

Command and Control

charles bailey for tinhelmet.com

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“Rescue Squad X to command, we are going to search the second floor”

“Command copies Rescue Squad X is going to search the second floor.”

“Engine Y to command we are going to stretch a line to the second floor through a window and put the fire out.”

“Command copies that Engine Y is going to stretch a line through the second floor window.”

Engine Z to command we already have a line in the second floor apartment.”

“Command copies Engine Z already has a line in the second floor apartment.”

“EMS to command.”

“Go ahead EMS, this is command.”

“We are going to throw the baby out with the bathwater.”

“Command copies that EMS is throwing the baby out with the bathwater.”

We have all surely heard that kind of talk on the radio. Some call it “repeat command” where the incident command simply repeats what the operating units are saying on the radio, giving the illusion of command without really commanding anything. There are many classes out available on incident command and each of them approaches in a semi-dialectical manner. What is lost in this approach, in this endless discussion of groups and divisions is the fact that commanding is not just filling in the boxes on a command chart, or repeating radio traffic but rather a form of art that requires intense knowledge of operational parameters and the exercise of critical, time sensitive judgment. The standard operating procedures are great but they only form the basis from which command begins to structure itself.

So then how does this self-proclaimed command novice hope to set the matter straight? Of course he will use a dialectic of his own and compare and contrast the military insight of command and control to the prevailing fire department versions in the hope of arriving as close as possible to some sort of civilian command ideal. And off we go.

What is Command and Control?

To answer this question I borrow directly from the experts:

Command and control is the means by which a commander recognizes what needs to be done and sees to it that appropriate actions are taken. Sometimes this recognition takes the form of a conscious command decision—as in deciding on a concept of operations. Sometimes it takes the form of a preconditioned reaction—as in immediate-action drills, practiced in advance so that we can execute them reflexively in a moment of crisis. Sometimes it takes the form of a rules-based procedure—as in the guiding of an aircraft on final approach. Some types of command and control must occur so quickly and precisely that they can be accomplished only by computers—such as the command and control of a guided missile in flight. Other forms may require such a degree of judgment and intuition that they can be performed only by skilled, experienced people—as in devising tactics, operations, and strategies.

<http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/mcdp6/ch1.htm> all further quotes are from the same source.

This statement bears some discussion. “Command and control is the means by which a commander recognizes what needs to be done and sees to it that appropriate actions are taken.” In order to do this the commander has to be in a position to see the global perspective of course, but more importantly must be firmly grounded in all of the appropriate technical and tactical operations that might be necessary. It is difficult for a commander to order, say a trench cut on a strip mall, at the appropriate time if the commander does not fully understand the amount of personnel and material this will require. So often those who find themselves in Chief’s buggies become increasingly removed from the hands on as time goes by. So often they find themselves unaware of new technologies and new methods. Of course this is natural and the progress of this detachment cannot be fully controlled, however, the incident commander must make every effort to stay abreast of current methods and theories. This can be simply accomplished by participating in company level drills. The troops can a level of respect for the commander’s initiative and the commander can both gauge the relative abilities of those under his/her command and take in a lesson or two themselves.

Also considered in the expert statement is the discussion of “preconditioned reaction.” We have preconditioned reaction in the fire department in the form of standard operating procedures. This mechanism of command allows for the companies arriving at emergencies to engage without explicit direction. The fire departments is not fond of not having a designated commander, and even in the presence of SOPs more often than not require a unit officer to assume the command. The logic of this, and I digress, confuses me. SOPs are not some amorphous set of rules but rather the written extension of the commander’s intent. In the case of SOPs the commander is the fire chief or operations deputy. The Chief exerts his will over the fire ground by ensuring that unit officers are aware of the SOPs and are practicing them. In this way the Chief is in command even when not present. However, as we will discuss more later, actual on the

scene command requires the development of initiative and the exercise of judgment at a level that is unfair to burden a unit officer with, or to quote, "...require such a degree of judgment and intuition that they can be performed by only skilled, experienced people." While some unit officers fit this bill the vast majority do not, by asking them to take command you satisfy having a box checked, someone was in charge. At some point the ability to provide sound guidance is critical as well and that is a box that cannot be simply checked.

The Control Part

It seems intuitive what command is. There is this person who is in charge, and with that comes a person who is ultimately responsible for the outcome of the event. (another reason it is unfair to place this burden on unit officers, even for a short time). But the military rarely speaks of command as an item unto itself. Military writing usually refers to command and control as sort of co-joined twins, intertwined and interdependent on each other for survival and effectiveness. In fire department literature you see the words used together a little more often in the recent past but certainly not as the co-joined twins they really are. So what is control?

The typical understanding of effective command and control is that someone "in command" should also be "in control." Typically, we think of a strong, coercive type of command and control—a sort of pushbutton control—by which those "in control" dictate the actions of others and those "under control" respond promptly and precisely, as a chess player controls the movements of the chess pieces. But given the nature of war, can commanders control their forces with anything even resembling the omnipotence of the chess player...

We are also fond of saying that commanders should be "in control" of the situation or that the situation is "under control." The worst thing that can happen to a commander is to "lose" control of the situation. But are the terrain and weather under the commander's control? Are commanders even remotely in control of what the enemy does? Good commanders may sometimes anticipate the enemy's actions and may even influence the enemy's actions by seizing the initiative and forcing the enemy to react to them. But it is a delusion to believe that we can truly be in control of the enemy or the situation.

Much like their military counterparts fire department personnel operate in a fog. They engage environments that are both hostile and strange. They operate in situations that are ever changing and require quick adaptation and heightened awareness. There is just no way for an incident commander to truly control the actions of an engine crew on the 8th floor of a building. There is no way to control the actions of a RIT searching for a downed firefighter in a flooded basement. And truly, in the fire department the situation is not under control until the units have returned to quarters safely. So what is this control?

Control is the ability to dictate as much as circumstance will allow, the general pace and strategic approach of a given incident. While you may not be able to control the nozzle pattern on the engine's hand line directly (you do so indirectly

with a solid training regimen) you can send them to that place with good directions and work to ensure they have the proper support. Here is where the fire department has a distinct advantage over the military. A fire is chemical and physical phenomenon that acts according to certain rules. The fire will not deviate from those rules, is in effect bound by them. Surprise on the fire ground can be traced almost always to two simple causes, lack of information, or failure to understand fire behavior. Of course there is a human side to the equation, namely the behaviors of the public and of the fire department. But with regards to the primary enemy the rules are fixed in advance.

So can you truly be in control of a fire? I think you can, you can predict the actions of crews, you can predict the behavior of the fire, you can predict needed additional resources, and you can predict your ability to engage. If you can predict then you can control the tempo and strategy of operations, in an imperfect world this suffices for control.

Initiative

We have discussed my perceptions of what it means to have the command, which is to have ultimate responsibility. And we have discussed my perception of what the control portion of command and control means, and that is the ability to assert the will of the commander. Both of these things do not bring ultimate control over the situation however, and that is a fact we must accept. We can get closer and closer to that ultimate, idealized control with increased information. Of course information alone is not enough, we must have the means to act on that information. To accomplish these things we need initiative.

Initiative is comprised of the individual actions of the sub-components of command, the sections, branches, groups/divisions, taskforces and units. Each of these sub-components is closer and closer to the actual action than the commander is and is thusly directly exposed to the fluid situation. These individual units should and must react the situation at hand by exercising initiative. Many argue that SOPs are too restrictive; that they destroy the ability to adapt to situations, this is simply not true. The Chief relays his/her intent to the troops via the SOPs and then leaves it to the judgment of the individual commanders to develop strategies to meet that intent. Likewise the incident commander, while exercising control, cannot be effective if he/she seeks to control every aspect of the operation. The company officer must develop and exercise tactical initiative. By way of example command may order ventilation. It is up to the sub-commander either the ventilation group supervisor or the individual company assigned to decide if that ventilation is vertical or horizontal or some combination of both. It is up to the individuals of the companies to deploy the right hooks and saws to get the mission accomplished.

Command and control is not about micromanaging the events, but rather about dictating the strategy and the pace of operations. Or again quoting, “The words “command” and “control” can be nouns, and used in this way the phrase command and control describes a system—an arrangement of different elements that interact to produce effective and harmonious actions. The basic elements of our command and control system are people, information, and the command and control support structure.”

Conclusion

Having command of a fire ground is a complicated job and a huge responsibility. Those who do it well are aware of the enormous stakes involved, there are lives at stake, there are irreplaceable personal belongings at stake, and there is always the chance that things might go horribly wrong. In order to have command and control the commander must be aware of the pressure but not oppressed by it. He/she must have an intense understanding of the strategies, tactics, and abilities available to him/her both in human and material terms. And then after all the logic is through and after all the classes are over this person must be able to apply this command and control over a wide scope of problems of varying severity.

Most importantly the commander must never forget that at the terminal end of each command is a person that has to carry it out...

All Marines feel the effects of fear, privation, and fatigue. Each has unique, intangible qualities which cannot be captured by any organizational chart, procedure, or piece of equipment. The human mind has a capacity for judgment, intuition, and imagination far superior to the analytical capacity of even the most powerful computer. It is precisely this aspect of the human element that makes war in general, and command in particular, ultimately an art rather than a science. An effective command and control system must account for the characteristics and limits of human nature and at the same time exploit and enhance uniquely human skills. At any level, the key individual in the command and control system is the commander who has the final responsibility for success.

I believe there is more here to be explored and so we shall on another day...