

The Leadership Route Less Taken:

Taking Charge in the Army's "Other" Commands

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Introduction

You have been selected to command! The notification comes via an email, a call or a note in the Assignment Interactive Module. It's what you been waiting on for weeks, months or even years. You'd put in your preference, and maybe you'd even gone through one of the Army's Command Assessment Programs (CAPs). But now you see a unit of assignment that you don't quite know much about or weren't expecting. Maybe it is an O1A or branch immaterial position, like recruiting, training or a garrison. What do you do?

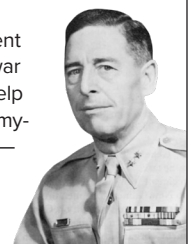
All officers have an unspoken level of nervousness and apprehension going into their command positions—and fears and uncertainty are likely heightened when officers are going into nontraditional command roles. There is a lot of written guidance on basic branch and operational commands, but there is not much to be found on “alternative” leadership positions in organizations such as U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), Installation Management Command (IMCOM), recruiting or other similar O1A/O2A commands. Given the advent of the CAP system, which allows its users to rank order all commands available, this paper serves to demystify the much-prized position of commander—to pass along lessons learned for those Soldiers who are about to take the colors in these less-discussed organizations that are nonetheless exceptionally critical to our Army. By capturing perspectives from a recent TRADOC company commander, a recruiting company commander, a garrison-based headquarters battalion commander and a recruiting brigade commander, we hope to give a more encompassing view of command of non-standard units. Throughout this article, we will discuss tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) to help Soldiers navigate the months leading up to command and to frame the time holding the guidon.

Pre-Command

A good starting point for any Army commander is Army Regulation (AR) 600-20, *Army Command Policy*. It is the foundational document for any commander at any level. It defines *command* as “the authority that a commander in the armed forces lawfully exercises over subordinates by virtue of rank or assignment.”¹ For any officer, this command could be the most important assignment of an entire career.

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In the interwar period of the 1930s, Major Edwin Forrest Harding was appointed editor of the *Infantry Journal*—an assignment that would begin a period of revitalization of scholarship across the Army. Almost a hundred years later, after the decades of war that began the 21st century, the Army has again found itself in need of such revitalization. To address this head-on and so to help the Army meet and overcome the next and future conflicts, The Harding Project was launched in 2023. As a part of this Army-wide effort, AUSA has partnered with Army University Press to host the LTG (Ret) James M. Dubik Writing Fellows Program—a voluntary, non-resident writing fellowship to encourage discourse that contributes to a community of military and national security professionals. *The Harding Papers* series exclusively publishes the work and scholarship of the Dubik Writing Fellows.



As such, commanding any unit brings with it sacrifice and reward. AR 600-20 states that “commanders are responsible for everything their command does or fails to do.”²² Even in a command-like garrison, or in recruiting or training, command is a privilege mixed with authority and responsibility that only a few Soldiers in the Army are given the chance to exercise.

If you find yourself anticipating such an assignment, no doubt the months leading up to taking command will typically be filled with your visualizations and dreams of what the job will be like and how you plan to change the culture for the better. Although imagining such scenarios can be a good exercise, it is important to use the time before command wisely to set conditions for success; don’t just dream—take some practical steps to set yourself up for success. Almost universally, this means reaching out to your sister commanders to get a baseline of what the installation, battalion, brigade and higher headquarters environments are like. Think about how those sister organizations may be geographically separated and/or technically, tactically or structurally different. For example, a garrison headquarters battalion in the Military District of Washington is cohorted with The Army Aviation Brigade, The Old Guard, The U.S. Army Field Band and two other headquarters battalions that serve two other garrisons.

You should research amenities, the unit area of operation, and specific resources that can provide assistance. This is the time to ask questions of your predecessor regarding the current systems that are in place. It’s also a good time to establish working relationships with your senior enlisted and/or senior civilian counterpart(s). But, even more so, this is when you need to dig into the specifics of your particular command. IMCOM looks very different from Forces Command (FORSCOM), for example, so understanding your requirements, reporting mechanisms, niche areas of work, etc., is important. Prioritizing going to the pre-command courses specific to your area will fill in a lot of blanks.

At this juncture, you should develop a few particular focus points: your own vision and mission; onboarding; understanding DA (Department of the Army) civilians; unique inventory considerations; and any final thoughts necessary to your particular set of circumstances.

A Unique Vision and Mission

Driving the train will be your organization’s mission and vision statements. Creating a vision statement is your first chance as a commander to lay out your expectations for your team. Vision statements should be personalized, understandable, and, most important, they must represent the beliefs, expectations and priorities for your organization. Vision statements are not the time for fancy PowerPoints and catchphrases—especially if they do not capture what it means to drive the unique capabilities, military occupational specialties (MOSs), branches and specialties of your unit. Additionally, bear in mind that transferring a previously used vision from, for example, your infantry or artillery time might just fall flat.

One of the most challenging aspects of developing a vision statement for an unconventional unit is quickly capturing the pulse of the organization and where you want to take it, especially when you are not the resident subject matter expert. A best practice for these types of units is to ensure your vision includes a focus on the specific mission or technical side of the organization in addition to the aspects that would be true in ANY organization—something that will endure the test of time and any potential changes in higher headquarters’ priorities. Along with their vision, new commanders often add a purpose statement accompanied by organizational goals to make their vision more tangible and achievable. This technique comes in handy when leading an unconventional command, as it keeps the leaders and organization on track to achieve longitudinal goals.

Carefully crafted vision and purpose statements should reach and resonate with the most junior Soldiers and civilians in the organization. If your vision is only meant for a select few leaders in your unit, it will never permeate as it should. To avoid this pitfall, consult your senior enlisted advisor first and foremost. If you have a senior civilian assigned, as in a garrison command that may have a civilian deputy, ensure that that individual brings in their understanding of the organization’s culture, strengths, shortfalls and everything in between. In organizations that also have other civilian employees and directorates, commanders should also consult with those senior civilian employees so that the vision, command philosophy, etc., also

resonates with them. When the Army talks about purpose and legacy, it talks about us “being a part of something bigger”; although your purpose and vision should be tailored to the organization, do not discount the need to fit into the bigger Army picture—even when your command is non-traditional.³

Onboarding

In understanding that your command may be geographically separated from a military installation or typical support structure, onboarding of personnel becomes critical. Many Soldiers and families arriving to a dispersed location will feel a sense of anxiety without the more routine sense of familiarity or community that generally comes with a unit. Therefore, commanders must emphasize the importance of sponsorship and onboarding. Make no mistake: A commander must be decisive in this onboarding process in non-traditional settings. It will be your job to ensure that this vital time does not become a “just going through the motions” type of event. If the unusual circumstances make things feel different and new for you, think of how much that sense of the unknown will be amplified for a junior teammate. Additionally, you need to keep in mind that your Soldiers will transition in and out more than your civilian teammates. Use that civilian stability to your advantage, incorporating civilians into the process of Soldier onboarding for a real positive gamechanger.

The onboarding process should serve to inspire and inform. A best practice is to have uniquely styled onboarding packets built. This packet should certainly include required in-processing documents, the commander’s welcome letter and vision statement, and perhaps a task organization chart for the Soldier’s situational awareness. Equally important is that it include the resources unique to a particular location that are available to Soldiers and their families upon their arrivals. Simple things, like spelling out acronyms and denoting whether someone is a GS-9 vice a GS-13, and what their potential Army equivalent rank may be, is yet another gamechanger for understanding climate and culture.

A commander must be decisive in the onboarding process in non-traditional organizations.

Understanding DA Civilians

It is incorrect to assert that “the relationship between the civilians and military members is that the value civilians provide is routine and not unique.”²⁴ On the contrary, what they bring to the table is beyond mere continuity. Do not overlook or underestimate their importance. DA Civilians are a part of the organization, and understanding their hierarchy (and their counseling and evaluation) *before* stepping into command goes a long way to relieving tension or confusion.

Additionally, you should think about considerations that your civilians may need that your Soldiers would not, like checklists that include their integration into the DoD’s Automated Time Attendance and Production System (ATAAPS), Defense Civilian Personnel Data System (DCPDS) and Individual Development Plan (IDP) tools. Their development, accountability and even leave and compensation aspects are tracked on DoD systems that are distinct from the systems that support your Soldiers’ corresponding needs. Accessing, integrating and training yourself on ATAAPS and DCPDS will alleviate a lot of hiccups on your part. Understanding how civilians are hired, fired and accommodated, as well as the many legal regulations and protocols therein, will not be something you can find at the Captains Career Course or at the Command and General Staff College. You’ll need to take the personal initiative to learn these systems.

Unique Inventory Considerations

In most units, the weeks leading up to command will be filled with pre-command inventories. It goes without saying that these should be taken seriously, but also these inventories provide you with a time to informally evaluate the effectiveness of your supply system. Understanding logistics and how parts are resourced is paramount in any unit, including unconventional organizations; figuring out these logistics right from the start can save you time down the road.

Additionally, atypical units often have unusual, peculiar or “commercial-off-the-shelf” equipment that supplement the organization’s mission. Be sure to get an understanding of how your particular unit utilizes such equipment and how it is maintained. Defining your “pacing items” is critical. In FORSCOM units, pacing items may be the number and types of weapon systems, such as the M1A1, Bradley Fighting Vehicles, Patriots Missile Launchers, etc., but they could be totally different, irregular and “outside of the box” in unconventional commands (e.g., military working dogs, funeral honors rifles and flags, caskets, Tesla vehicles, the recruiters themselves, etc.).

“Unique pacing items” may also be something less physical, like a course that is MOS producing, the number of associative instructors or the number of recruiting companies based on the “must-win markets and mission potential.” For example, in 5th Recruiting Brigade, 31 of 49 companies are pacing units based on their must-win markets, mission potential and historic mission accomplishments. Having sub-units identified as pacing allows for the commander to define resources and training to accomplish the mission more effectively and efficiently.

One TTP is getting your hand receipt sent to you during your pre-command course or Captains Career Course. This will allow time first for review—especially a review of what may be your unique items—and then for crafting questions to be ready for when you get on ground. It could also allow your subordinates, be they civilian or military, a chance to shine—or to demonstrate their shortcomings—as they get you ready for the Command Supply Discipline Program.

Final Thoughts

As your pre-command time comes to an end, remember: Pre-command is a very exciting time, but it can be almost as busy as your actual command time if you let it take over. Remember to take things in stride and to keep your family first. This is important advice for every phase of your career; it makes no sense to burn them out before you even start. Also, if you are in the position of taking on one of those unique commands, do not overdo your prep just on that account. On the other extreme, do not blame your ill-preparedness or imbalance on it being a unique command. That responsibility falls squarely on you, no matter the nature of the command you’re stepping into.

Most important, remember that your actions will build not just your habits and routines, but also the reputation that you will take into your command. For example, remember that you may have more travel or battlefield circulation in a recruiting command due to the disparate outstations you have. As such, having discussions with family about the required upcoming temporary duty and travel cycle may make you more particular about investing in leave and family time before command, as well as mapping out key times for leave and “investment at home” during your upcoming command tenure.

One last word of advice for this stage: Don’t ever say anything along the lines of, “Well, I wanted to command an infantry battalion, but I got this instead.” Honest or not, it’s a bad habit of negativity and discontent that you’re allowing in, and it will set a precedent and a reputation that you will have a hard time fixing. You can’t command well if you don’t appropriately manage perceptions.

During Command

Officer Professional Military Education is ripe with lessons about what it means to balance the art and science of command. However, most of the vignettes provided in such contexts are tailored for a traditional unit, where you are located with and see your personnel daily. In many non-traditional commands, like a recruiting company command, you will likely be geographically dispersed from your unit, potentially only seeing your team weekly, monthly or even quarterly. In other scenarios, you may have as many civilians as you do Soldiers. How can you employ the art of command if your Soldiers are not physically present alongside you or if you are working primarily with people who do not wear the uniform? And how can you ensure unit training management is done to standard if you are not able to be present at the training to certify or validate subordinate leaders—or did not grow up in the specialty (e.g., there is a recruiting MOS, but not yet a recruiting branch)?

We have several points of advice for situations like this as well: Remember that *dispersed* is not synonymous with *distant*; have frequent touchpoints; distinguish between mission command versus command and control (C2); use the tools at your disposal; and leverage conventional unit peers.

Dispersed Does Not Mean Distant

Given the constraints that come with unit dispersal, whether travel time, budget or other extenuating circumstances, a commander must be diligent in balancing a culture that enables the right blend of mission command, yet still maintains an adequate amount of C2. Being dispersed does not mean you have to be distant. A video conference call that involves the entire unit will mean far more than a “group-chat message” sent without peripheral context. American society is more digitally connected online than ever before; leverage that capability and precedent to reach your team. For commanders to be at the point of friction in geographically dispersed units, they require continued assessment so that they can quickly identify indicators and warnings and then responsively and responsibly provide the necessary purpose and direction. That said, commanders must also create a culture of transparency and openness with subordinate leaders to receive accurate information that paints the picture that provides the right level of support to dispersed teams.

Have Frequent Touchpoints

You must be disciplined in your application of communicative techniques across your formation. You must be prepared to spend a lot of time on video conferences, phone calls, emails and text messages. You must be ready to travel and “troop the battlefield.” Your subordinates must not feel abandoned while they are operating alone and unafraid. Consider what we believe to be a best practice: **Center your touchpoints on these two questions: “As your teammate, what can I do for you and your team?” and “What can the headquarters do better to support your mission?”**

Phone calls and emails merely to ensure compliance for a task or suspense will have a hard time growing into or contributing to a healthy culture built on trust and autonomy. A commander who focuses activities and communication efforts on supporting the unit and its people will begin to shape a climate centered on unit cohesion and mission command. With the right measures in place, you can expect your subordinates to seize the initiative out of a “winning mentality” rather than being scared to get a nasty phone call from their higher headquarters 200 miles away.

Another best practice in these types of environments is to intentionally create a series of battle rhythm touchpoints with subordinate leaders. As a recruiting brigade commander, one of the authors of this paper schedules touchpoints from the battalion command level to the individual recruiter level. All of these touchpoints have specific purposes and outcomes, reinforcing the commander’s intent, pushing leader development and assessing information flow. Meanwhile, in a training command, commanders may find ways to connect students or trainees with the operational force and vice versa. This connectivity does two things; it keeps cadre and students looking forward into the future, and it establishes avenues for the operational force to onboard incoming talent.

A commander must be careful to not “step on” subordinate leaders when operating from a distance. Instead, empower and motivate your team to action.

Mission Command Versus Command and Control

A commander must be careful to not “step on” their subordinate leaders when operating from a distance. This is not to say that you cannot hold your leaders accountable—far from it. However, you must be even more aware than if you were operating in close proximity that the mechanisms in place do not overreach boundaries and stifle initiative, but that they instead empower and motivate your team to action. Control certainly has its place and is necessary in some organizations. However, it should not be the goal.

Retired Marine Corps Lieutenant General Paul Van Riper is known for saying, “Be in command, yet out of control.”⁵ Be comfortable with delegating tasks, and trust that they will be completed to standard. As a distant commander, you must be prepared to “loosen the reigns” as quickly as you tighten them. A commander’s subordinate leaders will sense when they have the trust of their chain of command—and when that trust is threatened.

Command is both much more fun and much more fulfilling when trust is established and percolates throughout the unit, regardless of the mission set. A culture of trust is an Army *requirement*, not a “nice to have.”⁶ However, commanders are responsible for fostering opportunities to assess their commander’s intent and to provide new guidance as required. Trusting civilians, especially in a garrison or in another environment more populated by them than it is by Soldiers, means working hard and in uncomfortable ways to build that trust. You cannot, for example, just order them to work after hours or on a Saturday; you must be aware of labor laws, union rules and federal regulations, all while nesting their work needs and requirements with mission success.

Use the Tools at Your Disposal

In a post-pandemic world, the tools to command a unique organization have never been better. With video conference programs such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and more having come such a long way, and people more widely adept at using them than ever before, a commander can immediately call his or her formation together (albeit virtually) and provide guidance to steer the organization. These programs also enable commanders to maintain a pulse on the climate and culture of their teams at echelon. These tools, and the unique systems that support them, while not perfect in and of themselves, can greatly aid you in reaching your formation when travel may not be an option.⁷

Never forget that Army doctrine transcends the wide spectrum of organizations one might lead. The Troop Leading Procedures (TLPs) are intentionally not called the “FORSCOM TLPs” or the “Recruiter Leading Procedures”—instead, they are standardized tools for all Army leadership. Tools like the TLPs can be applied in manifold circumstances and can be employed in a wide-reaching capacity for any unit commander. If nothing else, doctrine provides a framework to follow, and, when acceptable, to appropriately adjust from.

This thought process is not any different in an unconventional unit. A commander with a firm understanding of the relevant operational framework, though perhaps not a technical expert, can still drive the operations process from a position of confidence in themselves and trust in their subordinates. Commanders should not be so bound to doctrine that they do not recognize the uniqueness of their specific organization(s); they should be open minded enough to understand that doctrine is a tool suited for planning, preparation and execution in any command, even though it may not result in tactics at a training center rotation or on a tactical deployment overseas.

Leverage Conventional Unit Peers

Just because you are in a unique command does not mean that you should no longer connect with or leverage your conventional unit peers. Gain perspective, support, TTPs and camaraderie from them. You are a commander just as they are—there should be reciprocity on both sides.

Additionally, you will likely return to your primary career field at some point, so you must maintain connectivity, mentorship, networking and relevancy within that community and field. That may seem common sense, but beware that, all too often, the tyranny of the urgent will get in the way of exercising this common sense.⁸ A balanced and purposeful approach at such a juncture is extremely necessary for your next career steps. Connectivity to your conventional unit peers is a simple, straightforward way to maintain this balance and purpose. Though not a discreet broadening assignment in the traditional sense, your unique command will broaden you as well, so work on maintaining and retaining that connectivity in both spheres.⁹

Conclusion

It has been stated many times over and by many people that leading America's sons and daughters in our armed forces is an unparalleled privilege. Therefore, every leader should enjoy the role and appreciate the journey of commanding wherever they may land. As a mentor once told one of the authors of this paper, "Every formation deserves good leadership." And while the role of the commander in non-traditional units certainly comes with distinct challenges and issues, as does any command, each leader must remember that, no matter the circumstances, a command is a command. It is not a privilege or a responsibility to be taken lightly—and it is certainly neither a guarantee nor a right for any commander.

Regardless of what unit you are assigned to or where you end up commanding, lead yourself first, add value to your people, and make sure you study and practice leadership daily and with intentionality. There are many others who were placed on the alternate list, were deferred or were not found ready for command. There are still others who will have to give up the chance or decline command due to life circumstances.

As such, be excited, and be ready to lead and grow where you are planted. You will find that commanding and leading people to excellence will make you a better person and, by extension, a better leader. Your legacy will be in the formations you lead, regardless of the guidon you stand before.



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Leading America's sons and daughters in our armed forces is an unparalleled privilege. Therefore, every leader should not only enjoy the role but also appreciate the journey of commanding wherever they may land.

Notes

- ¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 1-0, *Joint Personnel Support* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 31 May 2016).
- ² Department of the Army, Army Regulation 600-20, *Army Command Policy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 24 July 2020), 2-1.
- ³ “Purpose & Legacy,” GoArmy.com, <https://www.goarmy.com/explore-the-army/about/purpose-legacy>.
- ⁴ Robert Hynes, “Army Civilians and the Army Profession,” *Military Review* (May–June 2015): 71–77.
- ⁵ Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).
- ⁶ Michael Holmberg et al., “A Culture of Trust,” *NCO Journal* (May 2019).
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- ⁹ Justin Magula, “Broadening... Where Do I Start?,” *From the Green Notebook*, 2 April 2021.

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