



LTC Foster uncases the 4-10 Cavalry Colors during a ceremony in Europe

By: LTC Chad Foster

I learned a lot over two years in command of a Cavalry Squadron. I also re-learned many things that I had discovered during earlier assignments, but these lessons gained a new and broader context when experienced from a Commander's perspective. The list that follows is not definitive. However, I hope that this "top 10," as imperfect and incomplete as it is, might be helpful to some of those lucky enough to be taking command at any level in the future.

1. To truly command, you must have the courage to give up some control.

You **MUST** allow your subordinate leaders to do their jobs - That sounds obvious, right? But there can be a strong temptation to control everything. After all, YOU are the Commander, the most experienced and (to that point, at least) the most professionally successful officer in the battalion. Those who are focused on their own advancement, tend to obsess about

“looking bad” in front of the boss. Everything **MUST** be perfect, so they feel like they must control it.

No matter how strong this urge might become, fight it. Fight it with all you’ve got. Your subordinate leaders and soldiers will never develop effectively and your unit will never fully harness the power and talent of its members unless you give up some control. If you are controlling, it likely that you aren’t commanding anything. While there are times when you have to closely monitor and control actions, these are the exceptions, not the norm. Give intent rather than directives whenever possible and trust your subordinates with the freedom to maneuver while pursuing that intent. Any short term setbacks that might occur are well worth the long term developmental benefits to the unit and to those young soldiers, NCOs, and officers.

2. Never let perfect become the enemy of good enough.

Building on the comments above, it is vital to understand that “perfect” is a myth. Don’t waste your time trying to achieve it. The battalion (and you) have limited time and limited organizational energy. Avoid wasting them chasing perfection. That doesn’t mean that you lower standards or accept mediocrity, it just means that you understand reality. Work hard and push your team to get things as good as you can, but also know when to shift to the next target. Pursuit of perfection in planning tends to result in rigidity, and expecting perfect results invariably breeds a zero defect atmosphere. Instead, focus on simple, flexible plans that provide clear guidance but minimal directives.

3. Remind yourself every day that it isn’t about you

Command is about the team. Commanders come and go. You’re just a temporary caretaker – and there were literally hundreds of other leaders who were as good as you (or better) who didn’t get the chance to do what you are doing. Realizing this will keep you grounded.

4. You’re ALWAYS going to feel disappointed in many aspects of your performance as a commander. Often deeply disappointed.

No matter how hard you work or how hard you try, there is going to be something left undone or something that you will wish you had done better during your time in command. It’s unavoidable because . . . well, you aren’t perfect (see #2). Don’t be embarrassed by it when you are transitioning with your replacement. Instead, focus on those things that you did not do particularly well and help the next commander avoid the same shortfalls. If you

aren't sharing the "bad" stuff, then you aren't helping your unit to be better in the future. Leave a legacy that includes setting the conditions for the next guy to excel.

5. You can't accomplish every goal that you'd like. Pick the 2 or 3 that are the most important and focus on them. That's the best you can do.

With only limited time and limited organizational energy (see # 2), there is only so much that you will be able to do. Before you even take command, figure out what is most important to you as a leader. That will allow you to come into the job with a basic blueprint that you can then adjust based on your initial assessment of the unit and input from your CSM and other subordinate leaders. Once you have the possibilities identified, pick a few that are not only most important to you but that are also most vital for the success of the unit.

6. Organizational culture is the most difficult thing to change, and you can't do it alone.

Organizational culture is composed primarily of how the members of the team think and what they believe. Changing either of those things is a monumental task. And no matter how hard you try, it might not be possible to transform the organizational culture to the extent that you wish. However, to have any chance of success you MUST get others to buy-in so that they can help you. These "recruits" are potential agents of change that can exponentially increase the impact of your transformational efforts. Going it alone won't work. Building a team and leading it toward a common goal is the only way you can succeed.

7. Recognize when the majors and other staff at higher HQ are having a tough time. Help to lift them up.

Being a Major in a battalion is tough work. It is infinitely tougher for the ones working at the Brigade level. The Brigade S3 and XO not only answer to the Brigade Commander, they also have to answer to six battalion commanders, many of whom all have relatively recent experience doing the same jobs that they now hold. On top of all of that, these two senior majors must figure out how to effectively lead the other field grade officers in the Brigade as they plan, synchronize, and coordinate the key staff actions necessary to keep the unit running.

The Brigade S3, XO, and other members of the staff will have their share of hard times. Sometimes, their hardships are due to their own mistakes and oversights. At other times,

their “sufferings” are the result of things beyond their control. When these things happen, you should reach out to these young majors to provide support and encouragement or possibly even some advice. By doing so, not only you will have an immeasurably positive impact on the professional development of those officers, you will also help the entire Brigade by assisting these key staff leaders to get back on track.

8. Be a team player all the time, every time . . . even when others aren't. Do it because it's the right thing to do, not because you expect payback later.

This is a no-brainer . . . or, at least, it should be. Just do the right thing for the right reasons. If you are being a team player just because you think the Boss is going to see it and give you credit or because you expect payback in the future, you are missing the point.

9. Guard the time of your subordinates as jealously as you would like to have your own protected.

Minimize meetings and briefings. If your troop/company commanders are in meetings and conducting briefings, they aren't commanding their formations. Likewise, if your staff is tied up in such things, there is a lot of analysis and coordination that is probably not getting done, too. Sometimes these gatherings are necessary. Often they are not. Whenever possible, try to have quick, small group discussions to give guidance, receive feedback, identify problems, share ideas, and to just interact with your subordinate leaders. These are usually far more productive than formalized briefings.

10. It's not just about what you say and what you do. It's about how you make those around you feel when you say and do those things.

The best commanders are able to effectively identify and manage their own emotions and those of others. This means that they are able to adjust their actions and words to best communicate, motivate, inspire and influence subordinates, peers, and superiors. Make others feel like they are valued, and their contributions to the team will be greater. False praise or manipulation won't cut it. The best method is to be genuine. Really care about your team, and they will know it and respond accordingly. If you don't really care about your people, you are in the wrong profession and there's nothing that this list (or any other) can do for you.

LTC Chad Foster is an Armor Officer with over 19 years of experience in Cavalry and Armored units. He recently relinquished command of the 4th Squadron, 10th U.S. Cavalry after a two year tour that included deployments to Jordan in support of Operation Spartan

Shield (OSS) and to Europe in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve (OAR).

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