

Turning Korea Around: An Analysis of Mission Command at Chipyeong-Ni

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Abstract

The Korean war, famously euphemized by president Truman as a “police action,” was a near-miss military endeavor for America and the allied forces characterized by international threat, high body counts and unexpected reversals on the battlefield. Military strategy in Korea began with the failed task force Smith at Suwon, a movement GEN Douglas MacArthur later admitted being an “arrogant display of strength.” Indeed, although Americans had been conditioned by WWII to mount large-scale combat to complete victory, the Truman administration had made significant cuts to defense spending and it was clear early on that the situation in Korea required a new strategy. The U.S. lost 6,000 soldiers in the first few months of the war; south Korean casualties neared 70,000. By September 1950, the tide had changed and American military action, driven mainly by amphibious attack, had succeeded in the steady seizure of Suwon via Inch'on, resulting in the recapture of Seoul. But not more than two months later an “entirely new war” had emerged with the influx of more than 300,000 Chinese combat troops to aid Kim Il-sung and the soviet forces in north Korea. It was a bitter winter for the allies in Korea. Were it not for the exemplary leadership at the battle of Chipyeong-ni in mid-February 1951, the communist Chinese forces (CCF) would have continued their strong drive into south Korea and the war may well have been lost. Col Paul Freeman, commander of the 23rd regimental combat team (RCT), clearly met Gen George C. Marshall's definition of strong leadership and put into action the mission command principles that lead to successful mission completion at Chipyeong-ni. This battle was truly a major turning point for the U.S. and changed the way we fought future battles.

Keywords: Col. Freeman's team; Leadership; Army; Military command

Introduction

The nucleus of winning wars is excellent leadership. Contemporary American army doctrine defines leadership as “the process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization. [1]” according to the U.S. army doctrine reference publication 6-0 (hereafter ADRP 6-0), mission command leaders must, build cohesive teams through mutual trust, create a shared understanding, provide a clear commander's intent, exercise disciplined initiative, use mission orders, and accept prudent risk by U.S. Department of the Army [2] to these (only later clearly drawn) mission command principles [3].

Literature Review

Battle synopsis

Upon arrival at Chipyeong-ni, the mission of the 23rd RCT was to dominate the road intersection at the center of the village and occupy the high ground ringing the town to protect the right flank of I Corps while also anchoring the left flank of X Corps' defenses around Wonju [4]. Col. Freeman's team consisted of 4,500 American and French ally troops, including less than 2,500 front line infantrymen. In response to GEN Matthew [5]. Ridgway's aggressive order to “seek, fix and kill,” even after sustaining substantial losses in previous combat, COL Freeman established a tight perimeter defense around the village [6]. This required him to surrender to the Chinese the surrounding hills

which dominated the approaches into the town, since his force was too small to properly outpost them [7].

The Chipyeong-ni operation lasted three days, with the first attack occurring the night of February 13th, 1951. The next morning COL Freeman conditioned his soldiers, redistributed ammunition, reevaluated troop location on the perimeter and adjusted positions. Supplies were low, and COL Freeman had already expressed serious concern for the well-being of his army to Gen Hammond, to no avail. The CCF launched several attacks on February 14th, prompting COL Freeman to utilize close air support which stalled off and destroyed many CCF and allowed the U.S. forces to regain their positions [8]. On February 15th, the 23rd RCT was eventually relieved by Task Force Crombec. Despite having limited resources and less than one-fifth the number of the opposition's troops [9] (CCF forces in the nearby hills were estimated at 25,000), the 23rd RCT lost just 404 soldiers: 52 killed in action, 259 wounded in action, 51 non-battle injury and 42 missing in action [10].

Mission command analysis

Since as early as the 1980s, the preferred method of military command for the U.S. Army has been mission command, also referred to as mission-type tactics. Mission command is 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 [11]. The principles of mission command were delineated long after COL Freeman's success in February 1951, but it is clear his model of leadership influenced their development, among others [12]. Below I will discuss detailed accounts of the mission command

principles that COL Freeman with ease during the battle of chipyong-ni.

Build cohesive teams through mutual trust

Developing trust takes time, and it must be earned. It is the result of upholding the army values and exercising leadership, consistent with the army leadership principles [13]. COL Freeman established the trust of his team well before the battle of chipyong-ni; he was well-respected for communicating with his soldiers on their terms in places like the mess hall. Here he had the opportunity to assess morale and what his men really needed from leadership to perform optimally [14]. He skillfully used the victory of the previous (although taxing) success at the twin tunnels to motivate and gain even more trust from his soldiers. Successful leaders often conspicuously share their men's hardships and discomforts, refusing the amenities authorized them by their rank and position [15]. This was just the example set forth by COL Freeman. After being wounded on February 14th by a shell fragment from a mortar round in his left ankle, COL Freeman was ordered by the X Corps commander Lt Gen Edward Almond to leave the perimeter, and Col Walter Chiles was sent to assume command of the outpost. Outraged at the thought of it, COL Freeman refused to leave his troops in the middle of the battle [16]. This demonstrated to the soldiers that their Col was committed to victory, was willing to suffer with them and would not abandon the mission due to personal injury or hardship. It had the effect of inspiring the troops to weather their own difficulties and take responsibility for each other, which galvanized the army toward victory [17]. It was not until the 23rd RCT appeared to be out of clear and present danger that COL Freeman would agree to be evacuated for the wound he sustained [18].

Create a shared understanding

A key effect of the execution of mission command principles is the commander's ability to create a unified front of his men. This is accomplished by commanders and staff actively building and maintaining shared understanding within the force, and with unified action partners, by continual collaboration throughout the operations process [19]. COL Freeman, empowered by his ease of communication with subordinates, superiors and colleagues alike, exemplified this mission command principle. As easy company commander Beckford Sawyer recalled, "when Colonel Freeman said at Chipyong, 'we're surrounded, but we 'all stay here and fight it out,' we supported him with enthusiasm. There was never doubt in our minds. We knew we were going to succeed. [20]" COL Freeman's leadership created an unshakeable bond within his company. Although they may have ranked differently, no one man was more important than another. They all shared in the responsibility of the operation and further collaboration. In addition, COL Freeman would conduct reconnaissance with his staff, constantly reassessing battlefield positions and soliciting feedback when needed [21].

Provide a clear commander's intent

Intrinsic in the design of mission command is that leaders provide their soldiers purpose, direction and motivation; this reaches beyond one's own command [22]. COL Freeman articulated and effectively communicated to his troops the mission and carefully synchronized his staff while at chipyong-ni. His intent (indeed, the intent of the mission objectives at chipyong-ni) was understood clearly as it echoed throughout the formation during the operation. It was clear that every soldier knew their mission and individual purpose [23]. Furthermore,

numerous accounts given from his troops showed the understanding of the mission was relayed throughout the chain of command, an essential component of this mission command principle [24]. It is well documented that COL Freeman did, in fact, conduct battlefield circulation where he would communicate with his commanders one-on-one both prior to and during the heat of battle to ensure his intent was met and the commanders understood [25].

Accept prudent risk

There were several times during the battle of chipyong-ni that COL Freeman took calculated risks; such risks were necessary to the allies' defeat of the CCF at chipyong-ni. The Col was originally directed to occupy the hills that surrounded chipyong-ni, as it was thought that this would be the safest way to secure the village [26]. But COL Freeman deduced that dispersal of his reserve at the periphery, rather than concentrating them at the perimeter, would spell ultimate defeat. He did not have enough troops to be successful in a trained defense [27]. Thus, COL Freeman took a prudent risk and made the command decision to strategically place his troops near the roads. Having priority for close air support COL Freeman utilized this and the perimeter security of his infantry to take out a mass amount of the Chinese forces [28]. This combination proved to be a major advantage that equalized the battlefield. COL Freeman did not utilize his reserve until the near the end of the battle when it was absolutely necessary, after air support had done its job beating back the enemy's advances, and in the process, he was able to take out massive numbers of the CCF [29]. By seeing his challenges as opportunities for new strategy, COL Freeman's military action proved highly effective as it allowed him to maintain his combat power throughout the battle. He accepted the necessary risk and gained the advantage over the enemy [30].

Discussion and Conclusion

The victory at chipyong-ni represented the 8th Army's "complete recovery of its fighting spirit" and marked the beginning of the end of the Korean War [31]. Therefore, examining COL Freeman's command during pivotal events therein is an excellent way to retroactively study military leadership and modern mission command principles in action. The Col clearly met Gen Marshal's criteria for leadership, overcoming all obstacles no matter how overwhelming they appeared, building cohesive teams through mutual trust. He created shared understanding by keeping his staff involved in the decision-making process and ensuring that his entire chain of command was informed. COL Freeman solidified the trust of his soldiers by remaining on the battlefield after being seriously wounded. He showed great talent in weighing risks. In fact, after the losses at twin tunnels prior to the battle of chipyong-ni, Col Freeman had requested his troops fall back. But when his request was denied, he moved forward boldly, choosing to give up the surrounding hills so that his outnumbered troops could focus on a tight perimeter around the village. Had COL Freeman failed to act according to such mission command principles, the military stronghold created by America and the western allies in WWII could have been lost to North Korea and China. History could well have seen another outcome that would have presented a very different reality. In the words of Gen MacArthur, "if we [lost] this war to communism in Asia the fall of Europe [would be] inevitable, win it and Europe most probably would avoid war... [there was] no substitute for victory in Korea [32]."

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Note: Views expressed are not those of that of the United States Army, United States Military Academy and are solely those of Jamie L. Hickman.