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DECENTRALIZED DECISION-MAKING IN SMALL UNITS: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR

Modern conditions of armed conflict require new approaches to the command and control of small units. The experience of the russian-ukrainian war has demonstrated that the effectiveness of combat operations depends not only on technical capabilities but also on the ability of platoon and squad leaders to make independent decisions under conditions of limited information and a rapidly changing situation. In current combat practice, the mission command principle is increasingly applied, providing subordinates with a significant degree of autonomy in task execution. A senior commander defines the overall objective, intent, and desired end state, while the methods of achieving them are determined at lower levels of command. This approach significantly reduces unit reaction time, enhances the initiative of commanders on the ground, and decreases the risk of command paralysis in the event of disrupted communications or changing battlefield conditions.

Keywords: decentralized command, platoon leader, decision-making, combat resilience, initiative, mission command.

Statement of the problem. The full-scale war between ukraine and the russian federation has demonstrated significant changes in the nature of modern combat operations. One of the most important trends is the necessity of decentralizing command and control at the tactical level – within squads and platoons that operate autonomously and therefore must rapidly respond to changes in the situation and make decisions without waiting for orders from senior commanders. This approach increases the effectiveness of combat actions, particularly under conditions of high tempo, information saturation, and constant adversary impact on command-and-control systems.

Traditional centralized command-and-control systems common to Soviet-style armed forces have proven limited under modern combat conditions. Excessive vertical subordination, delays in decision-making, and the lack of initiative at lower command levels reduce unit adaptability and lead to time losses, which are a critical factor in battle. Therefore, the implementation of decentralized decision-making principles gains particular importance - when platoon, squad, and even small-group leaders are granted the authority to act independently within the framework of the commander's operational intent.

The Armed Forces of Ukraine (hereinafter – AFU) and the National Guard of Ukraine (hereinafter – NGU), as they transition to NATO standards, are gradually implementing the mission command approach, which relies on trust in tactical-level commanders and their responsibility for independent decision-making. This requires new approaches to commander training as well as improvements in communications, logistics, information support, and psychological resilience among personnel.

The scientific and practical significance of this study lies in the need to comprehend the experience of decentralized command accumulated during combat operations after 2022, to identify its advantages and risks, and to develop recommendations for further integration of this approach into the command-and-control system of small units in the Armed Forces and the National Guard of Ukraine.

Thus, the relevance of the research is determined by the fact that decentralized decision-making is a key condition for increasing the flexibility, resilience, and combat effectiveness of small units under modern wartime conditions, and its academic analysis is important for the development of national military theory and command practice.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The issue of decentralized command and decision-making within military structures at the tactical level has recently attracted significant attention from both Ukrainian and foreign scholars. Ukrainian researchers [1, 3, 4] emphasize the need for the AFU to shift from a rigidly

centralized command model to a more flexible command-and-control system based on lower-level initiative. Studies by scholars of the National Defence University of Ukraine named after Ivan Cherniakhovskyi [2, 3] stress that the effectiveness of modern combat operations is determined by decision-making speed and the ability of small units to independently accomplish combat tasks.

Publications by NATO member-state researchers and analyses by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) [6–11] reveal the essence of the mission command principle, which is based on trust, decentralized authority, and the development of junior leader initiative. This approach has proven effective in U.S., British, and German military campaigns, where decisions are made within the commander's intent rather than through rigid top-down instructions.

In Ukraine, since 2022, studies have emerged addressing the adaptation of this approach to the conditions of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Works [4, 5] highlight the importance of trust between commanders and subordinates, the role of moral and psychological training, and the need to reform junior officer education. Separate studies published in the journal *Science and Defence* [2] examine digital decision-support tools and the implementation of situational awareness systems.

Despite the growing number of academic and practical developments, several aspects require further research. These include the practical implementation of decentralized command under active combat conditions, the interaction of units from different agencies (AFU, NGU, SOF), and issues of information support, communications, and coordination in a dynamic battlefield environment.

Thus, the analysis of scholarly sources shows that while the theoretical foundations of decentralized decision-making are actively being developed, its practical application during the Russo-Ukrainian war remains insufficiently systematized. This underscores the academic value of the present study, aimed at summarizing Ukrainian combat experience and forming recommendations for improving the command-and-control system of small units.

The purpose of the article is to provide a theoretical justification and synthesis of the practical experience of decentralized decision-making in AFU and NGU small units during the russo-ukrainian war, as well as to determine the key conditions and principles ensuring the effectiveness of this approach in modern combat.

The research is based on contemporary military command theory, the mission command concept, principles of adaptive leadership, and systems analysis of combat operations. Academic prerequisites include studies in military pedagogy, psychology, command-and-control organization, and the experience of NATO member states in preparing commanders for decentralized environments.

To achieve this goal, the study defines the following tasks:

1. To analyze the essence and content of decentralized decision-making in the command-and-control system of small units, and to identify its differences from traditional centralized models.
2. To generalize AFU and NGU combat experience in applying decentralized command principles under active combat conditions, including in urban operations.
3. To develop recommendations for improving junior commander training and incorporating elements of decentralized command into educational programs and unit-level collective training.

The expected result of the study is the formation of a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms of decentralized decision-making, the identification of factors influencing its effectiveness, and the development of practical recommendations for integrating this approach into the command structure of Ukrainian defense forces' small units.

Summary of the main material. The essence of decentralized decision-making lies in granting small-unit commanders (platoon, squad, and small tactical groups) the authority to independently determine methods for accomplishing tasks based on the specific tactical situation and the senior commander's intent (see Figure 1). In contrast to the centralized command model - where decisions are made exclusively by higher headquarters - decentralization relies on trust, initiative, responsibility, and a high level of junior leader training.

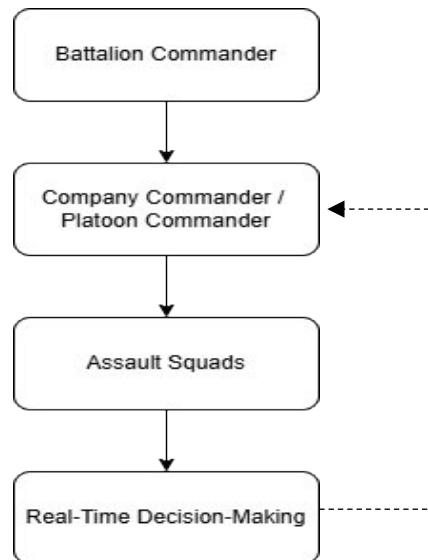


Figure 1 – Diagram of decentralized decision-making in small units

1. *Analysis of the essence and content of decentralized command.* From a theoretical standpoint, decentralized command is based on the *mission command* concept, which emphasizes achieving the intended outcome rather than formal compliance with orders. This approach ensures rapid reaction, increases operational flexibility, and allows units to adapt more effectively to changing tactical circumstances.

Analysis of operations in eastern and southern Ukraine after 2022 shows that small units whose commanders could make independent decisions demonstrated higher effectiveness and lower losses. For example, during the fighting in Bakhmut and Avdiivka, individual AFU platoons and companies maneuvered without direct staff coordination, relying on their own assessments - allowing them to avoid encirclement, maintain combat capability, and rapidly shift directions of counterattacks.

2. *Synthesis of AFU and NGU combat experience.* Practical experience shows that decentralized command functions best in units where commanders are well trained, trusted by senior leadership, and equipped with modern communications. During the defense of Kyiv (February–March 2022) and the Kharkiv counteroffensive (September 2022), the autonomy of small groups enabled them to perform tasks effectively under conditions of significant information uncertainty.

NGU units have also gained significant experience in decentralized operations. In particular, assault groups of the “Azov,” “Svoboda,” and other brigades operated in urban environments (Mariupol, Sievierodonetsk, Soledar), where centralized command was limited or impossible. Junior commanders were required to make independent decisions on assault tactics, evacuation, fire distribution, and drone employment. This experience formed the foundation for modern methodological approaches to small-unit tactical autonomy.

At the same time, combat practice revealed several issues: limited interoperability of communication systems across agencies, the absence of unified interaction protocols, and insufficient commander training for information-overload environments. This points to the need for joint training programs and rehearsed decision-making algorithms for dynamic combat scenarios.

3. *Developing approaches to improving training and command systems.* Effective decentralized command rests on three components: *commander competence, situational awareness, and trust within the command hierarchy.* Combat experience demonstrates a clear pattern: the higher the level of individual training and analytical thinking among junior commanders, the more successfully decentralized decision-making is implemented.

Training programs should include modules on decision-making under uncertainty, critical thinking, and leadership development. Simulators and scenario-based exercises that model rapid, independent decision-making have shown particularly positive results.

At the organizational level, implementing digital battle management systems can provide small-unit commanders with up-to-date information on the enemy, friendly forces, and changes in the situation - allowing autonomy while maintaining alignment with the overall operational framework.

Conclusions

The study confirms that decentralized decision-making within small units is a key factor in enhancing the effectiveness of tactical actions in modern combat operations. The synthesis of the combat experience of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) and the National Guard of Ukraine (NGU) after 2022 demonstrates that granting lower-level commanders autonomy enables rapid adaptation to changing conditions, optimal use of limited resources, and reduced personnel losses.

The analysis substantiates the effectiveness of the *mission command* concept and adapts its principles to the operational environment of Ukraine's defense forces. The article formulates clear recommendations regarding junior leader training, the development of decision-making algorithms, the implementation of digital situational awareness systems, and the organization of joint training for AFU and NGU units.

The research identifies several key patterns and trends:

- the effectiveness of small-unit actions directly correlates with the level of training and the ability of commanders to independently assess the situation;
- information support and the availability of interoperable communication systems significantly enhance the performance of autonomous actions;
- the use of concise reporting formats and predefined actions in case of communication loss helps maintain coordination without violating the principles of decentralization.

Prospects for further research include:

- developing real-time digital decision-support models for small units;
- examining psychological and organizational aspects of junior leader autonomy under high-stress conditions;
- forming unified training standards to ensure interoperability of AFU and NGU actions in urban operations.

In conclusion, decentralized decision-making in small units represents a strategically important direction for the development of the Ukrainian defense forces' command-and-control system, ensuring increased flexibility, responsiveness, and combat effectiveness. The results of this study can be applied both in the theoretical training of commanders and in the practical development of tactical-level command algorithms.

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ДЕЦЕНТРАЛІЗОВАНЕ ПРИЙНЯТТЯ РІШЕНЬ У МАЛИХ ПІДРОЗДІЛАХ: ДОСВІД РОСІЙСЬКО-УКРАЇНСЬКОЇ ВІЙНИ

Сучасні умови збройної боротьби потребують нових підходів до управління малими підрозділами. Досвід російсько-української війни продемонстрував, що ефективність бойових дій залежить не лише від технічної оснащеності, а й від здатності командирів взводів і відділень самостійно приймати рішення в умовах обмеженої інформації та швидкоплинної обстановки.

У практиці бойових дій все частіше застосовується принцип децентралізованого управління (*mission command*), який передбачає надання підлеглим значного рівня автономії при виконанні завдань. Старший командир визначає загальну мету, задум і кінцевий результат, тоді як способи їх досягнення визначаються на нижчих рівнях управління. Такий підхід суттєво скорочує час реагування підрозділу, підвищує ініціативу командирів на місцях та зменшує ризик паралічу управління у разі втрати зв'язку чи зміни обстановки.

Децентралізована модель ефективно проявила себе у боях на східному та південному напрямках у 2022-2025 роках, коли підрозділи Збройних Сил і Національної гвардії діяли у роз'єднаних районах, часто ізольовано від основних сил. Командири взводів самостійно приймали рішення щодо маневру, вибору позицій, організації спостереження та взаємодії з сусідніми підрозділами.

Результати аналізу бойового досвіду показують, що визначальними умовами успішної децентралізації є:

- якісна фахова підготовка молодших командирів;
- довіра між рівнями управління;
- наявність чітких стандартних операційних процедур (SOP);
- організація безперервного обміну інформацією.

Водночас слід зазначити, що децентралізоване управління вимагає зміни підходів до підготовки кадрів. Традиційна система, зорієнтована на жорстку ієрархію, не сприяє розвитку ініціативності та креативності. Тому у програмах підготовки командирів взводів і рот доцільно посилити роль тактичних ігор, командно-штабних тренувань і симуляцій, які розвивають здатність діяти самостійно у складних умовах.

Децентралізоване управління у військовій сфері передбачає передачу повноважень і прийняття рішень на нижчі рівні, що підвищує гнучкість та оперативність армії. В Україні, як приклад такої

системи, використовується програмно-апаратний комплекс «Дельта», який об'єднує дані з різних джерел для відображення обстановки, доступної для командування та підрозділів.

Ключові слова: децентралізація управління, командир взводу, прийняття рішень, бойова стійкість, ініціатива, *mission command*.

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