

Operation Anaconda Analytical Essay

This essay conducts an analytical overview to “Operation Anaconda”, a military operation conducted in Eastern Afghanistan in early March of 2002. This operation was designed to finish off the remaining Taliban and al Qaeda forces that were remaining after several months of intense combat who had gathered in Shahikot Valley. This operation provided many examples of how the principles of mission command are interwoven into the capability to conduct unified land operations. It also demonstrated the fragility of the relationship between those principles when the required attention to those principles was not applied. The successes and failures of this operation, in particular, were used to modify the relationship between unified land operations and mission command. Thus, changing the approach to all future engagements and how they would be governed.

Mission Command and Operation Anaconda

Mission command is used “to balance the art of command with the science of control”. The art of command is used to “exercise authority, to provide leadership, and to make timely decisions. Commanders and staffs use the science of control to regulate forces and direct the execution of operations to conform to their commander’s intent”. Mission command addresses the nature of operations by exercising mission command philosophy, executed through mission command warfighting function and enabled by mission command system.

The exercise of mission command encompasses how Army commanders and staffs apply the foundational mission command philosophy together with the mission command warfighting function, guided by the principles of mission command. The exercise of mission command assimilates mission command philosophy with mission command warfighting functions. Mission command philosophy is guided by six principles. These six principles are as follows; build cohesive teams through mutual trust, create shared understanding, provide a clear commander’s intent, exercise disciplined initiative, use mission orders, and accept prudent risk. The mission command philosophy is executed through the mission command warfighting function, which basically consists of a series of mutually supporting tasks. The supporting tasks fall into two categories, commander tasks, and staff tasks. These tasks are mutually supporting in that the commander tasks drives the operations process, develops teams, and informs and influences audiences inside and outside their organizations. Staff tasks conduct the operations process, knowledge/information management, synchronize information-related capabilities, and conduct electromagnetic activities. Mission command is accomplished through the execution of staff tasks that are defined by the commander tasks and these tasks define the mission command warfighting function. The mission command warfighting function enables the commander to execute the principles of mission command philosophy.

Operation Anaconda demonstrated a breakdown in all six mission command philosophy principles and became the catalyst for changing the way war was conducted by the United States. Each principal had an individual failure that created an enormous challenge to overcome

in order to accomplish the mission. The following is a look at exactly how the principles of mission command were compromised.

Build Cohesive Teams Through Mutual Trust

The United States had secured the support of friendly governments as well as much needed ground support from the Northern Alliance. The Northern Alliance proved to be battle-hardened allies that could be counted on to fulfill critical tasks of the mission command warfighting function. However, during Operation Anaconda, the Afghan troops were not from the battle-tested Northern Alliance, but instead from a local, untested Pashtun militia. The U.S. forces had not created mutual trust in order to build a cohesive team with this Pashtun militia. The assumption was made that this militia would perform just as the Northern Alliance performed. Sadly, the Pashtun militia demonstrated they were profoundly out-skilled in comparison to their Northern Alliance counterparts. They did not possess the desire to overcome changes in their operating environment nor the capability to do so if given the chance. The militia was even told to conduct their operations according to the way they wanted. A stronger creation of shared understanding between the U.S. military and the Pashtun militia would have assisted in providing more “ownership” of their critical role in the mission.

Create Shared Understanding

The goal of shared understanding is that “commanders, staffs, and unified action partners will possess a shared understanding of their operational environment, the operation’s purpose, problems, and approaches to solving them”. A great example of mutual trust and shared understanding is demonstrated in “The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant”. a letter of orders from General Grant to General Sherman. The correspondence between the two displays an understanding of the entire operational environment. General Sherman replies to General Grant his understanding and purpose of the orders. This type of shared understanding was not initially achieved by the commanders of the U.S. forces. Mainly due to the multi-head command structure and the lack of time to define correct approaches to solving problems that may be encountered. The Pashtun militia did not possess a clear, shared understanding of the importance of their role in the operation. They were not proficiently trained in the type of warfare they were being tasked to execute. The militia did not have an understanding of the “bigger picture” and just how important they were to the success of the mission.

Provide a clear commander’s intent

The earlier phase of the war had been conducted without a joint commander. When the execution of Operation Anaconda occurred, U.S. military presence in Afghanistan was not yet fully mature. This command structure consisted of multiple commanders of various agencies whom all had an individual role in the success of the operation. For instance, airstrikes had to be approved by a different commander than the one commanding the ground operations. This type of command structure inhibited the commanders on the ground to exercise disciplined initiative.

Exercise Disciplined Initiative

ADRP 6-0 states that the phrase “exercise disciplined initiative” is “action in the absence of orders, when existing orders no longer fit the situation, or when unforeseen opportunities or threats arise”. The Pashtun militia obviously failed to exercise disciplined initiative by failing to take action when unforeseen threats arose. The U.S. forces, however, exercised disciplined initiative by adapting to the situation and taking action when the unforeseen threats presented themselves. The U.S. forces had a mission to secure the escape routes out of the valley. Through seven days of heavy, intense combat they were finally able to secure the very last objective. On the second day, U.S. forces modified its original plan from a hammer-and-anvil focus to one that would see mass air fires on the valley’s eastern sides in support of the U.S. Army’s positions there. Because of this adaptation, the necessary adjustments were made and the tide of the battle would soon turn in favor of the Americans.

Use Mission Orders

Mission orders are the guide by which tasks are assigned, resources are allocated and guidance is issued. Initially, resources such as air support, heavy mortars, and personnel were not sufficiently allocated for the operation based largely on the inaccurate intelligence assessment. As events unfolded, commanders were able to quickly adapt to the realization of their predicament. Mission orders define the desired results but do not mandate how to achieve them. Mission orders rely on individual initiative and provide the maximum freedom of choice in how to best accomplish the assigned mission. Because of the poor initial intelligence assessment, the troops on the ground were initially exposed to a much higher prudent risk factor than what was originally anticipated. Only after the adaptation of mission orders did the acceptable prudent risk factor become acceptable.

Accept Prudent Risk

Intelligence assessments for Operation Anaconda presented the scenario that the coming battle would be fought with light arms and would last no more than three days, instead, it lasted seven days with intense combat and terminated after seventeen days. The commander took these factors into consideration because he judged that the deliberate exposure to potential injury or loss would be worth the cost, this is a prudent risk. The level of prudent risk instantly increased to an unacceptable level as soon as the battle began.

Overall, my stance is that the operation was a success. The military objective was achieved but with a higher loss of life than what was anticipated or warranted. Many high-value targets did escape, reportedly the primary target of interest Osama bin Laden, due to the many negative circumstances that occurred during the planning and conduct of the mission. However, valuable lessons were learned from Operation Anaconda and utilized in future engagements. The U.S. military aligned the command structure so that only one commander would be in charge. This commander would have the authority to assign resources according to real-time need. This authority would be delegated to subordinate commanders that ultimately shared one common intent. The mutual trust would have to be achieved before American lives would be put in danger. A shared understanding of the common operating picture is now a prerequisite, and that shared understanding supports only one (not multiple) intent(s). Because of this, the exercise of

the disciplined initiative is accomplished and gives subordinates the confidence to apply their judgment in ambiguous situations because everyone at every level knows the mission's purpose, key tasks, and desired end state. Mission orders that assign tasks and allocate resources became more accurate due to the missteps of Operation Anaconda. It is now accepted that the level of prudent risk has been maximally mitigated to ensure the greatest chance at success while minimalizing the chance for negative outcomes. Operation Anaconda was a necessary evil. The way the operation was planned and executed highlighted the need for a paradigm shift in the way the U.S. conducted military operations. It provided an example of the ability of the American military to accomplish the mission in the face of adversity and to succeed regardless of the chances for success. The operation displayed the military's capability to adapt to unanticipated changes and overcome them. The American military needed Operation Anaconda to happen in order to secure success for future engagements; however, it is regrettable that eight people had to provide the ultimate sacrifice in order to learn the required lessons.