

# Commander's Intent — Theory and Practice

by Lieutenant Colonel Walter N. Anderson

The publication of the new *FM 101-5, Staff Organizations and Operations*, passed last year with hardly an acknowledgment from commanders in the field. Significantly, the new FM disposes of the multiple decision-making processes provided for in previous editions in favor of a single military decision-making process (MDMP), which the commander may adjust to the tactical situation (METT-T). Most importantly in my view, the new FM revises substantively a concept we've been trying to get our arms around for years — commander's intent. Just when we believe we've come to grips with purpose, method, and end state, we're turned on our doctrinal ear by the May 1997 edition of *FM 101-5*.

The new FM describes the commander's intent as, "A clear, concise statement of what the force must do to succeed with respect to the enemy and the terrain and to the desired end state. It provides the link between the mission and the concept of operations by stating the key tasks that, along with the mission, are the basis for subordinates to exercise initiative when unanticipated opportunities arise or when the original concept of operations no longer applies."

If the commander wishes to explain a broader purpose beyond that of the mission statement, he may do so. Intent is normally expressed in four or five sentences and is mandatory for all orders. The mission and commander's intent must be understood two levels down.

**Key tasks** are those that must be performed by the force, or the conditions that must be met, to achieve the stated purpose of the operation (paragraph 2 of the OPORD or OPLAN). **Key tasks** are not tied to a specific course of action; rather, they identify that which is fundamental to the force's success. In changed circumstances, when significant opportunities present themselves, or the course of action no longer applies, subordinates use these tasks to keep their efforts sup-

porting the commander's intent. *The operation's tempo, duration, effect on the enemy, and terrain that must be controlled are examples of key tasks.*

The commander's intent does not include the method by which the force will get from its current state to the end state. The method is the concept of operations. Nor does the intent include acceptable risk. Risk is stated in the commander's guidance and is addressed in all courses of action. If the purpose is addressed in the intent statement, it does not restate the "why" (purpose) of the mission statement. Rather, it is a broader purpose that looks beyond the why of the immediate operation to the broader operational context of the mission.

Commanders from company level up prepare an intent statement for each OPORD or OPLAN. The intent statement at any level must support the intent of the next higher commander. For any OPORD or OPLAN, there is only one commander's intent — that of the commander. Annexes (and their subordinate appendixes, tabs, and enclosures) to the OPORD or OPLAN do not contain an intent statement; they contain a concept of support. For example, the fire support annex to the OPORD will contain a concept of support, but not an intent statement.

After the commander approves the restated mission and states his intent, he provides the staff with enough additional guidance (preliminary decisions) to focus staff activities in planning the operation.

If, during the estimate process, the commander has identified one or more decisive points, or an action he considers decisive, he should convey this to his staff when he issues his planning guidance. This should be a point where enemy weakness allows maximum combat power to be applied, leading to mission accomplishment. This point can be a location on the ground, a time, or an event.

It is not an end state, but a point where decisive results can be achieved. The commander can describe it verbally, with a sketch, or on a map. It should explain how he visualizes the array of forces at the decisive point, what effects he sees it having on the enemy, and how these effects will lead to mission accomplishment.<sup>1</sup> The decisive point "conveys to subordinates a potential point of decision that the commander has identified through his estimate process to apply overwhelming combat power."<sup>2</sup>

I don't propose to offer a judgment as to whether the new doctrinal description of commander's intent is correct. Rather, I would assert that, unless we commit ourselves fully to the study and application of commander's intent, our new version of intent will be no better understood or, more importantly, no better practiced, than was our old rendering. I would offer further that, while doctrine offers a conceptual framework for intent, field solutions may vary dramatically in form, yet be equally effective. Thus, my purpose is to stimulate thought and discussion of commander's intent among professional soldiers by offering some practical considerations for achieving an effective commander's intent. The end state is commanders and leaders who are better able to apply our doctrine in combat — that is, put the theory into practice. The focus of this discussion is commander's intent as it applies at the brigade level and below — armies win battles with companies and platoons.

Most commanders have a good idea of what they want their intent to achieve. Indeed, the desired effect of the commander's intent is a concise expression of the commander's vision of the operation that focuses subordinates on a common goal.<sup>3</sup> It's probably safe to say, then, that ideally, the commander's intent would define mission success in a way that provides commonality of purpose/unity of effort and unleashes subordinate leader initiative when either the

original plan no longer applies or unexpected opportunities arise. The problem is that few commanders achieve this effect with their intent. Either the intent is so vague as to be useless or so detailed as to be a rehash of the scheme of maneuver — both cases requiring subordinates to sift through and determine for themselves what the commander really wants. In few cases is the commander's intent truly understood one echelon below, let alone two.

While there are many schools of thought on commander's intent, two stand out in my recent experience as a CMTC trainer. The first is the task and purpose line of thinking. This involves specifying to subordinates their key responsibilities for an operation and why (purpose) that task is important. The second — and less preferable, in my opinion — school of thought is the "keys to success" method of expressing intent. This method tends to lack specificity with regard to who is going to do what, when and why, and is open to broader interpretation by subordinates. In either case, an effort is normally made to "nest" intent with higher levels of command. Ideally, this nesting would provide the "horizontal and vertical links" to ensure mutual support throughout echelons of command and *synchronization* at each level. In reality, at least as they are applied to the CMTC battlefield, neither method is achieving the effect that commanders desire. Confusion about what the boss really wants generally exists throughout units, which stifles rather than enables subordinate leader initiative.

How do we address this? How do we train commanders to render an intent statement that actually achieves the required effect and contributes to mission accomplishment? We start with a formal, doctrinal acknowledgment that this business of commander's intent is *not* a one-size-fits-all proposition. Intent is as unique as a commander's personality, as well as a function of the levels of cohesion and training of individual units. We *can*, however, prescribe some of those factors the commander should take into account when developing his intent statement.

The commander must seriously study the concept of intent before he ever puts pen to paper for his first OPORD. He must come to grips with the notion of intent in his own mind before he ever tries to convey it to subordinates. When that's done, he must continue the study and discussions with his subordinate leaders. This accomplishes two purposes. First, it allows him the opportunity to

convey first-hand, before the first fight, what his intent is going to look, feel, and smell like. Second, and equally important, it gives subordinate leaders the chance to provide the commander feedback on his intent — too long, too short, poor format, ambiguous terminology, too detailed, etc. Then, armed with a common vision of what the intent should achieve and will look like, the commander and his subordinates practice, practice, and practice. Whether in a garrison-type order (units should replace memoranda of instruction with OPORDs and FRAGOs), in simulation, or in the field, commanders at all levels should never, ever pass up a chance to convey personally their intent for a mission.

#### Considerations for an Effective Commander's Intent Statement.

- Commander's intent starts with the commander's personal estimate of the situation and his visualization of how an engagement will flow.

**Battlefield visualization** is the process whereby the commander develops a clear understanding of the current state with relation to the enemy and environment, envisions a desired end state which represents mission accomplishment, and then subsequently visualizes the sequence of activity that moves the commander's force from its current state to the end state. The commander articulates his battlefield vision through his intent statement, which guides the development of the concept for the operation and subsequent execution of the mission.<sup>4</sup>

TRADOC's battle command concept states further that "seeing the enemy, friendly forces, and terrain in terms of time, space, and purpose form the basis of the commander's estimate."<sup>5</sup> The intent statement does not *include* the commander's visualization of the fight *per se*, but certainly is a *result* of that process.

- The format of the commander's intent statement should be that which is determined to be most effective by and for the unit. Regardless of the format, however, the intent statement should adhere to the following standards for effective communication:

- **Clear**, so as to be easily understandable at least two levels below.

- **Concise**, so as to eliminate verbiage which leads to ambiguity and misinterpretation; ensure priorities are defined; and use precise, commonly understood doctrinal terms whenever possible.

- **Compelling**, so as to cause subordinate leaders to **act** when the situation dictates or opportunities arise.

- **Complete**, so as to tell subordinates what they must do and why (task and purpose), as well as define success for the unit in terms that are *executable*.

Ultimately, the commander must remember that he is providing his intent for leaders two levels below, leaders with whom he is very unlikely to have face-to-face contact to ensure an understanding of his intent.

- The commander's intent must **define success** for the mission. This definition of success is normally the **end state** of the operation and is the commander's expression of the final desired relationship between friendly forces or "self," the enemy, and terrain.<sup>6</sup> Again, the end state must be expressed in *executable* terms. Expressions like "restore the international boundary with 70 percent combat power remaining for follow-on missions" might be acceptable at the operational level, but leave us hanging at the tactical level. Perhaps, at brigade level and below, we would do better by saying that we want "the bridge over the Danube River secure, with Alpha and Bravo companies defending avenues of approach on the far side vicinity battle positions 1 and 2, scouts screening in front of them, and Charlie and Delta companies providing flank and near side security from battle positions 3 and 4."

- Based on the commander's definition of success, his intent should specify clearly to subordinates the **mission essential** (vice "key") **tasks** that must be accomplished to achieve success, and why (**purpose**) they are essential. After all, one indisputable effect we want to achieve with the intent statement is to express what the commander wants subordinates to **do** if all else fails ("secure the bridge over the Danube" or "defeat the security zone MRC").

Depending on the mission, the commander may want to specify in his intent the operation's main effort and how supporting efforts relate to it. I'll take this opportunity to digress a bit, to a topic that I believe is vitally important to our overall discussion. This is a true story. Several months ago, during a post-battle huddle of senior trainers at the CMTC, a visiting senior officer made the comment that "Brigades *synchronize* operations, task forces *integrate* them." Intrigued, I did some research and have since concluded that I disagree with the assertion. While we often use the terms *synchronization* and *integration* interchangeably, there is a distinct difference between the

two. Synchronization is “the arrangement of military actions in space, time, and purpose to produce the maximum relative combat power at the decisive place and time.”<sup>7</sup> I can find no doctrinal definition for the term integration, though it’s critical at all echelons, particularly among members of a staff. I prefer Webster’s definition of integrate, which is “to form, coordinate, or blend into a functioning or unified whole; unite.” Ultimately, it’s important that we understand the difference between the two terms to ensure that we do both. Clearly, we desire to both integrate and synchronize operations at the brigade, task force, and arguably, company levels. Why this digression? Simply, I have seen too many operations that include a supporting effort without the commander specifying how it relates to the main effort in time, space, and purpose; the supporting effort is totally unrelated to the main effort and is, therefore, no supporting effort at all. For example, if we’re going to use a supporting attack, we should define when, where, and why we want that attack to occur with respect to our main effort — so that we can get the enemy to fight in two different directions at once, if that’s our purpose, or deceive him as to our main effort, if that’s what we want. Without this specified linkage, we merely piecemeal our forces into combat ineffectiveness. The upshot of this digression is that an effective commander’s intent should contribute significantly to the synchronization of an operation.

- Further, it is entirely possible that the intent statement might lay out mission essential tasks **by phase of the operation**, if the commander deems this appropriate. This simply provides subordi-

nates greater clarity and a logical, sequential focus for their efforts.

- If the commander has identified a **decisive point** in the operation, he should convey that to subordinates in his intent statement. Doctrinally defined, the decisive point is “a point, usually geographical in nature, that, when retained, provides the commander with a marked advantage over his opponent. Decisive points could also include other physical elements such as enemy formations, command posts, and communications nodes.”<sup>8</sup> The commander must be able to express how the subordinate’s task and purpose relates to the decisive point(s) in the fight.

- If the commander deems it sufficiently critical to mission success, he should include mission essential tasks for other members of the combined arms team (fire support, engineers, scouts, etc.). The commander must think in terms of the combined arms and how he wants them to operate in time, space, and purpose to ensure *synchronization* (there’s that word again). For example, the accomplishment of a critical fire support task at a certain time and place on the battlefield might be so important that the overall success of the mission depends on it. Should that be the case, it would be worthy of note in the commander’s intent — less so for the fire supporter, perhaps, than for the subordinate maneuver commander who has to execute the task.

- Our new doctrine specifies that the commander’s intent does *not* include “acceptable risk.” Nevertheless, his **intent should, when appropriate, include the result of his personal mission risk assessment**. During his estimate, the commander must make a conscious ef-

fort to ask himself several questions regarding the operation: What’s the worst thing that can happen to my unit at critical points in the fight? What if the unit or a subordinate unit fails to accomplish a mission essential task? What opportunities for quick or unexpected success might present themselves during the fight? The commander must consider both sides of the coin *before* the mission, failure and success, and judge whether the answers to these questions are worthy of mention in his intent. By including the result of his personal risk assessment the commander does *not* want to address every possible branch or sequel to the operation. He *does*, however, want to address any that are absolutely critical to mission success. The result of this effort might be the inclusion of a specific **on order** task and purpose to a subordinate leader.

#### The Acid Test

Some or all of the considerations discussed above may be applicable to a given mission. Regardless of what style the commander uses for his intent, he should be able to answer affirmatively the following questions:

Does the intent

- specify for subordinate units and appropriate combat functions mission-essential tasks and purpose in terms that are *executable* (who, what, when, why)?<sup>9</sup>
- specify mission-essential tasks and purpose by phase of the operation, if applicable?
- define success in executable terms for the parent unit and its subordinates, that

See *INTENT*, Page 52

Mission-essential Task(s)	Who?	What?	When?	Why?
	Division			
	Brigade			
	Task Force			
	Co/Tm 1			
	Co/Tm 2			
	Co/Tm 3			
	Co/Tm 4			
	Fire Support			
	Engineer			
	Scouts (Recon & Security)			

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is, describe the operation's end state in terms of the relationship between friendly forces, the enemy, and terrain?

- identify the commander's appreciation of the decisive point(s) in the engagement, if possible?

- reflect the commander's mission risk assessment, when appropriate, by specifying mission-essential **on order** tasks and purpose to subordinates?

- meet the standards of communication (clear, concise, compelling, and complete) so as to be understood two levels below?

- enable subordinate leader initiative in the event that the original plan no longer applies or an unexpected opportunity presents itself? In other words, **will the intent make a difference during mission execution and contribute to mission success?**

Finally, though the last thing we might need is another matrix, I'd like to offer a tool to allow commanders and/or their staffs to do a quick cross-check to ensure that the intent achieves the standards discussed above. A task force might use a simple matrix like the one on Page 48.

This matrix is not meant to replace or duplicate the unit's synchronization matrix. Rather, it's a quick quality control check to ensure that the commander's

intent includes the critical information subordinates need to execute an operation and achieve the commander's desired end state.

Once the commander has arrived at his intent statement, he should **review it periodically** as new information becomes available or as the situation evolves to ensure that it is still relevant. And, throughout the planning and preparation phases of an operation, **the commander must never miss an opportunity to convey personally his intent to subordinates**. Opportunities to do this present themselves at orders briefs, during confirmation and back-briefs, during unit and subordinate unit rehearsals, and during informal discussions with subordinates around the battlefield prior to execution.

In the end, the commander's intent, in terms of form and substance, is likely as unique as the commander himself. Doctrine offers a framework and the comments above offer additional suggestions the commander may want to take into consideration as he wrestles this issue to ground. The reader may not agree with some or any of the thoughts expressed above, which is fine. The challenge is for the commander to think and work it through to come up with what works for him and his unit. The real acid test of the effectiveness of the commander's intent

doesn't come in an AAR van, but rather, in combat.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>FM 101-5, pp. 5-9 - 5-10. Emphasis, both bold print and underlined words, are the author's.

<sup>2</sup>FM 101-5-1, p. 1-47.

<sup>3</sup>Battle Command Concept, CG, TRADOC, 22 Feb 93, p.2-28. Emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup>TRADOC Pamphlet 525-70, 1 October 1995, pp. 2, 4.

<sup>5</sup>Battle Command Concept, p.2-18.

<sup>6</sup>One Fort Knox Small Group Instructor teaches the acronym SET, for Self, Enemy, and Terrain.

<sup>7</sup>FM 101-5-1, p. 1-155

<sup>8</sup>FM 100-5, June 1993, Glossary 2.

<sup>9</sup>Since, on the fluid modern battlefield the "where" is the most likely piece of the equation to change, I've intentionally omitted it.

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