

The Platoon Sergeant

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As a new platoon leader or company commander quickly learns, the platoon sergeant is the key leader in creating a highly professional and combat-effective force. As I prepared to assume command of a light infantry battalion, I published my concept of the tasks, conditions, and standards for all the battalion's key leaders. Much of this effort focused on the platoon sergeant, because he, along with the platoon leader, must understand and execute the battalion commander's intent two levels down. Additionally, he must always be prepared to assume the responsibilities of his platoon leader.

Some may argue that a battalion commander should concentrate on junior officer development and leave noncommissioned officer development to the battalion's command sergeant major and company first sergeants. Experience has taught me, however, that a uniform set of standards for key leaders is vital to combat readiness. Addressing the platoon sergeants on my first day of command, I outlined exactly what I would expect of them during our time together in the battalion. At the same time, I asked them to tell me what they, as the battalion's senior noncommissioned officers, expected from me as the incoming commander.

To ensure uniform standards throughout the battalion, I gave copies of these published standards to all company-level leaders. The officers and first sergeants were responsible for enforcing identical standards of performance for the platoon sergeants, thereby eliminating possibly conflicting standards at the various lev-

els of command. While I held all the platoon sergeants to identical standards, many of these senior noncommissioned officers were at different levels of professional development and experience. NCO professional development classes and performance counseling therefore became key tools in our efforts to ensure that all the platoon sergeants met at least the minimum standards of the battalion.

The platoon sergeant's general duties are easy to list: As the senior NCO of the platoon, he sets the example for military appearance and bearing; ensures that soldiers know and understand the standing operating procedures (SOPs) and field craft; and is responsible for the accountability, serviceability, and maintenance of all equipment assigned to the platoon and to the individual soldiers. He

is also responsible for the traditional "beans and bullets" logistical support, both in garrison and in the field.

A platoon sergeant's specific duties are not as well defined and may vary with individual commanders and first sergeants. My written guidance outlined several additional duties and responsibilities that I particularly wanted to emphasize at company and platoon level. A discussion of these areas may also be helpful to other battalion commanders:

Training. Although squad leaders have the primary responsibility for training their squads, senior NCOs should serve as the senior trainers for all common-task training, individual training, and Expert Infantryman's Badge (EIB) training. A platoon sergeant has a wealth of experience that squad leaders usually



lack, because he has more time in service and is familiar with other methods of conducting training.

A platoon sergeant must develop the squad leaders in leadership and, since the best leaders maintain the attitude that they are "training their replacements," also in his own duties. A platoon sergeant should make sure that the subordinate leaders adopt the same philosophy of leader development at their level and that squad leaders are training their respective team leaders for positions of increased responsibility.

Since the platoon sergeants in my battalion played such a significant role in the emplacement of crew-served weapons, I also held them responsible for training the crews. I therefore expected a platoon sergeant to be expert in the operation of every crew-served weapon assigned to his platoon. He was the unit expert on the care, cleaning, and operation of his platoon's weapon systems. Each realized that his responsibility extended to training the squad leaders to achieve similar levels of tactical and technical skill.

In this regard, a platoon sergeant has a major responsibility in certifying and training the trainers. During a platoon's training for the EIB and the Expert Field Medical Badge (EFMB), for example, the platoon sergeant should set and enforce the standards for subordinate leaders before the squad leaders train their soldiers to compete for these badges. This responsibility for training subordinate leaders extends to both tactical and garrison missions.

A platoon sergeant also has an inherent obligation to help his platoon leader become proficient at his job. This mission is important enough to be listed as one of the platoon sergeant's primary missions. This in no way negates the responsibility of the officer chain of command, but the platoon sergeant is in daily contact with the platoon leader and is in a unique position to guide and assist him. A prudent lieutenant will appreciate having a seasoned NCO assist and advise him as he learns the art of leadership.

Counseling. A platoon sergeant should counsel the squad leaders at least once a month and after each major training exercise. If these counseling sessions are to

be effective, they must be performance oriented. Unfortunately, junior leaders often view these sessions as distractions, although counseling reports have proved valuable. Since counseling sessions are often constrained by competing demands, they can easily become "check the block" payday activities. A wise company commander or first sergeant will maintain the counseling files in the company headquarters so he can inspect the reports to make sure subordinate leaders are taking their counseling responsibilities seriously. This will guarantee that the squad leaders receive the benefits of the platoon sergeant's attention and experience.

A platoon sergeant should also ensure that the squad leaders counsel every soldier once a month on his duty performance. When a soldier learns that his squad leader or platoon leader has not recommended him for promotion or for an individual award, it sometimes comes as a surprise. Periodic counseling that addresses goals, demonstrated performance, and promotion potential will eliminate this kind of confusion.

Another aspect of counseling that frequently escapes the scrutiny of small-unit leaders is the platoon sergeant's role in maintaining discipline and morale. More than any other leader, the platoon sergeant should be the platoon leader's link to the platoon's heartbeat. He should be able to take the pulse of his platoon and know when a potential problem is developing. If he notices that there are problems or that the soldiers are discontented, the platoon sergeant should lend a willing ear or serve as the spokesman for their complaints. Likewise, if a soldier deserves counseling or disciplinary action, the platoon sergeant should take the lead.

Inspections. The platoon sergeant plays a critical role in the inspection process. Part of a leader's job is to take care of his soldiers, and inspections are the best quality-assurance tool with which to evaluate a soldier's physical and materiel preparedness. He is in an excellent position to observe deficiencies and to demand immediate corrective action.

Unfortunately, conducting inspections is becoming a lost art in many com-

mands. Platoon sergeants should inspect their platoons daily in ranks, their living and work areas, and their equipment. Although the squad leaders can inspect their own squads, the platoon sergeant must make sure the inspections are conducted. Moreover, by inspecting the soldiers along with a squad leader, the platoon sergeant sets the example of how to conduct the inspection and also demonstrates that he cares enough for the soldiers to make sure they are meeting unit standards.

The platoon's senior noncommissioned officer also conducts inspections in a tactical environment. The best platoon sergeant is the one who spot-checks individual and crew-served weapons, maintains high standards in field sanitation, and sees that his soldiers have all the ammunition and equipment they need to complete a mission. In a sense, the platoon sergeant is the one who maintains the platoon's combat power in the field.

Accountability and Responsibility. It is easy to say that a leader is responsible for all his unit does or fails to do, but the platoon sergeant has a distinct role in accountability and responsibility. Although squad leaders should be held personally responsible and accountable for their squads' individual weapons, ammunition, and personal equipment, the platoon sergeant should be held personally accountable and responsible for the maintenance of crew-served weapons and ammunition.

In our battalion it was no secret that my first stop on every inspection tour in the field was the crew-served weapon positions, generally the M60 machinegun. Each platoon sergeant would escort me to his platoon's machinegun position and describe his reasons for recommending it to the platoon leader and the company commander, what the fields of fire were, and how the position was integrated into the overall platoon defense. In order to do these things, it was necessary for the platoon sergeant to have stood in the fighting position to observe the fields of fire from the gunner's perspective. The platoon sergeants soon developed standards and correct range cards for their entire platoons, which contributed to continuity. In so doing they were educating

not only the machinegun crews but also the platoon leaders and the company commander.

Maintaining the ammunition for a crew-served weapon is just as important as maintaining the weapon itself. If the platoon sergeant does not teach them that such practices are unacceptable, soldiers will wrap M60 ammunition around their waists or across their chests where it will accumulate dirt and debris. Obviously, automatic and semiautomatic weapons that do not fire are useless. Carelessness in maintaining weapons and ammunition to acceptable standards can cause undue loss of life.

Leader Development. Just as the platoon sergeant is responsible for ensuring that the squad leaders learn the skills they will need to perform at the next higher level, he must also be prepared to assume the responsibilities of the platoon leader or the first sergeant. Leader development must be a command priority. On the

modern battlefield, leaders who are skilled only in their current positions can be useless when casualties or other circumstances call for them to function at the next higher level of command.

Senior noncommissioned officers must set the example in attending such specialty schools as the Air Assault School, the Ranger indoctrination program, and the Ranger Course. Additionally, a platoon sergeant should compete for and earn the Expert Infantryman's Badge and other badges of individual excellence. (I must confess that I met some resistance here, but soldiers have a right to expect the most capable leaders—commissioned and noncommissioned officers alike.)

These are only a few of the duties and responsibilities I expected of the battalion's senior noncommissioned officers. To prevent any misunderstanding of my expectations among the platoon sergeants, I met with them quarterly to discuss the standards of performance. These

meetings were probably more beneficial to me than to them, because they could offer their unfiltered advice and recommendations on how to improve training within the battalion. The sessions also gave us an opportunity to discuss particular strengths and weaknesses we had observed in training during the preceding quarter.

Although our conversations were candid and open, I never relaxed my standards. I welcomed any recommendation that would improve the lot of the soldier and increase the combat readiness of the battalion, but I would not compromise on soldier welfare or unit readiness. Soldiers deserve nothing less.

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Heavy Task Force Medical Platoon

Maintaining Momentum in Offensive Operations

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One of the defining characteristics of a heavy combat team (especially one equipped with Abrams tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles) is its ability to exploit battlefield momentum. Combat service support (CSS) elements, including medical, must facilitate this momentum, and not impede it.

How should casualty evacuation be planned and executed so it will not hamper friendly operations? At what point do the internal (unit-directed) requirements of evacuation affect the commander's forward progress? The sustainment of

battlefield momentum thus forms the framework for discussing health service support in offensive operations.

I would like to share some lessons learned and problems identified during a task force rotation to the National Training Center (NTC). The balanced infantry-armor task force consisted of a headquarters company, four company teams (A, B, C, and D), and an antiarmor company (Company E).

The task force began field operations with live-fire exercises, then transitioned to force-on-force operations. During

these fights, the medical platoon's basic organization was one in which each company team received an M113A2 tracked ambulance in direct support. The remaining four M113A2s were used as area support vehicles under the direction of the medical platoon leader. If Company E was fighting "pure," one of the area support ambulances could be attached to it for direct support. The treatment squad was split into two teams, each moving in an M577. The M577s habitually operated in a "one up, one back" formation. The other medical platoon vehicles (all