



# SO YOU WANT TO BE A COMPANY COMMANDER?

By Major John N. Carey

*“Somewhere a True Believer is training to kill you. He is training with minimum food and water, in austere conditions, day and night. The only thing clean on him is his weapon. He doesn’t worry about what workout to do—his rucksack weighs what it weighs, and he runs until the enemy stops chasing him. The True Believer doesn’t care how hard it is; he knows he either wins or dies. He doesn’t go home at 1700—he is home. He knows only The Cause. Now, who wants to quit?”*

*Special Forces Assessment and Selection Course,  
Fort Bragg, North Carolina.*

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## Collected Wisdom

**T**his article provides straightforward, honest advice for future United States Army engineer company commanders. The company commander’s battle is personal, intense, and often violent. Whether in garrison or on operations, it is never routine. This document brings together the collective experience of previous company or squadron commanders from the United States Army, United States Marine Corps, Australian Army, and British Army. The contributors have fought in Northern Ireland, Iraq, Bosnia, East Timor, Afghanistan, Solomon Islands, Kosovo, Somalia, Rwanda, and Haiti. They have done the hard yards, made some mistakes, and learned from them. Perhaps their thoughts will be useful as you prepare for command.

**You are always the commander.** Whether at work, in the field, at home, or on leave, you are always the commander. Everything you do or say (or do not) will be analyzed and discussed by the members of your unit. Lead by example, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. You must push yourself to be better than everybody else by setting the example in everything from fitness, combatives, and marksmanship, to understanding tactical doctrine and current affairs. When you can, participate with the troops by getting dirty and sweaty. Morale is always high when the Soldiers see the boss out of the tactical operations center (TOC) doing physical training (PT) with the troops or helping out with a work party.

**Show the essence of leadership.** You provide energy, purpose, direction, motivation, and—most importantly—leadership. Have the confidence to stand alone, the courage to make tough decisions, and the compassion to listen to the needs of others. Take care of your Soldiers and their Families. Train your Soldiers to fight, yet also to do the right thing. Resource your sappers for the task you give them, and do not delude yourself by constantly asking them to “do more with less.” Encourage your team to understand their role in the larger plan. Do what you can with what you have, wherever you are. After receiving guidance for a task, do not ask permission—do what needs to be done!

**Always be learning for command.** You should spend your staff time observing success and failure in commanders. When not in command, make sure you are an instructor so you remain close to the troops. Put away the war novels and read professional books. Read and analyze history to learn

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how a Soldier thinks and acts, and you will quickly realize that counterinsurgency is not a new training event. You will see how others have achieved success with the barest of resources. You will begin to understand the importance of courage, humility, and fairness.

Learn from your unit's heritage. Keep photos, key documents, and press clippings. Foster links with organizations of retired military engineers. Do not allow yourself to inbreed by studying only Western military history. Read the classics, such as Sun Tzu, Vo Nguyen Giap, Mao Tse-tung, Sayyid Qutb, Carl von Clausewitz, T.E. Lawrence, and Basil Liddell Hart. Also read Lieutenant General Hal Moore, Guy Sajer, Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl, Robert Taber, Jim Collins, and Bruce Gudmundsson. Check out the U.S. Army Chief of Staff's professional reading list at <<http://www.history.army.mil/reference/CSAList/CSAList.htm>>, and read Field Manual (FM) 1.0, *The Army*; FM 1-02, *Operational Terms and Graphics*; FM 3.0, *Operations*; FM 3.24, *Counterinsurgency*; FM 3.34, *Engineer Operations*; and FM 5.0, *Army Planning and Orders Production*.

**Talk to everyone you can.** Ask your Soldiers about the strengths and weaknesses of the unit. Talk to the executive officer (XO) and first sergeant and get their honest assessments. Talk to the command sergeant major, battalion XO, and operations and training officer, and find out if there are any significant personnel issues or operational tasks coming in the next 90 days. Get a gut feel for how the current commander does business. Understand the deals that have been made, promises issued, contracts negotiated, and missions planned,

because you will have to assume ownership of the outcomes. After taking command, never bad-mouth the previous commander. How would your Soldiers know that you will not do the same to them?

Get a real handover from the outgoing commander. As you get ready for the change of command, ask yourself:

- What is the personality of the unit?
- What are its quirks?
- What is the status of discipline, training, morale, and maintenance?

**Think smart and not always hard.** Aggressiveness and initiative are admirable qualities, but you must also think. Focus on the big picture. Do not get lost in the noise of immediate issues. There may be urgent phone calls and e-mails but spend some time thinking, postulating, and shaping the future of your unit; nobody else will do this if you don't. Develop a command philosophy that lays out your command style, intent, objectives, and priorities. Spend time thinking about this before the change of command ceremony. Recognize that your priorities will change. The baseline must be Soldier first, sapper second, and specialist third. You are there to command, but that also includes leadership and management. Leadership is required in periods of uncertainty, while management looks at the details to ensure efficiency. You cannot focus on just one—you must succeed at all three.

**Be honest.** When your opinion is sought, be confident, be clear, but above all be honest. Nobody respects a person who offers a view shaped by what he believes is wanted rather than that which he actually believes. Never ask someone to do something you would not do yourself. Do not be afraid to report shortfalls in capability and readiness. Never be afraid to make the hard—but legal—decisions with weak leaders. Do not tolerate bad leaders; bad leaders in peace will be bad leaders on operations. Give unsatisfactory leaders counseling, training, and guidance, but if they do not improve to the standard required, remove them.

**Work with the battalion commander.** He is not just a provider of tasks but also a valuable source of experience and advice. He will enjoy discussing challenges and issues with you and your team. Keep him informed and demonstrate what you are doing with your



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command. Developing a close relationship with the battalion commander and command sergeant major will give you the confidence to approach them on any issue.

**Develop an open and honest relationship with your first sergeant.** The officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) in your unit deserve nothing less. Your unit will fail in its mission unless the commander and the first sergeant speak with the same voice. Whether you visit the troops in the field or conduct PT, your first sergeant must always be with you. Your first sergeant has risen to be the senior Soldier of the company for good reason—he can be trusted. He will think of things you have not. He will not always agree with you, but he will always back you once you’ve made your decision.

**Know your Soldiers and demonstrate genuine concern for them.** Ask your Soldiers where they come from, how many kids they have, and what they think of their training. Let Soldiers explain their trade to you so you can represent them better and make more effective decisions on their behalf. The Soldiers will suffer if the boss locks himself away in the TOC. Constant tours and two-way communication with the Soldiers, pats on the back where justified and boots in the backside when required, are mandatory. Get out from behind your desk and establish relationships with your Soldiers, or you will lack awareness of what is really happening in the unit. Never underestimate the importance of simply saying hello. There is nothing more powerful than hearing the boss say, “Hey, you are an outstanding Soldier, and I want to reenlist you in the Army.”

**Leave the company in better shape than you found it.** It is not “your” company—you are just looking after it. Practice mission command both in garrison and on operations. Make sure your subordinates can do the job two levels up. Encourage problem-solving and supervision of tasks at the

lowest practical level. Ensure that your first sergeant and senior NCOs stand up and take on big-ticket issues. Give clear commander’s intent. Do not get in the habit of giving useless briefings. Properly prepared and issued orders instill discipline and confidence at all levels of command. Subordinates cannot execute mission analysis from a briefing. Give your NCOs the resources, get them to back-brief those orders formally before going on the mission, provide plenty of encouragement, and ensure that they provide a post-brief afterward.

**Become a problem solver.** The U.S. Army has policies on everything, and they all can be found at Army Knowledge Online. Check current policy first, and be wary of people who insist on relying on memory and are not prepared to quote a reference when asked. They may be hiding ignorance with bluff, or they may have been in the job so long they cannot be bothered to check. Tell your Soldiers early in your tenure how you intend to make decisions:

- Tell me what the problem is.
- Tell me what the policy guidance says.
- Give me options and recommendations.
- I will give you a decision.

You do not need to be an expert at everything since you will be commanding very intelligent and experienced Soldiers, and there is plenty of support available from the chain of command. At the end of the day though, do not be afraid to trust your gut. When you have 70 percent of the facts and time is short, make a decision. Just make sure you know when to stop fighting for something you believe is right. Debate your point of view until a decision is made, and then support the decision wholeheartedly.

**Tell others how important engineers are to the fight.** We are often very humble about our success. As an engineer

commander, you are one of the next leaders of the Regiment. You can play a much larger part in shaping its future direction than you probably realize. Ensure that you get out and sell the engineers and our broad range of capabilities. Educate your supported commanders and your peers. Some of the questions to ask yourself are—

- What do topographic engineers do?
- When was the last time you read FM 3-34, *Engineer Operations*?
- Do you understand the relationship between the breaching organization and breaching fundamentals?
- How are warrant officers integrated into construction effects battalions?
- What do United States Marine Corps, Navy Seabee, and Air Force engineers bring to the fight?
- What engineer capabilities do the Aussies, Brits, and Canadians have that I might use in-theater?

Know all the capabilities of military engineers and their effects across the full spectrum of operations.

**Talk the talk and walk the walk.** Work hard to develop relationships with your supported commanders. Aim to make yourself an integral part of their team. Educate them by giving them briefs that explain your role and capabilities, if necessary. When you walk into any TOC, you should know just as much about combined arms operations and warfighting philosophy as any infantry or armor officer at your level. Do you understand the maneuverist approach, targeting, effects-based operations, and the intelligence cycle? As either a staff officer or commander, always be thinking about how to promote engineers. Do small things well. Ask of any project how can it be done better. Strive for self-improvement through constant self-evaluation—of both your unit and yourself as an engineer officer.

**Communications are the key.** With so much done by computers, e-mails, Blackberrys, conferences, and committees, make sure you get around to your team, listen, and then talk to them. Determine who will tell you the truth about the company and form good relationships with them. Talk to the chaplain, medical officer, supply staff, and unit mechanics. Walking around with a cup of coffee is a great approach. Face-to-face contact is best, followed by radio or telephone, and finally by written communication. You can always tell by the look in someone's eye or the tone of someone's voice if the person got your message. Ask yourself which form of communication you would prefer with your boss while in the fight—an impersonal e-mail or a calm face and reassuring voice.

**Maintain a healthy ego but keep it in check.** Your company might be the best in the battalion, but there is no need to rub it in the faces of the other company commanders. Be passionate but humble. You are part of a team, and you need to look after

and assist each other. In all forms of communication, use “we” more than “me, myself, and I,” unless you are expressing your intent or taking responsibility. When talking to other Soldiers, spouses, partners, or anyone else, it is more respectful to use the phrase, “I work with Private X,” rather than, “Private X works for me.” Respect is a two-way street.

**Work to maintain readiness.** Do not underestimate how much work is involved in that task; understand Army systems, check, then keep rechecking. Constantly prepare your personnel for operations, establish readiness procedures, and practice call-outs. Train as you fight, and fight as you train. Whether you are fighting in Belfast, Dili, or Baghdad, or just “shooting the breeze” in the United States, you are always training your Soldiers. Engineers must maintain both technical engineer and military skills. If you neglect either of these, you will be irrelevant to the fight. A tool some commanders use is to color-code the training program; green for engineer skills training, red for military skills. You will quickly see how the balance looks and where your gaps exist. Remember, military engineers are thinking Soldiers and thinking Soldiers need rest. Attempt to achieve the required task to operational standards at the least cost to your men. After 15 months in Mosul or Darfur, you will value the personal reserves this will create.

**Care for your unit's personnel and equipment.** Good units do routine things routinely—find a way to make maintenance and supply a part of your weekly battle cycle and protect their importance. Equipment care is vital because it underpins operational success. As a commander, you will be unable to get involved in the plethora of detail on equipment care, but your subordinates must understand its importance and that you take it seriously. Early in your tenure, seek out key people in the battalion who can assist you. Act quickly to resolve the issues that affect your people, especially areas of pay, housing, and medical care. Learn about the capabilities of the information systems in your unit. Before you get frustrated with your subordinates, understand what they are dealing with. Assist them by telling the chain of command what the problems are and look for ways to fix them.

**Be brilliant at the basics.** Always maintain an operational focus. With 2,000 years of example behind us, we have no excuse for not understanding how to fight the “Three-Block War.” Develop your ability to command in a tactical environment by setting your team up for success. At the company level, practice the military decision-making process. Ensure that your platoon leaders use troop-leading procedures (TLP). Write operations orders both in garrison and on operations. Get out with your lieutenants and NCOs; go on terrain walks; conduct tactical exercises without troops (TEWTs); read and discuss controversial articles; discuss current affairs, technical procedures, doctrine, and the military art. When visiting Soldiers in the field, help them focus on the way they communicate; for instance, sappers do not “blow stuff up,” they attack targets. Know your weapons and communications systems and how to employ them to

best effect. Marksmanship, PT, first aid, communications, navigation, and battle drills are essential for survival. Do you and your Soldiers know how to operate every weapon in the company? Does your company execute full spectrum PT—aerobic, anaerobic, battle, confidence, obstacles, ropes, rifle, games, competitions, and team sports? Do your Soldiers know how to navigate using both a compass and a global positioning system? Do your Soldiers know how to organize a casualty evacuation?

***Never underestimate the need for technical control.***

An engineer mission will fail if it is not technically correct. Signs of a possible decline in engineer technical competence include—

- The United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) response in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.
- Comments from senior military engineer leaders regarding engineer support to the War on Terrorism.
- Increased emphasis from senior leaders on construction engineering tasks because of stability operations and lack of technical competence within USACE.
- The failure of the current engineer force structure to facilitate senior engineer mentoring of junior engineer officers.
- Known decreases in military engineering developmental assignments.
- A shift toward a mobility and countermobility mentality in the Engineer Regiment.

The Chief of Engineers has asked the commandant of the United States Army Engineer School to lead further investigation and resolution of the decline, and company commanders can help. Technical control can cross boundaries if you plan and specify it in orders—be smart and use the network and people available. If you are a civil engineer, get your professional engineering license.

Ensure that your Soldiers complete technical courses at the USACE Learning Center at Huntsville, Alabama; USACE Protective Design Center at Omaha, Nebraska; and the United States Air Force Institute of Technology at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio. Ensure that our technical skill base is being preserved and not degraded by workloads that are repetitive in a narrow skills band or are non-engineer tasks. Write about your experiences in professional publications. Examine how your allies support general engineering. Seek reachback solutions from industry and the Corps. Get involved in the Society of American Military Engineers, industry, and other relevant professional associations. Use civil detachments and two-way exchanges, which are normally cheap and effective training. Ensure that these organizations understand you and your role. Prepare a simple memorandum of understanding to cover both the Army and the organization.

***Look after Families.*** We cannot do without the support of our Families. Soldiers cannot keep their minds on the job and be effective if there are problems at home. Keep Families informed, and know how the Family Readiness Group works. Make sure your program stand-downs to coincide with school vacation to give partners a break from looking after the kids on their own. Socialize and get to know the Families and friends of the company. Write letters to parents telling them how well their son or daughter is doing in the unit. Conduct briefings and open days for Families. Do everything you can to support Families, but develop a thick skin too. Nothing will ever be enough for some, and you can never please everyone, particularly the vocal minority. Do not let this get you down or deter you from doing your best for all Families.

## Conclusion

***You have been deployed to Iraq and/or Afghanistan not just twice but three times. You have been a platoon leader in combat and have spent some time as a fighting XO. You have seen company commanders come and go. Some were studs and others were not so good. You have read The Challenge of Command by Roger H. Nye, Small Unit Leadership by Dandridge M. Malone, and Company Commander by Charles Brown MacDonald. You have completed the Engineer Captains Career Course and the Sapper Leader Course. You are studying Arabic, Farsi, or Pashto because you know that you are engaged in a “Long War.” You’ve spent the last few years building the skills, experience, and judgment that you believe are critical for successful company command. Are you ready to take up the guidon?***

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