THE AGILE ORGANIZATION

Simon Reay Atkinson and James Moffat DOD Command and Control Research Programme (CCRP) Publications, Washington DC, July 2005

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Copies of this book were distributed by one of the exhibitors at the RUSI C4I conference held in Malvern in September 2005. It found its way on to this reviewer's 'probably indigestible' pile and would have stayed there unread had not your pitiless editor asked for a review. To my surprise, I am glad that he called.

The book's subtitle is *From Informal Networks to Complex Effects and Agility*. It explores different kinds of networks within enterprises and their implications for military operations. The authors are Simon Atkinson, a Royal Navy officer with particular insight into US experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Dr James Moffat, a Senior Fellow at the Defence Scientific and Technology Laboratory (dstl) with a background in operational analysis (OA) and model building.

The book is wide in scope and a little shapeless. Nevertheless, it rewards patience. Its fondness for personal anecdote is self-indulgent, but the enthusiasm of the authors and the wide sweep of the attack win the reader over. It is worthwhile reading not only for anyone attempting to understand the changing context of military operations, but also for the information professional who will gain a better understanding of some of the cultural issues in organisational design. And it puts the puffed-up subject of networked warfare into a philosophical and historical context, ranging from the nature of Postmodernism to the Peace of Westphalia (southern Catholics being pictured as rule-based and inward-looking, northern Protestants as international and outward-looking, thus better users of informal networks). Such historical contexts are drawn throughout the book. They are fun to read, but from time to time, flimsy.

The book provides some useful background to current thought on operational networks, ranging from 1970s' approaches to Cybernetics to the more recent flurry of work on Effects Based Operations (EBO). The book gives a particularly useful focus to readers, such as your reviewer, who feel that EBO can mean whatever the speaker wants it to mean. Knowing this, the authors helpfully define six aspects of EBO but, with the nationality of their publishers in mind, they inevitably link them to 'Shock and Awe'. This provides a useful reminder of the origins of EBO after the first Gulf War and its focus at the time on military effects. Maybe this gives some insight into the initial US impatience with non-lethal effects during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Atkinson and Moffat make much of the difference between Command and Control. They make the distinction that Command is about guidance, an outward expression of desired intent, whereas Control is about rules and direction. They describe the predominantly Control-based approach to management (both commercial and military) used up to this century and point out that it is too rigid to work against what they call the Complex Adaptive Systems used by current adversaries of the West. Surprisingly, they appear to believe that military commanders in both the US and UK are unaware of this.

Both Nelson and Churchill are invoked to illustrate aspects of a Command-based approach, one exemplified by a sense of purpose, a clear goal, impatience with unnecessary process and an inspiring ability to share the vision with the rest of the enterprise. The key element of Nelson's Band of Brothers was, they say, that it was a trusted, adaptive, informal network, which empowered its commanders to take risks.

The book then contrasts 1805 with 2005. It suggests that the UK, at its higher levels, appears to have lost much of the ability to innovate, which characterised it 200 years ago. It concedes that a good deal of innovative energy remains at the UK operational and tactical levels, but contrasts the speed at which the US strategic and higher echelons are learning from the Iraq experience with the sluggishness of the UK national response. The implication is that the UK appears to be stuck with 19th Century structures and processes, but without the energy and confidence that informed them in the 19th Century.

If this were all that the book contained, it would make entertaining air-travel reading, but would take us no further towards understanding the changes that a networked world demands of its military. What makes the book more worthwhile, as well as entertaining, is that throughout there are insights into the impact of networks on management. It is a pity that the reader has to skim skilfully to find them. Diligent reading reveals that the most effective and agile enterprises thrive on a mix of formal and informal networks.

Towards the end of the book, the authors make some suggestions for moving military HQs from the industrial age into the age of complex adaptive enterprises. Unsurprisingly, they stress that a shared vision of the aim, flexibility as to how it might be achieved and trust throughout the enterprise are the important factors. They stress 'control less and command more', but in this reviewer's opinion they underplay the requirement for what used to be called 'Co-ordinating Instructions'. Indeed, what makes networked warfare so tricky is the need to delegate to ensure responsiveness, but still to be able to handle the interdependence between components when action is joined. And that, as Napoleon has said, requires a commander with a 'superior understanding'. It also requires clear-sighted use of the tools of NEC and the full participation of operational users in their conception and development.

Despite its flaws, this book is a worthwhile read for anyone interested in the changing ways that enterprises might be run in a networked and unpredictable world. It is available from publications@dodccrp.org ■

Bill Robins