

# *Auftragstaktik:* It's More Than Just a Word

by Captain Ronald J. Bashista

*Auftragstaktik* is a German term used quite freely in our army, particularly in the armor/mech community, as a description of how we do business. But what, exactly, does this word mean? To many, it means nothing more than its rough, literal translation — “mission-type orders,” or orders giving great latitude to subordinates in regard to mission accomplishment. The subordinate is given a mission, and left to his own initiative in its execution and accomplishment. But a closer examination may reveal that this is an imprecise and incomplete understanding.

The most reliable source for an explanation of *auftragstaktik*, would be the originators of the term — the German Army. During a recent staff ride conducted with the Bundeswehr, German officers gave the following explanation to a group of American officers about the German concept of the term: *Auftragstaktik* is comprised of four essential elements — obedience, proficiency, independence of action, and self-esteem. In order for *auftragstaktik* to exist, all four elements must be present.

**Obedience.** In the framework of *auftragstaktik*, obedience refers to strict adherence to the intent of the higher commander, expressed in terms of purpose, method, and endstate. The method will probably be the least specific of the three, giving subordinates the maximum opportunity to exercise initiative in pursuit of the endstate. The subordinate ensures that any initiative he exercises adheres to and supports the commander's intent.

**Proficiency** refers to technical and tactical competence on the part of leaders at all levels. In order for *auftragstaktik* to work, leaders must be well grounded in their profession, understanding not only their own branch's capabilities, but also the capabilities of other branches. They must understand the application of all battlefield operating systems and be able to synchronize all available combat multipliers. The educational system of the Army must foster this. Training must focus on combined arms. Proficiency builds outside the school system and unit with a rigorous program of professional self-development. The end result is a leader capable of taking broad guidance and exercising initiative in an intelligent, effective manner, reflecting the intent of the higher commander.

**Independence of action.** The four elements which comprise *auftragstaktik* are equally important, but if one element is at the “heart” of the term, it would be independence of action. The higher commander allows his subordinate a great deal of latitude in the execution of a mission, allowing the subordinate to seize the initiative as it presents itself. This necessitates leader presence forward, at the decisive place on the battlefield. From this vantage point, he can exercise the freedom he has been given to influence the battle, tailoring the actions of his unit to take advantage of the tactical situation he sees.

**Self-esteem.** The subordinate leader must possess a high degree of self-confidence, and he must feel that his superiors have an equal degree of confidence in his abilities. This develops through training. During training exercises, superiors encourage the subordinate leader to exercise initiative in the execution of a mission, and he is not penalized if his initiative fails. He is not made to feel that he personally is a failure. Leaders analyze his actions, identify his shortcomings, and from this, a lesson is learned. Honest mis-

takes are survivable and accepted as part of leader development. This is crucial if subordinates are expected to exercise initiative.

This explanation makes it clear that *Auftragstaktik* is not simply a term describing a method of operating as a unit. It is a culture. Taken in its purest form, as it was originally conceived, the word describes a

culture within the profession of arms. We cannot wake up one morning and decide we are going to practice mission-type orders that day. Cultures develop over long periods of time, and if not practiced are soon extinct. We must practice mission-type orders every day, in everything we do as an Army.

Our present educational system fulfills the elements of proficiency and obedience. Young officers receive a thorough grounding in the technical aspects of their branch in the Basic Course. When they graduate, they are reasonably proficient in the basic skills of their trade, and additional proficiency comes with experience at their first duty station. Branch advanced courses bring a greater understanding and appreciation of the commander's intent, which is addressed as the focal point for all tactical and operational planning. At this point, we have an officer who knows how best to employ his weapon systems to achieve the desired endstate of his superior commander.

The final elements necessary to practice the culture of mission-type orders are the most difficult to develop. The desire to succeed tends to quell our willingness to allow subordinates independence of action. The old maxim — about wanting something done right and doing it ourselves — trips us up every time. We feel that by controlling every aspect of what our subordinates do, our intent will be more readily accomplished, but in doing this, we fail to develop our subordinate leaders. We must allow subordinates to develop their own methods to accomplish given missions. When they fail, we must allow them to survive and learn from their mistakes. We must continue to develop them without crushing their self-esteem and willingness to take risks.

*Auftragstaktik* works, and is borne out by historical examples ranging from Napoleon's marshals to the German storm troop detachments of the World War I. Well-trained small unit leaders, accustomed to seizing the initiative and exploiting it, are the keys to successful military operations, and in the fast-paced world of armor-mechanized operations, such leaders are crucial. Given this, we must fully understand and correctly implement the mission-type order culture that we are so quick to embrace as our way of doing business. We must practice it on a daily basis. We must discipline ourselves against the tendency to micro-manage. In our subordinates, we must foster the willingness to take calculated risks. Then we must take the time to evaluate their successes and mistakes, and develop them accordingly. When we do this in our regular course of business, then we have truly understood and adopted the mission-type order culture. The dividends which will follow on future battlefields will be well worth the effort.

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