On the Headquarters

by MAJ Amos C. Fox

On the morning of Dec. 16, 1944, disaster struck the U.S. Army. The Germans, in a last-ditch effort to pull victory from the jaws of defeat, launched the opening salvo of what became known as the Battle of the Bulge.

The German operation was predicated on surprise — attacking in deplorable weather through a nearly impregnable forest at a time when the U.S. Army thought German forces were on their heels. They did so to overwhelm and isolate American and other Allied forces, grab the critical road network at Bastogne and secure the port city of Antwerp, all in hopes of bringing the Allies to the bargaining table.[1] The initial phase caught the Americans off guard and left the Allies reeling for several days.

However, days prior to the German assault, Third Army's intelligence officer, COL Oscar Koch, had picked up signs the Germans were repositioning forces around the Ardennes, potentially preparing for a large offensive through the region.[2] Koch sounded the alarm to then-LTG George Patton and Third Army headquarters Dec. 7, 9 and 11. After visiting several of his divisions Dec. 12 and coming to a similar conclusion as a result of those visits, Patton directed his headquarters to develop options in the event that Third Army was instructed to reorient operations from its current location around Metz to the north in the vicinity of the Ardennes forest.[3]

On Dec. 16, Patton received a phone call from his superior, then-GEN Omar Bradley, the Twelfth Army Group commander. Bradley, alarmed, informed Patton that the Germans had indeed attacked and that several American divisions were in dire straits.[4] As historian Antony Beevor notes, "All major American headquarters lacked information on the true state of affairs."[5] Patton, having taken heed of his staff's analysis, took Bradley's phone call in stride.

As one analyst noted: "As a consequence of the Third Army's aggressive staff work, Patton was not overly surprised by Bradley's phone call during the evening of the 16th. He was disappointed that he could not continue his offensive toward the Rhine but not surprised by the German offensive. The continuing analysis and planning by his staff and Patton's recognized tactical intuition had allowed him to anticipate the offensive and even draw up contingency plans."[6]

As a result of Bradley's call, Patton directed Third Army's headquarters to develop three possible lines of attack:

- Neufchateau to St. Hubert;
- Arlon to Bastogne; and
- Luxembourg to Diekirch to St. Vith.[7]

Patton's faith in his headquarters and his own tactical foresight proved providential when he was summoned to the Supreme Allied Commander's (then-GEN Dwight Eisenhower) headquarters in Verdun the morning of Dec. 19.[8]

When Eisenhower queried Patton on what Third Army could do to help, Patton replied that he could attack north with 4th Armored Division, 26th Infantry Division and 80th Infantry Division Dec. 21. Patton's response generated incredulity within the room. Few leaders or staff officers in the room believed that, given the current environmental conditions and Third Army's contact with the enemy, Patton could turn his force 90 degrees to the north and drive straight into another attack.[9]

However, Beevor rightly notes what enabled Patton's aggressiveness during the meeting. Beevor contends, "Third Army staff had not wasted a moment."[10] To be sure, as Patton was meeting with Eisenhower and the assembled Allied commanders and staff representatives, Third Army's headquarters had already started a corps headquarters and combat command from 4th Armored Division moving north, with the rest of Third Army prepared to move by the end of that morning.

Once the meeting drew to a close, Patton telephoned his headquarters, gave the pre-arranged code word indicating which of the three options Third Army was to execute.[11] Through the course of the battle, Third Army's headquarters, in conjunction with Patton's leadership and decision-making, resulted in his force rescuing the beleaguered 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne and subsequently defeating the Germans in Belgium. In doing so,

Third Army's exploits during the Battle of the Bulge have gone down in history as one of the U.S. Army's high-water marks.

Figure 1. Third U.S. Army commander LTG George S. Patton (left) speaks with BG Anthony McAuliffe, acting commander of U.S. 101st Airborne Division troops defending Bastogne, Belgium, during the Battle of the Bulge in World War II. Patton's and his headquarters' preparation enabled Third Army to conduct a sweep across France and play an instrumental role in defeating the German counteroffensive in the Ardennes. Patton commanded Third Army from 1944 to 1945. *(U.S. Army photo by SFC Luke Graziani)*

Third Army's success was a blend of Patton's skill as an officer, coupled with splendid staff work and a bit of luck. Dissecting Third Army's headquarters success during the Battle of the Bulge results in three findings:

- The headquarters understood its purpose, enabling its subordinate units' fighting capacity while maintaining the flexibility to adapt to changing battlefield conditions;
- It was soundly able to control operations, coordinate plans and future operations, and sustain Third Army throughout;
- While wrestling with current operations, the headquarters was able to think, plan and resource into the future, enabling the headquarters to bring time to heel.

Although Army doctrine provides six functions common to all command posts, these functions do not capture a headquarters' *raison d'être*. Therefore, it logically follows that Third Army's performance throughout World War II, but more specifically during the Battle of the Bulge, provides a good point of departure in thinking about the how, why and what of headquarters operations.

Understanding role

To be successful, a headquarters must understand its role. To put it another way, a headquarters must understand its purpose and why it exists in the first place. However, given contemporary headquarters doctrine and operations, it is important to begin the discussion by highlighting what a headquarters is not. First, a headquarters does not exist to legitimize the officers and staff sections within it. Next, a headquarters does not exist to mindlessly churn out slides. Further, it does not exist to facilitate or generate irrelevant meetings. Nor does it exist to field-test **Harvard Business Review** concepts and ideas.

A successful headquarters' purpose is to enable and maintain the fighting faculty of its subordinate units. The headquarters accomplishes this by balancing the interplay of three functions: control, coordination and

sustainment. These functions are balanced in deference to time because, as theorist J.F.C. Fuller reminds the student of war, "Time is an all-embracing condition, and in war, even more so. ... One of the greatest problems of generalship is how to use time to the best advantage, and this demands a perfectly organized instrument in which friction, which is the enemy of military time, is reduced to its lowest possible level."[12]

Furthermore, a headquarters enables and maintains the fighting capacity of its subordinate commands by reducing organizational chaos, disorder and impediments to mission accomplishment. To put it another way, a headquarters that keeps its subordinate elements tangled in the minutia of staff bureaucracy and irrelevant battle-rhythm events reduces those formations' flexibility, thus making them more prone to mission failure.

However, purposeful alignment allows a headquarters increased flexibility, which helps not only itself but its higher headquarters and those that work beneath it. To attain purposeful alignment, a headquarters must ruthlessly remove impediments to its *raison d'être*. That, in turn, will free it to effectively manage the interplay among coordination, control and sustainment in a time-sensitive manner to achieve purposeful activity. A trained and trusted staff, like that of Patton's Third Army, is the centerpiece of an effective headquarters.

Commander's role

As Third Army's work leading up to the Battle of the Bulge illustrates, an adroit headquarters is a force multiplier that allows it to punch above its weight. Historian Allen Millet notes that Patton's staff was brilliant and perhaps one of the best in Europe during the war.[13] This wasn't by chance. Patton's Third Army staff was largely the one he enjoyed throughout the war, especially when he was at the helm of Seventh Army during the Sicilian Campaign.[14] Those many months Patton and his staff worked together served as the crucible for their operational relationship – during the period leading up to the Battle of the Bulge, Patton had been indirectly training his staff. This is where the essence of Third Army's success at the Bulge can be found.

A staff is the heart and soul of any headquarters, and for a staff to be good — efficient, forward-thinking and coordinating — it must be trained, disciplined and possess good esprit de corps. While the chief of staff or executive officer is nominally responsible for developing the staff, the onus truly resides with the commander. The commander develops the staff by holding it accountable, running it through incisive and rigorous processes, and respecting it.

Respect is what's hidden within Patton and Third Army's working relationship. Patton's relationship with his headquarters suggests he not only respected good officers, noncommissioned officers and Soldiers, but he also respected staff work. Despite lessons like this, all too often today staff work is denigrated, cast in a miserable light or offered as something that must be "survived."

A cottage industry has sprung up offering tips, tricks and pithy bromides to assuage the poor soul that must serve on staff. To be sure, a recent offering at **The Military Leader** Website is instructive. The post states, "Staff time is usually viewed as the trough in the career … a holding pattern … the purgatory before one's time in the spotlight. But as with anything, it is what you make of it."[15] This mindset regarding an assignment on staff is counterproductive and undercuts headquarters across the force.

Further, commanders who speak disparagingly of their staffs, do not spend time with their staffs or tout how little time they themselves spent on staff inflict a deleterious effect on their own staff and thus work against the effectiveness of their own headquarters. Routine, respectful interaction between the staff and the commander allows the staff to identify how best to present information to the commander, understand how his or her mind works and develop a good working relationship. Patton understood this, and it worked not only to his advantage during the Battle of the Bulge, but also to the advantage of the thousands of men and women trapped in and around Bastogne in December 1944.

Eliminating low-value work

To tackle purposeful work that increases the combat capability of its subordinate units and allows itself to positively manipulate time toward its advantage, a headquarters must remove the weeds and underbrush that inhibit productivity. To put it another way, a headquarters must eliminate low-value work. This type of work shows itself in many forms, whether that be:

- Battle-rhythm inertia;
- Mission creep;
- Higher-level staff officers' attempts to justify their jobs;
- Staff not being able to think beyond legacy processes; or
- Staff assuming every meeting or reporting requirement from a higher headquarters must be foisted on one's subordinate commands.

Chiefs of staff, executive officers and whoever else plays a part in assigning work to a headquarters must ensure the headquarters is oriented on what matters: work that contributes to the headquarters' purpose. The first step in this process is to understand what the headquarters is for.

The second step is understanding that to properly support a headquarters' purpose, it must generate good staff work. Good staff work requires space and time. Leaders of a headquarters are responsible for ensuring good staff work. Therefore, they are responsible to fight for time and space for their staff.

The third, and perhaps the most challenging step, is stepping beyond the "find a way to get to yes" mindset and embrace the word "no." While headquarters often find it easy to tell their subordinate units no, telling lateral units and higher headquarters no is often challenging, especially in the Army's "go along to get along" environment. However, telling others no is not a bad thing, especially when it is supported by data. Continually saying yes decreases a headquarters' ability to look beyond the current situation because it bogs down the headquarters and staff with superfluous work. Saying no, on the other hand, buys back time and space, creating room for a headquarters to think deep about a problem and deep into time. This makes it operate in a way more aligned with Third Army at the Bulge.

Therefore, leaders within a headquarters must ruthlessly find and eliminate low-value work that drives sub-optimization. They should do so with the expressed intent to generate more time and space for the staff to think, analyze, coordinate and develop products that support the command, create opportunities and improve fighting capacity.

Enabling fight

Napoleon Bonaparte is noted to have said, "The secret of war is to march 12 leagues, fight a battle and march 12 more leagues in pursuit."[16] Third Army at the Battle of the Bulge and afterward lends credence to Bonaparte's theory. Third Army's agility and ability to punch above its weight illustrates what a headquarters can do when it understands its purpose and is not bogged down with superfluous, sub-optimizing work. Its ability to rapidly react based on forward-looking staff work and a receptive and equally forward-looking commander is the epitome of how a good headquarters enables the fighting potency of its subordinate units to create useful options for its higher headquarters.

One must assume that the situation in and around the Bulge would have been far more dire for the men trapped there had Patton and Third Army headquarters allowed Bradley, LTG Courtney Hodges and others to dissuade them from their initial situation assessment in early December 1944.[17] However, Third Army's dogged persistence and ability to convey the potential importance and ramifications of its assessment sparked a planning dynamic that helped Eisenhower quickly staunch the bleeding around Bastogne, bring up additional reinforcements and rectify the situation for the Allies. Further, Patton and Third Army's clear and concise orders to their subordinate corps and divisions, and previous coordination, were the impetus for the success of units such as III Corps, 4th Armored Division and others.[18]

It is fair to suggest that this model should be the goal of any headquarters – to move beyond the foggy realm of reaction and to get firmly ensconced within the world of forward-looking, proactive plans and operations. Doing so, as illustrated by Third Army during December 1944 through January 1945, better enables the fighting potency of subordinate formations while providing agile, tailorable options to the higher headquarters.

Conclusion

In summation, Patton's Third Army is an instructive model for how a headquarters should operate. A headquarters is an organization's most vital element. It is that formation's central nervous system. It is the thinking and coordinating element that allows the "doers" to do. Yet this doesn't come to fruition on its own.

A handful of principles on the headquarters are offered as principles to help guide commanders, chiefs of staff and executive officers as they tirelessly work to improve their respective headquarters and supporting staff:

1. A headquarters' purpose is to enable its subordinate commands by reducing chaos, disorder and other impediments to mission accomplishment.
2. Purposeful headquarters activity increases flexibility for its higher headquarters.
3. Ruthlessly remove the weeds and underbrush of bureaucracy and staff inertia to create a productive and efficient environment.
4. Generate realistic and useful options that enable the commander, the subordinate commands and one's higher headquarters.
5. A headquarters manages the interplay among coordination, control and sustainment in a time-sensitive manner.
6. The *immediate* is the enemy of prepared; forward-reaching, disciplined plans and operations processes are critical to moving beyond operating in the *right now* space.
7. Moving beyond operating in the *right now* is critical to generating agility, synchronization, informed plans and operations, and realistic options.
8. A headquarters must always vigorously coordinate (for example, make the appropriate connections with people and resources) and then diligently synchronize (for instance, streamline their employment in time and space) capabilities; a headquarters should never pass on an opportunity to showcase its ability to do hard staff work.
9. Time is one of the most valued commodities in war and in a training environment; do everything possible to protect time from those who attempt to consume it.

Commanders, chiefs of staff and executive officers must develop their headquarters. They do so by putting their staffs through rigorous training on purposeful staff processes, holding it accountable and creating a culture of high standards. Also, leaders must knock down barriers to high-value work while removing the weeds and underbrush of low-value work that slows a headquarters and pulls it into the quagmire of routine battle-rhythm requirements.

Commanders, chiefs of staff and executive officers must also cultivate appreciation and mutual respect in their headquarters. Far too often today, Army culture and narrow-minded leaders denigrate the role of a headquarters and that of its staff. But even Patton, for all his vainglory, never demurred from extolling the primacy of his staff and advocating the central position it played in all he accomplished as a commander. Following the war, Patton remarked, "The remarkable movement of Third Army from the Saar to the Bulge was wholly due to the superior efficiency of the Third Army staff. ... Those who desire to inform themselves on how an army should be moved should study this operation as set forth in meticulous detail in the 'After-Action Operations Report' of Third Army."[19] Culturally, commanders, and the Army as a whole, would be wise to practice more appreciation because doing so will likely increase productivity within their respective headquarters.

MAJ Amos Fox is the squadron executive officer, 1st Battalion, 35th Armored Regiment, 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, Fort Bliss, TX. Previous assignments include operations officer, 1-35 Armored Regiment, 2/1 Armored Division, Fort Bliss; chief of plans, 1st Armored Division; strategic-plans officer, Combined Joint Forces Land Component Command – Operation Inherent Resolve, Baghdad, Iraq; commander, Troop L, 2nd Squadron, 16th Cavalry Regiment, 199th Infantry Brigade, Fort Benning, GA; commander, Company D, 1st Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR), Fort Irwin, CA; assistant operations officer, 1st Squadron, 11th ACR, Fort Irwin; commander, Headquarters and Headquarters Troop, 1st Squadron, 10th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, Fort Carson, CO; and assistant operations officer, 2nd Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment, 2/4 Infantry Division, Fort Carson. MAJ Fox's military education includes Command and General Staff College, Airborne School, Maneuver Captain's Career Course, Cavalry Leader's Course, Bradley Fire-Support Vehicle Course and Field Artillery Officer Basic Course. He holds a bachelor's of science degree in secondary education from Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis, a master's of arts degree in secondary education from Ball State University and a master's of military arts and science degree from the School of Advanced Military Studies, Fort Leavenworth, KS. MAJ Fox's awards include the Tom Felts Leadership Award, 2017; Draper Armor Leadership Award, Fiscal Year 2013; member of 11th ACR's honorary rolls; and the Order of St. George (Bronze). He is also a recipient of Silver Spurs.

Notes

[1] Antony Beevor, *Ardennes 1944: The Battle of the Bulge*, New York: Viking Press, 2015.

[2] Ibid.

[3] George S. Patton Jr., *War as I Knew It*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Beevor.

[6] Paul Munch, "Patton's Staff and the Battle of the Bulge," *Military Review*, May 1990.

[7] George S. Patton, *Notes on Bastogne Operation*, Jan. 16, 1945.

[8] Beevor.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] J.F.C. Fuller, *The Foundations of the Science of War*, Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute reprint, 1993.

[13] Allan Millett, https://www.pritzkermilitary.org/whats_on/pritzker-military-presents/allan-millett-siege-bastogne-they-key-allied-victory/.

[14] Ibid.

[15] "Surviving Staff Life," *The Military Leader*, https://www.themilitaryleader.com/surviving-staff-life/.

[16] David Chandler, *Napoleon*, London: Pen and Sword Publishing, 2007.

[17] Munch.

[18] Patton, *Notes*.

[19] Patton, *War as I Knew It.*

Acronym Quick-Scan

ACR – armored cavalry regiment