



# CompanyCommand

## Building Combat-Ready Teams



**To:** Current and Future Company Commanders  
**From:** Current and Past Company Commanders

### Advice on Taking Command

Last January, CPT Andrew Fleming was serving as a Basic Officer Leadership Course (BOLC) instructor at Fort Sill, Okla., but he knew that he would soon have the privilege of commanding a company of American Soldiers. Wanting to be as prepared as possible, he decided to tap into the collective knowledge of experienced commanders in the CompanyCommand forum. He posted the following.

*SUBJECT: Future commander wants your feedback!*

"I am about to PCS [permanent change of station] to Fort Carson where, at some point in the near future, I will be taking the guidon. I want to pick your brain about being a company commander. My five main questions are listed below, but please jump in with anything you want to pass on. I really appreciate your help."

We invite you to listen in to the advice that Andy received from these 10 experienced commanders: Edward Cappellano, past CDR of E/427th BSB and C/2-108 IN; Chuck Cline, past CDR of the 659th EN CO; Josh Shrader, past CDR of HHC at the Maneuver Center; George Coleman, past CDR of A/51st ESB and HHC, 62nd MED BDE; Brittany Meeks, past CDR of the



*CPT Andrew Fleming initiated the conversation that resulted in this article.*

178th MP DET; Jared Nichols, past CDR of C/1-12 CAV; Matthew McBride, past CDR of Engineer Co., MWSS-271 (USMC); Kevin Hadley, past CDR of C/1-504 PIR; Joshua Fuller, past CDR of C/4-7 CAV, current CDR of HHC/1-72 AR; Paul White, past CDR of A/41st EN BN.

#### What training really paid big dividends for your unit?

**Ed:** Platoon battle drills paid off for the company. The platoon leaders did them even in the Red and Amber phases of the year, using chalk boards, sand tables, etc. We did the same with some other key collective tasks.

**Chuck:** It sounds silly, but any training that is away from the company area and requires your Soldiers to get dirty and tired while working within their assigned teams, squads, platoons, etc., is high payoff.

**Josh:** I'm right with Chuck on this one. Your Soldiers will be whining while they do it, but the cohesion that comes from quality training and the confidence it builds in Soldiers is priceless. Make training as hard as you can make it—"give them the commercial."

**George:** A one-day, overnight training event. It was painful to execute, but it built a lot of camaraderie. Getting out of gar-

ison for even one night can help you focus on some of the basics. Since we were in the field, we didn't have to worry about anyone leaving for appointments, child care or some other excuse. We were able to hold a captive audience and knocked out a lot of the routine tasks that are OBE in garrison. It paid huge dividends when we started to ramp up for a deployment several months later.

**Brittany:** More time on the range for all of us; protected field/situational training for the K9 teams.

**Jared:** In all honesty, simulation training paid off big time. Since we were short of personnel and did not have vehicles following a tour in Iraq, we could not field a full company for training. So we utilized the various simulation facilities (CCTT/VCCT [close combat tactical trainer/virtual convoy combat trainer]) to focus on company communications, dissemination of information, radio procedures and, most importantly, troop-leading procedures. This paid off



*CPT Jared Nicholas, shown here with 1SG Jeffrey Campbell, advises future commanders that “when you say something to a Soldier or the company as a whole, you need to follow through with what you say.”*

big time in developing unit cohesion and confidence when we finally got to NTC [National Training Center, Fort Irwin, Calif.] and deployment.

**Kevin:** Battle drills. Get blanks, march to the training area and don’t come back.

### **What is a technique that helped you personally to be effective as a leader?**

**Ed:** Making sure that my platoon leaders were leaders and subject-matter experts, not managers. Supervising down two levels. In other words, providing guidance to the platoon leaders and then inspecting squad-level training.

**Chuck:** Caring about my Soldiers. This sounds like a “no-brainer,” but there are those who talk the talk but never come through when it counts. Remember that everyone is human and makes mistakes, but don’t be afraid to be tough and enforce discipline when needed. Don’t hold a grudge—act on an issue and then let it go. If the Soldier takes you back to it later ... then you smoke ‘em.

**Josh:** Training your Soldiers hard doesn’t work unless you’re right there with them. The company I took down-range was a National Guard company that had been brought together from across the state, so no one knew anyone, including their commander. The first time I got “street cred” was when I ran the buddy stress shoot and beat all the times to that point—after I had completed a road march with one of my other platoons. You don’t have to be the best at everything, but you’d better be above average at everything (my personal goal).

**George:** Getting organized. I am not a paper person, and the amount of paperwork you need to keep track of as a commander is monumental. I tried to get as much informa-

tion as possible through e-mail since it is easier for me to sort through and search. I had my orderly room keep a good log of where all actions were (i.e., with the PLT, 1SG, me, or BN); this helped us stay on top of all of our actions. Taking care of Soldiers was my number-one priority, and getting organized helped me do that by ensuring that as little as possible fell through the cracks.

**Brittany:** Clearly conveying my intent to my subordinates; working hand-in-hand with the 1SG; and emphasizing to my MPs, throughout all of our training, that they are warrior police, not just “cops.”

**Jared:** Following through. When you say something to a Soldier or the company as a whole, you need to follow through with what you say. Making false promises or not being up front and honest with your company will result in a loss of confidence in your abilities as a leader.

**Matthew:** Listening to and using my NCOs. When your NCOs know you trust them and listen to them, they will bend over backwards for you.

**Paul:** Allowing my platoon leaders to learn from their mistakes in training exercises and conducting formal and informal AARs [after action reviews] after any training.

### **What is one thing that you implemented that made a difference?**

**Ed:** There is no one thing, no magic bullet. There are numerous things that have to be done for a unit to be successful. Having said that, though, I want to mention that it’s very important that junior leaders train their subordinates to be able to take over. Squad leaders need to train team leaders, etc.

**Chuck:** On the day I took command, I gave my 1SG a handcuff key. He asked me what it was for. I told him that the handcuffs were being taken off. The NCO Corps was expected to act like the NCO Corps, and there were no more excuses. Bottom line, let your NCOs do their jobs.

**Josh:** I told the team leaders that they were where the fight was, and I expected them to earn their money. They were the decision makers on the ground. If I had an E-5 who wasn’t measuring up, he became a driver for the squad leader and a squared-away corporal took his spot. The Soldiers responded well to this as it gave everyone a great reason to do the best he could.

**George:** Routine site visits. I had teams on 12 different FOBs [forward operating bases] in northern Iraq. Getting out to each team sometimes involved aircraft and/or ground movements. My 1SG and I set up a weekly battle rhythm that put at least one of us out on the road three to five days a week. We traveled together as often as possible but would surge to get to the teams that needed more mentoring. We also ensured the PL/PSG [platoon leader/platoon sergeant] leadership was getting out to their sites as well.

**Brittany:** Developing and enforcing a predictable training schedule that specifically and purposefully targeted critical training skills. Also, creating a Military Working Dog deployment-validation program.

**Jared:** My command supply discipline program [CSDP].



Having an actual SOP and policy letters and having a supply team led by my XO ensured that everything was in its place.

**Matthew:** I managed to get some specific training focused on my perceived mission that paid dividends. It was outside the box, at a community college, and difficult to set up, but it was worth tenfold what it cost.

**Kevin:** An urban obstacle course. It was a sadistic PT test that set the culture for the company.

### **If you could have focused more on one area, what would it have been?**

**Ed:** I accepted risk in the area of APFT [Army physical fitness test]. My Soldiers were not PT studs, but they passed and could do their mission, while other units could not. I believed that I could turn PT around in 30 days if I needed to, so PT was not super stressed.

**Chuck:** This is a tough question. When I took command, the company had been “beaten up” by previous commanders who didn’t care, so I had a big broken mess when I started. I wish I had dedicated more time to officer and noncommissioned officer professional development.

**Josh:** Building the relationships between my platoon leaders and platoon sergeants. For some reason, this was a real struggle; I still don’t understand it. I think every company has its own special issue.

**George:** I would have developed my team chiefs more.

**Brittany:** More training with outside agencies (EOD [explosive ordnance disposal], Infantry, local police departments, etc.) for the K9 teams.

**Jared:** Officer professional development. If I had had more time, I would have done a better job of getting the platoon leaders ready for their commands.

**Kevin:** Property. It’s not your XO’s job; it’s yours.

**Paul:** My property book, because that alone can make or break a commander. Also, teaching my platoon leaders the eight-step training model.

### **What really motivated the unit and built unit cohesion?**

**Ed:** I challenged my Soldiers to be the best company in the battalion. I challenged them to do hard collective training that had not been done in years, training that people said was too hard to do. After they completed the training, they started to believe they were the best.

**Chuck:** We held a company “dining out.” It had never been done in this unit. I had NCOs who did not know what a dining out was. Honest! Seeing the “old man” relaxing and just having fun with friends and loved ones ... good stuff.

**Josh:** We did a lot of BBQs and other MWR [morale, welfare and recreation] activities prior to deployment, but the stories that are still told are about the hardest day of training or the day “so-and-so” got the nasopharyngeal. Use tough, realistic training to build cohesion. Make it a challenge, offering something like a three-day pass for the platoon with the best times in the obstacle course or on the stress shoot.

**George:** We started a monthly platoon competition. The winning platoon would get a small award that the PL/PSG

got to keep on their desk for the month. The competitions were varied: best average score on a PT test; most experts from a range; or any crazy competition my XO, 1SG or I could come up with. We kept it up in Iraq (to a lesser extent).

**Brittany:** Two things motivated them: tough training, planned at the section/platoon level where there had previously been no training; and sports PT once or twice a month. Usually we played flickerball, and it always brought out great competition, fun smack talk and camaraderie. My unit does a lot of decentralized operations, and sports PT always brought us together.

**Jared:** Company ultimate football (held about once a month while at home station), basketball (when we deployed), and developing a company logo and “branding” the company in T-shirts, coins, etc. By focusing on events that bound the company together, we stayed clear of pitting platoons against one another, and we mixed Soldiers around the company so that everyone knew everyone. Of course, we had the normal competitiveness during gunnery, but for the most part, we focused on the company rather than allow the platoons to focus on themselves.

**Matthew:** Work hard. Play hard. Suffer together. And conduct training that mentally engages your Marines and allows them to feel important. Go out of your way to get support for them—get a helo insertion instead of trucks; check out the live-fire shoot house; integrate training with other units, tanks, mechanized forces, interpreters, whatever; but invest in them, and they will take care of you.

### **Anything else you want to share about command?**

**Chuck:** Be sincere in all you do. Soldiers will see right through lies and false motivation. Be involved; the look on a Soldier’s face when you show up on his porch with the 1SG and a PL/PSG when he needs help is priceless. Take care of yourself. As a commander, you will have the opportunity to be



*CPT Paul White conducts a key-leader engagement with the Iraqi army’s 14th Field Engineer Regiment to discuss training the unit to conduct route clearance missions in southern Iraq.*



*CPT Josh Shrader celebrates his recent graduation from Ranger School with his daughter. He encourages his peers to "make training as hard as you can make it—'give them the commercial.'"*

a part of great things. However, your position will require that you do other things (e.g., command-directed psychological evaluations, turning Soldiers over to MPs/civilian law enforcement) that tend to weigh heavily on your mental, physical and spiritual well-being. Finally, ENJOY YOUR COMMAND TIME! You may find that it is far too short (in your mind), but realize that there is another excited officer right behind you. Leave the company better than you got it; the day may come when you have to depend on it for your life. Good luck!

**Brittany:** Prioritize what you want/need to accomplish in your unit in the time you are there. You cannot get it all done at once, so prioritize it. Don't just say no if higher tells you something you do not think you can do; instead, show them at what cost, and as much as possible, offer a different solution. Also, I'll echo Kevin's response on supply. It is YOUR property book. Your XO can help supervise the supply guys' actions, but it's your property. YOU do the cyclic; you manage it. It'll be better for you if you do.

**Joshua F.:** Do not assume that the XO and supply sergeant are managing property effectively. It's not that they don't want to or aren't trying; it's just that the pieces won't fall into place if you don't execute CSDP according to AR 710-2. Other thoughts: A TM [training manual] or FM [field manual] or AR [Army regulation] will end any debate on how something is supposed to be done. Summarized article 15s, revocation of pass privileges and bars to reenlist are the most effective tools you have. Have a first-90-days plan. By 90 days, all of your policies should be in place.

**Paul:** I agree with what Joshua had to say about not assuming that your XO and supply sergeant are managing the property book effectively. One of the hard lessons that I had to learn as a commander was trusting that my supply sergeant knew what the heck he was doing and that he knew his MOS (92Y), for that matter. My XO was outstanding, and with my mentorship through what I knew of the supply system, he was able to handle almost all supply and lo-

gistical matters. Knowing the CSDP is going to help you out immensely, and I also suggest that you understand AR 735-5. Ensure that the PBO [property book officer] gives you and the outgoing commander a thorough in-and-out brief, as well as explains what the brigade's CSDP entails. Another helpful thing that I did while in command was outline my own supply-discipline counseling that I gave to my platoon leaders to outline what their responsibilities were and what I expected of them when it came to hand receipts and sub-hand receipt holders.

**George:** The next time you might be able to be called a commander will be about 10 years down the line. Command is a privilege through which you are directly able to serve your Soldiers. You have the opportunity to make a huge difference in the life of every Soldier in your company. The pressure will be tremendous, and the price of failure can cost your Soldiers their lives. The more fun you make it, the more your Soldiers will respond. The best advice I got when taking command was that if you take care of your Soldiers, they will take care of the mission for you.

**Matthew:** My subordinates knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I had their welfare at the front of my mind. They knew I did everything I could to keep the BS at a minimum. And because of this, and this alone, they would not let me fail. I hope this helps. Good luck.

**CPT Fleming:** Thanks for all the feedback! I am printing everything and adding it to my binder I have been building. Pass the word if you know other people who can add to the discussion.

*Are you a commander who wants to tap into—and contribute to—our profession's most up-to-date knowledge about leading Soldiers at the company level? If so, we invite you to connect with your fellow leaders at <http://CC.army.mil>.*

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Art by Jody Harmon

Have you joined your forum?