

Deployment or Demotion

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Introduction

On the flight back to his home station, Army captain (CPT) Jack Thompson pondered his choices. He had to decide soon because his combat support company was about to deploy to Afghanistan. During a rotation at the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, CA, he had recognized leadership gaps in two platoons. He could leave platoon leadership intact, remove and reassign the platoon leaders elsewhere in the battalion, or reorganize the company leadership internally. This decision would impact the company and the careers of his platoon leaders.

Background

A recent graduate of the Army's mid-level career course, CPT Thompson was a distinguished military graduate of a major university's Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) program. He attained company command after successful stints as a platoon leader and executive officer. His company was comprised of 100 enlisted soldiers and three commissioned officers organized into two platoons, a headquarters section, and a maintenance section. A second lieutenant (2LT) platoon leader and a sergeant first class platoon sergeant (PSG) led each platoon. In the Army's hierarchy, non-commissioned officers—sergeants—were first-line supervisors charged with caring for the needs of soldiers. When commissioned officers, such as lieutenants and captains, took command of any unit, they were held responsible for *everything* the unit did or failed to do.

Being a platoon leader involved two distinct roles. First, the platoon leader needed to lead from the front, be the most physically fit, tactically sound, and technically proficient. Second, the platoon leader was responsible for day-to-day administration of his platoon. Platoons were evaluated both on execution of assigned tasks and on the documentation provided upon completion. Task completion included a required After Action Review (AAR) to be submitted to the company commander. An AAR was a structured de-briefing of an event that enabled soldiers to discuss and document what happened, why it happened, and how to sustain strengths and improve on weaknesses. Leaders and units used this tool to gain benefit from every task.

CPT Thompson's hands-on leadership style involved him in every aspect of unit preparedness. He had established an officer professional development program within the company in order to clearly lay out his expectations and mentor his lieutenants, who had arrived only a few months before he took command. The lieutenants were receptive to this program and took their careers seriously. After six short months under his command, his company had evolved from an undermanned, under-trained unit to first in the brigade in terms of readiness and training.

Then CPT Thompson's battalion commander informed him that his company was going to deploy to Afghanistan for a year. Thompson had eight months to prepare for deployment, including a rotation to the NTC for training before final preparations for deployment. The battalion commander held high expectations for the company, and CPT Thompson intended to deliver. Thompson was confident that he could meet all deployment requirements, yet he knew that he would inevitably face tough decisions.

In preparation for the NTC rotation, the company successfully completed all training assignments and met their benchmarks for training, personnel manning levels, maintenance for weapons, vehicles, and equipment, and overall combat preparedness. While both platoon leaders were proficient and competent, their leadership would be tested in a combat zone. CPT Thompson needed to ensure that he put the company in the best position to be successful during deployment and to make any leadership changes in time for soldiers to adjust before deployment.

CPT Thompson noticed disturbing trends with the leadership and management styles of his platoon leaders and their over-reliant relationships with their respective platoon sergeants. He closely monitored their professional development programs, hoping that after the NTC rotation the platoon leaders would demonstrate greater leadership abilities. Deployment required each lieutenant to be fully competent in all aspects of his position. If either or both did not fully meet the criteria, CPT Thompson needed to make a decision that would have a lasting impact on the company, and might damage the careers of the lieutenants: deployment or demotion.

The Platoons

2LT Jeff Russell, a 28-year old Officer Candidate School graduate with six years of enlisted experience prior to commissioning, led First Platoon. Russell's leadership style was similar to CPT Thompson's, in that he was very involved in the day-to-day operations of the platoon and created a culture of professionalism and trust with his soldiers. Russell diligently trained his junior leaders and provided opportunities for them to develop their own careers.

2LT Russell scored highest on physical fitness tests and received outstanding tactical evaluations; however, he fell short in the detail-oriented nature of writing operations orders, managing required maintenance programs, and keeping up with the administrative tasks of his platoon. Russell was involved in day-to-day operations and had specific reporting and administrative requirements. He delegated AARs to his platoon sergeant, who was on top of all of the administrative tasks of the platoon. CPT Thompson knew that those tasks were the responsibility of the platoon leader. He outlined these on 2LT Russell's counseling forms and continually worked with him to improve his administrative skills. For instance, CPT Thompson gave Russell assignments designed to focus on report writing and conducting meaningful AARs. Thompson knew that during a deployment, administrative skills were essential and highly visible because of increased operational tempo.

2LT Jack Wagner, a 22-year old, Ivy League school graduate commissioned directly from his ROTC program with no prior military experience, commanded Second Platoon. A highly intelligent mechanical engineer, Wagner excelled in technical aspects of platoon leadership such as managing the administrative requirements of medical readiness, promotion schedules, report writing, and AAR documentation. However, 2LT Wagner struggled to take charge and provide clear and confident instruction. The PSG for the second platoon was a 15-year Army veteran with multiple deployments whom Wagner relied on heavily to run the day-to-day operations of the platoon, take charge of mission execution, and lead training events.

CPT Thompson observed that whenever soldiers in the platoon had issues or needed guidance, their first call was to the PSG and not to 2LT Wagner. This bothered Thompson because the types of problems being raised to the PSG were of the sort that should have been handled by the platoon leader. 2LT Wagner repeatedly missed the mark and his soldiers were going around him to get their answers. On his counseling sheet, CPT Thompson wrote in bold letters: “As the platoon leader, you are responsible for everything your unit does or fails to do.” Thompson believed that NTC experience would either force 2LT Wagner to fully lead the platoon, or put him in a downward career spiral.

National Training Center

The NTC offered final training for units deploying to Iraq or Afghanistan. Its training simulated day-to-day operations of units forward-deployed in combat zones. Each unit was treated as if in a combat zone, and everything was documented for evaluation. CPT Thompson knew that this would be his best opportunity to evaluate his platoon leaders. On the flight to Fort Irwin, Thompson had one final professional development meeting in which he clearly laid out his expectations to both platoon leaders. He specifically told 2LT Russell and 2LT Wagner the performance dimensions he would be evaluating and the standards for success. The platoon leaders would be evaluated on their mission preparation and planning (to include writing clear and concise operations orders), mission execution, and recovery operations, including AARs.

The final NTC exercise exploited unit weaknesses by design. While the unit successfully completed the intermittent missions and the culminating field exercise, CPT Thompson’s fears about his platoon leaders were confirmed. 2LT Russell’s platoon exceeded expectations, but Russell himself received criticism and a below average performance evaluation in the planning phase of the culminating exercise. During the test mission, he failed to brief key aspects of communication and recovery plans in the operations order. 2LT Wagner received outstanding evaluations in the planning phase, but once the operation began, he allowed his PSG to take over and his command presence was minimal. When his platoon reached its objective, Wagner was in an observation post, unable to control movements of his personnel.

With deployment set for five months after the NTC rotation, CPT Thompson needed to make a decision as soon as possible. He reviewed both his evaluations and the evaluations provided by the observer-controllers at NTC. As neutral observers during simulated combat, observer-controllers followed battles, monitored radio transmissions, and gathered data for the AARs. The observer-controllers and CPT Thompson reached similar conclusions on the leadership and technical proficiency of his platoon leaders. Before he called his platoon leaders into a meeting in which he would inform them of his decision, Thompson pondered possible courses of action: leave the platoon leadership as it was, remove and reassign one or both platoon leaders elsewhere in the battalion, or reorganize the company leadership internally. This decision would have a lasting impact on the company and on the careers of his platoon leaders.

