



# Company Command

Building Combat-Ready Teams



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

## Zero KIAs as an Organizational Goal?

Throughout my two deployments and even recently, I've heard leaders prioritize zero KIAs ahead of mission accomplishment. They say, "My top priority is to bring every Soldier home alive." I'm always disappointed to hear this because it gives subordinate leaders and staff tacit permission to pull back from the fight to "accomplish the mission" of not losing a Soldier. Yesterday I read an article about a dynamic 1SG whose proudest accomplishment was "bringing every Soldier home." Shouldn't a Soldier's proudest accomplishment be "effecting real change in my AO," "defeating the enemy" or something to that effect? Leaders must be bold and train their Soldiers so they have every advantage when lead is in the air, but leaders must *not* shy away from contact simply because

casualties might be incurred. Surely the importance of any particular mission plays a part in how this line is walked, but I know that the Army and my fellow units expect me to kill the enemy firing at me, not to break contact. It just seems to me that the "zero-KIA philosophy" leads to apparent tactical successes that collectively can add up to a strategic failure. We all hope not to suffer casualties, yes, but a command emphasis on averting casualties seems misguided and, frankly, unattainable. A unit can hole up on the FOB and not accomplish its real mission, yet still lose someone to a mortar. If our goal is to bring 'em all home alive, we're fighting handicapped.

Anyone else have thoughts on this?

—Erik Archer, 127th MP CO

### James Schmitz

Past PL, 950th Clearance Company

Great topic! There are about a dozen things I could reference, but I think the Warrior Ethos and the idea of selfless service speak well to the issue. We volunteer to go into harm's way so others don't have to, and if Soldiers can't accept that fact, they're in the wrong business.

Reading LTC Dave Grossman's interview on MilSpace, I'm reminded of the long-term consequences of our actions. Doing our jobs effectively now will prevent many more deaths in the future. I'm interested in how other leaders have addressed this without seeming callous or indifferent, and I'm leaning towards: "No one left behind."

### Tony Burgess

A/2-35 IN and LRSD, 25th ID

To echo what James said, I think this is a really important topic for us to talk about as a profession. I agree that "no one left behind" is in better keeping with our values ("I will never leave a fallen comrade").

I'd like to share a quote from GEN Fred Franks, USA Ret. He lost a leg in Vietnam, persevered and commanded VII Corps during Operation Desert Storm. This comes

from a speech he gave to a group of soon-to-be commissioned officers:

Sometime after graduation, and I cannot predict when, our nation will look to you to accomplish a mission of extreme difficulty and importance, one that only you and your Soldiers can do. I do not know the conditions, nor part of the world, nor even how long after graduation, but I do know you will be on the spot to deliver mission accomplished at least cost to the Soldiers our nation has entrusted to your command.

"Mission accomplishment at least cost to our Soldiers" is the way he addresses this issue. Our calling as leaders in this profession is to have a hot, blue flame that drives us to do everything we possibly can to prepare ourselves and our Soldiers for combat and to do everything we possibly can to set the conditions for mission accomplishment at least cost—but knowing full well that there is always a cost in war.

### Pete Kilner

D/2-325 AIR

Thanks for raising this topic, Erik. I've heard other leaders express frustration about the same thing. I think that

## Company Command Glossary

**ADC-M**—Assistant division commander for maneuver, a one-star billet.

**AO**—Area of operations.

**CO**—Commanding officer.

**COA**—Course of action.

**COIN**—Counterinsurgency.

**CTC**—Combat training center.

**FOB**—Forward operating base.

**IDF**—Indirect fire.

**KIA**—Killed in action.

**PSG**—Platoon sergeant.

**RTO**—Radio telephone operator, the commander's communications assistant.

**XO**—Executive officer, the second-in-command of a company.

**1SG**—Company first sergeant, the senior enlisted member of a company.

the “bring everyone home” mantra sets a unit up for psychological problems, for several reasons.

■ Hell, if staying alive is our #1 goal, then why deploy? We can maximize our likelihood of “success” by staying at home with our families.

■ The enemy has a vote. Even the best leaders and best units—even if they're misguidedly putting casualty aversion first—can take casualties.

■ When those casualties occur, what's their meaning? If the Soldier was fighting to accomplish the mission our country sent him to accomplish, then his death has meaning within that cause. If, however, the “mission” was to “bring everyone home alive,” then the death is actually the “cause” of mission failure.

Soldiers will bear any burden, pay any price to accomplish the missions of our country. We owe it to them to give them real missions—not to utter platitudes that sound good at first (on the surface) but ultimately undermine their reason for being a Soldier as well as harm their long-term mental well-being.

### Joshua Shrader

HHC/ US Army Infantry Center

I agree with almost everything already stated. Biggest point I'd take away is the question, “What happens *when* you lose a Soldier?” Your leadership and Soldiers would then have to live with failing their #1 mission of bringing everyone home alive. The long-term consequences of that theme are really bad.

I think it's better to set everyone up to lose someone rather than to return with everyone. Every time I've gone downrange, I've had a serious talk with my wife and other significant players regarding different COAs. Once in Kuwait, I talked with my PSG/1SG and XO regarding themes I would want put across if I am the one to fall.

I've been extremely blessed in never having a Soldier

killed, but I've sent a few out of country for wounds. I'd rather look the remaining Soldiers in the face and say, “Hell of a job out there today” than have to say something like, “Well, we couldn't avoid this KIA, but we'll start over; no more KIAs from now until we go home.”

### Scott Shaw

A/2-14 IN & HHC/2 BCT/10 MTN

This topic is something that I have thought about through three deployments and continue to think about as I face another shortly. My company was at Buehring in deployment #2 to Iraq when the ADC-M briefed the assembled brigade leadership (CO/1SG and above). He told us that any unit that comes to Iraq with the expectation of zero KIA is setting itself up for failure. 1SG and I went out of the tent in a rage! I looked at my 1SG and said, “Well, that's not going to happen to us.” He agreed, and we went angrily back to the tent.

Pete is right on so many levels.

The enemy *does* have a vote; it's a large one. Even the best company commander, platoon leader and squad leader has a day when the bad guy has a leg up.

Why even deploy? To shirk your responsibility by ignoring the things that happen around you or that you can affect is dereliction of duty. I would call it conduct unbecoming an officer, noncommissioned officer and Soldier. I like the draw from President Kennedy: “We will bear any burden, and pay any price.” While keeping the boys safe was at the forefront of my mind, not one time did we shirk a mission, fail to patrol an area or otherwise fail to do our duty. Were there roads that we wouldn't drive at night? Yes. Did we always ride in up-armored Humvees and hotbed when we didn't have enough? Yes. Did we always wear body armor and Kevlars even when it sucked? Absolutely. But we never put out one patrol when the threat level called for two, and when it called for more than three patrols at a time, we split platoons and did that.

Killed and wounded Soldiers' lives and actions absolutely have meaning. That's why if you are going to put them on the streets, then there needs to be a reason for it. I can buy, “That's where we have seen some action before” (I am talking about presence in the AO); I can't buy driving around just to drive around.

Fortunately, we did not have anyone killed. Twenty-two Purple Hearts on that deployment, none on the next, but we came close too many times to count. 1SG and I were able to look each other in the eye after the deployment and say, “We did it.” It was with tears because our last wounded Soldier had returned from the hospital and was standing in formation.

What I wish is that rather than a general officer lecturing us on this topic, we would have had an open and honest dialogue at the battalion level about it. When I deploy this next time, my comments will start with, “You can't protect everybody all the time.”

### Mike Wetter

A/3-265 AD

Mission first, people always. No one wants KIAs; however, a failure to put your mission as top priority could re-

sult in failure of the higher headquarters' mission (and so on up the food chain). Eventually, a preoccupation with avoiding casualties could potentially lead to a strategic failure, causing more Soldiers and civilians to become KIAs. I've actually heard another officer say, "F\*\*\* the mission," followed by a "people-first" message. (Unbelievable, I know.) The troops reacted strongly against him, for good reason. "Mission first" is ingrained in all Soldiers from the moment we join the Army. Our Soldiers can and will sense the wrongness in the opposite message.

**Eric Balough**  
HHC/1-16 IN

Josh, you make an awesome point in that *when* leaders with a no-KIA goal lose a Soldier, they have just failed their #1 priority, so after that, nothing else will really matter.

I personally view the "We will bring everyone back alive!" as a "zero-defect" mentality. It's unhealthy, it does not lend itself to mission accomplishment and it promotes more mistakes by guys trying to avoid mistakes. This ultimately will breed a "me-first" culture in a unit, and ultimately the very soul of the organization will crumble.

Accidental deaths in motor pools, negligent discharges, etc., are really the only forms of unacceptable deaths. If a Soldier's death could have been prevented through better leadership or by the Soldier's own choice, then that is a problem that needs to be fixed. When a Soldier dies in combat on our watch, we should be able to say that we did everything we could do to prepare him for the fight and to prepare his family for the worst; that we brought his remains back; and that we killed more than we lost. If the enemy "exercised his vote," as Scott and Mike aptly put it, then that is war.

**Zachary Pierce**  
F/1-19 IN

I would prefer to be in a unit where my family and I are told that every (realistic) step is in place to ensure that I make it back intact, and that if I don't (through injury or death), my family and I will be cared for appropriately. That is a hard promise to keep, but it can be done with the personal sacrifice of time from leaders. If I see that level of commitment in my unit, then I'm going to move out and fight on the edge because I know that people have my back.

*Zachary Pierce, F/1-19 IN, does not believe "that the concepts of mission accomplishment and bringing everyone home should be affecting each other to the extent that we ever have to choose one over the other."*

So if a couple of folks in the Army put it out as their #1 priority to keep everyone safe and sound and even cancel some missions just because of that, then fine. If the bad guys take time off here and there (and they do), then it isn't going to hurt us to do the same and mitigate some of those obviously unnecessary casualties by talking to our guys about safety. There *are* deaths in combat that get chalked up to the enemy when the truth is that we just screwed up somewhere, and sometimes that comes from pushing too hard for results when really we need to slow our roll.

I don't think that the concepts of mission accomplishment and bringing everyone home should be affecting each other to the extent that we ever have to choose one over the other. If you get to that point, however, I would say it might be time for a stand-down day.

**Jonathon Burbach**  
C/1-105 CAV (RS)

It is a leader's responsibility to do everything possible to bring all Soldiers home safely without compromising the ability to accomplish the mission. This means exercising proper risk mitigation through training, planning, execution, adherence to SOPs and force-protection measures. It is unrealistic to outright declare or promise that any unit can bring every Soldier home safely. Even units that never leave the wire are subject to IDF. Most important is to ensure that Soldiers execute missions by taking measured risks that still allow the unit to meet its tactical objectives. The enemy's "vote" can never be eliminated, but measures can be taken to decrease its influence.





**Jamey Gadoury**  
C/1-9 IN

The most sacred obligation of the profession of arms is holding the lives of our Soldiers in our hands. I had an XO who observed, “Every commander gets his first god complex when he takes the guidon.” This is nowhere more true, apparently, than commanding the power of life and death. Leader decisions can quite literally determine who lives and who dies—Soldier, enemy or civilian.

Good Army leaders have struggled long and hard with this burden. It is interwoven in “men versus mission,” “proportionality and collateral damage,” and “escalation of

force.” It contributes to personal pain, as articulated in LTC Dave Grossman’s *On Combat*.

If the answer was as simple as “bring everyone home,” then much of the dilemma would no longer exist. No need to “shout, show, shove, shoot”—just shoot. But morality, long-term practicality and the Army’s reason for existence do not permit such an approach.

I remember the disgust I felt in the early days of the war when I heard a senior NCO exult, “We brought our task force in, and we brought our entire task force out alive.” Maybe the helicopter medevacating a Special Forces Soldier who eventually bled out was too vivid in my mind’s eye. Maybe I still heard our RTO relaying calls about a captured, killed or maimed special operator just a few kilometers from us. So what had our task force proven that the SF unit had not?

Despite this, I allowed the idea to foment. As I took command, I publically stated that I could never make that promise. Inwardly, I willed it so. If I did it right, if God was pleased, then somehow, this was attainable. I think good leaders earnestly want this and do everything to minimize risk—but they also recognize reality. I wanted a different reality.

*What is “most important,” says Jonathon Burbach, C/1-105 CAV (RS), “is to ensure that Soldiers execute missions by taking measured risks that still allow the unit to meet its tactical objectives.”*

Thinking this way invites devastation when that unspoken mission “fails.” I consider December 6th, 2006, the worst day of my life. It also marked when I was forced to think differently. Somewhere in the eyes of the 100 infantrymen staring back at me was the imperative to move on. Their unspoken question—“Can you bring *me* home?”—translated into a directive to act, to be better.

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Jamey Gadoury, C/1-9 IN, acknowledges that “leader decisions can quite literally determine who lives and dies—Soldier, enemy or civilian.” Good leaders, he believes, “do everything to minimize risk—but they also recognize reality.”



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**Chris Nunn**

**A/2-87 IN & HHC/2-87**

Jamey—long time no see, hope all is well.

Great post and I couldn't agree more.

My basic assumption about leaders is that they want to accomplish the mission with the minimum acceptable risk to their soldiers. If they don't, we should probably assist them with resume building on monster.com.

There are so many issues that go into "accomplishing the mission versus taking care of your Soldiers" that create the paradox Jamey spoke of. As others have said, however, this is what we as leaders do. This starts with training Soldiers to the level where they are confident they can accomplish their mission, educating your leaders so they understand why the unit is executing these operations, and preparing, training and educating yourself for the weight of this responsibility. If you are confident in your abilities to properly plan and resource missions and war-game out tactical risks, that will translate down to your leaders. Ideally, all will come home because you did all you could, but the enemy still gets to vote.

I have seen units that reacted to the few casualties they had very poorly and took "bring everyone home" to heart by skipping the first three Ss and going to "shoot." They were reactive for a whole series of reasons and caused problems in the AO for all of those reasons. They were

*"If the primary focus of a unit is 'bringing them all home,'" says Chris Nunn, A/2-87 IN & HHC/2-87, "what does this say about how the unit was trained and how the Soldiers view themselves?"*

more worried about what the enemy could do to them than what they could do to the enemy. They were not confident in their skills as Soldiers to accomplish their mission.

This type of mentality always makes me think back to something I saw long ago in Ken Burns' "The Civil War" series. Shelby Foote was speaking about a period just after GEN [Ulysses S.] Grant (understand he's not typically known for low casualty rates) took command of the Army of the Potomac and his subordinate commanders were saying, "Bobby Lee is going to do this and that to us." Grant immediately replied that they had better stop worrying about what Bobby Lee was going to do to them and start worrying about what they were going to do to Bobby Lee—he had to change their mentality from reactive to proactive.

If the primary focus of a unit is "bringing them all home," what does this say about how the unit was trained and how the Soldiers view themselves? What does this say to the Soldiers in that unit about why they are deployed, executing missions under this intent? In a different post in the CC forum, Niel Smith commented that one of the problems we had in fighting COIN and defeating the enemy is that, back in the day, victory at the CTCs was equated to the enemy being slant/zero. If you equate victory as zero KIAs, what is your unit really working toward?

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Art by Jody Harmon

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