

A COMPANY WITH NO COMMANDER

Situation: During Operation IRAQI FREEDOM I, I commanded a tank company in the Third Infantry Division. After the Division seized Baghdad, we remained in the city for approximately six weeks. The city was relatively peaceful compared to the violence levels of 2005-2007. In late May 2003 the violence spiked to high levels west of the city in and around Fallujah. Our Brigade was ordered to secure this unruly area and left Baghdad in early June after the 1st Armored Division relieved us.

The Soldiers of the brigade did not initially embrace this new mission as their commander always told them the "road home lies through Baghdad." However, after these initial grumblings about not going home and the movement west, the Soldiers got down to work bringing stability to the notoriously corrupt Fallujah area. The Brigade had to establish numerous combat outposts and a Brigade support area to sustain operations from Fallujah to Ramadi. As the Brigade got set and established its battle rhythm, a figurative lightning bolt hit. The Division decided to execute changes of command from the Brigade commander down to most company commands. Most Soldiers and commanders greeted this news with immense scorn and trepidation. Commanders believed they should bring their units home and thought it was bad policy to change horses in mid-stream especially after a significant move from Baghdad to Fallujah. Furthermore, Soldiers had built trust and confidence in their current leaders.

Despite the protests, even a direct appeal from the brigade commander to the division commanding general, the changes of command proceeded as scheduled. I gave up command of my tank company and prepared to assume command of our headquarters and headquarters company (HHC). While I did not like this situation, I realized I must execute the changes of command properly, especially in a combat zone. Due to the smaller size of my tank company and the quality of the officer assuming command of my company, the handover was relatively easy. Within a week we completed the inventories and right seat ride requirements for the tank company assumption of command. I then had a week and a half to do the same for HHC. As a point of comparison, a tank company had 85 Soldiers all located on the same outpost. The HHC had 385 Soldiers (including attachments) spread over eight outposts. I had grave concerns about executing the change of command as HHC still provided all the logistical support the task force needed. Basically the company still had to execute all its wartime functions while I had to inventory equipment, learn standing operating procedures (SOPs), evaluate leaders, and understand the daily missions.

As I started my inventories and handover tasks with HHC, I quickly became appalled by what I saw throughout the company. Except for the mechanics, the leaders in the company had no concept or concern about property accountability. The dire property accountability only hinted at more complex and ominous issues. Force protection at six of the outposts hardly existed and Soldiers were unfamiliar with their weapons. Only the two combat platoons knew how to operate with their weapons at night. Furthermore the support platoon did not conduct daily pre-combat inspections/checks or rehearsals prior to their thirty kilometer mission to the brigade support area. The unit had no SOPs for IED/sniper attacks. Two seemingly less serious issues exposed the complete lack of discipline in the company: no field sanitation and the proliferation of alcohol. Finally, I observed the company commander sun tanning in his swimming trunks while I conducted inventories. I was amazed the company had only a few minor wounded-in-actions (WIA) over the past two weeks and I now understood why HHC did not provide adequate mission support to the line companies. I thought the task in front of me was hopeless. What should I do about this mess?

REFLECTION...

After witnessing these leadership failures, I pondered any recourse I had prior to my assumption of command. Before I did this, I did consider this issue first. Every incoming commander sees things they do not like or that they want to do differently once they take command. That is human nature and what makes commanders different. I certainly knew this, but after reflection, I concluded this outgoing commander—who I will call CPT Sunny—and I did not just see things differently, but CPT Sunny was not doing anything as a commander. I will provide a little background on CPT Sunny. None of his peers liked him or respected him in the entire task force. He had a notoriously wild temper which led to a fist fight with a fellow captain in Kuwait during a training exercise. He did not embrace his role as the HHC Commander and was often bitter he "missed" out on combat because he was not a tank company commander during the march-up to take Baghdad. I believe this attitude led to a lackadaisical approach to his command which began before the unit went to combat. The rapid change of commands imposed in June probably further compounded CPT Sunny's apathy.

I thought I should report all of the gross deficiencies I uncovered during the change of command inventories to not only protect myself, but, more importantly, to hold CPT Sunny responsible for his inaction. Ultimately, the Soldiers would pay the price for his poor leadership. I thought I should report everything to the battalion and brigade commander. Unfortunately, the brigade commander had already conducted his change of command and provided his comments on CPT Sunny's OER. The battalion commander was scheduled to change command two days after CPT Sunny so I still had time to talk to him. On the other hand, I wondered how interested my battalion commander would be in my findings since he was leaving also. A malaise grew among my out-going superior commanders and fellow company commanders. Their time was up and they were leaving. I decided to take the easy road and keep my mouth shut about CPT Sunny. This decision appealed to my loyalty in that I did not implicate a fellow commander and brethren-in-arms for wrong doing. Additionally, my lack of action prevented the sticky involvement of my superiors especially since they were all leaving. Finally, the in-coming battalion and brigade commanders had no vested interest in seeing CPT Sunny get any sort of justice. Peers often avoid directly judging each other to superiors. Most superiors see it as petty and personality driven. However, in this case, I believe it was much more than that. Nonetheless, I assumed I could fix all the problems CPT Sunny had ignored. I believed just doing my job well would erase the mistakes of the "CPT Sunny" era. Regardless of what happened to CPT Sunny, I would still have to take command and turn the company around. So what difference did it make?

Ethical Dilemma at the Time of the Incident: I had to decide whether to report my fellow commander for dereliction of duty or overlook his behavior.

Rules/Laws That Apply: In this case, the rules/laws were not exactly cut and dry. However, the Uniform Code of Military Justice certainly applied in regards to officers exercising proper command. Furthermore, CPT Sunny clearly violated numerous task force Standing Operating Procedures (SOP).

At What Point Did You Say "Enough is Enough"? When And How Did You Take Action? After about a week of inventories, I knew I had to take action immediately after assuming command.

Conflict or Tension of the 7 Army Values? How Did You Resolve Those Conflicts? I was very conflicted between loyalty and duty. I chose loyalty to my peer over duty. I do not think I actually resolved any tension. I chose the path of least resistance because I could affect the situation when I was in command.

Consideration of Other COAs and the 2nd and 3rd Order Effects. The real issue is because I did nothing and accepted responsibility of fixing the company, CPT Sunny continued on as an officer in the US Army. Unbelievably, his major promotion board selected him below the zone and he was also selected to attend the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) whose graduates earn the unofficial moniker of "Jedi Knight" for their supposed superior planning and staff skills. He is currently an S-3 for a battalion somewhere in the Army and will likely command a battalion. Two days prior to his change of command in Iraq, one of his Soldiers was killed and another lost a leg in an IED ambush because they were on an uncleared route. As the insurgency grew after his departure, the casualties only escalated mostly as a result of poor conditions set by CPT Sunny prior to his departure. While I rapidly worked to repair CPT Sunny's damage, the company still took some unnecessary casualties and did not work at its highest levels until after I was in command for two months.

How Did You Get the Courage To Do the Harder Right? I do not believe that I did the harder right in this case.