



CompanyCommand

Building Combat-Ready Teams



To: Company Commanders
From: Company Commanders

The Art of Rewarding Soldiers

Our Soldiers do more for us than we can ever possibly hope to recognize. Still, the number of ways a commander can reward his or her Soldiers is literally limitless and extends well beyond the standard system of individual and unit awards. Company-level commanders are using both their imaginations and subordinate leaders to reward their troops in ways that are fresh, innovative and, most importantly, meaningful to the Soldiers themselves. Listen in as several experienced commanders discuss the fine art of rewarding Soldiers.

CJ Douglas
K/3-25 IN (USMC)

I took the approach that the best way to recognize a warrior is to praise him to his family. During my first tour in Iraq, I wrote to specific Marines' families. During my second tour in Iraq, I wrote thank-you letters to each Marine's family in my unit. In the letter, I explained that their Marine was doing a great job, how he was making a difference and how much I appreciated the support of his family. In addition, I

made sure to keep their families informed of significant events and other happenings through my family readiness group. I found that recognizing a Marine to his family was rewarding to both the Marine and his family.

Matthew Marston
Troop C, 5-7 CAV

One of my platoon leaders (PLs), along with many of my Soldiers, is really into mixed martial arts/ultimate-fighting competition-type exhibitions, so he asked if we could have a troop combatives tournament. We got the rules for the tournament out of the combatives manual, and the PL certified me and the XO to referee and score matches. We had a weigh-in and made brackets according to weight class. The morning of the event, we had rings set up on the PT field and a safety brief prepared (key risk management considerations: taking off jewelry, checking soldiers' fingernails, briefing illegal holds and positions and knowing when to stop the match). The matches went for two minutes or until one man "tapped out." My SCO and CSM came by to watch and thought it was great. The guys are still talking about it, and I've got a lot of Soldiers who want to try out for the division tournament in December. I like this kind of event because it's a definite break from the usual PT and fosters the ever so elusive "Warrior Ethos."

Jeff Sargent
Company B, 501st MI BN

One other thing I did that Soldiers seemed to like was posting a U.S. map and world map in the company area. We then took photos of each Soldier and linked the photo with their hometown with 550-cord gut and a push pin. This wasn't a reward per se, but it did in some way build the team. A lot of water cooler type discussion happened around the maps.

I took a lot of photos during command. As the time came for me to give up the guidon, I wanted to leave each Soldier with something, so I enlisted the help of one of my tech-savvy Soldiers and made a video that encompassed the entire 20 months. I showed the video the evening be-



Marine company commander MAJ CJ Douglas, center, in Nasiriah, Iraq, with one of his platoon commanders, SSG John Monte, left, and his company 1SG Joseph Angelino.



From left, 2LT Matthew Wiener, SFC William Cooper and CPT Matthew Marston of Troop C, 5-7 Cavalry, officiate at an Army combatives match during their troop combatives tournament.

fore the change of command, and there weren't too many dry eyes in the room. I then copied the 30-minute video on a CD-R for each Soldier to keep. My point is—be your Soldiers' biggest fan. Take an active interest in them as people as well as Soldiers, and they will follow you anywhere.

Dan Dwyer

Company A & HHC/1-63 AR, P/3/16th CAV

I found that one of the best rewards for a Soldier and his family was time off, so they could be together. Part of my battle rhythm as a commander, at the beginning of each month, was filling out personalized cards to those Soldiers whose birthdays landed during that month. The card was worth that day off. If they could not take their birthday off, or if it landed on a weekend or holiday, the Soldier, in concurrence with his chain of command, would use it another day. Before long, the word got out and Soldiers would remind me two months ahead of time when their birthday was. It was really cool and, in the grand scheme of things, a very small token of appreciation for their hard work. The information is readily available in your unit records, and the super trooper I had in my orderly room knew that at the end of each month, it was time to give me next month's list of birthdays.

Mindy Kimball

Company B, 509th PSB

Here's an idea that serves two purposes and applies more to post-deployment morale: When you return from a deployment, take the time to write a letter of thanks to your Soldiers

and personally sign the letter. You don't have to make it flowery or gushy, but just tell them you know about the sacrifices they made and that you appreciate their hard work. Address the letter to that individual Soldier and include the dates of their deployment. Once you write the form letter, you can cut and paste the names—it really doesn't take that much time.

It serves two purposes: First, it shows your Soldiers that you care. Using the word "appreciate" goes further than you can imagine. Many soldiers will share that letter with family and friends, and they can refer to it during their transition period while they are readjusting to garrison (you'll have more morale problems than you think once you redeploy). Second, when the admin tracking of the deployment goes all to heck (as it often does), your Soldiers will each have a letter proving that they deployed (who, what, when, where, why). If later awards or medical benefits come from that deployment, you have taken care of your Soldiers in the long run. This is especially important since many post-deployment award/money/benefits decisions have specific calendar dates and specific geographic locations connected with eligibility.



The "Soldier map" in CPT Jeff Sargent's company area.



CPT Mindy Kimball with two of her soldiers, SSG Gregory Giger, left, and SSG David Campbell, in Korea.

When I left Korea, I sent a postcard to each of my soldiers (handwritten) that was a little more personalized about their tour so far. I asked them to work hard for their new commander and to watch her back like they did for me. My successor told me later that the Soldiers enjoyed the postcards and they did work hard for her. It was only about 75 postcards, and I did it on my flight home. It was nice closure for my command to reflect on each one of my Soldiers.

Paul Voelke

Company A & HHC/4-31 IN, 10th MTN DIV

When it came to rewarding Soldiers, especially as an HHC commander, what I liked to do was to go talk to the BN CDR about the great job someone was doing. He would then seek the Soldier out and give him a coin. It usually caught the Soldier off guard. I also liked to recognize



CPT Paul Voelke, center, with two of his Soldiers, vehicle gunner SPC Matthew Wright, left, and driver SPC Aaron (Doobie) Locke.

guys during my weekly safety brief. The brief was a tool I used to talk to the company informally and was a great time to talk about what had happened during the last week.

For rewarding spouses, my wife and I recognized all the ladies who helped with the FRG at our post-deployment party. It was important to let them know that the work they did was noticed, and it reinforced how important their role in the FRG was.

As others have said previously, the best tool is to talk to Soldiers frequently, and just tell them that you appreciate their hard work.

Ryan Kranc

Troop Q, 4/3 ACR

In an organization like the Cav, rich in tradition, history and an abundance of canine and equestrian extravaganzas (as opposed to mere dog and pony shows), the unit did a lot to recognize soldiers. New spouses were given cavalry garter belts and inducted into the squadron with much cavalry ceremonial pomp and circumstance in a fun atmosphere of hails and farewells. Tiger Squadron would occasionally have Tiger Day, a very organized and well planned kegger and BBQ with designated drivers. Never do I remember an alcohol-related incident stemming from this, partly a result of NCO and leader emphasis, but I think even more it was because of the *esprit de corps* that the event generated.

Before OIF, the regiment conducted spur rides regularly. Sabre Squadron conducted a spouses' spur ride under COL Toby Green. This was a day-long event that was more of a spouse awareness-and-orientation seminar of what their husbands did. Ladies got to go into tanks and Bradleys in the motorpool, work with NVGs in a tent and worked a gunnery exercise in CCTT. At the end, they were awarded the Order of the Spur with a spur-shaped lapel pin.

I think the bottom line on something like this last event is the fact that as Soldiers we have pretty cool jobs. To expose our family members and invite them into our world and see what we do on a limited scale helps families cope with what mom or dad does for a living. It fosters, I think, a bit more mutual understanding and most definitely promotes more discussion among married couples. In addition, it brings the spouses together in a setting different from just a military ball or official military ceremony. In short, they have some fun together.

Frank Jenio

Company C, 1-503 AASLT; Company C, 2-75 RGR

More than anything else, morale building activities require work. My IN BN, while deployed to Iraq, tried to do at least one a month, but believe me, doing so required "extra credit" work, and it's not like the OPTEMPO slowed or stopped to let the BN build some morale. Get your younger guys involved and let them run with some minimal guidance.

My BN had 2 x Organizational Days (standard sports day complete with really crappy trophies bought in a small Iraqi town nearby—which the boys loved). We had a couple of su-



MAJ Jeff Sargent re-enlists SPC Brent Christiansen aboard a Navy MH-53 helicopter in Kuwait in April 2006.

per suppers, and for Halloween we rented donkeys and had donkey races and then did a Fear Factor contest in which the winner got a four-day pass to Qatar. We also had a boxing smoker that featured 2 x fights and the standard Thanksgiving and Christmas meals at which the officers served and the senior NCOs (PSG and above) pulled security at the base camp for two hours so the boys wouldn't have to eat and run. For Christmas, we chopped down a 40-foot tree and then bought some Iraqi lights and decorated it and put it up by a flagpole where we hung the Stars and Stripes.

The younger guys know what truly enhances morale; once you find that out, then it will require some work on your part to bring it to fruition. Whether in garrison or deployed, it is possible to have good events if you put some elbow grease into it.

Daniel Stuewe

PL, C/2-502 INF, 101st ABN DIV

The most important and most effective way to boost morale I've seen has been talking to your Soldiers. It seems so simple, but so many leaders forget to do it. We get caught up in operations and other stuff and forget about what makes a unit great: confident and focused Soldiers.

On Thanksgiving, our battalion commander shook the hand of every soldier in my unit. For 48-72 hours, there

was a noticeable difference in their attitudes, discipline and missions. If a leader sits with a Soldier or a more junior leader and puts an honest effort into talking to his men, they will know who cares about them and find more purpose in their duty than they could have ever achieved on their own.

Be as simple and off-the-wall as possible. Something that might seem stupid will make a Soldier smile quicker than you think. For us, it was the hard-nosed, no-nonsense first sergeant dressing up as Santa (with the rank sewn on the sleeves—nice touch) and handing out gifts to every Soldier in the company. Those Soldiers might be missing their families, but they'll never forget that moment on Christmas.

Remember, just an honest interest in the men can motivate them more than most understand.

Kenneth Burgess

Company C & HHC/2-325 AIR, 82nd ABN DIV

Host award and promotion ceremonies in small (company or lower) and frequent informal events. Personalize the presentations with unique descriptions of the Soldier and the conditions under which he's being rewarded. Allow his teammate, squad leader or platoon sergeant to say something in addition to the officers. I preferred informal ceremonies, with Soldiers gathered closely around and relaxed, over formal ceremonies with Soldiers at attention in

formation while official orders were read. Soldiers love recognition in front of their peers. Do not restrict recognition to official awards. Just pulling guys out in front of their peers for PT, marksmanship, performance in training—anything—shaking their hand, saying well done and reminding them about their contributions to the team goes a long way.

Rewarding Soldiers with breakfast, lunch or dinner is a personal, appreciated method of saying thanks. A guy reenlisting, a job well done on a live-fire, or PCSing from the unit are good excuses for getting a bite to eat. It also affords an opportunity to get feedback on your unit through the eyes of one of your Soldiers. If time is limited, just hit the unit chow hall for 30 minutes.

After new Soldiers completed their first night, mass-tactical airborne operation and a live-fire exercise, I presented them with a yellow safety lanyard that was embroidered with their name. It was a nonabrasive indoctrination that recognized that the Soldiers were now “seasoned.” It solidified their positions as part of the team. This was not a rite of passage—Soldiers need to feel needed and appreciated upon first arrival to the unit—but the recognition did serve to further cement the newer members into the company fold. Any apprehension they may have had about acceptance was dissolved.

Nathaniel Garza

759th Ordnance Company (EOD)

While deployed to Iraq for the early part of OIF-1 (and for all of it), systems were just being established to get all the “comforts” of the war zone in place. For example, the chow hall provided adequate and tasty food. But for me, I was getting tired of it. At work, too, we got into our routine, and work was slowing down and becoming repetitive. I wanted to spice up our routine, and a way to do that is to change what you eat.

In 1994, in the deserts of Fort Bliss, Texas, my squad leader instilled in me five basic things that affect morale. They are (in no particular order): food, ice, mail, pay and

training. Being at Fort Bliss on an FTX, especially during the summers, I experienced firsthand what something as small as ice means to a Soldier when you’re working outside in a desert environment. There was no happier time for me than when I saw the ice truck drive out to our grid to drop off gigantic blocks of ice for our welfare when the temperature was well over 100 degrees. I took that concept of these five items and thought to myself, “What can I do to improve morale (which was never low) or change things up just a bit?”

Being EOD, we receive some of the best training that any unit can receive—quality technical and tactical training. So I didn’t worry about our training. Everyone was enjoying their new deployment pays from DFAS, so I couldn’t influence pay. Our S-6 ensured we had access to e-mail which took care of the mail/e-mail. My battalion S-4, MSG John Landry, worked his butt off to get air conditioning in our building. So I couldn’t help with the ice. Food, my favorite pastime, came to mind. Now, I am selfish in the fact that I didn’t ask everyone what they wanted or ask all the Soldiers to submit three courses of action. I thought of the one food that I love and probably most warm-blooded Americans like, too—nachos. So I had my wife send the ingredients and we had our Nacho Fest. If you could have seen the faces of all the Soldiers when we sat down as an organization to eat, you would have been amazed. It reminded me of the deserts of Fort Bliss when my unit received its blocks of ice. For just a couple of minutes, you forgot you were in Iraq, and you were somehow transferred away from the hardships of the job we had. Together as a unit/family, we enjoyed each other’s fellowship over a fun meal.

Right now, leaders all over the world are sharing ideas on everything from tactics to awards, professional development to past remembrances, and Soldier awards to spouse welcomes. Do you have something to add? Come to companycommand.army.mil and JOIN THE CONVERSATION!

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in conversation

Art by Jody Harmon