



CompanyCommand

Building Combat-Ready Teams



To: Company Commanders
From: Company Commanders

Advice on Wartime Command

Many of our Army's best company commanders move on to serve as instructors at the Captains' Career Courses, where they educate and train the next generation of commanders. Several experienced small-group leaders from the Maneuver Captains' Career Course (MCCC) at Fort Benning, Ga., recently took time to re-

flect on their wartime command experiences and to share their thoughts with the profession via the Company-Command forum (CC.army.mil). These men have led Soldiers in combat; now they engage dozens of future company commanders every few months. Listen in as they pass along some of their hard-earned insights.

Robert Born

C/3-21 IN; P/2 ACR

Your men will do anything you ask them if they know you will be right there with them. This is especially true when there may be no "right" answer that can be attained from executing troop leading procedures and higher guidance. Never try to make everyone happy, particularly your platoon sergeants and squad leaders. If you do, you will only draw their contempt and they will still be unhappy. They can deal with anything as long as they know you don't take any unnecessary risks, develop tactically sound courses of action and share in the risk.

From my experience, it is not the fire-and-maneuver aspects of warfare that are challenging. You must be sound tactically, but you do not need a Ranger Company or a Delta Force Troop to effectively neutralize or destroy our current adversaries. It is leadership—motivating, coaching and directing. It is about shared burdens and risks, making timely decisions with inadequate information, sometimes saying "no" and firing people if they have lost the trust of their men.

I made a task organization change to my Stryker company that created four "equal" platoons (equal in capabilities, not necessarily in numbers) while deployed to Iraq. This change forced me to pull squads from platoons and replace them with squads from other platoons. I got a great deal of pushback and resistance from my leadership. I am extremely happy that I did not change my mind because the end state was four equally talented and effective platoons that were better able to share the load of a year's sustained operations in Mosul, Iraq. The company leadership later agreed that the concept was a good one. I did not have a "go to" platoon because of this—all of them could be equally counted on to successfully accomplish all assigned missions. Most importantly, this change to the task organization

not only created a more lethal and survivable rifle company, but it also helped with the predictability of company and platoon op tempo, which in turn greatly helped morale.

Rob Craig

A & HHC/4-23 IN, 2 ID

Focus on the people in your command (and the supporting staff). Leveraging the strengths and weaknesses of PLs, PSGs, SLs, TLs, individual Soldiers, fire teams, squads, platoons and so on will ensure success both for your unit and your command. Your company will not be handpicked. You are going to fall in on some good and bad Soldiers, some good and bad human beings, some with professional and personal "baggage"—and all will be looking at you. Some are looking for you to lead, others are looking for you to screw up. But they all will notice how you treat them. They will all know whether or not you are capable, competent and, above all, fair. Do not be in a hurry to discard what seems to be an undesirable Soldier. Find a place for him to be successful and contribute. Leaders do that. They spend the majority of their energy and strength getting others to be their best.

We had an E-4 who showed up to the unit grossly overweight. He was 6 feet 3 inches and 300 pounds. He had an OEF and OIF tour with a body and metabolism that did not do well during the long deployments with no PT. Immediately, both my 1SG and I recognized that this guy had potential, despite his weight and PT challenges. We put him on the overweight program and monitored him. During 12 months of trainup prior to an OIF deployment, he made only slight improvement on his weight but was strong in other areas. As a commander, I can define what amounts to "progress" on the overweight program, and I could have easily begun chapter paperwork on him. But I didn't. My 1SG and I knew that he was a good leader and we needed him.



U.S. Army/Spc. Thomas Herman

Behind Capt. Rob Craig and 1st Sgt. Juan Cornett, A/4-23 IN, their men conduct equipment checks. Capt. Craig advises wartime commanders to focus on people within the command.

After five months in country, the company was moved from Mosul to an austere FOB in Rahwa. Food was neither plentiful nor palatable—it was nourishment. The hours were long and hard. This Soldier had continued to do well and had become a SL. He also lost a tremendous amount of weight. When our unit was supposed to return home after 12 months, we were extended for another 120 days and moved to Baghdad, where living conditions were not austere. With access to a weight room and decent food for four months, this Soldier became a 6-foot 3-inch, 240-pound, muscled “poster child.” It was an amazing transformation. He continues to soldier today. Had my 1SG and I focused on the negative traits of this Soldier, the Army would have lost a terrific NCO.

The second thing I’d tell a new company commander is something Colin Powell said. He stated that command is lonely. You will never measure up to the expectations of everyone or make the decisions that support everyone’s ideas. In other words, you’ll never make everyone happy. However, by listening to your subordinates, talking to your boss, counseling with your 1SG and relying on your previous experiences and training, you will make the right decision most of the time. At times, you will feel like you have little support on difficult decisions (unless

you consistently do the expedient thing). Remember that you are the commander. You were placed in charge and given tremendous authority to make hard decisions. Have the courage to do what your heart and head tell you to do, even when it’s not popular.

There will be many times when you are going to have to make hard decisions that won’t sit well with people. Do all your “research” as necessary (1SG, BN CDR, CSM and so on) before you make a decision, and then trust your instincts. You may make a bad decision occasionally, but if you are paying attention to your surroundings, you will consistently make the right ones.

Mat Bunch

D & HHC/2-502, 101st ABN DIV

First, focus on the fundamentals. Shoot, shoot and shoot some more. Be ruthless in your standards for maintaining and caring for equipment. Second, don’t confuse caring for soldiers with gratifying their every whim, request and desire. The best way to make sure your Soldiers’ needs are met is to train them to standard. If you don’t enforce the standards during training, people die on the battlefield.

The big thing I know now that I didn’t know upon assumption of command is the importance of establishing a positive command climate. Morale, discipline, trust in the leadership and institutional dedication to Army values are all part and parcel with command climate. Your involvement in day-to-day affairs, your commitment and adherence to standards and excellence all contribute to the command climate.

I saw a lot of companies during my two rotations to OIF, both as a company commander and then as an aide-de-camp to the CG, 101st. The units with good command climate, regardless of echelon, performed well in all areas. Units with bad command climate sustained high casualties, had morale and discipline issues, and routinely had other companies covering their slack when they failed to meet the standards.



U.S. Army/PFC Kenneth Allen

Capt. Craig and SSgt. Russell Adams stand in front of their Stryker vehicle. Capt. Craig emphasizes communication—hearing out one’s subordinates, superiors and first sergeant—and trusting one’s own experience as essential for command success.

An Experienced Company Commander [Name withheld]

If you don't know how to plan or synchronize an operation, or if you just *don't* plan or synchronize your operations, people will get killed and you will fail in your mission. In just about every case of a Soldier killed during our 16-month deployment to Afghanistan, the loss was due to a failure to plan the operation at the battalion or company level. The lack of analysis and synchronization at those levels led to a series of decisions that ultimately resulted in a Soldier further down the line making a decision based on an incomplete understanding, causing someone to lose his life.

Don't assume that a person's rank automatically means he or she is competent and professional, and don't assume a person is incapable of contributing at a certain level based solely on rank. After working in positions where I was exposed to higher ranking officers, I realized there are plenty of incompetent people senior to me in rank. On the other hand, I had junior officers and Soldiers prove to me that there are plenty of people subordinate to me who are capable of performing at much higher levels than their ranks allow, and they sometimes have a better understanding of the situation than personnel at senior levels.

Zan Hornbuckle

C & HHC/3-15 IN, 3 ID

First, trust and develop your subordinate leaders. Make sure they know how to think and solve problems. Accomplish this through tough training and place them in situations where they have to rely solely on their judgment and your intent. This is the best way to build teams, confident leaders and agile Soldiers. When you do this, they are forced to understand the process behind the doctrine, tactics and warrior drills. Through this understanding they can adapt, combine or develop new techniques that are required based on the situation and environment they are in. Don't train them for your last deployment; train them for the next deployment and how to deal with the unknown. We never get a chance to make decisions with 100 percent resolution of the environment; the best we can do is make some deductions and take action. In taking action (whether carried out by a squad leader or you), you can gain control of the tempo.

Second, look across your organization for talent. Find those guys that can understand an enemy in a COIN environment and use them in your targeting cell. Likewise, place talented folks in your training room. This is the easiest way that you can ensure all your housekeeping tasks are done correctly and soldiers are taken care of. You also apply this to find the best folks to deal with civilians and understand human intelligence. The point here is that you will never be given all the assets you think you need to fight COIN. We get paid to problem-solve. In understanding your company and applying talents that exist within your organization, you can make do with what you have. The tie-in here is that if you



U.S. Army/PFC Nicholas Hasbrouck

Pvt. 2 Jason Stammer (left) patrols with Capt. Craig, who believes that successful commanders avoid mere expediency when faced with difficult decisions.



Capt. Zan Hornbuckle (left), C/3-15 IN, stands with his company executive officer, Capt. Gavin Rice (center) and his mortar platoon leader, Capt. Jason Shaw, prior to a mission with the Iraqi army. Capt. Hornbuckle's command trained and transformed an Iraqi army battalion.

One of Capt. Hornbuckle's NCOs supervises a precombat inspection by an Iraqi army platoon. Capt. Hornbuckle advocates developing trust and identifying and applying talent among subordinate leaders.

find a better way to do something, then share it horizontally and vertically within your organization. Always share with your brother commanders and develop your platoon leaders.

The story behind my first point comes from my time in both OIF 1 and 3. First, at OBJ Curlly [a 2003 battle in Baghdad], I had a great NCO with me. He identified an enemy trench, and I knew he could clear it with a small team. At this point in the fight we were low on combat power, and the enemy was a real threat from that trench. SFC Vincent Phillips led a small team and cleared a trench against a superior enemy force. My trust in him and willingness to accept risk allowed that great NCO to remove the pressure we had on our east side. Second, between OIF 1 and 3, I focused on training my company based on my experiences in OIF 1. While we were good at attack, enter and clear, we had to learn in theater about fighting COIN, growing the Iraqi army and dealing with SWEAT-MS [sewage, water, electricity, academics, trash, medical and security] concerns. Fortunately, I was surrounded by smart soldiers, NCOs and officers. The talents they brought from outside the Army allowed us to adapt and begin to understand COIN. This, of course, ties in with my second point. You need to know your organization, identify talents and then focus them where you need them to accomplish your missions.

As far as making do without all the resources you think you need, I am reminded of training the Iraqi army. At that time, it was a horrible organization, as most of you may have experienced. I had trained and resourced my company for warfighting based on my experiences in OIF 1. We only learned of an internal MiTT [military transition team] mission while in Kuwait. So without training, resources or experience, we went about the task of developing an Iraqi battalion. By focusing on what we knew of training management and combat operations, we began a training program that took them from a horrible organization to one that could execute independent operations to a tolerable standard. The Iraqis began to conduct their own targeting, ISR [intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance], and lethal and nonlethal operations with U.S. overwatch. We were only able to accomplish this with talented NCOs and a mind-set to solve the problem. In the end, the Iraqis were not as good as a U.S. battalion, but they could at least function as an organization after 12 months of hard work. As we learned how to make things work, we shared information across companies and battalions. The informal sessions we conducted on information sharing were invaluable.



able. Remember, you want your company to be the best in the Army, but you must always help your brothers, share information and watch out for each other. Competition is good, but not at the expense of a brother in arms.

Thousands of company commanders—past, present and future—are connecting and sharing insights with each other via the CC forum. Every few months, more than 100 captains at the MCCC step up to the plate to share lessons they wish to pass on to current and future company-level leaders. This article is an excerpt from that project, called the "MCCC Yearbook," which is published in full on the CC and PL forums. The profession is indebted to Bobby Toon, Zan Hornbuckle and Mike Schmidt for getting that project going.

Connecting in conversation...
...becoming more effective.

CC.army.mil

Art by Jody Harmon

Have you joined your forum?