



By Brad Hutchison

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The troops were ready: SHARP, OPSEC, SAEDA and CTIP training complete; field sanitation, environmental compliance, and ammunition handling teams trained and identified; all Soldiers who would come within the 385 days of their exit from the Army before their return to home station complete with Soldier for Life; everyone current on dental and vaccinations. Every task highlighted green from their pre-deployment checklist to the commanding general's "roll-out card". For his abilities and competence, the company commander was rewarded with a battalion headquarters company command upon redeployment from the National Training Center (NTC). Yet, after 11 days of fighting Blackhorse in the unforgiving California desert, the company tallied only three destroyed enemy vehicles against their own forty eight lost.

As a recent Observer-Controller/Trainer at the NTC I spent months watching units' defenses crumble like this and seeing their attacks stall against materially inferior forces. What

caused the failures? All that readiness. We ask more of today's units than ever before in the history of the Army, and it is harming both the mission and our Soldiers.

I am far from the first to come to this conclusion. Review the guidance from General Milley, General Abrams, or any number of senior leaders; they know our units have to many competing demands for them to be effective at their primary task, fighting and winning this nation's wars. Listening to division and brigade leadership rotation after rotation, they know these tasks cannot all be done too. But our companies and staffs aren't hearing it. All we hear instead is: "Why is [insert task of choice] not done?" Our personal/professional narrative of excellence in the face of the chaotic adversity of combat cannot survive in the face of the constant assault our failures have upon that ideal. Our inadequacies are exposed for the world to see at every command and staff meeting. It is easy to see how junior leaders will do anything to avoid their sense of inadequacy laid bare by the probing questions that follow a late award or unmet training quotas.

How burdensome is the bureaucracy of keeping the Army working from day to day? One of my fellow officers summarized the increase in mandatory training over the last several decades:

*Around forty years ago, the year my father commissioned as an Infantry Officer, there were about 150 days of mandatory training. Fourteen years ago in 2002, the number had grown to 297 days of mandatory training. Today, the tally has reached 514 days of annual mandatory training; literally two years of mandatory annual requirements to be done every year.*

How have we adapted to these increased demands? According to a [paper published](#) by the U.S. Army War College-We lie.

We have completely compromised the one value we claim that you can never get back once you lose it: Integrity. More shocking than the revelation that our integrity is a sham is how nonchalant leaders are with accepting this as fact. Months of informal and formal discussions on this topic and I have yet to find someone who can honestly disagree with the study's conclusions. I know I've signed EO or MRT training memos willfully ignorant to the virtual certainty the real attendance did not meet the required 90%.

I offer a simple solution. It doesn't even involve Congress or the DoD changing laws or regulations. We must embrace failure. Tell your commanders you expect them to fail to meet all the requirements. Tell them that it is ok to fall short (as long as that shortfall is deliberate, expected, and a consequence of a decision to succeed elsewhere). Then, make them believe it through your actions and the actions of your staff. For those Company/Troop/Battery commanders and commanders-to-be: It is ok to fail to meet your higher HQs requirements. Much like we do with new second lieutenants, failures by our company commanders should be expected and embraced. Given our current regulations of 20 months of required annual training, failure is inevitable.

My leadership openly admitted that as long as we could close with and destroy the enemy while keeping our Soldiers safe, the other requirements were simply a way of discriminating between our capabilities. This revelation was incredibly freeing for me. Failure to send all six Soldiers to this month's awareness observance did not necessarily mean I had failed to manage my Soldiers and tasks properly. I could sit in a command and staff with amber readiness levels in field sanitation and not sweat the question or comment it was sure to incite. By choosing to fail to meet sometimes highly visible standards I was able to focus instead on skills I felt were critical to my company's success.

When I talk to my peers, I am amazed at how localized my experience seems to be. Many of my fellow current and former commanders rarely believe that a battalion or even brigade commander wouldn't think them lesser beings for being incomplete on this month's

resiliency training, that all 6 of their machineguns are in maintenance following a field exercise, or that they were in the field without the requisite field-sanitation equipment. My commander did not see each of my failures as weakness, but my deliberate decisions about them as an outward sign of strength. I was reminded of that fact as each mock-battle unfolded at NTC: more than gunnery scores or PT averages, a commander's tolerance for less than perfect solutions allowed units to exploit their situations and bloody the opposing force.

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