



CompanyCommand

Building Combat-Ready Teams



To: Company Commanders

From: Company Commanders

Platoon Leaders' Stories

Our experiences as platoon leaders shaped our understanding of the Army and of our place within it as leaders. Today's lieutenants are learning to lead American Soldiers in a time of war, when the stakes are greater and the challenges more complex than ever. Although every officer's experience is unique, there are some experiences that are widespread among today's platoon leaders—such as taking charge while deployed, operating in

foreign cultures, leading in combat and feeling the intense emotions born of war. By reflecting on their stories, we can gain insights that enable us to lead and mentor our lieutenants more effectively. The following stories—which are among the hundreds that junior officers have voluntarily shared with their peers via the Company-Command and PlatoonLeader forums—remind us what it means to lead at the proverbial tip of the spear.

Taking Charge

Lt. Stephanie Gillespie sat across from her brigade commander in his office.

"What are your goals?" he asked.

"I want to be a platoon leader," Stephanie replied. She had been working as an assistant S-3 at brigade for the two weeks since she had arrived in Iraq straight from the chemical officer basic course. Her deployment experience so far

had been disappointing. After all, she hadn't left a successful career as a teacher and joined the Army as a 28-year-old just to make slides and write memos about staff actions in an air-conditioned building. She wanted to lead Soldiers.

"Are you willing to take *any* platoon?" asked the colonel. He seemed to have something in mind.

"Any platoon!" she assured him. As her father had 30 years before, Stephanie wanted to be a platoon leader.

Soon after she left the commander's office, Stephanie received word that her wish had been granted. She was to pack her bags immediately and move to a different FOB and take charge of an Army Reserve platoon of quartermaster Soldiers who were performing an "in-lieu-of" convoy-security mission. She and another new lieutenant in the brigade were being sent to the unit because of perceived leadership issues. The company she was joining had not had an officer platoon leader for five years.

Stephanie's plan for taking charge was to lie low at first—to assess the situation and get to know her people before taking action on any of the



Lt. Stephanie Gillespie took over a convoy-security platoon for which she was expected to raise standards. Her leadership was tested immediately.



Lt. Gillespie (front, middle) relaxes with members of her platoon during a layover between convoy-security missions.

problems she might identify. There was, however, one issue that Stephanie was prepared to address immediately. Her unit, she was told by her command sergeant major, had a reputation for poor uniform discipline outside the wire. The Soldiers did not always wear all of their protective gear while on missions. Stephanie felt confident that she could correct this shortcoming right away. She knew what “right” looked like, and safety was too important to postpone.

Hours before the start of her platoon’s first mission after her arrival, Stephanie took the patrol leader aside and reminded him of the uniform standard—Kevlar, IBA, DAPS for gunners, gloves, eye and hearing protection, elbow and knee pads. She wanted to be sure that something as basic as minimum uniform standards didn’t become an issue. Several hours later, the Soldiers showed up for their patrol brief and rehearsal. The only protective gear they carried were their Kevlars and IBA.

Stephanie could feel her heartbeat quicken. *This is why they sent me here.* She went to her company commander and explained the situation to her and indicated her intention to make

the Soldiers get into the right uniform.

“OK, that’s fine with me,” replied her passive commander, a major.

Stephanie returned to the platoon and reminded the convoy commander that the Soldiers had to wear complete uniforms on the mission.

“It can’t happen, ma’am,” said the NCO. “There’s not time; we can’t miss SP time.” The mission was set to begin in two hours, and the platoon’s barracks were a mile away from the motor pool where they were assembled.

“It can’t *not* happen,” insisted Stephanie as calmly as she could. “You know the uniform standard. I reminded you of the standard earlier today. It’s your job to enforce the standard, Sergeant. You have trucks to move everyone back and forth to the company area. There’s time to get in uniform and accomplish the mission. Now stop arguing with me and do your job.”

When her Soldiers returned to their barracks to get their equipment, Stephanie realized how deep the problem was. Some Soldiers couldn’t find gloves; others had to unpack locked duffel bags to find their DAPS and knee pads. It was painfully clear that these Soldiers had not worn the prescribed uniform in a long time. The Soldiers were not at all happy to be forced to scramble for their gear, but they did manage to meet their mission start time.

Communicating Across Cultures

Lt. Brian Lebieidnik looked at the doorway just behind him. He saw, or rather smelled, footprints leading from the door to where he stood. Sewage residue. *Damn.*

“I’m sorry about that,” he said through his interpreter to the eldest male of the house. The local responded with gestures indicating that it didn’t matter. Nonetheless, Lebieidnik realized that tracking human excrement into someone’s house isn’t good for winning hearts and minds. *Then again, they shouldn’t dump their chamber pots in the driveway.*

“Are there any weapons in your house, sir?” Lebieidnik asked. The local shook his head no.



Lt. Brian Lebieidnik (right) and his platoon’s forward observer, Sgt. Jason Carte, rest outside a house in Iraq while staging for a patrol.

"Well, we have to do a quick search anyway. Please move your family and all other personnel outside the house." His interpreter translated the message, and the Iraqi moved upstairs, corralled his family, and led a parade of women and children outside. Lebednik signaled his platoon to start searching.

Within seconds of searching, one of his Soldiers came downstairs with an infant in his arms.

"Sir, I think the man might want his baby."

Lebednik summoned the homeowner again.

"Why didn't you take your child when I told you to move your family outside? He could have been hurt."

After translation, the Iraqi looked confused.

"For the record, this counts as a person, too," Lebednik said, handing the child over to the local. The man took the infant outside, and the search resumed.

Moments later, a Soldier came downstairs carrying an AK-47. Lebednik called his interpreter and summoned the eldest male yet again.

"Why didn't you tell me there was a Kalashnikov in here? You said you had no weapons."

The Iraqi stumbled through his reply. The interpreter pieced it together and summarized the stammering: "He says it's for personal protection. It's not a weapon."

Dear God. "Ask him if he has any more personal protection paraphernalia." Lebednik noticed his interpreter's confusion over the word *paraphernalia*. He simplified: "Personal protection 'stuff,' I mean."

The Iraqi shook his head no.

Moments later, one of Lebednik's soldiers came downstairs, a shotgun in hand. Lebednik cursed under his breath and called the man back into the house.

"Can you tell me what this is?" Lebednik asked, pointing at the shotgun.

"That's not a weapon. That's for hunting," came the reply.

Lebednik rubbed his temples and thought through every possible phraseology that might avoid the confusion.

"Ask him if he has anything else in the house that can be used to kill people."

Once again: no.

After about another minute of searching, an NCO came down the stairs carrying a pellet gun.

"That's for shooting birds," the interpreter said.

Fertile Crescent Seinfeld.

"You didn't find any bombs up there, did you?" Lebednik asked his NCO.

"None, sir."

"All right, let's get the hell outta here. Sheesh."

Responding to an IED Ambush

Lt. Mike Johnston reached across the Humvee and slapped his driver on the arm.

"It feels good to be in the middle of the pack for once," Johnston said.

Johnston was the platoon leader of his battalion commander's personal security detachment (PSD). Usually, Johnston's vehicle led their convoys.



First Lt. Mike Johnston formed, trained and led the personal security detachment for his battalion commander in Iraq.

Today, however, the battalion was occupying a new area of operations. American vehicles had not driven this road, Route Malibu, in months. They were moving into enemy territory, so a route-clearing element was in front of the PSD. Engineer vehicles led the movement, followed by a platoon of infantry, then Johnston's element. Johnston's vehicle was just in front of his commander's, which was tenth in the order of march, a relatively safe position.

BOOM!

The noise and concussion shook Johnston's bones. *I'm hit.* Then he realized he hadn't been hit. The explosion had occurred behind him—right where the commander's truck should have been. Looking back, all he saw was a Humvee door sailing through the air about 30 feet high. *The battalion commander is blown to smithereens.*

Johnston sent a quick contact report to battalion and then heard a radio report from his medic, who was in the truck behind the commander's.

"Polar Bear 6's truck is flipped upside down and off the side of the road!"

Johnston jumped out of his truck and started running back along the road. Debris was still falling. The first thing he noticed as he approached the vehicle was the massive crater—15 feet wide and 5 feet deep—that obliterated the raised roadway. Then he noticed blue Diet Pepsi cans strewn everywhere. The blast had blown off the back hatch of the commander's Humvee, and the contents of the trunk

The Humvee of Lt. Johnston's battalion commander rests upside down along Route Malibu. The blast killed his interpreter. The commander was rescued and treated, and he continued to lead his unit for the remainder of the deployment. The "rat claw" is still visible on the commander's door.



had been jettisoned. Diesel fuel from the vehicle's cracked fuel tank was dripping over everything and everyone inside the upside-down truck.

The Humvee's nearside back door was open, and the first thing Johnston saw was the commander's interpreter, nicknamed Scarface, unconscious and suspended upside down by his seat belt. The back third of his head was cracked wide open, his brain matter exposed. Johnston quickly looked into the TC's seat and assessed his battalion commander. He was conscious and yelling in pain, bleeding from his ears and mouth.

Glossary

DAPS—deltoid and axillary protective system, which protects the Soldier's shoulders and upper arms and is typically worn by gunners and other exposed, mounted personnel.

EOD—explosive ordnance disposal.

IBA—interceptor body armor, which protects the Soldier's torso.

IED—improvised explosive device.

JERRV—joint explosive ordnance disposal rapid response vehicle.

Kevlar—the protective helmet worn by Soldiers.

MBITR—multiband inter/intra team radio, which is a small handheld radio.

S-3—operations officer.

SP—start point, the time at which an operation begins.

TC—truck commander, who sits in the front passenger seat of a military vehicle.

TOC—tactical operations center.

Scarface needs treatment first. Do I move him ... or will that screw him up worse? There's no time to debate.

Johnston began pulling the interpreter from the vehicle. The vehicle's driver, Spc. Martinez, joined him. Johnston looked upon the Soldier, who wore only ACUs. *Where the hell's your gear?* Then he saw Martinez's IBA, still tangled on equipment in the driver's compartment. Martinez had slipped out of his IBA in order to extricate himself from the vehicle. *He's out here on a battlefield without his equipment, risking his life to save his fellow Soldiers.* Johnston felt proud to lead such men. Together, Johnston and Martinez pulled Scarface out of the truck and onto the road, where the platoon medic, Sgt. Shane Courville, immediately began treating him.

Johnston and Martinez turned their attention to rescuing their battalion commander. His door was combat-locked, and the commander—dazed, bloodied, bruised and soaked in diesel fuel—was having difficulty staying alert. Johnston worried that the vehicle would go up in flames at any moment. He coached his commander to unlock the door's combat lock. Johnston and Martinez, both weight lifters, strained against the door, pulling with all their might to open it. The door wouldn't budge.

How are we going to get him out? If we have to wait for equipment, that's an hour at best. We don't have that much time.

Then Johnston remembered the "rat claw." When he had been at brigade headquarters a couple weeks earlier, the brigade safety officer had handed him a prototype rat claw that he had developed to pull doors off Humvees. Only one per battalion had been issued. Johnston had thrown it into the trunk of one of his vehicles and hadn't given it another thought ... until now. Fortunately, that vehicle was in the

convoy today. Unfortunately, it was last in the order of march, at least 200 meters away.

Johnston sprinted down the road. He felt totally exposed. The IED had been command-detonated. He knew it was likely that he was being watched. His understrength platoon had no dismounts to spare. His only protection as he ran along the raised roadway were his gunners atop Humvees, positioned 50 meters apart from one another along his route.

Johnston arrived at the last vehicle. The back hatch wouldn't open. *Aahhhh!* He beat on it. No luck. He climbed up on the hatch and stomped up and down as hard as he could. Finally, the hatch popped. Johnston pulled the hatch open and dug through the gear to find the rat claw. It wasn't small. At one end was a large, heavy metal claw designed to clamp onto Humvee doors. Several long cables came off it with hooks on their ends to affix to vehicles or winches. Johnston began his sprint back to the commander's destroyed truck. He held the claw to his chest with both arms, the cables resting over his shoulders, the hooks dragging along the ground behind him. Johnston, a collegiate athlete who prided himself on staying in top physical condition, was shocked at how exhausted he felt. *How the hell is it possible that I have to do this? Running my ass off, exposed to the enemy, dragging godforsaken hooks behind me, and my commander could go up in flames any second. This sucks.*

Back at his commander's truck, Johnston clamped the claw to the stuck door and then guided his own vehicle into position to hook up to the cables. It was time to try pulling the door off. *I hope it doesn't cause a spark that sends everything up in flames.* Everyone held his breath as the vehicle pulled forward. The door popped off without a hitch. The claw worked exactly as designed.

Johnston and the medic struggled to pull their commander out of the vehicle. He was a big man, and it seemed like every piece of equipment got stuck on everything possible as they attempted to extricate him. As soon as they got him

out and onto the ground, the commander went into shock. The medic, who had snaked a tube into Scarface and was still treating him, gave verbal instructions to Martinez, who successfully treated and stabilized his commander.

With his commander safe, the situation began to come under control for Johnston. Using his MBITR radio, he sent reports to the nearest company, which relayed them to the battalion TOC. The infantry platoon that had been in the convoy—which had inexplicably stayed with the engineers and not stopped after the IED attack—finally returned and provided security. With adequate security established, a medevac bird came in for the commander, landing in an Iraqi family's front yard next to the crash site. The destroyed vehicle's gunner, who was less seriously injured, had been able to crawl out of the turret and was evacuated by the EOD JERRV vehicle.

Scarface died on the road. The platoon placed him in a body bag and laid it across the back seat of one of their trucks for the short trip to the patrol base. The gunner essentially had to sit on the body, which he found upsetting—Scarface was like a member of the platoon.

On what should have been a short movement, another IED was found alongside the road. Johnston and his platoon had to wait on the road for about 35 minutes as an EOD team arrived and destroyed the ordnance in place. Johnston used the time to talk with his battalion TOC, correcting inaccuracies in earlier reports the TOC had received about the ambush.

Welcome Home

Lt. Schuyler Williamson gazed out the bus window at the passing lights of Fort Hood, Texas. It was hard to believe that he was finally back in America. Everything looked strangely peaceful and routine. He felt a slight tremor inside and wondered whether it was caused by exhaustion or excitement.



Second Lt. Schuyler Williamson (center, kneeling) poses with his platoon at the beginning of their deployment.



Lt. Williamson shares a laugh with his soldiers at their command post at Forward Operating Base Liberty in Baghdad.

The convoy of buses came to a stop at the division parade field. To his left, under the lights across the field, Schuyler could see the crowd of family members and friends who awaited his battalion. He knew that his wife was somewhere in that crowd, and his parents, too.

He filed off the bus with his Soldiers. He and the rest of the battalion from the other buses formed up in the street, where the line of buses blocked them from their families' view. The night air was cool and smelled like home.

A chant from across the field started softly and grew louder and louder. "Move that bus! Move that bus! Move that bus!" It reminded Schuyler of the television show "Extreme Home Makeover."

As soon as the unit was formed, the buses drove away, and to the wild cheers of the crowd, Schuyler marched forward among the Soldiers of the platoon, the company and the battalion with whom he had experienced a year of war. The formation halted in the middle of the parade field. A senior officer from the division spoke some words welcoming them home. Schuyler scanned the crowd for his family to no avail.

The senior officer's brief comments ended with: "Families and loved ones, go get your Soldier!"

With a roar, the crowd of loved ones surged forward, merging into the formation of Soldiers. It was chaos—hugs, smiles, tears, people everywhere. Schuyler kept looking through the crowd, but he could not find his family.

"Schuyler!" It was his father's familiar voice. Schuyler turned to see his dad moving toward him. Then he saw *her*. Rushing past his dad, moving as quickly as she could through the crowd towards Schuyler, was Kristen, his wife. She collapsed into his arms, a year's worth of worry and

loneliness flowing out in her tears. After a long embrace, Schuyler reunited with his parents. They looked as happy as he had ever seen them.

Then he felt a tap on his shoulder. It was one of his Soldiers.

"Sir," said his Soldier, "I really want you to meet my dad. He doesn't speak English, but I really want you to meet him."

Schuyler stretched out his hand to the man. The Soldier's dad squeezed Schuyler's hand with a firm two-handed grip. He looked directly into the eyes of his son's platoon leader, offering a wordless expression of gratitude for bringing his son home alive, breaking into tears as his son spoke.

"Sir," said the Soldier to his platoon leader, "I just want you to know, I will fight with you anytime, anywhere."

Watching all this, Kristen finally understood why her husband was so committed to serving his Soldiers. He was their platoon leader.

More stories like these will be featured in a forthcoming book on the experiences of Army platoon leaders in Iraq that is being put together by the Center for Company-level Leaders. If you are an experienced company commander or platoon leader who would like to share your experiences, engage with YOUR professional forum at CC.army.mil or PL.army.mil, or contact us directly at peter.kilner@us.army.mil.

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...becoming more effective.**



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