



By Scott Shaw and Chad Foster

Writing letters of introduction to your future battalion or brigade commanders has been a staple of the basic and career course since we were lieutenants and captains (and before our time as well). This time-honored tradition has turned from one of envelope and stamp to a well-written email. Whatever the medium, the purpose is still the same - to say who you are and that you're excited to be joining the unit.

So do they matter?

The short answer is yes. Both of us recently completed battalion command, and over the course of that period saw many emails come into our inbox from lieutenants in their basic courses and captains in their career courses. These emails typically reached us before their ORBs, so they were our first impressions of these new officers.

Below are some tips for writing a letter of introduction to your soon-to-be commander:

Do

- Remember that this is YOUR first impression. Your ability to communicate matters. Make sure your spelling and grammar are correct, and that your letter is coherent.
- Tell us about yourself.- Please tell your future commander about your commissioning source, your major, your family [very important - and please send contact information IF your family wants to be contacted (which we recommend - it can be difficult for the spouse of a Soldier moving to a new installation).
- Remember that you are joining the unit - not the other way around. The unit was there long before you and will continue long after you are gone. If you have the mindset that this is about the TEAM and not about YOU, there is a very high likelihood that you will be successful.
- Be careful about providing a list of your "accomplishments." This is a fine line to walk. We would like to know if you were an honor/distinguished graduate from your commissioning source. However, don't get carried away. Usually, less is more. You'll have plenty of chances to show your talents once you arrive.
- If it is your goal, express your intent to EARN a chance to serve in a specific position. For example, let your commander know that you are ready to work hard with the goal of proving yourself worthy of commanding a company or, if you are a major, serving as a battalion S3 or executive officer. However, emphasize that you are ready and willing to **serve the team** in any capacity that is required.
- Make sure you get the unit name and motto correct if you are going to mention it.
- Be brief but be complete. This is a delicate balancing act that can be assisted by the next point.
- Have someone who's articulate and writes well proof your letter. Note - Do not trust someone based on their rank. We know plenty of senior officers who are very poor writers. Also make sure that you give that person some time. Rushed proofing is not good proofing.
- Think about the timing of your letter. If you're wanting to influence where you're going (writing to a battalion commander to go to their unit vice sending a letter of introduction) then send earlier rather than later. If you received a welcome letter or email from the unit, respond when you receive.

Don't

- Attempt to be funny. We want you to have a personality, but first and foremost we want you to be a professional. One of us encountered a letter of introduction where an incoming officer actually wrote "I like long walks on the beach and stimulating conversation. But seriously . . ." Yes, that was really in a letter of introduction. There

will be a time and place to let your sense of humor shine, but don't do it right out the gate.

- Ask for a specific timeline to get into command or into a key developmental position. Everybody wants to get into their key jobs as soon as possible. A lot of factors go into determining when that will happen. Your soon-to-be commander must look at the "big picture" when determining or recommending timelines for company command and KD slates. If there are extenuating circumstances, save that for a face-to-face discussion once you arrive at the unit. Remember that brigade commanders determine company command slates and commanding generals determine KD slates for field grades, but the input of battalion commanders is often decisive in shaping those decisions.
- Push too hard to get your gaining unit to help get you to a follow-on school. Commanders have a lot on their plate with the units they are already commanding, so calling a school house on your behalf might not be a top priority in most instances. This is especially true if you are requesting a school that doesn't really translate well to preparing you for your duties in the type of unit you are joining. For example, a request to attend Airborne training when you are headed to an ABCT is less likely to get enthusiastic support from the commander. Additionally, upcoming unit training events and/or deployments are a big part in your commander's decision about whether or not to support any type of non-essential (or "good to have?") follow-on school. A better individual to engage on this topic is the battalion S3. That "Iron Major" will have a good understanding of the training schedule, unit requirements, and the intent of the commander regarding such things. Get in touch with the unit S3 and have that conversation separately. Doing so will allow you get a better feel for the situation and determine how best to proceed. Approach your conversations and correspondence with the S3 in the same professional manner as you would with the commander. This is another opportunity to make a positive first impression on another key leader with whom you will work closely in your new unit.

Having said all of the above, by all means attend those courses that WILL directly contribute to your unit. Don't skip out on Ranger School, Cavalry Leader's Course, or another branch specific course.

- Send a letter full of typos or that rambles. Don't use flowery language. We've actually read a letter where an officer called himself an "old soul." This is not the type of impression you want to make. Once again, have someone proofread your email before you send it.

Closing Thoughts

Like most things, there are some potential pitfalls with a letter of introduction, most of which usually result from the tone of the note. If you come across as humble and motivated, your letter will be well-received. It will get you off to a good start that you can build upon once you arrive. If you seem arrogant or entitled, your reputation will take a significant hit before you even arrive. There is a fine line between being bold and being foolish.

There is a lot of good that can (and will) result from a quality letter of introduction. A good one shows you are focused and care about the team. If you are unsure about something, it never hurts to call the unit S1 and ask. Above all, take the time to do it right. Doing so will help to set the stage for the rest of your experience in the unit.

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