



# Company Command

Building Combat-Ready Teams



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

## Do You Follow a Stupid Order?

What do you do when you receive an order that just doesn't make sense? What should we, as leaders, do? This isn't about pointing fingers; after all, most of us can probably think of not-so-bright orders that we ourselves have issued. But this is a legitimate question and one that is valuable to discuss as a profession. The more that we

understand these situations and ways to handle them, the better we can accomplish the mission, take care of our Soldiers, and support good order and discipline. Members of the CC forum have engaged in a lively conversation on this topic. Listen in as these leaders wrestle with the challenge of responding to a "stupid" order.

### Matthew Ritchie

E/111 FA

There's a difference between "legal order" and "good idea." Plenty of dumb stuff is legal. Our oath compels us to follow legal orders, even if they're not the best ideas. It's also important to keep in mind that:

- What looks dumb from our foxhole may make perfect sense at another level. Sometimes one section must sacrifice for the greater good.

- It is a subordinate's responsibility to follow legal orders. It is also his responsibility to make clear to the boss—in a

professional and appropriate manner—the costs and implications of following his instructions.

- Don't go to the boss with a problem unless you have a solution to propose (if not three to propose).

### Cory Hinrichs

623rd Engineer Company

Here is my proposed negotiation strategy for dealing with a stupid order: Begin by knowing *all* of the responsibilities and constraints of your job, and be able to tie all of those responsibilities to regulations, SOPs and safety. Then, if you receive a stupid order:

- Clarify the order and its intent. "If I understand you correctly, you want me to throw this dumbbell into the water to see if it will float?"

- Speak from your experience base and gain valuable NCO input. "Sir, I can't remember a time that I was ever able to make a dumbbell float. Sergeant Major, can you?"

- Prepare a risk assessment that shows how you are unable to reduce or eliminate the risks associated with dumbbell throwing and flotation.

- If all verbal negotiation fails, ask for a FRAGO push or a written order authorizing the throw. Keep it in a safe place for later.

### Richard Fifield

E/2-10 AV

If I receive an order from my boss that I find to be inappropriate, I owe him an explanation of what I see as the possible unintended consequences of that decision. If, after that immediate feedback, he still insists on the order, it is my job to carry it out, unless it's illegal, immoral or going to get someone hurt. After carrying out such an order, though, we all owe our leaders feedback on the outcome. All too often, people disregard orders they feel are stupid to enable the mission to succeed, but then the person who gave the order



CPT Richard Fifield (left) believes "... we all owe our leaders feedback on the outcome" of carrying out an "inappropriate" order: "... the issue is not with the 'stupid' order—it's with how we respond to it."

in the first place remains completely oblivious of his poor decision. Other times, the order is not executed because someone thought it was stupid, and the result is that an integral part of a bigger plan is not completed, a failure that is probably going to be discovered late because the subordinate wasn't aware of the bigger picture. So, the issue is not with the "stupid" order—it's with how we respond to it.

### **Aaron Titko**

**C/9 EN**

The real question here is, "What do you do when you are told to do something when the tactical conditions for mission success have not been set?" After all, we deal daily with stupid orders in garrison that we execute with little more than grumbling. On the other hand, stupid tactical orders can get Soldiers killed. In Iraq, in 2004, I was ordered to construct traffic-control points on the north end of the city of Samarra. After discussing the tactical situation with the maneuver commander on the ground, it was clear to me that the conditions were not set for my engineer company to conduct the mission. In response, I traveled more than 90 minutes to have a face-to-face visit with my commander. We discussed the security shortfalls and options to mitigate the risk. At one point, we contacted the brigade commander extremely late at night and tried to get the mission changed. We were unsuccessful and were told to execute the mission regardless of the risk. At the end of the day, I put as much combat power as I could on the site—had infantry in overwatch, dedicated indirect-fire support and helo support. I mitigated the risk as much as possible; despite these efforts, we were still attacked by the insurgents and forced to abandon the construction project. My point here is that if you do not agree with an order given to you, you are duty-bound to question the order. If you are told to execute, regardless of your objections, you must then shape the situation to the best of your ability and mitigate the risk. What you must not do is disobey the order, refuse to execute the order or compromise your integrity.

### **Brian Murdock**

**Future Company Commander**

I'm currently a platoon leader who just returned from an OIF rotation. I was in many situations in Iraq in which I received what I deemed to be stupid, nonsensical orders. What I did in those situations was voice my opinion to my company commander. In response, he would either: tell me to shut up and move out; listen and provide perspective about why the order seemed stupid but in fact was necessary; or push my concerns up to the higher level, provided the order hadn't originated from him. If I received the "shut-

*"The most important thing to do as a subordinate leader," says platoon leader Brian Murdock (left), "is to conduct the 'smell' test. If the order stinks, don't just salute and move out. Do everything you can, within the limits of good order and discipline, to shape the situation."*

up-and-move-out" response, I would do everything I could to shape the execution of the order to minimize risk to my Soldiers and maintain a positive working relationship with my ISF counterparts ... because if it seems stupid to you, it's going to seem twice as bad to the Iraqis. The most important thing to do as a subordinate leader is to conduct the "smell" test. If the order stinks, don't just salute and move out. Do everything you can, within the limits of good order and discipline, to shape the situation because at the end of the day you will stand in front of your Soldiers, take ownership of that operation and execute it.

### **Paul Yingling**

**A/25 FA (TAB)**

When I was preparing my battalion for deployment to Iraq, I ran a COIN academy using the "train-the-trainer" concept. We assigned our veteran senior NCOs to give classes to platoon sergeants and above; the platoon-level leadership then trained their Soldiers. The CSM and I circulated among these classes to see how well our lessons were making it down to the Soldier level. During one platoon's class on patrol TTPs, I heard the following exchange between a platoon sergeant and a couple of younger Soldiers.

**PSG:** "Vary your routines. Don't do the same thing at the same time every day. Change up your SP times, routes, order of march and leader locations. The enemy is studying you to find patterns he can exploit."







*For Garri Hendell, “Your job as an officer is to use your knowledge of the facts on the ground, your unit, the enemy and your commander’s intent to achieve that intent. That includes using your judgment to vary the plan when necessary.”*

**Soldier 1:** “What if they make you leave at the same time every day? In my last unit in 2003 we had to go out the same gate at the same time every day.”

**Soldier 2:** “My last unit tried that same sh\*\*. Our LT used to fake maintenance problems so that we could change up our SP time.”

**PSG:** “Now that’s a good LT.”

His platoon leader’s eyes were as big as hubcaps after that remark. I told the PSG that he gave a great class, and that in our battalion the platoon leader had the authority to make decisions that would accomplish the mission and keep our Soldiers alive. My CSM and I agreed that the best ways to avoid “fake maintenance problems” were to empower our junior leaders and to lead by listening.

### **Joe Grigg**

**183rd Maintenance Company**

This issue is about judgment—your own versus that of the individual who made the order. Lord knows there are

people out there who, as GEN [Russel L.] Honoré put it, are “stuck on stupid.” My saving grace has always been to follow the commander’s intent and ensure the mission is accomplished. The rest are just details that micromanagers use to make themselves feel superior.

### **Garri Hendell**

**Future Company Commander**

There is magic in the “commander’s intent.” If the order asks you to do A and doing A is really, really stupid, as a subordinate leader you can always pull out the commander’s intent card. It goes something like this: “I know that you ordered A, but I knew that the reason you ordered A was because you wanted to achieve B. When the facts on the ground made it obvious that A wouldn’t achieve B, I did C to achieve B.” Your job as an officer is to use your knowledge of the facts on the ground, your unit, the enemy and your commander’s intent to achieve that intent. That includes using your judgment to vary the plan when necessary to achieve the commander’s intent. That’s why this “dodge” always works—as long as you are otherwise a decent officer and your commander is a decent commander.

### **Anonymous**

If the order is questionable from a legal or ethical standpoint or ventures into the realm of fraud, waste or abuse, request the order in writing. That is usually enough to make the source of the order pause, rethink, and either revise or rescind the original order. If the order is simply stupid, I recommend using e-mail or some other written medium to conduct a confirmation brief with the source of the order. This accomplishes several things: It clearly delineates the stupid order in writing and separates the source from the executor; It gives the source/commander/supervisor a chance to rethink the order; If the order stands, it will help you to more clearly understand the task, purpose and end state so you can execute that order with 100 percent effort, so that when you complete execution and the result is folly—not because of your doing but because the order was stupid in the first place—the written exchange can help protect you from blame, especially if your “leader” is the vindictive type and has no qualms about burying his subordinates if it helps him stand higher. The important thing is to know which battles are worth fighting. Sometimes a stupid order needs handling as described here. Most of the time, though, it’s better for the unit and the command to just drink the Kool-Aid, press the “I Believe” button and execute.

### **Joseph Pedersen**

**A/2-58 IN**

A general officer—and unfortunately I cannot remember who it was—spoke to the officers in my battalion and asked us what *officership* was. One of the things he pointed out was that we as officers do not take an oath to obey lawful orders, as enlisted Soldiers do. Instead, we take an oath to well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office upon

## Advice From Our Forefathers

In his book *Words for Warriors*, COL Ralph Puckett (Army Ranger hall-of-famer) writes, "If you believe that your commander is about to make a serious mistake with the action he is contemplating, it is your duty to object to the point of insubordination. To do otherwise would be disloyal. When your commander has listened to your arguments and says, 'That's my decision!', your job then is to salute, say, 'Yes, sir!', and move out. You are then to work extra hard to do what your commander wants."

COL Puckett goes on to coach us to object as forcefully as necessary, but to do so in a professional and respectful manner.

One of my heroes, GEN Matthew Ridgway, had a lot to say on this topic: "The military services deal harshly, as they should, with failure to carry out orders in battle. The commander present on the scene is entitled to full, instant and enthusiastic execution by subordinates. Yet when faced with different situations from those anticipated as well as in the transition from plans to orders, there sometimes comes the challenge to one's conscience, the compelling urge to oppose foolhardy operations before it is too late, before the orders are issued and lives are needlessly thrown away.

"Or the leader may be faced with the decision: Shall I take the responsibility of discarding the original mission? Shall I take the initiative and strive for success along different lines? He will have to put those questions to his conscience. 'Blind obedience,' said Napoleon Bonaparte, 'is due only to a superior present on the spot at the moment of action.' I concur. ... It has long seemed to me that the hard decisions are not the ones you make in the heat of battle. Far harder to make are those involved in speaking your mind about some harebrained scheme which proposes to commit troops to action under conditions where failure seems almost certain and the only results will be the needless sacrifice of priceless lives. ... In any action you must balance the inevitable cost in lives against the objectives you seek to attain. Unless the results to be expected can reasonably justify the estimated loss of life the action involves, then for my part I want none of it."

GEN Ridgway was referring to situations in which he was given missions as commander of the 82nd Airborne Division that he thought were suicidal: the drop on Rome in September 1943 and the proposed attack across a particular part of the Volturno River.

—Tony Burgess (A/2-35 IN, LRSD/25th ID)

which we are about to enter. In the end, we are the ones who will have to live with (or die with) our decisions. Every commander, every officer, every leader in the military should do what he or she judges is right, regardless of personal consequences. The day your career means more to you than your Soldiers is the day you should be relieved of command. If you are absolutely positive you are right, then you should be willing to stand trial for your decision. This is part of what makes being an officer so challenging.

### Carla Getchell

#### Future Company Commander

Blindly following an order that is stupid puts you at just as much fault as (if not more than) the originator of the order. I firmly believe that it is our responsibility as experts in our fields to correct a problem when we see it. I have witnessed, time and again, that great leaders surround themselves with smart people whom they trust and look to for advice and input. It is our duty to give those leaders exactly that. The difficulty lies in the "how" of making that correction. It's an art to address a bad order in a way that results in the necessary change. If I see an order that is wrong, I

take to my leaders the reason it is wrong and how to fix it. I expect the same thing from my subordinates, and I have fostered an environment in which they are comfortable



*"It's an art," says Carla Getchell, "to address a bad order in a way that results in the necessary change. If I see an order that is wrong, I take to my leaders the reason it is wrong and how to fix it."*





*Mike Schmidt (right) believes candid discussion enables leaders to “identify the orders that make sense in isolation but just don’t make sense on the ground.” The challenge, he says, is not identifying the problem, but “opening the lines of communication.”*

worthy of following and which ones are not. I won’t belabor that point. The larger issue is that it’s an indicator of a fundamental problem within the chain of command: lack of respect and communication.

Despite our best efforts, stupid orders are going to occur. Ideally, we are operating in a command climate in which candid feedback is accepted and encouraged. It’s through these discussions that we identify the orders that make sense in isolation but just don’t make sense on the ground. If leaders do not have faith in the competence of their subordinates, seek their input and take action when they receive sound advice, then these discussions will be suppressed and it will only be a matter of time before your dysfunctional family of leaders gets someone killed.

As I look back on my own experiences, the answer to the question of whether or not to follow a stupid order is something along the lines of: “Never let it get to that.” Identifying the problem is rarely a challenge. The challenge is opening the lines of communication and developing the mutual respect required to make the relationship work. No matter how frustrating the endeavor, never quit! Knowing that a stupid order was moral and lawful doesn’t make the aftermath any easier to live with.

*We would like to acknowledge and thank MG Michael Oates, whose challenge to an audience of soon-to-be officers—“Okay, what about when you get a stupid order? What do you do? Do you follow a stupid order?”—inspired this conversation in the CC forum.*

coming to me with necessary changes—but they must provide good justification that is backed up with intelligent reasoning and facts. My first priority is to the mission, and then to my Soldiers. I am failing in my duties if I allow orders to pass that do not provide for mission success or the safety and proper utilization of my Soldiers.

**Mike Schmidt**  
C/3-71 CAV

I have this theory. For grins, let’s call it the theory of silver bullets and dumb-dumb rounds. Everyone is probably already familiar with silver bullets. I first heard of the silver-bullet concept from one of my mentors. He used it when referencing his senior-rater profile as well as when making the decision whether or not to give someone a strong personal recommendation. The idea is that you have to be very conscious of the accolades you hand out. If you aren’t, your accolades become meaningless.

On the other end of the scale, you have dumb-dumb rounds. These are the stupid orders we issue, whether they be of our own making or those we execute as part of a larger plan (since we all strive to issue all orders in our own name, right?), and whether they be minor in nature or potentially life-threatening, they all count. We can fire a dumb-dumb round every now and then, and it won’t be a problem. Our soldiers know we are human. As long as they know we give a damn and do our best to look out for them to the best of our abilities while accomplishing the mission, they will rarely give it a second thought. The problem comes when the firing of dumb-dumb rounds becomes a regular affair. When this happens, there are two issues we need to be concerned with. The most immediate is the potential for our Soldiers to get tired of the BS and to start taking it upon themselves to determine which orders are