



CompanyCommand

Building Combat-Ready Teams



To: Company-level Leaders
From: A Current Platoon Leader

Journal of a Platoon Leader in Afghanistan

The environment that company-level leaders operate within at war—demanding, dangerous, complex and ambiguous—can be difficult to imagine until it is experi-

enced personally. This month, an exceptional platoon leader in Afghanistan enables us to gain experience vicariously by tapping into excerpts from his journal.

July 2010

We are very busy here, and our accommodations are Spartan. Much is asked of my men, and little is returned in the way of creature comforts and conveniences. Two months after occupying real estate on high ground south of a village, we are still living without electricity or running water. My men work grueling shifts sitting on guard under the blazing summer sun for six hours on, six hours off, repeatedly for up to a week. When they are not on guard, they are with me out on patrol, chalking up kilometer after kilometer of walking through farmland and vineyard, up mountains and across rivers. But they are strong and have done well against the terrain—and against the enemy. Our feet are rarely dry, and our faces have adopted a perpetual red glow from daily exposure. We have been ambushed, and we have ambushed. A couple of weeks ago, four hours into a particularly grueling patrol, we chanced upon an enemy compound. All hell broke loose, and we tangled with a tenacious enemy force for more than three hours. By the end, I had called in 10 helicopter gun runs and six Hellfire missiles just to allow my smaller force to retrograde from a well-entrenched and reinforced enemy position.

Every week I sit down with my subordinate leaders and we come up with what missions and patrols we'd like to do. In the two months since our arrival, we have probed out to the farthest reaches of my platoon's area of operations (AO) and have discovered where the enemy is, how he moves, when he moves and what weapons he has. But the situation is incredibly complex—the enemy's make-up is not clear-cut, the population is not good, the enemy is not evil. We are less fighting an ideology than a well-financed gang in an agrarian society where work and money are scarce and where the government, on every level, is corrupt and parochial. The gang we are fighting are the "bad guys"—the cool rebels who have guns, drugs, and an allure that draws rebellious young people to fill their ranks to

conduct risky (but well-paid) tasks that earn them "street cred" as well as independence from their fathers and uncles and the tiresome farm work their destiny holds.

We have done really well in our efforts to partner with the Afghan National Police (ANP). I work with three ANP commanders who man three checkpoints in our company's AO. Yesterday, we were reinforced with a company of Afghan National Army (ANA). Slowly I am learning conversational Pashto. Unfortunately, our ANA speak Dari, so although I can now put a smile on a Pashtun's face with a smattering of Pashto, I have to start from square one with Dari.

August 2010

I spent the last two days prone on my cot recovering from a struggle against an enemy more hidden and stealthy than the Taliban: *E. coli*. I don't think I've ever been sicker in my entire life. Thankfully, our medics here are professionals and within 24 hours after passing out in the first-aid station, I was cognizant and colorful. Now, 48 hours later, I'm up and fit for duty, although I weigh considerably less than I did two days ago.

We are in the month of Ramadan here. Our ANA and ANP counterparts, along with the rest of the population, do not eat or drink from sunup until sundown. As this is a particularly holy time, the enemy believes he will be rewarded tenfold the normal rate for dying in combat. The good news is that he is weaker for not having consumed any vitals all day. The bad news is that our counterparts, the ANA and ANP, are weaker, too. They don't really feel like going out on missions because they're tired, hungry and cranky. The day before I fell ill, I got into an argument with one of our ANP commanders who was giving me flak about participating on my patrol. We were supposed to leave at 1800 to conduct a "street-level engagement" with locals where we had recently sustained an IED [improvised explosive device] attack. The ANP commander refused to go, saying



CPT Jason Wayne

"It's Ramadan; we have to go eat because at 1800 we break our daily fast." That simply was not true. They break their daily fast at 1920, and I told him so. He did not respond. So I challenged him a little bit, saying, "Look, the enemy fights during Ramadan fasting. As we speak, they are attacking A Company north of the river. They emplaced an IED in your town two days ago, during the day. They attack B Company every day. So why are you not fighting the Taliban? Maybe they're stronger than you. If this is the case, just let me know ..." He participated on the patrol.

I wish I could say and believe that our partners will be prepared to shoulder the burden of their own security when we leave, but I can't. Even if I look at them from afar and squint and tilt my head left or right, I still can't discern a legitimate fighting force that can sustain itself. So I focus on the personal level. I've developed a really good friendship with their 2nd Platoon leader, my counterpart.

September 2010

The past couple of months have been busy as we focus our efforts at building up the population centers. We've begun to funnel thousands of dollars in development money to begin construction projects. Oddly, despite being an infantry platoon leader, I am all of a sudden identifying projects, contacting contractors, accepting bids and supervising construction ... as well as continuing to find, fix and finish the enemy.

Among all our projects, building a school has been the most trying. The contractor is perpetually cutting corners, and the man upon whose land the school is being built frequently ambles over to the construction site when he's bored, high, or drunk and orders his cronies to abuse the

workers for skimping on quality. Each of these episodes, of course, completely derails the construction schedule and delays work for at least a week; this is how long it takes to calm/appease the landowner and convince the poor workers that it won't happen again. In addition to the school, we are also going to begin work on numerous bridges, one mosque refurbishment, a rainwater drainage canal and the refurbishment of the town's main street, which we have churned into moon dust with our heavy vehicles.

In other news, we have finally identified a willing candidate for the role of village elder. Thus far, no one has been willing to fill the elder role for fear of reprisal from the enemy. The Taliban did very well at destroying the tribal system here and systematically killing off village elders who were not aligned with their cause. With those years still vivid in most elders' minds, it's tough to goad them into the job. I am still skeptical of the newly announced elder because so little incentive exists for taking this role. And, of course, everything here is about incentives. The people here act based on what is good for them and their families, not for the welfare of their town, district or country. Everyone here is a realist. So, why did he agree to become the elder? Time will tell.

The last three days have been action-packed. Two days ago, we were ambushed by enemy during an interdiction patrol barely 100 meters into enemy territory. Sadly, one of my most faithful ANP friends, Commander Lahwil [a pseudonym], was severely wounded. We had been moving up a road towards an intersection where the enemy sometimes erects a checkpoint to intimidate passersby. After the ambush was initiated against us, I began giving fire commands to the ANP and ANA soldiers with me to ensure

they were returning fire and suppressing the enemy, which was firing on us from three sides. I turned to yell at Lahwil that we needed to retrograde to find better cover. I saw him holding his weapon out, firing, when all of a sudden he dropped his weapon and his arms went limp. He looked at me, confused, and then collapsed onto the road. A bullet had penetrated his left shoulder, traveled through the subcutaneous tissue of his chest, punctured his right lung and then exited through his right arm. The bullet severed both humerus bones, leaving his arms immobile. I grabbed him up and carried him to our medics. He will most likely lose both arms. Minutes later we called air support and dropped bombs to support our exfiltration.

Early yesterday morning, my platoon moved under darkness to occupy positions around enemy compounds we have been tracking for months. We got within 50 meters of the front door of the main compound when all hell broke loose. I was traveling with my lead squad as we bounded toward the objective, closing the distance. Basically, of my three squads, one is always stationary with guns ready to suppress any enemy, one is moving forward, and one is behind, ready to move up and reinforce or maneuver around to flank the enemy. At 100 meters from the enemy stronghold, my lead squad leader and I looked at each other warily as we crouched in the knee-deep water of an irrigation ditch that afforded us cover. That ditch was the last defensible area up to the enemy compound, and we knew that once we left it we'd be out in the open for 100 meters. I radioed my other two squad leaders, ensuring that both were in position. I radioed my platoon sergeant, who was 300 meters to my rear, to ensure that he was ready to receive casualties and had a helicopter landing zone ready to go. All sent me confirmation; everybody was set. We moved for-

ward, leaving the ditch behind. About 50 meters into the open area, all hell broke loose. The enemy opened up from the compound and from a canal to our north. Miraculously, no one was shot, and we crawled back to the ditch, where I immediately called for air support and artillery. Helicopters arrived first and strafed the compound, and then followed up with Hellfire missiles. We moved back another 100 meters to allow clearance for larger bombs. The enemy continued to reinforce, and we began taking fire from east and west of the objective. Within two hours, we had called in helicopters, artillery, F-15s and A-10s, completely demolishing the enemy objective and fighting positions.

Yesterday was a much-needed success after losing Lahwil. I wore the same pair of bloodstained pants for three days in Lahwil's honor, and it paid off with yesterday's success.

Today life continues. A bug is going around camp, and half of my men are vomiting. I've remained invulnerable, probably because I've already beaten *E. coli*. The weather is finally cooling, slowly but noticeably. The nights are much cooler, and with highs in the 90s, the days are much more tolerable. We almost have running water. Last month, the contractor we paid to dig a well dug to bedrock and then filled the hole with bottled water. That water ran out soon after he did. Two days ago, we finally began to receive daily shipments of 2,000 gallons of water. But our pump is broken, so although we have all the water we need, we have no way to fill our pipes, shower or laundry. And so it goes on. Call this the "Land of the Not Quite Right," I suppose.

October 2010

A few weeks after we destroyed the enemy headquarters, we received the mission to occupy a town deep within enemy territory. This small town had once been friendly, but due to

its distance from our company outpost (COP), we had been unable to "hold" it. At the time, my platoon's area of operations consisted of five towns totaling more than 2,500 people. Too much time would pass between patrols there, and its distance from our COP enabled the enemy to take it. Word got to us that insurgents had infiltrated the town, threatened the people and placed IEDs along the approaches into the town. This was horrible news. The families there had been good to us and were extremely friendly. I had become good friends with the elder. Now I imagined what kind of abuses they were likely suffering due to our friendship with them. I mulled over the IEDs. Nothing angers or scares me more than IEDs. Just as my leaders and I were contemplating these challenges, battalion decided that my platoon would kick off the next "clearance operation" by clearing and occupying the town.



CPT Jason Wayne



LTC Pete Kilner

In order to get there safely, we had to avoid the IEDs. Our mission was to secure the town no later than 0500 in the morning. This meant that we would be “breaching” a way into town sometime around 0300. In other words, it would be pitch-black out and thus nearly impossible for us to identify possible IEDs. Problem identified. So we worked to mitigate it. First, I decided we would avoid using the roads into town. Instead, we would scale a wall and climb down into the eastern-most compound. For that, we would have to construct two ladders; I tasked that to my 3rd squad leader. Next problem: What if there were IEDs at the base of the wall? The enemy is known to use this tactic precisely because we sometimes use ladders. However, it is more difficult for the enemy to target walls because walls don’t canalize us like roads do. Simply put, the enemy has a limited supply of IEDs. He can’t line the whole perimeter of the town with them. My estimate? A couple of IEDs on each access road and maybe a couple near the lowest portion of the wall. Solution: Bring the GPR [ground penetrating radar mine sweeper]. I tasked this to my 2nd squad leader. Next problem: What to do with the villagers? I felt bad to evict them, but our mission was to secure and hold the town, meaning we had to occupy it. Once we occupied it, there would be a very real chance the enemy would target us and attack the town. There was no other option; the villagers would have to leave. We addressed several other minor issues and broke up in time to catch a couple hours of sleep. Ideally, we should be well rested before an opera-

tion of this gravity, but it never works out that way. Before departing, we armed ourselves with plenty of 5-Hour Energy drinks.

By 0230, we were approaching the village, moving through the middle of a cornfield on the eastern side of town. It was difficult staying quiet as I crunched up towards the position of my lead squad leader, “Wil.” I peered through my night vision, looking for the infrared flash from his helmet. Found him. We linked up, conducted a quick map check and confirmed we were 150 meters from the wall we had to breach. I radioed to the other squad leaders and my platoon sergeant: “ORP [objective rally point] identified, continue movement, conduct linkup and set in security.” As my two other squads quietly approached, Wil and I prepared the mine sweeper. We had decided that he would sweep and I would “interrogate,” or probe the ground, when the detector was set off. I couldn’t stomach assigning that task to anyone else.

After Wil readied his squad, we departed the ORP to clear and secure the portion of wall we were to breach. Twenty feet from the wall, Wil signaled a halt. He was in lead, I followed directly behind him, and his squad followed behind me. He had emerged from the cornfield; the path and wall were in full view. We scanned the path and wall for any signs of movement or IED indicators. None. He switched on the GPR and instructed his squad to stay put and watch our backs. Wil and I took two steps out of the cornfield toward the wall. He began to sweep left to

right, right to left, slowly and deliberately with the GPR. Some minor beeps, nothing big. We shuffled forward. *Sweep, step, sweep, step.* It took us about 20 minutes to cover the first 10 feet. Then we heard a loud, prolonged beep. He mapped the area; it was definitely something that didn't belong. I grabbed his shoulder and carefully pushed him behind me. I got on all fours, my knife in hand, and began to probe the area. I worked slowly, pushing my knife into the soil carefully, unearthing clumps of dirt. *Probe, pry, analyze. Probe, pry, analyze.* Progress was painstakingly slow, but being slow and deliberate is proven to save lives. I found only some old nails and a large rock. We moved on. It took us 45 minutes to cover the 20-ft distance to the wall. Much relieved at having made it to the wall, I was about to call my 3rd squad forward with the ladders to begin the breach when we heard a voice (or was it voices?) coming from some nearby bushes. Wil and I froze. We raised our weapons and got low to the ground. Wil signaled back to his squad, silently communicating to them to "prepare to fire in that direction." Once all had been warned of the possible danger, I grabbed "Tarzan," my interpreter, and instructed him to tell whoever was hiding in the bushes to present themselves peacefully. He yelled the command. Moments later, our friend and ally, the town elder, emerged from the bushes, shaking but relieved to see us. We both realized who each other was and immediately embraced, exchanging the local greetings. We had mistakenly, and almost tragically, suspected each other of being the enemy.

This was an unbelievable relief. I was elated that my friend was not only alive, but also still in town. He immediately informed us that all the villagers were OK, albeit scared and shaken from receiving periodic Taliban threats. "Thank God," I said out loud. The elder showed us a safe way into the village as I radioed back the good news to everyone still in the ORP. I had my platoon sergeant array my squads around town, ensuring we established 360-degree security while my friend led me around, pointing out where all the IEDs had been emplaced. The elders of all six families gathered at the village well, and I informed them of what we had to do, apologizing but assuring them that they would be compensated. I knew that once the enemy learned we had occupied the town, it would be eager to attack. We had to get these people out immediately. About 10 minutes after the last family left town, toting sacks of blankets and clothes with goats, sheep and chickens in trail, I sat down for a moment of rest with my 3rd squad leader, Sergeant W. We broke open some MREs [food rations]. Just as we began to comment on how lucky we'd been, we heard the familiar whoosh and whistle of an incoming RPG [rocket-propelled grenade]. We reacted instantly, throwing our food aside and hitting the floor. There was a loud explosion and dust everywhere. I looked up and realized I couldn't see or hear anything. I checked myself. No injuries. Good. I groped my way forward as the dust cleared and my hearing returned, hollering at the top of my lungs, "Distance, direction! Distance, direction!" No re-

sponse. I ran up to the nearest rooftop position. "Why aren't you returning fire?" I screamed at my machine gunner. "Sir, I don't have positive identification!" he replied. I cursed the rules of engagement. The rules are such that sometimes they scare soldiers from shooting when they should be shooting, fearful of repercussions. Several minutes after the first RPG impacted, two more were fired simultaneously. I heard the whoosh and ducked down. (Those few seconds between whoosh and impact are tense!) Even before the RPGs exploded, my machine gunners began rocking. When the dust settled, I realized that one of the RPGs had impacted right where Sergeant W. and I had been sitting earlier. Lady Luck was with us.

That particular firefight lasted about an hour. We suffered no friendly casualties, and we inflicted three enemy casualties. This was a very good day. Lady Luck had smiled on my platoon once again. Almost three weeks later, we still hold the town as we build a nearby police checkpoint. Perhaps once that checkpoint is finished, we will pull back and rejoin our company, and allow the villagers to move back in.

We've gained a lot of ground. These days, attacks are rare and it is rumored that most of the Taliban in our area have fled to Pakistan. Some have fled to Helmand. Whatever the case, it is eerily quiet. The regular gun battles echoing in the distance have ceased. We conduct patrols through areas that would have been impossible a few short weeks ago. But we must remain active, with or without an enemy.

Are you willing to share your experiences to assist your fellow company-level leaders? If so, please write team@us.army.mil or join the conversation in the CompanyCommand or PlatoonLeader online professional forums (<http://CC.army.mil> or <http://PL.army.mil>). The cutting-edge knowledge of our profession resides in leaders at the tip of the spear!



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Art by Jody Harmon

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