

51 Tips I Wish I Had Pre-Command

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Below are my reflections on being a post CCC captain through command. I began to compile these about 6 months before I passed off the guidon and continue to add to and reflect on this list as the weeks and months go by out of command.

Disclosure: I attended Marine Expeditionary Warfare School (EWS) so my experience is colored through that lens, but I think the info is what I would have wanted to be told to me before I arrived at the unit. They are a series of bullets captured in countless green and leather-bound notebooks and they can be repetitive. Enjoy.

1. The Army has recently put more emphasis on its “People First” initiative – it should come as no surprise that my greatest challenges in command were all people related. Not gunneries, qualification ranges, or ACFTs. Placing the right NCOs and officers who take initiative, can work together as a platoon leadership team, and helping to foster individuals will enable your company to achieve success in training proficiency. Things like being just and compassionate in administering UCMJ, having empathy for a Soldier whose job performance is being affected by a divorce, knowing when to send a Soldier to a school they’ve wanted to go to even though it may not benefit your immediate command, taking every EO and SHARP complaint seriously and acting appropriately on them - all will enable you in the long term to focus on Soldier lethality and proficiency when it matters most. Know your formation, not just your PLs and PSGs. This is a tall order, as a Tank Commander I had 76 personnel at the most with attachments but Infantry Companies can range up to 140 and specialty companies can grow upwards to 300. Make the effort.

2. Training Management & Training Meetings. I cannot overstate how easy this is to achieve on paper, but how difficult it is to make happen on the ground. Training management is critical at the Sergeant level. Platoon Leaders should prioritize tasks with the PSG on how to achieve the CDR's end state and intent. Then Sergeants should brief Platoon Leaders on how they will achieve these priorities. Platoon Leaders show Commanders how they will achieve their intent and end state. This provides predictability and ownership; your Sergeants have decided how they will conduct the hour-by-hour and daily business of what their formation does in a training week, it is their training calendar and not yours. If your training calendars are being built by platoon leaders, or worse – by you, you need to get the Sergeant back in the fight. When you hold your first training meeting, ask yourself who is the meeting for. If you are doing all the briefing, and everyone is looking for your confirmation – the briefing has become about the commander and everyone is there to survive their one slide and move on. It took me 18 months to get a training meeting where PLs briefed me training calendars built by their section sergeants and then discussed and deconflicted amongst each other while the XO/ISG for resource and troop-to-task deconflicted. I tried to talk as little as possible, emphasizing that this meeting is about collaboration amongst the formation to achieve a common goal. I provided guidance and intent,



and when changes occurred in the short term – context. Here are some guides you can use to gauge the training management and ownership in a unit when you take the guidon.

a. Do Soldiers look at the training calendar and consider them reliable or do they ignore them?

b. When the PL/PSG get pulled into a meeting or other event, what does the rest of the formation do? Do they execute the Training Calendar or do they wait to be told what to do?

c. Do Platoons set aside time for their own 'Training Sync' or another method for the NCOs and the PL to sit down and talk about HOW they will achieve an end state?

d. When you show up to an event on the Training Calendar, is it occurring? Is it being evaluated with a TE&O or standard that was published on the training calendar?

3. Expect more of your subordinates. As an AS3, my S3 demanded more than I thought I was comfortable to handle. When other units had field grade officers briefing the BDE Commander for a major operation, he expected me to walk the terrain board to brief what our Squadron was doing. He was always there watching and providing feedback, but let me grow in discomfort and brief my senior rater. This may appear, to your subordinate, like you are giving them your work but in the long run, you are preparing and developing them with confidence to understand the intent and take action in your absence. You build systems that become less 'me' centric and allow you to focus on problems that are truly yours to solve. Do not walk gently with your Lieutenants, you must push them to the limits of their comfort zone and beyond. The modern battlefield will expect dispersed leaders to operate within limited intent and discipline, but you also need to train them to be competent. Every time you give them an alibi on a standard, such as not meeting an LD time by 'just' a few minutes – you are messaging that standards don't matter. Expect more!

4. The Company's climate starts at the Commander. Your unit will reflect your beliefs and your ethos. I was surprised at how often I could observe a squad, section, or Platoon and instantly tell what unit they belonged because they echoed the language, behavior, and culture of their Commander. The Soldiers will tolerate behavior and values (EO, SHARP, bad work ethic) that leadership has shown is acceptable.

5. You and your formation will inevitably fail at something. How you recover and react to failure will showcase your character and your organization's resilience. Don't take too much counsel of your demons, clearly focus on the way ahead for setbacks. Get ahead of your failures early, you should discuss with your team an assessment on how that failure occurred and back brief your boss as soon as possible. No Battalion commander wants to be briefed bad news by the Brigade Commander, nor do they want to hear about failure in your formation with no recommendation on the way forward. When another unit fails at something, immediately look within your organization – just because you didn't have a roll-over or some other event that got a lot of visibility doesn't mean your formation is immune. Learning from other's mistakes is much better than learning it yourself.

6. You will spin the plates of innumerable extra duties, ranging from the always important – Drivers training, Motorcycle Mentor, SHARP & EO reps to ones that gain in prominence during certain periods, like the Voting Opportunity Representative. Put someone in charge, grant them the authority to make decisions, and then develop a routine to check on the performance of these duties. They will atrophy over time if you do not check them.



7. Take advice and counsel on what your unit is capable of and incapable of doing with a grain of salt. They are offered with the best intentions and experience. Sometimes your willpower is what carries an operation in training and deployment to success against the nay-sayers.
8. Your organization will resist change, if you don't have the mental and leader energy to see that change through - either drop the initiative or recognize that this is a major project that will absorb most of your command time to shape the organization's culture. Ask whether this energy could be better used to achieve small successes, or reserved for a small list of big projects. If you try to tackle it all, you'll be left with a trail of half measures and unaccomplished dreams.
9. Let subordinates' experiment and fail at the small things and consistently push their capability as far as you can. Failure is a great tool for coaching and mentoring, and it lets your leaders have ownership of the things they do.
10. Do the right thing, always. This seems obvious, but the temptation to cut corners will always be there. Whether that's pencil whipping a PT test or trying to solve "in house" issues like EO or Sharp. It's the wrong thing to do, and it's exactly the kind of thing that gets Commanders and 1SGs relieved (If you follow the news, it tends to get Generals relieved as well). That Soldier who you dislike because they are a consistent disciplinary issue is still entitled to the same fair judgment and rights as your best Soldier. Assume that at any point your Company would be put under a microscope, would you feel proud of how they are doing business? If not, change it. Your signature matters, don't put it on something you haven't reviewed.
11. We have rotten apples in our Army, get rid of them. We have exceptionally talented Soldiers in our formation, groom them for leadership as an NCO, O, WO - or get them into a highly-skilled career field like SF. For the vast majority of your formation, accept that they are average or just below average and make them better. Making average and underperforming Soldiers better is tough and demanding, but they will often fail/succeed based on the purpose and motivation provided by that first line NCO. Have you prepared that NCO for that challenge?
12. Using your authority to compel your team to accomplish a mission that may be due to another unit or a higher headquarters failure is never fun, but you should have the humility to accept that you also will never be successful in everything you do and will require help at some point in your command. Look beyond your unit's foxhole and step up for the team. You are a commander because you drive the unit towards a unified purpose beyond your organization.
13. Know when to fight. I was once told you get one sword to fall on and two silver bullets. You may receive a lot of poorly planned, poorly synchronized, badly resourced problems laid in front of you by your higher HQ. The vast majority of the time the best thing to do is to support the organization and carry the mission through to success and save your leadership energy for what are truly detriments to the larger organization. Don't let your hubris assume that the staff officer who labored all day on this order or product didn't ask the hard questions, give them the benefit of the doubt if the inconveniences are minor. Once you get associated as the "combative" commander, right or wrong, your feedback gets taken less seriously.



14. Henry Kissinger told my EWS class at Quantico that, "trust is the coin of the realm." If you don't have trust, your Soldiers will vote on whether to follow your orders in trying and difficult times both in garrison and combat. Trust is your currency between all the relationships you have within and across your company. It is a lot like the soul in that If you sell it, you may never get it back.

15. Counseling is a deliberate, on-going effort that you must plan time for. It is a daily contact sport, you can't fire and forget. Developing others will develop you.

16. You will be subjected to all kinds of pet projects and good ideas. This can be the Squadron Commander or Sergeant Majors fascination with a new program, or entertaining things they did 18 years ago as privates and lieutenants, or it can be constantly changing software like G-Army or eFLIPL or Vantage. Recognize you have an obligation to execute these programs and offer candid feedback on how they impact your force. Trust that your leaders have put critical thought into implementing these ideas and they are expending their energy in trying to get your buy-in.

17. No Soldier joins the Army wanting to fail. Don't fall prey to hitting the easy button on a Soldier who begins to slip from standards. The Army has made a significant investment in these men and women. It is a waste to just kick out a private after two PT tests. Use the full kit of rehabilitative tools, UCMJ, Counselings, bars....it takes more time and is a drain on your HQ but you could be investing in a future CSM.

18. I had the misfortune of a PL and a PSG being relieved while I was in command. Both of them held their positions much longer than they should have. This was a series of leadership failures that led them there. Neither of these individuals should have been in front of Soldiers, yet I was the one with the guide-on when the shoe fell. Advise your command early and often when you have concerns that may lead to relief - don't settle for waiting for an LFX observation by the senior rater to determine that outcome, you're passing the buck onto your BC/SCO. If you're going to have to relieve someone one level down, know that this decision needs to go to your CSM/BN CDR for discussion. Getting rid of a PSG without paperwork is nearly impossible, don't expect most LTs to be capable of providing PSG counseling without training and expect to handle some of that negative counseling yourself.

19. If your instinct tells you something is wrong, you're probably right. You now have 5-6 years of Army experience under your belt and for combat arms officers this has mostly been at the company level, your instincts are more finely tuned than before. Investigate and be curious when you are telling yourself something isn't right; that's the first indicator of a deeper problem. When a commander is seeing 'indicators', then this thing you are observing is likely very prevalent within your command.

20. Be clear with those you rate and senior rate where they stand personally, where their organization stands, and what they need to do to become better. There are few more frustrating feelings you will get walking out of a counseling session asking yourself where you stand. This shouldn't be the focus of discussion, but ultimately we all want to know whether we have a



future in this career or if we should be seeking new opportunities before our OER/NCOER is due.

21. Every conversation with your Battalion/Squadron Commander should be an opportunity to highlight those he senior rates. I consistently reinforced throughout my command what I felt the 1SG and my PLs and XO were doing for the Troop. The BC/SCO will rightly assume if you neglect to discuss how your leaders are performing, that they aren't doing much at all.

22. My first brigade commander in Korea told me that the heart of a company is its arms room and the soul its supply room. If systems there function to requisition, maintain and properly organize and document actions it can serve as a good check that larger systems work well.

23. To my last comment, I would add, the Training Room is the connective tissue of the Troop. If you put garbage in your HQ, that burden will shift first to your 1SG and XO and ultimately to you and your Platoons. Take the time to train your HQ NCO and Training room NCOs. It is unfair to shift this solely onto your XO. You and the 1SG own this. You probably have more experience in all those spreadsheets you built and perfected during your time on staff or as an XO.

24. Relationships are everything, you will hear this a lot because it is true. A personal thank you, going to the FRG events, going to the bosses beer call, are just decent things to do in a modern culture that prefers to ghost people and find excuses to stay home. When you're on staff, support the HHT CDR. Being a compassionate and professional human will bring personal satisfaction and professional support when you need it most.

25. Help the staff, you're on the same team. Recognize that you weren't God-sent for command, most often you were the next man up. They are your peers.

26. Using the phrase that "The BDE/SQDN has not published an order yet.." to explain to subordinates why you don't know what is occurring is a weak excuse as an AS3 and a CDR. You've been around long enough, or have access to people who have, to know what 60% of any operation will look like. Build that plan and FRAGO as the higher HQ adjusts. If you're doing it right, you're sharing your plan and avoiding too many changes. There's a small window for tactical patience, but when that vanishes do your best analysis and plan.

27 Your emotional bank account for your spouse, kids, and family fills slowly and withdraws in large amounts - draw from it sparingly and only when necessary. Quantity time is as important as quality time with your family. The Army will leave us all one day, try to make sure your family doesn't do the same.

28. Field Grades are allies, not foes. I grew up as a 2LT where the fastest way to be destroyed was to bump into the SXO or the S3. The Army has changed, and as a commander, your relationship has changed to your field grades. A good field grade who can leverage their relationships to help solve problems where you've gotten stonewalled is invaluable. They are great mentors and coaches - and unlike the SCO/BC, they don't rate you. So, bounce ideas off them, support their success, and don't be afraid to ask them for help. You can exercise your right



as a Commander to bypass the XO/S-3 to talk your Senior Commander about an issue – but do so gracefully, know your commander, and be armed with why you disagree on an action you are being told to take. I would caution you to use that privilege sparingly.

29. In the book, "Black Swan" the author warns that more expertise in an area directly correlates to inaccurate time estimates to complete work. I think this is why leaders who under promise and over deliver end up doing so well - they accurately assess any number of uncontrollable factors dictates that flexibility has to be in any operation. If you plan to the margins of failure your organization is extremely frail and subject to a slight error tumbling the whole house of cards.

30. Get to Yes. When another commander or the higher headquarters asks for help, consult your 1SG, and find a way to make it happen. Don't jealously covet your fiefdom (if you are that guy with the only working printer...share it....and yes, someone else will break it). Instill this ethos in your formation, because it is the same behavior that will cause your Soldiers to pass by some trash in the Motor pool or some other jacked-up thing in the unit and do nothing about it because you've instilled that individual success is more important than the organization.

31. Don't abandon maintenance to the XO and personnel to the 1SG. Don't let them be detached from training and operations. Each of you is better positioned to deal with each of these areas, but you will need to keep your entire "big 3" invested in each of them. Your Squadron/ Battalion can rapidly identify a Troop Command team that isn't talking to each other.

32. Get rid of things that require your permission. Countless things are required to be approved by commanders IAW Army regulations, don't add to this list if you can avoid it. Don't make PLs ask for permission to release platoons at the end of the day, make them understand your intent, and hold them accountable if they fail to do it. Don't make your 1SG ask your permission to conduct troop business, make sure he knows your intent, keep you informed, and let him know when you think he's outside of your intent. Not asking permission is NOT the same as not giving you situational awareness of your formation. I constantly sought opportunities to ensure subordinates were fully aware of their empowerment. They will get it wrong, resist the urge to suddenly switch to draconian rules. They will misinterpret your intent, or assume that because they don't need your approval they'll just not inform you of what's going on...but If you want to be able to sleep, take a piss, or walk away from your CP and know that the organization can fight and action without you - then build that organization.

33. Ask why. Some Army leaders disagree, but I believe you (and your subordinates) are entitled to this answer if time permits. Given that few decisions outside of NTC and combat operations exist with such time constraints, you should ask the purpose of any operation. If you don't know why you're doing something, how can you provide purpose and intent to your formation? Take the time to provide the context to decisions, especially those made by your higher HQ - or you risk the HQ being viewed as some cold robotic organization that made decisions on an Excel spreadsheet.

34. Write and give orders. This is much harder than it sounds. However, you should practice giving company orders for your major training events. If for nothing else, to determine responsibilities in the orders process. The big surprise for MCCC graduates, but I highly



discourage the commander brief the entire order. Consider your XO to brief Paragraph 1 and 4...your lead platoon in the movement to brief Phase I (Movement) of your operation, your 1SG to brief the company CASEVAC plan....etc. Leave the intent, mission, the concept of the operation, and key parts of the order to you. This goes back to ownership. You don't need to ask 1st Platoon to back brief the route to you because they planned it and prepared it and rehearsed it with you before the OPORD. Too many Commanders go into "officer defilade" and build plans in a vacuum and then reveal it for the first time on the terrain board to their subordinates. This is, in my opinion, because we set up our officer schooling this way - but it does not reflect the reality of how planning is done at the Platoon and Troop level.

35. Develop a method of personal task tracking. You will give out oodles of guidance, tasks, and deadlines to your formation. If you don't take the time to organize these thoughts and capture them somewhere, you'll simply forget that you asked the commo guy to back brief you on the parts ordering status for your JCRs three weeks from now. A Company task tracker helps, but you need your system for what you as a commander personally are doing/following. This list of things is surprisingly long when you write it down, considering you are not including battle rhythm events. I used a "to do" list shared with me by a great signal officer and I shared it with my XO/1SG so they could see where I will be focusing my efforts and where they could support me.

36. If you don't give a deadline, it won't get done. Remember your subordinates are prioritizing their efforts, with no time requirement for a task you've given them the liberty to prioritize it according to their timeline, not the company.

37. Ego and Envy are two great threats to your career success and happiness. If you define your happiness by how you will be rated, how your company will perform compared to others....you will be disappointed. If you start believing you "deserve" things as a commander....do a self-assessment and find a trusted person who can give you some honest feedback. Do the best with what you are given for the time you are in command. If you fail to get the things you believe you deserve; it's okay, you will survive - and if going back to staff or in a functional area is your Army future instead of leading Soldiers, then recognize that as your skillset and be good at that.

38. Seek out a mentor before you complete CCC. It could be someone who commissioned you in ROTC or a previous commander or a civilian. This person should be someone who can offer you candid advice, that you are ultimately free to ignore (i.e; Probably not your current rater). My mentors have been extremely helpful, from helping me envision what I want my command to look like, to navigating tricky conversations I needed to have with my boss about my career.

39. Leaders are readers. Don't count on going to schools while in command (Unless they are a requirement in that unit culture – like Jump Master). The majority of your development is self-development and one of the best ways to add context to your understanding of the world is through reading. Consume vast quantities of information, use that information to train your force, or experiment with best practices from civilian and military writing. Short of a monthly or quarterly OPD at the BDE level, no one is going to make that kind of investment or send you to school again until post command or ILE. Don't wait until you are a major to start seriously



reading, you're embarrassing yourself at the individual level and it shows a sincere lack of intellectual curiosity at the professional level.

40. Be an effective communicator across every medium. You will communicate at various echelons across all sorts of verbal, written, and digital media and will have to translate abstract written BDE orders into something that makes sense to your leaders. Likewise, you need to turn a PSG's verbal rant into a coherent message about risk, value, and recommendations to your higher HQ. If you can't communicate well, awards get downgraded, NCOERs/OERs look weaker, and you fail to influence decisions.

41. Define the standard. If you don't, your subordinates will. Most learn this lesson as a PL, but you should rarely accept that anything is "good" unless you and that individual have shared what "good" is. What makes this different as a CDR is that you now likely have MOS' under your command which are not your own. "Good" is often mistaken with "Qualified" or "Certified", which to me is the basic performance of a skill to a minimum standard. When you as a commander are asking if a unit is "good", you mean "Proficient", as in they've developed an advanced mastery of the skill under multiple challenging conditions like day, night, live fire, and CBRN. Not sure how to define what proficiency is for a task? Reference TE&Os, they will tell you or ask a senior NCO in that MOS.

42. Your MTOE can be found at FMS web. Read it. Too many Commanders talk about their MTOE and what they are authorized for personnel/equipment but they have no clue.

43. Your behavior is being mirrored. PSGs will modify behavior towards PLs based on whether you treat them like kids (or let your 1SG treat them as such). I recommend you be able to clearly articulate why Lieutenants are important to Platoons since Army culture has trended toward the idea of them being silent interns who make the powerpoints. Your PLs will look at your interaction with the 1SG, PSG, and your CSM/SGM to shape what their relationship is with their PSG and future NCO counterparts. They will look at you to learn what officers consider decisive events.

44. My first SCO said, Officers, vote with their feet. Where you spend your time signals to your formation what you really think is important. This is especially true in command, where your limited time means you must identify your main effort and decisive operations and weigh them accordingly.

45. Do not walk timidly through your command. It is your company/troop/battery. Don't ask for permission if it's your decision to make and within the intent. Better to take action, apologize, and correct yourself afterward. Learning when to brief the boss for permission and learning when to solve it on your own is an art that you will only learn through time. You'll know what I'm talking about when you make a call to come in late, cancel PT, or some other decision that first 120 days in command without back briefing the boss for his approval. You aren't a PL anymore; the hand holding is over - make decisions and stand by them, but don't keep the boss in the dark either.



46. Language matters. Mirror the language your boss uses and make it the language of your organization. This is one of the primary ways BDE and Battalion CDRs get intent down to privates. This isn't ass-kissing or hollow platitudes, it is you helping a vision come into reality. So if the boss believes they need lethal experts, use those words and explain to your leaders what a lethal expert is and include that language in AARs.

47. A BDE CDR explained to me that Readiness is a combination of:

- a. USR metrics that measure manning, equipment, and training
- b. Your unit's ability to mobilize rapidly, load out, move to an objective, be lethal, and conduct your assigned mission.

You will need to be good at both. It is easier to be good at the metrics.

48. Company command philosophies matter. It's your first opportunity to write down how you think you will lead, combined with an opportunity to put it into practice. Don't publish it, but frequently talk and express your values to influence the organization. This is an opportunity to figure out what kind of leader you are before you lead larger organizations.

49. Write an intro letter to your future BDE and BN/SQDN CDRs if you know them. Write less about your professional background and more about your family and interests and your willingness to give to the team.

50. Be emotionally predictable to your subordinates. Whether you decide to be a hard ass, a soft personality, or a straight-faced stoic - be true to what you are and be consistent. If your subordinates don't know if you're going to flip out or brush off bad news it will cause them more stress just figuring out HOW they should prepare to deliver and receive your reaction instead of just giving you the information.

51. You are a commander, but you are the most junior officer holding that responsibility. You have numerous commanders above you with increasing rank and responsibilities who will guide and sometimes dictate how you will conduct your business. Don't get offended, execute, and move out and recognize you still have autonomy over a large portion of your formation.