

about him as well as the bad.

All things considered, your peers may well make the difference between your success and your failure in the battalion. Ultimately, you may find yourself in combat and depending upon your fellow lieutenants for the survival of your men and the success of your mission. Even in garrison, much depends on the nature of your relationship with your peers: help with additional duties, for example, or advice, or the exchange of needed information. If you make a serious investment in your relationships with your fellow lieutenants, both personal and professional, the return will be well worth it.

THE OLD MAN

You've probably guessed already that your company commander will have the greatest single influence on your development and your eventual success or failure as a lieutenant. I served under six different company commanders in three years. Two, I thought, were poor; the others were hard-working, committed to their profession and their companies, and genuinely concerned with their lieutenants. Each was different, and each stressed slightly different things. All had a tremendously difficult job to do and never enough resources to do it with.

I offer these basic principles concerning company commanders:

- Establish and maintain a reputation for working hard; it can gain you immediate respect and can help to turn away the wrath an occasional honest mistake can bring on.
- Never make the same mistake twice. This is fundamental and is usually what separates the good lieutenants from the mediocre ones.
- Do your best to anticipate problems, and always take the initiative, while keeping the boss informed. Every lieutenant should do all he possibly can to relieve the commander of his administrative burden and free him to lead his troops. If you find that in acting independently you usually make a mistake, it may be necessary to reevaluate your professional aspirations. The solution, however, is *not* to retreat into a shell and do only what you are specifically told to do.
- Know your job inside and out and act like a leader. You will be amazed at how many lieutenants lack the aptitude or the inclination to exercise leadership. Although your company commander may or may not be blessed with it himself, he will almost certainly recognize it and approve of it in his subordinates.
- Never, never, criticize your company commander, either openly or to anyone you would not trust your career with. Commanders, being human, are as sensitive as anyone else to criticism. The difference between them and other people is that they can do something about it and usually will.

You should expect that at some time during your first tour you will probably have a company commander who is something less than your ideal. If you do, swallow hard, put your head down, and do the best you can under the circumstances. It is in your interest, as well as in the interest

of the company and its mission, to make the best you can of the situation

This is not to say that you should overlook obvious cases of truly poor leadership, such as breaches of integrity, abuse of your soldiers, or even outright criminal activity. (These cases are extremely rare but not unheard of.) Let your common sense be your guide, along with whatever advice you may seek from such outside sources as the chaplain or the battalion executive officer. Again, you should confide your initial misgivings only to those you feel you can trust, and only after you have made sure your information is correct and complete. If you are in the right, you can be confident that your chain of command will take the necessary action. If you are wrong, you will probably pay a heavy price for having raised the issue.

Sometimes despite your best intentions, you may find that you just can't work for a certain commander. This is a tough situation and one that doesn't have a completely satisfactory solution. If all else fails, it is probably best to confront your commander with your feelings and request another assignment. If the channels of communication are so poor that this is not really a good idea, an interview with your battalion commander may be your only alternative. In such a case, you should expect a somewhat-less-than-glowing OER, but if your performance has been sound and effective, and you don't have an excessively negative counseling file, you will probably not be hurt permanently. If you retain your self confidence and your drive, you have every reason to expect success and recognition as you go on with your career.

"TOP"

As a young officer I had a much higher opinion of my rank than I would have later on. This is not to say that a lieutenant, even a brand new second lieutenant, doesn't enjoy a certain degree of authority or respect. In time I found, and I think you will find, that where you show genuine respect to the senior NCOs in the unit, you will get genuine respect in return. This begins with the First Sergeant.

First Sergeant is a rather puzzling rank and position, because nowhere is there an exact description of who the First Sergeant is or what he does. You can expect good and bad ones in roughly the same proportion as company commanders, and much of my advice about them goes hand in hand with my previous comments about company commanders.

Good First Sergeants seem to have a few things in common. For one, they accept responsibility for the noncommissioned officers in the unit and take an active role in NCO development. They also exhibit a high degree of loyalty to the commander, both personal and professional, and work closely with him in all areas having to do with the administration and daily running of the company. I never met or heard of a First Sergeant fitting this description who did not enjoy a good reputation; conversely, I never met or heard of one who did not meet it who was rated a success.

There are some basic principles that cover your dealings with the First Sergeant. First among them is to rely on his



guidance and advice when dealing with your NCOs and troops, until he gives you reason not to. A good First Sergeant can be a fount of wisdom on such matters, and any problem you may have, he has probably seen many times before.

Next, you should never try to pit the company commander against the First Sergeant. If you think about it for a minute you'll see that your commander cannot hope to succeed without the willing cooperation of his right hand man. (Make no mistake about it, that means the First Sergeant and not you.) If you must oppose the First Sergeant on some issue—a promotion, for example, or disciplinary action, or some other issue you feel strongly about—be sure to do it in a way that doesn't compromise his position or prestige. And win or lose, try to keep the issue a strictly professional one, for the working relationship you develop with the First Sergeant of your company can be a most effective tool for you to use as you go about your duties as a platoon leader.

THE BACKBONE OF THE ARMY

The other NCOs in your unit will also be important to you. It is with sergeants that the business of running the Army is carried on. They will be your tools just as your weapons, vehicles, and radios are, but with the added dimension that they are emerging leaders just as you are. The younger ones may seem to be too much like your junior enlisted men at times. The older ones may strike you as tired or just reluctant to pitch in and get involved. In the main, I found that the NCOs I worked with shared the strengths and weaknesses

common to all ranks, and all people.

With the exception of your platoon sergeant, you may be surprised to find that the knowledge gap between you and your NCOs is not as great as you may have expected it to be. All of them will be experienced soldiers, but most will be new to the art of leadership. They will make mistakes, as you will, but it is vital in garrison as well as in the field that you exercise leadership *through* your NCOs and not around them.

Sometimes you may be tempted to do their work for them. The pitfall here is that in either training or combat you simply cannot run a platoon by yourself. Your good sergeants will learn to be competent leaders by leading. The substandard ones may have to be removed or reduced. If, in spite of everything, you rely on what you've been taught and work through your subordinate leaders, you'll be a fair bet to succeed.

Often a new lieutenant, when he first joins a unit, worries more about his platoon sergeant than about any other single person in it. There's a good reason for this—it's a rare man or woman who can walk into an experience as difficult and challenging as leading a platoon and do it well without help. If I have any words of advice about the subject, they are these: Just as the First Sergeant must be treated with great respect so that his authority with the troops will be a visible, tangible thing, so must the platoon sergeant be supported in front of the troops so that his position as the "doer" in your platoon is clear and unchallenged. His mission in life is to execute your orders and "run" your platoon. Your mission is to tell it where and how to run.

Much of what you and the platoon sergeant do will overlap. For this reason, the closest cooperation is required, and that means clear and open channels of communication between the two of you at all times. Mutual respect and two-way communication—it's hard to go too far wrong if you bear these in mind.

THE TROOPS

As for the troops themselves—the soldiers of your platoon—much has been written and said about what a privilege it is to lead American soldiers. You will undoubtedly spend some of your best moments as a lieutenant interacting with your soldiers and sharing with them the fellowship and comradeship that is one of the great blessings of military life. You should be prepared, though, for an endless series of problems and challenges from them.

One of your most important missions will be to help them solve their personal problems—problems with finances, marriages, education, work, or even health. Sometimes this can be extremely frustrating, because so many of these problems could have been avoided if these soldiers had used common sense or adhered to basic SOPs. Even so, you really have to take a concerned approach and do your best to help. You can't solve the problems of the world, of course, or even guarantee that the same soldier won't repeat the same mistake all over again. What you can do, and must do, is convince that soldier (and by so doing, the rest of your soldiers, too) that you really, sincerely *care* about him. Once your platoon is convinced of this, you are well on your way.

How should you act around your troops? I won't presume to suggest that there's any one approved method of leading. I personally observed any number of different "types" in action, and there seemed to be good *and* bad lieutenants who shared the same kind of personality. I suspect, though, that the most successful ones were the ones who didn't try to submerge or mask their own personalities in an attempt to adopt a particular "style." After all, it's tough to try to be something you're not and still be convincing.

I tried to follow this rule of thumb: Reward them for good performance; counsel, correct, or punish them for poor performance; avoid playing favorites; and always try to be fair. (Being fair implies consistency, something all soldiers prize from their leaders.) You should not expect to be popular with every one of them, but if you sense that the good ones (the majority) seem to respect you, you'll know you are in the ballpark.

In the main, your soldiers will be different from you in many ways. They will generally be younger, less educated, probably less career-motivated, perhaps less physically fit. Does this mean that you are a better soldier or a better person than one of them is? In one sense perhaps it does, for, after

all, the government has made a considerable investment in preparing you to lead. But we are all Americans, and Americans tend to recognize ability over privilege, merit over position. American troops have always looked on themselves as *anybody's* equal; it's probably one of our Army's greatest strengths. My point is this: Demonstrating your right to lead your soldiers through competence and effectiveness and aggressiveness is a worthy goal and one you should strive for. But if you lean too much on your rank or position, or constantly refer to your education or background, you run the risk of seeming to think you're "too good" for your soldiers. And whatever a lieutenant may think of his talents and abilities, that has never been the case and never will be. So, before all else, dive into the business of managing and leading *people*, with all its frustrations. (I'm betting that the lessons I learned will be the most important of all in the years to come.)

Although I mentioned the importance of being yourself and avoiding a leadership style that is foreign to your personality, there are two character traits that I recommend to you, regardless of your personal style. The first is the ability to be calm under stress or adversity, and the second is a sense of humor. These qualities seem to steady the troops in a bad spot, and, perhaps more importantly, they help to steady you, too. That's not original advice, I'm afraid, but it's some of the best I was ever given. I hope it will serve you as well as it has me.

These, then, are the things I think of to share while the memories of my days as a lieutenant are still fresh in my mind. I won't try to tell you that every day of those three years was fun and easy; as a matter of fact, very few of them were. It was for me a period of hard physical and mental effort. I wasn't born with these lessons in mind. I learned them by making mistakes and then learning to do it the right way. But I was relieved to discover that a new lieutenant is not tasked with a mission that is beyond his abilities. He is only asked to exert himself to the fullest, and in the end that proves to be enough. I can truthfully say that I never lacked the feeling of job satisfaction, and I never doubted for a moment that what I was doing was vitally important to my unit and my country.

My hope is that you will go into your platoons, not in fear of what you have yet to learn, but with confidence in yourselves and faith in what you've been taught to believe.

I welcome you to the ranks of the Field Army. Whatever we "Old Soldiers" may say, we need your energy and optimism, and we wouldn't want to do it without you.

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