

LEFT BEHIND:

ONE REAR-D COMMANDER'S EXPERIENCE

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“You’re going to be the rear-d commander” — the one phrase no officer wants to hear. Rear-detachment duty is no light task, and I would argue it may be one of the most difficult jobs in the Army. If given the option, I would not have chosen this duty, but I learned so much more than if I had deployed, which has set me up for success in numerous developmental areas.

My brigade, the 4-2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team, labeled its rear detachment the Raider Ready Reserve (R3). The difference from most rear detachment commands and my experience was the aspect of being organized with a one-to-11 leader-to-led ratio while transitioning Soldiers and training deployable personnel (which consisted of more than half our formation). I feel I have surpassed my peers, not in stature, but in experience and the ability to manage staff, Soldiers, and the Uniformed Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) process as a commander. As the 2nd Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment (Tomahawks) R3 commander, I learned all the pertinent information every commander wishes he knew in order to spend less time on administrative paperwork and more time training.

As I dwelled on how to accurately describe my experiences, I kept returning back to our brigade commander's (COL Mike Getchell's) repetition of the unit's motto: RAIDERS — ready, accountable, informed, disciplined, experts, resilient, and Soldiers, families, and teams. The best way to convey my lessons learned as an R3 commander is to utilize this acronym.

Ready

Raiders (and in my case Tomahawks) are ready when the nation calls. The nation called on 4-2 SBCT to deploy to Afghanistan from October 2012 until August 2013. Once the brigade was informed of the deployment, preparation for the R3 began. The initial jump start to my success and what put me ahead of the other rear-detachment battalion commanders was being delegated as the R3 commander for 2-23 IN before the battalion departed for its rotation to the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif. This opportunity gave me the chance to gain experience as a commander and, most importantly, gave me an additional six months to prepare before the brigade actually deployed. Most R3 commanders in my brigade were not selected until almost one month before the brigade deployed, which placed that commander in a “catch up” mode for the beginning of the deployment. Being assigned six months prior to deployment allowed me to focus my energy on personnel readiness rather than getting my feet planted underneath me.

The unique thing about the 4-2 SBCT R3 rather than a normal rear-detachment organization was that 40-50 percent of our population was deployable Soldiers. Our force manning level on the mission in Afghanistan maxed at roughly

A gun team from the Raider Ready Reserve (R3), 4-2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team, pulls security during a team live-fire exercise at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., on 29 January 2013.

Photos by SGT Ryan Hallock



50 percent of the formation. Unfortunately (or fortunately, however you see the glass filled), Soldiers were taken off the deployment roster, which for many dampened their spirits. On top of the non-deployable medical evaluation board (MEB), chapter, legal, permanent profile, and injured Soldiers, I also had a 40 percent deployable formation that I had to keep proficient and trained to be ready in the event that these Soldiers were needed to replace Soldiers in Afghanistan. Keeping up motivation and giving them a purpose to serve was taxing. Although no one wants to join a football team to be benched in the first season, as a leader you must find ways to inspire others. For me, I encouraged family time and weekend passes. On top of being left behind, you are also engaged with Soldiers that are trying to stay motivated to serve in the Army after receiving backlash from deployed Soldiers. Deployment is an experience, but so was the R3. Soldiers that were left in my formation conducted multiple training exercises, engaged in red cycle taskings monthly, served as borrowed military manpower (BMM) to support division-level taskings, as well as conducted multiple marksmanship ranges, land navigation training, Expert Infantryman Badge training and testing, and numerous memorial ceremonies. To some that doesn't seem difficult, but to give that task to a R3 element with such a low leader-to-led ratio (highest-ranking leaders typically being sergeants) becomes an intense challenge. Most of my leaders were taking on jobs and tasks that were three pay grades above their rank and experience.

This brings me to my next point: putting the correct leaders in the correct positions. In order for the R3 element to be ready to assume responsibility as a company, the deploying companies need to leave back capable and adaptable leaders. It's a lose-lose situation when you leave an E-5 over a platoon of 26 Soldiers, have him sign for more than \$40 million in equipment, and then throw multiple tasks in his face every day. You cannot expect an E-5 in that position to operate at your expectations. As with any leadership challenge, leaders have to place the correct person in the correct job in order to make an organization maintain or grow. If someone isn't working out, be that leader that can fire and rehire. It's not easy and I'm not saying it is, but it's our responsibility.

Accountable

One of the most taxing tasks as the R3 is having NCOs (E-6 and below) sign for an entire company worth of equipment. Coming up with a good sensitive item (SI) procedure (to include adding checklists [Standard Form 702, *Security Container Check Sheet*] on all containers and buildings that contain SI and having staff duty/CQ check it at certain times of the day/night) will make your life easier. SF 702s help identify the point of friction. If any negligence is found with equipment, the SF 702s will help narrow the timeline which something was checked or not, if administered properly. Additionally, every company needs to have a GOOD key control system/custodian. If checks and balances are not in place, then it leads to buildings being unsecured, improper use of storage facilities, and just plain old lost equipment. Lost or stolen equipment leads to a Financial Liability Investigation of Property Loss (FLIPL), which typically leads

to loss of money from the Army or Soldier.

As with any formation, leaders must also be accountable for personnel. Leaders still have to maintain a list of all MEBs, chapters, legal cases, deployable, non-deployable, end term of service (ETS), and permanent change of station (PCS) personnel. On top of tracking all Soldiers and their appointments, the unit is still receiving new Soldiers every day into the battalion. Integrating Soldiers can be undervalued if there are not capable leaders to mentor, coach, and sponsor them. Along with the million other tasks, you must find a way to integrate new Soldiers and not allow them to be influenced by the few undisciplined (example: drug and alcohol misuses) Soldiers left behind.

Informed

As an R3 commander, I was ultimately in charge of more Soldiers than any other company commander in my battalion. I also had the combined chapter and legal cases from the entire battalion into one company. Although a challenging position, I had one strong tool in my toolkit: the consolidation of the family readiness group (FRG) leaders. FRG leaders can either make or break a commander, and in my case I am happy to report I had a great FRG established! While preparing for an R3 company, a leader must continue to focus on ALL aspects of support and communication, including the families. By keeping the FRG and leaders informed of flights, events, and if necessary tragic events, unknown tasks and issues can be resolved with support. There is an old saying: "More communication is better than none." Well, it's true — it saves you time and energy. Give the FRG leaders guidance and watch them work for you. GEN George Patton once stated, "If you tell people where to go but not how to get there, you'll be amazed at the results." It is a MUST to keep your FRG in the loop with everything; they have the leverage, wits, and ability to take care of you as the commander. If the FRG is blown off or not taken care of, the unit will suffer.

When developing a plan to inform your FRG leaders and NCO in charge (NCOIC) in the battalion, don't wait too late to give information. Verbalize whatever info you can when you have it. Don't make perfect the enemy of good enough. So many leaders try to develop a perfect plan before issuing out any guidance, but it backfires due to poor planning and not having the ability to adapt to change. Put out an initial plan/development at a 60-70 percent solution, send out fragmentary orders (FRAGOs), and refine later as you can when time is available.

Disciplined

Not only will the R3 commander be knees deep in grenade pins, but discipline must remain and continue in all Soldiers. Essentially, when having your formation and receiving new Soldiers, continue to enforce the Army standards and maintain that atmosphere all the way through. As the senior officer in charge, the commander must always account for his actions, and there are more people watching than anticipated. An officer must be the moral compass for the unit — whether for a platoon, company, battalion, or brigade. They must hold themselves accountable while also holding their subordinates accountable. What helps in this endeavor

reverts back to what I mentioned previously: having the right person in the right job. If the deployed company left back a stellar Soldier, that just makes your life much easier as a commander. If a less-than-stellar Soldier was left back, it is still your duty to train and retrain.

Although it will seem like you're drowning most of the time, you must find an outlet so you do not get burned out. I had a hard time with time management; I took on too much to ensure my battalion didn't fail. Nine times out of 10, if not completed by 1800, it will still be there in the morning. Additionally, I will add that commanders need to keep emotions out of decision making and focus on facts, particularly regarding Soldier-related decisions. At first, I spent a lot of extra time at the office (working 12-to-17-hour days six to seven days a week easily); I then started making poor decisions and barking orders with no justification. As a leader, never speak out irrationally. I've made many apologies due to my mistakes and actions, but luckily I had built an empire in R3 where we all supported and respected each other. When it came time that I cracked under the whip, my peers/subordinates/junior leaders supported me and offered to take on tasks they could handle. Having a stressed leader will not put an organization in a good position. Don't wait until the last minute to seek help; delegate where needed. I realized over my R3 experience, some nights you will leave early or late, but the work will always be there the next day if not completed. Manage what tasks you CAN complete and which ones you will not complete — I'm not speaking of failing. To use a metaphor, you will have five to 10 balls juggling between your hands at all times. You must figure out which balls can be dropped, which balls can be thrown, and which balls will bounce (and depending how high they bounce may give you leverage to stay afloat).

Finding your outlet to release at the end of the day is crucial.

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You must always remember to be who you are and don't let the burden of R3 change you. My best resource for outlet was finding select peers that understood my stressors and having a 30-minute to an hour conversation at the end of the day to blow off steam. Usually it included a redeployed friend, an NCOIC, or my 1SG. Usually we'd laugh about how crazy our day was and say to ourselves, "Geez ... just when you think you heard it all, today happened!" Typically, when I had that outlet, I felt better when going home to my wife. The bad days were when everyone was stressed and cut out

early to relax, I was left back with no outlet before I left to go home. Those days were not fun and made it very stressful for my wife. You must find that outlet: I golfed on the weekends, rode my motorcycle, and went to the gym. It still always helps to release your stress verbally; however, I would not recommend unloading it all on your significant other (but if that's how you operate, then go for it).

Experts

Bruce Lee once stated, "If you spend too much time thinking about a thing, you won't get it done." Once we began the readiness process to stand up R3, I noticed many of those in the headquarters spent a lot of time coming up with a plan of action to execute R3 operations. Sometimes you've got to just give out a 60-70 percent solution and refine. Continuing to be experts, we had to maintain all readiness statuses for the R3 element. Maintaining readiness included performing equipment maintenance, conducting education on all Army policy updates, training the standard and empowering the NCOs to do their job, and lastly focusing on the continuation of standardized and mandatory annual training.

Unfortunately, on R3 you will not be the expert you expect to be. Many Soldiers in the formation raised their hand to deploy and fight, which is what they train for. On R3, you will need to be the backbone for the formation and

educate your Soldiers so they can be experts at home station as well. Being an expert doesn't necessarily focus strictly on marksmanship or ruck marches. Being an expert involves being that "complete" Soldier and having the integrity to be a professional at all times. For me, being an R3 commander meant being an expert towards managing Soldiers, educating myself on all processes to allow our team to serve our Soldiers properly at home and in Afghanistan, and being able to solve any issues involving Soldiers and family members.



Photo by SGT Ryan Hallock

Soldiers from the Raider Ready Reserve, 4-2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team, reload an M240B machine gun during a team live-fire exercise at Range 60 at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., on 30 January 2013.



Soldiers with 4-2 Stryker Brigade Combat Team salute during a redeployment ceremony on 16 June 2013.

Photo by SGT LaToya Nemes

Resilient

Being an expert on rear detachment can be frustrating. As the R3 commander, you are the one leader that everyone in the battalion leans on. The deployed chain of command, the families, the Soldiers, the brigade, and the rest of the R3 team all expect you to be the source of information and the problem solver. Fortunately, you get really, really, really good at handling problems. Unfortunately, you get really, really, really consumed with everyone else's issues. You need a strong and mature person to take charge of the R3 formation. No matter how strong you are though, you will need some sort of resiliency. For me, I attended a Strong Bonds event, and it was great! About the time I needed to attend, my wife and I were stressed beyond belief and could not communicate the way we wanted to. Over the course of R3, I had decided that my job was more important than my wife, unintentionally of course. The Strong Bonds event I attended helped me place my priorities back in order, a form of resiliency. Additionally, my wife and I sought out couples counseling. There is no shame in counseling, especially if needed to restore a marriage. Think of counseling as a vehicle. If you service your vehicle consistently, the less likely it will break down. If you wait until things are broken, the repair could be costly.

The Soldiers and NCOs left back should take advantage of time off: go see a movie, get out of town, submit four-day passes, and go fishing. You have to find something that keeps you who you are and sane! I know many Soldiers who conducted combatives training and martial arts to relieve stress. You must find an avenue of relief in order to prevent from snapping or blowing up. Also, remember that everyone is looking your way, and the wrong move can set a bad example. Find something enjoyable to do as long as it doesn't bring discredit upon yourself or the Army. "Example is Leadership" — Albert Schweitzer

Soldiers, Families, and Teams

I believe this is the most important aspect of my R3 command. In considering who to assign as R3 commander, the single most important question to ask is, "Who do I trust to take care of all the families?" The families in the battalion are extremely important, and this job isn't to be taken lightly. You must always care for them while also not putting yourself into a position to get in trouble. Update families with any information on hand and give timely updates. Trust me, as a commander you will not be able to please them all, but if you have their best interests at heart the rest will fall in place.

We did suffer some injuries and fallen Soldiers. No one can prepare you for caring for those families and wounded Soldiers upon their return. The devastation of losing a Soldier is emotional on both the deployed and R3 command groups. One thing to realize is as the commander, you will be the face of the battalion; this is something leaders should take into consideration while selecting someone to watch after their unit back home. That leader must be professional and courteous. They will be your representative to the deceased and wounded families, which can leave a good or bad impression of the Army on them.

My learning curve was extremely steep throughout the R3 experience and well received. No words can explain the depth of knowledge or respect earned while serving as a R3 commander. Although not a glorious position, my experiences have taught me more than I could have imagined. If given the opportunity to serve as the R3 commander, a person should take advantage of its position, and it will be rewarding.

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