

REFLECTIONS OF A RIFLE PLATOON LEADER

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The intended purpose of this article is to reflect on my time as a platoon leader and share some things I wish I had known before becoming platoon leader and some of the things I learned while serving in the position. My intent is to convey my experience and the lessons I learned that may be of some use to others.

There is not a whole lot of literature written about being a platoon leader. Before taking over the platoon, I hoped to read some of the experiences of past platoon leaders to provide me a glimpse of some of the challenges and experiences they had, but there was not a whole lot out there to read. I thought it was important to write about my experience so as to provide some insight on the personal and professional challenges I had as a platoon leader. I wanted it to be written in a form that conveyed ideas and not a series of one-line catch phrases that were open to general interpretation.

TAKING OVER THE PLATOON

I was excited to assume duties as a platoon leader (this after all was my lifelong dream). My excitement was tempered by the realization that I was now in charge of 40 Soldiers. It's a daunting task if you put it into perspective, but that did not diminish my enthusiasm. Leading men into harm's way to defend and uphold our nation's will was a challenge I was really looking forward to.

Meeting the platoon for the first time was a thrill (looking at their faces and wondering what each man was thinking about me); it gave me the opportunity to let the men know where I came from and my initial expectations of them. I did not talk too much; it was a simple meet and greet. I never liked the idea of talking to the platoon at the onset because it was merely stating the obvious, but I have changed my view on the matter. I now believe that this is important to do because it is an opportunity to let your Soldiers know about you, your expectations, and the direction you want to take the platoon. It sets you up for a good transition.

Taking over the platoon initially has its challenges; the best way to begin is to make an assessment and get to know your Soldiers. Your commander can provide you some guidance on what is ahead and from that you can plan for your transition. It may feel overwhelming at first, especially if you get in there in the middle of training that is already in progress and you don't have time to transition. The only thing you can do is to observe and apply what you have learned. You will be surprised with what you know. The Infantry Officer Basic Course (IOBC) and Ranger School will equip you with the basics — if you paid attention. Do not feel overwhelmed, most of it is just perceived because you are new. Once you are grounded, you will get the feel for how things work.

IMPRESSING THE BOSS

I don't know if I ever truly impressed my company and battalion commanders. I might not have succeeded at each mission, but I



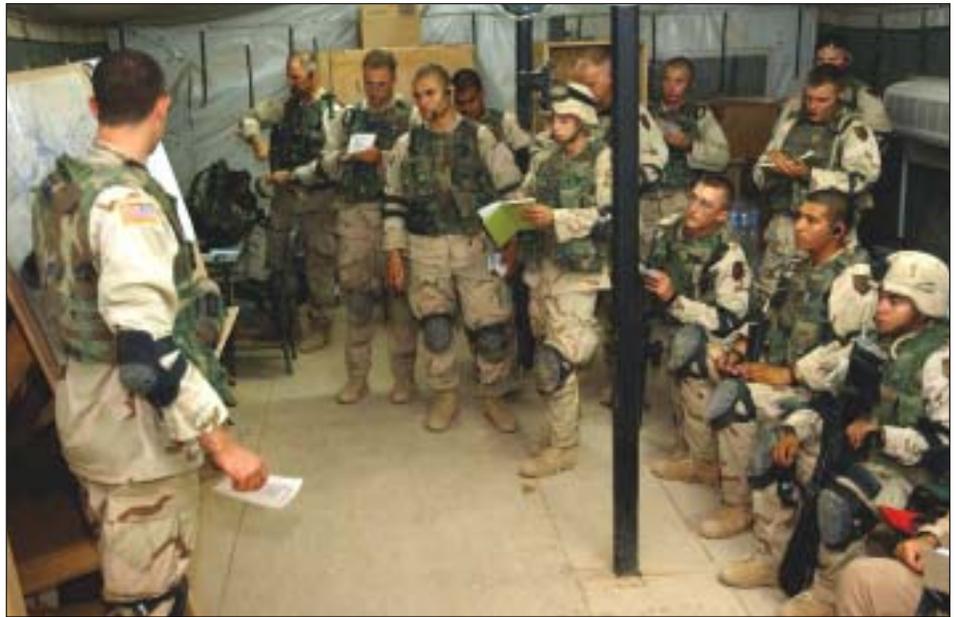
always tried to do my best in every task I was given and learned from my successes as well as my failures. I would be a hypocrite if I said I did not want to impress them, but I thought it was more important to learn and gain experience than worry about impressing them constantly. Earning their trust was more of my concern than trying to look good. Impressing the boss with flattery can only go so far; after a while you have to perform.

Doing your best is not enough sometimes, but it's a good start. You can't possibly know everything, and proficiency comes with time. Knowledge is learned and gained by experience. As long as you make a conscious effort to learn and get better, your mistakes will be underwritten as learning curves. I made many mistakes and in the process I learned a great deal. I am far from perfect, but I am far better than I was. Impressing the boss should probably be the least of your worries. In the end, the only people you truly have to impress are your Soldiers. You need to gain their respect, which only comes from being able to lead them.

OBSERVE AND LEARN

Any good leader or book on leadership will tell you to not make any changes until you fully understand the situation. The same thing applies when you get to a new platoon. The best thing to do initially is to observe, absorb, and analyze. Making sudden changes after beginning your tenure is not a good start. You have not been there long enough to make any judgment calls yet. Make an assessment of your platoon and its status; on average it takes months to get a grip on things.

Observe around you; watch the other platoon leaders in the company and learn from them. It is great when you establish rapport with the other PLs and pick their brains on some of the issues you have questions on. It also helps if one of them takes an active interest in getting you grounded. Sometimes you take over a platoon with really no transition time with the outgoing PL. Absorb everything — your time is very limited so try not to waste it on nonessential things. You have to hit the ground running. Learn quickly and digest information that is relevant. Don't waste time on trying to know every little



Tech Sergeant Scott Reed, USAF

A platoon leader briefs his Soldiers on an upcoming mission in Iraq.

thing. Concentrate on what is important and relevant now.

BE A LEADER

A lot is expected out of you. You might not think so but this is the case. There are some expectations you have to live up to. You have to lead from the front and establish your credibility as a leader by your actions. You must conduct yourself with class on and off duty. You don't have to be a saint, but there is an expectation of you. Like it or not, you are held to a higher standard. Establish a good working relationship with your platoon sergeant. Also, get to know your squad leaders — some of them have more years of experience than you can count on both hands. As a PL you are expected to lead — remember that. You might meet some resistance initially, but you have to exert your authority; it is your platoon. Your platoon sergeant can help you with this if he is a true professional. I was fortunate enough to have such.

The platoon takes on the personality of its leader. If you want to know which personality, just observe your Soldiers — it will become clear to you. Soldiers are looking at you for leadership; you must know and understand that.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO MAKE MISTAKES

It will happen and you are not the first

or last to make one. My experience is that honest mistakes are pardonable. The best way to learn is by making mistakes and learning from them. Don't allow mistakes to cripple you from making decisions. Remember, it is training until real bullets start flying. Training is as much for you as it is for your Soldiers. I have been called overly decisive (if there is such a thing), overly excited on the radio when making reports and just plain John Wayne at times, but that has not stopped me from learning and making hard decisions. It is better to make mistakes now and learn from them than make them later when lives are on the line. However, make no mistake about safety. Safety is always paramount; nothing you do in training is worth losing life, limb, or sight. Not knowing is not an excuse as a leader. Remember that your job encompasses all that the platoon does or fails to do. Always do your best and learn from your experiences.

LIVE A LITTLE

Don't take yourself too seriously; humor can make life more bearable. Spend some time getting to know each and every Soldier in the platoon. You will have some characters. Humor will defuse any tense situation and make light of any perceived difficulty. Just have a smile or a joke readily available to lighten the mood. Sometimes you just have to laugh about things that you

cannot control. I don't think I ever had a bad day the whole time I was a PL (maybe I did, but I just can't recall it). It was a joy being with the NCOs and Soldiers in the platoon. Many of my Soldiers are some of the finest young men our country has to offer. Their discipline and dedication to duty was truly inspirational to see day in and day out. You can't take everything seriously; try to lighten the load with some humor and fun. Do physical training (PT) and nonstandard PT with your platoon; it will strengthen your bond.

TAKE CARE OF SOLDIERS

First and foremost, this is your job — nothing could be more important than this. Always keep your Soldiers informed. Avoid propagating rumors and confront every rumor with facts. If you do not know, tell them you don't know.

Taking care of Soldiers is more than asking about them and their families. It is a conscious effort to help them improve and better themselves. There is no such thing as NCO business when it comes to taking care of Soldiers. This is your job, too. There are many different reasons why each Soldier joined the Army, but the bottom line is he volunteered to serve and defend our nation and way of life. Nothing short of absolute dedication to their care must be afforded them for what they volunteered to do (realized or not).

The best way you can take care of Soldiers is to prepare them to be ready for anything. You have to make an assessment of what your platoon is weak on and try to improve it. I found that getting feedback from the SLs works well. You have to trust your junior leaders and encourage their initiative.

KEY TO SUCCESS

Pre-combat checks/pre-combat inspections and rehearsals are the key to success. This is a critical leader's task to any mission tactical or otherwise. Preparation and training is the key to accomplishing anything. Rehearse every mission and let everybody know what each element is doing. Make sure they know their task and purpose and the commander's intent. Nothing will get you more ready than having everyone know what each element is doing in the overall scheme of maneuver. There is much more to this than merely stating the obvious. Establish a checklist (copy one preferably) that you go through prior to each mission and life will be much easier.

There is no secret formula to accomplishing a tactical mission. Preparation and decisive action are the only sure methods you can employ that will allow you to succeed. Know and understand your junior leaders' capabilities and weaknesses. With this in mind, you have a grasp of how to best employ and fight your platoon in a tactical setting. It is an amazing thing to see a platoon operating at peak performance. To get there requires much time and training. You have to prioritize and delegate — you can't do everything. It is a lot easier when you have great NCOs. There is no substitute for being prepared. The only sure way to succeed is to be ready.

LIST YOUR PLATOONS ACCOMPLISHMENT

I made a "List of Excellence" that I posted inside the platoon's command post (CP) of all the platoon members' accomplishments.

I am not sure if it made any impact on my Soldiers' performance, but they saw that I was keeping track of their accomplishments. This can include Soldier and NCO of the Month and Quarter competitions, Audie Murphy Club inductions, times assigned as the main effort during tactical missions, and reenlistments in the platoon. I am not sure if this makes any difference, but I like to think it does. Reward Soldiers that excel and appreciate their hard work. Nothing is more satisfying to a Soldier than being recognized for a job well done by his leaders among his peers. Always appreciate hard work with a kind word or thanks.

BE YOUR OWN MAN

In the end, you are your own best critic if you are honest with yourself. There is always something bad that can be said about you and your performance. You can almost always find a flaw in anybody if you look hard enough. Your commander cannot see and know everything you do. He bases your performance on what he knows and sees. The only thing you can be sure about is the knowledge that you have done your best and will continue to learn and grow. Never forget to be a team player. This does not mean participating on silly things or hanging out just to belong, rather contributing to better the unit whether not recognized or seen. You don't have to prove yourself to anybody but yourself. Take comfort in knowing your capabilities when they are not duly recognized. Personal satisfaction comes from knowing what you are capable of doing.

There is really not much you can do about other people's perceptions. You can only count on what you know to be true about you in your heart.

IN CONCLUSION

My time as a platoon leader was far too short, spanning only 12 months. There were things I wish I could have done differently, but that is the pain of regret. I wish I could have stayed in the position longer so I could have done and learned more. My time as a PL was definitely one of the highlights of my career thus far. It was truly a very satisfying time professionally. The bond shared under conditions of discomfort and pain, and the fond memories made on many training events will always be dear to my heart.

The Soldiers and NCOs in my platoon are some of the best our nation has to offer. I will always treasure the time I spent with them. The experience for me was both physically and mentally satisfying. The challenges were many, but the knowledge and experience I gained are significant in my growth as a leader, Soldier, and individual.

There was definitely a lot to learn and much more to learn still, but knowing the basics and applying what you learned will give you a good head start. There is probably more we can do to improve junior leaders' education before and after they leave the institution of learning, but that is a different discussion altogether.

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