

# the **BATTALION**

Executive  
Officer

LIEUTENANT COLONEL WOLF D. KUTTER



An assignment as a battalion executive officer is a challenging one, and one that many officers look forward to. It can also be either the most fulfilling one an officer ever had or the most frustrating, for he must try to accomplish the unit's mission and promote the welfare of the soldiers of the battalion at the same time.

In the spirit of professional exchange, therefore, I would like to share some of my own experiences as a battalion XO in the hope that they might prove helpful to other officers who may be assigned to the job.

Needless to say, it is a position that must be defined from the outset by the battalion commander. A commander, for example, might entrust his XO with being the unit's deputy commander, as practiced by the West German Army, or he may feel more comfortable with his XO acting as the chief of staff for the battalion's principal and special staff officers. No matter how the executive officer's role is defined, though, the outcome ought to be that the battalion's command group, consisting of the commander, the command sergeant major, the XO, and possibly also the S3, ratify a kind of contract of expectations that everyone clearly understands. The command sergeant major, for instance, works *for* the battalion commander and *with* the XO.

A new XO should be aware of the many roles he will be expected to play: He will be a teacher, conciliator, sounding board, investigator, coordinator, facilitator, planner, supervisor, counselor, and leader. In all of them, he should lead by example and avoid the pitfalls of "managing."

It has been my experience that most of the soldiers, noncommissioned officers, and officers of a combat arms battalion want to do a good job. I believe that most soldiers are happy in a well-disciplined unit, that NCOs will exercise whatever authority they are given, and that today's combat arms officer is the best I have ever seen.

If all this is so, then what is the job's special challenge?

First, some of the problems the new XO faces are unique to that job. Although he has seen most of them before, he will be seeing them from an entirely different perspective.

The pace of the job is especially hectic because of annual inspector general (AGI) visits, maintenance assistance team reviews, and the unit's training activities. Maintaining the battalion's equipment and managing personnel, logistics, and financial resources effectively usually also fall within the XO's special domain. In addition, he has to accomplish all of these tasks in the face of reduced manning levels and a potentially high turnover of personnel, which means that policies, procedures, and SOPs need to be constantly reviewed, reinforced, revalidated, and retaught.

The XO often finds himself explaining key rules for the third or fourth time in a year because the people responsible for adhering to them are gone. He can expect breakdowns in the various support systems in the battalion because of what I call an "underlap" of personnel. He may be too thinly staffed to have an understudy for the PLL clerk who knows where to deliver the key req-

uisition form so that a critical part for his M113 can be drawn.

People are not the only challenge. Equipment is another. Training hard with our weapons, our wheeled and tracked fleet, and our communications equipment is our reason for existing; we are expected to be a combat ready force. Sometimes, though, reducing the use of equipment can be an advantage. There is no profit in training so hard today that the next command group has to have as its first priority a "get well" equipment program.

Repetitive, thorough maintenance training that includes operators and supervisors will preserve equipment, reduce the demand for spare parts and major assemblies by 20 to 40 percent, and also improve readiness. In my battalion, the time we dedicated to equipment recertification because of the high turnover of personnel paid high dividends.

All of these challenges can be seen in terms of goals, and the quest for a combat ready battalion can be broken down, particularly as it concerns the XO's role, into immediate, intermediate, and long range goals.

My own immediate goal as an XO was to mitigate frustrations, particularly among noncommissioned and junior officers — frustrations caused by not having the needed tools, spare parts, manuals, or supplies — and to troubleshoot any problems in the personnel, maintenance, and supply systems. For example, if the direct support maintenance company failed to honor an unserviceable equipment turn-in date and the battalion motor officer did not get immediate satisfaction, it was time to act.

Intermediate goals are the ones most commanders concentrate on, such things as the successful completion of ARTEPs and AGIs, and general defense plan exercises, all in support of combat readiness. As a result, the XO will usually spend most of his time on these goals as he plans, organizes, and coordinates the staff to accomplish those missions. But his focus really should be wider.

His long range goal should be to make sure the young men who join his unit today become tomorrow's successful leaders. Through his efforts, a squad leader who reports for duty with previous assignments in recruiting, ROTC, and at a training center should become a successful platoon sergeant. Similarly, he should see that each junior officer gets the professional development he needs to perform vital roles in combat at least one level above his current rank.

In short, the XO has a trustee responsibility. He must not only achieve the highest possible readiness for the moment but in that process set aside the time to build tomorrow's Army leadership today. In addition to these professional development programs, he should become involved in programs that include the soldier's family, the facilities he lives in, and the equipment he operates.

In reviewing my tenure as a battalion XO in light of these goals, several issues come to mind having to do with the differences between the XO as chief of the battalion staff and the XO as deputy commander.

As the chief of the battalion staff, I held three short morning meetings a week to coordinate actions, review programs, and issue instructions. If I had been limited to that role, however, the battalion staff would not have been able to accomplish as much as it did. Therefore, I carefully nurtured my role as deputy commander, because as the principal administrator and logistician of the battalion, I had to have the force of law behind any instructions I issued. Extensive face-to-face discussions about problems, especially with company executive officers and their commanders, were normal, and we tended to resolve those problems more easily that way. We rarely had to involve the battalion commander in trivial details.

In the continuing tug of war between centralizing and decentralizing functions, I resisted all efforts to wrest control from subordinate commanders, and similarly refused to centralize functions under battalion control. PLL clerks were not centralized under the battalion motor officer, the battalion supply activity center remained disbanded, and financial resources were parceled out to company commanders. This kept things cleaner and simpler, and it put the burden of performance where it belongs — on the subordinate “green tabbers,” who are always ultimately responsible.

This is not intended to imply that the battalion staff was secondary to the company commanders; there was no competition. Our purpose was simply to provide superior service and good staff products. We encouraged the companies to regard the battalion staff members as their best employees, and the staff members likewise had ready access to points of contact within the companies to get their jobs done.

On the assumption that an XO should state policy based on the battalion commander's guidance while the staff should develop procedures, in our battalion we preferred to give mission orders to the staff, we kept reports and statistics to a minimum, and we had frequent face-to-face communications with our subordinates — and with our superiors, too, for that matter. This face-to-face communication process can be compared to the function of the cop on the beat — the more he walks, talks, and observes, the better feeling he has for what is really going on in the neighborhood.

The XO usually finds that various members of the battalion will bring policy issues to him soliciting his support for one action or another. Invariably, in considering these issues he should ask himself, “Am I trying to achieve the highest standards in one of the battalion's functions or subsystems at the expense of another?” The correlative question is, “Can we accept something less than 100 percent in that function — perhaps 85 to 90 percent — and thus avoid sacrificing that other function?” For example, we could say, “We're going to redo all our clothing records for the AGI.” Or we could say, instead, “We'll validate all clothing records against the Unit Manning Reports, seeing that the S4's SOP specifies such checks monthly and that supply sergeants are actually reconciling their company clothing records transactions

with the S4 CTA 50-900 section monthly.”

Another recurring issue is that of specializing versus generalizing jobs. Having seen lieutenants switched from one position to another within a battalion every six months for “career enhancement” purposes, I can only suggest that trying to make everyone a generalist is self-defeating. We have enough turmoil among our leaders without creating more. What we need to do is to build expertise, which means specializing, not generalizing. There is nothing more valuable than an S1 who has held the same job for two years. (Not to mention an XO who has been around for a while. Today, a battalion commander often has as many as three different XOs during his 30 to 36 months of command.)

Junior officers in particular need to be left in one place long enough for them to develop a bond with their NCOs; such a bond promotes trust, mutual respect, and unit cohesion. Further, it is precisely the long range goal of professional development that can bring out the tactical expertise of an S1 or S4. The XO should have these officers enroll in correspondence courses or professional writing programs to expand their tactical knowledge as well as to raise their esteem among their peers and superiors.

## TECHNIQUES

In dealing with all of these interrelationships between challenges, goals, and certain key issues, the XO has to develop some techniques for problem-solving. These techniques can be discussed in terms of planning, organizing, controlling, supervising, and evaluating.

**Planning.** When the XO is doing his planning, he needs to look ahead three to nine months and develop his own detailed calendar of events, making sure that he and his staff have consistently touched base with the division and brigade staffs. Planning requires him to be his battalion's ambassador in dealing with the various organizations. If the people in these organizations regard him as such, they are more likely to tell him about crucial changes that affect his battalion.

The XO must also visualize proposed plans and the arrival of new equipment in terms of the work effort required of every echelon in the battalion. This may entail reconciling a “can do” attitude with the actual productivity of the various organizational echelons. A case in point is determining the number of mechanic manhours actually available against the projected maintenance requirements generated by back-to-back FTXs plus an ARTEP.

**Organizing.** When it comes to organizing, a multilevel approach is best. The XO's first step is to make sure the staff officers are organized to offer the best assistance to him and the battalion commander. At the lower level, the XO should ask if the effort is organized so that the NCOs have what they need to do their jobs — people, time, supplies, equipment, and facilities.

Organizing also means that directives and procedures

such as maintenance SOPs, driver training directives, and platoon ARTEP letters of instruction are widely distributed. It also means that everybody is given the time they need to read and comprehend all of this information.

Finally, organizing implies that the XO has a firm grasp of the key indicators that provide him with warning signals. I am not advocating management by statistics. What I am advocating is the organization of controls, the formulation of key questions, and some indications that a plan is on track. Thus, knowing what to look for on a readiness report, a technical inspection sheet, or a deadline report, and then asking the right kinds of questions, constitutes mental organization.

**Controlling.** Communicating and controlling can be among the most fascinating aspects of the XO's job. Face-to-face communications are usually more warm and meaningful, especially when they are coupled with positive reinforcements. Enlisted soldiers and NCOs should see that the XO cares when he comes to their worksite, and the old truism that what is checked gets done still holds up. It makes a big difference when the XO asks a company motor sergeant about his zero balance lines, about the reconciliation of due outs, and how his new mechanic is working out, and thanks him for a great effort on the last FTX.

Because control involves communications, the XO should encourage the flow of information. He needs to let his subordinates, especially the staff officers, know that he wants even bad news to come to him promptly. His subordinates must also be encouraged to build open, honest communications in all of their functions. This means with and between constituents — S4 to supply sergeants, company XOs, the brigade S4, and so on. When communications are open and frank, and the XO makes the rounds of his own constituents — the brigade staff, the brigade XO, and so on — he will undoubtedly pick up enough information to keep the battalion commander informed and two steps ahead of any problems.

And if he finds that the best staff directives have been modified, it is his job to find out why.

**Supervising.** The XO should decide first what is important enough to warrant his personal attention and what the staff should supervise for him and the commander. He should remember that oversupervision stifles initiative; it does not allow people to grow in their jobs, to make enriching mistakes, or to produce up to their potential. So the XO must decide carefully what he wants to observe, what he should check, and what he really needs to supervise.

Good staff supervision will highlight problem areas, but before he jumps, the XO should ask himself if the problem is structural or procedural or if it reflects a lack of resources or a failure to adhere to published directives. In other words, he should let his own good judgment tell him what to do. (For example, when a company fails to turn in its Class IX report, he might consider that the company XO is new and the motor sergeant is on leave.) And he should remember that short-range solutions often

have long-term ramifications.

Sometimes just standing for a few minutes at one of the key intersections of the battalion (places such as the mess hall, the motor pool, and near billet entrances) can give him an indication of the progress that has been made and of what still needs to be done. These standards should relate to the basic tools readily at hand for the junior officers and the noncommissioned officers. Standards expressed in terms of the soldier's manuals, battalion SOPs, and technical manuals improve comprehension, foster the XO's role as teacher, and provide a degree of continuity.

**Evaluating.** This is something we generally do not do very well. It is probably the pace in the battalion that keeps us from seeking the feedback we need to do a good job of it. Nevertheless, the XO must insist that it be done continually; he must cull the results from after-action reports and then integrate better methods of doing things into the next cycle of events.

These "oughts" of what to do should then be related to the immediate, intermediate, and long range goals that have been established. Feedback may tell the XO that his mess hall account went into arrears on the last day of the month because the dining facility manager overbought Class I items. An evaluation may indicate that this is a recurring problem and that the wrong kinds of main dish items were purchased.

Similarly, feedback may tell the XO that the battalion's administrative transactions are not timely and that, in fact, his people do not know how to use the various support systems effectively. Whatever his evaluation of these and similar problems, the result may very well be a "dirty dozen" list that he and the command group will have to work on. And if things should ever get monotonous, he may ask himself what else can be done to unlock the human potential in the battalion, what small action if implemented might pay off in terms of his goals.

Any officer who is fortunate enough to be assigned as a battalion executive officer should enjoy the opportunity and feel rewarded by it. During his tenure, he can be certain that tomorrow's leaders will be preparing themselves by following his leadership and his example.



**LIEUTENANT COLONEL WOLF D. KUTTER** is assigned to the office of the Comptroller of the Army in the Pentagon. A 1963 OCS graduate, he has served in numerous Infantry assignments, including one as a battalion executive officer in Germany. He holds baccalaureate and master's degrees from The American University and has completed the Armed Forces Staff College.