



Thoughts

on Being A Battalion S-3

Captain Walter F. Ulmer III

Many formal sources of "how to" information are available for battalion staff officers, especially for those who are assigned as the operations officer. Field Manual 101-5, Staff Organizations and Operations, for example, outlines specific staff responsibilities. The Combined Arms and Services Staff School gives Army captains an insight into staff operations at the brigade, division, and corps levels. The Command and General Staff College prepares captains and majors for the many challenges they will face as staff officers.

But little seems to have been written to show current "grass roots" perspectives on life as a battalion S-3. I would like to share such a perspective, based on my recent experience in that position. The following remarks are not meant to be a recipe for success, but rather to examine some of the earthier aspects of the job.

A new S-3's first step toward becoming effective in the job is to define his professional relationship with the battalion commander. Since command is highly personal, commanders take different approaches in guiding their units. Some choose a passive method, leaving their staff members free to develop the battalion scheme of maneuver; others are more active in their approach and expect more conformity.

Whatever his commander's method may be, the S-3's relationship with him, if it is to be effective, must be a close one. The S-3 must develop the ability to anticipate the commander's wishes and to plan accordingly. And in the absence of clear guidance, he must be confident he is correctly executing the commander's intent.

Flexibility is the key to success in this relationship. The commander will undoubtedly be more active in planning some events than others. An effective S-3 will identify this tendency early and temper his involvement accordingly.

The fact that a commander does not get personally involved in a certain event does not lessen its importance. (Most commanders realize that they can give their personal attention only to certain selected matters.) Sometimes, all the S-3 will have to do is to fill in the missing pieces. At other times, he will receive specific guidance to use in formulating a plan. Ideally, the S-3 will be able to catch the nuances of his commander's broad brush strokes and prepare a workable plan.

Early in an S-3's tenure, too, he will find that other relationships are critical to his success. First, the battalion executive officer (XO), as staff coordinator, will work with him on a daily basis. The formal link between the two officers will depend on the commander's desires. In some battalions, the S-3 works directly for the commander; in others he answers to the XO. The S-3 will handle some actions exclusively, of course, but most will require coordination with the XO.

An initial session between the S-3 and the XO to define roles and limits of responsibility will be time well spent. Regardless of the S-3's rating scheme, there can be no turf battles. Continual interaction between these two principals is essential to staff effectiveness.

Although the XO formally coordinates the staff, the S-3 will informally coordinate his actions with the other staff officers in the battalion. I discovered quickly in dealing with fellow staff officers that they would protest loudly if they thought I had cut them out of my decision making process. Fortunately, this reminded me of the need to include as many staff officers as possible, time permitting, in the planning cycle. Additionally, it allowed the staff to use much the same planning scheme it would use both in garrison and in the field.

Another aspect of my relationship with the other staff officers evolved more slowly. As they developed approaches to solving their own issues, they would use me as a source of feedback on their plans before introducing them to the battalion commander or the executive officer. It was good to be able to help them mold their ideas, and it also kept me abreast of other staff issues within the battalion.

The S-3's relationship with the command sergeant major (CSM), though less formal than his association with the XO, is no less important. A sergeant major can play a crucial role

in the battalion, and through daily chats with him the S-3 can gain insight into ways of dealing with battalion business.

The S-3 must also encourage continual dialogue between the CSM and the operations NCO, because these two are routinely recognized as being the battalion's taskers. Conflicting guidance from them can create havoc for subordinate units.

The S-3 will spend a lot of his time dealing with the line company commanders in the battalion, and these are important relationships. Since most S-3's have previously served as company commanders, they have some idea of how subordinate commanders think. Almost universally, for example, company commanders are interested in the way the S-3 is developing their training input. Although it may be a humbling experience for an S-3 to receive their critique on the development of the battalion training plan, that very commentary is essential to the success of the next plan.

It is imperative, however, that company commanders execute the final plan. (Staffs plan, commanders execute.) They have the appropriate mind set, the authority, and the resources to accomplish the mission effectively. Fixing responsibility on subordinate commanders will produce a better product every time.

The S-3 can make distasteful taskings more palatable by calling the commanders ahead of time to warn them of upcoming taskings.

HHC COMMANDER

An S-3's dealings with the headquarters company commander (HHC) will differ markedly from his dealings with the line commanders.

First, the HHC commander owns the resources the S-3 must have to execute his daily mission, and the S-3 is responsible for seeing that both the soldiers and the equipment are cared for. Although the operations NCO and the HHC first sergeant will deal routinely with this issue, the HHC commander and the S-3 may have to intervene occasionally.

Since the S-3 may be too busy to oversee the daily garrison training of the specialty combat platoons (scout and mortar), many battalion commanders give this responsibility to the HHC commander. In the field, however, these platoons fall under the control of either the S-3 or the battalion commander himself. The HHC commander and the S-3 must therefore ensure a smooth transition for these platoons between garrison and field operations.

I was fortunate to work with an HHC commander who took a special interest in the scout and mortar platoons. Together, we developed their garrison training schedule, and he supervised its execution. Although I occasionally dealt directly with the platoon leaders or inspected their training, he was their boss at home station. And in the field, he visited the platoons to check their progress as I had done in garrison.

Finally, the S-3 must be especially prudent in tasking the HHC, because the supporting nature of this organization tends to make it the recipient of numerous one- and two-man details. While the line company commanders will make sure the HHC

commander is getting his fair share of the work, the S-3 must develop a tasking plan that also takes into account the company's routine duties.

One of the battalion S-3's relationships outside the battalion is worthy of note—that with the brigade S-3. If there is to be continuing rapport between these two officers, they must cooperate from the beginning. They must achieve a balance between what the brigade S-3 considers appropriate for the brigade and what the battalion S-3 considers appropriate for the battalion.

A system of "chits" is likely to result. As the battalion receives its fair share of tasking (and also picks up some short-fused taskings as "favors" for the brigade), the effort will be recognized and taken into account later. Battalions that routinely fight the brigade staff are not helping themselves and, in the long run, are usually left with the less desirable missions.

If he establishes good relations from the staff with the brigade S-3, the battalion S-3 will get early warning of future division events. This should help him reduce the effect of upcoming division requirements on his battalion's training.

S-3 Resources

One of the topics of discussion during the battalion S-3's initial session with the commander should be the resources for the S-3 section—both personnel and equipment.

Although I would not have had the same opinion during my company command, I have come to feel that the current modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) of many line battalions does not give the S-3 enough resources to conduct sustained combat operations. Although discussing this controversy will not solve any of the Army's MTOE issues, it will help build a mutual understanding of the assets that will be allocated to the S-3.

Two philosophies define the boundaries of this discussion:

The first is that staff sections should be given as little manpower as possible, while the line units should be given as much as possible. This perspective focuses on the battalion's fighting equipment as the sole element in its combat arsenal.

The second philosophy is that staff sections in the battalion should be given enough assets to sustain continuous operations and to provide redundant command and control measures as well. The credibility of this approach has been reinforced frequently by the relative success of units rotating through the National Training Center (NTC). The units with "stacked" staffs have routinely provided better support to their subordinate units.

This philosophy applies to garrison operations as well. A few extra people in the S-3 section to ensure a good product to meet short-fused briefings, panic displays, and no-notice taskings will let the rest of the battalion carry out scheduled training with fewer distractions. Additional personnel will also allow the section to take better care of its equipment. As a result, the S-3 will be better able to help the subordinate units within the battalion, and the battalion commander will be better able to measure the quality of training within his unit.

The S-3's initial conversation with the battalion commander should also include the quality of the soldiers and the length of time they are to be assigned to the section. Many S-3 sections are jokingly referred to as "hotels," because they are filled with transient soldiers, personnel assigned temporarily to the battalion for various reasons, or soldiers who have been identified as under-performers by the line units.

Obviously, an S-3 would like to build a team that has a certain amount of stability. On the other hand, accepting the challenge of using "temporary hires," or soldiers who have had a difficult time in line units, can produce surprising results. A soldier who is not quite making it as a Bradley commander, for example, might be just the one to keep an eye on the conduct of fire trainer or prepare briefings. Potentially creative thinkers have been known to blossom in S-3 sections and make worthwhile contributions. An initial heart-to-heart talk with new section members to clearly define their responsibilities will allow an enterprising S-3 to reap unexpected dividends.

At the same time, he should lobby for soldiers with a realistic mixture of abilities and try to establish both a minimum and a maximum assignment length for the soldiers in the section.

Each battalion allocates equipment to its S-3 section differently, depending upon where the commander plans to use his S-3 on the battlefield. In some tank battalions, for example, the commander puts his S-3 in his wing tank. In others, the commander stations his S-3 in the tactical operations center (TOC). Some commanders in mechanized infantry units allocate an additional M113 to the S-3 section, outfit it with additional communications equipment, and use it as a "jump" TOC or forward communications relay platform. The S-3's location in a light infantry battalion will greatly affect the distribution of the battalion's precious secure communications equipment.

Whatever equipment is allocated, it must be manned. There is no point in requesting vehicles or radios that cannot be manned or that will not be used regularly.

Organization

The S-3 must see that the section's equipment and personnel are properly cared for. Without specific emphasis in this area, a staff section tends to become absorbed in servicing the battalion's subordinate units while neglecting its own assets.

Fixing responsibility for this task on one individual will make it more manageable. The soldier who assumes these duties will probably not be the operations NCO, who is usually busy coordinating with the brigade and the companies, as well as insuring the efficient day-to-day functioning of the section. I used the assistant operations NCO and it worked well. This responsibility needs to be fixed early, if it has not been established by the previous S-3, to avoid potentially embarrassing situations and to improve the readiness of the soldiers and equipment.

It is no great secret that periodic coaching sessions make any organization more effective. It is imperative that each member of a team fully understand his duties, and that these



responsibilities be reinforced periodically.

To reinforce this concept, I had a team-building session about every three months. I assembled all the officers and non-commissioned officers in the section and conducted a sensing drill. On a blank sheet of butcher paper, each of us would list his significant duties and responsibilities. I would begin with mine, and we would work our way down the S-3 "chain of command." As we progressed, we would highlight specific problems encountered in the daily execution of our tasks and the steps we were taking to overcome them.

These exercises helped our section in a number of ways. First, it reinforced each individual's perception of his job. Second, it gave me an opportunity to refresh my perspective of where we were headed, as well as an opportunity to refine what I felt were each player's primary duties. Third, it reinforced each soldier's understanding of the section's importance within the battalion. Finally, it provided a degree of cross training—the soldiers learned first-hand the duties of their fellow team members and were better equipped to route questions addressed to the section to the person responsible for the action. In retrospect, these sessions proved invaluable to the section's functioning and left us with a clearer outlook on our individual duties and our collective direction.

In some cases, a new S-3 may inherit an organization with which he feels comfortable. In others, he may recognize a need for restructuring. If he walks into a functioning operation (as most S-3s do), though, he must think carefully before making big changes.

Major dysfunctions in the section will be obvious and will require immediate attention. Less visible problems will surface

more slowly and, as in most organizations, will take longer to solve. Structuring an organization around the various personalities in it is not a new concept, but task organizing the section with clearly defined duties is important to success.

A new S-3 might first consider his own role. He should be looking over the next mountain range instead of just over the next hill. He should be conceptualizing, articulating, inspecting, proofreading, and directing.

Rarely, if ever, did I set pen to paper in preparing letters of instruction, standing operating procedures, or training schedules. Instead, I formulated orders, plans, and the like as far in advance as possible (understanding that changes in plans were not only possible but inevitable) and then had my subordinates prepare the actual documents.

An S-3 may choose to save certain tasks to do himself. One example is the battalion's planning calendar. Whatever the structure of this important tool, there must be only one funnel for scheduling events. While I hoped to create an atmosphere of open communication that would allow for the addition and deletion of events on the calendar, I guarded this document carefully and routinely checked it for conflicts.

Responsibilities

Once an S-3 feels comfortable with his own responsibilities (and has carefully explained them to his subordinates), he needs to examine his subordinates' responsibilities. It can be a real challenge to assign jobs according to personalities, job descriptions, personal desires, and longevity. A few guidelines make this task easier.

First, the S-3 must clearly delineate responsibilities and duties, making sure each soldier in the section is assigned duties commensurate with his potential. I quickly realized that a stated job title does not always describe the duties of a given position. For example, the S-3 Air was not just the close air support coordinator. (That job occupied only about one-fifth of his time in garrison.) He was also the ammunition officer, the plans expert, the Army National Guard and U.S. Army Reserve (or partnership) officer, the athletic kingpin, and the maneuver area planner.

The second rule of thumb is equally important: The S-3 should assign jobs according to the longevity of the soldiers in the section. He should let the transient soldiers routinely tackle events that do not tend to recur. I used them for the special events that cropped up sporadically (spring clean-up, special ceremonies, one-time moves, and the like). They seemed to appreciate working on projects they could complete during their tenure. There is nothing more frustrating for a staff officer or NCO than to start a project knowing he will be gone before it is completed.

The permanently assigned soldiers should be responsible for the recurring events (gunnery, NTC, periodic sports days). The historical perspective they gain by working on these events more than once will enable them to do a better job and will provide more stability in an inherently unstable system.

Finally, the S-3 should assign internal section suspenses and make sure they are met. The hectic pace maintained in many battalions makes it easy to wait until the last minute to perform a task. An effective operation cannot tolerate missed suspenses.

I used a suspense roster to track all S-3 actions. In addition to suspense dates, it included in-progress-review dates for the actions that required more time and listed the name of the individual who was responsible for each action.

We frequently updated the roster to highlight the projects that had been completed as well as the actions that had received deferred suspenses. As the roster became a working document in the section, it routinely established priorities for suspenses and increased the frequency with which those suspenses were met.

Information Management

Another important matter to an S-3 section is information management. Information is power, and the management of different types of information is critical to an S-3 section's success.

The first type of information might be called internal—the information that is passed between section members. As a company commander, I had two major problems with the battalion staff. The first involved getting people to return phone calls. Too often, when I asked to have a call returned, I would have to call again, only to learn that the person I needed to talk to had never received my message. The seemingly simple task of receiving, transferring, and returning phone calls in an office is more difficult than it appears.

I fought this battle through the sensing sessions and on-the-

spot corrections. I gave particularly firm guidance to those people in the section who had trouble taking correct messages. Gradually, the problem lessened, but frequent reinforcement was required to keep it under control.

A second internal information problem stemmed from the section's compartmentalized structure. Earlier, when I was a company commander, I would become frustrated when a person I reached in the battalion S-3 section could not answer my training-related questions. As an S-3, however, I soon realized that those expectations may have been too high.

As in most organizations, some specialization in the S-3 section is necessary. The soldiers assigned can reasonably be expected to become subject matter experts only in certain areas. The schools NCO, for example, is primarily concerned with schools and the master gunner with gunnery.

The cross-training provided by the team-building sessions gave the soldiers in the section a rudimentary understanding of each others' duties. But it did not provide the depth necessary to allow everyone to be familiar with all the working actions. At best, the S-3, S-3 Air, operations NCO, and assistant operations NCO should be conversant with most issues. If the rest of the members can be taught to steer incoming calls to the right people, the section will be successful.

The second type of information an S-3 will deal with is that flowing into the section from outside sources. The amount of external information available to an S-3 can quickly become overwhelming. Disaster lurks in situations where members of the section receive external directives and respond to them without the S-3's knowledge.

An S-3 must establish a system that allows him to keep abreast of current issues without experiencing "information overload." In the beginning, I handled this nemesis by demanding that all the information that came into the section be routed through my "IN" box. After the first time I came to work and peered over the 350 19K SQT notices that the operations NCO had dutifully placed in my box, I changed my guidance slightly to screen out some items I obviously did not have to see.

By filtering the paperwork, I was able to keep current on most issues. I established a personal desk file of working issues I needed to find quickly. I would look over other incoming items as necessary, provide marginal notes if appropriate, and send them on their way through the S-3 labyrinth. Surprisingly, I established a reasonable recall for items I had seen. While this system incorporated some techniques of micromanagement, I found it necessary if I was to keep abreast of current issues.

The third type of information the S-3 section must handle carefully is that generated by the section itself and passed to outside offices, units, and people. Obviously, information sent to the battalion commander is critical. I found that if I informed my commander of every action in which I was involved, I would spend all of my time receiving information and passing it to him, and he would be the one to experience "information overload."

Therefore, I filtered the information I would send to him

on the basis of what I thought was important and what he had indicated that he was interested in. As I got to know him better, I became more adept at providing him worthwhile information in a timely manner. I learned to pass both good and bad news quickly, regardless of the reaction I might receive.

Information passed on to others by members of the S-3 section is critical to a battalion's success. But it must be correct information. The line units, in particular, rely heavily on this information. Its management might better be described as "the minimization of misinformation." A first sergeant who phones the S-3 section and is given an incorrect time or location for a battalion formation is put through a needless drill. More important, such a drill wastes a lot of his soldiers' time.

Soldiers assigned to the section will often try to satisfy customers by providing as much information as possible. Unfortunately, though, their well-meaning efforts can be counterproductive. Combating this tendency without dampening their spirit is tricky. The coaching sessions provide an opportunity to reinforce the point that it is better to give no information at all than to give information one only *thinks* may be correct.

I spent a lot of time fighting the battle against misinformation. Incidentally, it was interesting to discover what different

people defined as "coordinating" with the S-3 section. A CQ runner's call to the S-3 clerk-typist was all some leaders needed to state assuredly that they had conducted the required coordination with the operations office.

Finally, there is a debate today on whether a battalion S-3 should be a captain or a major. It is true that a major normally has a broader depth of experience. Unfortunately, many majors are thrust into S-3 roles after an extended period away from line units. Thus, a captain fresh from command may have less experience but may be more receptive to the needs of the company commanders in the battalion.

In the end, it probably does not matter. Each S-3 will bring to the job his own perspective. Many successful battalions view the S-3 and his section as the unit's hub. Life as an S-3 is therefore hectic, but also challenging. Hopefully, this discussion will assist others when it is their turn to enjoy the challenge of being an S-3.

Captain Walter F. Ulmer III, an Armor officer, served as S-3 of the 4th Battalion, 67th Armor, 3d Armored Division and in various other armor and cavalry assignments. He is currently a personnel readiness officer at the Total Army Personnel Command.

