

The First Step

A Second Lieutenant's Guide

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I will never forget my first duty assignment as a second lieutenant, especially how I was greeted by my company commander in 1943. When I reported in the prescribed manner, copy of orders in hand, he glared at me and barked: "What'n hell are you doing here?" Startled, I pointed to the orders just given him and said that I was merely following them. "I don't know what I'm going to do with you," he fumed, "because you make the second officer overstrength in my company." (I refrained from saying that was really not my fault.)

"Well, since you're here, I'll have to do something with you, I suppose . . . What do you know about unit supply?" Before I could respond, he went on: "Don't answer that. Lieutenant Zippo is going to some fool school next week, so you could—maybe—fill in for him for a couple of weeks." The company commander then dismissed me with a wave of his hand.

A few days after Zippo had left, first telling me condescendingly that I had nothing to worry about, we got word that First Lieutenant Hardcase from battalion was going to inspect our unit supply. When the supply sergeant heard this, he groaned: "He'll kill us." He did.

What does a second lieutenant need to know before reporting to his first duty assignment? Some cynics would say, "Everything," and then in the same breath, "But it's really hopeless." Others might say, "Nothing"; this is somewhat like the clean-slate approach where it is left to the first unit to prepare the mold. Still others might suggest that perhaps there is some ground in between, where the new officer helps himself to a certain

extent, but comes prepared to learn as quickly as possible on the job. This latter position presumes, of course, that there are competent and willing "instructors" on hand—those who recognize such a responsibility and who either have the time for the job or are determined to find it.

As I reflect on my own experiences as a young lieutenant (which must be different in some respects from 1986 lieutenants) but certainly not in the fundamentals), I have to admit that I did not know what I should have about:

- Supervising a unit mess.
- Running a rifle range.
- Administering unit supply.
- Handling unit administration and personnel.
- Running a motor pool.
- Supervising NCOs older and more experienced than I.
- Serving on a military court, or functioning as a TJA.
- Doing a lot of other things.

MISTAKES

Yet at 22 I was quite confident of my abilities when I probably should have been alarmed at my ignorance and inexperience. In fact, I was already in the "muddle-through" process but didn't realize it.

Right off the bat, I made several mistakes:

- I believed the officer who had said I had nothing to fear about the condition of unit supply—now in my temporary charge—and the inspection now upon us. Worse yet, I didn't even know how to

spotcheck quickly and sufficiently to learn the actual situation. So, Lieutenant Hardcase fell upon us like a dive bomber, dropping his bombs all over the company area.

- When I became the unit PX officer, I foolishly let another officer jump in and help out during a big rush of business one night. When I tallied the sales results afterward, though, there was a cash shortage of more than \$100.

- At one time I found several of the unit NCOs more agreeable and competent than several of the officers, but by imprudently associating with them for a time, I subsequently embarrassed them and myself.

- Once I led a small unit truck convoy for 15 miles before discovering that we were headed in the wrong direction. I had not really bothered to verify the route in advance, because I thought it was going to be quite routine.

- As the officer selected to put on a big dance for the company's first real relaxation since our arrival in England (remember Jack Lemmon as the Laundry and Morale Officer in *Mister Roberts?*), I rounded up a group of women from nearby British military units and some from a big laundry in a large town, plus a U.S. Army band. It was a great party. But when the dance was over, I foolishly let some of the women ride back to their RAF base and billets in the same truck as members of the band. The next day an RAF officer (male) found and informed me that the base CO (equivalent to a U.S. Army colonel) was in great distress about the damage done to base property by the truck, which had struck several buildings in the blackout condi-

tions, and about the considerable ruckus that ensued when RAF personnel tried to flush the band members from the women's billets. The commander suggested that for the next dance I go somewhere else.

While I am not trying to suggest that these instances are typical of the trouble young lieutenants get themselves into today, I believe there are some parallels. How prepared are today's lieutenants? What should they know?

A typical company commander concludes that second lieutenants are supposed to be ready to start work immediately with a minimum of orientation. After all, what is the service school doing, anyway? Additionally, he has many pressing matters that require his personal attention, and these tend to override any feeling that these young officers really merit his personal involvement. For all practical purposes, what generally occurs when a lieutenant comes in is a perfunctory greeting and orientation concluding with the admonition that the lieutenant had better be prepared to "get with it fast."

Most of us were taught that an officer is expected to display considerable initiative and resourcefulness, which implies that little guidance is needed. ("Don't bother me with the details, lieutenant," says the commander, "that's your job." Or, "Figure it out yourself; that's why you're an officer!")

PERSPECTIVE

Unfortunately, initiative and resourcefulness need a base of knowledge and the subsequent development of a proper perspective on such information and how best to integrate it. So there must be acquisition and assessment phases before effective action is forthcoming—both of which take time.

If we care at all how our young officers are to become effective in an organizational setting, it is both possible and necessary to plan how a lieutenant should use this time.

Just as an athlete prepares himself for a coming contest, so should a lieutenant get ready for his first assignment. He might ask himself what that assignment

might be. What is the likelihood it will be a certain job? What are the jobs that second lieutenants typically get? Which is best for me? What should I seek?

Setting some appropriate goals should be the first order of business. Goals set the stage for the type of preparation that common sense ought to suggest is applicable. Without specific goals a person tends to drift, to accept whatever comes along. A young officer needs to recognize early that he is the only one who really is going to manage his career. He should never rely completely and passively on a central personnel management office to represent his best interests. For all practical purposes, to that office the typical second lieutenant is just another document file.

True, at the start of his career, he does not have much to go on and does need some appropriate guidance that a management office can provide. But he should use this guidance to look at each of his alternatives and at what each appears to offer in terms of performance demands as well as long-term opportunities.

Good decisions depend in great measure on "good" information—accurate and pertinent. Thus, one of the first actions a new lieutenant should take is to begin collecting information. A thoughtful appraisal of this information will help to establish the foundation for goal determinations and for the qualifications for various positions. This information originates typically from military service school instructors and published material, the central personnel management office, superiors, senior NCOs, peers, Army regulations, and other official documents such as field manuals, tables of organization, and the like.

In the process, a lieutenant can look especially at such vital matters as principles of organization, organizational practices, principles of leadership, motivation and conflict fundamentals, and case studies of effective leadership.

From his collected data, a lieutenant can develop an appreciation of the missions and roles of the units to which he is likely to be assigned and the specific duties and responsibilities in those units for young officers. As he studies these possibilities, he should try to judge each such position in regard to the qualifica-

tions required for successful performance.

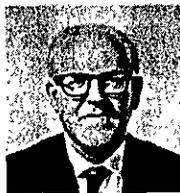
The basic question is: What is expected of a leader? Other questions come quickly to mind. Within the highly structured environment of a typical military unit, how much latitude does a new lieutenant have for action? What are the criteria for judging an organization? What are the essential elements of a good organization? Good operational procedures?

GOALS

As he works his way through these critical questions, he should develop a list of typical jobs and their demands. From this effort should come not only what is available now for the first assignment but also what other types of jobs ought to follow. In effect, the young officer has begun to develop a way of looking beyond his initial assignment. In other words, his career goals should extend outward for several years, say, from an initial assignment as a platoon leader to that of company commander. At the outset, of course, he must keep his sights set on the immediate demands and on meeting them satisfactorily.

There are various ways to analyze job opportunities and their requirements, even when a lieutenant may have little choice in his ultimate assignment. By knowing in advance what a particular position is all about, however, he can properly prepare himself.

The fact that he must collect considerable data about the positions he is most likely to encounter will serve him in significant ways. Like a football scout, he now knows what he is about to meet and is not likely to be surprised. If he has done his homework well, he knows he is ready. Thus, he can approach his new position with considerably less anxiety and with a great deal more confidence.



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