

A Lieutenant's Plea to Company Commanders

Mentoring Can Focus Initiative on the Bigger Picture

by First Lieutenant J.P. Clark

SITUATION:

Imagine yourself as a company team commander attacking through the Central Corridor of the NTC. Your mission is to set a support by fire (SBF) as part of a task force breach. The battle heats up and artillery comes down all around your position. Auto-masking is in effect, and you have difficulty understanding even the simplest transmission. Platoons are bounding forward and backward performing survivability drills. Frantic reports come in from the other teams and the engineers. Everybody is stepping on each other over the net. You strain to understand what is being said on either net. As the platoons make their moves you lose situational awareness of your own company.

Meanwhile, your junior platoon leader bounds his platoon forward to avoid artillery. He sees a small depression leading towards the obstacle which looks inviting. As far as he can tell, it provides a good covered and concealed route for his mine plow. He tries several times to ask for permission to send his wingman forward to breach, but he cannot get through to you. Should he send the plow through or not?

It is an impossible question; the short vignette does not provide enough information. Has your task and purpose changed since LD? Has the task force's task and purpose changed? Where are the other teams in relation to you or the point of penetration, and what is their current combat power? Where are the engineers? Have they moved forward yet? Are their MICLICs still alive? Even if your company is operating in a vacuum, are the conditions set for his platoon to move forward? There is not enough information to decide. Most likely, the lieutenant will not have that information when he makes his decision either, but he *will* make a decision. So, then, what information is he basing his decision on? What factors is he considering? Have you given him the tools to make the right decision?

The majority of armor company/teams operate as three separate platoons being controlled by the company commander, rather than operating as a cohesive com-

pany. This system quickly breaks down under the friction and fog of war that exists on the modern battlefield. The junior platoon leader is about to make a decision that will have a dramatic, if not decisive, effect on the entire battle, and the company commander will have no input other than his instructions during the OPORD and any FRAGOs. Never forget, Murphy is an honorary colonel of the 11th ACR and also probably has a commission in the army of our next real-world adversary.

Platoon leaders lack the training to prepare themselves before battle and then, once contact has been made, lack the training to make the correct decisions during the battle. Lieutenants do not lack aggressiveness; that is not the problem. The problem is the lack of mentorship from company commanders to their platoon leaders. Your platoon leader thinks that initiative is good. If he sends his plow forward, he is taking initiative, *ergo* send the plow forward. He will do a quick assessment of whether it is practical on the *platoon* level and if the answer is yes, he will execute. The possible result is that a good portion of your combat power is on the other side of the obstacle. Are you willing to write off so much of your company's combat power and not support that platoon? If your whole company is committed, is the battalion commander ready to write off so much of his combat power?

Depending on how the battle turns out, that lieutenant may have won or lost the battle. But did he make the decision in a conscious effort to support the team, task force, and brigade missions, or did he take initiative for the sake of initiative? Each company should have five officers thinking like company commanders. That goal requires company commanders to be aggressive in training their lieutenants long before they reach a CTC.

My first suggestion: Decide whether you want platoon leaders or platoon sergeants on the company net. Each company I served in, or observed, brings up the same AAR comment: "We need to cross-talk better." Most armor teams seem to have a problem with the most basic level of cross-talk, platoons keeping

each other informed about their position and their ability to mutually support each other. That is only the beginning of what is needed. Each platoon also needs to have at least one leader, if not two, on the net who thoroughly understands the commander's thought processes. They need to understand not just his plan but also the various courses of action; no plan survives contact with the enemy. Can a platoon sergeant — who did not even attend the company OPORD in most instances — possess this level of understanding of the commander's mind? The majority of platoon leaders lack this understanding and they *were* at the OPORD. The conventional wisdom, that the platoon sergeants do the majority of reporting and talking, is based on two fallacies.

The first is that most of the information that needs to go over the company net is the mere reporting of location, combat power, and enemy actions. This mindset is a big part of our problem. If the platoons send up simple SITREPs and little or nothing else, which happens in the majority of companies, then the decision cycle is incredibly simple, wasteful of subordinate talents, and breaks down extremely quickly. The platoons provide raw data, the commander processes it and provides instructions. As soon as communications, maintenance, environmental problems, or even death, prevent the commander from receiving that data and sending back his orders, the company fragments. The XO or a platoon leader will attempt to take the commander's place as the "big brain" who commands all of the "drone tanks," but that will work no better than it did for the commander. My proof is the perennial AAR comment, "We need to improve our cross-talk." Cross-talk is impossible in a company where the platoons are only sending up raw information. But it is a natural by-product if the platoon leadership is actively thinking not only on their level but also on the company level as well.

The decision cycle should be a report of information coupled with a recommendation of a course of action that supports the company, and even task force or higher

mission and intent. That requires the company commander to trust the subordinate making the recommendation, a trust that is not mere blind faith because the company commander and his subordinates have discussed his intent for this mission, not just in the OPORD, but throughout his entire planning process, and before they even left garrison. Certainly, I would not trust that a subordinate knew my intent well enough if he had not even been present at the OPORD. So, why do we do this throughout the Army so regularly?

The second fallacy is that the platoon leader needs to be fighting his platoon and does not have the time to be on the company net. It is true that platoon leaders need to fight their platoons, but a properly trained platoon will be able to execute off of a very brief transmission. Listen to one of your platoon nets sometime; your average lieutenant breaks squelch much too often and for much too long. Within a few months, this lieutenant will be an executive officer and within a few years, a company commander. If the platoon and company nets are too much, how then will they cope with company and task force nets?

Here is my vision of a highly functioning company: A platoon makes contact with an unexpected enemy that — due to either location, composition, or some other factor — has a major impact on the task force plan. The platoon leader gives a quick order to the platoon, some combination of action/contact drill and fire command. At the same time, the platoon sergeant gives a contact report over the company net. If the company commander and executive officer are outside of visual contact, the platoon leader in contact, or another platoon leader in visual range, quickly realize the importance of the contact to higher and make a recommendation to the commander on a proper course of action. Due to the earlier training of his subordinates, the commander trusts they can identify what is important to him and make a good recommendation that matches his intent.

I have several recommendations on what the commander needs to do to increase the lethality of his platoons and company. The bulk of this effort must happen in garrison; the commander does not have time to train his lieutenants in the field.

First, train your platoon leaders in the Troop Leading Procedures (TLPs). The proper execution of TLPs is the platoon leader's primary job and is taught poorly (if at all). Too many platoon leaders simply regurgitate the company OPORD to

their platoons; they have not been taught to think at the proper level.

Begin by sitting down with your lieutenants and an old task force OPORD and show them how you do your company-level Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB). Go through the whole process, have them make a SITTEMP and then discuss the significance of your conclusions from the IPB. Often, what little IPB is done at the platoon-level is given to the platoon as, "when we cross PL Dumb we will be in artillery range, when we cross PL Dumber we will be in AT-5 range, when we cross..." That does little good and indicates your platoon leader lacks a clear mental picture of what the enemy will look like on the ground. Point to the spot on the map where all of the red circles that depict maximum engagement ranges intersect. Explain to your lieutenants that it is a very bad spot of ground. You might have to go through there, but get them thinking about it. Explain that there is a good chance their platoon (or company or task force) mission will very likely change once you reach that point. Then train them to look beyond the information they receive in paragraph one and on the SITTEMP and to look at other possible crisis points. If you show your lieutenants how you identify possible crisis points at the company-level, they will be able to do it for their platoons. If this is not done on their level, your lieutenants are caught fighting the plan instead of the enemy.

At AOBC, I received a course on IPB from an E-6 with no platoon sergeant time. Later, before getting my platoon, I served as a BICC during an NTC rotation. In that capacity, I realized that what I had learned at Ft. Knox was not only incomplete, some of it was dead wrong!!! Commanders, unless you train your platoon leaders in IPB, that staff sergeant will be their only instructor.

After conducting a proper IPB and identifying potential crisis points, your platoon leaders will naturally start coming up with a mental picture of what that will look like on the ground and possible reactions. This is the difference between "Draw your sabers and charge over the hill" initiative and cunning, deadly, battle-winning initiative.

Once you have reached this point, your lieutenants are primed and ready. Increase their efficiency by taking every opportunity to instruct them in company-level tactics. The platoon tactics will be improved automatically. Use sand tables, personal experiences, staff rides, tactical vignettes, and even some of the better computer games out on the market right

now as a basis for discussion. The important thing is that you concentrate on conveying what you will be thinking as the battle progresses. What conditions do you want set before a breach? What concerns will you have during an attack? A movement to contact? A defense? What factors will make the difference between one course of action being chosen over a different one in a certain situation? What do you perceive as your strengths and weaknesses versus a particular enemy? How do you take advantage of those? The important thing is not to give your lieutenants a set reaction for every possible contingency but instead to give them a better idea of your thought processes. The benefits of that are obvious: better execution of your intent with simpler instructions, better recommendations, decisions that better support your intent when out of communications, and finally lieutenants who can better reason through tactical problems because they receive the benefit of your prior experiences. Most importantly, your company leadership has a much stronger common core of thought. Perhaps you have just assumed command; maybe all three platoon leaders were trained (or not trained) by your predecessor. Do you want to roll to the field, content that he trained them the way you would like?

When you get to the field, take advantage of your highly trained lieutenants and reinforce their skills. Next time you are the task force reserve, have all your lieutenants come up on the company and task force nets. As you track the battle, talk to them on your net about the significance of reports from other teams. Tell them how that might change your mission. Tell them what you would be doing if you were the commander for that other team. That gives even better, more immediate training on battle tracking as well as improving situational awareness. The platoon sergeant will always be able to come up on the company net to reach his platoon leader if there is a problem. If you do not do this, each platoon leader will institute his personal rest plan, drooling on his gunner's head while his head rests on the GPSE. To reinforce their skills, inspect their graphics after the battle to ensure they were tracking the battle.

Finally, attempt to give your lieutenants as complete a picture as you have. If you can, integrate them into your planning and wargaming. That way they understand why you may have chosen one course of action over the other and what assumptions you made in making those decisions. If those assumptions are incor-

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rect, they may save you and your command by realizing that on the ground and taking the proper action to fix it. Time is short before an operation, but 30 minutes of wargaming with your lieutenants before you have gone too far into your plan to integrate their suggestions will make for a better plan and make OPORDs and rehearsals run smoother and quicker.

Life in the armor community is hectic. The training distracters are everywhere. I believe that some quality time with your platoon leaders can provide the biggest bang for your buck as a commander. It will require sacrifices elsewhere — personal time, perhaps Sergeant's Time or maintenance may not be supervised as much as you would like. Why do we train everyone except for the lieutenants? Consider the amount of tactical training they received at AOBC. My class received over a week in small group instruction around a sand table. The student-teacher

ratio was 8:1. My instructor was an outstanding NCO, but a newly promoted sergeant first class with no platoon sergeant time. We discussed operations of a platoon operating independently with no higher mission or intent. It provided a good basis and achieved the training objectives, but that does not provide sufficient training for your platoon leaders. They need some training time with a 3:1 ratio. Even more importantly, they require an instructor who can show them how their four tanks tie into the larger picture.

On the other end of the spectrum, a battalion-level tactical discussion is useful and I have benefited from these, but they are not a replacement for a company commander sitting down with his platoon leaders. We all say that the battalion commander is the primary trainer for lieutenants, but how much time do they have to devote to this task? Of the time

they do spend training the lieutenants, how ready are the newest platoon leaders, the ones who need the instruction the most, to speak up and ask a lieutenant colonel what they fear is a stupid question? The company commander is going to be the most effective teacher and mentor.

Wherever you have the chance, please take the time to train those platoon leaders. A company with aggressive lieutenants who take intelligent initiative will be very deadly indeed.

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