

Company Command Building: Combat-Ready Teams — Making Sense of Killing

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To: Company Commanders

From: Company Commanders

MAKING SENSE OF KILLING

We train our Soldiers to kill, equip them to kill, develop plans for them to kill, and sometimes even give them the lire commands to kill, yet too often we don't help them make sense of the killing they do ... "Prep for combat" and "recovery" should include actions to equip our Soldiers to deal with the moral and psychological aspects of killing in combat.

An Army at peace does everything an Army at war does except for one — kill other human beings. Every day in the Global War on Terror, American Soldiers are killing our enemies, and we are very effective at it. Yet, as we wage our first long-duration war in over a generation, we are learning that we as company-level leaders could do a better job at helping our Soldiers deal with the psychological aspects of killing. You won't find this topic addressed in an AR or FM, but we have found that it's being talked about by leaders as they gather in motor pools, TOCs, mess halls and in the Company Command forum.

In order to give this issue more visibility and generate effective ideas, we asked past, present, and future commanders the following question in a recent CC poll:

Do you have responsibility to equip your Soldiers for making sense of killing in combat?

Yes: 180 No: 11

According to the poll responses, company-level commanders overwhelmingly agree that we have the responsibility to equip our Soldiers to make sense of killing. How, then, do we do it? Here are some of the comments from CC members on how they are equipping their Soldiers to deal with this tough and relevant issue.

BEFORE KILLING

Make Killing an Acceptable Conversation Topic

Pete Kilner

OIF

Soldiers are going to think about the morality of killing either BEFORE, DURING, or AFTER combat. It's in their, and the Army's, best interests to have them think about it beforehand.

What's important is that we as leaders make the topic of killing and guilt an acceptable topic to talk about. By talking about it with their buddies and leaders, our Soldiers will be much more likely to make sense of killing in their own moral terms. We don't need to provide THE ANSWER (there

may not be one that works for everyone), but we can do a lot to help our Soldiers find their own answers. As leaders, we can create conditions where our Soldiers can talk about and make sense of killing. Soldiers with clear consciences are better Soldiers and better people, so this is a leadership issue.

EQUIP SOLDIERS BEFORE KILLING

Bill Rodebaugh

OIF

As a commander, you have to ask Soldiers to consciously make the choice to pull the trigger BEFORE they are even put in the position to kill. If not, they either won't pull the trigger, or they will do it out of instinct, or because they hear an order to do it. Then they won't ever reconcile the act later in life without counseling. I try to communicate to my guys the truth on why we kill and how it is a necessary thing. It is commander business: Combat Stress Teams are good after the fact when commanders fail to do their part on the front end.

LEVERAGE THE WHOLE TEAM

Nick Ayers

OIF I & II

Preparing Soldiers for the realities of war is difficult, but it is what we get paid to do. I don't think that leaders have to do it alone, though. The squad leader, platoon sergeant, or even CO shouldn't feel all of the responsibility is on their shoulders alone. A commander can enlist the help of a variety of resources, including chaplains and Combat Stress Teams. A commander can work to get a guest (subordinate, peer, or superior) to come talk with Soldiers to perhaps share experiences. There are a limitless number of ways and techniques, all of which are derived from the personality and character of the commander and of the unit.

SHOW FAITH IN THE CAUSE

Rob Griggs

OPERATION JUST CAUSE, OEF II & OIF

As far as how I tried to prepare my Soldiers to make sense of it all — I was always honest about what I thought they should expect and I relayed to them what I believe—that we are part of the world's greatest fighting force and that our job is an important job that will make a difference in the history of the world. There have been times when I have been challenged by those who cannot make sense of combat on the policy level. At these times, I tell them that while I may have an opinion on policy, as a Soldier I am comfortable un-

derstanding the mission and executing the mission, ensuring that I understand how my mission nests with my higher headquarters' mission. When I deploy I go – knowing and believing that the cause is just and the mission can and will be accomplished.

UNDERSTAND ROE & COMBAT STRESS

Steve Cunningham

OIF I & IV

Before deployment, our unit regularly conducted combat stress and suicide prevention classes as well as ROE and Law of Land Warfare classes to discuss the mental health and legal aspects of our mission. The combat stress and suicide prevention classes are meant to specifically teach the symptoms of the same to both individuals and peers. First, this lets the Soldier know that combat stress is a real thing, and not something to necessarily be ashamed of. Second, the collective group is taught the symptoms of combat stress in order to identify problems their peers might be experiencing. The legal aspects of the ROE and Law of Land Warfare are used to discuss the difficult situations Soldiers will find themselves in while deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. These scenarios are purposely difficult and ambiguous in order to replicate the reality of the battlefield. The discussion leader highlights the importance in understanding the reason behind the ROE, and the magnitude of making split second decisions while in these difficult scenarios. We discuss the need to use the ROE in order to meet the desired strategic endstate, and the need to protect the force. Enough Soldiers have been exposed to these scenarios on past deployments to share their experiences with their buddies.

TRAIN TO MAKE SENSE OF KILLING

Jonathan Silk

OIF I & II

During training prior to deployment, you can have Soldiers explain to you or the O/C why they killed.

After an engagement in a training exercise, do not bring the OPFOR “back to life” right away for the AAR. Walk the fire team, squad, or platoon through the engagement area with the OPFOR where they were engaged and destroyed. As you come upon a group of “dead” OPFOR, ask your Soldiers, “Who killed them?” When Soldiers step forward to say they did, then ask, “Why?” Make Soldiers tell you why they killed the OPFOR. They may say something like, “They were maneuvering to the other squad’s flank to engage them, so I engaged the group of OPFOR to protect the other squad.” Then you tell them they were justified in killing the enemy and they did a good job.

By incorporating this into training you will have the Soldiers think through why it is okay to kill.

While it is impossible to replicate the violence of combat in a training environment, I think incorporating something like I just suggested will help prepare Soldiers to kill and to deal with it after they have killed.

CREATE A HIGH-STANDARD, SUPPORTIVE CLIMATE

Joshua Shrader

OIF III

This question I think has more than just one part. The first is, “Will my Soldier be prepared to take the shot if needed?” secondly, “Will the Soldier be able to take responsibility for it?” If the command climate is one that will train the Soldier to a high standard in both duties and ROE, and on top of that, back his/her decisions, you are much more likely to have a Soldier who is ready to kill in combat. If your Soldiers are not ready to kill in combat, they may be at risk for being killed in the enemy’s place.

AFTER KILLING: CONTINUING THE FIGHT

INVOLVE COMBAT STRESS TEAMS

Dave Polizzotti

OIF I

I found that integrating the Combat Stress Teams into my battle rhythm was a critical part of my success. Those guys were absolute miracle workers. They are capable of handling Soldiers on a one-on-one basis. In some cases where there was a significant part of the company involved in an engagement, I would have them do what they called a Critical Event Debriefing to educate Soldiers on behaviors following a traumatic event. Depending on circumstances, there were times that I mandated that certain individuals or crews go to see the CSTs, and other times I left it wide open. I made a point to have them come to my company area at least once a month, and more if I could afford to do it.

TALK TO YOUR SOLDIERS

Bryan Carroll

OIF III

As Soldiers, we all want to know that we are fighting the good fight. Talk to your Soldiers about why they are there, what they are accomplishing, how they are keeping their nation safe. A Soldier who believes in what he is doing, rather than just “following my orders to go do something,” is a much more lethal weapon.

We had a great Combat Stress Team and chaplain who would come down proactively and intercept small problems before they became big problems. The biggest thing is just talk to your men, however that works for you, but talk to them, and find out what’s going on, who’s having problems, and who needs to talk to someone.

SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES

Ned Ritzmann

OIF I

After killing or another traumatic event, I wanted to ensure that Soldiers would be able to “armor up” for the next mission. I did not look at it as a long-term mental health or “nightmare mitigation” measure — I focused on the near targets, not far. How I addressed it was by talking to Soldiers — guard, pulling security on missions, etc. I used to specif-

ically ask them what was bugging them. When guys said they were scared, I told them that I was, too, and that it was okay and natural. They understood that we had a job to do.

We are currently training National Guard units to go to Iraq, and as part of that, we have OIF vets discuss things that happened to them in theater. When OIF vets in the audience hear us discuss a pretty traumatic event, you can see their reaction — it's kind of like, "Wow, that happened to you, too?" Simply knowing that you are not alone helps. It's kind of like the old adage in school — if you have a question, someone else does, too.

REINFORCE THE MISSION'S PURPOSE

Matt Stapleton

OIF II

I think communicating the long-term purpose for the mission is the best way to help Soldiers make sense of killing. I think the "us versus them" mind-set over the long run is the best approach. I reminded Soldiers constantly that the best defense is a good offense: we are here more than anything to carry the fight to the enemy so IEDs didn't eventually happen in their hometowns ... or further attacks like 9/11.

STRESS COMMUNICATION & INVOLVE CHAPLAINS

Anthony Flood

OEF

When troops have had their first "contact," especially if there was bloodshed (on either side), it's a good idea to get the platoon, squad, etc., together and discuss the incident. Essentially, do an AAR, but try to get everyone to contribute to the discussion. Use it as a tool to see if your troops are handling it well. Having a good relationship with the junior leaders helps, too — that quiet word to a squad leader over a cup of coffee.

I found having a chaplain to be a "force multiplier." I had never expected a tremendous asset. I encouraged our chaplain to be available for the troops: he'd go on patrols, hang out in the motor pool, PT with a section, and so on. Anytime I found out one of the troops was having issues, I'd mention it quietly to the chaplain and he would make a point of checking in with the Soldier to see how he was doing. It really helped defuse some issues.

SYMPATHIZE & SUPPORT YOUR SOLDIERS

Chris Hossfeld

OIF III

When I had Soldiers who were unsure if they did the right thing, if they had doubts about killing, I tried to address it with them from my own personal experiences. When they know that you have had to do it yourself, it gives credibility to you telling them that it's okay. As leaders in combat, we have to be there for our Soldiers. We have to tell them that they did the right things. We have to support them when they make tough decisions. We have to ask them tough questions, and

then support them. That is what the Soldier really wants to know. "Did I do the right thing?" If you know the situation, listen to them, and then tell them that you understand what they are going through, and reassure them that you support them. They will go out there and continue to make tough decisions because they know that their leaders care about what happens to them.

AFTER KILLING: MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL LEADERS ACTIVELY ENGAGE SOLDIERS

Matt Benigni

OIF II

During redeployment, we conducted train the trainer to equip each CO with factual information about combat stress and what we called "normal reactions to extremely abnormal experiences." Instead of having psychologists come to our formations and conduct interviews with all of our Soldiers, my Brigade Commander chose to train company commanders so that they and their leaders could interview their Soldiers.

Identifying Soldiers that need professional help is a leader's job, and in order to do that, some stereotypes need to be removed. You can assume that it is extremely difficult for many Soldiers to share the problems they are going through. Their chain of command and peers have shared some of the experiences with them and are in the best position to identify Soldiers that need help.

We were not in the business of treating these Soldiers; we made sure that the Soldiers understood these emotional/physical reactions were normal and gave them an outlet to burden — share or seek help through the chain of command. In a company of 75 tankers, we had about five instances where Soldiers, ranging from E4-E7/O2, came to the chain of command seeking some help. Ensuring that redeploying Soldiers understand they are bound to have some adjustment problems and will not have any stigma attached by asking for help has had immeasurable benefit in my company and brigade. We continue to conduct interviews as part of reintegration six months after redeployment.

LEAD BY EXAMPLE

SF Officer (anonymous)

OEF & OIF I

About eight months ago, I received a rapid influx of Soldiers into my unit. All of them came from combat-deployed units. Lately, I've been having a lot of problems sleeping, which I do not attribute to PTSD, but I made no secret at work that I was seeking some assistance from Mental Health. Imagine my surprise when at least four of my Soldiers immediately self-referred to Mental Health for issues they experienced during the war that have been causing them problems at home. I keep learning that I can never underestimate the power of my ability to influence my Soldiers as a commander.

NCO LEADERSHIP & AARs

Steve Cunningham

OIF I & IV

In our unit, the chaplain, command sergeant major and first sergeant constantly surveyed Soldiers to get a read on their morale. We had a team of psychologists, chaplains and other leaders who would counsel Soldiers after a catastrophic event. These were mandatory individual and collective bull sessions that seemed more like AARs than mental health sessions. The chain of command took an active role, and we openly discussed our feelings of anger and frustration in front of the men. It was therapeutic to discuss mistakes made, and to identify the things that were beyond our control. The professional unit that conducts AARs for every

mission will usually address the issues that cause combat stress, will be able to identify Soldiers who are feeling its effects, and take measures to mitigate them.

CC IS COMPANY COMMANDERS.

The CC forum is a voluntary, grass-roots forum that is by-and-for company commanders. The forum is positive and practical-focused like a laser beam on the practice of company command and those things that are important to company commanders.

Send article ideas to nate.self@us.army.mil.

Company Commanders, connect at <http://Company-Command.army.mil>

