

INFANTRY COMPANY COMMANDER



Article by: Barry R. McCaffrey, General, USA (Ret.)

To be published in forthcoming book, 2012

211 N. Union Street
Suite 100
Alexandria, VA 22314
(703) 519-1250

INFANTRY COMPANY COMMANDER

(To be published in forthcoming book, 2012)

April 25, 2011

Over the years, joining a new organization, be it military or governmental or business --- I bring along the lessons remembered from service as B Company commander in 2nd Battalion 7th Cavalry. It was the most important and rewarding responsibility I ever was honored to exercise.

My leadership instincts were formed on the third combat tour as a Captain commanding an infantry company in Vietnam during 1968-1969. It was an airmobile infantry assault unit which encountered intense combat first in I Corps in the northern mountains--- and we then redeployed to take part in a 1st Cavalry Division screening force along the Cambodian frontier in the III Corps Tactical Zone. Our mission was to break up the North Vietnamese Army 1969 abortive campaign to capture the huge American logistics base at Long Binh.

During this period of the Vietnam conflict US overall casualties ran up to 400 killed-in-action per week. My light infantry company was typical of that phase of the war. Normally I would have just over a hundred soldiers in the field. We were armed with light infantry weapons...M16 rifles, M79 Grenade Launchers, M-60 Machine guns, and 81 mm mortars. We were loaded like beasts of burden carrying well over 80 lbs. of ammunition, demolitions, hand grenades, water, and entrenching tools and sandbags.

The soldiers were almost all teenage draftees who were high school graduates and in superb physical shape. They were very aggressive, funny, and respectful to me as the company commander. These young cavalry troopers were high energy and creative in adapting to very severe combat conditions. The company's sergeants were draftee soldiers who had been put through an "instant NCO" course at Ft Benning. Lieutenants were mostly draftees with a college degree who had just graduated from OCS. They also had very little military experience.

The company First Sergeant Emerson Trainor was a Korean War veteran of the same company. The two of us were normally the only soldiers in the unit who were regular Army, over 24 years old, and with any prior combat experience. Both of us were on our third combat tour and had been previously wounded twice in combat. Both of us would go on to become casualties while leading the company. Existence as a field combat soldier was living like a wild animal. Over time, most of us would expect to eventually be wounded and perhaps killed. We were exhausted, dehydrated, underweight, filthy, and in constant discomfort from skin rashes and minor muscle and sprain injuries. At night we dug into the ground like moles. We were constantly aware of our security and were wary like hunters focused on noise and light discipline.

The enemy we fought were North Vietnamese Army Regulars. They were very, very good soldiers... courageous, well- led, and extremely well trained in camouflage and stealth. They were ready to die and did not expect to get back to their homes.

Combat encounters were almost always initiated by my soldiers surprising enemy units deep in their secure rear areas. We would rapidly gain overwhelming fire superiority with heavy automatic weapons fire, bring in massive and rapid artillery fire, and use hand grenades to fight our way into the enemy bunker positions. If we encountered difficult opposition we would employ very accurate US Army Attack Helicopters firing rockets and machine guns--- and then bring in US Air Force Phantom jets dropping 500 lb. bombs and long cylinders of napalm to burn the NVA out of their position. The roar of gunfire, the confusion, the sensory overload of fear and excitement was intoxicating. This rush of battle was saturated with the utter misery of the death of our battle comrades--- and the horror of devastating wounds to soft human flesh from high velocity weapons at close range---and the ripping power of enemy mortars and hand grenades. Combat was crawling on your gut in the mud with a sack full of hand grenades trying to kill someone 15 feet away ---while glowing green NVA tracers cracked by your head. In the background were the screams of badly wounded US and NVA soldiers. This was a tough life.

Here is what I learned.

- **We learned to trust the American soldier.** These teenage soldiers were ferociously brave, had tremendous initiative, and would without hesitation lay down their lives to protect their buddies. If they believed you knew what you were doing--- they would follow orders that might result in their almost immediate death. They came from normal American families. They were the best people I ever met.
- **As a battle leader there is a huge premium on being an expert at your job.** It is great if you are well educated and articulate--- and if you have energy, good looks and ambition. However, in combat—the only thing that really counts is that you must be a master of your job. Lives were at stake. The First Sergeant and I knew what we were doing. We had huge years of experience and the technical expertise to handle communications, air and artillery, logistics, navigate, control mortars, use sensible tactics, and teach these young sergeants and lieutenants how to fight. Thank God.
- **There is never perfect information.** There is always paralyzing risk. The leader is always exhausted and fearful of making a mistake that could yield an immediate disaster of bloodshed. However, you simply have to make simple, rapid decisions based on the situation you face and given the mission you must accomplish. Risk can be understood and hedged. Risk can be mitigated by training. Risk can be a factor in your decision. But at some point you have to go with the gut concept that flows from your feel of the battle. Fiercely executing your plan can normally override the unknowns.

- **Take care of your soldiers.** This is a practical requirement not a feel-good obligation. Your first and over-riding responsibility is to send them home alive if you can--- while still getting to your objective. That means the leader must be unrelenting in enforcement of combat standards. Soldiers recover from blisters from digging in. They snap back from exhaustion. However, they are dead forever.
- **Taking care of soldiers also means a mother’s focus on what really counts.** How can I get them hot food and water? When can we get them clean and non-ripped uniforms? Can we put out security and let soldiers rotate and clean themselves in a stream? How can I ensure that each soldier gets time to shave, clean their weapons, write a letter home, sleep for three hours, and put on clean socks? Keeping people effective by managing their needs and controlling time is the central responsibility of every leader. A company commander is a servant to his soldiers.
- **Soldiers must understand the plan.** There is an elastic element to getting people organized. Units have inertia. Machinery starts up immediately. However, people need to be warmed up and organized with clear, simple instructions. They need to get a warning order that something new is about to happen so they can mentally and physically prepare for a change of mission. Plans have to be rehearsed. Plans have to be explained with a terrain model. Soldiers have to be asked to explain back the concept and their role. If there is no common understanding of the task--- the team will come apart under the stress of combat.
- **Never ask people to do things they are not capable of doing.** This should be obvious. The “point man” needs to be a volunteer—this dangerous duty takes a special sense of confidence. If you cannot read a map—you cannot serve as an infantry lieutenant. If you cannot handle numbers—you cannot work with mortars. If you are not extremely bright—you cannot be a company commander’s radio operator. If you are not in excellent physical condition and capable of handling constant physical pain—you should not ever serve in a rifle company. The commander must move people to positions where they can succeed--- given they receive the needed training and coaching.
- **Of most importance--- leaders have to go first.** You cannot give orders from the rear. It is the same as pushing on a string. You have to do personal reconnaissance before you can formulate a decent plan. When the unit executes the plan--- the company commander must be up front. The plan will never survive for long after exposure to the enemy. The commander must be with the lead elements to sense the dynamics of battle. If the plan goes wrong – you must be where your soldiers will see you die with the rest of them.

- **Finally—the only absolute requirement of infantry combat is never abandon your wounded or killed.** The unit must know and believe in their hearts that everyone to include the company commander is willing to die before we will leave a soldier on the battlefield. If this is the central trust of the soldiers--- then everything is possible. Without this confidence and bonding—there is no possibility of success.

In later years I have commanded organizations with tens of thousands of soldiers and thousands of vehicles carrying out complex operations. As a civilian I have served on Boards of Directors of huge corporations and managed a budget of \$19 billion. When faced with new responsibilities, I go back to my roots as an infantry company commander in combat ---and the boys of Company B.