

Do Large-Scale Combat Operations Require a New Type of Leader?



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Situation update: Last night, the brigade on our right lost half a battalion to indirect fire and a penetration during an integrated enemy attack. Our brigade did not receive the brunt of the attack but still lost eighty-two people in the last twenty-four hours. We have intermittent communications with our division headquarters, but we have maintained contact with the enemy through reconnaissance and fires. The enemy overextended the penetration throughout the day; this presented an opportunity. Our commander decided to transition to the offense to exploit the enemy's exposed flank. Moving north and east through the night to counterattack the enemy's second echelon force, our lead battalion destroyed the enemy's division logistics element, causing their offensive to grind to a halt. Do these battlefield conditions require a new type of leader?

In Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, large-scale combat operations are described as “intense, lethal, and brutal” and require agile and adaptive leaders to overcome the complexity and chaos of tomorrow’s battlefield.¹ Today’s leaders do not need prior experience in these conditions to be successful because the Army Leader Development strategy transcends the range of military operations. In fact, the large-scale combat environment requires leaders to demonstrate competencies outlined in FM 6-22, *Leader Development*, now more than ever.² Leaders must lead by example to model the desired behavior for their organizations, leaders must develop others to instill mission command within their organizations, and leaders must prepare themselves to accept prudent risk to seize opportunities on a dynamic battlefield. Historical examples demonstrate that leaders who *lead by example*, *develop others*, and *prepare self* are primed to fight and win in large-scale combat operations.

Then a brigadier general, Douglas MacArthur led by example by modeling battlefield courage that the 42nd Division needed to overcome the perils of trench warfare during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive in World War I. Then a lieutenant general, George Patton Jr. *developed others* by instilling mission command in his staff and subordinate leaders who maneuvered the Third Army across Western Europe to counterattack during the Battle of the Bulge. Gen. Dwight Eisenhower prepared himself by accepting prudent risk to launch the most audacious amphibious assault in history during the invasion of Normandy, France, in World War II. These historical figures honed their leader competencies during their own professional development; then, they leveraged these competencies to lead organizations through the complex environment of large-scale combat operations.

MacArthur Leads by Example

Sometimes it is the order one disobeys that makes one famous.
—Col. Douglas MacArthur, 27 February 1918³

In February 1911, MacArthur, then a captain, took command of his first engineer company at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. In his previous assignment, MacArthur received an evaluation report that read “exhibited less interest in and put in less time” in his role as a staff engineer.⁴ Command was different. MacArthur thrived under the responsibility of command, leading his soldiers on long forced marches, training engineer tasks, and developing skills necessary for combat. He began to experience the power of leading by example.

Six years later, MacArthur took charge as chief of staff in the newly formed 42nd Division, nicknamed the Rainbow Division after its formation of National Guard



units from across the United States.⁵ In the three months before setting sail to Europe, the division hardly had enough time to learn the basics of warfighting, let alone to build the necessary cohesion to fight and win in the savage trenches of the western front.

MacArthur understood what needed to be done to instill confidence in his men as they moved into the trenches for the first time. In the early morning of 9 March 1918, MacArthur reassured his men as he walked down the trenches through ankle deep mud. When the time came, MacArthur went over the top of the trench first and later wrote, "For a dozen terrible seconds I felt they were not following me. But then ... in a moment they were around me, ahead of me, a roaring avalanche of glittering steel."⁶ The Rainbow Division endured artillery barrages and machine-gunfire during that first assault, but the men carried the objective.

Is today's leader as prepared as MacArthur to lead soldiers in large-scale combat? For those leaders who lead by example, FM 6-22 lists strength indicators: provides presence at the right time and place, displays self-control and composure in adverse conditions, and encourages others.⁷ MacArthur clearly demonstrated these strengths the morning of the Rainbow Division's first offensive. He walked the trenches allowing his presence to calm nerves.

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower (*left*) and Britain's Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery (*far right*) confer with a junior U.S. Army officer on the progress of tank maneuvers in England 25 February 1944 in preparation for the invasion of Normandy in June 1944. (Photo from the Everett Collection via Alamy Stock Photo)

He overcame his worry of leading the charge alone by encouraging his soldiers as they rushed past him into the German trenches. MacArthur led by example, but this was a leadership style that he first learned as a company commander seven years before the Great War.

MacArthur's company at Fort Leavenworth was formed of new volunteers. As commander, he had to not only train the men for combat but also build cohesive teams by developing organizational culture. Edgar Schein, an expert in organizational change, states that primary embedding mechanisms like modeling behavior and coaching are how leaders form organizational culture.⁸ MacArthur experienced this effect with his soldiers by leading them on long road marches and challenging them through realistic training, leading by example. The result: a well-prepared combat engineer company. The Rainbow Division was no different. The unit was a collection of various National Guard units thrust into war. MacArthur

used the same approach. He modeled his desired behavior, this time in the trenches, and the result was the same. He led by example, and the Rainbow Division prevailed in its first engagement in large-scale combat.

As a company commander, MacArthur could still directly influence the development of each one of his soldiers. This was not the case for the thousands of soldiers in the Rainbow Division, making his example in the trenches that much more impactful. One colonel, a tank commander, would write home to his wife about his experience with MacArthur. While MacArthur was at an observation point preparing for another offensive, this tank commander moved forward to meet him. A German artillery barrage began creeping toward the two officers. When the barrage got extremely close to the two officers, the colonel flinched and looked at MacArthur who was standing steadfast in his position.⁹ The two officers would never meet each other again, but the colonel would never forget the meeting.

That colonel was George S. Patton Jr. Would the Army have received the courage of “Old Blood and Guts” Patton in World War II, if MacArthur had not led by example?

Patton Develops Others

A man should not be damned for an initial failure with a new division. Had I done this with Eddy of the 9th Division in Africa, the army would have lost a potential corps commander.

—Lt. Gen. George S. Patton Jr., 7 July 1944¹⁰

Leaders must develop others to fight and win in large-scale combat. The adversary’s ability to conduct division coordinated attacks, degrade communications, and mass indirect fires creates an environment that necessitates shared trust and disciplined initiative at the point of contact. Leaders develop a shared trust with their staff and subordinate commanders. The leader trusts his or her subordinates’ decision-making ability, and the subordinates trust they will not be relieved on the chance of a wrong decision. Developing this leader-follower relationship sets the foundation for mission command with leaders providing mission orders and subordinates taking disciplined initiative within the commander’s intent.¹¹ Patton developed others to create mutual trust in the Third Army, and the results were immeasurable.

The Third Army chief of intelligence, Col. Oscar Koch, began receiving reports of German formations massing in the Ardennes Forest on 6 December 1944. Patton told

Koch to monitor the reports as they continued to plan for offensive operations. This all changed on 16 December 1944 when the Germans launched a massive offensive, punching through the First Army north of Patton, an offensive later known as the Battle of the Bulge.

Within forty-eight hours, the First Army, commanded by Gen. Omar Bradley, was scrambling to stop the Allied retreat and Eisenhower, the supreme Allied commander, called an emergency meeting with his senior officers. Patton knew his plans had changed. At 0730 on the morning of the meeting with Eisenhower, Patton called in key staff members to provide an update. At 0830, he called the entire staff and his corps commanders. In less than two hours, Patton and his team developed three different courses of action that could move the Third Army from its current position to a position one hundred miles north to counterattack the German forces. Then, Patton left.¹²

After briefing Eisenhower and Bradley on his plan, Patton called his headquarters to give the code word for the selected course of action; then he stayed at his new headquarters. Over the next forty-eight hours, Patton’s staff and subordinate commanders coordinated the movement of hundreds of thousands of soldiers, tanks, and trucks from their current position to an attack position within range of Bastogne. While his staff focused on coordinating the movement, Patton focused on developing others. One day after his meeting with Eisenhower, Patton met face-to-face with seven different division commanders to ensure that they understood his intent and to provide them encouragement as they prepared to counterattack at Bastogne.¹³ Patton had developed shared trust, so he knew that with clear intent, his staff and subordinate commanders would achieve results.

Were Patton’s competencies unique to his experience in large-scale combat? FM 6-22 states that a leader who *develops others* encourages subordinates through actions while guiding them, pushes decisions down to the lowest practical level, and presents challenging assignments that require team cooperation.¹⁴ Patton also developed others in the Third Army. He understood the desperation of Allied forces after the German offensive at the Battle of the Bulge and challenged his staff and corps commanders to respond in forty-eight hours. Once the divisions began moving, Patton ensured he met with his subordinate commanders to provide clear intent and encouragement. Then he stepped back, allowing his commanders and staff to demonstrate their abilities to lead and execute. As a result, the Third

Army was prepared to overcome logistical challenges and degraded communications while anticipating the next fight. Patton clearly demonstrated his ability to develop others to foster mission command, but this was a competency he gained well before leading large-scale combat operations.

In 1921, then Maj. Patton first met Capt. Eisenhower, five years his junior. The two officers shared a passion for understanding new technology and developing techniques for incorporating tanks into modern warfare.¹⁵ A few years later, in 1925, Patton graduated from the Command and General Staff School in Fort Leavenworth and found out that Eisenhower, his friend, would be attending the following year. Without asking, Patton sent Eisenhower a trunk full of all his notes and letters of encouragement for the upcoming year; Eisenhower graduated number one in his class.¹⁶

Patton understood the impact of developing others well before leading the Third Army. If Eisenhower had not graduated at the top of his class at the Command and General Staff School, would Gen. George C. Marshall have ever recognized his future potential?

Eisenhower Prepares Self

OK, we'll go.

—Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, 5 June 1944¹⁷

Ten thousand U.S. dead and wounded, three thousand more from Great Britain and Canada, twelve thousand aircrew lost, and one commander's decision that changed the course of World War II.¹⁸ How does one person develop the courage to make that decision? The Army mission command philosophy calls this accepting prudent risk when the commander judges the mission accomplishment as worth the cost of deliberate exposure to potential injury or loss.¹⁹ Eisenhower did more than accept prudent risk; he prepared himself throughout his entire military career for that decision.

Just four years earlier, in 1940, Eisenhower, then a colonel, was disheartened after being called to the War Department in Washington, D.C., exclaiming that he would be “spending the war in another frustrating desk job.”²⁰ Eisenhower was not a war hero like MacArthur and Patton, who both received valorous awards in World War I, but his experience during that time became the foundation to prepare himself. In 1917, Eisenhower wrote a letter to the War Department requesting to deploy to combat in Europe. His request was denied, and

he was sent to Camp Colt, Pennsylvania, to establish and command the Officer Candidate School. Although gravely disappointed, Eisenhower set aside his personal feelings and developed Camp Colt into the finest training program in the Army, thereby, earning the temporary rank of lieutenant colonel. When he finally earned a command in Europe, he was so excited that he volunteered to take a reduction in rank to major if it would get him overseas sooner. The war ended before he would be deployed, and his only response was “I suppose we'll spend the rest of our lives explaining why we didn't get into this war.”²¹

A leader without experience must rely on doctrine. Eisenhower did not have relevant combat experience, so he focused on becoming a student of doctrine. He took an assignment at Fort Meade, Maryland, as a tank commander, where he first met a then Maj. George Patton. The two officers bonded through trying to understand the full capabilities and limitations of tanks, so much so that they stripped a tank down to its nuts and bolts and put it back together again. Both Eisenhower and Patton then wrote articles on the future of tank warfare, thinking they were closing a gap in Army doctrine. The chief of the infantry wrote Eisenhower a scolding response for suggesting any role change of the infantry.²² Another setback.

Eisenhower shouldered more challenges. Later that year, he lost his son at a young age from scarlet fever, which also led to marriage troubles. He was then charged for breaking an Army regulation on housing allowance because his son had not been technically living with him while receiving treatment. Eisenhower endured. In 1922, he finally received his first break while working for then Brig. Gen. Fox Conner, who later taught Eisenhower three years of postgraduate education in military history.²³ Conner recognized Eisenhower's potential and worked behind the scenes to secure him a slot at the Command and General Staff School. Eisenhower would not disappoint.

Were Eisenhower's setbacks what allowed him to accept prudent risk on D-Day? FM 6-22 states that a leader who *prepares self* removes emotions from decision-making; expands

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Capt. Eric Cannon (*seated*), commander of Company C, 2nd Battalion, 69th Armor Regiment, briefs his subordinate leaders the evening before an 8 May 2019 attack on the fictional town of Razish at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California. (Photo by Matthew Cox, courtesy of [Military.com](https://www.military.com))



knowledge of technical, technological, and tactical areas; and sets aside time for self-development, reflection, and personal growth.²⁴ It was not the setbacks that caused Eisenhower to accept prudent risk; it was how he prepared himself through those setbacks. When assigned to establish Officer Candidate School at Camp Colt, Eisenhower removed his own emotion after not getting a combat assignment and focused on his impact of developing other combat leaders. He also recognized after World War I that he did not have combat experience, so he committed to expanding his technical and tactical knowledge. Last, Eisenhower reflected. When given the opportunity to work for Conner and then attend the Command and General Staff School, Eisenhower recognized it as an opportunity not to be squandered. Commanders who accept prudent risk focus on creating opportunities rather than preventing defeat.²⁵ At every setback, Eisenhower focused on creating an opportunity, not simply accepting defeat.

Eisenhower's self-preparation throughout his career guided his decision-making, leading to his order to invade Normandy on 6 June 1944. He revealed his character not just in his resolve to launch the largest invasion in history but also in his courage to accept responsibility in the letter that was never sent:

Our landings in the Cherbourg-Havre area have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold and I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to

attack at this time and place was based upon the best information available. The troops, the air and the Navy did all that Bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt, it is mine alone.²⁶

Conclusion

Today's leaders may not have led soldiers through sustained artillery barrages or corps-on-corps-level attacks. Just because we do not have the experience does not mean we are not ready. MacArthur had never experienced peer combat when he led the Rainbow Division out of the trenches. Patton was a World War I veteran but had never led an Army staff and maneuvered multiple corps on the battlefield. Eisenhower had never experienced combat before taking command of all allied forces in Europe. The key to these leaders' success was that they developed their competencies well before reaching the battlefield.

Today's leaders are in a similar situation—some have combat experience and some do not—but they all have the ability to develop their leader competencies, the competencies MacArthur learned while leading basic trainees, Patton learned through peer leadership, and Eisenhower learned by preparing others for war. Army leader development transcends the range of military operations. Leaders who *lead by example*, *develop others*, and *prepare themselves* will be ready to fight and win in large-scale combat operations tonight. ■

Notes

1. Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], October 2017), 1-2.

2. FM 6-22, *Leader Development* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, June 2015), table 7-4.

3. Arthur Herman, *Douglas MacArthur: American Warrior* (New York: Random House, 2016), 110.

4. *Ibid.*, 71–73.

5. *Ibid.*, 99–101.

6. Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 55–56.

7. FM 6-22, *Leader Development*, table 7-18.

8. Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 236.

9. Herman, *Douglas MacArthur*, 130.

10. Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers, 1940–1945*, vol. 2 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 479.

11. Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-0, *Mission Command* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, March 2014), 2-1.

12. Paul G. Munch, "Patton's Staff and the Battle of the Bulge," *Military Review* 70, no. 5 (May 1990): 50–52.

13. Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 687–88.

14. FM 6-22, *Leader Development*, 7-46–7-50.

15. D'Este, *Patton*, 297–98.

16. *Ibid.*, 332.

17. Tim Rives, "'OK, We'll Go': Just What Did Ike Say When He Launched the D-Day Invasion 70 Years Ago?," *Prologue* (Spring 2014): 40, accessed 17 June 2019, <https://www.archives.gov/files/publications/prologue/2014/spring/d-day.pdf>.

18. Carlo D'Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier's Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 2002), 534.

19. ADRP 6-0, *Mission Command*, 2-5.

20. D'Este, *Eisenhower*, 300.

21. *Ibid.*, 126–29, 136.

22. *Ibid.*, 151–53.

23. *Ibid.*, 167.

24. FM 6-22, *Leader Development*, 7-39–7-41.

25. ADRP 6-0, *Mission Command*, 2-5.

26. "Message Drafted by General Eisenhower in Case the D-Day Invasion Failed and Photographs Taken on D-Day," National Archives, accessed 12 June 2019, <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/d-day-message>.