

‘WHO KNOWS, WINS?’ KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AND EMERGING ARMY TACTICAL COMMAND AND CONTROL CONCEPTS

William D. Blair¹

Abstract. Success on the land battlespace has traditionally been attributed to the leadership and skill of the commander. The introduction of the staff system and limitations of communications tended to isolate the commander from the sources of his information. Paradoxically, the capacity of modern communications and information systems may constrain the commander by overwhelming him with the volume of data. Recently, a concept known as ‘Network-Centric Warfare’ has made claims of being able to speed up command decision making and improve tactical command and control. This concept leans on technology and procedures being developed in the commercial world. At the same time, commercial management has explored a development known as ‘Knowledge Management’. This paper explores Knowledge Management concepts to consider what relevance they might have to Army tactical command and control specifically at formation and unit level. It particularly asks what parallels might exist between Knowledge Management concepts and those of Network-Centric Warfare. The paper argues that Network-Centric Warfare embraces only a sub-set of the concepts enunciated under Knowledge Management.

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

T.S. Eliot, from *Choruses for The Rock*

INTRODUCTION

‘Knowledge Management’ is a relatively recent catchphrase in management circles. Such notable authors as Thomas Davenport, Laurence Prusak and Ikujiro Nonaka have written many books and articles to claim the value of managing a corporation’s knowledge to the same extent as managing other corporate resources. Knowledge management has an underlying aim of improving commercial practices so a company can become more competitive or more innovative. One might ask if there is anything to be learnt for command and control at the land tactical level, also whether there are some of these knowledge management techniques and attitudes already in place. Such questions are particularly pertinent in light of the current discussion on another cross-pollination from commercial management into military thinking, that of the Revolution in Military Affairs and specifically Network-Centric Warfare.

TACTICAL COMMAND AND CONTROL—SOME ASPECTS OF THE CHALLENGE

Historical Perspective

Since the time of cavemen warriors, the role, tools and approaches of commanders have evolved. With the advent of modern communications, greater specialisation of forces and weapons of longer range and greater lethality, the battlefield became too physically large and too complex for the commander to expect to control as a single person. The traditional solution has been the development of a hierarchy of command and the concept of supporting staff. The commander became removed from the immediate battle and now needed to deal with intervening commanders as well as members of his immediate staff. The intervening commanders and the staff were the extended eyes and ears of the commander but inevitably filtered and distorted the information coming to the commander for his decision

making process. Similarly, the directions of the commander in shaping the battle were subject to the interpretation of his subordinates and the vicissitudes of the complicated organisation that was his command.

Military philosophers since Clausewitz have cited as enduring lessons of the history of war that its conduct is dogged by the twin spectres of the ‘fog of war’ and the ‘friction of war’. The fog of war relates to the uncertainty and lack of command awareness of the battlespace situation. One can argue this is partly because of the constraints of communications and the turmoil of battle, but also because the commander must rely on relayed descriptions of the situation. There is also a strong argument that the modern ubiquity of communications, and the consequent flood of data and information, has added to the fog through information (or data) overload. The friction of war is created by the sophistication of the war machine under command, and in particular the complexity of interaction between the parts. This model also raises the potential that the breakdown of one element can bring large parts of the war machine to a complete halt. At best, the need for the commander to control the simultaneous action of these components, and for the components to coordinate with each other slows down the progress of the battle.

Revolution in Military Affairs—Network-Centric Warfare

The past has seen a number of revolutionary changes to the conduct of war. The machine gun, tank and aircraft are all examples. There is now a case that a new revolution is upon us that might redress the fog and friction of war. The proponents of the Revolution in Military Affairs argue that the advent of the ‘Information Age’ is fundamentally changing the way wars will be fought. In discussing the Revolution in Military Affairs, the Australian Government’s 2000 Defence White Paper [1] re-affirms the need to move forward with technology (along with well trained staff) to maintain what it describes as a ‘Knowledge Edge’. The Knowledge Edge gives us an advantage over our potential adversaries due to superior knowledge. The White Paper also recognises the power of networking weapons systems platforms using communications and information technology.

¹ Defence Science and Technology Organisation, DSTO C3 Research Centre, Fernhill Park, Canberra, ACT, 2600, Australia