

Becoming Number One - Assuming Battalion Command as the Executive Officer



By Daniel Clark

You've been at the job for a few months now. You're just starting to get the hang of this executive officer thing. You know the unit's mission, you understand most of the personalities in your battalion, and you're starting to see the staff rowing in the right direction. You've even been "in command" for a day or two while the old man was out TDY (temporary duty/travel). There's still a mountain of work to be done, but between you and

the operations officer, the unit is running pretty smoothly. You're almost content, not yet ready to punch on the autopilot, but ready to take just a moment to relax. Then the phone rings. "Get to the brigade commander's office, now." You don't even get a chance to ask what it's about before the brigade XO hangs up the phone.

Now you're standing outside the commander's office wondering what one of your personnel might have possibly done this time. A DUI, a domestic incident, a lost sensitive item? It could be anything, and you're racking your brain trying to think if there's anything you missed, and if so, why does the brigade commander know about it before you? Does your boss know? Where is your boss by the way?

"This isn't going to be easy," the brigade commander tells you, "but I have every confidence that you'll be able to do the job, if I didn't, I wouldn't put you in the position." Your head is swimming just a little bit while you try to process what you just heard. You're the battalion commander now.

As executive officers, we're the number two, expected to step up in the unlikely event that our commander falls, whether to injury, illness, or to some malfeasance. While it is the prime responsibility of the second in command, it's not something we're ever really prepared for. We don't spend a lot of time thinking about it, mostly because we're so busy trying to run the battalion, there isn't time to worry about having to assume command. However, losing a commander will affect your battalion. Whether your unit is able to continue to function now rests heavily on your shoulders.

No one wants to think about the potential loss of a unit commander, but setting these five conditions will make all the difference if you find yourself on the receiving end of an assumption of command order.

Know your commander's intent - As the XO, this information should already be ingrained in your mind. However, it's easy to get so buried in the day to day that you lose sight of

where your unit is going. At times like these, it's important to maintain stability in your battalion. Depending on your boss' personality and reputation, or the circumstances of the loss, this event can be emotionally jarring for the unit. You still have a mission to accomplish. Keep everyone flying in the same direction, don't make a bunch of changes, and stick to your boss' plan. This is not the time to try and fix things you might think are wrong in your unit. You'll make some small tweaks along the way, but no matter the reason for your assumption, keeping the air calm and avoiding turbulence will help keep your craft on the right azimuth.

Know your senior enlisted advisor (SEA) - Most XOs have a good relationship with their SEA. But the relationship between the SEA and the commander is different. Now, the relationship won't just be about how to get things done anymore. You'll have to rely on the SEA to help keep you grounded. Think of them as a compass. A compass card will always tell you what direction you're going, as long as you're flying straight and level. Bank too hard, and you'll find your compass either ahead of, or behind you, and you won't really know which way you're headed. Maintain this relationship at all times, you never know when you might need it.

Know your experts - Just like your boss, you won't be able to do it all yourself. The battalion staff and your subordinate commanders will be critical to staying on course. Don't be afraid to look for help. The brigade and division staff have specialists (lawyers, surgeons, chaplains, equal opportunity leaders) that have been around the airfield a few times and know the pattern. While you may have relied on them as the XO to get something done, now they're there to advise and assist you. Not only will they help you, but they are likely privy to information you may not have been as the XO. They can bring you up to speed on all of the issues brewing in your unit that you may not have known.

Know your unit - There are some commanders (at all echelons) who believe certain things are only the purview of commanders. As the XO, it is incumbent upon you to impress upon

your boss the importance of reading you into everything, not for action, but for awareness. Anything they know, you should know. Be present for discussions with subordinate/higher commanders, or follow-up immediately afterward. Ask to be carbon copied or forwarded all professional correspondence. Track his/her calendar, not just the unit battle rhythm. In the event, you do find yourself in command, the less time you have to spend catching up on issues within the unit, the more time you'll have to focus on keeping your unit on course.

Know your fellow commanders - To your left and right, there are men and women who know the job and understand many of the challenges you face. Seek their support and mentorship. There's not much new under the sun and any challenges you face, they have likely already faced. The same goes for your higher commander. Don't be afraid to seek out his or her guidance and advice.

No amount of planning can prepare you for the experience of assuming command of your battalion. Your unit will be, at best, distracted. You will have questions that you may not ever find answers to. There may be ongoing investigations. There may be additional personnel losses/changeover. Your unit may even have to change locations. Being the calm at the center of the storm will help keep your unit moving in the right direction and you'll all come out the other side to clear skies and following winds.

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