COMMAND CHALLENGES AT UNIT LEVEL

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*With me as leader, ye men, control your anxieties;*
*Under my guidance, let ship and crew run straight.*

*Publius Ovidius Naso, ‘Ovid’*

**Introduction**

1. A Battalion Commander is responsible for everything that his command does or fails to do; this popularly quoted Army adage supports Ovid, quoted above. Commanding a unit is arguably the most challenging, yet most rewarding, of all jobs that an officer undertakes. Commanding Officers form the back-bone of the Army. They are the essential cogs that command units, determine morale, manage resources, and shoulder the responsibility and the blame when events refuse to follow the plan.

2. Though Command could simply be defined as the exercising of authority, it is the human element under command that derides this simplicity. So, while command is bestowed upon an individual by virtue of his length of service and acceptable grades on courses of instruction, leadership is an attribute that is perhaps more ingrained than acquired. Also it is more valuable than the mere wearing of ranks, even though rank facilitates leadership. The command experience is varied and differs with the type of unit that one commands. It would be safe to assume that, given the dynamism of human nature, those who command men-intensive units as against material-intensive units face a stiffer challenge. Despite the resilience that is often associated with humans, and soldiers in particular, the severe demands of serving in peace and field today, in an Army occasionally afflicted by unprofessional considerations and compulsions, leaves no doubt about the stark trial that a Commanding Officer faces in keeping his subordinate officers and men motivated to willingly obey. With a few recent incidents of troubled relations between the officers and men, deemed command failures, the theory of command that has for so long largely been passed down as lore and in anecdotes over drinks appears to have been put to test.

**Scope**

3. What then are the typical challenges that confront the Commanding Officer today? How can he balance the aspirations of his subordinates while ensuring a fulfilling command
experience? What does the organisation need to do to assist this all-important cog to function without a snag? This essay will attempt to answer these posers.

**Factors Affecting Command**

4. **Intrinsic and Extrinsic Factors.** Figure 1 gives a summary of the various factors that impact the command of a unit. Aspects that stem from the Commanding Officer’s personal attributes as well as those that germinate within the unit are clubbed under ‘Intrinsic Factors’. ‘Extrinsic Factors’ comprise those facets that may effectively be deemed to be beyond the purview of the Commanding Officer. This includes the influence of the hierarchy and aspects such as policies, operational environment and the organisation’s efforts at preparing an officer for command.

![Figure 1. Intrinsic and Extrinsic factors affecting command of a unit.](image)

5. **Factors as a Challenge and Opportunity.** While various issues may be listed as separate factors, some issues will invariably converge with others to pose challenges during command. The Commanding Officer’s individual character attributes will perpetually be called into play in dealing with various challenges. Hence, it is pertinent to note, as highlighted in Figure 2, that the challenges as well as the means for resolution of...
these challenges are contained within these contributing factors. If a factor plays a negative role in facilitating command, it becomes a challenge. On the other hand, the factor becomes an asset or a means to overcome a challenge if it enables the Commanding Officer to exercise effective command. The sum total of this effort by the Commanding Officer to overcome challenges yields the command climate that characterises his unit.

Figure 2. The factors that affect command are also the ones that contain or provide the means to overcome these challenges. Command Climate is the environment generated during the application of these means to overcome the challenges.

Challenges for a Gratifying Command

6. **Policies of Military Secretary Branch.**

(a) **Command Planning.** The challenge starts the moment the Number 3 Selection Board results are declassified. Every officer aspires to command his own battalion/ regiment. Destiny or the Military Secretary’s (MS) Branch sometimes will otherwise. By allowing itself to be reduced to a mutely assenting rubber stamp in matters of command planning, the MS Branch has abdicated to the Colonels of the Regiment (COR) a very important role. While, earlier too, the inputs were sought from the COR, the MS Branch was the upholder of policy to get the deserving his due. Having abandoned the decision making totally to the COR, no longer do command planning policies hold water. Sitting seconds-in-command, approved for command and walking the barracks in pompous self-importance have been unceremoniously shunted out to accommodate parochial considerations, in violation of policies and reasoning. Preventing rightful candidates from assuming command of their battalions damages the credibility of the MS Branch and breeds dissent not only in the affected officer but also in those who learn of the mishandling.

(b) **Primacy to Staff: Deriding Regimental Duty.** If it wasn’t for the Young Officers from the Services, Infantry units couldn’t keep their head above water. Just commissioned, they are the mainstay in field and operational areas with each unit
having two to four of these Young Officers who give premium time to the unit while the unit YOs venture out for mandatory courses. The middle rung of officers is invariably missing from the unit, being posted on staff and instructional tenures. It is anathema for the MS Branch to post an officer qualified on the Staff Course to the unit. Particularly so, if he has been ‘Adequately Exercised’ in the Company Commander’s appointment. While prolonged tenures in Staff are the norm, allowing a PSC officer adequate regimental time is not a consideration. Staff tenures are given over-riding importance at the expense of regimental duty.

(c) **The Bogey of Exposures.** In providing officers two staff/instructional exposures before command, the MS Branch has messed up its arithmetic, particularly for the Infantry, with the reduced age for command. The above average officer, who is expected to be approved for command, anyway avails a foreign tenure varying between one to three years, a year at Staff College, one or two seasons preparing for the same (including pre-staff), more than a year of mandatory courses of instruction and about two years of annual leave. That makes it seven to nine years of absence from regimental duty. Add to these two exposures of two years each and you have upwards of ten years of absence. By any stretch of imagination, it is abject overkill. Rather than address this anomaly, the doomsayers are pointing fingers at the younger age profile of the Commanding Officers, implying a lack of maturity for command. Even 20 years will be insufficient if the organisation conspires to keep the officers away from their profession, being practised in the battalions from unit command point of view, and the men that they are supposed to command in battle.

7. **Nature of Unit.** The type of unit one gets to command brings with it typical challenges. The best scenario is, of course, the command of one’s own battalion. But there are several Rashtriya Rifles (RR), Assam Rifles (AR), Vikas, and National Security Guard (NSG) battalions that need to be led. In a RR Battalion, the CO will be confronted with a consortium of Arms and Services that has to be meshed into a unified fighting force. Setting a new course is relatively easier given the heavy turnover. However, the pulls and pressures from the operational environment and the infamous ‘RR mentality’, that seeks to revel in the liberating, incognito status and ‘freestyle’ (read lax) culture in the absence of regimentation, needs to be guarded against. In an AR and Vikas Battalion, the CO and officers are the transients with the men comprising a permanent cadre. So there is a need to be aware of existing ethos and traditions that stand the outfit in good stead. Commanding a regular battalion other than your own requires an acute sense of adaptability since the CO will be the only outsider and is bound to be closely watched and even judged by the officers and men.

8. **The Senior Command Course.** This is supposedly the Battalion Commander’s Course for the Army officers. It falls woefully short of expectations in preparing an officer to face the vagaries of command. The command hopefuls are given a refresher course on tactics and as is true for all courses, the emphasis is on testing the candidates through war-games and
Assimilation Exercises. With the varied terrain and enemies within and outside that our nation is blessed with, the course quickly degenerates into the familiar assignment submissions and cramming, so typical of the Army courses. The course curriculum does not in the remotest way prepare the candidates for command. There are no exercises on unit administration, civil-military relations, handling of crises, legal procedures, Army values, command philosophy, situation reaction, etc. A CD is handed out at the end that gives out the theory of unit administration. The value that could have been gained from three months of contact classes with ex-COs is lost in the muddle. This leaves those who have not served as the seconds-in-command to learn on the job once they take over command of a unit. A challenge indeed, to arrive only with a perception of the job and then deliver on an arduous task. In sum, the Senior Command course is a great opportunity, but presently, a lost one.

9. **The Challenge Originates Within.**

   The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
   But in ourselves...

   Cassius to Brutus, Julius Caesar, Act 1, Scene 2.

While it may be convenient to blame all challenges on matters beyond the control of the CO, it would be worthwhile to introspect on the fibre of the CO as an individual and consider his motivations, character and capabilities. Rudimentary events may be challenges depending on the perspective of the CO. A few critical aspects are highlighted below.

(a) **Resilience and Stability.** Some individuals handle pressure better than others. Usually the former variety can foretell how crises will play out and thus brace themselves while keeping the hierarchy informed. Also, resilient COs bother about the bigger picture rather than sweating the small stuff. Consequently, they appear unfazed when others would be dialling a stress helpline. They are conscious of their perception amongst their subordinates and strive to act composed under stress. Gradually, it becomes a habit that portends well for the unit.

(b) **Intellect and Maturity.** These qualities overlap and a CO with sound intellect can reasonably be assumed to be more mature in handling of situations simply because he can read more facets of a seemingly simple event. Unfortunately, maturity has come to be confused with diplomacy, flexibility and a conceding of ground at the expense of soldierly attributes and this interpretation must be guarded against. Most events, from disagreeable superiors to unpleasant or difficult situations, can be dealt with if the CO possesses intellect and maturity.

(c) **Leader vs Manager.** A leader thrives on challenges and therefore seeks them out as opportunities. A manager is a status quo-ist who cannot comprehend the dynamism of human nature and believes that a certain action must invariably produce the desired reaction. A CO with demonstrated leadership skills who inspires wilful
obedience under all circumstances is infinitely more desirable than the manager who gets things done but cannot stir the conscience of his followers.

(d) **The Over-Ambitious Commanding Officer.** Once upon a time, not too long ago, an officer aspired only to command of a battalion. So, most commanded like the ‘tigers’ they were supposed to be. For a while now, the command of a battalion is no more than a box to be checked in the pursuit of a career beyond. Shackled with a self-serving mind-set, everything is a challenge for this CO. Zero-error is the mantra. Everything and everyone suffers. Exhausted and cautious, he wants out at two years. The consequent spread of unhappiness is elucidated in the composition at Figure 3.

*Where Have All the Tigers Gone?*

This Commanding Officer’s tale must be told;  
For there portends a glut of similar mould.

Blissfully abandoned, the CO’s onerous responsibility;  
Be damned: perception, reason and acceptability.

Care for his esteem, he has scant;  
Lack of faith in him, none will recant.

Regimentation and administration, sadly unknown;  
His mind, in joyous ecstasy, envisions a future throne.

The Paltan; but a resource, a stepping stone;  
Alas, how disillusioned the best men have grown.

Flogged sleepless for the organisation, the men condone;  
But this abject misuse of authority, they sadly groan.

Avaricious, with a glutinous appetite for success;  
In his quest for Higher Command, he infuses stress.

All that matters are the ones superior;  
Subordinates are tread-over, as decidedly inferior.

Career over men! His motto smugly proclaims;  
Subscribes to a new school with messed-up aims.

Is it the Army that has made him so?  
Nay, ‘tis his choice – to craftily plough.

This man-on-top purrs like a pussy cat;  
Oh, to expect him to lead in combat.

Where have all the tigers gone?  
In chorus, officers and men bemoan.

*Figure 3. An ode to the over-ambitious CO. Composed by the author.*
10. **Whims of the Hierarchy: Mentoring vs Interference.** The hierarchy is increasingly intolerant of things going haywire, this label being stuck onto all mundane issues that do not stick to plan or work like a charm. Brigade Commanders have their own ambitions with a nomination to the coveted National Defence College (NDC) being the first obvious step. Consequently, a prejudiced view, not too different from that of the over-ambitious CO plays out. Command of a battalion, it appears, is too serious a matter to be left to the Commanding Officer.

(a) **Death by Advisory.** Advisories, with the barely-concealed aim of serving as an I-told-them-so cover up, are dished out for anything and everything. COs are held accountable to the formation commanders perception of command of a battalion with instructions on battalion routine and quantum of summary punishments.

(b) **Commanding by Remote.** Anonymous complaints, the tool of the morally weak, are investigated in full, for, it is reasoned, there can be no smoke without fire. The effect on the morale of a battalion is not considered worthy of attention. ‘Nothing untoward must happen in the formation during my tenure’ seems to be the over-riding concern as the hierarchy seeks to command battalions by remote.

(c) **Circumventing the CO.** To obviate the occurrence of any unpleasant event, phone numbers allowing direct access to the formation commanders by circumventing the CO are provided to the men. Junior Commissioned Officers (JCO) from the Army Education Corps masquerading as Psychological Counsellors are tasked to be the ears and eyes of the formation commanders. Suitably tasked and empowered, these JCOs incite men to report physically uncomfortable routines and sit in judgment over the quality of command of a battalion. No matter that soldiering is anything but physically comfortable. Panic-stricken COs reduce welfare to an appeasement tool, enhanced standards not be wrought at the expense of being chided by the formation commander.

(d) **Demanding Operational Environment.** For COs of battalions committed in Counter Insurgency operations, the operational environment, already demanding, is made even more so by the fretful over-supervision of the hierarchy. Nothing is deemed unworthy of the attention of the superiors, everything must be reported. Micro-management is encouraged even though it is detrimental to development of COs and company commanders. The role and space of the CO has been usurped.

(e) **Perils of Part-time Command.** COs are often kept away from their battalions doing the work that their superiors and their staff are supposed to do. Study groups, military papers, seminars, etc. are a drain on the time of the CO. Consequently, the average CO looks more out and up than in and down.

11. **Changed Socio-Economic Conditions.** This oft repeated challenge for battalion commanders is over-rated. These conditions have been changed for more than the
commissioned life of the present commanding officers. Only a blatant disregard for the reality of society will pose a challenge of man-management and leadership.

**Overcoming the Challenges of Command**

12. That many COs do have a fulfilling command is testimony to the quality of the COs and the ideal superiors who are content with playing a useful supportive role.

13. **Organisational Support to the CO.** Burdened with responsibilities, the CO is the ox that ploughs the field that yields the grain. He deserves the unequivocal support of the organisation.

   (a) **Trust the CO to Command.** Restore the CO’s space. Let him be a ‘Tiger’, complete with stripes and a growl. If an officer is approved to pick up the Colonel’s rank, trust that he can do his job. If not, fix the system that approves underachievers. Superiors must mentor the COs but stop well short of interfering in the command of the battalion. Further, to command the battalion must be the exclusive task of the CO. Involving him in endeavours that keep him away from the unit is sacrilege and unfair to the men he commands.

   (b) **Adequate Exposure to Regimental Life.** The organisation’s energy must be concentrated in building the officer’s capability to command through adequate exposure to regimental life. The current career graph charted out at MS Branch is not in consonance with organisational requirements, for it enables the pointing of a finger at the aptitude of Commanding Officers when the blame should actually lie at the feet of the organisation and its policies. Serving the first five years in the battalion, a company commander stint of three years and at least a one year tenure as a second in command, that enables him to officiate as the CO on occasions, must be made obligatory for approval for command. This entails a non-negotiable regimental stint of nine years. The Infantry officer still has five to six years to get the exposure outside the battalion.

   (c) **Restructuring of Senior Command Course.** A suitably structured Battalion Commander’s course that imparts instruction solely on the nuances of command is indispensable to provide a firm footing to Commanding Officers. The present course does not address the requirement.

   (d) **Reduce Role of Parallel Hierarchy.** The role of the spouse of senior officers in their capacity as the leaders of the Army Wives Welfare Association (AWWA) and Ladies Club brings no joy insofar as forced social events are concerned. While the role and intent of AWWA is indisputable, the lack of leadership skills in spouses that wear their husband’s rank on their sleeve, organise elaborate events that consume manpower, resources and the bliss of many homes is avoidable.
14. **The CO’s Call.** Finally, as always, the buck stops here. The CO is responsible for facing the challenges and finding means to resolve them.

(a) **High Self-Concept.** It is essential that a CO be convinced that he is a good man with bonafide credentials and honest intent. This will allow him to seek and absorb the big picture, grant freedom of action to his subordinates and maintain a sense of calm in adverse situations. More importantly, it will enable him to see the opportunity in each challenge he faces as battalion commander.

(b) **Strength of Character.** In obeying an unlawful command or craving undue success, a CO will end up passing unenforceable orders. COs must have strength of character to make ethical choices that are in the interest of the unit and in consonance with Army values. In questioning an unlawful command a CO, as a soldier, performs a difficult task. Once an order is established as ambiguous, he owes it to his unit to seek clarification to the extent necessary.

(c) **Time Management.** A CO must be able to find the 25th hour in a day. Proficient time management skills are critical to meet and enforce deadlines, accomplish multiple tasks and to raise the unit standards in all spheres.

(d) **Competence.** A professionally competent CO quickly becomes indispensable for the formation and his unit carries the mantle of delivering on the professional front. Soldierly tasks are allotted to the unit and the unit fibre strengthens from enhanced training standards. Projecting the unit as a professional outfit is therefore, important.

(e) **Questionnaire for the CO.** To gauge his capability to overcome challenges a CO must take stock of the command climate that he has been able to bring about. Figure 4 carries a list of questions that a CO must answer honestly to get a feel of his command and his effort to overcome challenges.
Questionnaire to Gauge Command Climate

- Is the unit and the men my number one priority? Is my family willing to be second rung?
- Do I plan for the unit beyond my tenure?
- Do I take an ethical stance irrespective of the consequences?
- Am I forthright in expressing my opinion in the interest of the unit or do I favour a diplomatic approach to a soldierly one?
- What matters more to me — the men under my command or the hierarchy on top?
- Do I take accountability for my decisions and actions?
- Does my brand of welfare promote soldierly attributes or does it comprise only of enhanced material comfort?
- Am I approachable to the men with personal issues?
- Do I cite ‘heavy paperwork’ as the reason for my inability to be with the men in the field?
- Do I take myself so seriously that I lose composure with an officer who speaks his mind even if it is in the Mess bar?
- Do I postpone taking unpleasant, tough decisions?
- Do I avoid changing an unenforceable order for fear of appearing fickle-minded?
- Do I keep a larger perspective or do I micro-manage?
- Do I accept error of judgment from my subordinates?
- Is officer relationship a Key Result Area? Do I keep a close watch on this aspect?
- Am I committing the same errors in attitude and leadership for which I faulted my COs?

Figure 4. A questionnaire for Battalion Commanders. Honest answers to the listed questions will give COs an idea of the kind of command climate that they have been able to achieve. Compiled by the author.

Conclusion

15. An Army is only as worthy as its Commanding Officers. They are expected to work harder than at any other time in their life. Morally, they cannot afford to put a step wrong. They are constantly under the scanner from their superiors and their subordinates. The organisation owes it to the COs, who shoulder the responsibility of keeping the Army battle-fit, to make their task a little easier through conducive policies and a large-hearted hierarchy. ‘Tigers’ cannot be expected to live in the boxes on the Confidential Report. With the Army values as a guide, COs must be allowed to exercise initiative and command from their heart and mind.