Operational Leadership and the New Guinea Campaign

by

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**Abstract:** In order for the operational leader to become successful in the use of joint military forces, he must be knowledgeable and proficient in certain key operational leadership skills. Those key skills are the ability to (1) create and transmit his vision to his organization, (2) overcome inter-service rivalry and install a concept of Jointness/teamwork in his subordinate leaders and staff, and (3) lead through the use of mission type orders. The study of the operational leadership of General Douglas MacArthur in the World War II New Guinea Campaign is used as a historical example to reinforce this theory.
Almost any mission that our nation's military leadership will be given today and in the future will require joint operations to accomplish it. For a basis of understanding in this paper, joint operations are defined as the use of a combination of land, naval and air forces in a military activity designed to accomplish a designated mission. With the understanding that each service component has unique capabilities, characteristics and standard operational procedures, conducting joint operations is not an easily accomplished feat. In fact, the common belief is that this process is an art and is specifically referred to in many military circles as Operational Art. The glue that binds the different aspects of Operational Art, as in many other endeavors, is leadership.

Operational leadership is a recognized component of Operational Art. What is operational leadership? In its purest form, leadership is the ability to influence people to do what you want them to. Operational leadership is this same ability of a leader to influence, but the people to be influenced are the leaders and staff members in a joint command that will be responsible to accomplish a given mission at the operational level of war. The operational level of war is that level of war that transforms national strategic objectives into successful military plans and combat actions.¹ Our senior military leaders of today and tomorrow must be operational artists capable of conducting joint operations through the use of operational leadership.

If our military leaders of today and tomorrow must be proficient in the conduct of joint operations and therein practitioners of Operational Art, then they must be skilled operational leaders. The best way to become a skilled operational leader is certainly the study of the theory and practice of operational leadership. The most realistic and practical method of this study is in the context of a military campaign where it was an

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especially significant factor in the success of that campaign. From the study of such campaigns, the aspiring operational leader can learn the leadership skills that may help him achieve success in his future endeavors. The focus of this paper therefore, is the examination of the operational leadership of General Douglas MacArthur in the New Guinea Campaign of World War II for the purpose of discovering those operational leadership skills that are most essential to the operational leader.

There are a great many leadership skills that any leader must possess in order to lead an organization. These skills are acquired and honed to perfection (hopefully) as the leader rises to greater and greater positions of responsibility in his own service component. The major requirement of translating strategic goals and objectives into campaign and operational goals and objectives makes the operational leader responsible for the planning, preparation and employment of joint combat forces and often multinational forces as well. In this very difficult situation of leading very different components of our national military, the operational leader must be adept at the practice of certain crucial leadership skills. Those crucial leadership skills that are essential to the operational leader are the ability to: (1) create and transfer his own vision of the organization and its mission to his subordinates leaders and staff, (2) foster jointness and teamwork in his organization by overcoming inter-service and or inter-national rivalry, and (3) develop a command relationship with his subordinate commanders wherein he can lead and direct them through the utilization of mission type orders thereby promoting initiative, flexibility and creativity in everything they do.

To support my thesis, I will show how General Douglas MacArthur utilized these crucial leadership skills to achieve success in a most difficult campaign. The New
Guinea Campaign was an essential part of the Pacific War strategy to defeat Japan. In March 1944, the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed the allied operational commanders in the Pacific to conduct an offensive to capture the Philippine Islands. The intent of this strategy was to gain a strategic position whereby the essential Japanese lines of communication to the rich resources of the Netherlands East Indies, Indochina, Thailand, and Burma could be cut. In addition, the allies could construct bases in the Philippine Islands from which subsequent allied advances against Formosa, the China Coast or Japan could be conducted. The offensive was to be launched along two avenues of approach. The first avenue of approach was through the Central Pacific Ocean via the Marshall, Caroline and Palau Islands. The second avenue of approach was up along the northern coast of New Guinea.³

The advance up the northern New Guinea coast was conducted by General Douglas MacArthur and the forces assigned to his Southwest Pacific Area Headquarters (SWPA). After the completion of the Papuan Campaign and the isolation of the enemy stronghold at Rabaul on New Britain Island in early 1944, General MacArthur faced a series of strong Japanese concentrations along New Guinea’s north coast. A reported 240,000 Japanese were operating in SWPA’s area of responsibility. In western New Guinea alone, 50,000 were entrenched and positioned between MacArthur’s forces and Luzon.⁴ Rather than assault these Japanese strong points head on, he conducted a series of amphibious end runs along the coast bypassing them. Specifically, his method was to advance along the northern New Guinea coast by moving his land-based bomber line westward in successive jumps occupying new airfields and logistic bases from which to stage the next jump. Once this was accomplished, ground forces were rapidly deployed
forward by air transport and amphibious landings to seize the next objective. Once that new objective was taken, additional airfields and operation bases were established. Enemy air and naval forces were eliminated along the line of advance to facilitate each jump. The procedure was repeated again and again, thereby neutralizing and pocketing Japanese strong points and leaving them isolated to wither on the vine. The campaign began with an amphibious landing on the Admiralty Islands in late February 1944 and was quickly followed by landings at Hollandia-Aitape, Wakde-Sarmi, Biak, Noemfoor, Sansapor-Mar and terminated in September with the seizure of Morotai. (see map #1).

At the conclusion of the campaign, General MacArthur had advanced his forces 1400 miles and positioned himself for the invasion of the Philippine Islands in less than 7 months. The significance of this enormous undertaking can’t be overemphasized. To put the distances covered in the proper context, see map # 2. It must also be remembered that this was an immature theater. There were no roads, no port facilities, no airfields, and no supply or staging areas. They all had to be constructed. In addition, MacArthur’s navy consisted of small ships; he had no aircraft carriers, battleships or large troop transports. Moving and supplying the force was a great deal harder than fighting it. By the end of the campaign, General MacArthur commanded 1,377,000 allied troops, eight American divisions, three independent Regimental Combat Teams, three Engineer Special Brigades, a fleet, and two Army Air Forces. Certainly the significant measures of success for this campaign are the enormous geographic leaps made to traverse New Guinea, the neutralization of the Japanese forces in the theater and the low cost in allied casualties. All told there were 11,300 allied casualties. The damage inflicted upon the enemy was far more significant. MacArthur had succeeded in cutting-off and isolating
the Japanese 18th Army. Known Japanese casualties from direct combat actions were 26,345 dead and 1,625 prisoners of war. The number of enemy wounded was never determined. Military history has recorded this campaign as a great success conducted in a masterful manner by a consummate strategist and operational commander.

There are many reasons why this campaign was so successful. Certainly the strategy of bypassing Japanese strong points via amphibious end runs was crucial. The flank support provided to SWPA by the Central Pacific Campaign led by Admiral Nimitz tied up Japanese forces and prevented them from interfering with his operations. The forces of SWPA were well trained and continually produced results. General MacArthur had outstanding subordinate commanders in Admirals Kinkaid and Barbey as well as Generals Kenney and Krueger, who were very able in utilizing their forces to accomplish each operational objective. His headquarters staff planned, supported and executed operations in a masterful way. The teamwork of his joint focussed land, naval and air forces was instrumental to success. Not discounting any of these factors, I believe the noted naval historian, Samuel Eliot Morrison clearly points to the very key element of success of the New Guinea Campaign.

Expert planning and a high order of teamwork between Army, Navy and Air Forces of the United States and Australia produced these results; but it is questionable whether they could have been attained under any commander but Douglas MacArthur. Everyone who served under him, in whatever arm of service or from whatever country, acquired a great respect for his military judgment and leadership.

The essential element to success in the New Guinea Campaign was the operational leadership of its commander that brought together all the strengths of SWPA described above into a focussed effective organization that was able to accomplish its assigned operational mission.
If one looks carefully at the leadership style of General Douglas MacArthur, it is apparent that he possessed and utilized those key leadership skills indicated above that are essential to the operational leader. He visualized his mission and effectively communicated it to his subordinates. He fostered jointness and teamwork in his forces. Finally, he issued mission type orders to promote initiative, flexibility and creativity in his component commanders. In the following paragraphs I will discuss each of these in detail.

The first of these most important leadership skills is the ability of the operational commander to develop both the vision of the organization he leads and its goals and then the transmission of this vision to his subordinates. The transmission of this vision must be so complete that the vision is shared by the members of the organization. A shared vision provides a corporate and enduring sense of purpose, a measure of success, it transcends day to day issues, it has a legitimate meaning in the both the present and the future and it empowers both leaders and followers to act.\textsuperscript{10} A vision shared by both the leader and those who follow is essential to success.

General MacArthur developed his strategic vision the very moment that he left the Philippines. Simply put, Japan had attacked the United States. He had been defeated in the Philippines and essentially chased out. The people of the Philippines, with which he so closely identified, were suffering terribly at the hands of the Japanese. American forces in the Pacific were on the run. His vision was to turn all of this around. He was going to lead the allied effort to defeat Japan and liberate the Philippines. The strategy he conceived to carry out his vision consisted of an advance from Australia up through New Guinea to the Philippine Island of Luzon in order to sever the Japanese lines of
communication. This "focus upon the objective" was present from the very beginning and became the central theme of all operations in which he lead. 11 This was his vision and it became the vision of his subordinate commanders and staff as well.

By studying many of the personal histories of the war and other correspondence written about this campaign, it becomes clear that the transmission of the vision was truly effective. In MacArthur's Amphibious Navy, Admiral Barbey, MacArthur's amphibious force commander, wrote that when he first reported to General MacArthur in December of 1942, the General took the time to clearly explain in detail his vision of how he was going to defeat Japan. An essential part of that explanation was the description of Admiral Barbey's part in that vision. 12 General Kenney, SWPA's air forces commander, so clearly understood the vision that he was sent with MacArthur's Chief of Staff to Washington to sell SWPA's vision and plans for the defeat of Japan to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. 13 The vision was successfully transmitted down to and adopted by leaders at the tactical level as well. During the battle along the Driniumor River in the defense of Aitape, Major General Charles P. Hall, the XI CORPS commander, made tactical decisions on the disposition of his combat units mindful that a Japanese break-through of his defensive line could discredit General MacArthur's strategy in the eyes of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. 14 MacArthur's vision was so well communicated that it guided and harmonized SWPA's commanders and staffs at all levels. It created and reinforced the principles of both Unity and Economy of Effort in SWPA and in so doing facilitated the completion of operation after operation in this difficult campaign across 1400 miles of air, sea and sand. MacArthur's component commanders and even his tactical
commanders had ownership of the vision and as a result everything they did supported each others efforts as well as those of the commander.

The second essential leadership skill is the capability to create a joint mindset and a sense of teamwork in the various service components of the operational commander’s military force. In the work, *On Operational Art*, Professor Milan Vego cites a definition of leadership that postulates that the leader of any organization must influence his subordinates to work together toward a common objective. In this context, the operational leader is responsible to get the leaders, organizations and personnel of very different and at times competitive and even antagonistic organizations to sing from the same sheet of music. The leaders of the Army, Navy and Army Air forces back in Washington were unable to achieve this relationship, yet MacArthur at the operational level and in his theater did.

In the case of SWPA during the New Guinea Campaign, these three components and other elements had to work hand in glove, if the common strategic and operational goals were to be achieved. Although it may not have started off in early 1942 as a homogenous group, it did come very close to that end by 1944. The reason this came about was due to the insistence of the commander of SWPA and the emphasis he placed upon it. General MacArthur’s concept of jointness is clearly described in the quote below from July 1943, where he describes how he visualized his headquarters and the way he wanted his headquarters to function:

Complete and thorough integration of ground, air, and naval Headquarters within General Headquarters is the method followed with marked success in the Southwest Pacific Area rather than the assembly of an equal number of staff officers from those components into a General Headquarters staff. Land, air and naval forces each operate under a commander with a complete organized staff. Naval and air commanders and their staffs are in
the same building with General Headquarters. The land commander and his staff are nearby. Those commanders confer frequently with the Commander-in-Chief and principal members of General Headquarters. In addition to their complete functions as commanders, they operate, in effect, as a planning staff to the Commander-in-Chief. When operating in forward areas the same conditions exist. The personal relationships established and the physical location of subordinate Headquarters make possible a constant daily participation of the staffs in all details of planning and operations. Appropriate members of General Headquarters are in intimate daily contact with members of the three lower Headquarters.

Air officers and naval officers are detailed as members of General Headquarters staff and function both in planning and operations on exactly the same basis as army officers similarly detailed. The problem in this area is complicated by the fact that it is an Allied effort. Australian and Dutch naval, air, and army officers have been assigned to General Headquarters. General Headquarters is, in spirit, a Headquarters for planning and executing operations, each of which demands effective combinations of land, sea, and air power. General Headquarters has successfully developed an attitude that is without service bias. Although the physical location and staff procedures of all four Headquarters are of the utmost importance, it is only the determination that General Headquarters shall act as a General Headquarters rather than as the Headquarters of a single service that will produce the unanimity of action and singleness of purpose that is essential for the successful conduct of combined operations.¹⁶

Not only General MacArthur viewed SWPA that way. General Krueger, SWPA's land component commander and chief operations planner, indicated in his book that the success achieved by SWPA was due to the teamwork and cooperation of the land, air and naval team. During the New Guinea Campaign, his Sixth Army planning staff was heavily tasked. It was required to plan several future operations simultaneously while still working on operations currently in progress. Opportunities and situational changes caused many plans to be altered. The degree of joint planning necessary for the type of amphibious operations that the forces in SWPA conducted was extensive and continuous. Although service differences of opinion occurred in the joint planning group, General Krueger stated that they as a rule were ironed out. If an impasse occurred, the component
commanders met and in the spirit of cooperation reached an agreement. At no time during the planning of the various operations of the New Guinea Campaign did General Krueger have to approach General MacArthur to settle an inter-service dispute. Certainly General MacArthur's hands-off attitude at the operational level contributed to this inter-service cooperation. Since his component commanders were free to run their operations as they saw fit, within broad limits, they appeared to be more willing to compromise than if they had been subordinated to one or the other. Finally, SWPA's J2, Major General Charles Willoughby, commented in his book on MacArthur and his staff that by the Hollandia Operation, General MacArthur was extremely confident in the training and capabilities of his forces. In addition, General Willoughby indicated that there was indeed a real integration of the land, naval and air forces and a "sense of unity of services" existed in SWPA.

The third essential leadership skill is the use of mission type orders, a style of leadership that promotes initiative, flexibility and creativity. The operational commander is responsible to establish operational objectives. He must also clearly communicate to his subordinate commanders his concept of the operation and the end-state he desires. He must participate with his commanders and staff in the planning and conduct of the operation. He must determine the mission of each of his subordinate organizations and then provide them with the necessary resources. Most importantly, the operational commander should give only general guidance, leaving the detailed tactical employment of forces to his subordinate commanders thereby promoting in them initiative, flexibility and creativity.
General MacArthur followed the principle of focussing on the big picture and left the technique of execution and details to his component commanders and staff. Whether or not he knew the concept as "mission orders" as we are taught today, this is the style of leadership he used. He told his component commanders and planners what he wanted done. They were imbued with his vision. He gave them operational goals and objectives, but did not tell them how to accomplish them. General Krueger best describes General MacArthur’s leadership style:

General MacArthur commanded all Allied army, navy and air forces in SWPA, but did not exercise direct personal command over any of these contingents. He formulated all strategic plans, issued directives designating the operations to be undertaken, the commanders to conduct them, the forces and means to be used, the objectives, and the missions to be accomplished. But in conformity with the principle of unity of command, he did not prescribe the tactical measures or methods to be employed.  

General Kenney said of General MacArthur’s leadership style:

MacArthur leads—he does not drive. People who work for him drive themselves to carry out his wishes. They feel that they must not let ‘the Old Man’ down. You never feel that he has given you a direct order to do something, but at the same time his positive way of expressing himself never leaves you in doubt. I do not remember ever having been given a direct order by MacArthur during the whole time I worked for him, but I always knew exactly what he wanted done and knew he expected me to do it.  

General Kenney discovered early in his tenure what General MacArthur’s style of leadership was like. After taking command of SWPA’s air forces, he toured the units and facilities in theater. When he reported back to MacArthur with the corrective actions he wished to take, General MacArthur told him he didn’t care how he ran the air forces as long as they accomplished the mission.
The relationship that he established with his component commanders was an important element in his style of leadership. MacArthur knew that in-order to fulfill his vision, that joint operations (triphibious operations as he preferred to call it at the time) would be the key. He had to develop all three arms and they had to be welded into a dynamic synchronized machine. He secured three innovative hard charging component commanders and through his technique of mission orders allowed the component commanders great flexibility and freed them to let innovation run wild in a way that this resource constrained theater required. This can easily be seen by examining their accomplishments.

The first of his component commanders was Major General George C. Kenney. Given the freedom to lead his forces as he saw fit, General Kenney took over a demoralized 5th Army Air Force and turned it into a formidable organization. His aggressive and innovative tactics combined with his uncanny ability to secure otherwise scarce resources contributed greatly to the New Guinea Campaign. His air forces destroyed Japanese air power in the theater, paved the way for the ground offensives by softening up Japanese positions and conducted aerial resupply operations when necessary. General Kenney was an energetic fast paced commander and an out of the box thinker, who neatly dovetailed his air forces into General MacArthur’s joint forces team.24

Admiral Daniel E. Barbey was SWPA’s amphibious commander. Like General Kenney, he was a forceful and innovative leader. Prior to coming to SWPA, Admiral Barbey was Chief of Staff to the Commander, Training Force, Atlantic Fleet. While in this position, he participated in all amphibious training exercises in the Atlantic. After
Pearl Harbor, Admiral Barbey was ordered to Admiral King's headquarters, the overall commander of the Pacific and Atlantic fleets. His job was to establish an amphibious warfare section responsible to coordinate all training and procurement programs for large-scale amphibious operations. He was directly involved in the procurement and testing of the Landing Craft, Tank (LCT), Landing Craft, Infantry (LCI), the Landing Ship, Tank (LST) and the Alligator. These craft became the backbone of MacArthur's small boat amphibious navy in the New Guinea Campaign. Upon his arrival in SWPA, MacArthur charged Admiral Barbey with the responsibility of planning and leading all amphibious operations, the acquisition of landing craft and other related equipment as well as the training of all army units in the technique of amphibious operations. If anybody was the right man to be the SWPA amphibious forces commander, he was the man.

General Walter Krueger was MacArthur's Sixth Army commander. In addition to all the inherit duties of a ground component commander at an army level, he was the chief organizer and supervisor of the joint planning and the execution of all the operations of the New Guinea Campaign. General Krueger was a man of great accomplishment having risen through the ranks from Buck Private to Three Star General. MacArthur's opinion of Krueger's capabilities and contributions are clearly stated in the following quote:

I don't think that history has given him due credit for his greatness. I do not believe that the annals of America have shown his superiority as an Army commander. Swift and sure in attack; tenacious and determined in defense; modest and restrained in victory-I don't know what he would have been in defeat because he was never defeated....the great mantle of Stonewall Jackson would certainly fit his ample frame.
By assembling this team of outstanding component commanders, General MacArthur was able to successfully conduct a campaign of a size, scope, and importance that military leaders of today can only dream of.

There are several possible counter arguments to my thesis. First, many of MacArthur's biographers in the recent past have focussed upon his faults and upon areas where he could have achieved greater results. In essence, they charge that he was successful inspite of himself. They even propose that his idiosyncrosies and efforts to determine the Pacific War strategy undermined the total war effort. Second, it could be said that the leadership skills that I have identified as especially essential to the operational leader are common to all leaders at all levels and therefore, there is nothing unique to my thesis. I shall deal with both of these arguments in turn.

Certainly General Douglas MacArthur had unique flaws. He enjoyed and even cultivated the attention of the press to the point that he even jealously prevented other leaders in his command from receiving their due praise. He felt he was the leader that was destined to lead the war against the Japanese and that only he had the winning strategy and therefore went to great efforts to promoted it to the national leadership. Essentially, he was egotistical. He has been dubbed "the American Caesar" by at least one biographer. These charges are true to a degree, but also immaterial to the thesis of the paper. This paper examines the success of his operational leadership, which the careful study of this campaign can only bring the serious student to the conclusion that it was indeed successful.

The second argument is more to the point. Certainly the leadership skills that I have identified to be essential to the operational leader can be and are utilized at other
levels of command. The point is that the uniqueness of the realm in which the
operational leader dwells makes them essential to him. The operational leader faces
problems that he didn’t face when he commanded single service organizations. He did
not face the problem of eliminating intense inter-service rivalry. He wasn’t required to
understand the capabilities, vulnerabilities and limitations that other services possess. He
didn’t have to determine how to focus very different service component organizations in
his command to work toward the accomplishment of a common mission. Last but not
least, does he himself understand how to integrate all the different organizations into one
team? The operational leader may or may not have had to utilize the leadership skills I
have identified in his past single service commands, but even if he did, they are still
essential in the conduct of joint operations.

By carefully studying the New Guinea Campaign and the operational leadership
of General Douglas MacArthur, we are able to discern key operational leadership skills
that are essential to the operational leader. General MacArthur was able to communicate
his vision to his subordinate commanders. His vision became their vision. He realized
that in order to realize his vision he had to foster jointness and teamwork in SWPA. He
did so. Finally, he realized that that the sheer size of his area of responsibility required
that he would be separated him from his subordinate commanders by hundreds if not
thousands of miles during planning and operations. He had to build a team of
subordinate commanders with the integrity, skills and abilities that he could trust to be
semi-autonomous. Once he had done that, he empowered and turned these leaders loose
to carry out the mission orders he gave. This style of leadership allowed his commanders
the freedom to plan and execute. It fostered creativity and improvisation. He depended upon his commanders to deliver results and gave them the freedom to do so.

This paper doesn't judge the reasons behind General MacArthur's strategy and operational art. It examines the effectiveness of his operational leadership. The point of this study is for the reader to come away with an understanding that the key to success in conducting joint operations is dynamic operational leadership. The dynamic operational leader knows that in order to bring a joint force to mission accomplishment that he must give them a vision, weld them into one team, and provide the team leadership with the ability to be innovative, flexible and creative.
Notes


2 Ibid., 258.


6 Taaffe, 2-3.

7 Ibid., 232.


11 Willoughby, 7-8.


14 Taaffe, 199.

15 Vego, 252-253.


18 Ibid., 9.

19 Willoughby, 178.

20 Vego, 259-260.


24 Taaffe, 237-238; Kenney *Reports*, 44.


27 Willoughby, 124.
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