



# CompanyCommand

## *Building Combat-Ready Teams*



**To:** Company Commanders  
**From:** Company Commanders

## **Resilient Leadership**

Will our units thrive, survive or fail in the unpredictable, volatile and extreme environment of combat? One factor that determines this is resilience—the capacity to take a blow and come back fighting. Resilience is embodied when an individual or unit resolutely bounces back—mentally, physically, emotionally and morally—after a traumatic event. Resilient leaders and their units are able to maintain their combat effectiveness and professional values even in the face of extreme adversity.

We had the privilege of interviewing a company-level commander who—like so many of our peers—proved to be a resilient leader. Capt. Ryan Howell commanded Grim Troop, Sabre Squadron, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment during OIF III. We talked to him in Tal Afar, Iraq. Listen in as Ryan talks about facing adversity and trauma as a combat leader. These three stories are transcribed excerpts from his oral interview. We believe they provide insight into the critical leader trait called resilience.

### **First Enemy Contact/Loss of Soldiers**

Our first contact with the enemy was an IED explosion that occurred during RIP (relief in place) with the unit we were replacing. Two junior enlisted Soldiers were killed, a senior specialist lost his leg and another specialist was wounded and later returned to duty. It woke my guys up.

We got everyone together and talked about the two Soldiers who died. They couldn't find one of my Soldier's dog tags; they couldn't find his ID card. So I had to go in and see the bodies. It solidified some anger in me. It empowered me to be focused and diligent in hunting down the enemy.

At that moment, I could have put the troop on line and leveled the whole city. Everybody was angry. I guess that wasn't so much a concern, but it was a reality that I knew was out there—the whole vengeance thing. You know, "My buddy got killed, so I'm going to go kill someone," and trying to justify actions that way. I made sure the guys understood that there has never been a place for that in the American Army and there never will be.

To know that they would have done anything at my command reminds me of the whole burden of command. I'd always heard, "Your guys will look to you for answers," but I didn't truly understand it until then. I realized that I had to be the strong one—the father figure—and show them what they needed to do. It's scary, too, to realize that you have the ability to give candy to a kid and in the next instant destroy an entire neighborhood with a simple push of a button on the radio. It's a very sobering experience, because I realize the decisions I make will affect me and my Soldiers'

lives and the people of Iraq. My decisions can bring credit or shame to my nation.

I pulled the guys in and told them, "We took one on the chin today, but we are going to get right back out there and get them. We fell off the horse, and we are going to get back on the horse." I told them, "We need to grieve, but we have a mission to do. Everyone is going to handle this differently. Don't let your anger turn towards your buddies. Some will cry, some will laugh, some won't say anything. We are a family, and if there's one time we need each other, it's now. Do what you need to, and then when you get back out there, be professional Soldiers. When you find the enemy, kill or detain them. But keep in mind there will be innocent bystanders out there, and you need to treat them with dignity and respect. You need to direct your anger at those who deserve it, and direct your compassion towards those who deserve that also." I wanted to keep the guys focused on the enemy as an outlet for their anger and focused on helping the Iraqi people as an outlet for compassion.

When it was time to go back into the city after that, I could see the hesitation in my men. I told them, "It's going to be OK. I'm going with you." You know you have to take action, and you know you have to take charge a little more than you normally would. I tried to do whatever I could to reassure the guys that this is not the end of the world, although it is a horrible event. The experience made me think so much more about the personal dynamics of combat. It's easy to sit in an office and say, "Go do this and go do that."



*Resilient leadership proved crucial in this search for weapons caches by members of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment in Tal Afar, Iraq.*

It's harder to say, "We are going to go do this, and let me get my body armor on because I'm going with you."

### **Heavy Contact Involving Civilian Casualties**

We conducted a patrol with Iraqi Army soldiers in a part of the city that was supportive of the old regime and angry with our presence. We wanted to talk with them and say, "Hey, we are here to help. What are your concerns?" I don't think we made it a hundred meters before we ran into an ambush. We returned fire, killed an insurgent, and for the next three hours we worked through the complex urban terrain while under fire.

As we were fighting, the insurgents would set up in a position, fire at us with RPG and small-arms fire, and then bound back. This is one of those times when you realize all of the power in your hands. We were receiving enemy contact from an alleyway and from behind a car in another direction. Our small-arms fire was not having an effect, so I told one of my Bradleys to suppress the car with coax machine-gun fire, and the enemy subsequently moved out. It was about an hour before we were able to clear out that area and get down to where the car was. We moved up to the car and found two dead children behind it, and a blood trail where a wounded insurgent had fled. We've seen kids throwing hand grenades and sometimes the insurgents use them as human shields. One of the neighbors con-

firmed that the insurgents had grabbed one of the kids.

We brought up body bags and I said to the people, "We want to meet with you to make restitution." We tried to get the people back and attempted to assist, but it was starting to get out of control. My interpreter was phenomenal. He said, "Sir, here's the deal. They need to be allowed to do what they are going to do in the mourning process." They were physically hurting themselves. They were inflicting pain like banging their heads against the wall and slapping themselves. And there were people starting to wash the bodies—the feet and the hands—preparing them for burial.

Having seen dead bodies before helped me. One of my sergeants came up and almost threw up. Another guy was about to cry. I was like, "OK, you need to leave; you are acting fine, you stay." I worked to set up security and was overcome by events. I was too busy to really know what was going on, and I was trying to be sympathetic to the families at the same time. The Iraqi Army soldiers were starting to get hysterical and trying to comfort and pray for the family. The Iraqi commander said, "My men don't need to see this." So he set up security on the perimeter. It was like Western and Arab culture—everything came to a head right there.

Eventually we were able to reconcile with the family. We arrested some guys that day, and we found the insurgent who was wounded.

The gunner of the Bradley who fired was later sent back to the States for PTSD. He was a brand new father and his wife was pregnant with their second child. I told him, "Look, I told you to fire," but he just couldn't handle it.

So I've got collateral damage in my face, children dead, and a Soldier who did not take it very well because he was the gunner. That was another hard lesson to learn.

I couldn't have built a better crime scene. You've got the Bradley, you've got the car, tons of AK47 ammunition behind the car. You can also see on the Bradley where all the enemy rounds hit. I showed the gunner pictures of where the Bradley was hit and where he wounded the enemy—we could see the blood trail going from behind the car. It didn't work for him, unfortunately. I couldn't have staged a better vignette for tragic events that happen in war.

### **Sustained Contact with Reinforced Enemy**

We conducted a raid based on intelligence that identified the location of a weapons cache and foreign-fighter safe house. The target was two houses adjacent to a school. We rolled into the target area, established security and ran into prepared enemy defensive positions. As soon as the Bradley ramp opened, a machine gun fired on us from the school. We killed that guy and then found ourselves in the middle of hell. The enemy had lots of RPGs and machine guns. One of my soldiers was shot in the throat. We were firing everything we had at the school, but they were dug in. We could not get to them without a serious fight. We also received a lot of the contact from alleys as they repositioned other forces. It was about a five-hour firefight. When my First Sergeant brought in the medic vehicle to evacuate our wounded soldier, he was hit by an IED, which flipped the vehicle and crushed the driver. In spite of his own wounds, First Sergeant was pulling guys out of direct fire from the enemy and covering bodies with his own body. Fuel was everywhere, power lines were down and sparking all over the place.

We were still receiving fire from the school, so I was working with the aviation unit to fire a Hellfire missile at the enemy position. But at the last minute the pilot was called off. There was confusion about a report that there might be women and children in the school. In actuality, the women and children reported were in a separate building. We ended up pulling back after the contact died down to sporadic fire. There were lots of enemy killed and wounded; we had defeated the counterattack. One of my Soldiers had been killed and another had his leg amputated. Everything was a blur.

I've run this through my head a million times. There was a point when everyone on the net was talking—"One of our soldiers is dead." And I had to get on and say, "OK, take a deep breath. I don't want any communication on the net for 30 seconds—let's get refocused." I remember at that point sitting on the ground by a truck saying out loud to myself, "Gosh, guys are wounded, one Soldier is dead, I have 360-degree contact with the enemy and we are getting low on ammunition." Then it was, "Let's go!"

After the contact, there was a point when I could see my guys looking at the detainees we'd taken as if they would

■ **Resilient leaders embrace challenges.** Instead of despairing, they are energized and rise to the occasion. Their confidence energizes those around them. They see change as positive, and they believe that experiences—even failures—make them and their units better in the long run.

■ **Resilient leaders are positive and optimistic,** even under extreme circumstances. They not only hope for the best, they expect the best. They have the ability to face harsh reality and call it what it is, but they don't get mired down in the negative. The attitude of resilient leaders creates an echo effect that reverberates through the unit.

■ **Resilient leaders remain committed to the mission and their people for the long haul.** Instead of withdrawing and shirking their responsibilities, resilient leaders remain fully engaged and visible, relentlessly pressing forward, on toward victory. Their presence at the decisive points of the operation clarifies their commitment. There is no doubt in anyone's mind as to where these types of leaders stand as far as loyalty to their soldiers and to the mission are concerned.

■ **Resilient leaders take action.** They believe that outcomes are not locked in stone; instead of being paralyzed by the vastness of the challenge at hand, resilient leaders take action to influence those things that they can influence. These leaders understand that they can't "eat the elephant in one bite," so they break the situation down and work at it "one bite at a time." Resilient leaders develop plans that transform overwhelming situations into actionable tasks for the unit.

■ **Resilient leaders are effective communicators, which includes listening.** They are tuned in and perceptive and continuously engage with their soldiers. In addition, they use multiple techniques to keep their soldiers informed and to help them "make sense of" and understand what is happening. Examples include face-to-face discussion, written notes/newsletters, and radio commo. Soldiers in these units believe that their voice is heard, and they also believe that they know what is going on. They have a strong sense of purpose and sense of direction in the midst of chaos.

like to beat the s\*\*\* out of them. I told them, "We aren't doing anything to the prisoners." I then told my leaders to get the Soldiers focused on working on their vehicles, and I put my First Sergeant in charge of the detainees. I was trying to refocus their energies.

In the aftermath of this experience, I learned I have to make more time for me—time to release all my anger and sadness and frustration and everything else. I was listening to my guys and counseling my guys, but it was my First Sergeant who sat me down and said, "You wanna talk?" I said, "No, I'm good." But he didn't let up. "No, we need to



*Capt. Ryan Howell commanded Grim Troop, Sabre Squadron, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment during OIF III.*

talk,” he insisted. So he started saying some things and I started to say some things. Then he said, “Why don’t you talk to the chaplain?” I told him, “Nah, I’m OK.” But the next thing I know our chaplain was down to see me the next day—“First Sergeant said for me to talk with you.”

I appreciate more than ever that this is a volunteer army. A lot of guys joined out of patriotism after 9/11. These guys are over here fighting for their country. But now it’s more than that—they are fighting for their buddies, they are fighting for a guy in the troop they don’t even like, but he’s their brother in arms. And it has really made me understand more deeply the humanity of every Soldier. Before commanding here in Iraq, I thought the whole PTSD thing was a bunch of crap. I’m more sympathetic now to the fact that a human being is a fragile organism. I hadn’t really thought about or planned for how I was going to sustain my Soldiers for 12 months of combat. So, I set up a rotation where they weren’t always in the fight—finding a way for them to decompress. I think that’s the biggest thing that is different from anything I’ve done—trying to find a way to do continuous combat operations without destroying the human being.

**Note to company commanders:** Please see more company commander experiences like this in your professional forum <http://companycommand.army.mil>. We invite you to join the conversation.

Finally, we would like to thank Ryan for taking the time to share from his experience so that we can learn and grow as a profession. Ryan, thank you for modeling this for us and for living out your professional calling so faithfully.

## About CompanyCommand

CC is a place for company-level commanders—current, past and future—to connect and share ideas and experiences. This is YOUR forum—it is voluntary, grassroots, by and for company commanders and is focused like a laser beam on CompanyCommand. By joining, you are gaining access to an amazing community of professionals who love Soldiers and are committed to building combat-ready teams. Collectively, as a profession, we possess the knowledge that can enable us to build and lead our units more effectively. With this in mind, please participate, contribute and tap into the experiences of others. You’ll never know the full impact of taking a moment to share your experience with others!

## Connecting leaders



*Art by Jody Harmon*

## in conversation

The CC space is organized around Leadership, Warfighting, Training, Fitness, Supply, Maintenance, Force Protection and Soldiers & Family.

We also have an area specifically for Professional Reading, as well as the CDR’s Log (as highlighted in this article), where commanders are journaling their command experiences. And, if you are preparing for command, we recommend you check out the “1st 90 Days” topic located in the Leadership Section of the web site. If CC is adding value to you, encourage your platoon leaders to check out their forum—a forum that is centered on excellence in platoon leadership—at

<http://platoonleader.army.mil>.

Send article ideas to [tony.burgess@us.army.mil](mailto:tony.burgess@us.army.mil).

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