

Everything You Need to Know in the Army You Learn as a Company-grade Officer (advice for Lieutenants)

By Jaron Wharton

Since my commissioning in 2001 as an Infantry Officer, I have benefited from serving with quality Soldiers, NCOs and Officers. Over the course of three operational deployments, you learn a great deal about yourself and others. Being candid about your experiences, in my mind, is critical to the development of others. As a Lieutenant and as a Captain, I made mistakes and continue to make mistakes. Making a mistake once is ok. It's a learning experience, and this is not a zero-defect Army. Making the same mistake twice is negligent. With that in mind, I attempted to capture 10 pieces of advice that I received during my earlier years that were crucial in my personal development. These are in no particular order, and I hope that these vignettes are as beneficial to others as they were to me.

#1 "Be a good dude": Of the multitude of advice one gets before going to Ranger school, ranging from packing lists to patrolling techniques, then-2LT Seth Bodnar (Rhodes scholar/now CPT) offered me this timeless piece of advice that plays to the many relationships you will have in the Army—e.g. PL/PSG, PL/Soldier, peer/peer, PL/XO, LT/1SG, LT/CSM. Always being helpful, hard-working and respectful is essential to forging working and lasting relationships. Pay particular attention when you get to your first unit and meet the other lieutenants. That group is usually the single most competitive audience you'll see. It's critical to capitalize on your relationship with them so you can share experiences. For every main effort in a unit, you need a supporting effort one and two. Additionally, being a good dude is often soldier-speak for being a good leader. Quickly define the line between being friendly with your Soldiers (encouraged) and being their friend (strongly discouraged). However, share in their hardships and do not ever ask them to do something you would not do yourself.

Part of what 2LT Bodnar called being a good dude included being able to take orders in stride. He said to offer your input when it's the right time, but when it's time to move out and you're not in charge, move out. If someone tells you to move the machine gun, just move the machine gun. While he was speaking about Ranger school, this advice has several practical applications. Behind closed doors, encourage ideas from subordinates and provide them, when prompted (with solutions, if presenting a problem), to your bosses. When the door shuts and a decision is made, move out and support the decision *provided that it's ethical*. This will undoubtedly affect every officer in the force. It is inevitable that one day you will work for someone who you believe makes poor decisions. Do not undermine his authority by being problems-based vs. solutions-based. Be the better man and make the situation better, absorbing the potential impacts on other Soldiers.

#2 "Learn something new every day": When I was a brand new 2LT, my company's First Sergeant—Dennis Bergmann—was responsible for this quote. Aside from putting an innate fear into most officers, 1SG Bergmann (now CSM) was what you expected out of a first-rate NCO. His counseling me as a 2LT was so critical to my development that I encouraged my 1SGs later to continue this practice. His rationale behind the quote was that if you retained 365 new pieces of information about your profession a year, over the course of time, you'd be a force to be reckoned with. As a new 2LT, one should be a sponge for information. In fact, this is true anytime you undertake a new assignment. Nowadays, platoon leaders don't spend much time in platoons before they move up to become executive officers where they are one bullet away from command. Rarely do you get a formal block of instruction on how to perform that job. Our Soldiers are trained to step up if a man falls in the stack, and you should too. Besides, you will find that as soon as you begin to fully grasp your current job, you get reassigned. Additionally, if you're learning something new every day, it will be harder for individuals to present the regular bureaucratic pitfalls associated with larger organizations, often manifesting itself in the form of a support agency or a lazy platoon sergeant. *If it smells funny, it usually is funny.* Learn someone else's system and get smarter on it than they are. They won't be able to pull one over on you ever again. As I've found to be true in most things, listen to your 1SG.

Consequently, learning something new every day will allow you to determine when to not take no for an answer when the answer must be yes. Fight through the no until you find the yes, especially when it comes to Soldier personal issues (pay, family problems, promotion, or re-enlistment issues). Do not waste time dealing with folks who cannot say yes because they do not have the authority to grant an exception. Find the person who can grant the exception and make your case to them. Then bring in the heavy artillery (field grade officers) if you cannot convince them to say yes. If the decision maker is a Colonel, sometimes it takes a Colonel to convince him. If you can't convince your Colonel to take up the battle, you may not be fighting the right fight. Also, sometimes Command Sergeants Major can solve problems when commissioned officers can't or won't. Earn their support, trust, and confidence.

#3 "Never pass up an opportunity to take a leak before getting on a helicopter": I don't recall which person specifically told me this first, because I have heard it so many times. While the obvious lesson here is something anyone who has been on an air assault will swear by, another implied lesson here is to take an extensive approach to your planning efforts. If you don't plan correctly in a way that allots time for you to ensure your kit is squared away, you're not giving your Soldiers the time they need to prepare. Ensure they know, at a minimum, a task, purpose, the commander's intent, and a sprinkle of important coordinating instructions (e.g., timeline, you need your protective mask, etc.) before moving out. Lastly, don't forget to rehearse!

#4 "Don't ever compete with your Soldiers": When I was a commander, I challenged a boasting Soldier to accomplish a particular feat. It was something small, but it resulted in a minor injury to the Soldier, diminished my combat power, and left me feeling a little stupid. That evening when I asked the 1SG how things were going, we ended up talking for over an hour about anything and everything. As is the case with commanders and first sergeants, they can be extremely candid with one another behind closed doors. 1SG Mike Rosemore reminded me that you can challenge your Soldiers in an attempt to make them better, but never make it out to be "you vs. them" because no one wins in the end. He told me not to take the criticism personal, and if I did, I was taking it the wrong way. Me being me, of course I took it personal. Our conversation that evening altered my thinking in a way that I realized I needed to be more humble in general. It got me thinking a great deal about dealing with people in general. I think he knew that would be the end state; he is a smart man.

#5 "Mission first, Soldiers always or mission, men, and me": This is a very cliché Army statement that most commanders or military science professors like to pose in the form of a question. In that regard, it has always annoyed me to be asked which one comes first, the mission or the men (the me is always last). My dad taught me this answer very early in my development. The two co-exist and are inseparable. One cannot accomplish the mission without the men and the consideration thereof. When given a mission one must consider the disposition of his men. Are they trained to accomplish this task? Do I have sufficient manpower/firepower to accomplish the objectives of my mission and meet my commander's intent? Is the appropriate level of risk mitigated to ensure this plan is done 'right'? I offer that if someone gives you an answer that is anything short of what is written above, it is incorrect.

#6 "It's about training your Soldiers to accomplish any mission": My platoon had just occupied an abandoned school following the seizure of Saddam International Airport in April of 2003, when my platoon sergeant, SFC Dave Roels offered this piece of advice. In walking around the perimeter, I was initially concerned about our force protection during a particular time at night. My concern was over one Soldier, who, for the most part, was less than stellar. SFC Roels offered up that if I wanted to change the force protection plan that was one thing, but I should not question the ability of a Soldier to do his job. His point was that Soldiers can accomplish any task they have been trained to do, and, conversely, proper training will give your Soldiers and leaders confidence that they can accomplish the mission. Soldiers will not fail to accomplish the mission because they are weak or stupid (in fact, you will find some of your Soldiers have master's degrees or 1500+ scores on SATs), rather they will fail only because you have not trained them properly or thoroughly. The fact that I found my platoon sergeant walking the perimeter at 0200 hours was a testament that he knew what he was talking about.

#7 "Don't be afraid to stake your commission on something at anytime": Every once in a while there will be a defining moment in an Army career, usually once or twice, where you need to fall on your sword. This is not reserved for small issues, but perhaps it's an order that doesn't seem morally straight. Perhaps it's a zealous commander that is legitimately asking too much for the wrong reasons. Our "can-do" attitude sometimes precludes us from acting on this. A retired officer, MAJ Tony Martin, told me that an officer cannot be a careerist because there may come a time when you have to put it all on the line for what you believe. I whole-heartedly concur with his judgment.

#8 "Sir, I got it": There's a consistent theme to the majority of my aforementioned pieces of advice. Most of them come from NCOs or former NCOs and this one is no different. It's difficult as you progress in rank to have your physical proximity to the objective replaced by things like *guidance* and *intent*. There have been many situations when an NCO has told me that they had all they needed from me to accomplish the task. Sometimes I listened and provided oversight when needed (supervised), while other situations required a more hands-on approach (another form of supervision). During my company command, SFC Bassett often quoted me a line from the NCO creed: "Officers of my unit will have maximum time to accomplish their duties; they will not have to accomplish mine." It's a line that I've heard many times after, "Sir, I got it." It was his way of essentially telling me that he understood, would comply, and that I could relax. Another old platoon sergeant used to say it to me, most notably on one occasion when there was a lull in operations when our defense was continuously probed by remnants of the Iraqi Special Republican Guard. I hadn't slept in what seemed like forever and there were a few small tasks that I had to get accomplished. SFC Roels simply said, "Sir, I got it." I don't think I could have been more thankful.

While the SFC Bassetts and SFC Roels of the world are not as common as one would like to think, their units were just better than others within their organizations. They stood out, but not on purpose. Strong NCOs train their subordinate leaders and take this task personally. They also train their officers because no matter what anyone tells you, you will always be a direct reflection of the platoon sergeants you have when you are a lieutenant (ironically enough, SFC Bassett was CPT Bodnar's first platoon sergeant). Just make sure that you look out for their well-being because they're sometimes deficient in taking care of themselves. Lastly, keep in mind that sometimes you must take, "Sir, I got it," with a grain of salt. When a failure to accomplish a task occurs, ensure that your *kindness is not mistaken for weakness*. I would also encourage the documentation of such failures, but not always formally.

#9 "Know your enemy": This has a both a tactical and a practical application.

Tactically: So many times a mission will come down and the tactical leaders already know their scheme of maneuver. After all, the basics of fire and maneuver are simple. "Cover me while I move," is as applicable to maneuver

battalions as it is to buddy teams in basic training. Often forgotten, however, is the fact that the enemy is not dumb and probably knows your scheme of maneuver also. You must get in his mind and determine how he will defend his piece of land, etc. If you were defending the house you grew up in from a squad of infantry, how much damage could you inflict knowing every inch of that residence? The enemy thinks the same way. Knowing his strengths, capabilities, and disposition is important. However, it's more than just "he typically moves in 2-3 man elements and is wearing reverse DCUs." How can he affect me with his weapons, and where is this most likely to occur? Who does he work for or affiliate himself with? What are the most recent TTPs in his area?

Practically: You'll find that many people believe they have the single-most important job in the Army, in Washington, etc. They truly believe that. To get in the mind of your enemy, whether a uniformed enemy or a bureaucrat, knowing what motivates him is essential in achieving your desired end state. When people meet, they inherently trade bios in a game of "one-up manship". You know what you've done during your career so verbalizing it does not actually make you any smarter. Listen, understand more about those around you and it may alter your perspective or provide you a different lens through which to view your own.

#10 "Your commission must be ratified daily in the hearts and minds of your Soldiers": While elaboration on this point should perhaps not be necessary, many leaders take advantage of their position. Just because you obtained a certain rank, you are not precluded from following your own guidance. Whether it is motor pool activities or walking the perimeter at night, you must consistently go beyond showing concern for Soldiers by *genuinely being concerned*. This is certainly not a call for coddling Soldiers. You must understand the awesome duality in responsibility: accomplish your mission and bring your Soldiers home. All efforts, during training or conflict, should be directed towards this goal. Build referent power—know your Soldiers and let them know you. There is no other profession that endures the same challenges and fosters the camaraderie as ours—revel in it. Leaders do not have to be the fastest, strongest or best, necessarily, at anything, just always try to put your best foot forward.