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DIVISION COMMAND INTERVIEWS: DO THEY REFLECT REALITY?

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

Lieutenant Colonel Harrison Lobdell, III, IN

Doctor James W. Williams  
Project Advisor

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U.S. Army War College  
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ABSTRACT

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DIVISION COMMANDER INTERVIEWS:  
DO THEY REFLECT REALITY ?

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Since division commanders lead the organizations which are the primary building blocks of our Army, their ideas about the state of their particular divisions and the attitudes prevalent within, ought to reflect those within the rest of the Army. If their perceptions are skewed, the value of the Division Command Lessons Learned (DCLL) program drops dramatically. This study will examine the ideas expressed by outgoing division commanders over the last three years in the areas of training, leadership and ethics, and compare them to the issues being discussed in the military journals of the same period to see if they are consistent with the perceptions of the field.

BACKGROUND

The Division Command Lessons Learned Program, an oral history program conducted under the auspices of the U.S. Army Military History Institute, provides incoming division commanders the results of personal interviews done by the outgoing commander within the last six months of his command. These interviews cover many significant areas related to the training, maintenance, management and health of the organization in order to give the new commander as much of an understanding of his particular division

as possible. Additionally, the outgoing commanders have the opportunity to reflect upon those decisions and experiences which made a significant impact, and can be couched in terms of advice for the new commander.

The Army has proclaimed areas of special emphasis in recent years by designating those years the Year of Training, the Year of Leadership and the Year of Values. With the special emphasis being placed upon these areas, it seemed likely that not only would division commanders address their thoughts in these areas in some depth, but the professional literature also would be more likely to reflect current issues in these areas. This examination becomes useful because if a disconnect exists, then there is at least the possibility that division commanders may be out of touch with their units and soldiers, a possibly disastrous situation within the broader context of war, but more certainly very inefficient for the short term growth of the organization. Where ideas are in synch, we have a degree of confidence that our divisions are moving along a path consistent with the direction desired by division commanders without dysfunctional detours caused from within the organization.



## CHAPTER II

### TRAINING

Within the general context of training, two areas stand out by virtue of the numerous comments appearing from division commanders and similar remarks made in the professional literature: the role of the National Training Center and the professional development of our noncommissioned officers. Although the commanders discussed training from virtually every aspect, only in these two areas was there sufficient published information to make comparison possible.

#### THE NATIONAL TRAINING CENTER

No training decision made by the Army within the last twenty years has had the profound impact of that to construct the National Training Center (NTC) at Ft. Irwin, California. However, only recently, have the spin-offs of unit training on the desert floor permeated throughout the Army. Division commanders whose units went to NTC were universal in their acclaim for its importance as the two representative comments below make clear:

"In 31 years of service, nothing told me so much about the state of training of my units as did the National Training Center.... Not even combat itself told me so much about my troops and units." 1

"First of all, find an anvil. You have to have something that shapes people and forces them to focus. Going to the National Training Center is an anvil....you have to have something that forces people to prepare for, think for, plan for, and train for an evaluated event." 2

Although it is undeniable that NTC provides more information about units than was ever available before, the second comment correctly reflects where NTC has had its most profound impact: it provides focus. As Michael Ganley and Benjamin Shemmer noted in the Armed Forces Journal, "For the first time in history, we're teaching people how to win, not how to die." 3 The focus which is now prevalent in virtually every combat organization within the Army has been refined to a Mission Essential Task List (METL) which accurately reflects those tasks which a unit must perform to successfully accomplish its wartime mission. While one division commander's comments in 1985 indicate that in his unit, a METL driven training plan was not in effect upon his arrival, later division commanders made numerous comments indicating that the use of a METL to narrow the scope of training and to provide focus at all levels of the division was a universal procedure. These same commanders attribute our current appreciation of the importance of a METL to the requirement to refine training in order to perform successfully at NTC.

Initially, only the the heavy maneuver forces benefited from the realistic, high stress training provided by NTC. More recently, a training center for light forces (JRTC) and another smaller training center for European forces (CMTC) have been

constructed. The capstone to the training center program is that which takes place at Ft. Leavenworth to train division commanders and their staffs. As MG Mallory, then Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Training at Training and Doctrine Command, notes:

"Training centers have demonstrated effectiveness in rapidly improving combat readiness. [NTC, JRTC, and CMTC are]...three legs [of a stool] tied together by common standards, evaluation and realistic OPFOR." 4

The importance of common standards cannot be overemphasized and many division commander comments specifically address the evolution in "training to standard" that has taken place over the last four years. Notably, one of the contributing factors to this process was the publication of FM 25-100 which, for the first time, tied together a process for METL development and follow-on training planning. Use of the system outlined in that circular results in a program built around common standards.

Division commander comments, professional literature, the development of additional training centers and supportive training doctrine, all indicate that the Army is moving toward a more narrow focus on warfighting skills. The catalyst for most of this movement has been NTC.

#### NONCOMMISSIONED, OFFICER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The professional development of Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs) received numerous comments from division commanders and is obviously an area in which they feel there is room for

improvement. As one commander, commenting on an NCO development deficiency, observed:

"...the biggest leadership shortfall within the division...was the lack of trust and understanding of the role and duties of the noncommissioned officer. What I've been trying to do is somehow raise the esteem, prestige, authority, and responsibility of the NCO so that he or she knows that they are fully responsible for the individual training of the individual soldier -- SQT skills, common training task skills, combat skills, and the training of their squad/crew/team/section." 5

The division commanders espoused a number of different programs for correcting the NCO training deficiency as they saw it. These ranged from a formal certification program that NCOs must pass through before assuming control of soldiers to the more common "NCO Professional Development" seminars which are common to most units. There is consensus in the need for increased training, but little of the training described by these commanders to address the problem encompasses all of the stages recommended by Sergeant Major of the Army Glen Morrell for NCO development. He states that NCO development is a five stage process: selection, coaching, give responsibility and authority, observe and critique but allow for error and recoach. 6 The most difficult of these steps is the third. Officers begin their careers more used to authority and its use. For them, it is not something that must be jealously guarded, and they are more apt not to stand on authority as a result. NCOs, however, rise through the ranks, without authority or responsibility in large measure until the day they pin on their NCO stripes. The sudden transition is often

difficult to make for many NCOs and because they have not had authority in the past, they are loath to give way on any issue which they perceive as a challenge to that authority. 7 The challenge for commanders is to empower NCOs in such a way that they are confident of their position within the leadership structure of the organization. It is apparent from the division commander comments that they have not completely broken the code in this area, and most would be well advised to use SMA Morrell's article as the baseline from which to develop their programs.

## ENDNOTES

1. "Experiences in Division Command," Division Command Lessons Learned Program, 1985, p. 5.
2. "Experiences in Division Command," Division Command Lessons Learned Program, 1987, p. 27.
3. Michael Ganley and Benjamin F. Shemmer, "Getting the Army Ready for War," Armed Forces Journal, May 1987, p. 64.
4. Glynn C. Mallory, MG, "Training the Force to Fight." Military Review, October 1987, p. 6.
5. "Experiences," 1986, pp. 36-37.
6. Glen E. Morrell, SMA, "What Soldiering is All About," Army, October 1986, p. 41.
7. Steven Gravlin, Cpt., "Jurisdiction, Responsibility and the Commissioned Laborer," Armor, November-December 1987, p. 46. An interesting Revolutionary War example of the process discussed may be found in this article.

## CHAPTER III

### LEADERSHIP

"We think the most powerful combat multiplier on the battlefield is leadership." 1

A senior leader such as a division commander has a number of leadership obligations which he must fulfil to be effective. One of these is the establishment of a command climate for his organization. Much has been written recently about command climate because of the positive or negative effect it can have on the entire unit. As FM 22-103, Leadership and Command at Senior Levels, points out, because of the intangible nature of command climate, it depends upon the perceptions of subordinates about how their leaders transmit concern for their welfare. In this context, actions often speak louder than words and senior leaders must always be on their guard not to do something which will give the appearance of lack of caring. Additionally, command climate has much to do with the way in which subordinates feel they are treated.

An Army War College study conducted in 1982 concluded that over one-third of the former brigade commanders selected for brigadier general in that year were judged by their subordinates to have had negative command climates. The battalion commander respondents characterized their previous bosses as being overly ambitious, concerned over looking good at the expense of real

accomplishment and intolerant of mistakes. 2 This study is interesting because it is almost certain that some of the general officer selectees would have been among the division commanders interviewed between 1985 and 1988.

Note that one of the complaints by the survey respondents was that their former commanders were intolerant of mistakes. This comment is in direct counterpoint to numerous division commander comments represented by the following:

"The most significant leadership problem in my division was, and probably still is, the lack of initiative and willingness to assume responsibility...in tactical operations. 3

As William Knowlton points out in the article from which the AWC study was cited, inevitable mistakes occur in training and must be seen by leaders and subordinates as opportunities to learn lessons which can then be applied to the battlefield if the leader is to be truly effective. Few subordinates will be willing to attempt innovative solutions to complex problems if they fear the results of possible failure. Without the ability to make the attempt and learn from the experience, subordinates soon stifle their creativity in favor of safer, more traditional solutions. In this area, it is possible that division commanders may not be fully appreciative of the role they play in fostering or overcoming the shortfall in initiative remarked upon.

Within the command climate environment that they must build, senior leaders must communicate their intent or vision, the risk parameters and their concept for operation. Having made these



concepts understood throughout their command, they must then be willing to "[allow, without prejudice, honest mistakes within their bounds of intent and acceptable risk." 4 This whole area of risk and acceptance of mistakes is difficult for even the most Solomon-like to unravel. AirLand Battle doctrine requires initiative as one of the underlying tenets of the doctrine because it is the linch-pin of decentralized operations, a fundamental necessity for success on the modern battlefield. Commanders at all levels seek perfection in the execution of that doctrine at all levels. The questions become: when does the quest for perfection become a "zero defects" mentality, and how often and to what extent can mistakes (read failure to many commanders) be tolerated? Risk taking and innovation are diametrically opposed to zero defects and careerism. 5 It is apparent that, if some of the division commanders are of the group surveyed in 1982, their problems in developing initiative within their subordinates may lie close to home.

A related issue, and one which ties in the leadership challenge of developing initiative with the role of training centers, is the question of relief for failure to adequately perform in this training environment. One school of thought is characterized by a division commander's observation that:

"We have to be able to identify in peacetime those who will almost surely fail in wartime. We are 'too kind' to our commanders in peacetime. I regret I was not quicker to relieve commanders I felt would not perform well in combat. Incompetence in field training is another factor that should weigh heavily in weeding out poor leaders." 6

In his comment, this division commander expressed a belief held by the part of several division commanders that they had an obligation to make sure that only the best leaders led soldiers in the event of war. A recent four-star speaker at the Army War College echoed this sentiment by declaring that tactical incompetence should not be tolerated when observed at any of the training centers, and leaders ought to be held accountable for their actions. Obviously, there is a point at which this attitude butts up directly against the requirement to allow subordinates freedom to make mistakes in an environment where they can learn from their mistakes through non-threatening feedback. This is not a settled issue. If the training centers are perceived by subordinate commanders as testing centers, their value in initiative development will surely be lost. However, it is equally clear that in an era of constrained resources, the Army is paying a very high price for some commanders to learn through experience things which they might well have been expected to learn in other ways.

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1. "Experiences," 1987, p. 6.
2. William Knowlton. "In Rating the Leaders. Ask the Led," Army, June 1987, p. 22.
3. "Experiences," 1985, p. 6.
4. Thomas G. Clark, Maj.. "Leadership Doctrine for the AirLand Battle." Armor, May-June 1988, p. 33.
5. "Zero Defects and Careerism," Marine Corps Gazette, July 1987, p. 34.
6. "Experiences," 1985, p. 7.

## CHAPTER IV

### ETHICS

With the publication of Secretary of the Army John O. Marsh's White Paper on Values in 1986, ethics and values began to receive more attention in the professional literature. They have always been a popular subject for writers since professional ethics and values are at the very core of service beliefs, but the new awareness fostered by the Year of Values brought into perspective some of the ethical issues which had been bothering soldiers for some time.

Chapter 3 of FM 22-103 talks of the:

"... necessity for senior officers routinely to explain the military code of ethics to junior officers who are often insensitive or uncomfortable with high ethical standards." 1

And the division commanders in general agree with this philosophy. Numerous comments underscore the requirement for the division commander, as the standard setter within the division, not only to foster a positive ethical climate by his actions, but also to actively teach his subordinates. Many commanders used formal programs to meet this requirement, but others relied upon informal gatherings and allowing their actions provide the teaching vehicle for proper behavior.

Perhaps even more than in the leadership area, the ethical climate is set by the actions of the commander. General officers

exert both a direct and indirect influence on their subordinates because they are so visible. Their values are studied and emulated by their subordinates, many of whom are in the process of establishing an ethical base which will carry them for the remainder of their careers. All division commander comments which addressed this issue indicated a real appreciation for this responsibility. Their thoughts are summarized by the comment:

"It's your everyday actions that count. Actions speak louder than words. I'm not sure I know how to teach those things. You have to present the right example and handle yourself in the proper way...." 2

Many of the commanders tied the requirement expressed above with the issue of how they handled bad news. The danger which they perceived can be summed up in one word: fear. If subordinates begin to shield a commander from the unpleasant, it is because they are fearful. They have tested the courage of their commander to hear the truth and found it wanting. 3 Under these circumstances, it is only a matter of time before a subordinate is placed in a dilemma where he perceives the trade-offs of informing the boss to be professional survival or lying. Survival instincts usually prevail. By failing in this critical area, commanders may foster an ethical climate which actually promotes unethical behavior, notwithstanding their own high standards of moral and ethical behavior.

Another of the professional values which received much attention from the division commanders was integrity. These comments which addressed ethics included integrity issues as the

centerpiece of the division commanders' concerns. Most of these comments can be summarized by the statement that integrity is not negotiable. Failures in this area are not tolerable. Only a few comments, however, addressed the possible causes for integrity problems. One, of course, is the issue raised above; how well does the boss receive bad news? Another cause, and the primary one raised by the division commanders, is the introduction of policies which force subordinates into ethical dilemmas. One example given is the use of statistics where the statistics themselves take on the appearance of being more important than what they represent. Such a focus on statistics translates to subordinates as careerism, a zero-defects mentality. As Major Clarke succinctly notes in his article on professional integrity, "Careerism is a not so subtle enemy of professional integrity." He goes on to state that once officers or noncommissioned officers compromise their integrity, such action invites other observers to choose their own brand of compromise, tailored to individual habit and desires. 4 Division commanders must constantly be on guard that a well-meaning policy does not take on an appearance which fosters unethical behavior within the command.

ENDNOTES

1. Walter F. Ulmer, Jr. "The Army's New Senior Leadership Doctrine," Parameters, Winter 1987, p. 15.

2. "Experiences," 1987, p. 18.

3. Larry H. Ingraham, LTC., "An Uninvited Talk to Army Leaders," Military Review, December 1987, p. 46.

4. R. D. Clarke, Maj., "Professional Integrity: How Many Holes are in a Bubble?" Marine Corps Gazette, July 1986, p. 20.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Although this survey focused very narrowly on a few specific subject areas, it is possible to draw some conclusions relevant to the way division commanders do business and the value of the Division Command Lessons Learned Program itself. Training comments ranged from the "how to," to specific accomplishments of which the commanders were justifiably proud, to training philosophy. The role of the National Training Center in particular and other training centers in general was the single consistent thread throughout these comments. This correctly reflects the importance that the rest of the Army attributes to these important training vehicles which have done more to standardize and sharpen the Army's war focus than anything since World War II.

The development and revitalization of our NCO corps received much attention because it has been one of the Army's greatest challenges since the end of the Vietnam War. We are not there yet, primarily because division commanders have not instituted programs which develop NCOs in a complete and comprehensive way. They clearly recognize the importance by their comments, but most of the programs described fall short of the mark. This is an area which deserves continued attention by new division commanders.

Leadership challenges abound for senior leaders, but setting



a command climate which fosters good leadership and training is difficult to do. Our doctrine demands leaders who can take the initiative required by decentralized operations. Divisional commanders bear a real responsibility for developing that initiative, and it will not suffice to simply complain that it does not exist in their subordinates. They must be willing to accept a degree of risk and honest mistakes. Determining that degree of risk, transmitting that effectively to subordinates, and sorting out what mistakes are acceptable is a delicate balancing act which often determines the success or failure of an organization. New division commanders must address the development of command climate in a planned way; they can not simply let it evolve. To do so invites the development of perceptions which may prove impossible to reverse.

The ethical responsibilities of senior leaders remain of crucial importance to the health of their organizations. For division commanders, an ethical minefield surrounds their every action. They must take great care to set the example, challenge and teach their subordinates directly, and examine every policy for possible ethical implications. Unquestionably, division commanders are aware of this responsibility, but awareness may not be sufficient to avoid a problem unless that awareness is constant and unswerving.

In doing this survey, it has become clear that the DCLL program serves a valuable purpose not only to new division commanders, but to the Army at large. A closer examination of

other issues raised in the exit interviews, and comparison across time would provide valuable insights as to how well the Army is doing in conveying the ideas, principles and concepts that it believes important. Further comparison, as this survey has done, with the professional literature would surface possible disconnects between the Army's leaders and the led. Such an effort would be well worthwhile if it allowed the Army's leadership to address these problems before they affected the health of major organizations.

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