



CompanyCommand

Building Combat-Ready Teams



To: Company Commanders
From: Company Commanders

Second-Guessing Our Decisions

Darrell Thomsen was my battalion chaplain back when I was a lieutenant at Fort Bragg. He is an absolutely inspiring person who has shared many powerful insights with me and other CC members over the years. Darrell interacts with countless Soldiers all across the Army, so when he called recently, I asked him what he's been seeing lately. Here is what he had to say: "I'm talking with lots of leaders who are experiencing unneces-

sary guilt and stress over past decisions that they've made. They are second-guessing their decisions to the point where it becomes debilitating to their leadership. We've got to *get beyond the stress of the second-guess!*"

We posted Darrell's comments in the CC forum and asked the question, "Is this a topic worth developing further?" The overwhelming answer was, "Yes!" Listen in.

Darrell Thomsen Army Chaplain

We know that combat is a traumatic experience. A combat environment is stressful enough without us piling on more stress by second-guessing our decisions.

Second-guessing shakes the foundations of a leader's feelings of competence, confidence and courage much like an earthquake shakes the foundations of a well-designed and well-constructed building. Just because a strong building experiences the shock of an earthquake does not

mean that the building should be automatically condemned or torn down. Yet "second-guessing leaders" condemn or tear down their own leadership capabilities because they have been shaken by a traumatic event.

Each time a leader's mind flashes back to the moment of a traumatic event, feelings of guilt and shame can mount, forcing the leader to do one of two things. The leader will either become seized by second-guessing or will settle the matter mentally and spiritually. Second-guessing seizes leaders who develop the notion that they are irresponsible and at fault because they couldn't foresee the future. On the other hand, leaders who settle the matter mentally and spiritually accept the traumatic event for what it really was—an unfore-casted reality—and they learn to live beyond the moment, not get stuck in it.

Robert Ritz

C Troop, 8-10 CAV, 4/4 ID

I know from personal experience this trauma. My commander had been taken out of action with an IED about a week before, and I was the acting commander. We had planned a routine patrol in our area of operations with nothing expected other than some bilateral engagement. At the S-2 prepatrol brief, my patrol leader was tasked by the S-2 to go check out a suspected cache site. (*I know, I KNOW! Staff giving my platoon leader an order is a NO-GO.*) The



Army chaplain Lt. Col. Darrell Thomsen baptizes a cadet during a retreat at West Point. Chaplain Thomsen says that leaders must "get beyond the stress of the second-guess."

"Losing a Soldier is never easy," says Capt. Robert Ritz, "and no matter how hard you try, you can never fully detach yourself."

platoon leader ran with the information and, in the process, was ambushed. An IED killed one of my guys, severely wounded another and destroyed a Bradley fighting vehicle. Where was I during this time? Catching a nap.

During the patrol debrief and our internal after action review, several procedural errors were pointed out. As the commander, I took full responsibility, but I couldn't get over the fact that one of my Soldiers was killed while I slept. No matter how much the other commanders or the battalion executive officer tried to counsel me about the numerous errors of that day, I kept coming back to myself being asleep when I should have been leading.

Luckily, this lasted only about a day. What brought me out of my downward spiral? My junior platoon leader. I looked at him and saw that he was headed down the same road I was headed. And this was a platoon leader who was my stud—"Mr. Does Everything Great." So we sat on the roof that night and talked for about six hours. I ended it by saying, "Go to bed. If you wake up and still want to lead your men, do it. If not, you aren't the man I thought you were." We both woke up the next morning and continued to soldier on.

I wish I didn't have to learn a lesson like this. Losing a Soldier is never easy, and no matter how hard you try, you can never fully detach yourself. But I do believe my failure made me a better leader. I was just lucky enough and honest enough with myself to realize where I was headed and to get away from the second-guessing and mental self-flagellation.

Mike Howard

HHC/3-505 PIR; B/2-75 RGR; 1-87 IN; 3-71 CAV

You've got to think through in your own mind how it is you are going to handle it when you make a mistake, because when you make a mistake, someone can die. That is a difficult thing to think through, but you've got to think through it before you go to combat, because you are going to make mistakes.

You can look at every single person who has died in this squadron, and there were decisions that could have been made differently that could have changed the outcome. And believe me, when you lose a Soldier, you go through every one of those decisions and every one of those outcomes in your mind, and you can make yourself nuts.

One of the things I personally look for in junior leaders when I talk to them is: "If I had done this, this would not have happened." Because everyone can answer that question with something they could have done differently. Every



single leader in that Soldier's chain of command can answer that question with something they could have done differently that might have changed the outcome. But the fact is, you didn't. You didn't make the decision differently. You made the decision the way you made it, and the guy perished. And it's terrible. It's hurtful. Especially when you're close to the guy.

How do you get through it? You've got to be able to look yourself in the eye and say, "I'm a good guy. I made the best decision I could make with the information I had. I'm not reckless. I'm thoughtful. I think things through." If you can honestly assess yourself this way, you can drive on. And you *have* to drive on. If you don't drive on, you're going to hurt somebody else.

Niel Smith

B/2-37 AR, 1/1 AD

I had held back from posting my experience to this thread. In fact, prior to this, my wife is the only one who knows my take on this incident.

In May 2006, elements of my company and Iraqi police were engaged in a conflict with an unknown number of gunmen located in a house on the outside of town. The insurgents threw a grenade that lightly wounded one of my Soldiers and a few of the IPs. I arrived and dismounted on the ground with a squad-sized element of engineers and infantrymen. After receiving heavy small-arms fire, I authorized a section of M1 Abrams and an M2 Bradley to open fire on the house. They fired eight tank rounds and about 100 rounds of 25 mm into the structure, severely damaging it. The small-arms fire ceased, and I decided to lead my two teams to clear the single-story house. My battalion commander offered to let me employ Hellfire air-to-ground missiles from some AH-64s that were now on station to finish the job, but I waived off, trying to contain any collateral damage, and my troops were already inside the SDZ [standard danger



Capt. Niel Smith, above right, leads a patrol in Tal Afar, Iraq, accompanied by Col. Sean MacFarland, commander of the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division. Below, Capt. Geoff McKenzie (right) with one of his platoon leaders, 1st Lt. David McCollum, while their unit installs protection barriers in Ghazaliyah, Baghdad.



zone] of the weapon. So I continued with the plan to do room-by-room house clearing.

One of my squad leaders, SSG Legaspi, pulled me aside and asked me to let him lead the entry team and for me to follow in the second team. We also had about 10 Iraqi police with us. We advanced on the house and threw some grenades inside to prepare for entry. After they detonated, SSG Legaspi's team began entering the house and clearing the first rooms. The IPs cowered and refused to enter,

so I led the second team in, flanking around the side of the house. As SSG Legaspi led his men into the rear first-floor room, shots rang out, and I watched in horror as SSG Legaspi collapsed on the floor about 10 feet in front of my position. The Soldier behind him was pinned by fire behind a pillar and screaming for help. I was stunned—one of my Soldiers just got hit, another was trapped, and the only way to get to either of them was to traverse the same open area that they just got shot in. Not a good set of options.

I thought about what to do for what seemed like an eternity, but I was told later it was only about 10 seconds. I still don't know why, but I got up and started through the side door leading into the room my Soldiers were in. Apparently, the second team leader had the same idea, and we collided in the door (Keystone Cops style). We kept going, followed by my RTO [radio telephone operator] and the remaining Soldiers. We suppressed into the room that the fire came from, grabbed SSG Legaspi's motionless body and dragged him out across a floor that was strewn with debris from the tank fire. We kept up fire until everyone was out of the room. My 3rd Platoon leader, taking the initiative, ordered his platoon sergeant in an M113 to back up to the house for CASEVAC [casualty evacuation]. We loaded SSG Legaspi in as quickly as possible (we still didn't know if he was dead or alive—there was no obvious blood or noise from him—he seemed unconscious), and I ordered everyone out of the house. The brigade commander came on the net and directed the house to be destroyed rather than risk further loss. We subsequently leveled the house with three Hellfires and one 500-pound JDAM. Afterwards, we

found a family next door where a woman had been killed and several children injured in the crossfire between the IPs and the gunmen, but only one dead insurgent. SSG Legaspi was pronounced dead at the battalion forward aid station, shot just below his SAPI [small arms protective insert] plates across the gut.

For his leadership and heroism, SSG Legaspi was awarded the Silver Star posthumously. The team who pulled him out received valor awards, including myself.



Capt. Brent Clemmer (center), commander of C/2-3 IN, stands on a rooftop in Mosul, Iraq, with Lt. Col. Rich McConnell (left), the Military Training Team (MiTT) chief and their Iraqi army and Iraqi police counterparts during a joint U.S.-Iraqi operation.

However, I felt as if I had failed myself and my men. Making it worse was that everyone was telling me I had done a good job and had waged a heck of a fight. I didn't feel that way. Word got back to me from a fellow commander that one junior NCO in the company (cross-attached from his company) was saying that there was "no reason for CPT Smith to have entered that house—he got SSG Legaspi killed." (Note: This Soldier received a medical chapter for mental problems two months later, related to combat stress from other incidents.) I was crushed inside. My worst fear had come true—that I was tested, and when I found myself under great stress and fire, I made a poor decision that got a Soldier killed—and at least one Soldier felt that way, too. I covered up my feelings to everyone around me, and I continued to receive commendation for my actions that night from many sources. Every time they did it, though, I felt worse. However, I realized that I was a commander and didn't have time for second-guessing, so I pushed it all away and kept going.

A few weeks later, a partner commander was in a similar situation. Instead of charging in, he used police tactics and brought in the TPT [tactical psychological-operations team] truck to demand surrender, which the insurgents eventually did. I immediately began kicking myself. *Why hadn't I done that? Or, why hadn't I dropped a bomb to begin with since my commander was willing?* I kept doing my mental AAR, and each time I found myself wanting. Soon after, I read an article in *Infantry Magazine* arguing against the current training for house entry—that it was getting too many people killed because the extensive training for it makes it a *first*—rather than a *last*—option to many commanders.

It really hit home for me later, and I've seen counseling

about it. The fact that I'm able to share this now is a milestone. I now realize that, like Mike Howard says, I did the best I could under the conditions I was in. The decision to enter was tactically sound and not reckless. It may not have been the absolute *best* option, but it was a logical and reasonable choice after the pounding the building had taken from the tanks and BFV [Bradley fighting vehicle]. SSG Legaspi was killed by the enemy, and I can't control that. That said, I still kick myself for not taking the extra 30 seconds to think of alternatives to my choice, and I can't help but wonder what the difference might have been.

It's true that you can pack it up, internalize the lessons and move on. But it's false that you can somehow purge the experience from your psyche. You can only modify how you perceive and deal with it. Learning to live with choices we've made when there is no MILES rekey is something that isn't replicated well in peacetime training.

Geoff McKenzie

A/9 EN, 2/1 ID

I know from my personal experience that there are plenty of occasions immediately following a catastrophic event that will draw you into some degree of self-reflection—such as writing letters to your fallen Soldier's parents or spouse, when you are sitting there during the memorial rehearsal or even during the actual memorial ceremony. It is a good thing to critique your actions and determine if you could have chosen a better course of action. But you also have to take a step back and realize the bigger picture—that you are still in command and still need to effectively accomplish the mission and lead your Soldiers.

This being said, I still think about decisions that I made

12 months ago. I think about my Soldiers who died or were seriously injured. Did I train them well enough? Did they have the right equipment? Did they have the right leaders? Did I make the right decisions? I always find that with the resources I had available and the knowledge that I had at the time, we were doing the right things. Sometimes horrible things happen no matter how good/lucky/prepared you are, so as leaders we have to be ready to deal with the aftermath.

A Current Commander

This is a great topic and something that needs to be talked about. Although the “zero-defect mentality” is officially kiboshed, it is still too often the training model we use to evaluate and instruct leaders. Anyone who has sat in the AAR room after an exercise and been berated—while watching the video, with the low points accentuated on PowerPoint slides, and a thick binder of what you did wrong handed to you at the end—knows the feeling. We train for perfection by hammering on the million little things that went wrong, but not by identifying the larger systemic issues and building long-term solutions.

For example, when a Soldier is involved in an incident, say a DUI, the chain of command looks for the million ways it could have been prevented. Was there a safety brief? When was the last ADAP [alcohol and drug abuse prevention] training? Did he have a battle buddy? The larger issues in that Soldier’s life that made him arrive at that bad decision get ignored for the quick-fix answer. We have an institutional mentality that trains our leaders to nitpick our decisions, no matter how insignificant. Is it any wonder, then, that when we make important decisions that involve Soldiers’ lives, we apply the same process?

Darrell Thomsen

Army Chaplain

I think we live in a “prevention” environment that is systems-focused. The obvious downside is that whenever a problem occurs, it is assumed that leadership failed somewhere in preventing the problem. If this is indeed the environment we are operating in, I guess we can either fight it, focus on it or learn to function in spite of it.

The best leaders I’ve had the privilege of watching in action learn the art of functioning within the system. Great leaders understand that Soldiers are our primary mission and that without them no other mission can be accomplished. Great leaders learn the art of letting the system work for them while they work within the system.

I’m trying to think of a metaphor to relate this to. When you execute a mission, one thing you have to deal with is the weather. You can’t control the weather; it is just part of the conditions you have to operate in. We can get angry and fight with the weather because the weather is not cooperating, but of course that doesn’t get us very far. In fact, if we focus on the weather, we risk losing sight of the mission and becoming dust in the winds of the weather. Our best option, then, is to learn to function within the conditions we find ourselves in. Sometimes the weather benefits our mission, and sometimes it burdens it. Either way, great leaders never lose sight of the mission.

Brent Clemmer

C/1-23 IN, 3/2 SBCT

I have great empathy for leaders who find themselves second-guessing their decisions. That being said, as I look back at the 27 months I have spent in Iraq, I do not see any point where I second-guessed myself. That’s just the way I was

HEAR to Prevent Second-Guessing Yourself

The hindsight effect (HE) is a term I use to describe what can happen when either: (1) people in our lives play armchair quarterback and tell us what we “should have” done; or (2) we get stuck in the “stress of the second-guess” and begin questioning our own ability to lead.

I always remind leaders that it’s not so much what is said, but rather what a leader hears that makes the difference in contending with the hindsight effect. The only way a leader can win against the “HE monster” is to learn to “HEAR” well. To HEAR well is to: possess an attitude of **H**umility; **E**xpect the best; **A**ffirm the truth; and **R**esist the lie.

Those who HEAR well maintain an attitude of humility. Humility provides you the capability to accept constructive criticism without having to defend yourself and also provides you the ability to graciously dismiss the destructive criticism of armchair leaders.

Those who HEAR well expect the best. Great leaders expect themselves to be the very best leaders they can

be. Armed with an understanding that they cannot lead effectively without self-confidence, they choose not to get caught in the mire of “why” questions (Why didn’t I do this or that? Why didn’t I think of that?). Instead, they optimistically pave their future by focusing on the “what” questions. (What, in all that is being said, can help me better myself as a leader? What can I do better next time?)

Those who HEAR well affirm the truth. Great leaders affirm the truth of their calling to lead; affirm the truth of their commitment to lead; affirm the truth of their convictions as leaders. These leaders affirm what they have, not what they have lost; affirm the future, not the painful past; affirm the process of pressing on, not settling in.

Finally, those who HEAR well resist the lie. Great leaders resist the tempting lie that invites them to self-imposed leadership limitations. They resist self-doubt, depression and denigration and instead embrace self-discipline, determination and diligence.

—Chaplain Darrell Thomsen

brought up by my dad (a pretty tough SFC). He taught me that life doesn't have a rewind button; you make the best possible call you can with the information you have. You would be paralyzed as a person, let alone a leader in combat, if you constantly revisited every life-or-death decision you made.

I'd like to add some thoughts about Army culture and systems that contribute to leaders second-guessing themselves. Whenever a Soldier in my brigade (BDE) was killed, an AR 15-6 Investigation was conducted into the death. This is a valid action, and unfortunately there are examples when units that did not conduct a thorough investigation paid a price. Here is the situation as I experienced it. My company had lost a great platoon sergeant to an IED after an all-night ambush trying to kill an IED emplacer. I had approved the mission and sold it to the battalion commander. Later, as I'm sitting in my CHU [containerized housing unit] writing the eulogy I'm going to give at my Soldier's memorial service, an officer from the BDE staff arrives to do the job he has been charged with—the 15-6 investigation. I was lucky that the officer was a good guy, but when I'm answering questions like, "Did you know it was a Tier 1 IED site?" (*No sh**, Sherlock. That's why we were trying to ambush the bad guy there!*), I can see how an officer can quickly start second-guessing his decisions. I watched other commanders have to deal with 15-6 officers who, having grown up in a peacetime Army, tried to find out "whose fault it is" that a Soldier is dead. This can be really trying for a commander, and I saw some of my brothers struggle to remain professional to a fellow officer who was basically accusing them of getting one of their guys killed. Of course, it doesn't help when the person doing the accusing is a brigade staff officer who has never commanded an infantry company, let alone commanded in combat.

Being a 15-6 officer pretty much sucks, but it would not be a bad idea to ensure that the appointed officer has been a commander and if possible been outside the brigade TOC (headquarters) once or twice. Failure to conduct an investigation of the death of a Soldier is a bad idea. Failure to put some thought into the choice of the 15-6 officer and the instructions you give him is even worse, and it greatly exacerbates the problem of leaders second-guessing themselves.

A Current Commander

Mike Howard's advice hit home for me. Our sister company had a Soldier shot in the head by a sniper (by God's grace, he's still alive—but definitely not the same). Anyway, to get to the point, my battalion commander was so wrapped up in this incident and what failed to happen (there were plenty of mistakes and "what ifs") that I think his focus was impaired from that point on.

I can't say I would react differently—but certainly I felt an impact as one of his subordinate commanders. So my take-away question is, "How as leaders do we appropriate the right amount of attention, reaction, assessment and blame without overreacting?"

If you are a CompanyCommand forum member, we invite you to log on and join the discussion. If you are not a member but are a currently commissioned Army officer, we invite you to join at <http://companycommand.army.mil>. If you would like to contribute to this discussion but are not a currently commissioned past, present or future company commander, you can send your input to cocmd.team@us.army.mil and we will share your thoughts with the community of company-level leaders.

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.

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