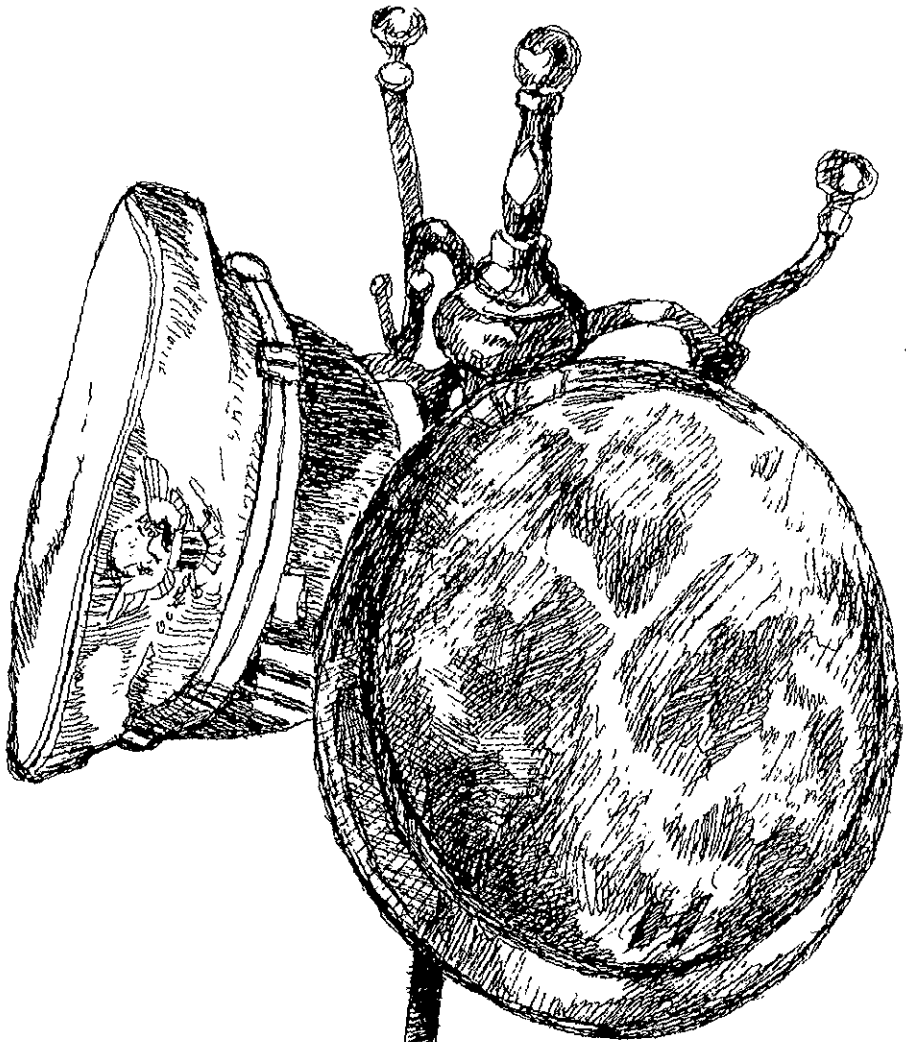


COMMAND IN EUROPE

CAPTAIN ROBERT L. MAGINNIS

Commanding a company anywhere in the world today is challenging, but commanding a mechanized infantry company in Europe is especially so. In fact, this command may be the most challenging company-level job in the Army. It is important for the prospective commander of such a company to understand the special challenge and to take some steps that will prepare him to meet it.

There are essentially two differences between this type of command in Europe and the same job somewhere else. First, in the U.S. Army, Europe (USAREUR), there is the ever-present General Defense Plan (GDP), which dictates almost everything the commander does — how he trains, where he spends his time, how he equips his unit, and how he organizes. As his soldiers are constantly reminded, their mission is to be ready to fight at a moment's notice.

But the second major difference, Europe's unparalleled high-stress environment, makes it difficult for him to accomplish the requirements of the GDP. This means that although the commander must train his unit to fight at a moment's notice, he may not always have the resources he needs to accomplish that training.

A mechanized infantry company commander in Europe has to vie with other U.S. and NATO units for access to training areas — either maneuver right areas (MRAs), which are civilian sectors where off-the-road maneuver has been authorized by the German government, or local training areas (LTAs). With the exception of the annual REFORGER exercise, during which USAREUR units, on a rotating system, are given the opportunity to take part in cross-country maneuver, such training is too often curtailed or cancelled because of the prospects of maneuver damage.

Competition for live fire ranges is often even more frustrating than vying for MRA and LTA opportunities. The shortage of ranges is further complicated by the same training ammunition problems found in the rest of the Army. Then, when a commander does get access to the ranges he needs, he has to hope that the weather cooperates so that he can accomplish at least his unit's mandatory tasks.

A broad spectrum of administrative burdens, in addition to the usual ones, also go with the job in Europe. A major source of these additional burdens is the commander's role as monitor of most of the Army-supported needs of his soldiers and their families. He has to arbitrate problems that arise between his soldiers and the local nationals, beginning with those associated with landlords. The unsuspecting company commander often feels helpless when confronted with the structured German bureaucratic system, which pervades essentially all aspects of his unit's life.

The commander is even responsible for monitoring the registration of privately-owned vehicles, the issuance of driver's licenses, and the administration of punishment for both on- and off-post traffic violations. Periodically, he is called upon to inspect the off-post quarters of company personnel, to quell domestic disturbances in both government and economy quarters, and, frequently, to coordinate the cleaning and maintenance of government quarters. At the same time he is expected to support different community organizations such as dependent youth activities, scouts, chapel, German-American Club, Red Cross, and Army Community Service.

Another thing that makes this a high-stress assignment is personnel turbulence. First-term soldiers rotate every 18 months. By the time they in-process, go through weeks of the Headstart Program and other classes peculiar to USAREUR, participate in a major FTX, fire one or two densities at Baumholder, Grafenwoeher or Wildflecken, and take a well-deserved leave, it is almost time for them to start out-processing. Most of the noncommissioned officers as well are on two-year unaccompanied tours. When these short term tours are coupled with the numerous special duty requirements, the commander ends up with skeleton crews and inadequately prepared soldiers.

(Although the turbulence in Korea is worse, the environment there provides a major advantage in that almost everyone in the 2d Division is unaccompanied. In addition, the individual soldiers live in the remote camps with no POVs, and the training resources far exceed what is customarily available to the mechanized infantry company commander in Europe.)

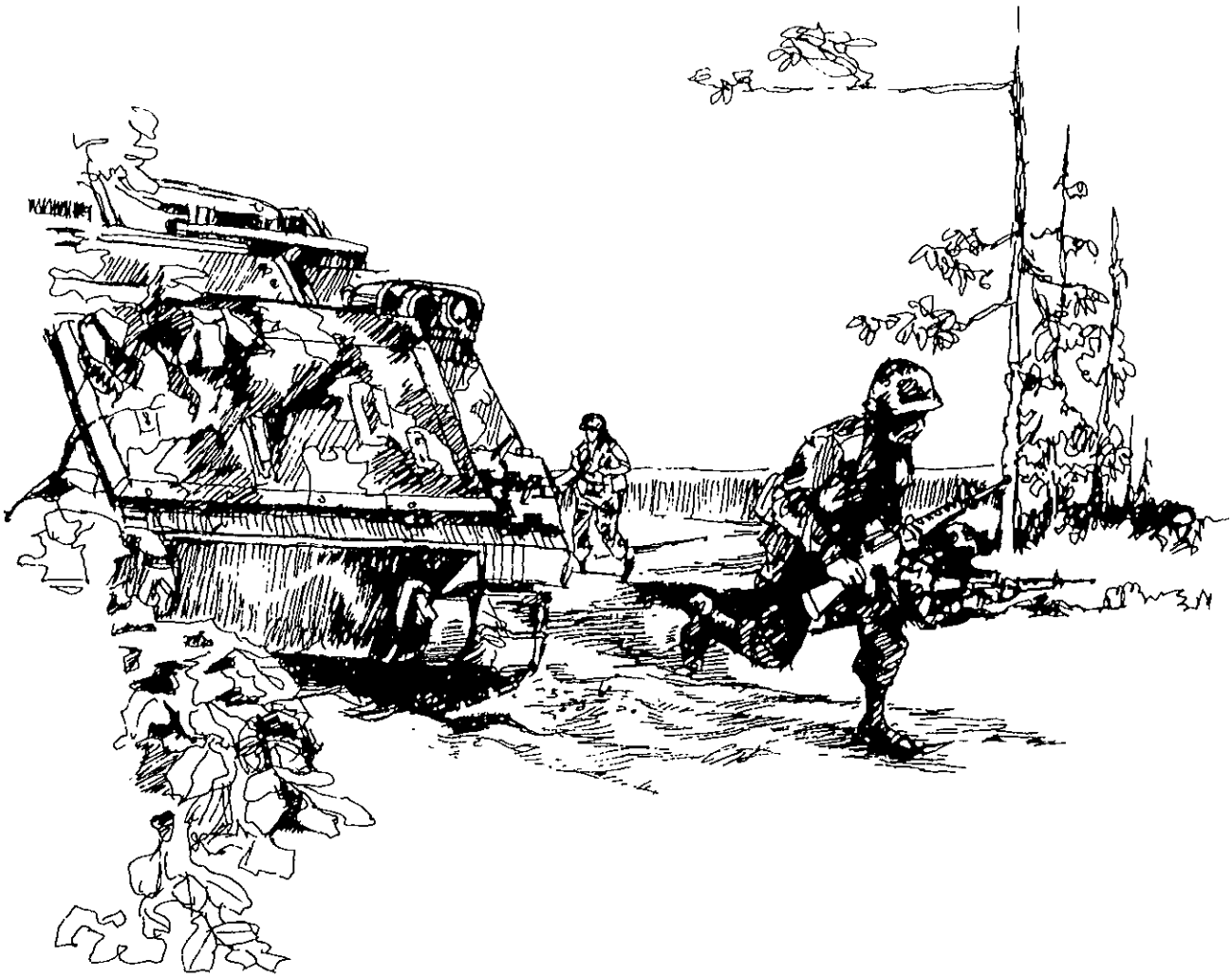
The extended support environment also makes things difficult. Most of the combat units in USAREUR are separated into numerous small casernes, or installations, scattered throughout Germany. This often means that routine maintenance and administrative actions must be performed at more than one location, usually several traveling hours apart. Simple repairs and administrative actions often turn into day-long operations, and if something can go wrong it will; if someone forgets to take along a vital tool or piece of equipment, it often means trying again another day to accomplish the task.

These are some of the things a mechanized infantry company commander in Germany has to live with. But there are some steps he can take to make it easier. The following advice, from someone who has been there, includes suggestions on how an officer can prepare himself for the job and then on how he can succeed at it once he is there.

ADVANCED COURSE

The first thing a prospective mechanized infantry company commander should do is to resist the temptation to take a command before he has attended the Infantry Officer's Advanced Course. Too often a young and aspiring, but still inexperienced, lieutenant grabs the opportunity for a USAREUR command without fully realizing what he will be missing by not attending the advanced course first.

Specifically, he will be missing the hours of advanced course training on combined arms, maintenance



management, supply accountability, and the Battalion Training Management System, among other subjects.

So, in preparation for a command later on, he should attend the advanced course and immerse himself in combined arms planning, digging deep and studying barrier planning, combat communications, and the use of close air support and attack helicopters. He should become an expert in understanding and writing operations orders and fragmentary orders. And he should not neglect the force modernization classes that will acquaint him with the many combat systems scheduled for USAREUR units as a part of Division 86.

He should also become knowledgable in maintenance procedures by getting his hands dirty while pulling an engine, changing a track, and performing a preventive maintenance check list. He should do an operator's checklist for the ITV, learn how to schedule Qs, check parts requisitions and driver qualifications.

Once he is assigned to USAREUR, and before he takes command, he should persuade his battalion commander to schedule him for the pre-command course at the 7th Army Training Center. This two-week course can put the finishing touches on his pre-command education

In addition to educating himself, the prospective commander should also prepare himself to cope physically and emotionally. In Europe he is not likely to be making a lot of long road marches with a 50-pound rucksack, but he should not be fooled by the mechanized infantry "rider's" mentality.

Mechanized infantry soldiers require a different type of conditioning than do light infantrymen. They need to train their bodies to do heavy lifting over extended periods of time. Too, mechanized infantry soldiers need to be prepared to lift box after box of ammunition into their vehicles while suited in full MOPP protective gear.

USAREUR is no picnic physically. What a commander needs most is stamina, because his command will involve long hours and a hectic pace, with a lot of time spent away from the garrison and his troops and a lot of hours catching up when he returns to his office.

Precisely because of the hectic schedule and long hours, a part of the emotional preparation for this kind of command has to do with the commander's family, if he is married. He should understand the importance of this from the start and he should prepare his wife and children for his extended absences as well as for their own problems of living in a foreign country. (Planning ahead for trips and tours can help.) If he fails in this regard it

will only add to the stress of his job.

SUPPORT AGENCIES

As early as possible, the commander should get to know the support agencies he will be working with, because he will need them to help him solve many problems.

He should become familiar with the Criminal Investigation Division (CID) and the provost marshal's office. Riding with a military police patrol on a payday, for example, will teach him a lot; it will enable him to become acquainted with trouble spots so he can brief his new soldiers on what to avoid. A couple of days of self-guided orientation through local support agencies and some time getting acquainted with service agencies such as the Red Cross emergency message service and Military Airlift Command (MAC) service will save him time later when he needs them.

He should also visit his tour and travel center to find out what tours might lure the "barracks rats" out into the sunshine. He might also want to consider arranging a company tour to Paris, Rome, or London over the Christmas holidays.

The final step in the preparation process is by far the most difficult — trying to learn to read people. It requires almost a sixth sense, and some people never learn it. But it helps if he can become astute at discerning his boss's goals for the battalion — his prejudices and the things he feels strongly about.

Reading his subordinates is just as important. To get his job done he must be able to influence them to tackle their jobs with enthusiasm and determination. Getting the most out of key subordinates is often the difference between being a good commander and being an outstanding one.

These preparatory steps out of the way, and knowing what he is facing, the commander can start considering how he is going to go about commanding the company.

First, he has to set priorities on his time. Because he will be away from garrison at least 25 percent of the time, he cannot afford to waste what is left. He should develop a garrison schedule, designating certain times for administration, and then follow it. And he must not waste time on training that is not related to the GDP.

Next, the commander must organize his team. His soldiers must know their own jobs and how those jobs fit into the team. It is up to the commander to define the roles of his subordinates, trying to focus on individual interests and talents in the process, and this involves spending enough time with the men to be able to make the proper decisions. Once the team has been formed, the commander must provide clear direction for its members as he approaches the routine and the not so routine tasks — that is, AGIs, ARTEPs, and so on.

These subordinates must also be trained to do the jobs they are supposed to do, and it is up to the commander to provide the required instruction. One technique for giving them the necessary know-how is to encourage his subordinates to take advantage of each professional learning experience. Effective after-action reviews can be excellent tools for bringing out lessons learned and the best ways to alter individual or team behavior. The altered behavior should then be reinforced through repetition.

This learning and team-building technique should be aimed at preparing subordinates for their next step up the chain of command. These techniques can be supplemented with company-level professional development classes that contribute to professional creditability — maintenance training, for instance, tactical exercises without troops, reviews of field SOPs, and war games.

All of these steps lead to the most important task of all — giving the soldiers in the company first-class training. The commander may not always be able to do all the training he would like to do, but what he does do, he should do well. He must not allow the constraints of the environment to become an excuse for poor training.

What he should try to do, as a company commander anywhere should, is to plan thoroughly and then execute the plan professionally. Too often USAREUR training, amid all the turbulence, is well planned but improperly executed because of limited resources and general discouragement.

But a commander cannot afford to waste scarce resources on poorly planned or poorly executed training. A failure to plan properly can lead to meaningless training; a failure to execute properly is poor testimony to professionalism.

Success in command is often considered in terms of survival. Any commander who has common sense, keeps

things in perspective, and stays flexible can survive company command in Europe. But survival should not be the goal; and survival in itself is not success by any measure. Success is achieved through a positive attitude that is focused on several points:

First, the commander should remember that his company is not an insular unit, that it must work in concert with its sister units. This means that, in regard to the GDP, he must continue to update his plan, always conscious of his assets and liabilities and of the fluid planning process. He must ask: Where does my unit fit into the battalion, brigade, or division plan? How and from where will my unit be resupplied? Such questions will help him and his subordinates focus on the common goal of being combat ready.

Next, to earn the respect and the confidence of the men, the commander must be knowledgable in all aspects of his command. His soldiers expect him to be the resident expert in combat arms and company administration and they assume that he is, unless he proves otherwise. When he makes a mistake, he should admit it and correct it. His soldiers will respect him for it.

But nobody really expects him to be a superman and he should not try to be one. He should, therefore, learn to delegate authority and responsibility to his subordinates, then check periodically to make sure they are doing the job the way he wants it done. He should not give them more responsibility than they can reasonably handle, but what he does give them he should demand that they take seriously and that they learn accordingly. Frequent counseling sessions can be used to guide their progress.

Finally, the commander should encourage feedback from his subordinates and listen with a discriminating ear. More often than not, they, especially the senior noncommissioned officers, have been down the same path before and may know a better way to accomplish the mission.

EVALUATION

Even if a commander does all these things, survives, and succeeds to some degree, how does he measure his success? There are several ways, some more objective than others.

One of the most important measures of success is his satisfaction with his own performance. He might ask himself whether he accomplished what he had in mind to accomplish, whether he attained his pre-command goals, and whether his soldiers seem happy in the unit. A good measure of the soldiers' satisfaction is whether they are re-enlisting for the same MOS or for their present duty assignments. Another is how much or how little they complain or how willing they are to go the extra mile when something needs to be done.

Another measure is the degree of maturity the commander has attained during his command. He might ask himself: Am I better able to do my job now than I was at the beginning? Are my key subordinates more able than they were at first? How did my soldiers perform on their SQT? Maturity is learning; if the commander can articulate what he has learned during the course of his command, then the chances are pretty good that, on this point at least, he has succeeded.

A third measure of success is unit discipline, because it is a reflection of the commander's performance. Unfortunately, a unit's track record is often a matter of public record, especially when the name of one of its soldiers appears on the morning blotter too often. The number of Article 15s, chapters, and courts-martial the commander has administered or requested also has some bearing on how he and his unit are perceived.

Next is what do his soldiers look like? Are they known for sharp haircuts, military courtesy, and good-looking uniforms? At sporting events, are company teams supported by other soldiers from the company? All of these are indicators of unit esprit and discipline. Soldiers who know their own limits, their commander's expectations, and their own roles on the team will generally represent the unit well.

One of the subjective evaluations of a commander's performance is announced at the conclusion of each ARTEP or AGI. These evaluations provide feedback on how well he has prepared his subordinate leaders for their jobs. But there are less formal evaluations that are often better indicators of success: Do soldiers from other units frequently try to join the company? Does the unit have good reaction time, and are the men thorough in conducting the company's readiness tests? How long does it take the company to load its tracks, empty the supply and arms rooms, and begin to move? If it improves each time, that is a positive indicator.

Finally, there are the tangible measures of success, such as early promotions, awards, and decorations, but these are scarce. The best criterion of success is the commander's own satisfaction with the job he has done, because he is usually his own harshest critic.

But despite all the special frustrations associated with command in Europe, it is still the best and most rewarding command environment. Any mechanized infantry commander who goes into the job knowing what to expect and who approaches the job with enthusiasm, common sense, and a sincere desire to do his best, will have a good chance of living up to his own high expectations.

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