



DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
HEADQUARTERS AIR COMBAT COMMAND
JOINT BASE LANGLEY-EUSTIS VA



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MEMORANDUM FOR ACC Commanders

SUBJECT: Leadership, Initiative, and War

1. I've attached two directives behind this letter. Together, they describe the exercise of command, the correct use of initiative and the barriers to both. These directives were issued by Admiral Ernest King in 1941 and the language reflects the time. However, I could not issue better guidance for today. Here are two of the key paragraphs:

"We are preparing for –and are now close to – those active operations (commonly called war) which require the exercise and utilization of the full powers and capabilities of every officer in command status. There will be neither time nor opportunity to do more than prescribe the several tasks of the several subordinates (to say "what", perhaps "when" and "where" and usually for their intelligent cooperation, "why"); leaving to them – expecting and requiring of them – the capacity to perform the assigned tasks (to do the "how").

If subordinates are deprived – as they now are – of that training and experience which will enable them to act "on their own" – if they do not know, by constant practice, how to exercise "initiative of subordinates" – if they are reluctant (afraid) to act because they are accustomed to detailed orders and instructions – if they are not habituated to think, to judge, to decide and to act for themselves in their several echelons of command – we shall be in sorry case when the time of "active operations" arrives."

Take a minute now to read both directives. Share them and discuss them with your subordinate commanders and leaders.

2. As a step toward practicing the skills outlined in the directives, I'm directing ACC Wing Commanders to integrate a series of exercises into your training plans. My intent for these exercises is to practice the autonomy and initiative that combat operations will require at the squadron and flight level by deploying small teams of Airmen and aircraft, for short durations, to practice the skills we will need to execute Adaptive Basing concepts. The objective of these exercises is to increase tactical proficiency, hone the ability to rapidly deploy and employ combat airpower, and develop trust and initiative in and between ACC leaders. That means these exercises should be planned and conducted by junior leaders...not higher than the wing weapons officer level. In addition to tactical execution, I expect flight leads and mission commanders to lead the team of operations, maintenance, logistics, and any other mission assurance personnel required to assure mission exercise objectives. Successful execution will require coordination and familiarization across bases and wings to allow each agency to identify and resolve issues.

3. Squadron leadership will coordinate with regional CAF units to provide the "what", "when", "where", and "why" for the exercises. Junior leaders will formulate tactical scenarios and provide the "how." The exercise timeline will incorporate tasks essential to rapid execution of combat capabilities in Contested, Degraded, and Operationally limited environments while balancing impact on home-station operations.

Agile Combat Power

Wing and squadron leaders will have to balance total deployed force size with other readiness requirements. I suggest you limit total participation to no more than 12 aircraft to focus training on integration and unit desired learning objectives, not deconfliction. I suggest you expand the exercises in building blocks--start with 1 day out and back exercises and build to 2 to 3 day deployments. Commanders of wings with missions that do not deploy aircraft should develop training exercises related to and supportive of the adaptive basing concept and practice the autonomy and initiative required to win in a CDO environment.

4. I'd like ACC Wings to plan and execute one exercise per quarter. I realize each unit has constraints and may not be able to participate in the full spectrum of exercise events or in every event. Wing Commanders should receive an out-brief after each exercise that includes lessons learned and recommendations for improvement. I'd like Wing Commanders to summarize these out-briefs in their quarterly reports to me. Upon request, ACC/A3 will help ensure resources are available to accomplish these exercises.

5. I expect this to be a training exercise that develops our future leaders at the lowest levels. This is not a readiness inspection, but a means to prepare for rapid deployment for the next fight. We'll continue to discuss ways to develop leaders that can win joint warfights in the weeks to come. Thank you for your continued leadership, and I look forward to hearing your feedback.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Holmes", written in a cursive style.

JAMES M. HOLMES
General, USAF
Commander

Cinclant Serial 053 of January 21, 1941

Subject: Exercise of Command – Excess of Detail in Orders and Instructions

1. I have been concerned for many years over the increasing tendency – now grown almost to “standard practice” – of flag officers and other group commanders to issue orders and instructions in which their subordinates are told “how” as well as “what” to do to such and extent and in such detail that the “Custom of the service” has virtually become the antithesis of that essential element of command – “initiative of the subordinate.”
2. We are preparing for – and are now close to – those active operations (commonly called war) which require the exercise and utilization of the full powers and capabilities of every officer in command status. There will be neither time nor opportunity to do more than prescribe the several tasks of the several subordinates (to say “what”, perhaps “when” and “where” and usually for their intelligent cooperation, “why”); leaving to them – expecting and requiring of them – the capacity to perform the assigned tasks (to do the “how”).
3. If subordinates are deprived – as they now are – of that training and experience which will enable them to act “on their own” – if they do not know, by constant practice, how to exercise “initiative of the subordinates” – if they are reluctant (afraid) to act because they are accustomed to detailed orders and instructions – if they are not habituated to think, to judge, to decide and to act for themselves in their several echelons of command – we shall be in sorry case when the time of “active operations” arrives.
4. The reasons for the current state of affairs – how did we get this way? – are many but among them are four which need mention; first the “anxiety” of seniors that everything in their commands shall be conducted so correctly and so smoothly, that none may comment unfavorably; second, those energetic activities of staffs which lead to infringement of (not to say interference with) the function for which the lower echelons exist; third the consequent “anxiety” of subordinate least their exercise of initiative, even in their legitimate spheres, should result in their doing something which may prejudice their selection for promotion; fourth, the habit on the one hand and expectations on the other of “nursing” and “being nursed” which lead respectively to that violation of command principles known as “orders to obey orders” and that admission of incapacity or confusion evidenced by “request instructions.”
5. Let us consider certain facts; first submarines operating submerged are constantly confronted with situations requiring the correct exercise of judgment, decision and action; second, planes, whether operating singly or in company, are even more often called upon to act correctly; third, surface ships entering or leaving port, make a landfall, steaming in thick weather, etc., can and do meet such situations while “acting singly” and as well, the problems involved in maneuvering in formations and dispositions. Yet these same people – proven competent to do these things without benefit of “advice” from higher up – are, when grown in years and experience to be echelon commanders, all too often not made full use of conducting the affairs (administrative and operative) of their several echelons – echelons which exist of the purpose of facilitating command.
6. It is essential to extend the knowledge and the practice of “initiative of the subordinate” in principle and in application until they are universal in the exercise of command throughout all echelons of command. Henceforth, we must all see to it that full use is made of the echelons of command – whether administrative (type) or operative (task) – by habitually framing orders and instructions to echelon commanders so as to tell the “what to do” but not “how to do it” unless the particular circumstances so demand.
7. The corollaries of paragraphs 6 are:
 - (a) adopt the premise that the echelon commanders are competent in their several command echelons unless and until they themselves prove otherwise;
 - (b) teach them that they are not only expected to be competent for their several command echelons but that it is required of them that they be competent;
 - (c) train them – by guidance and supervision – to exercise foresight, to think, to judge, to decide and to act for themselves;
 - (d) stop “nursing” them;
 - (e) Finally, train ourselves to be satisfied with “acceptable solutions:” even though they are not “staff solutions” or other particular solutions that we ourselves prefer.

Ernest J. King

Cinclant Serial 0328 of April 22, 1941

Subject: Exercise of Command -- Correct Use of Initiative

Reference: My confidential memorandum serial 053, dated 21 January 1941 -- Subject
'Exercise of Command -- Excess of Detail in Orders and Instructions.'

1. In the three months that have elapsed since the promulgation of the reference, much progress has been made in improving the exercise of command through the regular echelons of command -- from forces through groups and units to ships. It has, however, become increasingly evident that correct methods for the exercise of initiative are not yet thoroughly understood -- and practiced -- by many echelon commanders.

2. The correct exercise of the principle of the initiative is essential to the application of the principle of decentralization. The latter, in turn, is premised on the basic principle known as 'division of labor', which means that each does his own work in his own sphere of action or field of activity.

3. What seems to have been overlooked is that the exercise of initiative as involved in 'division of labor' (as embodied in 'decentralization') not only requires labor on the part of those who exercise any degree of command, but, as well and even more particularly, on the part of those who exercise initiative. It also seems to have been overlooked that the correct exercise of initiative is applicable not only to operations but to administration and, as well, to personnel and material matters.

4. (a) Initiative means freedom to act, but it does not mean freedom to act in an offhand or casual manner. It does not mean freedom to disregard or to depart unnecessarily from standard procedures or practices or instructions. There is no degree of being 'independent' of the other component parts of the whole -- the Fleet.

(b) It means freedom to act only after all of one's resources in education, training, experience, skill and understanding have been brought to bear on the work in hand.

(c) It requires intense application in order that what is to be done shall be done as a correlated part of a connected whole -- much as the link of a chain or a gear-wheel in a machine.

5. In order that there may be clearer understanding -- and better practice -- in the exercise of initiative, the following paraphrase of certain passages in the reference, together with appropriate additions, are enjoined as a guide upon all those concerned in the exercise of initiative:

'..... active operations (commonly called war) require the exercise and the utilization of the full powers and capabilities of every officer in command status';

'Subordinates are to become "habituated to think, to judge, to decide and to act for themselves";

'It requires hard work -- concentration of powers -- to exercise command effectively and, frequently, even harder work to exercise initiative intelligently;

'When told 'what' to do -- make sure that 'how' you do it is effective not only in itself but as an intelligent, essential and correlated part of a comprehensive and connected whole.'

Earnest J. King