were now in contact. With the entire operation devolving into a massive react to contact, the mutual trust garnered between the units involved ensured that the AFO teams could continue to engage the enemy in the Valley below.

Blaber's audacious plan to accept risk and infiltrate his teams over land saved countless lives on the first day of Anaconda; it would save many more in the days to come. The AFO was the only friendly unit to successfully control any of the key terrain. Their success resulted in hundreds of enemy deaths and ultimately in the freedom of maneuver for friendly forces. Though the occurrences of communication breakdowns among the units in contact, their leadership and the various supporting aircraft are all well-documented, the communication between the AFO, Blaber and the various Tactical Operations Centers still enabled key leadership to maintain some modicum of situational awareness. Various reporting and intelligence mechanisms shaped the actions taken by friendly forces during the battle, but the flexibility given to leaders on the ground—to make decisions and exercise disciplined initiative in the absence of orders—was instrumental in avoiding mission failure.

After the battle, Major General Hagenbeck would say, "We weren't idiots, but we weren't asking the questions we needed to."³⁰ In retrospect, Lieutenant Colonel Blaber had been asking the right questions upon mission receipt. He questioned the use of rotary-wing (RW) aircraft, understanding that the history and terrain of the Valley suggested it would not be conducive to RW capabilities. He was skeptical of the need to infiltrate the Shahikot under the assumption that the enemy controlled the Valley floor, when in reality they controlled the key terrain and the high ground.³¹ Erroneous intelligence reports, lack of communication and coordination between corresponding commands—and the fact that Major General Hagenbeck was not granted command over the Afghan forces or the U.S. Special Operations Forces—all contributed to the adverse conditions experienced by coalition forces in the Shahikot Valley in those early days of March.³²

While varying degrees of failure were pervasive throughout the beginning stages of Anaconda, Blaber's practice of mission command ensured that these failures would not be catastrophic. Throughout pre-mission planning, he ensured that his teams had a shared understanding of the operational environment and he entrusted them with the latitude to take initiative and to operate as the situation on the ground dictated. Blaber provided clear intent to his men; through feedback from his teams, it was possible for him to continually assess the situation and make decisions that would eventually save countless American lives. His application of the principles of mission command resulted in hundreds of enemy killed in action and the safe return of every light infantry Soldier involved in operations in the Shahikot Valley.³³

Conclusion: Afghanistan Today and Beyond

The analysis of the two battles begets the question: how does all of this play into the security environment in Afghanistan today? First, it is helpful to put some significant pieces of the puzzle together; 31 years after Lieutenant General Azimi's battle and 15 years after Lieutenant Colonel Blaber's fight, we are not just involved in Afghanistan—we are still fighting in the exact same locations. There are still security issues along the border with Pakistan, an area fraught with instability partly due to tribal loyalty, cavernous terrain and terrorist sympathizers, but also due to the general lawlessness of the Federally Administered Tribal Authority region. The events that faced Azimi and Blaber are just two examples of many such scenarios; this situation has been replicated in many other parts of Afghanistan often enough that the last administration decided to slow the military drawdown. Until the security situation improves, American troops—and the administration behind them—are continuing to wage a war that many believe "seems likely to grind on indefinitely."³⁴

Many of Lieutenant General Azimi's missteps in Zhawar were because of the failure to employ multiple principles of mission command, in particular building cohesive teams, creating shared understanding, having clear commander's intent and accepting prudent risk. As shown by contrasting perspectives in 1986 and

2002, these issues all seem to have been solved in the execution of Lieutenant Colonel Blaber's operations in the Shahikot Valley. That said, however, not much progress has been made overall; Afghan forces today are still not as strong as they need to be. Hopes of building an Afghan force capable of protecting its country's "precarious security situation" have seemingly fallen short.³⁵ The United States has even gone so far in recent days as to reintroduce a familiar strategy—a troop surge. Although this is a revision in the short term, it is not by any means a new strategy.

As was the case with the Soviet withdrawal in the late 1980s, Afghans today worry about what will come next. The gap formed by Soviet withdrawal and the end of American support created a ripe environment for civil war and the rise of the Taliban. Afghan guerrilla leaders like Ahmad Shah Massoud, who fought proudly against the Soviets, also fought against the Taliban, but were not successful in preventing the uncertain situation that we know in Afghanistan today (Massoud was killed two days before the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland).³⁶ What will the environment look like when (or if) American forces are fully withdrawn? Who will fill the gap? Will the IS infect the country as it has in Iraq and Syria after the removal of U.S. troops creates a void? Are our enemies simply waiting us out?

Even with a keener understanding of the principles of mission command, there is arguably no clear answer. Both Zhawar and the Shahikot Valley show the progression of the precepts of mission command, but the quagmire persists. Today, the Afghan government is struggling with security, losing ground to Taliban insurgents and simultaneously fending off localized district fights contested by militants claiming IS affiliation.³⁷ America's endgame might mean taking troops out of the country and so helping to win the approval of a war-weary public, but in the end history tells us that the enemies in that part of the world have been "notoriously patient"—there is no guarantee that a safe and stable Afghanistan will ever come to fruition.³⁸ What will this mean not only for Afghanistan in 2030, but for American national security in 2030? If history has taught the world anything, it is that it tends to repeat itself.

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