



CompanyCommand

Building Combat-Ready Teams



To: Company Commanders
From: Company Commanders

Leading our Soldiers to Fight with Honor

He who fights monsters should look into it that he himself does not become a monster. When you gaze long into the Abyss, the Abyss also gazes into you.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

Extended combat operations, especially counterinsurgency operations, unleash forces that can distort our Soldiers' moral compasses. The intense emotions of combat—fear, anger, grief, frustration, power, exhilaration—are experienced with a complexity and scale unlike anything outside of war. In this environment, we are called upon to lead our Soldiers to engage the enemy without becoming like him, to kill the murderers without becoming murderers ourselves. The overwhelming majority of us succeed, even if the media focus on isolated incidents of leadership failure. Listen in as recent commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan share their experiences of how they trained and led their Soldiers to fight with honor.

Lead by consistent, personal example...

Jeff VanAntwerp

Commander, A/1-24 IN, 1st BDE, 25th ID
(SBCT)

From my experience, the only way to ensure that Soldiers will do the right thing, in any situation, is to develop meaningful relationships with them and consistently model correct behavior through personal example. ROE briefings, vignettes and AARs are great, but they are all secondary to leadership by personal example that is

grounded in values that don't change when the shooting starts. Regardless of whether I was at the opening of a park, trying to avoid being suffocated by excited children as I handed out soccer balls or locking down a neighborhood in search of an AIF shooter who had just injured one of our own, Soldiers did as our leaders did because we were committed to leading by consistent, personal example.

Obviously you, the company commander, and your platoon leaders and platoon sergeants can't be everywhere. But you need to be in a lot of places a lot of the time to ensure that the respectful treatment of people becomes habit, regardless of the circumstance. To really be consistent, you must know who you are and your Soldiers must



CPT Jeff VanAntwerp, left, with one of his platoon leaders, 1LT Scotty Smiley, in Mosul in early 2005



U.S. Army

SPC Antoine Davis, from the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, patrols Tal Afar, as an Iraqi child walks alongside.

as a chance to learn about your expectations and develop their relationship with you.

Sometimes physically setting the example is easy and opportunities abound. It may be the difference between breaking the car window or asking for the keys when the intelligence on the target is suspect, or slowing down and using the horn rather than throwing objects at people's cars.

But sometimes it can be really hard. After one of my soldiers had been shot and subsequently died en route to the CSH, I went straight back to the neighborhood, determined to find the shooter or get some information. I was still crying and incredibly angry as I picked a house near where I thought was the shooter's original location. I asked the man at the door what he had heard or seen, and when he denied knowing anything, I slammed him into his door and verbally went off! Within two minutes, my platoon leader and interpreter were doing the same thing. I quickly changed my demeanor and reminded them that the shooter was most likely not from the neighborhood and that the people were just afraid. I later apologized to the man and his family. A few minutes later, a young boy approached my battalion commander and described how the shooter had fired from the rear seat of a gray Opel sedan with some distinguishable markings. Two days later, the same platoon killed the insurgent as he stepped out of his gray sedan with an RPK with a 75-round drum and took aim on my TAC. The incident served as a good reminder of how quickly my actions affected my subordinates, both positively and negatively, and how the respectful treatment of people ultimately reaped the greatest reward both tactically and personally.

know the fundamental values that govern your behavior. If a week went by and I had not been on a patrol at least once with each of my platoons, it was unusual. In a year-long deployment, your leaders and Soldiers will get beyond the feeling that you are somehow checking on them or evaluating their performance. They will see patrols—just like card games on the FOB, a day at the range, or PT—

Excerpt from "Morals in a Combat Zone," by Maj. Pete Kilner. The complete essay was published originally in The Washington Post on June 11, 2006, and is available in the CompanyCommand and PlatoonLeader professional forums.

A combat zone is not some parallel universe where the nature of human beings or moral judgment is different. Combat is a human endeavor, and like any human activity it can be carried out morally or immorally, and moral judgments can be made on it ...

The circumstances of this war's battlefields are terribly complex. Soldiers find themselves conducting a wide range of operations, from warfighting to policing, often during a single patrol, and those different operations require different principles for the use of force. It is often difficult for soldiers to discern which approach is appropriate and when ...

The good news is that well-trained, well-led soldiers can and do overcome the moral challenges of war and conduct themselves with great honor, and the great majority of American soldiers are well-trained and well-led. Although we fight an enemy who intentionally violates all norms of human decency and goads us to follow him into the abyss of wanton killing, America's soldiers continue to exhibit remarkable restraint.

What explains the difference between units that commit war crimes and units that don't? Leadership. Leadership is the critical factor in ensuring moral conduct in war. When junior officers and senior NCOs train their soldiers to do what is right and when they maintain their composure and lead by example, their soldiers are able to retain their moral bearings despite the temptations and frustrations of battle. American military history reminds us that war crimes can be prevented by small-unit leaders with moral courage and judgment.



CPT Josh Bookout attends a District Shura meeting in Afghanistan in February 2005.

Mentor and supervise subordinates...

Keith Kramer

Commander, A/3-69 AR, 1st BCT, 3ID

After the death of a Soldier, his platoon or even the whole company can begin to develop a revenge mentality. It is very difficult to help your Soldiers maintain the moral high ground when you yourself want to go out and break things and hurt those responsible.

I struggled with this after the loss of a young Soldier in OIF III. His platoon wanted very much to find and kill those responsible for the IED attack, as did I. The problem became identifying who was responsible for emplacing the IED and who wasn't. It becomes very frustrating in identifying the guilty party when the standard answer is "No Ali Baba in Samarra, Mista" every time you talk to people who have had IEDs blow up within 100 meters of their homes.

I began to identify issues with the platoon's use of force and thought some of it was indiscriminate, so I sat down with the key leaders of the platoon—the platoon leader, platoon sergeant and some of the squad leaders. I generally talked to them individually and not in a butt-chewing mode; I intended more to be in the mentoring mode (although some of those leaders may say otherwise about our talks now). I changed some of the missions I gave them and was very specific in ROE/engagement criteria. The bottom line is that I reeled them back in a little more than they were used to and provided more direct supervision to them, but I never let them off the hook except for a short period when I pulled them from patrol and placed

them on the force-protection mission to help them reorganize and reassess. This was frustrating to them, but it was needed, and it allowed me to go up on the roof of the patrol base and talk with "Joe" at 0200 when he is pulling security from his bunker. I had some very interesting conversations with him, but always worked to bring it back to what we are trying to do in the big picture and how killing everybody alienates us from the population and only builds the insurgency.

Establish clear expectations, control emotions...

Josh Bookout

Commander, C/2-5 IN & C/3-4 CAV, 3rd BCT, 25th ID

I believe that setting the conditions to ensure Soldiers do the right thing in combat starts with realistic and challenging training. To every extent possible, plan every major training event to involve difficult situations that replicate actual combat experiences from units in OIF/OEF. If you can put junior leaders and Soldiers into tough situations during training, they will take that knowledge and experience into combat. I found that good AARs after such training will give you insight into what the Soldiers and NCOs thought throughout the training. I found at times that there can be vastly different perspectives and feelings surrounding TTPs or decisions within the ranks—especially when the training event challenges the Soldiers to react to new situations. You can be the sounding board to get everyone on the same track and ensure that "right" and "wrong" actions are clearly understood.



CPT Neal Mayo receives a gift from the leader of a Neighborhood Advisory Council in appreciation of his company's assistance and cooperation with the Iraqi Security Forces during the January 2005 Iraqi National Elections.

The most difficult aspect of training is that it can never evoke the emotions that occur during combat—especially when friendly casualties are involved. You can never underestimate the importance of leading by example in these situations. If you completely lose control, verbally or emotionally, the Soldiers will view that behavior as acceptable. It is important to set the example—because every Soldier will remember the leader's reactions.

I found that talking with the junior leaders and Soldiers immediately following a mission that involved friendly casualties helped to set the conditions for coping. Every Soldier is going to deal with it differently, and it is important to give them some space and time to do it. I relied heavily on my NCOs to give me feedback on the Soldiers who were having the most difficult time or those who expressed particularly "hot" emotions. The 1SG and I made it a point to have one-on-one conversations with those Soldiers to help them through the process. The relationships you have with your Soldiers will help to continuously reinforce the command climate you set to always do the right thing.

Train to prevent over-reactions...

Chris Douglas

Commander, K/3-25 IN, USMC

Ensuring your people will do the right thing in combat begins prior to deployment. The focus of my company's pre-deployment training was on weapons handling, culture briefs and Killology classes. The purpose of weapons handling was to ensure a Marine was comfortable with his tools and did not overreact in a high-stress situation. Culture briefs were intended to educate Marines to avoid misjudging a situation that involved Iraqi civilians. Finally, Killology classes ensured that all hands understood the difference between

killing and murder. To ensure we operated in the same manner, all of this training began with my NCOs and officers. The company leadership continually drilled tactical decision games during our pre-deployment time, and they, in turn, drilled their Marines. The final step was repetitive review of the rules of engagement.

Our emphasis on the ROE continued during the deployment. Review of the ROE was built into pre-combat inspections. Marines were quizzed on actual and likely scenarios with differ-

ent variations. Whenever there was a development that we could not answer at our level, I requested a Staff Judge Advocate to conduct a review. The SJA also held question-and-answer sessions during which the Marines would provide actual scenarios that we had encountered. We would then "what if" the scenario and problem solve with the SJA's input. I believe that when servicemembers are comfortable in the environment they are operating in, comfortable in their ability, the ability of their equipment, and comfortable in what actions they can take, they are less prone to overreact and make a mistake.

All the talk in the world won't matter if leaders don't act responsibly when under fire. Our actions send a message to our subordinate leaders more powerful than all our words combined. How we act will trickle down to all our subordinates. During combat operations in Hadithah, Iraq, my company came under fire. During the fight, an RPG killed my civil affairs officer, and five other Marines were wounded. Although I had just lost a good friend and fellow warrior, I knew that it was important for the Marines to see me respond professionally. They, in turn, acted in a way that kept our honor clean.

Make on-the-spot corrections to uphold the standard...

Torrey Cady

Commander, A/1-37 FA, 3/2 SBCT

I believe that more training on the fog of war, using vignettes coming out of Iraq, would help leaders to really think about these situations before they occur. Just as importantly, they would allow leaders to see the way their Soldiers think when they are placed in the situation. I was very surprised during the train-up for my Balkans deployment in

the 1990s by some of the responses my Soldiers and NCOs gave when placed in complex scenarios via a vignette. The reason they felt comfortable giving the responses they gave was that they honestly did not see anything wrong with the thought processes that led to that response. The vignette training gave me a window into how that Soldier thought, which then gave me the opportunity to train the Soldier and teach him a different way of looking at the situation. It also reinforced the ROE and command guidance and taught my soldiers how those messages applied in different scenarios. My unit did some vignette training prior to Iraq, and we continued to reinforce proper behavior in combat through discussions during AARs and on-the-spot corrections.

Nothing can replace a leader on the scene—leading by example, showing your Soldiers how to act under pressure through your own behavior and immediately correcting the actions of soldiers who are not behaving properly, regardless of the circumstances. If a Soldier treats a noncombatant or prisoner inhumanely, and a leader allows it, then a new standard has been established in your unit that may escalate into a worse act. Leaders at all levels must use the bully pulpit of their position to place command emphasis on what they want their Soldiers thinking about and talking about. If no command emphasis is placed on ethical behavior in combat, don't expect it to occur by itself.

Humanize the indigenous people through personal interaction...

Neal Mayo

Commander, A/1-153 IN, 3rd BCT, 1st Cavalry Division

As an Infantry officer generally focused on the “tougher” side of the job, I used to respond to the term “cultural awareness” with sarcasm and frustration. Having served in Iraq, I am now a firm believer that developing personal relationships with the indigenous people serves as a foundation for success in counterinsurgency operations. Developing professional Soldiers who act appropriately across the full spectrum of conflict requires an enormous amount of

discipline. Our company attempted to meet this challenge through the development of personal relationships with the Iraqi people in Baghdad.

Given the inherent cultural differences between U.S. Soldiers and Arab people, it is incredibly easy to stereotype, associating all Iraqi people with the insurgency. This phenomenon exists especially in cases in which insurgents have conducted recent attacks on U.S. forces. In an effort to combat this phenomenon and create conditions for positive responses, our company leadership attempted to humanize the Iraqi people, interacting with them on a daily basis in a professional manner, creating personal relationships instead of an “us versus them” mentality.

Specifically, the leadership felt it extremely important to conduct dismounted patrolling throughout our area of operations. In addition to the tactical advantages it provided, it allowed us the opportunity to interact more closely with the Iraqi people, capitalizing on the common needs and struggles that we all faced rather than on our cultural differences. Over time, not only did we develop positive relationships with the Iraqi people, thus humanizing them in the eyes of our Soldiers, but the Iraqis felt comfortable sharing actionable intelligence with us, thus leading to a more stable environment and enhancing the force protection of our Soldiers.

We specifically ensured that Soldiers conducted patrols and visited “normal” events—such as school and hospital ribbon-cutting ceremonies, neighborhood soccer games, outdoor musical events, and even community council meetings. Although these events might sound mundane and unexciting—and many times they were—they served as an environment in which Soldiers could associate and connect their experiences from home with the experiences of the Iraqi people we operated around on a daily basis.

Given various threat levels, I clearly understand that this method is not feasible in all environments in which the Army is currently operating. Based on the experiences of our company, though, we believed this mind-set of humanizing the Iraqi people led to more professional soldiering and successful operations across the full spectrum of conflict.

Connecting leaders

CC is Company Commanders.

The CC forum is a voluntary, grass-roots forum that is by-and-for company commanders. The forum is positive and practical—focused like a laser beam on the practice of company command and those things that are important to company commanders. Send article ideas to peter.kilner@us.army.mil.



Company Commanders, connect at <http://CompanyCommand.army.mil>

in conversation

Art by Jody Harmon