



# Company Command

*Building Combat-Ready Teams*



**To:** Junior Officers  
**From:** Junior Officers

## Leading our Soldiers After They Lose One of Their Own

*“Private Paton was killed by a sniper. Shot through the neck. He was a good kid and always had a smile on his face. He was very close to my Soldiers, and they took it real hard. My Soldiers were so angry and were asking me, ‘Why are we helping these people? They are just shooting us and killing our friends. Why are we doing this?’ I had to deal with my Soldiers being down-and-out—coming up to me and crying. I had never seen my soldiers crying before.”*

This leadership challenge was experienced by LT Matt Burch, a platoon leader in Iraq. Like so many other junior officers, he has led his Soldiers through the emotional aftermath of losing a comrade in war. We shared Matt’s story with other combat-tested leaders and asked them, “What would you do?” Listen in as they share their insights with a desire to help others be more prepared for this type of leadership challenge.

### Mike Dick

**B and HHC/1-64 AR, 2/3 ID**

This did happen to me. SGT Kelly S. Morris was one of my team leaders and was killed by a sniper who shot him through the vest above the plate with armor-piercing ammunition. SGT Morris died in the arms of his squad leader.

Some salient thoughts:

1. The unit needs to take time to grieve. We needed to pull back and talk it through, explaining that there are good people and bad people everywhere; for example, cops get shot in New York City, but it doesn’t mean the whole city is terrible.

2. Give your men and yourself time and *permission* to grieve. I cried, and I did so at the memorial service in front of my troops. They did, too. The next day, we cinched up our chinstraps and drove on.

3. Units need to develop rituals to cope—memorial services, and other things. One of my squads sat down one night and carefully burned SGT Morris’ bloodstained gear while they stood at attention. They then brought out a guitar and sang some of his favorite songs. It was their way of saying good-bye.

4. Leaders need to step up and help clean up the mess—literally and figuratively. Soldiers should not have to clean out their own bloodstained vehicles; instead, maintenance and medical personnel should take care of this, and unit leaders should assist. Lead-



*CPT Mike Dick, right, and his fire support officer, 1LT Keith Williams, soon after their patrol was attacked by a vehicle borne improvised explosive device along Route Predators in East Baghdad in March 2005.*

ers need to use a critical incident debrief team (with combat stress control and chaplain) to help the squad and platoon.

5. Commanders and first sergeants step up at these points and set the example—they grieve but carry on. Soldiers must know that their humanity is encouraged and respected, but at the same time, grief cannot be allowed to debilitate the unit.

**Stacy Gervelis**  
3rd PLT, 272 MP CO

As a leader, you have to deal with this on numerous occasions, and not just when a Soldier is killed. However, the best thing to do is have the chaplain, the combat stress team and the counselors ready to talk to your platoon to deal with the crying and the emotions people have when a Soldier is killed. They are the experts and *very* helpful.

As a platoon leader, you need to sit down with your squad leaders and platoon sergeant and see what their feelings are and make sure they are on the same page as you when you talk to your platoon. Also, make sure they are not making comments like, “Why are we helping these people?” in front of the Soldiers. After talking to your NCOs, sit your entire platoon down and explain to them that the actions of one sniper do not reflect the sentiments of the entire country. Then go over the rules of engagement so they understand, and wrap up with letting the Soldiers know you have an open door and that the chaplain, combat stress team and others are always available.

It’s *very* important to address these feelings before they get out of control and you have Soldiers shooting civilians. Do *not* ignore the side comments people make; they gen-

erally tell you what the true sentiments of the platoon are. Making sure your Soldiers distinguish the enemy from the civilians is an ongoing battle in a nonlinear battlefield.

**Paul Krattiger**  
C/1-4 CAV, 1 ID

There are two things that need to happen. As the platoon leader, you have to motivate the Soldiers to do the mission right now. They might have to go out in 10 minutes, so a short-term fix is motivating them to do what they are told because they are Soldiers. Have them focus on the mission at hand, and ensure that they know that if they are not giving 100 percent, the enemy has the advantage, and someone else could get hurt or killed because they were focused on feeling sorry for themselves or disagreeing with why they are there. In addition, you need to let them know that you acknowledge their issues and that you will address them soon.

Your next encounter should be focusing on the long haul—why we are here, why we are doing this mission. As the leader, you will have to find things to motivate your Soldiers. They will be different from what the division, brigade, battalion and possibly company commanders are saying. Redefine success so that your Soldiers can identify it on a daily basis. Make sure that they see the positive impact—families reunited, kids going to school and other things.

When Soldiers go on missions, they know they have a job, but they are very focused on taking care of each other. Promote this fact. We are here because we volunteered to serve our country. We may not be able to control what is asked of us, but we can look out for and protect our fellow Soldier.

Soldiers need reinforcement every day on the positive things they are doing. You have to find them and point them out if guys are having a hard time seeing them. This will be an issue in every type of unit, and it is there even when Soldiers are not getting killed or wounded.

**Aaron Pearsall**  
3/B/3-71 CAV, 3/10 ID

Soldiers cry, and sometimes it is necessary, so don’t create an environment where it’s seen as “weak.” The key is to keep their heads in the game until it is safe to decompress. Sometimes all this took for me was to remind the men we needed to finish the mission first. That’s the first part. The second part, when it is safe, is to let your Soldiers know that it’s OK to mourn their fallen friend. It is important for them to know that you are hurt by the loss as much as they are. Soldiers like a hard, tough leader, but they don’t want a robot who has no feelings, especially no feelings for the loss of a



*1LT Stacy Gervelis conducts a final vehicle check before a mission in Baghdad in September 2004.*



*1LT Aaron Pearsall cools down at his platoon patrol base after a long mission in the mountains of Afghanistan.*

team member. Also, it's not wrong to give one of your guys a hug or an arm around the shoulder for encouragement. I wouldn't make a habit of it, but some guys just respond to it. That part comes down to knowing your Soldiers.

Finally, I don't think it is entirely possible to answer the question, "Why are we doing this?" for each individual. My experience is that people have to justify in their own minds why they go through war. Soldiers at the platoon level see a diplomatic answer as fake, as well as not a good enough reason to fight. It is up to the individual to answer why he is risking his life in a faraway place. Give the Soldiers time to mourn, use the comfort of the brotherhood of the team and then give them a focused task that requires their energy and can yield success.

The task is the hardest part to define, because every situation is different, but examples include increased training of local police, helping schools or working on local projects to bring aid to the area. Again, the point is not to give them busywork, but something that will have tangible results and keep them focused.

### **Nick Ayers**

**B/1-34 AR, 1/1 ID**

First, I think the platoon leader needs to have a serious heart-to-heart with the platoon sergeant [PSG] to develop a game plan to get the platoon back into gear. There is obviously a lot of stress and anger, and apparently the platoon's junior leadership is not able to contain it. This is a problem. As I develop a plan with the PSG, I would enlist the advice of the commanding officer and first sergeant as well. This doesn't mean that I would need/want them down there fixing my problems, but I would solicit advice.

Second, after talking with the PSG, he and I would get the NCOs together and refocus their efforts. We would remind

them of their responsibilities, about how anger and frustration are normal but must be channeled and maintained. They (the NCOs) need to get a grip on the platoon, but it's critical that the lieutenant and platoon sergeant appear united when addressing the other NCOs. I would make sure that I was in the room when the PSG talked to the NCOs (and not just let the PSG take care of it—but that is just my style in this kind of circumstance). After I was sure that they "got the message," I would allow the PSG to talk with the other NCOs alone.

Third, as soon as possible afterward, the platoon needs to regroup, and I (the platoon leader) would talk to the

platoon about our responsibilities as Soldiers, about accomplishing the missions given us. I would acknowledge the anger and sense of loss from PVT Paton's death, but then tell them that it needs to stop now and that the only way to keep the platoon moving forward is by getting back to the missions assigned, going back to doing things right. I would remind them that there are 35 (or whatever number) Soldiers still in the platoon, whose lives and safety depend on them accomplishing the missions given. I would remind them that attacks from the community will probably occur in the future (even if they are giving out aid). This is a fact of life. If they start letting this frustration overtake them and take it out on the populace, then things will get really bad, and "grandmas will be on the street putting out IEDs and shooting RPGs."

Fourth, I would identify individuals who may be having greater difficulty with the loss, talk to them one-on-one and consider integrating outside assets such as the CO, first sergeant, unit chaplain or combat stress units.

Fifth, I would talk to the CO and try to get my troops back out on mission.

### **Casey Randall**

**A/4-27 FA, 2/1 AD**

The first thing I would do is acknowledge the pain and frustration. I would seek informal opportunities to talk with the men and allow them to share their feelings without attribution. I would also work with the commander to schedule a meeting with the squad/patrol affected and a mental health rep and the chaplain. As part of the unit response, I would encourage Soldiers to write letters to PVT Paton's loved ones in order to share experiences of who he was and the nature of his impact on the unit. At the end of the 24-hour down period, I would sit down with my leaders and

*CPT Casey Randall reenlists SPC Tarrod Jackson in Baghdad's International Zone in May 2006.*



assess who was ready to return to the fight and who might need additional attention. Armed with all this, I would sit down with my commander and discuss options for both getting back into the fight and continuing the recovery from the trauma.

**Joe Ewers**  
C/1-6 IN, 2/1 AD

Communicate, communicate, communicate. When it comes to messages like “Dignity and respect to the Iraqi people,” you must be relentless and boring. This message of how to treat the Iraqi people was my final “key task” in my commander’s intent on every operation order that I published in Iraq. Your Soldiers must be continually reminded that: The Iraqi people and the insurgents are not one and the same people; dignity and respect for the local populace have both near- and far-term security implications for your unit—today’s flagrant disrespect can be tomorrow’s WIA/KIA [wounded in action/killed in action], and we should not punish the populace at large for the actions of one specific person or group. On the third point (group punishment), ask them if they like getting punished for something that their squad mate did? Universally, the answer is a resounding “no,” therefore solidifying your case. You will never know where your Soldiers stand on this continuum unless you continually maintain a dialogue about it. Finally, perfect tranquility on this front does not necessarily mean success. Rather, it can often mean that the issues simply aren’t reaching your awareness. You should have some conflict and struggle on these issues, but they should be dealt with in a constructive and solution-oriented manner.

**A 25th ID Company Commander**

First and foremost, I’d be honest and let them know how I was feeling as well. I remember crying with my Soldiers on at least three separate occasions when my guys were killed or seriously injured. Some people think that sharing your emotions will somehow jeopardize your position as a leader by showing your Soldiers that you’re soft or maybe that you’re falling apart and won’t be able to lead well anymore because your focus and determination have been compromised. I found that the opposite is true, and that shared emotion builds trust. My Soldiers knew how much I cared about their buddies who were killed or injured, because they could see it. I didn’t put on a facade of outward strength and pretend that it was all just a part of combat and that we just needed to get over it and move on. Consequently, they also knew that I felt the same way about them. They knew that I did not take their lives for granted and that, in the planning and execution of combat operations, their lives and best interests were really, really important to me.

That being said, I can tell you that when a Soldier was killed or seriously injured in our battalion, we got after it. We were more aggressive (not violent, but aggressive) in our pursuit of the enemy and our dedication to improving security in our area of operation and more alert, more determined to succeed. Platoons never took a day off after they suffered a loss, and they never asked for it. We always made time for special recognition of our killed or seriously wounded Soldiers with memorial ceremonies and other remembrances but understood that the best coping and healing occurs when you are actively engaged together in the fight.

Like anyone, my perspective is, in large part, a product of my experience. I was fortunate to have never had so many casualties that my company or one of my platoons was combat ineffective. Unfortunately, I know that many units have had such experiences and are in the midst of such an experience right now, and I don't pretend to know what that is like. What I do know is that this kind of attitude and warrior spirit starts with leaders—squad leaders, platoon leaders, commanding officers. While I didn't always agree with everything we were doing politically or some of the strategic decisions that had resulted in our situation on the ground in 2004-05, it really didn't matter. While you and your Soldiers need to understand these things and the strategic effects of your small unit operations, it is most important that as the leader of your company, platoon or squad, you figure out what does make sense and what you are committed to (like killing and capturing terrorists who want to kill you, making life better for the good people in your area that are just trying to feed their families and raise their babies, and taking care of each other). You then make these the purposes that drive the tasks you conduct on a day-to-day basis. It is your job to provide your Soldiers with a good task and purpose at all times, to ensure that these tasks are contributing to the success of your overall counterinsurgency strategy and then to take advantage of opportunities to share that strategy and make the connection between their day-to-day operations and strategic success.

As a leader, you should question what you're doing constantly and should always be in search of a better way, especially when bad things happen. You have to do it, however, in a way that prevents purposeless doubt from becoming part of your unit mentality.

### Chris DeRuyter

3/B and Mortar/1-325 AIR, 2/82; 1/A/1-75 RGR

I would reply to the Soldier with, "I understand your pain, and I'm as upset about it as you are. But we all volunteered to do this job. We all volunteered knowing full well that we may be the one to get a round in the face, yet we still volunteered. It's normal to be furious and pissed off and frustrated. But in the end, we volunteered to do something that most men can't, and most of America won't. It falls on us to protect our friends and family back home, and right now that includes completing our mission. But the most important thing to remember is that we're surrounded by like-minded people, like Paton and like you and me. You need to refocus, stay sharp and don't forget about Paton, because he would want us to go out there and kill that (insert favorite expletive). If you let this incident affect you from this day forward, then the sniper that killed Paton not only took him away, but he's taken you out of the fight, too, and that will affect your team and the whole platoon. I'm going out with you again, and I need you there with me. We'll get past this."

*A special thanks to Nate Self, Chris Miller and Brett Hersley for helping generate this content, and to the team at the Army Research Institute for sponsoring the Leader Challenge Project. Thanks also to all the experienced leaders who contribute their knowledge and experience to help the next generation of leaders become more effective, more quickly. If you are a currently commissioned officer who is a current, future or past company commander or platoon leader, we invite you to join the conversations about leading Soldiers at <http://companycommand.army.mil> or <http://platoonleader.army.mil>. Send your feedback, ideas and suggestions to [peter.kilner@us.army.mil](mailto:peter.kilner@us.army.mil).*

## 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 site 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>.