



Company Command

Building Combat-Ready Teams



To: Company Commanders

From: Company Commanders

Standards on Remote Outposts

When we put a small element—a squad or a platoon—on a remote outpost by itself for long periods of time, it's likely that some standards will slide. How do we know this? Well, we've been that platoon leader ourselves, and we let some standards slide. Truth be told, we were glad to get away from the flagpole and "relax" a few of the not-so-common-sense standards.

But now we're company commanders, deploying to places where our platoons and squads will be operating from remote outposts. Knowing what we know about standards and the propensity for junior leaders to let them slide over time, what are we going to do about it? How can we influence our platoons so that they maintain their discipline and edge throughout a long deployment?

Michael Taylor

Current commander

B/1-87 IN, 1 BCT, 10th MTN DIV

A young platoon leader thinks he knows everything after he's been in one firefight. Some will think all of these standards are stupid. "Why can't I roll up my sleeves? Why do I have to shave? Why do I have to blouse my boots? Why do I always have to have my weapon on me in the patrol base? Why do I need a range card? Why?" This is my response to my platoon leaders as a company commander in Afghanistan right now.

Here's why we follow standards. I was in the 1st Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment, during the 2005–06 deployment to Mahmudiyah, Iraq. It was a hostile and volatile place. There was a platoon in my battalion that failed to follow standards. They wore their own company patches. They didn't shave. They didn't clean their uniforms or weapons. Their security was lax at static checkpoints. They didn't abide by a lot of basic Soldier standards.

One Soldier we'll call Joe figured, "Well, I don't need to shave or clean my weapon, and I think it's stupid to have two guys awake all the time. I'm going to sleep; one guy is plenty of security. I bet I can drink here, too." Then, once he realized he could drink, he figured he could get away with doing drugs. Once he got away with that, he realized he could do just about anything he wanted. Then he sees a girl come through the checkpoint with her family and decides it would be a great idea to go rape her. I assume that he and his buddies were drunk or high at the time. They realized that they couldn't just get away with raping the girl. They'd have to kill her, too, and the family, to boot. So, "Joe" and his buddies

plan it out and actually do it. They rape a girl and kill the entire family. No one knew about it for a month or two.

During this time, they continued to be complacent with security and failed to live by standards. Three Soldiers at a



CPT Michael Taylor's strong commitment to enforcing standards stems from his experiences as a platoon leader in Iraq.

CPT Chris Brandt says that "it's the commander's responsibility to ensure that subordinate leaders know why certain standards are so important."

checkpoint got attacked. They didn't even fire the crew-served weapon on top of their truck. One was killed on site and the others were shot and taken alive, dragged behind a truck by wire for 6 kilometers. We found their bodies, decapitated, four or five days later. They had been executed and rigged with explosives. In the meantime, a new Soldier arrives to the unit. He notices that these dudes don't really abide by standards, and he hears rumors of this rape. He tells his platoon leader, there's an investigation and, sure enough, it's true. For the next year or two, everyone remembered the 101st for that.

It all boiled down to a failure to enforce standards in the first place. If you want to risk it, go ahead. Maybe you don't have a psychopath in your unit. I'm not willing to chance it, so I'll enforce standards and ensure that my NCOs are doing so as well.

Ari Martyn

**Current commander
B/1-68 AR, 3 BCT, 4 ID**

My platoon was part of a hodgepodge unit in Baghdad consisting of SF [Special Forces] and foreign troops with very different standards from those of my infantry platoon. My company commander was not even in the same theater, so I knew there was little chance of him just showing up.

When we were in our "house" (literally a former Ba'ath party official's mansion), the PSG [platoon sergeant] and I allowed anything to go. The minute you step out of the house, though, you were in full AR 670-1 [the regulation on uniform and appearance]. The other note on this was that I got top cover. I briefed my boss—and my PSG briefed my boss' NCO counterpart—on what we were doing regarding altering AR 670-1 inside the house.

When it comes to altering standards, leaders get to make decisions, and I provide boundaries. For example, when I was in Afghanistan and owned two small half-platoon firebases in the middle of nowhere, I told my squad leaders that hats were OK, beards were not. However, a private didn't get to choose to wear a baseball cap. A leader had to tell him that it was OK first. I couldn't be at both firebases simultaneously, so I got specific with my squad leaders as to what was OK and what wasn't. I wanted them to ask first, lest it turn into "When the cat's away ...". Above all else, there were no deviations to normal Army standards while we were outside of the wire or on guard. To enforce this, I laid down the law early, but also followed this up by explaining why certain standards existed. I would flat-out ask a private, "What's a standard we have in this platoon that you think is stupid?" Almost every time, this created an opportunity for me to clarify to the Soldier the good reasons for the standard. But I remember once that a Soldier's question caused me to go back to my



PSG; we discussed the standard and decided to change it.

There was one platoon in my battalion when I was in Afghanistan that had a bad experience when the brigade CSM arrived unannounced. The platoon thought that he was a routine supply bird and went out to meet him in brown T-shirts, civilian shorts, flip flops and beards. It did not go well for them. I used this as a teaching point for my platoon. We had great pride in ourselves and our unit, and I was able to tap into this. We all know how higher-ups only get to see snapshots of squads and platoons. I told my squad leaders that I did not want anyone in the brigade to think that we were a bunch of undisciplined rogues. We wanted to be remembered for the good hard work we were doing.

If I thought I could adequately explain to a reasonable commander a deviation to a standard, then I was comfortable making the change. For example, I had a reason for allowing my guys not to shave first thing in the morning: It was subfreezing outside, and I deemed it reasonable to allow ourselves to wait until the afternoon, when (usually) the water would not freeze against our faces. I also believed a reasonable commander or CSM would understand that life in a 24/7/365 harsh combat environment isn't bearable unless you can wear a baseball cap when you get back from a mission and are in your living space in "chill" mode. On the other hand, I vigorously checked and inspected any standard that related to the safety of my men or the accomplishment of my mission, and, if anything, I think it could be

said that my platoon's standards were fairly high.

Security, values and safety are nonnegotiable, and mission accomplishment is the highest goal. Leaders get paid to make judgment calls. This topic is about whether I, as commander, trust my subordinates to make those calls. That trust isn't automatic, but if I cannot trust them to make good judgment calls regarding low-impact uniform standards, then I also won't trust them to be on their own in the first place because too much is on the line—American lives and the mission itself.

Lazander Tomlinson

Current commander

A/1-84 FA, 170 IBCT

Focus on nonnegotiable standards, without a doubt. However, I would argue that “nonnegotiables” are different from unit to unit. For example, a few of mine are weapons skills and handling; physical training; and vehicle and communications' PMCS [preventive maintenance checks and services]. The real friction point is where certain “higher-echelon” standards are not being met. It's the old “frontline Soldier versus REMF” dynamic. As a leader, I submit that we help filter higher-echelon standards. The Army trusts us to be commanders and make decisions in every type of environment. Know what the nonnegotiables are, and remember that not everything can be the main effort.

Chris Brandt

Future commander

XO, C/2-8 CAV, 1 BCT, 1 CAV DIV

Discipline has to be taught and enforced from the ground up. The commander and first sergeant set the command climate that the company will ultimately conform to. The old adage still applies: Don't expect what you don't inspect. Encourage your leaders to pay attention to detail, and they will pass that on to their Soldiers.

Are the “not-so-common-sense standards” there for a reason? Do the Soldiers understand why the standard is what it is? Emphasis has to be placed on the important standards, but it's the commander's responsibility to ensure that subordinate leaders know *why* certain standards are so important. If Soldiers understand why they're doing something, they're much more likely to continue doing the right thing when you are not around. Don't let a Soldier's death be the reason they figure out why they were told to do something.

Michael Harrison

Past commander

A/1-32 IN, 3 BCT, 10th MTN DIV

First off, I think this discussion is warranted and timely. These issues, when left unresolved, can significantly disrupt the cohesion and effectiveness of units, especially at the platoon and squad levels.

The vast majority of company commanders now have deployed and fought in the shoes of their platoon leaders. This allows us to understand the hardships and issues fac-

ing a PL in combat (discipline, complacency, boredom, infighting). One would think that this would make commanders more empathetic, but we know that's not always the case. Often, commanders become aloof, catch “tunnel vision” and forget where they came from.

It is imperative to establish standards that protect the Soldier by mitigating the risk of loss of life, limb or eyesight, but that also still retain an element of common sense. Too often the chain of command overreacts to unbloused boots, unshaven faces or related offenses without understanding the situation from the Soldier's perspective. I believe the NCO, either PSG or 1SG, must actively reach out to the Soldiers and understand the situation from their shoes before establishing and maintaining a standard. Only through an active approach will the leaders, both officer and NCO, make well-informed decisions that pass the “common-sense test.”



CPT Michael Harrison chats with an Afghan boy while on a joint patrol with the Afghan National Army. Harrison argues that standards on remote outposts must pass the “common-sense test.”

James Bithorn

Past commander

A/1-506 IN, 4 BCT, 101 ABN DIV (AASLT)

Adherence to standards begins with the type of climate that is fostered by the commander and first sergeant. How well is the commander's intent understood by platoon-level

leadership? How often is company leadership present at a remote outpost, not only to spot-check but also to ensure that every member of a platoon at the outpost understands his piece of the big picture?

Standards have to be established and spot-checked early on. That includes the big stuff like base defense planning (known by all and rehearsed), CASEVAC/MASCAL [casualty evacuation/mass casualty situation] planning and rehearsal, reporting criteria and adherence to battle-rhythm events as well as the little stuff like uniform and appearance, and light-and-noise discipline.

In my experience, the problems don't start early on, but rather after six to eight months spent in a combat outpost. It is entirely too easy for platoon leadership to feel neglected and, in turn, to allow standards to relax. I know it may not sound logical, but keep in mind that a platoon may have had to medevac several Soldiers, live without proper toilets or chow, and continue to execute COIN [counterinsurgency] operations for months on end. When a unit reaches that point, inexperienced leaders can "throw in the towel" temporarily, possibly doing so at a point in time that can result in further casualties. It is the commander and first sergeant's responsibility to find the time—much more often than once or twice—to spend an overnight with their platoons. When they do so with some level of consistency, the commander's intent will remain clear, and, more importantly, relaxed standards will be identified and fixed. Commanders who do not make time to do this are usually the ones blindsided by a VIP visit turning out a dangerously relaxed standard.

Sean M.

Past commander

Unit in 3 BCT, 10th MTN DIV

Standards are created for a reason—usually at someone else's expense—and are put in place so that the inciting incidents do not happen again. If your Soldiers understand the basic standards (shaving, bloused boots, etc.) and are taught this discipline before deploying, your deployment will go more smoothly overall. We can all tell the difference between a disciplined unit and an undisciplined one, and so can the enemy. Your command climate will set the tone, and your NCOs will follow you and your 1SG's lead. When deployed, some standards are nonnegotiable—those dealing with life, limb or eyesight. To steal a term from Michael Harrison's post, they have to pass the "common-sense test." If they do not, it is your job as the company commander to send this information back up the chain of command. Based on your circumstances while deployed, you, as the company commander, may let your leaders and Soldiers slide on some standards. If you decide on this course of action and your superior(s) disagree, it is your responsibility to fall on the sword.

A standard (much like any other order) needs to be owned by every leader down to the individual Soldier. Creating divisions between each level of command by saying "this is higher's stupid standard" (true as it might be) only weakens the unit.

—Jake Czekanski

Mike Panaro

Past commander

A/6-9 CAV & C/3-8 CAV, 3 BCT, 1 CAV DIV

If a standard is negotiable, then it is not a standard. A standard can be changed as a result of negotiation, but then you have a new standard. Our Soldiers, and particularly our junior leaders, have to adhere to the standard.

I've been in units that have done some funky things in Iraq. If something doesn't make sense, then try to get it changed. In our squadron, if we thought it was stupid, we got all the troop commanders together and went to talk to the SCO [squadron commander] about it. We either stood united and together on an issue, or we didn't go to the boss. And while we were in with the boss, all of our 1SGs were in talking to the CSM. If we got the standard changed, then great. If we didn't, then it was still the standard, no matter how dumb.

You have to instill the importance of discipline in your subordinate leaders. You have to get them to take ownership of their subordinates as well as of the



CPT Mike Panaro (left) meets with Peshmerga forces at the Mosul Dam in Iraq. Panaro believes that commanders must establish clear priorities of work to resolve conflicts between standards.



CPT Joan Hollein has learned that Soldiers will respect, if not always like, leaders who enforce standards, and that it is a leader's duty to uphold standards.

standards passed down by various levels of command. Not shaving may not lead to your platoon committing war crimes, but the attitude and indiscipline that leads to not shaving could. My policy was that Soldiers shaved once a day, if they needed. I didn't care if it was morning, lunch, night, whenever, as long as it happened once a day. If I can't trust a platoon leader to ensure that his soldiers are shaving (which takes, what, five minutes a day?), then how can I trust that guy to make sure his Soldiers are doing any of the myriad tasks that are far more important?

What is most important? Well, we have these things in the Army called priorities of work, and commanders establish them. Our priorities enable our subordinate leaders to know what is important to us; for example, I want the wire strung before guys are shaving (to use our favorite example). If the unit is abiding by those priorities, what is anyone going to say? If, however, people are not abiding by standards because they are lazy or think that the standard is stupid, then that is a lack of discipline that a commander needs to address.

I think that it is important to have these types of conversations with PLs and PSGs before you deploy or immediately after you take command in theater. One of my favorite sayings is, "Good units do routine things routinely." That is what most standards are—routine: weapons maintenance, orders, PCCs [pre-combat checks], PCIs [pre-combat inspections], position improvement, field sanitation, admin actions, awards, evaluations and so on.

Joan Hollein

Past commander

A CO (MICO), BSTB, 3/3 ID & HHT/3-3 ID

"Leadership versus 'likership'—which one do you have?"

A 1SG mentor wrote this on a napkin for me in the DFAC [dining facility] during Operation Iraqi Freedom V when I took command of my first company, and I'll never forget it. A lot of this easing of standards and talk about putting on a different show when the boss comes around is a form of "likership." Young PLs are susceptible to this; they are new, potentially coming into a situation where they have the

least amount of knowledge or experience, and they want their Soldiers to LIKE them. They think that being liked equates with being respected.

As you mature in the Army, you (hopefully) will realize this is not the case. Your Soldiers may not like you at the time you enforce standards, and that's OK, but they will RESPECT you for upholding standards. It is not our choice to decide what is a good standard or a stupid standard; our job is to uphold it. That's what is important, that's why we wear the rank on our chest and that's why we are leaders.

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