

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 8
Number 1 *Parameters* 1978

Article 2

7-4-1978

TACTICAL COMMAND

Arthur S. Collins Jr

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

Recommended Citation

Collins, Arthur S.. "TACTICAL COMMAND." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 8, 1 (1978).
<https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol8/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

This article is adapted from a lecture presented at the US Army War College in the Creighton W. Abrams Command Lecture Series, 1978.

* * * * *

TACTICAL COMMAND

by

LIEUTENANT GENERAL
ARTHUR S. COLLINS, JR.
US ARMY, RETIRED

Tactical command is a fitting subject for discussion in a series of lectures which honors General Abrams because it is a facet of command in which he excelled. From a personal point of view, I feel privileged to be a part of this program and to have an opportunity to set forth some ideas which I hope will further your study and consideration of this subject which is so vital to Army operations.

I know that most of you have read about, studied, and discussed tactical command many times over, and many of you in the combat arms have already been tactical commanders. So this is a subject that you are familiar with from personal experience and on which you have firm opinions. Because of this background, my approach will be to comment briefly on the level at which tactical command is most pertinent and then to make some observations on the impressions good tactical commanders have conveyed to me. These thoughts on tactical command stem from personal experience as a subordinate commander looking up the chain of command and as a senior commander looking down; from observation of hundreds of tactical commanders, especially at the battalion and brigade level; and from study and reading.

LEVELS OF COMMAND

At the outset, at what levels of command is tactical command of primary importance? It was as a battalion and combat command commander that General Abrams attained fame in World War II, and his reputation carried him on to other important assignments culminating in his appointment as Chief of Staff of the Army. Is tactical command pertinent above that level at which

General Abrams first established his reputation?

Before answering these questions, there is need for some clarification. *Joint Chiefs of Staff Publication 1* defines tactical command as “authority delegated to a commander to assign tasks to forces under his command for the accomplishment of the missions assigned by higher authority.” This is clear enough, but it is so broad that it could apply at any level of command and for all types of units. To bring this subject into focus, I will put rather severe limits on the levels at which I consider tactical command to be truly pertinent. Although I realize that some manifestations of tactical command can occur at almost any level of command, there are levels at which the *active exercise* of command responsibility is most constant, obvious, personal, and effective in operations and training, and that is what tactical command is all about. Then I will describe the *manner* in which the best combat arms tactical commanders exercise their authority and responsibility.

My experience, observations, and study persuade me that battalion command is the essence of tactical command. The battalion is the highest level at which a commander consistently lives and deals with people and facts that can be seen firsthand. The battalion commander normally sees his subordinate commanders and troops daily, and even if he has communications problems, he can still get around to talk to commanders, check conditions, and see the terrain.

At the next level of command—brigade, combat command, and regiment—the level of command of a full colonel, there is still considerable tactical command. The commander, however, is more dependent on staff reports and the observations of others; in a combat zone the area to be covered precludes easy movement from one unit to another. If communications break down, it is not always possible to visit all the major subordinate commanders or to assemble them for a face-to-face discussion.

Above that, at division and corps, there is

limited tactical command in the context in which I address it. Division and higher commanders are more constrained by time and space and their overall responsibilities in support of their own subordinate tactical commanders. However, the outstanding generals under whom I served in combat invariably got out with the troops and saw some elements of their command every day. It may have been more for “tactical inspiration” than exercise of command, but it worked.

In time of war, the division, corps, and army commanders—who should be the outstanding field commanders of the Army as a result of their training, background, and ability—will be at the critical point in operations to sense the situation or to encourage or direct a subordinate. Battalion and brigade commanders, however, will be the principal executors of any plan of action adopted.

One of the things that I have observed time and again throughout my service is that division commanders think in terms of the combat power of the battalions in the division. When a division gets in a tight spot in combat, it is often difficult to disengage a

Lieutenant General Arthur S. Collins, Jr., graduated from the US Military Academy in 1938. His first two years of service were with the 13th and 14th Infantry at Fort Devens and in the Canal Zone. In May 1942, he joined the 130th Infantry and remained with the regiment for four years. General Collins commanded a battalion in combat in New Guinea and a regiment in combat on Morotai and Luzon. Following several key staff assignments, he commanded the 10th Infantry, 5th Division, in Germany for more than three years. A US Army War College graduate, he served on the faculty of the War College from 1956 to 1959. General Collins subsequently commanded the 4th Infantry Division, deploying it from Fort Lewis to Vietnam. Following an assignment on the Army Staff as Assistant Chief of Staff for Force Development, he returned to Vietnam to command the I Field Force. His final active duty assignment was as Deputy Commander-in-Chief, USA-REUR and Seventh Army, from 1971 to 1974. General Collins' book, *Common Sense Training: A Working Philosophy for Leaders*, was recently published by Presidio Press.



brigade and move it on short notice. So sometimes division, or even corps, directs the movement of a battalion-sized combined arms task force to plug a hole, to cover a flank, or to carry out a special mission. The brigades then spread out to cover the gaps left by the units that have been moved.

For the reasons noted, I believe that the primary exercise of tactical command takes place at battalion level and below. At levels below battalion—company, battery, troop, platoon, and on down the chain of command—tactical command is constant and, in time of war, is exercised under the most demanding conditions of the combat environment. The guiding spirit for the company-sized units, however, will continue to be the battalion commander, since the battalion has more autonomy in planning and executing missions than the units below battalion.

IMPRESSIONS OF TACTICAL COMMANDERS: THREE ROLES

Over a period of many years, I have observed that the best tactical commanders consistently did certain things well and conveyed a variety of impressions. The learning and maturing process was an important part of their development, and this was most evident in the ranks of lieutenant colonel and colonel. I know I will strike a sympathetic chord with those of you who have commanded when I say that the *good* tactical commanders were successful in most of the capabilities and characteristics that will be discussed below—the *best* had totally mastered all of them.

Trainer

First and foremost, the effective tactical commander is a first-class trainer, and this is nowhere more evident than in a battalion. A well-trained battalion uses weapons efficiently, effectively, and in concert; it maintains its equipment as it operates; and it communicates well both up and down the chain of command. The service and support

elements are geared to support the fighting elements of the battalion, and the commander trains them to function as a team. The smooth integration and interaction of each unit's capabilities is apparent as the battalion operates. The subordinate units work so well together that you don't think of them as separate elements; there is a complete melding of all the units. But this doesn't happen automatically or overnight. Practice, it is said, makes perfect; it does, but only realistic practice of correct tactics, techniques, or skills. This is what makes the well-trained battalion I have described possible; this is what I mean by the training ability of the battalion commander.

Teacher

During the training process, the tactical commander also emerges as a demanding teacher. He teaches constantly, and that is chiefly what makes him a good trainer. When he observes some activity that warrants corrective attention, he asks the senior officer or noncommissioned officer present for a diagnosis and a cure, but is prepared to give his own if needed. He sees a weapon in position, and just maybe he will get behind it to see if there is a good field of fire; he knows the fundamentals of his unit's equipment and how it should be employed; he has high standards and insists that these standards be met in the day-to-day training and operations of his subordinate units. When he recognizes voids in the military education of his officers and NCOs—and there is so much to learn that there are always voids—he conducts schools for his subordinate leaders.

The teaching and stress on high standards in daily training activities are major factors in creating disciplined, well-trained combat units, without which no tactical commander could be effective. The best commanders continue to conduct the training and the teaching even when in combat, adjusting to new conditions as they develop.

Delegation of authority is important in the development of subordinate leaders and is an important part of the teacher-trainer role of the tactical commander. I make special note

of this because in peacetime it is sometimes neglected or deliberately avoided by commanders whose lack of confidence results in their failure to delegate authority.

Delegation is essential so that competent subordinate commanders will be ready to step forward when those above them are killed or wounded. At other times units may be out of communications with higher headquarters, or sudden and unanticipated events may demand that the commander act swiftly on his own initiative. This is a talent that can only be developed by giving subordinate commanders an opportunity to act on their own without fear of relief. Commanders who are overly concerned about their own image are slow to delegate. They fail to give subordinates a chance to learn from their mistakes, which in most cases teach valuable lessons with no great loss except for a little personal embarrassment. The good tactical commander learns early the importance of subordinates taking action on their own, and he delegates responsibility routinely.

Student

To train, teach, and develop subordinates to conduct military operations and to plan and direct the execution of military missions, a tactical commander must himself be thoroughly familiar with all aspects of the systems that contribute to the operational capabilities of the units under his command: effective range of weapons; movement times for different types of units; logistic, communication, and maintenance requirements, and which units provide them.

This is manageable for competent commanders at battalion level and below. At higher levels of command, a wider array of different weapon and support systems is often available for a commander to use. Few commanders have the time and capacity to acquire expertise in the details of all these systems; that can be left to the battalion commanders and their subordinates. Regardless of the level of command, however, the tactical commander must know what the other arms and services can contribute to the accomplishment of his

missions, so that he can accomplish them expeditiously and with a minimum of casualties. The best tactical commander grasps quickly the significance of this wider range of capabilities and knows how and when to ask for them.

In this connection, the importance of the contributions of different arms and services to success in combat has always been recognized, but they have often been neglected because of parochial branch interests or the emphasis of enthusiasts. Advances in technology and the mechanization of forces in recent years has forced the operation of combined arms task forces lower and lower in the chain of command. Infantry and armored units learn quickly in combat that there is a limit to what either of them can do alone. They also realize that to keep casualties down, the support of other arms and services is essential.

As late as World War II there was a tendency for infantry or armor to operate independently, until they got into trouble. Then, cross-attaching and supporting infantry with armor—or vice versa—was common until the trouble was cleared up. Modern weapons are so lethal and expensive that recent conflicts—notably the brief but violent battles in the Arab-Israeli wars—make clear that pronouncements about the importance of combined arms teams must be translated into reality in early phases of training, and this down to the company level.

An understanding of human nature is a most complex subject, and it confronts the tactical commander every day. He must be aware of the mental and physical condition of his men and the effects of fatigue on his soldiers who may be worn and weary from the demands of combat. He must also know when and how to demand the last reserves of strength and energy, as in a pursuit, and when to husband the troops' strength under adverse conditions.

Thorough grounding in basic Army matters; a keen sense of the American soldier; and a willingness to accept responsibility for all that goes on in his unit—these are what is

required of a tactical commander. The ideal tactical commander knows how all these subjects and conditions interrelate because he is a student: of people and what motivates them; of weapons systems; of the enemy; of tactics; and of military history. The knowledge acquired by his study and his experience breeds a confidence that enables the tactical commander to interact in a positive fashion with his subordinates and his superiors. Study, hard work in the field with troops, and constant attention to detail in the execution of all missions, administrative as well as tactical—I know this sounds familiar to you and that you understand that this is the best way to learn.

As an aside, I believe that in recent years many battalion and brigade commanders did not have the knowledge of the fundamentals of their respective branches of the service—and some of them who were promoted to general officer carried this deficiency into higher grades. Lacking this knowledge, they did not know what to look for; they did not recognize what they should be teaching their subordinates; and they had few standards to go by. Officers with these shortcomings may command units, but they are not tactical commanders. They most often commanded at the expense of their subordinates.

FURTHER IMPRESSIONS: FURTHER QUALITIES

In addition to a high degree of skill in fulfilling the roles we have just discussed, there are many other qualities, skills, characteristics, or traits—call them what you will—which the better tactical commanders I have known all uniformly possessed. Taken together, these qualities are such that they have set off the great commanders from those who just do well. I know that you each could add your own selections to the list, but just let me mention several of those I consider to be most significant.

Integrity

Integrity is an absolutely vital quality in a tactical commander. To be brief, integrity as

I use it here means that the commander of Company A knows that if his unit gets in trouble, his battalion commander is going to come to the aid of his outfit if there is any way to do so. Keeping the soldier fully informed, caring for his basic needs, and standing up for his legitimate interests helps build this sense of trust. Once the troops have confidence in a commander, believe he can be trusted with their lives, and want to be with *him* when the chips are down, there is a special spirit that flows through the unit; and there is nothing that will give a tactical commander more satisfaction. Knowledge of human nature and concern for the troops creates this atmosphere over time. An important feature of this is for a commander to be himself and not try to emulate someone else. That seldom works because the troops spot a false front very quickly. Learn from others, but don't try to copy their ways.

Terrain Appreciation

The best tactical commanders have a keen appreciation of terrain. In some, it is inherent; in some, it is acquired; in most, it is probably a combination of the two. Such a commander's unit experiences one tactical success after another. There is no doubt in my mind that a commander's ability to see the advantages and disadvantages in terrain for attack or defense is a major contributing factor to his unit's success. Associated with terrain appreciation is an understanding of the effects of the weather and the elements on operations: the difficulties of movement in rain, snow, or under icy conditions; the influence of fog, darkness, and clouds on visibility; the time span of darkness or light available to complete a mission.

I do not believe we give terrain appreciation the attention it warrants. In the training of other armies—the British, Israeli, and German Armies in particular—they stress terrain. They study it, walk over it, and examine its advantages and disadvantages in different situations; there is constant and exhaustive simulation using the sand table. We would be wise to pay more attention to terrain and weather in our unit training and in our schools.

Presence I

Presence is difficult to describe because it reflects the individuality of each person's makeup. Varied though it is, presence is real and important in tactical command, so the effort must be made to describe it. I will discuss presence in two modes. The first is a physical presence on the ground that for convenience I will refer to as "Presence I." This presence is easy to see, but the ability to be at the right place at the right time—which is an important part of the true meaning of presence—is an art. It is not blind luck.

I have often heard officers talking about some fortunate fellow officer who happened to be at the right place at the right time. This happens, but in the field of tactical command that lucky fellow just didn't happen to be there. He had no doubt been there about 95 percent of the time, because the effective tactical commander is out where the action is. I don't mean that he is leading the attack in the first tank or the first squad, but he is not in the command post, and he is not in the operations center. Some people get confused about this and think the outcome of the fight will be decided at one of those vital focal locations with all the maps and blaring radios. Not so; it is decided out where the troops are. Someone taught me that in a dozen different ways when I was a young officer, and perhaps it was the most valuable lesson I ever learned as a soldier.

The true tactical commander is with one of the lead units, or at a forward observation post where he can see the ground being fought over, or at a critical crossroad or stream crossing, or at the forward collecting point talking to men who have just been wounded in battle. In the course of a day, he will have been at several such points. All the time he is weaving a web of knowledge of the terrain, the effectiveness of his unit's firepower, and of that of the enemy. He is aware of the hardships and pressures his troops are being subjected to and how they are reacting in a given situation. He is consistently sensitive to his unit, his troops, and the conditions under which his unit is fighting. The same applies in peacetime training and operations.

Familiarity with the area; knowing the mental and physical condition of the troops; being up-to-date through having talked to or observed a variety of commanders and their troops; all this contributes to—and results from—presence with a capital "P." This intangible quality—which is endowed by the creator to a fortunate few, but which comes to most of us by hard work—permits a commander to react vigorously and rapidly to changing conditions. There is no substitute for this physical presence on the ground. It is the launching point for boldness, imagination, and ingenuity, all marks of the great tactical commanders in time of war.

This is a good place to reiterate that it is the battlefield that provides the payoff for the Army's emphasis on physical fitness. As I know you who have been commanders will agree, if a commander is to be bold and aggressive he had better give thought to staying in top physical condition. The demands of combat on an individual cannot be appreciated until they are experienced. The lack of sleep; the ever-present minor infections from the flies, waste, and decay in the front-line areas; the ever-present danger; and the constant concern for the lives of subordinates all make heavy demands on the system. Soldiers are always tired in combat, and the heaviest fatigue hovers over those with the greatest responsibility. Weariness will soon wear down a tactical commander unless he maintains good physical condition. Once a commander succumbs to fatigue, fear and foreboding creep into the decisionmaking process, and the boldness, drive, and confidence required in tactical operations is lost. Stalemate and unsuccessful operations then become the norm.

Presence II

A second form of presence—I term it here "Presence II"—is the manner or impression the commander conveys; often he conveys one impression to his troops and another to outsiders. This is more a matter of the personal makeup of the commander and his reactions to events that impinge on his unit.

Many people find it hard to maintain a calm air in time of stress and danger, but this

the successful commander must do. When the going gets tough, the good tactical commander does not get rattled, does not rush about, and does not do a lot of shouting. The greater the pressure, the cooler that commander gets—or at least he appears to—and the unit will reflect his actions. It is easy for a battalion commander to create a businesslike atmosphere in his unit, and the time to do it is in training; the brigade commander can do it with a little more effort. In training, some battalion and brigade commanders create a lot of unnecessary pressure because they are chiefly concerned with their own successful image. Personal ambition leads to excessive display of a “can do” attitude which is not in the best interest of the troops. If the commander finds himself trying to put on a show or look better than a fellow commander, he had better reconsider why he is commanding a unit.

The battlefield is characterized by abnormal stress, uncertainty, confusion, and apprehension. This in turn demands that the tactical commander require tight discipline, act confident, and remain calm. In a unit's early enemy contacts there can be considerable scurrying about because most of us are scared and worried when the shooting starts, but nonetheless people try to do their jobs. Sometimes people think that noise and rushing about is a good way to show they are involved, but it is a poor substitute for moving and acting with purpose. Whenever troops are new to combat, a good tactical commander makes it a point to get around to visit his subordinates' areas and look over the units with the commanders. If things are a bit hectic, he can suggest that they just dampen the excessive activity. This only has to be done a few times because most commanders are perceptive, and they get the message. From then on, their operations are purposeful and steady. One of the hallmarks of a good unit is a businesslike attitude when the pressure is on. A good tactical commander can create the proper atmosphere, and his demeanor—which is the second form of presence—is reflected in the unit presence.

This second form of presence is not a surface appearance, although it starts with the personal appearance of the commander. Presence II is affected to a degree by personal appearance, but appearance alone is not the key to establishing a commanding, confident presence. That comes from the commander's inner self; it emerges and takes shape over a period of time. It is difficult to predict what it will be, so don't be fooled by surface impressions.

One thing has struck me at all levels of command: Commanders who cared for their troops, who had clean barracks, good messes, good maintenance, and good training in preparation for combat, invariably performed well in battle. These results can only be achieved when a commander establishes and maintains high standards in operations and training, and this requires pressure in the development of capable and competent units. There is a dividing line between the unnecessary pressure of the commander driven by personal ambition and the necessary pressure of the commander determined to create an effective unit, but it is not always clear.

There are times when commanders do well in a peacetime environment and fail in combat, but generally the commanders who do their jobs well every day go right on doing the same when the shooting starts. This means there is a bit of the tactical commander in all of us. How well we do depends on how much effort we put into learning about the military profession and improving our units.

A point worth stressing is that good tactical commanders do not necessarily come in heroic models. The military image would be great if all commanders could pose for the fashion magazine ads. I think of General Abrams on this point since this lecture series is in his honor. He was visiting US Army, Europe, sometime in 1972-73 and was making some observations to its Commander-in-Chief, General Davison, at the end of his trip. He told about a lieutenant he had seen in one of the units. “He was just a little fellow, his raincoat was too long, he

wore glasses, and he sure didn't look like much. Then I started talking to him about his platoon, and his eyes lit up. He could tell you about every man in his platoon and where each one came from, and he could tell you about their families. Then I looked at some of the weapons, watched the training, and talked to some of the men." Then suddenly the room rattled as General Abrams banged his fist on the table and exclaimed, "By God, what a commander he is! The men in his platoon know it, and you can feel it when you are with them."

I have seen many outstanding commanders that no one would ever have picked from a crowd: some tall and scrawny, others small and lean or short and stocky—even pudgy—and those built to be a guard or a tackle. Most of them were just ordinary-appearing individuals with nothing to distinguish them until they were doing a commander's job. Then on some raw, cold night when I, as their next higher commander, was there face-to-face with them during some crisis, and they stood there in all the noise and confusion, tired, unshaven, rain dripping from their helmets, splattered with mud, and told me what was going on and what their units were doing, I fully understood the extraordinary character and quality of these seemingly ordinary people. Unfortunately, too few outside that immediate circle will ever suspect or truly appreciate the great talents they had as tactical commanders. *That* is what I mean by Presence II—and I know that many of you have seen it for yourselves.

IN CONCLUSION

I have tried to depict here some of the images that emerge as a competent tactical commander goes about a soldier's business—teacher, trainer, student, physically present in time of crisis, and present day-to-day as he exercises responsible leadership. The end result of all of his efforts is that when missions are assigned, his unit is ready to execute them, whatever they may be. Units trained by good tactical commanders accomplish their missions because the units are disciplined and they are trained through

the full range of the capabilities of the men, weapons, and equipment available to them. At each level of command, the trained unit is a team and is ready to combine with other well-trained units to carry out the vast variety of tasks that are assigned to Army units in peace and in war.

History does not dwell on the low-level tactical commanders who fight the wars and win or lose the battles. Quite understandably, only the most famous senior commanders are singled out for study. Only the tip of the iceberg is visible, but what a tip it is, because these great field commanders are largely the latter-day reflection of the superb tactical commanders they were in earlier years as company and battalion commanders.

Witness Guderian on 12-13 May 1941 at the crossing of the Meuse. At this critical point of the attack in the west, he is there talking to the battalion and regimental commanders making the attack. Follow his footsteps during the period 9-24 May 1941, as he describes these actions in his book, *Panzer Leader*. You will see that he understood and practiced these things we have been discussing.

Rommel, the peerless tactical commander, is an even better example. Just after World War I he had written a book, *Infantry Attack*, based on his experiences as a company and battalion commander. It was little noticed outside the German Army until Rommel became famous as the "Desert Fox" in World War II. Speidel, in writing about Rommel as a company and battalion commander in World War I, said Rommel was always at the critical point of the action. It seems only natural, then, that in World War II they used to say, "The front is where Rommel is."

General Abrams—Colonel Abrams then—was famous for the same thing as a battalion and combat command commander in World War II. The great and famous field commanders at corps and army levels were almost always in their early years superb tactical commanders. They were intensely interested in their profession and the technical developments that might change tactics and methods of operation.

It seems to me, the goal of every combat arms officer should be competence as a tactical commander. Those who are the most competent, and whose intellectual and leadership qualities enable them to handle more complex organizations and greater responsibilities, should be the division, corps,

and army commanders of the future. These same qualities—combined with the troop experience that provides the foundation for tactical competence—should make superb staff officers too, so no one loses in his endeavor to be proficient in tactical command.

