



By [Aaron Childers](#)

### **You are going into a survival situation and you can only bring ten things...**

Sometimes being a field grade is like being in a survival scenario. You have a lot to do, build shelter, find water, and search for food. All of these things are important and your survival depends on accomplishing these tasks. The situation is daunting but luckily you are stranded with a group of peers to help you through this time and you have brought your field grade survival kit.

Being a field grade in a XO/S3 position is one of the most challenging jobs an officer will have faced up to that point in their career. Although there are many great resources out

there, (I highly recommend [The Iron Majors Survival Guide](#)) here are the ten things I would bring with me to survive as a field grade. The items listed below did not come from self-discovery, but instead came from leaders I trusted and respected. Thanks to them, my experiences were not something I “survived,” but instead something I truly valued.

**1-Bring your work ethic.** The two years you have at a battalion/brigade will be the hardest you have ever worked, and you owe it to your unit and yourself to give it your all. Whether you are the XO or S3, you will touch EVERYTHING that the unit does. A mentor once told me “If you don’t accomplish something for your unit, it won’t get done, your unit will fail, and as a major, there are no safety nets.” I laughed at this at the time but it is absolutely true. No one else will rewrite your orders, fix your unit’s procedures, or make sure everything has been accomplished on time. Although you should and will work hard, make sure that you take the time to develop efficient trackers and systems that work for you and your team.

**2-Bring the right attitude.** If you approach your XO/S3 time as a competition with other field grades, then you will meet competitors; if you see this as the opportunity to be part of a team, then you will find teammates. Your fellow major in the BN absolutely needs to be your teammate. If this relationship goes well, then everything will be easier and your unit will run more smoothly. As with most things, communication is key, and you always need to assume that the other person has the best intentions-remember the golden rule. Some of my strongest friendships remain those I developed with my fellow XOs, S3s, and majors on the brigade staff; you are in this together.

**3-Bring your “Green Notebook” and continue leader development.** Mentor those below you. At the battalion level, you will have lieutenants that are waiting for platoon leader time and at the brigade level you will have a bunch of captains waiting on command. These are two populations that are getting ready to lead troops and should

be “hungry” for anything that will help them prepare for the essential roles they are about to assume. You have had their jobs and succeeded; pass along whatever you can to these groups.

Push “Leader Development” in operations- I would look to see how you can help build your commander’s leader development program. Good units have leader development programs (for both officers and NCOs), and as a field grade you have an important role in this. Bring your ideas and broadening experience to the table. Use what you have seen in your other units, online, and through self-study to the table. Resources like USMA’s CALDOL (who come to the unit for workshops), guest speakers, and even articles online are great ways to enrich programs.

Ask your boss for some development time. My brigade and battalion commander always took the time to answer self-development questions when asked, and I appreciated it.

Take advantage of your boss’s experience and recognize that your boss was selected by the Army/ Marine Corps to command for a reason; take the opportunity to learn from them.

**4-Take charge! You are still a leader as a staff officer - never forget this.** You will impact people the same way you always have, and your staff will recognize this. As the XO/S3 in your organization, your influence is even greater. Remember, whether or not you realize it, the entire BN will look at you. This means living by the same standard you did as a commander (and hopefully the same standard throughout). Congratulations- you are the “them” and the “those guys” that junior leaders always talked about. If you cut corners or slack on standards, people will notice.

**5-Take a moment to recognize the importance of your position.** The last time you were in a battalion, you were one of five company commanders in your battalion and one of 30 or so in the brigade. Now there are only two majors in the battalion and only

eight (give or take) maneuver majors in the brigade. You will be counted on to make things happen and blamed when things go poorly. Expect to hear in passing, “well the S3 said” or “but the XO told me.”

**6-Take an appetite suppressant.** There are too many officers worried about what they are going to do next. This goes both ways. If you are constantly worried about who is going to be named the next brigade XO or S3, then you are not taking care of your battalion. A leader once told me, “the easiest way to ensure you won’t be the next brigade XO/S3 is to focus on that.” The same goes for those who are looking to go to their next “easier” job. You are not in position to “survive” for two years and move on. The E-5 does not want to hear about how hard your job is if you fail to coordinate for meals or miss training time. Stay focused on the task at hand.

**7-Bring your thinking cap.** Solve your next higher headquarters’ problems- always work to make your brigade/division’s job easier. If you are doing an event at the battalion level, then you should ask for the minimum you need to be successful from brigade (you are potentially taking a resource from another battalion). Your next higher headquarters is never going to fully plan your operations (nor should they). The responsibility rests with you for planning. You should appreciate that the brigade is responsible for five other battalions also and is probably working with division on other issues as well.

The same goes for good ideas. If you have a good idea, then share it and help the other units. At the battalion level, we had several different programs that we opened up across the brigade. At the brigade level, I was constantly talking to the other brigade S3s, sharing ideas and solutions. Develop a network of peers that you can share ideas, products, and have discussions with.

**8-Bring the ability to work by, with, and through, your own organization.** I know

the expression is meant for advising, but it is a true statement in garrison. Don't go over people's heads, go around your brigade/division, or keep people in the dark. If you deviate from the standard procedures, communicate why and then proceed.

**9-Take your pillow and some running shoes.** I did a poor job of this. Make sure you stay on top of PT and sleep. You owe it to your staff and your unit to stay sharp physically and mentally. You do nothing for your unit if you fall asleep in meetings or can't keep up physically. Even if this means not getting to everything on your task list-find a way to get recharged.

**10-Bring your family.** They will be the ones you live with at the next duty station. Expectation management is critical, you need to have an honest discussion with your significant other about what this time going to look like. Develop a list of priorities for your family and be open about your professional priorities.

I personally worked through dinner on a regular occasion, but did everything in my power to protect my weekends and focus on the family. I have peers who will make it a point to be home every night for dinner, even if that means coming in well before 0400 the next day. Whatever is important to your family, make sure you discuss it beforehand.

Make sure you take advantage of block leave periods and holidays, even if you stay local. My boss used to tell me, "leave is as much for leaders as it is for Soldiers" and that couldn't be more true.

My wife and I enjoyed battalion and brigade events. We went to as many balls and unit functions as possible. With four kids we were already getting a babysitter so many of these events became our date night (on purpose). Treat these events as something that you enjoy and that same attitude will spread.

In the end the goal is not to just “survive” your time as a field grade, but to emerge as a successful and competent staff officer, taking your unit to another level. This time is about understanding you boss’s intent and achieving something great. You might start in survival mode but you should finish with a staff that can operate without you- and it will. Just in time for the next new major to start...

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