



# BATTALION COMMAND

## A PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY



In my judgment, a personal philosophy of command does not exist in a vacuum. Nor is it something you can "acquire" in a pre-command course. On the contrary, a personal command philosophy is a complex set of notions gleaned from study, experience, and, time permitting, considerable reflection.

A command philosophy also partakes variously of an individual's self-image and of how he views people generally, even how he relates to his superiors, peers, and subordinates in a particular command environment. The latter relationships, however, pertain more to behavior and style than to philosophy itself. This is not to suggest a chameleon approach to command, but it is to suggest that a philosophy of command worthy of the phrase endures while behavior and style may change with the environment.

My own philosophy of command stems from my philosophy of leadership. In essence, the following observations synthesize, with regard to leadership and command, what I call "A Theory of Expectations":

- Most people want to perform, achieve, produce.
- Most people like to think that whatever they are involved in is worthwhile and that it is so recognized by others whom they respect.
- Some people do not perform, achieve, produce, or they do so at levels that are unacceptable to the organization to which they belong.
- For the purpose of analysis and corrective action, non-performers either don't know or don't care.
- The leader's critical tasks are to distinguish between performers and non-performers (or low-performers), and then either to integrate them into the unit or to separate those who don't measure up.
- Rewards and punishment are essential to motivating both individuals and groups in the Army.

Clearly, effective leadership at any level requires more than just a philosophy; it requires action. This is particularly true of command. If a commander is not a man of action, he is merely a figurehead, contributing about as much to his unit as the figure on a ship's bow does to the navigation of the ship.

My approach to command, I believe, is consistent with my overall philosophy of leadership. In both, I view people in general and soldiers in particular in terms that are essentially positive, essentially optimistic. In both, I recognize the value of integrating individual goals with unit goals whenever possible and feasible. Most impor-

tant, both my approach and my philosophy have worked well so far for me. Thus, I am comfortable with them and I will continue to be guided by the values they encompass.

What, then, is my approach to exercising command at the battalion level?

First, it seems to me, a battalion commander needs to understand and accept the simple fact that he is now a battalion commander, and no longer a company commander. Obviously, this point is more than just one of perspective; it relates also to command behavior and style. The way a battalion commander views his role with regard to his subordinates, peers, and superiors will set the tone for the way he will run his battalion.

Second, the battalion commander must beware of the tyranny of nostalgia. That is, he must resist the temptation to try to resolve the problems of the present with solutions from the past. This does not, of course, mean that experience is irrelevant. It simply means that organizations change over time and so do the problems of group dynamics. What worked well for an officer as a company commander in, say, Hawaii in 1977 may be of little or no use to him as a battalion commander in Germany in 1984. Thus, the battalion commander of the 1980s needs to temper his prior experiences with reflection and study, and with a fresh analysis of the command environment of which he is now a part.

Someone has said that "the reward of the general is not a bigger tent, but command." Surely, the same should be true for colonels and captains. To command soldiers at any level is a rare privilege, an opportunity to serve in the fullest sense. To command soldiers at battalion level is rarer still, a privilege extended to a relative handful of the many who are qualified. It is, in short, an unusual opportunity to serve; it should not be viewed as a perquisite for personal gain.

## FOCUS

I believe it was Casey Stengel who said, "If you don't know where you are going, you are liable to end up somewhere else!" This aphorism applies, obviously, to more than baseball. By focusing on his mission, the battalion commander will be able to distinguish between the critical and the important, and between the routine and the trivial. These distinctions are as necessary as they are difficult, because once he has made them, he can set realistic goals and objectives, determine priorities, and allocate resources. Focusing on the mission should also clarify his thinking and lend substance to his actions. His failure to focus on his mission will muddle his thinking, thwart meaningful action, and leave him and his unit floundering from crisis to crisis.

The welfare of the soldiers and the accomplishment of the mission are not, as some would suggest, competing concerns. They are part of the total process of command. To the extent that we take care of our soldiers (and their families, too), we contribute to a sense of belonging, unit



identification, pride, and esprit. In turn, this contributes to mission accomplishment — if it is properly done.

There are pitfalls, however. Chief among these, it seems to me, is a facade of concern pasted on the reality of neglect. The prudent commander will avoid this pitfall by assuring that taking care of soldiers is ingrained in the everyday life of his unit and that it is not relegated to catchy slogans and morale support activities.

For the commander, though, the welfare of his soldiers transcends matters of comfort, mood, and even morale (narrowly defined). It extends, for example, to seeing that his soldiers clean their weapons, vehicles, and other combat gear immediately upon returning from the field so that they will be ready to go again with little or no notice.

The welfare of soldiers extends to training as well. In essence, our Army has two vital missions: to train and, if called upon, to fight. If we do the first well, we are infinitely more likely to do the second well, too. Unfortunately, the converse is also true — if we train poorly, we are more likely to fight poorly. Poor training only permits soldiers to practice their mistakes; thus, they become very good at being very wrong. Poor training is the ultimate insult to the soldier and to the unit. The prudent commander, therefore, will satisfy himself that his unit is well-trained, individually and collectively. In so doing, he will actually be taking the longer view of the welfare of his soldiers.

A commander would also do well to remind himself

frequently that those who wear the uniform are soldiers first and officers, noncommissioned officers, and others second. Soldiering is not a vocation or an avocation. It is a time-honored profession — a way of life. Officers and noncommissioned officers are the profession's gatekeepers and standard bearers. They determine, in large measure, who enters and who leaves, who advances and who does not. This awesome responsibility must not be taken lightly. Rather, it must be seized upon at every opportunity, and especially in terms of the professional development of subordinates.

## DO IT BETTER

The professional development of subordinates is a function of leadership that is widely preached but not so widely practiced. It makes so much sense, theoretically and practically, that it deserves the commander's early and continuing emphasis. Why don't we do it better?

The first obstacle is time. The pace of the workaday battalion is fast and furious. In the press of meeting crisis after crisis, developing subordinates all too often gets short shrift, but it should not and the battalion commander must see that it does not. By planning ahead, by focusing on his mission, and by assessing the talents of his subordinates, he can and must take the time to train, educate, develop, and evaluate them. This is the essence of professional development; it is the tie that binds individuals and groups into competent, confident, spirited units.

A reluctance to reassign people is another obstacle to professional development. It is, however, a false issue. Personnel turnover is a fact of life in the Army — and it always will be. The key point is to make change work *for* professional development and not *against* it. After all, most personnel gains and losses are predictable. The prudent commander should anticipate these personnel changes and should be ready to use them to the long-range benefit of his people and his unit.

A third obstacle and, in my opinion, the toughest one to breach, is the risk associated with the professional development of subordinates. We often hear, "I'd really like to give Lieutenant Shagnasty a shot at being the battalion antitank platoon leader, but I'm just not sure he can handle it." Or "I'd really like to help Captain Smedlap get that job in the brigade S-3 shop, but I just can't afford to lose him." All too often these are only the plaintive wails of an insecure, shortsighted commander.

On the other hand, the conscientious, concerned commander who truly has the interests of his subordinates and the Army at heart will take some short-range risks to

reap the long-range benefits of professionally developing his people.

The obstacles of time, personnel turnover, and risk are by no means insurmountable. But they must be dealt with boldly and diligently. A "master plan" for professionally developing officers, noncommissioned officers, and other soldiers is a valuable management technique for dealing with these issues. [See the author's "Bolstering the Backbone," *INFANTRY*, May-June 1980, page 25.]

A word of caution, though: Such a plan must not become just another item on the AGI checklist, another requirement met. Instead, it must be carried out with command and staff commitment and involvement. Otherwise, the result will be merely an illusion of professional development, not the reality of it.

Finally, I would suggest that a battalion commander, early in his command tour, assess the reward and punishment situation in his unit. After all, incentives and awards, along with sanctions, contribute immensely to individual morale and to unit esprit and cohesion. Most soldiers like to be recognized for their excellence and expect to pay for their transgressions. Commanders should not disappoint their soldiers on either count.

A sound policy of incentives and awards should encourage the pursuit of excellence, especially in training, supply, mess, transportation, maintenance, and administration. It should not, however, encourage cutthroat competition and lapses in ethics. In my view, having soldiers compete against a standard of excellence rather than against each other is preferable for most events.

Discipline is the hallmark of the professional military unit. Self-discipline is the ideal to strive for. Short of that, though, there must be a command environment that enforces high standards of military appearance, conduct, and performance. Punishment, where necessary, must be swift and sure. Moreover, it must be fair, with due regard for the offender as well as the offense.

This, then, is a bit of my personal philosophy and approach to command. As I said at the outset, it stems from my views on leadership in general. All I can honestly say is that it has worked well so far for me. As for others, "to thine own self, be true."



COLONEL THOMAS B. VAUGHN commanded the 1st Battalion, 19th Infantry, 25th Infantry Division in Hawaii and has been selected for brigade command. He is now serving as Senior Army Advisor to the Commander of the Air University and is an instructor in national security affairs at the Air War College. He is a graduate of the Defense Language Institute, the U.S. Army War College, and the University of Kansas Graduate School of Political Science.

