

PRINCIPLES FOR THE SMALL UNIT LEADER

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Recently, a former company commander of mine, who is now a tactical officer at the United States Military Academy, asked me what I would share with cadets who were soon to be commissioned. I reflected back to my time spent as a platoon leader in Fallujah, Iraq, and Gardez, Afghanistan. The two deployments were on opposing ends of the spectrum of Army operations. Countless combat operations, typically cordon and searches targeting both Saddam loyalists and insurgents, characterized our time in Iraq. As a battalion, we were in contact daily. Our mission in Afghanistan was to facilitate the country's first ever national elections. It was, arguably, a stability and support operation. While the battalion was in contact on more than one occasion, operations there were nowhere near as intense as those in Iraq. Despite the differences in the two deployments, I have identified some common principles that when applied at the small unit level, led to mission success. These principles are versatility, aggressiveness, and safety.

Army doctrine is full of concepts, definitions, and terms. As a cadet at the United States Military Academy, as a second lieutenant at the Infantry Officers Basic Course (IOBC), and again as a captain at the Infantry Captains Career Course, I've studied and used mnemonics to memorize and learn concepts such as the Principles of War, the Tenets of Army Operations, and the Elements of Combat Power. That being said, what I do not intend to do is undermine doctrine or force junior leaders to remember three more "principles." I would like to illustrate, based on experience, why these principles are important and how they can contribute to mission accomplishment.

Versatility

FM 3-0, *Operations*, defines versatility as the ability of Army forces to meet the global, diverse mission requirements of full

Photo by Sergeant Jeffrey Alexander

Soldiers with the 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, secure the perimeter during a cordon and search operation in Iraq.



spectrum operations. Leaders and Soldiers at all levels must be able to quickly transition from full spectrum to stability and reconstruction operations. In April 2004, our battalion redeployed from Iraq after nearly a year of a fairly intense operations tempo (OPTEMPO). In August of 2004, we were rapidly deployed to Afghanistan. We expected our junior leaders to make the transition, including new tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) and rules of engagement (ROEs), seamlessly. The contemporary operating environment (COE) mandates that junior leaders also understand the environment in which they will be operating. Often, it is a second lieutenant or even a staff sergeant who is speaking to an indigenous person on behalf of the Army. In Afghanistan, our platoon was deployed to secure a polling site in Sayed Karam. As a first lieutenant, I held daily meetings with the tribal elders and the mayor of town while my squad leaders worked hand-in-hand with the chief of police. Leaders must be versatile enough to understand the cultural, political, social, economic and religious aspects of the operating environment and potentially be able to communicate their understanding to indigenous personnel.

Small unit leaders must also be able to perform unique missions for which they may not have been trained. For example, the enemy in Iraq prefers to attack coalition forces using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) placed along the roadside. As a second lieutenant, I was never trained on “react to IED.” I was, however, taught how to react to a near ambush. With the help of NCOs and experienced Soldiers, we were able to develop SOPs for reacting to IEDs based on existing doctrine. Leaders must be able to apply what they have been taught (doctrine) to what they have to do, using the assets they have. That being said, we must learn and understand not only the capabilities of our own units, but also those of the units fighting on our right and left. My task organization for the polling center security mission in Sayed Karam, Afghanistan, included my platoon (an airborne anti-tank platoon), two Marine squads, a 60mm mortar section, a Raven unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) team, a combat camera team, and an interpreter. The typical second lieutenant or sergeant

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first class does not know what a Marine Corps assault squad brings to the fight or how far and long a Raven UAV can fly. We had to be versatile enough to incorporate these assets into our team to accomplish the mission. This is particularly important because in the COE, platoons are operating in company-sized battlespaces with company-level assets and companies are operating in battalion-sized battlespaces with battalion-level assets. Small unit leaders need to be students of their craft and be able to operate independently in areas much larger than they are accustomed to with assets inorganic to them.

Aggressive

Small unit leaders must be aggressive. “Aggressive” does not mean “shoot first and ask questions later,” but rather the desire to take the fight to the enemy. Every leader in the Army must embody the Warrior Ethos. Equally important is his ability to instill this into his subordinates. This includes all branches of the Army, not solely the combat arms. In the COE, every Soldier, regardless of military occupation specialty or unit affiliation, is a shooter. Nothing illustrates this point better than the infamous ambush of the 507th Maintenance Company in Nasiriyah, Iraq. Being aggressive keeps the enemy on his toes, makes him think twice about attacking and denies him sanctuary and the ability to attack.

What does this mean for the small unit leader? It means that if he makes contact, he must aggressively react to it. Use fire and maneuver to fight the threat, not to get away from it, but to eliminate it. In stability and support operations (SASO), this

translates into projecting an aggressive posture to prevent an enemy attack. When all Soldiers are pulling 360-degree security, when weapons are at the ready, and when helmets, eye protection and IBAs are worn properly and fastened, units present an aggressive posture. An aggressive posture prevents attacks, and displays professionalism and discipline. From August 2003 through March 2004, the battalion area of operations (AO) for the 1st Battalion, 505th Infantry, 82nd Airborne Division, was a large swath of land in Iraq’s Anbar Province that included Al Fallujah. The majority of the units that were ambushed with catastrophic results in that AO were nonaffiliated combat support (CS) and combat service support (CSS) units. These units typically had a poor defensive posture; in general, crew served weapons were not properly manned and tactical convoy procedures were not followed. The enemy is a thinking enemy and understands discipline. He would prefer to engage a “soft target.” To the enemy, a soft target is identifiable by a perceived poor level of discipline.

Safety

The third principle is safety. Safety is not just for training or for making sure Soldiers come back in one piece from a long weekend. Safety includes common sense, force protection and sound, responsible decision making. Safety must be instilled at the lowest level. One of the best ways to stay safe is to provide realistic training for Soldiers. When NCOs and junior officers plan and execute realistic training it instills confidence in even the most inexperienced Soldiers. A confident Soldier is less likely to be unsafe. The first time a Soldier maneuvers while a support by fire element is engaging should not be “downrange.” Our battalion deployed to both Iraq and Afghanistan with minimal notice, yet we ensured that every Soldier who deployed had undergone a minimum of squad live-fire training. The live-fire training was realistic; it incorporated newly developed TTPs such as mounting and dismounting HMMWVs, which was fairly new for an airborne infantry battalion. Additionally, it is important to take administrative measures for force protection. These

include personal hygiene and tasks as simple as taking malaria prophylactic medication. In Iraq, my platoon “lost” several Soldiers due to dysentery and rashes caused from animal and insect infestations. On one occasion, an NCO had such poor personal hygiene that a weasel was actually sharing his sleeping bag with him. We became aware of this only after the NCO came down with a rash. Something as simple as ensuring your Soldiers keep themselves clean can be a force multiplier.

On the tactical side, being safe means mitigating risk and not giving the enemy any “freebies.” In both Afghanistan and Iraq, one of the enemy’s most dangerous capabilities are IEDs. In Iraq, a second lieutenant from a sister unit was killed while personally inspecting a suspected IED site along a main supply route (MSR). The officer literally walked to within 20 meters of the emplacement. His death could have been prevented by the use of optics and other assets. For example, in Afghanistan, we were able to utilize the Raven UAV to reconnoiter our routes to detect IEDs and small arms ambushes.

Another example of tactical safety is aggressively patrolling within a 10-kilometer radius of friendly operational support bases. For the enemy to place accurate mortar and rocket indirect fires on us, he must be within 10 kilometers. Rockets and mortar attacks are frequent and casualty-causing occurrences in both Iraq and Afghanistan. By patrolling this ring, we can reduce the enemy’s ability to emplace these systems.

Finally, it is important to remember that the COE and current OPTEMPO now make it necessary for units to be responsible for larger AOs. For example, as a platoon leader operating in Afghanistan, I was responsible for an area that would typically be controlled by a company. Platoons are occupying company-sized battlespaces; companies are occupying battalion-sized battlespaces and so on. This means that small unit leaders are responsible for

securing large patrol bases and safe houses. In Afghanistan, lieutenants and platoon sergeants are establishing and operating from safe houses. They must understand how to establish good defensive plans. They need to know how to plan a defense, employ weapons systems in the defense, and maintain good communications. These are key elements of force protection when operating in small units separate from the main body.

It is obvious how the principles of versatility, aggressiveness, and safety can contribute to mission accomplishment. By no means are these principles all encompassing, and they are not intended to replace doctrine or add to it. In fact, all of the principles are discussed in one form or another in a modern Army manual or publication. The aforementioned principles are simply one officer’s summation of what enabled his unit to be successful in the COE under varying conditions. Today’s Army is full of combat veterans. The majority of Soldiers have at least one, often two or three, deployments to either Iraq or Afghanistan under their belt. It is of vital importance to our Army that this experience is passed on to the inexperienced Soldier and future commissioned leaders.

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Photo by Master Sergeant Andy Dunaway, USAF

A Soldier with the 2nd Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, provides security during a patrol of a village in Iraq.

