

Admiral E.J. King's Philosophy of Command

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 an 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 the 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 subordinate" – 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 go so smoothly, that none may comment unfavorably; second, those energetic activities of staffs which lead to infringement of (not to say interference with) the functions for which the lower echelons exist; third, the consequent "anxiety" of subordinates lest 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 the expectation on the other of "nursing" and "being nursed" which lead respectively to the violation of command principles known as "orders to obey orders" and to 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, making 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 are not made full use of in conducting the affairs

(administrative and operative) of the several echelons – echelons which exist for 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 the 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 them “what to do” but not “how to do it” unless the particular circumstances demand.

7. The corollaries of paragraph 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."

CINCLANT SERIAL (0328) OF APRIL 22, 1941

Subject: Exercise of Command -- Correct Use of Initiative.

Reference: My confidential memorandum, serial 053, dated January 21 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 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*.