Learn from My Mistakes: What I Wish I Knew Before Becoming a Lieutenant

by 1LT Justin Leugers

I believe the Army does not prepare its junior leaders for what they will face when they arrive at their first duty station. This means that most of what you need to learn becomes on-the-job training/learning. With that in mind, there were a lot of things I wish I would have known prior to arriving at my first duty station at Fort Bliss, TX.

I started learning what I still needed to know when I first became a platoon leader. I conducted platoon- and company-level field-training exercises and multiple live-fire exercises where I actually learned how to maneuver a platoon-sized element as part of company operations in the unforgiving deserts of New Mexico. I also participated in a National Training Center rotation prior to a nine-month rotational deployment to Camp Humphreys, Republic of Korea (RoK). I learned a lot, but I wish I had known more at the beginning.

Figure 1. Red Platoon conducts platoon-level operations while forward-deployed in the RoK. *(U.S. Army photo by 1LT Justin Leugers)*

With that in mind, the point of this article is to recommend some ways new lieutenants can learn from my experience.

Care – it's your only job

As a new lieutenant you are eventually bound to get a platoon. Remember, you only have one job and that is to *care*. Soldiers and leaders who truly care about each other develop mutual trust and respect. If you care about

your job and everything your job encompasses, you will be successful. Care about the Soldiers in your platoon, care about your vehicles, care about your additional duties and care about all the random taskings you will sooner or later inherit. Caring for your platoon is harder for leaders who lack empathy/sympathy (I am one of those people), so it took me a few months to fully understand my Soldiers and what it truly means to care.

Your platoon sees everything you do and do not do, so sit down with them and talk to them like people you care about – not a group of subordinates you can tell what to do. Your Soldiers will see that you care and will be more willing to do what you ask of them; your Soldiers will also respect you as a leader.

As the platoon leader you need to care about their families, hobbies, medical appointments and all the metrics your first sergeant will be yelling about. Also, you need to understand that your platoon sergeant will take care of tracking your Soldiers, but you will need to keep readiness in the back of your mind.

When you get to your platoon, within the first month you should sit down and have a one-on-one conversation with each Soldier. This allows you to get to know the Soldiers you could one day lead in combat. You will find out that one or more of them has some higher education, even a bachelor's or master's degree. Ask them why they joined the Army and what their goals are.

Caring for your Soldiers also means maintaining standards and discipline. Your noncommissioned officers (NCOs) will help with that, but ultimately you are the standard, so do not deviate. Mutual trust and respect will help mitigate any doubts that come up in stressful situations. Care about your job and your evaluation will write itself.

Educate yourself

As a new lieutenant you do not yet really understand how the "Big Army" works and how much there is to learn. Therefore, you must learn quickly how to "drink from the firehose." Read regulations, read doctrine, read policy letters, read relevant articles, read professional development and self-development books and, most importantly, read something fun. You should always have a book nearby that you are reading or listening to.

I have been more successful in retaining my reads by listening to audiobooks than actually having a paper copy in my hands. Do what works for you.

I often have a hard time finding periods during the day or evening where I am able to pick up my book and knock out a few chapters. I discovered that my 30-minute commute offers me the longest uninterrupted period of the day, during which I can listen to whatever book I am "reading."

Consuming books offers you knowledge you will not get anywhere else. Television documentaries and impromptu conversations with field-grade officers are great, but getting absorbed in a book and understanding the author and his/her point of view, motives and reasons for writing it in the first place really gives you wider access to other viewpoints, and it allows you to develop a wider perspective.

Read "Funk's Fundamentals." I have it hanging in my office for quick reference. GEN Paul E. Funk II, commander of U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, has 40 quick points that I believe are excellent advice. If you are able to apply the fundamentals early in your career, you will be more successful.

Ask, ask, ask and ask questions. Your technical knowledge is so limited at this early stage of your career that you have to ask questions. You will drown in questions if you don't ask them, but be careful who you ask. A brand-new lieutenant should seek out his/her platoon sergeant because he/she is your right hand and the person with whom you will work most closely. Even to this day, I ask my platoon sergeant first.

Then I recommend asking the senior platoon leader in the company or a peer and then the company executive officer or first sergeant. I wouldn't ask the company commander anything unless it was a question I couldn't get answered elsewhere. Your commander has a hundred other things going on and does not need a lieutenant asking him/her five questions a day, especially when the question can be easily answered by asking someone else.

I would find myself asking my specialists and below about certain equipment and how they operate it because they are the Soldiers who work on that piece of equipment each day. Also, it gives you a chance to test your Soldiers' knowledge and show them you care about their jobs.

Never leave a question unanswered; if you think it's a "stupid question," ask your NCOs. They will set you straight.

Don’t neglect PT!

Physical training (PT) in the morning is very important. It is usually the only time most of your Soldiers will work out or do anything remotely active all day. Invest in a Bluetooth speaker to play music on lifting days or while you are conducting an Army Physical Fitness Test or Army Combat Fitness Test. It will come in handy more times than you think.

Taking your PT plans seriously will ensure your platoon is healthy and can help build esprit de corps. Be creative in your workouts: create a platoon PT competition once a month, use the pool, conduct an off-post run or coordinate to use the equipment at your local gym. I know commanders will want a concept of the operation and risk assessment, showing what you will do and how you will mitigate risks associated with a different type of PT, but take the extra 15 minutes and knock it out. Put in the legwork so you can keep PT creative and your platoon fit and motivated during the workouts.

Regularly conduct an after-action review to determine what went well and what needs improvement. Most importantly, let your NCOs run PT. This is a great opportunity for them to lead Soldiers, for you to develop them as leaders, to learn from them and develop yourself.

Maintenance will make or break you

My time in a tank company, and in an armored brigade combat team (ABCT) in general, has drilled the importance of maintenance deep into my brain. My battalion commander used to always say that maintenance is training, and the longer he was in the position, the less he empathized with traditional training and the more he cared about maintenance. He knew that traditional training would happen regardless, but good maintenance would only happen if it was a priority.

He was exactly right. As a platoon leader, you might be in charge of four tanks, worth around $6 million each, or a various set of vehicles and weapons. It is ultimately your job to maintain and sustain them. If your tanks or rifles do not work, you cannot fight. You have to be able to move, shoot and communicate.

You need to be able to read and understand Department of the Army 5988Es, Equipment Status Reports, and all of the codes that correspond on them. These tools help you understand what is “officially broken” and when you can expect replacement parts to arrive. Each unit will have a different 5988E flow, so understand yours and again ask questions if you don’t know. I was expected to brief the battalion commander on the status of my vehicles at any moment.

You need to have a relationship with the maintenance chief, the maintenance-control officer and especially your company maintenance team. Those relationships are more important when you become an executive officer, but talking to all these people regularly and showing them you care about their work will express to them you care for maintenance.

This whole process, at least in an ABCT, starts every Monday with thorough preventative maintenance checks and services (PMCS), and it will continues every day of the week. You have to ensure that your platoon is conducting PMCS by the technical manual (TM) with platoon leadership supervising – and preferably maintenance personnel are included as well. I would ensure that the crew had the TM open on the front slope of the tank and knew how to read it.

As a tank-platoon leader, I found out that it should take almost the whole day to PMCS a tank and some of the other larger tracked vehicles. When a crew is done by noon, you know you need to spot-check their 5988E.

Many young Soldiers truly just do not know what right looks like, hence the need for leadership at all levels from the lowest echelon to battalion must be present for maintenance. As a platoon leader or executive officer, you will have so many other tasks and spot-checks that sometimes you cannot get inside your tank during PMCS, but you have to understand the process and what correct looks like. Officers need to have a strong, competent NCO on their vehicle who can ensure tasks are completed to standard in the absence of officer supervision.

Figure 2. Red Platoon conducts recovery operations since the platoon leader's tank threw a track. *(U.S. Army photo by 1LT Justin Leugers)*

NCOs: the backbone

The most important relationship you will have is with your platoon sergeant. Your platoon sergeant will run the daily operations of the platoon, especially when you get called away to attend meetings, leader professional development, operations-order briefs or any other random "officer task." He/she makes sure everyone is where they need to be, whether that is at appointments, on their vehicle for maintenance, or in training.

You and your platoon sergeant must be on the same page. You should have all your disagreements behind closed doors, hash out the problems and return to your platoon confident and with a plan together. With that in mind, you should always run your "great ideas" by your platoon sergeant first because you will soon realize that many of them aren't really that great.

Another best practice is to regularly engage NCOs outside your normal channels (from other platoons or companies). This will allow you to gain awareness across the formation as well as provide a wider base of experience from which to glean information.

By doctrine, the first sergeant is the senior trainer in the company and is typically the most experienced NCO in the company. Make a point to interact with the first sergeant often – he/she can provide sound advice based on personal experience and can give you a better perspective based on his/her unique vantage point observing leadership's interactions at all levels within the battalion.

My initial first sergeant was a dual tank and Stryker Mobile Gun System master gunner. I used his experience and expertise to help develop my own technical knowledge. This in turn allowed me to be a better leader and allowed me to better educate and empower the Soldiers in my platoon.

Do not discount your NCOs; they have much more experience than you and can be a force multiplier.

Property – what a headache

Property is a beast to understand, and once you think you understand it, you will find out something else you did not know.

All documents pertaining to things you are signed for and will sub-hand-receipt to someone should be kept consolidated in a hard-copy property book. There is also the digital property book that's in Global Combat Support System-Army (GCSS-A). Your property book could range from a few pages and a thousand dollars to tens of pages

and upward of $20 million in value. Failure to closely manage your property could result in catastrophic consequences and financial liability.

One thing I learned early is not to sign for something or sub-hand-receipt it to someone else unless you have a complete understanding of what the item is. You need to understand what the components of *end item*, *basic issued items* and *additional authorized items* are, as well as the items on those lists. If you do not understand what an item is, then leverage the resources the Army provides you to gain a better understanding.

Your supply sergeant should be your first touchpoint for all property needs. Supply personnel should understand, at the absolute minimum, the basics of GCSS-A; property books; ordering shortages; the difference among expendable, durable and nonexpendable shortages; and the lateral-transfer process. If your supply sergeant cannot answer your questions, talk to your S-4 officer in charge and the S-4 NCO in charge, or check in with the property-book officer. These are the available property resources within a brigade and should remedy all but the most catastrophic property situations.

As stated earlier, new lieutenants often don't yet know what they don't know. That's the point of this article – to help them learn from the experience of one who has walked the path they are now on.

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Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team
GCSS-A – Global Combat Support System-Army
NCO – noncommissioned officer
PMCS – preventative maintenance checks and services
PT – physical training
TM – technical manual