



# CompanyCommand

## Building Combat-Ready Teams



**To:** Company Commanders  
**From:** Company Commanders

## Leadership and Laptops on Combat Deployments

We recently asked a line-company platoon leader in Iraq how he spends most of his time. His answer? PowerPoint! We pressed him on this, but he wasn't budging. "I'm dead serious, guys," he replied. "The one thing I spend more time on than anything else here in combat is making PowerPoint slides. I have to make a storyboard complete with digital pictures, diagrams and text summaries on just about anything that happens. Recon a water pump? Make a storyboard. Conduct a key leader

engagement? Make a storyboard. Award a microgrant? Make a storyboard." When we consider the amount of time that our platoon leaders spend on CONOPS, TIGR net, patrol debriefs, awards, NCOERs, sworn statements and so on, it becomes clear just how much time these green-tab leaders are spending alone in front of a computer screen. So we asked our fellow company commanders: Does this jibe with what you are experiencing? Is this what we want our platoon leaders doing?

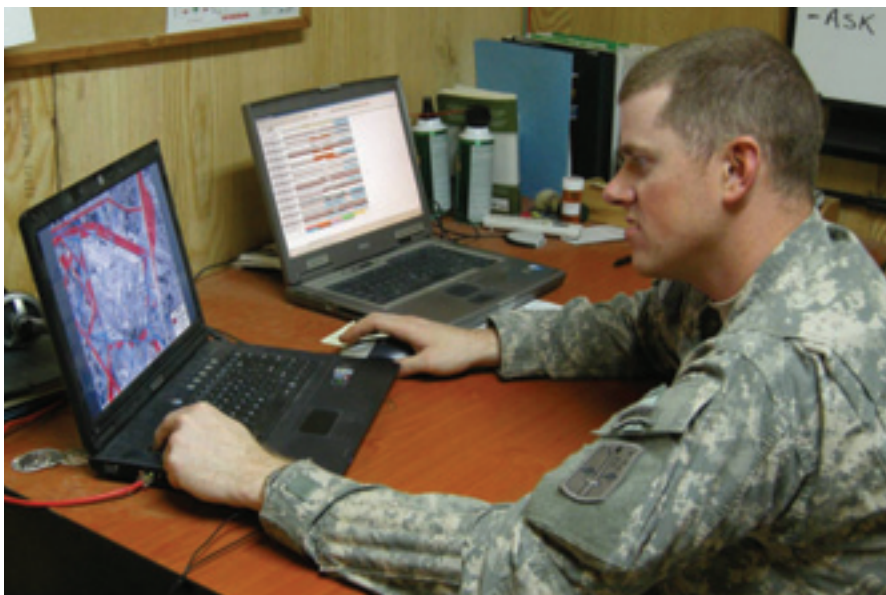
**Joel (Aaron) Brown**  
E/2-2 CAV

I just returned from Iraq in November 2008. I was a company commander, and in my observation this platoon leader is absolutely correct. I would get in debates with my battalion commander about this subject. I would argue it was taking too much of the platoon leaders' time to do storyboards, patrol debriefs and TIGR net. His response was, "What else are the platoon leaders doing?"

I can tell you what they were supposed to be doing: They needed more time for troop-leading procedures, maintenance, training and property accountability. With the amount of patrols our troops were conducting on a daily basis, the leaders needed to be getting sleep and rest so they could make important decisions with well-rested and alert minds. A poor decision made by a tired platoon leader (PL) at Ranger School may mean he gets a "no go." A poor decision in combat may cost someone's life. Bottom line is that this comment about the platoon leader's time is absolutely true. We are taxing our platoon leaders with time-consuming reports that are redundant, and most of the time the reports don't get used for their intelligence value.

**William Whaley**  
A/2-8 IN

In Iraq today, every patrol requires a CONOP, patrol brief, patrol debrief, executive summary to BDE for any key-leader engagement (KLE), and then a more detailed KLE summary for the S-2. An eight-hour patrol easily stretches to 12 hours for a leader. Figure two to three hours beforehand for PCC/PCIs, the patrol brief and mission prep. Then the patrol leader can expect about two to three hours of typing afterwards. I understand the need for each document and the purpose of each, but should a PL really be doing three to four hours of presentations/briefs each day? My fight is trying to weed through the information and see what



*First Lt. Chris Wagnon works on a PowerPoint slide at his office on FOB Kalsu, south of Baghdad.*



*Capt. Richard Ince (far left) stands with his company's leadership team at Patrol Base Courage in Baghdad.*

## **Richard Ince**

**A & HHC/2-5 CAV**

I left Iraq last January after having served as an infantry commander for 12 months and an HHC commander for three months of my 15-month tour. I think that platoon leaders are spending too much time on their computers because more and more reporting requirements are being tacked on by the chain of command, and I'm talking division commander on down. Given this situation, the permanent fix is to make higher aware of the consequences of its policies with regard to information-reporting requirements. My other recommendation is to look at your company's and platoons' internal systems. Is there another individual (for instance,

can be taken off their hands. Currently my company has the mission of FOB defense, and even my tower guards are completing a debrief sheet during and after their shift. The information requirements from "higher" seem to grow every day. There are trackers for widgets and trackers for the bolts that go with the widgets. I am even guilty of telling my company ops guy, "Hey, I need a daily tracker for this." Just yesterday I realized that I said this, so I caught myself and told him, "Forget it. If I need the info, I will ask you when I need it or create it myself." I understand the need for information, but the information "requirements" have gotten out of hand.

## **Adam Greene**

**PL & XO, A/1-32 CAV**

I absolutely agree with the statements, and I haven't been in the Middle East since September 2006, but it was already bad and getting worse when I was there. Initially, we briefed only if we saw or noticed anything unusual. The battle captain would ask us just a couple questions; he would write down the answers and process the information. By the end of the deployment, debriefs were so large that there was one computer dedicated to patrol debriefs and nothing else in the S-2 shop; the debriefs were so long and took so much time to complete that patrol leaders would go back to their bunks and fill them out there, and someone from the unit would bring them to-go plates from the mess hall so the patrol leaders wouldn't miss the two-hour deadline to submit the lengthy reports.

*First Lt. Adam Greene visits with the leadership of an Iraqi police station in Qara Tapa, Iraq.*



FSO, XO, competent company clerk) who can put the storyboard together after the PL compiles the information? Are the PL and CO training the PSGs and SLs in these tasks? The bottom line is that PLs should be spending more time with their Soldiers than with their computers. We are stunting their development if we continue to allow this to happen.

## **Craig Reuscher**

**C/426th BSB**

Having been a platoon leader during OIF I, a battalion S-3 in OIF 2005–2006 and a company commander in OIF 2007–2008, it is my opinion that computers are simply tools that can be friction points or enablers. Keys to success with submitting CONOPS, post-OPS, etc., via PowerPoint are the following: 1—Company-sized elements should employ an Ops-Intel cell that does the bulk of the report development and tracking, i.e., PowerPoint work. Generally this can be manned by two personnel such as the company XO and a



## Glossary

**BDE**—brigade.  
**BFT**—blue force tracker.  
**BN**—battalion.  
**CO**—company or a company's commanding officer.  
**CONOP**—concept of the operation (in other words, the plan).  
**FOB**—forward operating base.  
**FRAGO**—fragmentary order, an abbreviated operations order.  
**IPB**—intelligence preparation of the battlefield.  
**MEDEVAC**—medical evacuation by aircraft.  
**NCOER**—noncommissioned officer evaluation report.  
**PCC/PCI**—precombat checks/precombat inspections.  
**OPORD**—operations order.  
**OPS**—operations.

**PPT**—PowerPoint, the presentation software by Microsoft.  
**PSG**—platoon sergeant.  
**S-2**—intelligence shop or intelligence officer.  
**S-3**—operations shop or operations officer.  
**SIPR/NIPR**—the classified/unclassified Internet networks, respectively.  
**SL**—squad leader or section leader.  
**Storyboard**—a PowerPoint slide, usually with graphics and text, used to describe an event or activity.  
**SWEAT report**—security, water, electricity, academics, trash.  
**TIGR**—tactical ground reporting system, which stores and shares information collected on patrols.  
**TOC**—tactical operations center.  
**UAV**—unmanned aerial vehicle.

sharp E-4 or E-5. 2—Have a template for the CONOP/post-OP, SWEAT report, etc., that is multifunctional and allows leaders to quickly input the five *Ws* + 1 (who, what, when, where, why and effect, intended or actual). This template can include a section for a map and graphics, the five *Ws* + 1, time line, key tasks, enablers (for example, aerial weapons teams, UAV support, mortars, scouts, medevac) and maybe a miscellaneous section. I have seen most brigades and battalions develop a template that becomes the standard format—no “making up stuff” for every mission. 3—Platoon or patrol leaders should be concerned only with transmitting the five *Ws* + 1 to the company Ops-Intel cell. The CO Ops-Intel guys then complete the report, validate the information with the PL and send it to higher. 4—If you

have to fill out more than a 3x5 index card for a patrol report (CONOP/post-OP), then it's too long. Oh ... and this 3x5 card, in combination with a BFT or radio, is pretty handy when there is no power on your mission for multiple days.

### David Callaway B & HHB 1/180 FA

Good story! I experienced the same as a commander while serving in Baghdad and Ramadi from 2005–2006; however, my platoon leaders did not. I tried to get out of my TOC as much as possible and managed to get out probably four days a week. The rest of the time I was in front of one of the two computers on my desk (SIPR, NIPR). I spent 12 to 14 hours a day on those things. My platoon leaders, on the other hand, were running daily squad or platoon missions and may have spent an hour or two each day completing sworn statements, mission planning and NCOERs. Towards the end of our tour, they spent a lot of time on awards. The rest of the time they were focused on the mission.

### Paul Volke A & HHC/4-31 IN

That platoon leader who says he spends most of his time on PowerPoint is missing the point of what he's really doing. He's not spending his time on PowerPoint—he's spending his time *reporting*. If he weren't doing it on PowerPoint, he'd be doing it on a typewriter or filling out forms in triplicate like our predecessors have done since the Revolutionary War. The questions he needs to ask himself are: How can I do this more efficiently? What systems can be put in place to streamline the process? What parts can be delegated to save every-



*First Lt. Leif Gilsdorf, the fire support officer of Company B, 2nd Battalion, 28th Infantry Regiment, and fire support NCO Sgt. Vincent Wolterman plot the collateral damage estimate for a 120 mm mortar fire mission on PowerPoint as part of the target nomination process.*



*First Lt. Mike Gunther works on an evaluation report for one of his noncommissioned officers at his unit's command post in Samarra. Five minutes after this photo was taken, 1st Lt. Gunther and his platoon were engaged in a firefight.*

imagine they did. Computers haven't changed anything other than the amount and type of information that is relayed to higher headquarters. Some of these issues could be fixed by having the "TOC guys" start or complete products for the platoon leader. I will say that unless you are very blessed in the personnel department, what you would make up for in efficiency, you would more than lose in quality. Only the platoon leader or platoon sergeant knows the true story of what happened out there, and most TOC guys aren't going to have as much education and training as a platoon leader or platoon sergeant. Finally, a good commander should press his platoon leaders to complete requirements that are important, yet he should also shield them from requirements that do not serve a function. When a platoon leader comes in tired from a mission and complains about a storyboard involving intelligence that may help the S-2 make a recommendation to the battalion commander, it's the company commander's job to ensure that he completes it. But when the requirement is not time-sensitive or important except to an obscure staff officer/NCO, it's the company commander's job to assess his leader and deflect the pressure until that leader is rested.

#### **Joe Pruitt** **E/4-3 AHB**

Having just returned from Baghdad as a BDE battle captain, I can tell you that all of our storyboards were created at the BN level or higher. That said, everyone—down to the people involved in whatever it is that we were reporting—was involved in creating reports of some kind and pushing them higher. We use PowerPoint now because it is easier, generally takes less time and relays a greater depth of information than an "old school" radio report. If reporting to higher is taking too much time away from the LT in question, maybe he needs to take a class or learn how to manage his time better.

#### **Lou Nemec** **571st Sapper CO**

I expect my platoon leaders to do it all—lead the mission, help recover from it, ensure that their soldiers are conducting their priorities of work and then complete reports to include a storyboard, if required. Hasn't it always been this way? Didn't the platoon leader in Vietnam come back from a mission, set down his pack and head to the TOC to talk to the "old man" while his soldiers showered and bedded down? Although I wasn't there, I



*Platoon leader 1st Lt. Joshua Cobb and platoon sergeant SFC Gus Reiley develop a patrol debrief after returning from a mission.*



*Capt. Robert Richardson (center), 1st Lt. Will Sullivan (left) and 1st Lt. Casey Baker (right) prepare for a night air-assault mission to capture a high-value individual in Taji, Iraq.*

The requirement to report to higher has always been around and isn't going away any time soon.

**Jason Wayne**  
A/1-503 IN (ABN)

Interesting conversation. I've felt the pain of building PowerPoint slides numerous times as a PL, XO and CO. But the relevant question is, "Should your PLs be PowerPoint savvy?" The answer is, "Absolutely!" It comes down to communication. This is a fundamental leader issue, and PowerPoint is the current medium of choice for communication. Communicating the right information to higher—"painting the picture"—has won and lost wars since the beginning of time. Now, is the "water plant 30-day follow-up slide" going to win or lose the war? Probably not. Is it even necessary? Maybe yes, maybe no. Will it provide you a tool to evaluate whether all the money you are dumping into the project is actually worth a damn? Absolutely yes, if done correctly!

My PLs build only three things for me on PowerPoint:

- CONOP—No more than three to four slides including risk assessment; it also doubles as their PLT OPORD for the mission, which they have to do anyway. This gets reviewed by me and then sent to battalion for their use and abuse.

- Patrol and Intel Debrief—Uses a shell into which they fill the five Ws, key points, key intel developed and any pictures taken during the patrol. This is *my* tool to assist with current ops IPB and gets fed directly to my battalion S-2.

- Project Assessment—Simple one-to-two page write-up of the project's current status with pictures attached. Key points focus on whether the project is meeting its desired intent and what additional resources are needed.

As commanders, we need to train our platoon leaders to communicate using PPT. I can crank out a PLT or CO CONOP in about an hour. The first



few times, it took my PLs several all-nighters to get theirs correct. Now they can do it in about the same amount of time. Your PLs need to practice this stuff or they are going to be just like the PL in the original post—spending too much time on PowerPoint.

**Robert Richardson**  
A/1-7 CAV

I've got one word for that PL—delegation. When my PLs started spending too much time doing admin stuff, I gently reminded them that they had a stable of NCOs and EMs who were more than capable of performing those types of tasks. After about three months in theater, every NCO and E-4 in my platoons (to include the HQs) was capable of preparing and submitting storyboards, CONOPS, TIGR net



*First Lt. Steve DuPerre, a platoon leader in Company A, 1st Battalion, 7th Field Artillery Regiment, works on computers in his battery's command post.*

*A company commander, first sergeant and three lieutenants plan operations from their company outpost in Baghdad.*

reports, and any other admin or computer-based thing that was needed. Once the skill set is developed, the load can be spread around among the platoon. All the PL should be doing is reviewing things prior to submission to higher, which allows him time to lead more effectively.

**Wynn Nugent**  
1022nd EN CO

Computers: Good thing or bad thing? My answer is neither—computers are a tool. PowerPoint is just a tool.

It can be effective or counterproductive depending on how it is utilized. All of the other posts have excellent points as to what seems to be driving the train. Bottom line—it is the company commander's job to shelter his or her PLs from this stuff and to give them the room they need to lead troops. I guarantee you that this PL is doing this because he is pushed by his commander. Of course, I am sure that the commander is getting pressure from a BN staff, who is getting pressured from BDE, who is getting ... well, you get the picture. Somewhere someone has to say, "The buck stops here!" I have to believe that the higher commanders are not aware of the time being taken away from the troops. This is one of those "don't tell me about the birthing pains, just show me the baby" things. Even your best commanders are going to rock along as long as suspenses are met and there doesn't seem to be an issue. I have to believe that even if the info gathering was a priority and it was taking the PL's time from his troops, a good commander would find additional resources to assist this PL in getting back into the fight with his troops. Now, as company commanders, we need to have our house in order before we go to the old man. Make sure that your PL is not having time-management issues and that he doesn't just need a quick down-and-dirty on PowerPoint or something like that.

**Anthony Freda**  
603rd TC

I just finished a tour in Iraq, down south. I deployed as a separate company and served under two different battalions. One battalion buried us with PowerPoint, micromanaged us and forbade my PLs from going out with their Soldiers. My officers were administrators, not leaders, which fostered contempt among the Soldiers. A few months into the deployment, another battalion took over and changed all this. Then my PLs were able to be out there with their Soldiers, and you could sense a change. As far as the briefs went, they were cut down drastically. I required my PLs to diagram events and submit a time line to me, and I



would take time out of my schedule to do any PPT briefs that needed to be done so my platoon leaders could maximize their troop time. Between myself, my XO and my first sergeant, we would put together a brief, let the PL and PSG review it, and then send it higher. Commanders, shoulder that load from your PLs and allow them the time to spend with their Soldiers. I guarantee you results, and you, as a commander, will have a better understanding of what's going on out there even if you can't always be there.

*The Company Command Team would like to thank Sam Nuxoll for being the catalyst for this discussion.*

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Art by Jody Harmon

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