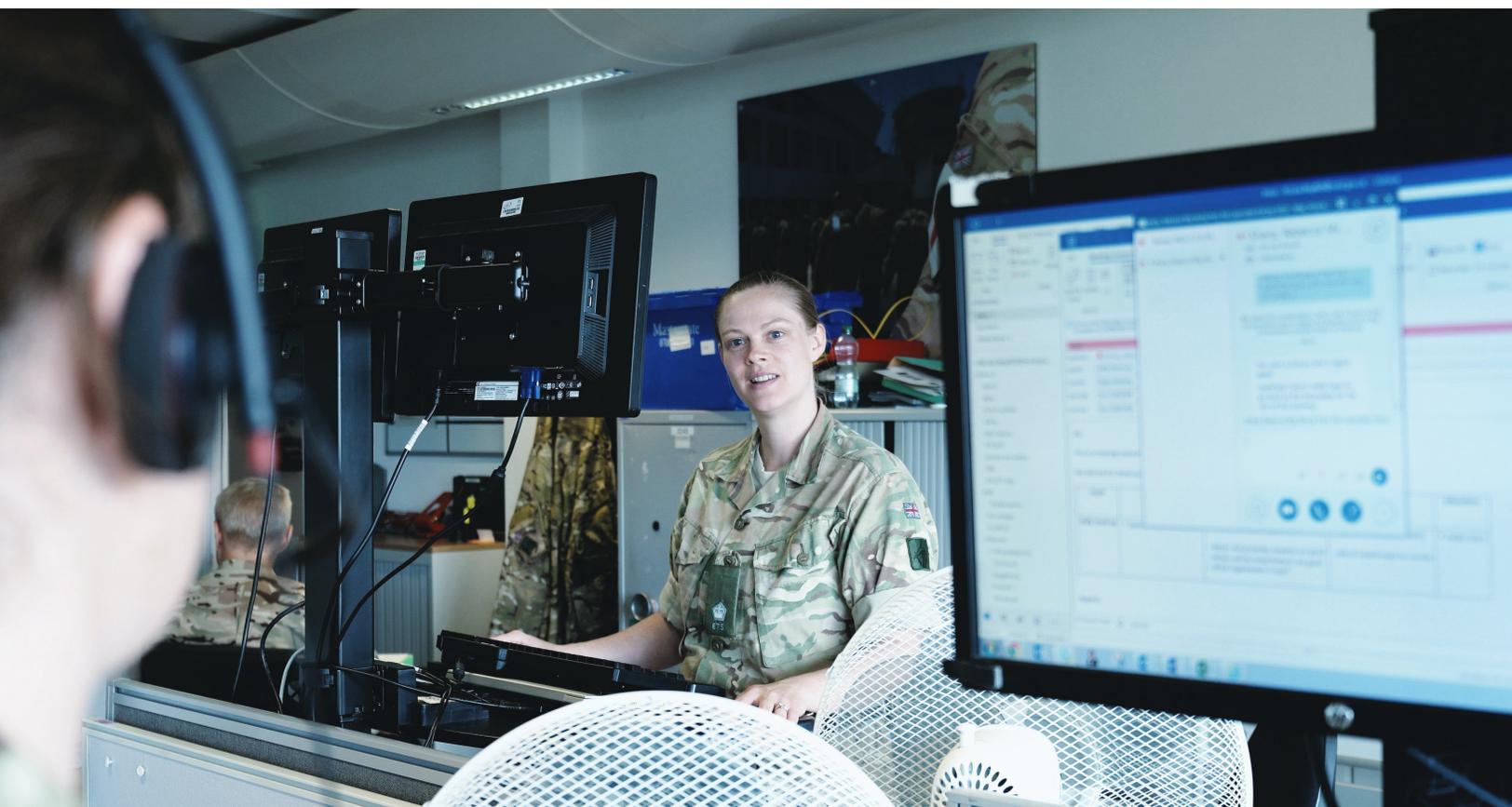


Organization Practice

# How the British Field Army headquarters shifted to agile ways of working

Facing increasing operational responsibilities, HQ Field Army undertook a massive effort to embrace agile ways of working. Leaders discuss the journey—and how the pandemic affected their efforts.

*by David Chinn, Christopher Handscomb, Jesper Ludolph, and Laurence McHauser*



**In early 2020**, HQ Field Army—the branch of the British Army responsible for the generation and preparation of 112,000 soldiers on current and contingency operations around the world—found itself with increasing operational responsibilities but no additional resources. HQ leaders, determined to improve decision-making processes to efficiently manage these new responsibilities, began adopting agile practices.<sup>1</sup> A few months into this undertaking, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, increasing their operational demand further and necessitating more flexible and remote working for Field Army staff—underscoring the importance of their efforts to embrace agile but also throwing a wrench in the processes they had thus far adopted.

In this interview, Lieutenant General Ivan Jones, Major General Ian Cave, and Colonel Craig Hanson discuss HQ Field Army’s journey to embrace agile—how they created greater clarity around priorities, deployed resources more flexibly to pursue those priorities, improved transparency around progress, and ultimately empowered staff to do their best work (see sidebar, “Biographies,” for more on their backgrounds).

**McKinsey:** What prompted you to pursue an agile way of working?

**Ivan Jones:** Two factors. First, while routine business was managed effectively, we lacked the ability to respond quickly to new opportunities. The organization was too hierarchical and stovepiped, people were focused solely on their inbox, and we didn’t flex resources to where need was greatest. Trying to pull teams together for important “sprints” was nearly impossible. Could it be that everyone across the HQ was doing work of equal importance such that they could not be released? Surely not. It was such a contrast to the agility and flexibility we display on operations overseas. We needed to draw our operational experience into peacetime practices and shift from a clunky Industrial Age organization to one fit for the Information Age.

Second, the hierarchical nature of the organization did not give our workforce freedom to flourish. People felt constrained by numerous layers of management and by an overly directed approach. We needed to unshackle and empower them if we were to maximize their various talents.

<sup>1</sup> David Chinn, Jonathan Dimson, Christopher Handscomb, Jesper Ludolph, and Xavier Tang, “Building agility in the British Army’s headquarters,” October 31, 2019, McKinsey.com; Justin Maciejewski and Rob Theunissen, “How the British Army’s operations went agile,” *McKinsey Quarterly*, October 31, 2019, McKinsey.com.

## Biographies

### Lieutenant General Ivan Jones

Lieutenant General Ivan Jones was commissioned into the British Army’s Corps of Royal Engineers in 1989 and served in a variety of roles, including Chief of Joint-Force Operations and Chief of Staff, Field Army. He was appointed as the Director of Personnel in May 2018 and assumed the role of Commander, Field Army in March 2019. He is also the Army’s Gender Champion.

### Major General Ian Cave

Major General Ian Cave commissioned into The Royal Welch Fusiliers in 1988 and served in a variety of roles, including Chief CJ5, ISAF headquarters in Kabul and Director Training, Army Headquarters. He was appointed Deputy Chief of Staff, Plans at JFC Naples Headquarters in July 2015 and assumed the appointment of Chief of Staff, Field Army in April 2018. He is also President of Army Cycling.

### Colonel Craig Hanson

Colonel Craig Hanson was commissioned into the Royal Logistic Corps in 1999 and served in a variety of roles, including as the military assistant to the Defence’s Operations Officer. Having completed a successful command of a logistic support regiment in early 2019, he assumed the role of Assistant Head Military Strategy for the Army, which was subsequently redesignated as Assistant Head Operate for the Land Operations Command.

**McKinsey:** What did the shift to agile working entail?

**Ian Cave:** We first came together as a leadership group to set clear priorities across HQ Field Army and agree on our new “Battle Rhythm”—a single, structured process for delivering on those priorities and revising them in the future.

Then we had to reorganize from a siloed structure, in which teams operated with different approaches to planning and limited collaboration, to a network of cross-functional teams. What we wanted from this transformation was a holistic, multidisciplinary approach to delivering our outputs—for example, to reassign capacity to service emergent priorities. And this required setting up cross-functional teams across three activities: plan, generate, and operate. These teams comprise functional experts and subject-matter experts [SMEs] in six areas: personnel, logistics, equipment, medical, capability, and legal. All six are interrelated; essential to each stage of planning, generating, and operating; and underpinned by our command support and finance functions.

And finally, we had to ensure that the progress we made in any effort was fully visible. And that meant finding ways to chart our progress and identify the blockers and friction across the organization. Once we had mitigated the friction, we knew we could resolve issues faster and have greater situational awareness. Previously, our work felt highly reactive. Our priorities were unclear, and we often refocused our effort between urgent tasks and people.

**Craig Hanson:** The vital element in this shift to agile was to empower our people—military and civilian—to build a greater autonomy to execute on agreed-upon goals. This means making sure that priorities are clear,

everyone knows what they are accountable for, and they are trained to deliver against these priorities—just like we do on operations.

**McKinsey:** You created the HQ Battle Rhythm to help make these changes. How did it emerge?

**Ian Cave:** We wanted to be able to track progress daily and match that progress to quarterly and annual priorities. This meant establishing a rhythm that was daily, weekly, fortnightly, and quarterly. The Battle Rhythm is a structured, disciplined process centered on quarterly planning and two-week sprints, which include reviews and retrospectives that give us the fortnightly feedback loop [exhibit].

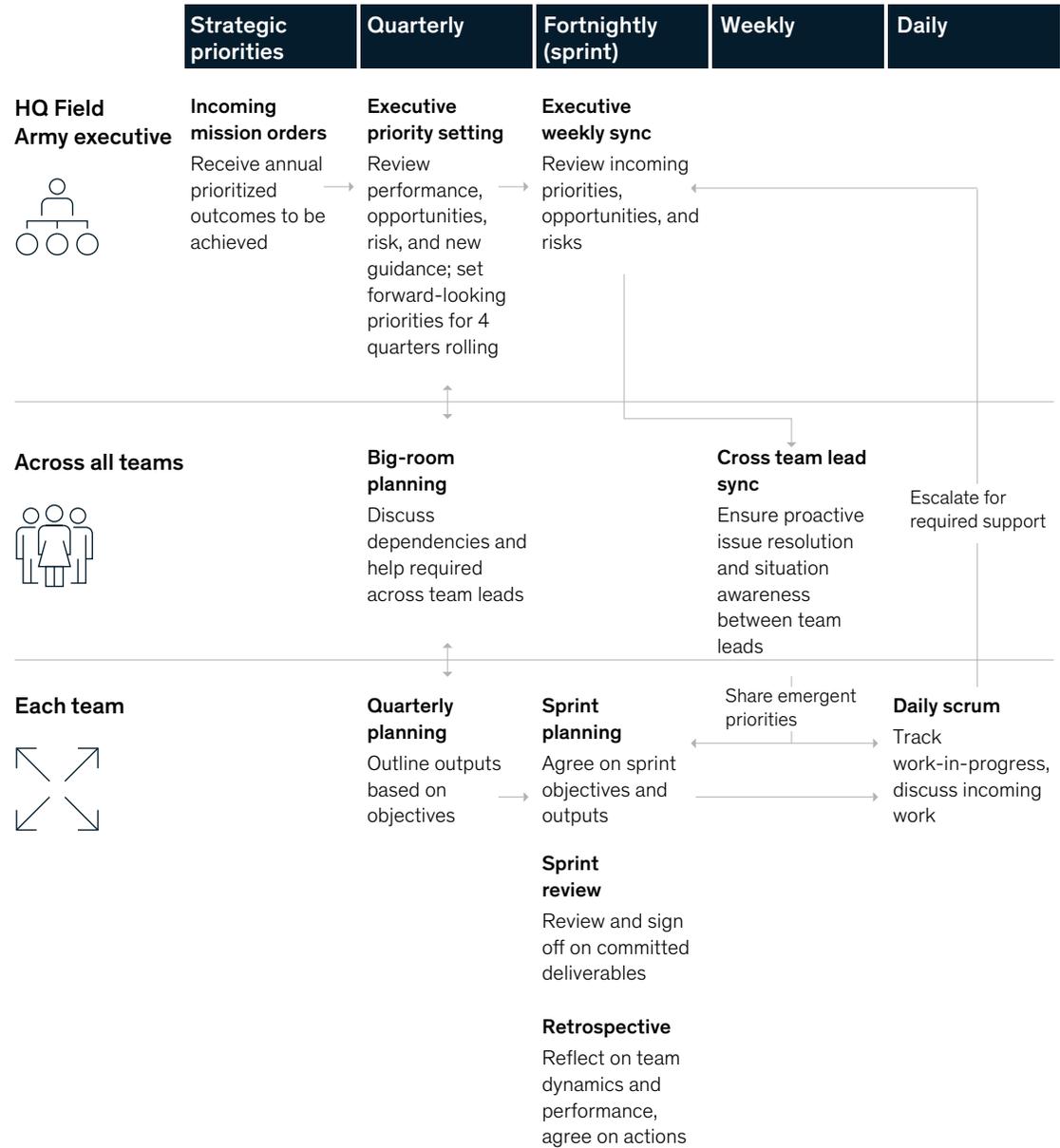
We began by testing the new Battle Rhythm with two pilot teams. Staff underwent a two-day bootcamp on agile mindsets and behaviors and received regular coaching as they adapted to the HQ Field Army Battle Rhythm. We found that this Battle Rhythm works for our people across all levels of the organization.

**Craig Hanson:** In our pilot teams, what was really instructive was the shift to priority setting, which enables the executive to share clear priorities on an annual and quarterly basis. The quarterly “big-room planning” then enables team leads to plan capacity to meet these objectives, identify opportunities for collaboration, and mitigate risks. This planning had an unexpected consequence in terms of our ability to allocate our time. When we started this process, we anticipated that a team would be able to forecast about 40 percent of its time. We are now regularly planning more than 70 percent of our time. This has significantly increased our time spent on work

**“We anticipated that a team would be able to forecast about 40 percent of its time. We are now regularly planning more than 70 percent of our time.”**

Exhibit

**The Battle Rhythm provides a single, structured process to set priorities, creating transparency and alignment across the headquarters**



that adds value while also improving staff morale by providing greater predictability.

**Ian Cave:** In terms of the bigger picture, the quarterly objectives and annual outcomes have enabled us to push out our planning horizons, allowing what has been, by nature, a reactive organization to become more proactive. It has allowed us to embrace urgent priorities as well as other important goals, such as planning and integrating future capabilities and improving the lived experience for our soldiers.

**McKinsey:** How did you run the transformation program?

**Ian Cave:** We established a permanent team comprising a transformation lead and senior business analyst, and SMEs rotated in and out of the team over time to provide specific inputs. It was crucial that the team had the right skills and experience to deliver a large change program, as well as a deep knowledge of our organization's culture and operations.

The flexibility to draw on SMEs was crucial for allowing us to adapt during delivery. For example, these experts helped launch the digital tool that enabled remote working during COVID-19.

As a delivery function, we "lived the change" by adopting our own agile Battle Rhythm and using the digital tool to plan our work. This not only enabled us to plan effectively but also helped the team find opportunities to further improve the process.

**Ivan Jones:** From a leadership perspective, it was important to me that we were clearly seen to embrace and embody the change as leaders. To achieve this, we set a clear direction from the start and stayed engaged throughout to provide the rest of the organization with the support to embrace the change.

**McKinsey:** COVID-19 hit in the middle of your transformation program. What was the impact on the HQ as a whole and on this program in particular?

**Ivan Jones:** The agile practices we were increasingly adopting helped us here. On the one hand, we had to deliver greater output to contribute to the national response at home and adapt our ongoing operations overseas. On the other hand, we had to adjust to staff working more flexibly. Operating with agility was key to the success of what we were now being asked to do, enabling us to quickly reprioritize and redeploy resources.

**McKinsey:** The army is used to remote working in operations and on deployments, but how did the need to be remote affect business as usual in the HQ?

**Craig Hanson:** Some of the traditional approaches to agile were no longer possible. For example, teams could not gather in person around a kanban board or run quick stand-ups and sprint meetings in the same room. We decided to deploy a digital tool—Microsoft Azure DevOps—to track all work and offer real-time visibility on progress, ownership, and blockers. This approach then fitted to the Battle Rhythm: the executive and the branch leaders used the tool to set annual and quarterly priorities, and the teams then built outputs and tasks with a virtual kanban board to facilitate daily stand-ups. We moved key information for team leaders into dashboards, and this improved situational awareness and decision making.

**Ian Cave:** The move to remote working really showed us that we could unleash our capacity for change. It was a timely testing ground—we took on more responsibilities, did them well, and continued to improve. The shift resulted in better data, deeper and wider collaboration, and further planning horizons.

**McKinsey:** What aspect of the army's COVID-19 response are you most proud of?

**Craig Hanson:** I am really proud of the role the Field Army played in generating and preparing forces that went on to build the Nightingale hospitals. The team responded swiftly—20,000 troops built seven large-scale, critical-care hospitals to provide additional capacity to the National Health Service

[NHS] England. The NHS Nightingale Hospital London was built in just nine days.

**McKinsey:** What has been the impact of the shift to agile working at HQ Field Army?

**Ian Cave:** We've seen impact in four areas. First, we are undoubtedly more resilient and flexible, able to respond more quickly to a range of unexpected events, even in a remote or hybrid working environment. Second, the transformation has enabled us to do more with less. We've seen a 25 percent improvement in resource efficiency, with staff spending a greater share of time on work that adds value. This efficiency has been instrumental in enabling us to take on and sustain new operational responsibilities. Third, since we understand our priorities and how each one of our outputs contributes to our annual outcomes, we have been able to flex our capacity to focus

on work that adds the most value. Fourth, our people report a greater sense of purpose and empowerment. They understand how their work contributes to the bigger picture, and they feel trusted to develop solutions while leaders maintain big-picture situational awareness.

**Ivan Jones:** In essence, we are bringing our agility on operations into the peacetime workplace. And in this shift, there are three principal benefits: a more empowered workforce—which means a better lived experience at work for our people; the greater productivity that can come from flexibility combined with stability; and, most significant, the ability to respond swiftly to an ever-changing world.

For more on the British Army's overall agile transformation, see the interviews "Building agility in the British Army's headquarters" and "How the British Army's operations went agile."

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