

Issue Brief

January 2026
No : 479

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of a Battalion:
The Ultimate
Test of Leadership

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Abstract

Command of a battalion represents the ultimate test of leadership in the Army, demanding courage, wisdom, and empathy. A battalion commander directly shapes the fighting spirit, morale, and professional growth of his troops, serving as their friend, philosopher, and guide. He must be fair, foresighted, and emotionally resilient, balancing compassion with discipline while leading by personal example. His influence extends beyond the battlefield, fostering unity, trust, and professionalism among men of diverse backgrounds. Ultimately, the true measure of a Commanding Officer lies in his ability to inspire his unit to perform with excellence, even in his absence.

Introduction

There is a popular saying that there are only three commands in the Army. Platoon Command, Battalion Command and Divisional Command. Out of these, battalion command is an ultimate test of one's leadership. This command is Direct, Demonstrative and not only shapes the fighting spirit of the current body of troops but also shapes their future combat capabilities through well thought out policies and training, keeping future trends in warfare and likely combat theaters in mind. No wonder a Battalion Commander is referred as "Old Man" with affection as wisdom and foresight is expected from him.

It is with a reasonable length of service with troops, approx. 17yrs that the Army thinks one is capable of commanding a battalion. These 17 yrs give him exposure both in field and peace areas, combat and non-combat assignments in mountain, high-altitude, against Pakistan China and possibly active combat conditions of Counter insurgency in J&K. After having performed successfully and critically tested, he is the one out of say 36 percent of his course mates to make it to this coveted assignment. Luckier are those who get a command of a unit they were commissioned in.

Here is a man who is always lonely in taking decisions. His men look up to him to lead them to victory in war and train them to achieve this. Such commanding officers are always remembered by the coming generations of the unit.

The men never doubt the capability and sincerity of their commanding officer unless he proves otherwise. That is why they consider him their Friend, Philosopher and Guide. They also expect from him to take care of their family if they are not in this world while executing his orders.

Respectful

He is expected to be fair to everyone and give equal respect to each one under his command. He should be fair in granting leave and promotion without any regard to caste, region and creed. This task becomes more challenging if one is commanding a mixed unit.

He is also expected to respect their culture, religious beliefs, region they belong to and create harmonious living among rank and file of the unit. A commanding officer was shot dead with three other officers for making disrespectful comments on the caste the unit personnel belonged to.

A Maestro

A commanding officer is expected to carry every one with him. Each one having different individual traits, likes and dislikes. Each one is different in the level of his dedication to his duty. Each one is different in his standard of training, combat skills, hopes and aspirations. Each one is like a different instrument of an orchestra and a commanding officer is expected to be a Maestro to produce a fine tune of Esprit de corps.

A Psychologist

A commanding officer is expected to be a psychologist and trained enough to judge the mental state of a person on just looking at him. This ability will ward off cases of ill-discipline and suicide. He will develop this faculty if he mixes openly with his men in the activities of morning physical training and evening sports. During sports the atmosphere should be informal.

Men expect from his commanding officer protection from the pressure of higher Headquarter, if it interferes in a day today activities of the unit administration, religious and community affairs. They also do not like their commanding officer succumbing to unreasonable demands of higher headquarters -employment of men on unprofessional duties.

Leading From the Front

Late General Bhagat was of the firm view that a commanding officer is the one who needs to be respected for the good of the Army as a whole, as he is the one who can turn defeat in to victory and can bring desired result even to a plan with tactical infirmities .

To give respect to this post he had ordered that vehicle of a commanding officer will not be checked for duty by any check post in his entire Northern Command.

In 65 war a battalion defying the norms of having 3:1 superiority for attack, captured an objective held by a PAK battalion- duly entrenched in a built up area of village Dograi.

Again in another incident in 65 war, when a battalion was pinned down in the forming up place (FUP) due to heavy enemy fire and did not get up for attack, the battalion commander walked up alone towards the objective. He died midway due to enemy MMG burst. Seeing their commanding officer dying the battalion got up and captured an unsurmountable objective, against all odds, saving the honour of the unit.

A Mother Too

A commanding officer is expected to be a Mother too— giving his men emotional stability in times of their personal worries. These could be financial, grudge against the system or family. In a unit a soldier attempted to commit suicide while the commanding officer was away on temporary duty. Against all sorts of pressures he did not disclose the reason of his attempted suicide. On enquiring by the commanding officer personally, when he went to see him in the hospital, the soldier confided in him the reason of the attempt.

This commanding officer had evolved a system to earn the confidence of his men. He used to be available in the unit mandir once a month. The day and time used to be communicated well in advance. On this day anyone without informing his immediate senior could see him and was free to share his problem/worries, be it personal, professional or family. That was his style of earning confidence of his men.

Foresight

A commanding officer is expected to possess a rare quality of foresight too. He is expected to plan 6 months in advance of unit's engagements — operational deployment, exercise with troops, professional and sports competitions, unit inspection and visit of senior officers. This faculty is must- to conceive and evolve standard operating procedures for the

safety of men and material taking in view likely threats to their safety due to espionage, enemy action and local security environment. To be proactive in warding off such threats, he is expected to cultivate his loyal informers within the unit.

Any act of ill- discipline having ramifications to overall reputation, security and morale of the unit, he is expected to handle it with heavy hand, demonstrating his remorseless face .

Morale

A commanding officer is also expected to maintain morale of the unit reasonably high under all circumstances. This is best achieved by keeping men engaged in professional tasks, enhancing their promotion prospects, sharpening their combat skills and to make them feel at home . For this unit routine must be relaxed at least once a week.

Men resent non- combat and unprofessional engagements. These are major demoralizing factors. Men like to belong to a winning outfit. Winning sports and professional competitions well within the capability of the unit ,does contribute in keeping the morale intact. Maintaining morale becomes more challenging under active combat conditions and depends on the ingenuity of the commanding officer to achieve it.

Innovative

There is a beautiful story of a Second World War A battalion in defence was under heavy pressure due to continuing enemy attacks and shelling for days. Casualties were mounting. The commanding officer could sense that his men will bolt off any moment. He got himself out of the trench, sat in the open on a chair, called the unit barber to give him a hair cut in full view of his men in trenches while the intermittent shelling was going on . This simple innovative act gave confidence to his men that situation is not as bad as they had thought of. They stuck to the task, kept the enemy at bay till the threat finally petered out.

A leader Must Produce More Leaders

Task of the battalion commander as a leader is to produce more leaders. It will not only take some load off him, but will also provide good set of leaders to accomplish the task while he is away from the scene of action. For this he should unearth talent, train and groom them to be capable to lead their respective sub units in a desired professional excellence , and be the back bone of the unit for the future.

In a unit from the number of officers commissioned during the tenure of a commanding officer, 9 officers became commanding officers of different units of the regiment. Out of these 9-one became a Brigadier and two became Maj Generals.

Conclusion

Commanding a unit is a most demanding and challenging assignment in one's career. Many expectations from one man- who is lonely to take decision some times with a very thin margin between defeat and victory, life and death of men under him. During 65 war, a unit lost a locality due to enemy counter attack. The commanding officer had no combat soldiers as reserves to launch a counter-counter attack. He mustered 35 non-combat soldiers (NCE's), launched a successful counter attack and regained the lost locality.

All assignments beyond the post of a commanding officer are managerial in content – managing the given resources and not expected to leave a legacy. Unlike the commanding officer, they cannot directly influence the outcome of the battle, and war is nothing but series of battles fought by units and sub units .For any debacle the higher ups have some head to roll, but in the case of a battalion commander he can only offer his head to roll.

History is replete with examples where commanding officers sacrificed their life, comforts and career to uphold the honour of their men and unit. In this context a second world war Hollywood movie “ Bridge On The River Kwai” starring Alec Guinness playing role of colonel Nicholson - exploring themes of duty and honor is worth watching .

A commanding officer every moment has to have only one thought in mind - to train his command to bring glory to it, be it a combat or non- combat situation. A test of a true leader is -his unit accomplishing assigned mission even in his absence. In this context Hollywood movie 12 O' High starring Gregory Peck is worth watching

A good commanding officer has to be 'dependable' both for higher -ups and for his men and not be careerist. And that is the essence of 'Dharma'. This assignment needs respect and support and freehand by the higher hierarchy of the Army if it as a whole desires to win war for the Nation.

Views expressed are personal.

About the Author

Major General CM Seth (Retd) was commissioned in 1963 and took part both in 1965 and 1971 Wars. An alumnus of Staff College, he held instructional appointments in infantry School, College of Combat and IMTRAT. Been Deputy Force Commander NSG, BGS and Chief of Staff of a Corps. He also commanded a division in mountains and retired from the post of ADG Territorial Army.



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