

Commander – Unit Psychologist: A Powerful Tandem

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ABSTRACT

The Commander stands for the virtues of wisdom, sincerely, benevolence, courage and strictness. There is no commander, who can be successful without those five qualities. But only one can win, who understands. (Sun–Tzu). These words of the important and clever person adequately uncover background of the possible relations and interactions between commander and psychologist.. Only few of soldier – specialists (psychologist, mental health professional or chaplain ...) realized the origin of fragile relations, even in tense situations during NATO operational deployment. Those relations are based on mutual supporting, understanding and respecting of functional peculiarities of their tasks. They should be synergic oriented for fulfilling one and only goal. “Accomplish their tasks with success and back home without injury”. For commander that could means “Without physical injury“, for psychologist on the other side “Without psychical trauma”. Methods and tools which are using by them are different from people to people. Finally it really does not depend on their position in unit but

*The good fighters of old first put themselves beyond the possibility of defeat, and then waited for an opportunity of defeating the enemy.
(SUN – TZU)*

FOREWORD

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is already two years since my homecoming from Iraqi deployment, which I spent in the operational environment of MND CJTF- 7. All of You should know how “significant” are two years old knowledge and information for the command of modern military operations. Hopefully some of these experiences are not altered by time so significantly and under certain conditions they should be applied in practice regardless when and where they were uttered. For example master Sun the author of the supreme writing “The Art of War” specified already two thousand years ago (480-221 b.c.) five basic virtues of a commander. These were \ are: wisdom, sincerity, benevolence, courage and strictness.

I was asked to share my experiences about the commander – psychologist cooperation during the first rotation of the Slovak engineer unit in the Operation Iraqi freedom (August 2003- February 2004). Today, I can boldly say that I am able to imagine cooperation with a commander and assess his range of responsibility. My conviction is arising from a half year long teamwork and daily contact, hours and hours of talks, monitoring the results of my commander’s performance on formal and informal level and retroactively from the soldiers.

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1.0 PREPARATION FOR DEPLOYMENT AND FIRST DAYS

Before the main deployment of the Slovak engineer unit under MND CS command the chemical unit were shortly deployed in Kuwait. To months of operational deployment in MND- CM helped me to understand the fundamental differences between the demanded qualities of a commander in peacetime and during operational deployment. Commander however capable in his occupation, who is lack of personal appeal, natural respect, or self-confidence, is not able to fight for his crew and be a leader or a psychological pillar for them. New dimensions of stressors were taken into account to build up a new engineer unit in Iraq. I was selected as a psychologist of the unit.

I was theoretically well prepared as a psychologist. I was able to predict the potential critical periods of the unit, and also determined the main tasks for the particular periods. Except of our unit there were troops of 7 other countries.

The Slovak engineer unit was deployed in the area of Central South with the Main Camp in the town of Al Hilla, which is located only 9 km far from the HQ MND CS in Babylon. The main tasks of the first days were mostly activities connected with adaptation to the new conditions like climatic, security, an organizational. Until the commander dealt with formal and organizational questions, as a psychologist I intensively worked with lower commanders on the platoon level. I helped them to realize the differences in understanding the mission (money, interest, discover new places). So my relationship with the commander developed directly during these activities.

2.0 COMMANDER AND THE PROCESS OF ADAPTATION

Probably no specialist in its branch can create and strengthen optimal working relations without studying the professional background of its colleges. Former experiences in UN military operations (previously considered as advantage) emerged as a double sword.

2.1 Initial Adaptation Phase

A few day of coexistence showed the need to deal right with this group of soldiers. I knew that the process of adaptation to any new situation in a first period appears with a mobilization of body reserves to overcome a situation of suffering and starvation. Therefore the main task in this period was to be there, to be seen, be sensed in time and place and be accepted as a specialist by the own soldiers. Systematic terrain work with group phenomenon, team vitality, several small activities, allowed the commander to overcome the period of adaptation earlier more easily. It is needless to think that the commander avoid the adaptation process.

In this period as a psychologist I carried out these activities:

- First contact individual counseling
- Support and explanation the specifics of adaptation process of individuals
- Support of solidarity and group consciousness
- Enhancing the knowledge in the field of psycho hygienic, body overheating and sunstroke prevention

Elimination and softening undesired emotions often produce an insufficient mastering of the first days of adaptation. The primary aim was - overcome this dangerous stage successfully and without any injuries. The commander was intransigent and hard, lots of peoples didn't like him, they hated him.

2.2 Conscious Adaptation Phase – Complete Adaptation to Situation

The second phase of adaptation was specific with its altered character of activities. The commander and the crew were already adapted to the climatic conditions and to the lack of contact with the local culture. Performing specific tasks opened a wide range of opportunities for psychological activities, to benefit the units and the commander. The main tasks of the psychologist were to optimize the troops life conditions, organize activities to decrease inner tension, and to prepare and organize pleasure time activities.

The psychologist main activities were:

- Psychological preparation for convoy escorting tasks
- Debriefing, defusing, demobilization
- Prevention of claustrophobics
- MWR activities
- Psychological counseling
- Enhancing morale

The commander received sufficient amount of information to make appropriate decisions which should optimize and enhance the quality of life in the camp.

2.3 Phase Three – Preparation for Homecoming

The terminal phase has no significant influence for the psychologist-commander relation. The first five month of common activities allowed us to learn more about each other in many situations, and uncovered possible sensitive areas and common interests. Despite of this the last period was specific with its subconscious increasing of alertness and sensitivity of soldiers to hidden risks. They tended to spend the last month in comfort and safety. In cooperation with the commander we composed a rotation strategy, where I explained the troops the possible risks in connection the homecoming and integration to the civilian life.

CONCLUSION

There are several limitations which may have distinct influence to the psychologist- commander relation and task performance in the AOR. I repeatedly can use the words of the superior master and leader Sun-Tzu:

There are three ways in which a ruler can bring misfortune upon his army:--

- 1) By commanding the army to advance or to retreat, being ignorant of the fact that it cannot obey. This is called hobbling the army.
- 2) By attempting to govern an army in the same way as he administers a kingdom, being ignorant of the conditions which obtain in an army. This causes restlessness in the soldier's minds.
- 3) By employing the officers of his army without discrimination, through ignorance of the military principle of adaptation to circumstances. This shakes the confidence of the soldiers.

If the commander masters the five virtues of the leader and is aware of the above mentioned three points, it is very possible that the cooperation between commander and psychologist will be fruitful and strong. I can proudly say that my commander Col. Novosad was, is, and will be such a leader.

Thank you for your attention.

