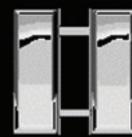




# CompanyCommand

*Building Combat-Ready Teams*



**To:** Future Platoon Leaders

**From:** Current and Past Platoon Leaders

## Advice for New Lieutenants

Life accelerates quickly for second lieutenants. Their college days are over; their professional careers have begun. Within their first year they attend their branch-specific schooling, often complete additional specialty training and then arrive at their first operational units. Having spent years preparing to lead American Soldiers, they begin to lead for real, with real consequences.

Professionals seek to raise the bar of their practice. In the Platoon Leader (PL) Professional Forum, experienced officers share their experiences and lessons learned to enable the next generation of lieutenants to build upon that hard-earned knowledge. This month, we feature excerpts from advice applicable to 2LTs as they transition from being cadets to leading Soldiers.

### **Making the most of your Basic Officer Leadership Course [BOLC]**

*More than 400 lieutenants commissioned in 2010 participated in a PL Forum survey to share their insights on their first years of service with this year's newly commissioned officers. Here are excerpts from their advice.*

**Pay attention** to the classes on supply and maintenance. They weren't emphasized much in school, but they are just as important as tactics (which makes up the core of the course) when you get to your unit. Make sure to spend time studying each night, even if only for 30 minutes to an hour, even when it isn't required for the next day. If you can get a

little ahead of the game, it will help a lot when tactics begins and you get really busy with long, long nights.—**1LT, Armor**

**Get as many** certifications done as possible—Sec+, N+, A+. You will need them, and BOLC is really the only time you will ever have time to get them without pulling away from your other duties. I was placed into a battalion S6 position, an O-3 slot, immediately after arriving to JBLM [Joint Base Lewis-McChord], and I have been in this position for over nine months. With the Army continuing its transition to brigade combat teams, it is becoming more and more likely that 2LTs will be filling battalion S6 positions instead of PL slots for Signal units. You will be expected to be the

subject matter expert on all things related to communications even if it is not your equipment, so get a copy of your receiving unit's MTOE [Modified Table of Organization and Equipment] and start looking up TMs [technical manuals] and quick reference guides for all of your communications equipment.—**1LT, Signal Corps**

**The biggest takeaways** are the relationships you develop with other LTs along the way. You will literally know people all over the world after you finish, and you never know when you

*Soldiers receive training in the Basic Officer Leadership Course (BOLC). "Your progress in this course," according to one lieutenant, "will directly relate to your success as a platoon leader."*



*While attending BOLC, soldiers are trained in skills such as supply, maintenance and tactics, the latter making up the core of the program.*

might see them again. (Two of my BOLC classmates replaced me in Afghanistan). You'll learn the technical stuff once you get to your unit. Keep all class materials and network, network, network. Keep your instructors' emails and hound them for stories about things they went through. For the most part, their advice is legit.

—1LT, Quartermaster

**BOLC is no sweat**, but flight school is no joke. They have completely gotten rid of the hold periods between phases. Your timeline will be something like this: BOLC, one-to-two weeks

off; SERE [Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape], one-to-two weeks off; IERW (basic flight school), one-to-three weeks off; Advanced Airframe, two-to-three weeks off; and then PCS to your duty station. My advice is to study for each phase as it comes. There is a lot to know for each phase so it's really not worth trying to study ahead. Just be prepared to study hard throughout your time at Fort Rucker, and then to continue studying once you leave.

—1LT, Aviation

**Take your classroom** scenarios seriously. Treat them as real life. Pay attention to details in the products you create, and maintain a broad understanding of the whole picture, not just your contribution to the group.—1LT, Military Intelligence

**Work hard**, both physically and mentally. I don't know how many times I was told that all that matters is to show up at your first unit in shape and competent. It was absolutely true. Do not worry about gaming deployments or units; focus instead on doing your best in both gunnery and fire support, while getting in shape. When you get to your unit—no matter how bad you may want to be an FSO, FDO, or PL—the fact of the matter is they are going to put you where they need you. That position must become the job you wanted; dedicate yourself to it. That is why it is so important to understand both the gunnery and the fire support sides of our branch.—1LT, Field Artillery

**IBOLC will prepare** you tactically but not for everything a platoon leader does. Learn on your own during your free time. Focus on things like property and accountability, range operations, convoy movements and reporting. These are the types of things that will set you up for success as a platoon leader.—1LT, Infantry

**Don't skate through** BOLC. Go into the course knowing that once you leave you're going to be leading Soldiers (some straight into combat). Your progress in this course will directly relate to your success as a platoon leader and



to your Soldiers' perceptions of you and your leadership. In addition, keep your nose clean while you're training. Soldiers see you in public places and know you are a 2LT (just like you know they're Soldiers), and perception is everything. Your classmates are going to the four winds after BOLC is over; don't sacrifice your career for a few good nights.—1LT, Military Police

**You're going to get** out of BOLC what you put into it. You will not be challenged academically to study and learn the trade, so I strongly suggest getting into the FMs [field manuals] and TMs [training manuals] to learn as much as you can about the many aspects involved in being an engineer. Don't expect to get a follow-on school when you leave Fort Leonard Wood [Mo.]. I was the only person in my class to get a slot to Ranger or Sapper school, and it was only because I contacted my unit in Hawaii to have them cut me orders and pay for it.—1LT, Engineer

Be prepared to work. You're not in college anymore. The things you learn in BOLC will be needed as soon as you get to your unit.

—1LT, Field Artillery

**"Driving On" in Ranger School**

*After completing Ranger School in January 2012, 2LT Nate Webster wrote a 13,000-word reflection to share his experiences and advice with the next generation of Ranger students. Here are excerpts from his "Ranger Notes."*

There are many Ranger School primers and experiences out there. I will try to share mine as honestly and completely as possible, as well as provide some tips and tricks I found useful. ... My writing ability is pretty abysmal at this time, so don't judge my grammatical errors or syn-

tax/diction mistakes. While I could write you a pretty solid OPOD [operations order] right now, this stream-of-consciousness work might not be so hot.

... My friend Wes Cochrane told me before I went to Ranger School to remember that eventually you will be warm, eventually you will eat and eventually you will take your ruck off. I kept that thought in the back of my mind every day. Just remember that whatever hardship you are going through, it will eventually end.

You will, of course, be suffering constantly. This sounds a little pessimistic, but it is true. Ranger School draws out the reality of Maslow's hierarchy, sometimes in an ugly way. I saw officers lose their dignity over food in Darby phase. You will constantly think about how to be less cold, less hungry (not full ... you are never full) and less tired. You will be shivering in formations wondering why you aren't allowed to wear your snivel gear. You will be so cold you'll share a bivvy sack with your Ranger buddy. You will conduct far too thorough an analysis of what extra stuff to pack in your ruck because each ounce of weight is a little more suffering on your back. There will be times in Mountain Phase when you look up the hill and convince yourself that there is no way you're going to get up it. You will *dread* taking a knee at security halts because your joints feel close to exploding. You will probably see many of your Ranger buddies simply screw over the leadership and remain standing, even though you and they know the right thing to do is take a knee, but you and they will be in too much pain. You will blow off showering when you're in garrison because those four minutes could be better spent sleeping—even though hygiene is important. You will get royally frustrated with the dude in your squad who always gets the "good" MREs, and then you'll probably scheme and plot your own way to get the better MRE next time. You will shake uncontrollably in the morning, stay in your bivvy sack a few more minutes than you should and not hustle to get your stuff ready for the morning, even though your buddy is in leadership and needs you to work faster.

You will do all these things because I—and every other Ranger student in the history of the world—did. And it's okay. No one is a perfect Ranger student. You can only hope to be better than you were the day before. I had the most childish tantrum in Darby when I couldn't untangle the claymore mine from its ridiculous rat's nest of tie-downs. I pulled out my knife and cut every single one of them (not the right answer) and felt momentarily better. I then had to spend five minutes our squad didn't have retying those knots. I'm not proud of the many moments of indiscipline I had during Ranger School—but that's the point. It's a humbling experience, and I learned greatly from it.

The key is to try and not do that one wrong thing the next day and to help out your buddy every time. It takes discipline in the purest sense. I had a very elementary notion of discipline before Ranger School. True discipline is doing the task required of you at the individual level in order to benefit the group without being told to do so. There will be many moments when you can easily get away with not doing the right thing. Ranger Instructors [RIs] will not gig you for being a turd as a rifleman; they *will* gig your squad leader. And when you are suffering immensely with a ruck on your back, you won't care about your squad leader even though he's your friend. You can hope, though, that you will have the discipline to do the right thing, because tomorrow you might be the squad leader who needs his guys to do the right thing in turn. That sort of give and take shouldn't be your primary motivator to do the right thing, but for some guys in your squad it will be.

The Florida RIs used to say to us a lot, "Don't just survive!" I actually loved hearing that because it was a sharp reminder for me. I wish I'd have heard it more in Mountains because I personally was way too focused on how miserable I was during that phase. Ranger School is a personal survival school, but you have to—and you will—overcome that. You will suffer immensely, but at the end of the day, you will hopefully be able to share a few minutes with your Ranger buddy, eat your MRE and know that you are one day closer to the finish.

Be the guy with a well-timed joke, positive attitude and stick of gum to share and you will make it through. You will be told over and over again not to quit—but really that's unnecessary and stupid. You won't quit because the guys to your left and right aren't quitting. You will be with people who are working harder than you even thought possible. That's what makes Ranger School special.

*Second Lieutenant Nate Webster, left, completed Ranger School in January of this year. In his reflections on his experience, he wrote, "You will suffer immensely, but at the end of the day, you will ... know that you are one day closer to the finish."*



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—2LT Nate Webster

### Taking Charge as a Platoon Leader

*The most viewed file in the 11-year history of the Platoon Leader forum is “Congrats ... you’re a platoon leader. Now what?” by 1LT (now MAJ) Nate Palisca. Here are excerpts from his advice.*

This is it. After countless hours spent earning your commission, you finally have it. A platoon. *Your* platoon. Sure, the goal at West Point, OCS and ROTC was always to get your gold bar, but now you can truthfully call yourself a platoon leader. So what happens now? Here are 10 things to focus on in your first 90 days as a platoon leader.

**You and Your PSG.** Without question, your platoon sergeant should be the first person in the platoon you talk to. Sit down with him or her and ask for a rundown on the platoon. Some ideas for questions: How trained are the Soldiers on critical tasks? How do we stand on PT? How is morale in the platoon? What tracking systems do you have in place and can I get a copy? How is maintenance? What are our SOPs? What training is planned? How do you visualize our relationship as PL/PSG? Are there any major personnel issues/legal cases? Who are the problem children? Who are the studs? It is important that you form your own opinions about your people, but the extremes (good and bad) are easy and your PSG should know.

**You and Your Platoon.** You can meet with your NCOs before talking to the Soldiers if you want to, but it’s not necessary. Definitely schedule a time to talk to your platoon as a whole soon after taking charge. They will be curious about you, and they need to see your face as soon as possible. You’re not just another new guy; you’re the new lieutenant. Let them know who you are and where you’re coming from. You don’t have to give them a hardcore Patton-style speech; just be

*While still a first lieutenant, CPT Nate Palisca (now a major) wrote a document on the Platoon Leader forum that gives advice to new platoon leaders on skills such as communicating with their platoon sergeants and soldiers.*

yourself. Your Soldiers will be able to see through any smoke and mirrors.

Do not, under any circumstances, criticize the last platoon leader. That shows insecurity, weakness and unprofessionalism on your part; and it’s simply in bad taste. Let your Soldiers know that you’ve heard good things about the platoon and that you are excited to be there—it helps if you actually mean it.

**Counseling.** Counseling a sergeant first class who has 12 or more years of time in service can be an intimidating proposition, especially when you have all of about six months under your belt. How are you supposed to tell him or her anything? It all comes down to how you approach it. Given that each person is unique, there is no set method that guarantees success. Take a week or two to get to know your platoon sergeant before initiating counseling, and then proceed with a well-thought-out plan.

The bottom line on counseling is that you owe it to your PSG to let him know what your expectations are and to give him some direction. Don’t let this one slide. It could come back to haunt you when it’s time to write your PSG’s NCOER [noncommissioned officer evaluation report].

**Playing Well with Others.** Cultivate good working relationships with the key players in your world. In general, people are much more willing to help you if they see you as a friendly face. Examples include: your commander, XO, first sergeant, other platoon leaders, supply sergeant, maintenance team chief, headquarters platoon sergeant and anyone else you will be working with on a regular basis.

**Being with Your Soldiers.** Be visible to your Soldiers without being nosy or overbearing. This is easier said than done, but it is worth your effort to get it right. Yes, you will make a first impression when you initially talk to your platoon, but it will take a while for Soldiers to “feel you out” and see what kind of PL you are.





According to one first lieutenant, “The biggest takeaways are the relationships you develop with other lieutenants along the way. You will literally know people all over the world after you finish.”

**Standing Operating Procedures.** If your platoon has a written SOP, read, learn and internalize it. If not, get with your NCOs and start drafting one. Everyone in your platoon needs to be on the same sheet of music if you are going to be successful.

**OER Support Forms.** If your commander doesn’t give you a copy of his OER [officer evaluation report] Support Form (DA Form 67-9-1), ask for it. You should have a copy of your rater’s and senior rater’s support forms. Both of those forms will not only give you ideas on how to write yours, but they will also show you how your bosses think yours should be formatted.

After you have your bosses’ support forms, start drafting your junior officer developmental support form [JODSF] and your support form. You might think that your commander will remember all of the great and wonderful things you did—and he will, after you remind him. A good support form is a tool that helps you get a fair shake on your OER.

**Layouts and Property Accountability.** You should (and likely will) do a layout of all of the equipment assigned to your platoon. You will inventory and sign for all of it, thus taking responsibility for your platoon’s equipment. You can’t afford to screw this up. Here’s some good advice: While you are counting widgets and gizmos, ensure you are looking for serviceability in addition to just how many are there. If you have a piece of equipment that is unserviceable, it’s not doing you any good, so you may as well be missing it.

After your layout, you will need to ensure your hand receipt is correct (so you don’t sign for things that aren’t there) and begin the process of filling your shortages. This is where your XO and supply sergeant can be very helpful. Both of them can guide you through the process of ordering replacement equipment.

**Systems Improvement.** Look around at how your platoon conducts business. Start thinking about what I call sys-

tems improvement. Look for things that could make your Soldiers’ lives easier. Sometimes that may be a tool or piece of equipment that they never had; sometimes it’s streamlining a system. Whatever it may be, your guys will appreciate you looking out for their welfare. One important caveat to that is: Don’t make changes just for the sake of change, or to be able to say, “Look what I did.” That won’t help anybody. It will only serve to make you look ego-driven and alienate you from your platoon. Just observe, ask your Soldiers/NCOs and give it some thought.

**You and Your Ego.** You don’t have to tell your NCOs that you are in charge. They know how you fit into the platoon. That being said, listen to your NCOs and pick their brains for the knowledge that only their years of experience can bring. The bottom line is that you are in charge, but your opinion isn’t the only one that matters.

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**Connecting in conversation...  
...becoming more effective.**

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*Art by Jody Harmon*

**Have you joined your forum?**