



# Company Command

*Building Combat-Ready Teams*



**To:** Company Commanders

**From:** Company Commanders

## **Leadership Challenges in Iraq**

Leading America's sons and daughters in combat is an awesome privilege and responsibility. Soldiers entrust their lives to us; our decisions in war have life-or-death consequences for them and many others. Our solemn duty, then, is to do all we can to command our units expertly.

The more we learn from each other, the less we have to learn from our own mistakes. With that in mind, more

than 120 company-level commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan have sat down this year with the Company-Command team and shared their leadership experiences. A first step to preparing ourselves for leadership challenges is being aware of them. Listen in as company commanders in Operation Iraqi Freedom briefly share their most demanding leadership challenges.

**Shane Finn**

C/4-31 IN

### **Developing a company-level intelligence cell**

Our battalion has the best S-2 I have ever worked with, yet higher intel still fails us daily. It's the nature of the war. In order to stay in touch with what is going on I have always devoted hours daily to figuring out the terrain (people) in my sector. It's a challenge to develop my subordinates and my command post to appreciate the importance of company-level intel processes, but we have developed some good ideas on how to battle this monster. At the company level, you have to figure out and learn the personalities in every household in the battle space in order to understand where you want your troops to maneuver to have the desired effect of isolating the insurgents from the people.

**Jim Walker**

A/2-12 CAV

### **Training/working with Iraqi Security Forces**

Working with the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) is a huge challenge. They are often unreliable and unwilling to operate independently. Elements of the ISF, especially the Iraqi Police here in Baghdad, are actively engaged in anti-Coalition forces activities and extra-judicial killings. You want to help the ISF to develop and improve so that the government of Iraq can establish control and we can go home, but you also have to keep both eyes open so you can reduce, or at least not unwittingly enable, their illicit activities.

**Brendan Gallagher**

B/1-5 CAV

### **Managing risk**

Managing risk is a constant process that could have catastrophic implications if not done effectively. There is a constant tension between protecting your Soldiers and accepting necessary risk to accomplish the mission. There are also trade-offs between short- and long-term effects. For example, decisions about today's guard force will impact tomorrow's missions (Soldiers' rest, equipment readiness). Should you have more Soldiers manning the entry control point today or more Soldiers rested for tonight's raid? Managing risk pertains to all operations—defending our combat outposts, patrolling, rest plans and more. Where do you choose to accept the risk and how do you mitigate the effects? The commander has to make these



*CPT Shane Finn at Company Patrol Base Corregidor, in a rural area south of Baghdad, values "the importance of company-level intel processes."*



*CPT Brendan Gallagher commands his unit on a company-sized raid in western Baghdad.*

decisions and live with their consequences, which literally can have life or death implications for your Soldiers.

### **Jayson Morgan**

**B/2-32 FA**

#### **Performing non-METL missions**

The most significant experience I have had so far was converting a field artillery battery to an infantry company in the weeks immediately before, during and after our deployment. This was not very difficult for the platoon leaders, but the NCOs were a different story. In artillery, NCOs are more technically oriented. They take great pride in knowing everything possible about their weapon system, and they work diligently to get their crew drill down to as fast as possible. But they are used to taking all orders from an officer. For every fire mission executed, there are several checks, all of which are blessed off by an officer. It was very difficult to get some of the more experienced NCOs out of this mind-set. Developing squad leaders and team leaders proved to be most challenging. In the past months the battery has become very good at its role. But this is at a cost. If we were asked to fire artillery today, it would be very difficult and time-consuming to execute. I think our technical mind-set has led us to be very successful with the non-kinetic missions. This, in turn, has led to successful kinetic missions. Overall, while challenging, this change of mission has been a positive experience for the battery.

### **Josh Taylor**

**B/1-73 CAV**

#### **Ad-hoc task-orgs/switching AOs in mid-tour**

Since deploying, my task organization has changed five times and my battle space four times. These kinds of changes are necessary in a nonlinear battlefield. The environment is very fluid and commanders have to be prepared to change with it in order to keep ahead of the enemy.

*CPT Jayson Morgan interacts with Iraqi civilians to assess 'atmospherics' during a patrol in the Yarmouk neighborhood of Baghdad in April 2007.*

### **James Downing**

**C/1-325 AIR**

#### **Coaching a struggling subordinate**

My most challenging decision so far was temporarily suspending one of my platoon leaders from his duties and responsibilities. At the time, he was failing to consistently enforce some tough but nonnegotiable standards, such as maintaining security at all times, as well as having some difficulty understanding my intent about appropriate uses of force. After being given some time to think about what is expected of him as a leader in combat, he's back on the job and doing much better.

### **Anonymous**

**Current commander in Iraq**

#### **Receiving inadequately resourced missions**

My most demanding challenge is being inadequately resourced to effectively conduct operations in a highly volatile area. We conduct continuous operations while maintaining force protection and force projection, despite receiving no backfill for the personnel and equipment that we have lost in battle. We are directed to operate on multiple lines of operation instead of focusing on the one or two where we could make an impact, given our resources.

### **Leo Wyszynski**

**C/10th CAV (OIF-2)**

#### **Preventing burnout in yourself**

More than any single event, maintaining focus over the length of the deployment was extremely challenging. It took me several months when I was approaching the breaking point to understand that taking care of myself in terms of sleeping, eating and discussing issues with other commanders was essential to maintaining the energy required to lead.



### **Having a Soldier Killed or Seriously Wounded**

This is the leadership challenge cited most often by experienced company-level commanders. Nothing can ever prepare us completely for this tragic challenge, but these commanders hope that their experiences will help their fellow combat leaders.

“What has been my most demanding wartime leadership challenge? Leading a freshly arrived unit through the grieving process for a senior NCO lost on the first day of patrolling.”

—Robert Richardson, A/1-7 Cav

“Trying to keep the company mission-focused after suffering substantial combat losses; this includes my own feelings and perspectives after my own patrol suffered a loss due to a catastrophic IED.”

—Rob Nevins, D/2-5 CAV

“Walking into an aid station and seeing one of the strongest men I have ever known reduced by an IED that took both legs from him. Staying with him, looking him in the eyes and telling him that he is in good hands. Then finding out, two hours later, that he passed away in surgery and delivering that news to a platoon that had lost an NCO just five days previously to a sniper.”

—Mike Baka, C/1-26 IN

“Maintaining focus and composure as I watched a Soldier’s corpse burn next to a burning vehicle with ammunition still cooking off, then fighting the feeling of helplessness that comes from it in order to recover the body and get it out of sight of the other Soldiers.”

—Cecil Strickland, C/1-26 IN

“Dealing with the death of one of my most trusted and competent platoon sergeants.”

—Sung Kato, D/1-505 PIR

“Dealing with everything surrounding the loss of four soldiers at once.”

—Chris Wehri, C and HHT/1-7 CAV

“Working through the loss of two Soldiers (team leaders) to IEDs, trying to rebuild the fire teams and squads that experienced the losses.”

—Adam Stocking, 543rd MP CO

“Suffering the loss of one-third of a platoon in three minutes, followed by the long-term effects on the Soldiers (stress, PTSD, anger).”

—Buddy Ferris, C/2-505 PIR

“Leading soldiers back into areas where contact was near guaranteed. Taking casualties nearly every day in the same market area and still suiting back up to go in and explaining to my Soldiers why it’s important to do it.”

—Jay Wisham, E/2-5 CAV

“Writing letters home to the families of my Soldiers who had been killed.”

—Jim Rogers, A/1-16 IN (OIF-2)

“Dealing with the loss of a Soldier—delivering the news to the company (for those who didn’t know), properly memorializing and paying tribute, staying mission-focused and continuing the mission, and identifying Soldiers’ emotional/psychological reactions, sometimes months afterwards.”

—Jeff Noll, B/1-23 IN



*CPT Mike Baka greets an Iraqi Army soldier before a joint patrol in Adhamiyah, Baghdad.*

**Ed Lerz**

HHC/2-3 IN

### **Preventing burnout in others**

Trying to keep my subordinates and Soldiers informed and motivated during clearing operations in other units’ battle spaces is a big challenge. We move to a new area every few days, so we constantly have to become familiar with a new battle space. We don’t have the satisfaction of staying in an area of operation to see the results of our work. Also, my unit is a headquarters and headquarters company that operates in a nonstandard role as a smaller, plug-and-play maneuver element. We do just as much as a line company, but with fewer vehicles and personnel. I try to manage OPTEMPO so my men have as predictable a schedule as possible.

## Top Challenges of Army Company Commanders in Iraq

The CompanyCommand team surveyed 84 combat-experienced company commanders in Iraq from April through June 2007, as well as 25 company commanders from previous Operation Iraqi Freedom rotations, a total of 109 combat-tested commanders.

*Which of the following wartime experiences of Company Commanders do you think would be most valuable to gain a deeper understanding of as a profession? Select up to 10.*

Frequency	% citing	Challenge
62	57%	Having a Soldier killed or seriously wounded.
58	53%	Developing your own company-level intelligence cell or processes.
53	49%	Training and/or working alongside indigenous security forces.
51	47%	Dealing with burnout in yourself and others.
48	44%	Engaging with the local population.
39	36%	Interacting with indigenous political or social leaders.
38	35%	Dealing with Family Readiness Group issues.
38	35%	Coaching/mentoring a struggling subordinate.
37	34%	Performing non-METL missions.
37	34%	Dealing with combat stress/PTSD among your Soldiers.
36	33%	Managing risk, in terms of mission accomplishment versus force protection.
36	33%	Working with ad-hoc task organizations.
33	30%	Operating autonomously from your parent unit (e.g., company outpost).
33	30%	Adapting your unit's SOPs/TTPs to counteract the enemy.
32	29%	Receiving poorly defined or inadequately resourced missions.
30	28%	Communicating the strategic mission to your Soldiers in terms they understand.
30	28%	Building your relationship with your first sergeant.
30	28%	Deciding to fire a subordinate leader.
30	28%	Taking command while deployed.
30	28%	Dealing with varying interpretations of rules of engagement or changed ROE.
29	27%	RIP/TOA/battle handover challenges.
29	27%	Making a decision when all options are ethically problematic.
24	22%	Switching area of operations in mid-tour.
22	20%	Leading your Soldiers through bad news (e.g., tour extension).
21	19%	Making judgment calls that violate a higher-unit SOP or policy.
21	19%	Dealing with unethical actions by your own subordinates.
20	18%	Sharing hardships with your Soldiers.
15	14%	Addressing fear—in yourself and/or others.
15	14%	Helping your Soldier ramp up/ramp down in accordance with the situation.
12	11%	Integrating new Soldiers into your unit while deployed.
12	11%	Being the subject of an investigation.
12	11%	Killing noncombatants.
11	10%	Dealing with rear-detachment issues.
11	10%	Losing equipment—due to enemy action, negligence, accident, etc.
11	10%	Dealing with unethical proposals/actions by a senior officer.
9	8%	Experiencing an actual or near-miss fratricide in your unit.
8	7%	Killing enemy combatants.
7	6%	Working with NGOs, host-nation services, OGAs, etc.
7	6%	Being mentored by a superior—you made a mistake and were supported.



Above left, 1LT Chris Harrington and CPT Carl Dick during the construction of Combat Outpost Firecracker in central Ramadi. Above right, Soldiers of HHC/2-3 Infantry conduct a dismounted patrol.

**Carl Dick**  
C/9 EN

### Working with ad-hoc task organizations

Commanding an ad-hoc company team of 190+ Soldiers, Marines and Seabees while building COP Firecracker for the Marine Corps. We constructed the largest COP in Ramadi in four days—working 24/7 and emplacing approximately 100,000 sandbags. The Marine task force had a great plan and provided great support. My company and I showed up two days before the operation kicked off, and as soon as the site was seized, we

became the main effort, leading attached platoons of Marines and Seabees.

*The intent of this article is to increase our shared awareness of the leadership challenges that company commanders are facing in the war. If you are preparing to command Soldiers in combat, or if you are a currently commissioned officer who is willing to share your own leadership experiences, we invite you to log on to <http://companycommand.army.mil> and join the conversation.*

## 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

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 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>.