

TRAINING NOTES



The Mechanized Rifle Company As a Leadership Academy

LIEUTENANT COLONEL THOMAS R. ROZMAN

A mechanized infantry company, despite its best efforts, always seems to be performing a balancing act in managing its time. When this is coupled with an equally challenging need to sustain a competent leader cadre in the company, despite an always changing personnel situation, a company commander can be kept on the razor's edge between success and failure throughout his stewardship.

One company's approach uses the company itself as the basic source of its own leaders. The system it develops assumes high levels of leader turnover, particularly in sergeants and staff sergeants, with a constant and often short-fused procession of commitments and taskings that intrude on company programs. The approach does not suggest establishing a school with special staff in the company. Rather, it focuses and orients the company's existing personnel and organization on an established mission — leader development.

This company, a mechanized infantry company in a mechanized brigade based in the continental United States (CONUS), had recently changed commanders. As with most CONUS units, personnel turmoil assured a constant

turnover among its junior to mid-level noncommissioned officers, almost 25 percent per quarter. Since these corporals, sergeants, and staff sergeants represented almost 86 percent of the approximately 40 NCOs authorized, the company found itself trying to fill seven to ten vacancies every three months.

LOSSES

Although the company dutifully posted its projected losses — assuring that the battalion's personnel center had current requisitions for all vacancies by grade and military occupational specialty (MOS) — fill was sporadic and too often not timely. Replacements tended to be late, and they frequently lacked the desired breadth of experience. Well-rounded sergeants who had experience at squad level and with maintenance and administration, and who were knowledgeable of supply procedures, were rare. More critically, these NCOs often lacked tactical and "people" skills. For these reasons and others, depth in any single critical area was one man or less.

As the new company commander took stock of the NCO replacement

issue, he began to ask himself how he could assure a smooth flow of competent and prepared NCOs. He has to achieve this objective despite the effects of a constantly changing and unpredictable schedule, an assured high turnover rate, and a less than responsive individual replacement system.

After examining several alternatives that appeared to have promise in solving the NCO turnover problem, the commander formed the rudiments of an NCO leadership development program.

The underlying idea of the program was that the company, in addition to meeting its operational missions, would become a leadership academy for its privates, corporals, and sergeants. Another part of the program would focus on promotable sergeants, staff sergeants, and sergeants first class. Specifically, it would include ways to enable these soldiers to perform their current duties to an increasingly professional standard. More important, it would prepare them to assume the duties of the next higher rank.

To initiate the program, a plan was outlined that focused on three components:

Component 1. Identify private soldiers, privates first class (PFCs), and

specialists fourth class (SP-4s) who show NCO potential and (through a professional development track) prepare them to perform as NCOs.

Component 2. Professionally develop corporals and sergeants to prepare them for promotion and assumption of the duties of team and squad leaders.

Component 3. Professionally develop promotable sergeants, staff sergeants, and sergeants first class for promotion and assumption of duties as platoon sergeants and first sergeants.

This plan considered Army-directed promotion requirements for each grade such as schools, awards, experience, and skill test requirements. The plan also looked at the opportunities the company offered for experience by MOS in terms of available positions. (The mechanized infantry company tables of organization and equipment at the time authorized NCOs in the following MOSs: 11B, Infantryman; 11C, Mortarman; 11H, Antiarmor; 76Y, Supply; and 63C, Maintenance.)

The company commander decided that if his plan was to succeed it had to orient all three components, in terms of this environment, on two progressive objectives. The first was to help the soldiers succeed at promotion boards. The second was to inculcate in the soldiers a sense of commitment to the program and to ensure that all members of the company realized it would lead to opportunities for advanced experience and responsibility for junior soldiers, and a continuous flow of competent subordinates from within the company to fill critical company positions. The latter point, of course, had to be balanced by a fair and effective integration of new men from outside the company.

The company commander had access to a wealth of resources: The company's soldiers, officer and NCO leaders, authorized NCO positions, equipment and organization, and operational missions along with installation and Army schools, the installation training aids support center, and also NCO accessions, losses, and position vacancies.

He believed that these assets, if used

properly, would produce an abundance of competent professional NCOs. To achieve this result, though, the company needed an overall management mechanism and, for each of the three components, a relatively simple, but aggressively pursued subprogram.

The key players in assuring the proper execution of the plan and achieving the objectives were to be the company commander, the first sergeant, the training NCO, and the platoon leaders, supported by the platoon sergeants, the motor sergeant, and the supply sergeant. The platoon sergeants, in particular, would play a major role in identifying, counseling, and otherwise developing the promising soldiers in their platoons.

ASSESSMENT

If the company was to function properly as a practical leadership academy and producer of its own NCO leaders, it also needed to identify clearly and realistically what could be accomplished in a unit that already had a tough and busy schedule. The answer rested on the following:

- An accurate knowledge of existing leaders, including an assessment of their capabilities and potential.

- A method of assessing privates for the same qualities.

- An effective system of tracking vacancies in leadership positions and planning for placing candidates in these positions. (This included monitoring 90-, 60-, and 30-day losses, observing soldiers, actively discussing with platoon leaders and platoon sergeants their assessments of soldiers, and conducting first sergeant and company commander interviews.)

- A system of successive assignments for soldiers during the time they could normally be expected to remain in the unit — 18 months, 24 months, and the like. (This sequence of assignments would be designed to broaden a soldier as a professional and a leader in terms of his practical understanding of the company's operations and business.)

- An embedded and effective sense of responsibility for subordinate profes-

sional development among the senior leadership of the company.

- The full use of available resources. (For example, if a soldier was promised a school and an opportunity to use his new knowledge, the company would have to have a vacancy at the desired school and then would have to have an appropriate assignment for the soldier on his return.)

Obviously, to achieve effective results in the face of all the constraints, the company needed methods and practices that would harness the resources and apply them in support of the program's three components. One of the devices the company commander used to manage the program was a matrix of NCO positions that was built from the TOE. The matrix included the following:

- The incumbent in a position, along with his anticipated departure date, and a planned replacement when he was within 90 days of departure. (Primary and alternate replacements were identified.)

- Key data relating to each soldier: his assignment date and anticipated time of reassignment, and his professional status (standing on a promotion list, professional schools, tests, and the like).

- The soldiers within the company who had been identified for initial NCO positions or higher NCO positions and their development status in terms of experience and schools. (This included performance assessments by their chain of command. This group, both identified replacements and NCO development track soldiers, constituted the company's internal NCO replacement resource. Counting PFCs and SP-4s, this group came to average about 50 soldiers available at any one time to fill NCO requirements.)

- Incoming NCOs. The company was aggressive in pursuing personnel data to obtain the best pre-assignment possible. The new soldiers were interviewed by the first sergeant and the company commander during their first few days in the company.

To update this matrix, the first sergeant and the company commander conducted monthly reviews of soldier

performance with the chain of command. If a soldier's performance was less than desired for the program, a more thorough review of his counseling records followed. The first sergeant and the company commander then jointly reviewed the results and determined the soldier's assignments, his continuation in the program, or other actions that might be necessary. The reviews could be conducted more frequently as vacancies occurred. (Intermittent disciplinary situations would also precipitate such meetings.) Both the first sergeant and the company commander would counsel soldiers and advise their chain of command of the results of the review.

The training NCO was a critical member of the review team in that he was expected to manage two key areas.

First, he was to make an aggressive effort to obtain all available troop school slots (both on and off post) appropriate to NCO professional development, and for other specialized training (supply, maintenance) related to the company and its operations. The training NCO, working directly with the first sergeant and the company commander and based on the results of the monthly reviews, would select two primary and two alternate candidates for each course and then schedule them for screening and counseling (usually with the company commander or first sergeant, with the training NCO as backup). This counseling was intended to ensure that the soldier understood how important the school was to him and the unit and also to make sure the soldier did not have personal or other problems that might compromise his performance.

Second, the training NCO was to report on school performance results at the monthly review. This would include progress reports on the soldiers who were attending schools. The objective was to identify a problem and a possible remedy early enough to prevent failure.

The training NCO was to maintain a complete library of correspondence course catalogs, and was to encourage soldiers to take those courses that were appropriate to their level of development. Thus, a soldier who was to be assigned to the supply room would enroll in a

supply course, while a SP-4 who was programmed to pin on corporal stripes and assume the duties of a rifle squad team leader would take a pre-NCO course. As with the resident courses, the training NCO monitored the soldiers' progress regularly through their academic reports. No soldier would assume a position unless he had successfully completed the preparatory resident or correspondence course.

To recognize a soldier's movement into leadership positions, the company commander and the first sergeant could use one of several different methods to highlight the moves — personal interviews, for example, and announcements in formations, letters for official files, certificates, and awards. Ultimately, the



primary recognition became regular and steady promotions, soldier performance (fully competent to outstanding), and additional promotions for program alumni.

Along with the positive aspects of this program, the company also had to deal properly with its substandard soldiers. For this purpose, the company chain of command was specifically oriented to handle, expeditiously but fairly, the soldiers who did not measure up. To protect the prestige and integrity of the NCO rank and position of leadership, sergeants who demonstrated an inability to perform as NCOs had to be removed from their positions as quickly as possible and, when necessary, denied the rank as well.

There were three important elements

in this part of the program:

First, the administrative machinery had to be efficient. Elimination or reassignment procedures had to be correct, thoroughly developed, and effective. The worst possibility would have been to allow a sergeant who was known to be substandard linger in the company as an NCO; this might give the soldiers the impression that the company was powerless to remove him.

Second, everyone in the chain of command had to use the counseling system, combined with the uniform code of military justice, properly. The entire chain of command was held to a high standard of counseling. It had to be perfectly clear that when a sergeant appeared before the company commander for an Article 15 hearing, previous efforts had been made to correct his defects. These efforts were to be made available to the commander in a counseling record by the soldier's chain of command.

(Certainly, there would be examples of a good soldier making the "one time mistake," and to keep from ruining a good man unnecessarily, each case was assessed on its own merits. Every soldier's dignity was to be respected, even one who may have shown the least potential. The counseling statements generated by this process were essential to the expeditious administrative processing of reductions or eliminations. The entire chain of command was made aware of this point.)

Third, once reasonable counseling had failed, soldiers who demonstrated substandard performance in the program had to be removed, and the program had to have a system for dealing with them. These soldiers would essentially fit into three groups—those who should be eliminated from the service, those who might have potential but who needed a fresh start in another company, and those who definitely had potential but needed a fresh start within the same company.

The first sergeant and the company commander both understood how important it was for this system to be efficient and responsive. They also understood that the system would not

work without swift administrative action based on a soldier counseling system and the quick departure of substandard soldiers.

The company commander, the first sergeant, and the company chain of command quickly emplaced this management system, and it was functioning within two months. Within three months, it was producing its first graduates as corporals and sergeants.

Also critical to success was the subsystem developed for each of the three program components being managed under this system. Some discussion on each is important to an understanding of the results that were ultimately achieved.

Making NCOs from Privates. This was the most creative part of the program. The company would take the raw material of its PFCs and SP-4s and develop them into competent NCOs. Properly managed, a system for doing this would greatly mitigate the unevenness of the NCO replacement system. In fact, it had the potential to produce more NCOs than the company needed, and therefore to become a source of NCOs for other units. This, in fact, began to happen after the program had been in operation for six months.

The system that took shape within two months essentially consisted of the following design:

- Once a soldier was identified for the program, a series of successive assignments was mapped out for him during whatever period of time he had remaining in the company.

- The objective for these soldiers would be to expose them to the business of the squad first as a squad member, preferably for four to six months. Ideally, a soldier would serve as a rifleman initially, then as a grenadier or machine-gunner or driver. Company policy required that each squad maintain one primary and two alternate drivers who were licensed. The alternate drivers had to be proficient in their assigned squad positions and also had to become familiar enough with driving the squad's vehicle and its preventive maintenance to serve as the driver when necessary. With this policy, in four to six months

with the squad, most soldiers were exposed to at least two squad duties, possibly three.

- During this initial assignment in the company, a soldier's leadership potential was continually evaluated. If he was considered leadership material, he was selected for assignment to one of the company's special areas — supply, arms room. (There was more diversity in the mechanized company TOEs at that time, but this principle could be applied to today's companies as a cross training mechanism or using a supernumerary concept in which a soldier understudies a certain position, such as training NCO. The company com-



mander used this approach as a later refinement.)

- Before assuming these duties, a soldier would have to prepare for them by completing at least one correspondence course. (Several soldiers might be oriented on a particular position at the same time, with the ultimate selection being made on the basis of their subsequent duty and course performance.)

- These specialized duty assignments would expose soldiers to broader aspects of company business outside the squad that were essential to the company's operations. This knowledge and experience would add significantly to the soldiers' development as NCOs and leaders in terms of how the company ran and how it could support their soldiers when these tasks were done well.

- While assigned to these functions (usually for five or six months), soldiers were enrolled in pre-NCO correspondence courses, at least, and were also sent to available resident basic courses.

- On the basis of their performance

in specialized areas and the pre-NCO course, soldiers were identified and considered for appointment as corporals or promoted to sergeant if they were eligible. (Ultimately, because there were not enough specialized areas, more creative approaches involving supernumerary and other devices became necessary.)

- Upon selection for appointment to corporal, soldiers were then identified to fill projected or open leadership vacancies, usually as rifle team leaders.

At the point of assignment to an NCO position, soldiers then entered management under Component 2.

Professional Development of Corporals and Sergeants. This component assured that new NCOs developed under Component 1, and NCOs of these ranks recently assigned to the company, were oriented on a track that would prepare them for promotion, proper performance of their current duties, and duties at the next level. The form the program took was essentially as summarized here:

- All NCOs in this category were enrolled in the next level of the NCO correspondence course program. If a corporal recently assigned to the company had not completed any formal NCO instruction, he was immediately enrolled in the initial correspondence course.

- The company sought to place all NCOs at this stage in a resident NCO course timed to support their contribution to company missions and their individual promotion competitiveness.

- NCOs assigned to the company who had not served previously outside rifle squads were identified for rotation to a company special area. They were then enrolled in the appropriate correspondence course. Again, the intent was to broaden their awareness of company functions and to provide enough soldiers who were capable of performing in the special areas.

- The monthly reviews indicated where the NCOs were in the program — specifically, who was ready for assignment from a position of team leader to a specialized assignment (reenlistment, training) or to squad

leader if there was a vacancy and a staff sergeant was not available, and who was ready to be selected for promotion to sergeant or staff sergeant.

- Through the reviews, the counseling system described in the management section, and the emphasis on schooling requirements, soldiers were made aware that the company was interested in their professional development and advancement.

Component 2 also had an important obligation to an individual soldier to assure that he developed to his full potential and that he was properly advised of his strengths or weaknesses. In terms of strengths, for example, a soldier might indicate a potential for commissioned service. At this point in the program (or earlier during Component 1), he would be counseled accordingly. All mid-range and senior NCOs were encouraged, as their performance indicated, to consider seeking reserve commissions. (This counseling effort was not intended to discount the value of thoroughly professional career NCOs, without whom the Army could not operate. The rationale behind it was that the toughest challenge a mobilizing Army faces is to expand the officer corps with competent, seasoned, company grade officers, and that the regular NCO corps represents one of the best sources for such battle leaders.)

On the other hand, a superb NCO might have several weak areas in his record that needed attention, perhaps a lack of the necessary civilian education. Consequently, during these assessments and in cooperation with the chain of command and the training NCO, soldiers who needed such improvements were supported in entering and completing available civilian education programs.

This component arrangement met the program's objectives by assuring the company a larger pool of experienced, professionally prepared NCOs ready to assume the duties of squad leaders and platoon sergeants from within the company. It also reinforced an individual soldier's competitiveness within the NCO corps by assuring him as complete a military and civilian education

and experience background as possible.

Professional Development of Staff Sergeants and Sergeants First Class. This component focused particularly on staff sergeants. Schools, counseling, and assignments designed to prepare these soldiers for their current duties, for duties at the next level, and for promotion were tailored into individual soldier programs. The importance of this emphasis sprang from the realization that staff sergeants were the immediate second line of NCO leadership behind the sergeants first class. When one of the five SFC positions authorized in the company was not filled by a soldier in that rank, or when an SFC was on leave, on quarters, or in the hospital, the senior SSG had to be prepared to perform his duties. If the SSGs were ill prepared, obviously the company's operations and its soldiers would suffer.

Since the SFCs were, for the most part, veterans of long service and the most experienced soldiers in the unit, the program sought to orient their professional development and to help them reach their personal career objectives. The program did help these soldiers seek improvement, where performance indicated it was needed, through schooling or counseling. Primarily, the situation in the latter category consisted of insufficient military education background, as opposed to performance of duty or competency.

Over time, the implementation and refinement of this leadership academy program made the company virtually self-sufficient in NCO leadership. It provided a depth of capability in all leadership positions. For example, the company could suffer a loss of 10 to 15 NCOs in a quarter and replace them from its internal resources. Additionally, the program assured the company considerable backup in all of its technical areas. After six months of operation, a pool of three or four additional soldiers had developed who were trained and available as replacements in each specialized area — supply, arms room, NBC (nuclear, biological, and chemical), and the like. At the same time, this broadened individual experience translated into improved squad

and platoon operations.

Given the current trends in the Army, certain aspects of this approach toward developing NCOs may have broader use. In fact, if the Army's training resource base becomes more constrained in the future, self-contained unit programs may become necessary.

The claim that current unit schedules preclude such programs is, in my view, invalid. The example cited occurred in a busy TOE company. Further, new technologies are increasing the feasibility of conducting a company leadership academy, examples of which are various distributed learning and training programs in which instructional material is presented to soldiers through such media as video tapes and computer software programs in an effective, responsive, and easily available format.

There is little question that different units, in whole or in part, have duplicated such a program over the years. But NCO development in units has never been embraced as a uniform expectation. In fact, trends over the past 10 years — with extensive focus on operational missions — have probably discouraged it.

As a postscript, it is worth considering that other modern armies have somewhat similar programs. In the case of the German Army, something that may be described as a unit NCO academy is in operation. Essentially, a battalion creates an additional company of one officer and eight NCOs. Each of the NCOs is responsible for training three or four NCOs to standard. This is a full-time effort based on a two- to four-week program of instruction.

Perhaps the time has come to formalize a way of training the NCO leaders in our units. Such a system would more effectively balance the role of the school, the personnel system, and the unit in developing NCOs.

Lieutenant Colonel Thomas R. Rozman is assigned to the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Training, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command. He previously served as chief of G-3 training resources, 1st Armored Division. He is a 1970 graduate of the United States Military Academy and holds a master's degree from the University of Massachusetts.
