



CompanyCommand

Building Combat-Ready Teams



To: Company Commanders

From: Company Commanders

Leadership and the Death of a Soldier

"No one ever prepares you as a Soldier or a commander on how to deal with these losses, much less how to speak to your Soldiers when you are dealing with the same pain."

—Michael Gonzalez (D/1-504 PIR)

One of the harsh realities of war is that our Soldiers get killed. The death of any Soldier is a traumatic event for a unit. In the few days following the death of a Soldier, a leader must take actions that will likely have lasting repercussions on the unit and on the family of the deceased Soldier.

The following composite story was developed from interviews with several commanders who experienced the death in combat of one or more of their Soldiers—Nick Ayers (B/1-34 AR), Orlando Cosme (D/2-325 AIR), Mike Gonzalez (D/1-504 IN & C/1-3 IN), Matt Harmon (SFODA 313 & HSC/1-3 SFG), Chris Hossfeld (C/1-24 IN), Ryan Mor-

gan (C & HHC/2-502 IN), and Jess Sellars (F/2-3 ACR), as well as one acting commander, Todd Arnold (K/3-3 ACR) and one platoon leader, Nate Self (1/A/1-75 RGR). Art La Flamme (B/302 MI), a casualty assistance officer in US-AREUR, also contributed ideas in a CompanyCommand forum discussion that are reflected in this story.

Leading my Soldiers after the death of one of our own (A composite story)

I doubt that anything could fully prepare a company commander to deal with the death of one of his Soldiers. I always knew that it could happen, but I never saw anything written about it. As I learned, it happens, and it demands a lot from commanders. I don't pretend to know all the answers, but here's my experience, put on paper for my fellow leaders who might find themselves in a similar situation.



1LT Todd Arnold at the memorial ceremony for SPC Ronnie Williams, one of his troopers in K Troop, Thunder (3rd Squadron, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, who was killed during combat operations in Iraq.

After SPC H was killed, I pulled his platoon in and talked with them. These were his closest friends. Some needed to vent, some needed time just to think and grieve. The chaplain spent a lot of time with them, and I coordinated for the combat stress team (CST) to visit. People were angry and questioned everything. We did a good AAR to see if there were any TTPs we needed to adjust. There weren't. The AAR was also a good time for me to reinforce that all of them had done their best in difficult circumstances, that there was no reason for them to feel guilty or hang their heads. I let them know that I was hurting, too, but I also tried to keep my head up. The mission had to go on, and I was the commander.

Also, as soon as we had heard about the death, as per SOP we locked down communications between Soldiers and their families until we could confirm that the casualty notification process had been completed. That's a small price to pay to ensure that the deceased Soldier's family is informed in the right manner and that other families in the unit are not traumatized by rumors.

I had the 1SG work with the Soldier's PSG to inventory his equipment and prepare his personal effects for shipment to his next of kin (NOK). As a task-organized unit, we had to sort out some issues of chain of custody for equipment. As we inventoried and packed his personal effects, we tried to keep in mind that the locker we sent home would be one of his family's few tangible keepsakes of the man the Army and the war took from them. We wanted it to be like a shrine. Things were folded and packed neatly. Some of his friends added personal notes and photos in the locker for the family to see.

I talked with the other platoons, too. They wanted to help out, but the platoon that suffered the loss needed their space and didn't want others involved. I made the PLs and PSGs aware of the mixed feelings. I don't know if I could have done more.

The battalion took the lead on planning a first-class memorial ceremony, which was incredibly important for the whole unit to begin to get a sense of closure. At the memorial ceremony, I kept my remarks short but personal; a memorial ceremony is not the time to be generic or talk in clichés. His friends took longer to speak, as they should. We videotaped the ceremony, editing it as appropriate, and sent the tape, along with the program and photos from the ceremony, to his family.

The memorial ceremony took place about 26 hours after the death. Six hours later, I sent his platoon back outside the wire. The down time had been needed, but now they had to get busy again. They were angry, scared, sad. I talked to them about honoring our fallen by completing the mission. I told them that I needed them to be professionals,

to keep their heads in the game. We knew by then that even if we did everything right, we could suffer casualties, but I reminded them that our odds would be better if we focused on the mission at hand and maintained our standards.

I offered to the PL and PSG to join them on that first mission. It demonstrated to the Soldiers that I wasn't afraid to go back out. It also would have been a way to ensure that their anger over the death didn't cloud their sense of values and professionalism. They seemed to appreciate the offer but declined. I did work with the platoon's chain of command and the CST to assess whether any Soldiers were not ready to get back in the fray. We ended up holding one guy out for a couple days, until he understood that "pay-back" would only make things worse.

Soon after notification, my battalion commander and I had both called the Soldier's family. I followed up a few days later, as they prepared for the funeral back home. Of course the parents are experiencing a lot of emotion and are going to blame you at some level, but they really appreciated the calls. We talked about what a great person their son was. I wrote them a pretty long letter, aware that they'll likely keep it their whole lives. I've heard that some COs haven't written letters. In my opinion, a thoughtful letter to the family is an absolute must. It's the toughest thing I've ever had to write.

I also coordinated with rear-d to establish communication with the casualty notification officer (CNO) and casualty assistance officer (CAO). They were able to help me under-



CPT Jess Sellars and 1SG Lynn Bradley of F Troop, Sabre (2nd) Squadron, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, at the memorial ceremony for one of their Soldiers, SGT Tyrone Chisholm.

stand how the family was coping, and I was able to convey to the CAO how important it was to me and my unit that the family be treated with the utmost compassion. A Soldier who dies has two families who love him—one who raised him and another who trained and fought alongside him.

I know this isn't always the case, but we had the opportunity to select a Soldier to escort the body home. We chose SPC H's squad leader, SSG G, because he'd already met the family and was present at the death. We knew we were accepting some risk to our other Soldiers by giving up a leader while the missions continued, but we felt it was very important to have the right representative of our unit and the Army there when the family received their son's body.

The arrival of SPC H's replacement required my attention. The concern was that some Soldiers in the platoon seemed to think that this poor private was trying to replace their buddy and was just a "FNG." The 1SG and I spoke with all of them about how their friend was irreplaceable, yes, but his combat power HAD to be replaced, and our new Soldier was now part of our team.

In the weeks and months after the death, the 1SG and I tried to designate time to cope for the guys who were present on the mission with SPC H. Talking about it with each other, the chaplain, and the CST in the days immediately following the incident were important and valuable, but that didn't totally resolve all the issues for the surviving Soldiers. We'd heard that the grieving process takes time, and from what I've seen, that's true. It's still going on for many of us.

It was important to the Soldiers in the company that SPC H be memorialized, not just at the ceremony, but permanently. Since SPC H was a PT stud, we chose to name our unit's semi-annual PT competition after him. A plaque that remembers our fallen hero hangs in our company area.

I'll never forget SPC H, nor should I. His photo sits on my

desk as I write this. After returning home, I visited his family, and together we visited his gravesite. His family asked a lot of questions about their son and the circumstances of his death, and they seemed profoundly relieved to have their questions answered. We have stayed in touch. On the first anniversary of the death, I made it a point to call them, and also to connect with the other Soldiers who were most affected by the death.

I now understand the things I'd heard about the burden of command. But I've come to accept the fact that anyone could get killed in war; usually, it's no one's fault. I don't let my Soldiers feel guilty about the death, and I try to remember that myself. I've had to learn how to grieve, and how as a leader I can help my other Soldiers and my fallen Soldier's family work through the grieving process.

I wouldn't wish this experience on any leader. I hope this helps some commander out there be a little better prepared than I was when the bad news comes over the net.

A Note to Company Commanders: We invite you to log in, share your own experience, and join your peers in conversation on this topic. We owe it to our Soldiers, their families, and our Nation to prepare ourselves and to help our fellow professionals prepare for the challenges of leadership after the death of one of our Soldiers.

Additional resources for leading your unit through the death of one of your Soldiers can be found in the Soldiers and Families topic of the CompanyCommand forum and in the Leadership topic of the PlatoonLeader forum. Many thanks to Ray and Mindy Kimball for creating a great resource on casualty operations for company-level leaders.

Finally, we would like to thank the leaders who shared their experiences on this difficult topic. Your contribution is making a difference and is greatly appreciated by current, future, and past company-level commanders.

Connecting leaders

CC is Company Commanders.

The CC forum is a voluntary, grass-roots forum that is by-and-for company commanders. The forum is positive and practical—focused like a laser beam on the practice of company command and those things that are important to company commanders. Send article ideas to nate.self@us.army.mil.



Art by Jody Harmon

Company Commanders, connect at <http://CompanyCommand.army.mil>

in conversation