HOW TO INACTIVATE A COMPANY:
A PRIMER FOR COMPANY-LEVEL LEADERS

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I n June, Chief of Staff of the Army GEN Raymond T. Odierno announced that the Army will reorganize the number of brigade combat teams from 45 to 32 over the next four years. The changes, which are part of the Army's effort to reduce its budget by $170 million and trim the number of Soldiers from 570,000 to 490,000, represent what GEN Odierno calls, "one of the largest organizational changes probably since World War II."[1] In February, a report from the Congressional Research Service suggested the Army may even drop to 24 brigades if the force is reduced to 420,000 Soldiers.[2] These changes are not just significant at the strategic level, but they will surely have a considerable impact at the tactical level with the hundreds of sergeants, lieutenants, and captains charged with inactivating companies. Luckily, the Army has been inactivating and reactivating units throughout its history. Most recently, the 170th and the 172nd Infantry Brigades, both stationed in Germany, were inactivated as part of the initial wave of force adjustments. As a company commander and executive officer (XO) in the 172nd Infantry Brigade during pre-deployment training, combat operations in Afghanistan, redeployment, and inactivation, we have a unique perspective on inactivation and some key points that may assist other companies across the force as they prepare for their own potential inactivation.

While not as glamorous as a decisive-action rotation or as adrenaline inducing as a combat deployment, inactivation is just as demanding — albeit in a much more administrative way. In order to responsibly inactivate a unit, it is helpful first to build a company team specifically for inactivation. Then, one must focus and train the team not only for inactivation but for follow-on assignments and future deployments as well. Finally, the company team — specifically the Soldiers — must be sustained, as inactivation can be a frustrating and demoralizing endeavor.

Building the Team

Maneuver companies are built to fight wars, not deactivate units. Therefore, a new team must be built before inactivation begins. This starts with task organization and getting the right people in the right places. During inactivation, a unit may look very different from training rotations or combat deployment. That is perfectly normal, as the demands of training and deployment are quite different from those of inactivation. Teams and organizations that are not part of a traditional unit modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE), such as reconfigured training rooms, legal teams, or supply rooms, are useful to a company during inactivation. After restructuring the MTOE, it is important to weight the main effort or provide additional manpower to the most important operational elements. During inactivation, the main effort may not be the line platoons. It is far more likely that a company's main effort will be the supply room (if it is a large, property-heavy organization) or the training room, as it is the single point through which all of the unit's permanent change of station (PCS) awards, evaluations, leave paperwork, administrative forms, legal actions, and medical issues flow.

Put the right people in the right places. Years of combat deployments made it painfully clear that only the best officers and NCOs should be in leadership positions in combat. Typically, squads and platoons receive priority in manning while staffs and company commodity shops come second. During inactivation, it is the opposite. The best junior officers should be S1s and S4s, not specialty platoon leaders. The best NCOs should be running company commodity shops, not squads. If it hurts to pull an officer or NCO from his platoon or squad, it is probably the right choice. Moreover, the entire company should be familiar with command supply discipline and how to prepare property for turn in. If not done correctly, 90 percent of the work will be done by 10 percent of the company, and there will be significant problems.

Establishing priorities and determining where to focus organizational energy is one of the most challenging aspects of command. There is truly an art to identifying what tasks are absolutely critical, what tasks are lower priority, and perhaps most difficult, where to assume risk. During inactivation, it may be helpful to identify the top three priorities for the company each day and list them on a white board or butcher block in a prominent common area. Emphasize these points in a morning huddle prior to physical training and during training meetings. Build and mold a common understanding of the company priorities and supervise execution that supports those issues. Often the company priorities will not involve training, as the sheer size and scope of manning and equipment issues will be overwhelming, at least initially. Manning issues can be quite frustrating, but equipment issues — if not handled properly — can actually lead to criminal charges and financial penalties. After establishing priorities of work, the commander must ensure all Soldiers in the company understand their particular roles in the operation. A good technique is to delegate the various equipment-related tasks like filling out turn-in forms or inventorying shortages to the company's platoons. Assign the supply sergeant and XO as the direct supervisor of these activities, and the workload on the commodity shops will be greatly reduced.

During our company's inactivation, we built a unit legal team, a supply group, and a motor pool crew that augmented our commodity shops (with some of our best in charge). The additional manpower and new task organization helped to address the unique demands and constraints of inactivation while minimizing the administrative burden of the command team. Our training room focused on PCS awards, leave forms, administrative paperwork, and the monumental effort of tracking the PCS status of every Soldier leaving the unit. Our battalion created a manning briefing format that served as a tracker for unit strength and personnel progress along each step of the PCS process. At the company level, we reviewed and updated this tracker by name for every Soldier, which helped to maintain efficiency and oversight in the process. This allowed command teams to identify PCS roadblocks early and address them with the appropriate agencies and get the Soldier to his or her next unit quickly.

Developing genuine working relationships with the military personnel division is an absolute must. Our battalion commander and S1 officer personally visited our on-post personnel division, handing out coins and meeting face-to-face with the civilians who address and manage the PCS paperwork for our Soldiers. Our company command team did the same, which paid dividends when we had confusing or complicated problems with our Soldiers transitioning out of the unit. Due in large part to the relationships we developed with our military personnel division, our unit had a much easier time correcting paperwork and addressing problems in the PCS timelines of our Soldiers. If the inactivating unit is stateside, the process for transitioning Soldiers out of the unit may be considerably easier, as most Soldiers may be able to simply transition into a sister brigade on post. Regardless of where a Soldier transitions, the process must be highly regulated, and the command team must have constant oversight. Typically, the supply room and the XO handle equipment and property issues, but during inactivation, a more robust team is needed.

Training the Team

Soldiers need to train not only for the inactivation mission at hand, but also for the next mission at their next unit. Just because Soldiers are not performing MOS-related duties daily does not mean they should not remain experts. Unfortunately, training during inactivation can be incredibly difficult. Often the resources, time, organizational focus, and personnel needed to conduct training are not there or are severely limited. Nevertheless, it is critical to continue training both to prepare Soldiers for their follow-on assignments and to ensure they are actively engaged at work because some inactivation tasks may not involve the entire unit. There are four ways any inactivating unit can maximize training opportunities in a resource-constrained environment.

First, focus on simulators. Most posts have a wide array of simulators. The most useful may be the engagement simulations trainer (EST) and the call-for-fire trainer (CFF), as these simulators do not necessarily require coherent units to facilitate training. If a unit maintains functional

teams, crews, squads, and platoons long enough, it may even benefit from collective training simulators such as the close combat tactical trainer (CCTT), unit-conduct of fire trainer (U-COFT), and Virtual Battlespace 2 (VBS2). Regardless of the size and scope of the training, simulator-assisted events must be deliberately planned. While this may be common sense, during inactivation some units will be tempted to simply schedule the trainers as a quick way to fill white space or to occupy the Soldiers while the leadership focuses on equipment turn-in or manning conferences. Such haphazard planning should be avoided at all costs, and simulator-assisted training should be part of a larger training plan that has clear tasks, conditions, standards and end state. Additionally, collective training in simulators should also be multi-echelon training, with operation orders (OPORDs) and troop leading procedures playing an integral part. If the unit conducts a VBS2 event, develop and brief company and platoon OPORDs. Train the platoon leaders to deliver quality orders while also exposing the NCOs to platoon-level planning.

Second, remember the key to successful units is often in the quality of leaders from the team to the platoon level.
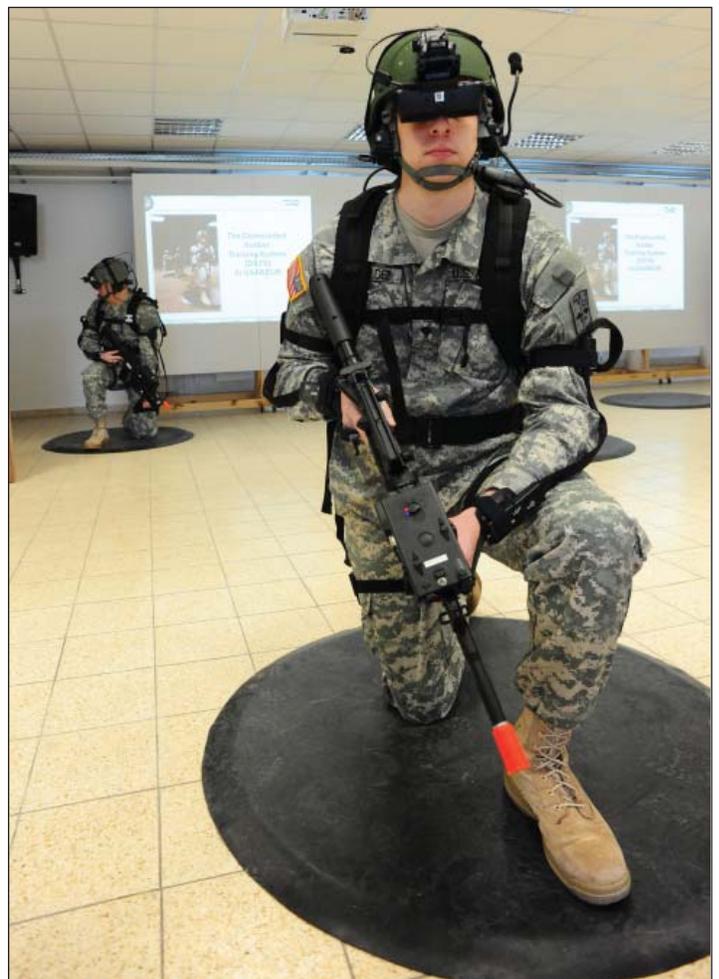

Photo by SSG Pablo N. Piedra

Soldiers from the 172nd Infantry Brigade train using the Dismounted Soldier Training System (DSTS) at Grafenwoehr, Germany, on 21 February 2013. The DSTS is the first fully immersive virtual training environment to conduct dismounted Soldier operations.

Leader training and professional development for officers and NCOs must be part of any inactivation training plan. Deployments and increased operational tempo have limited professional development programs in the past. As the Army returns to garrison life, many leaders may be intimidated by establishing a leader development program, possibly because they assume such programs must be complicated and involved. But some of the best programs are rather simple. Book clubs amongst the officers and NCOs are a great way to spark discussion and creative thinking. There are an abundance of reading lists such as the Army Chief of Staff's reading list, that could easily provide material for months of training. Focusing on one book a month, with one officer or NCO leading the discussion and highlighting significant aspects and ideas, is an ideal way to focus a company professional development program.

Third, tactical decision exercises or vignettes are excellent vehicles for leader development. At the basic school, our instructors often used these during lulls in training or ranges to force us to think quickly and employ sound tactics to achieve specified objectives. These exercises usually involve no more than a map or imagery, a fictional scenario, a hypothetical enemy of any type, and a specified objective. Participants then have a short time to think through the problem, develop a course of action, and brief the plan.

If tactical decision exercises are too basic, then perhaps lead a company tactical exercise without troops in which one half of the company leadership replicates attacking forces on a particular range or terrain while the other half replicates defenders. Both groups conduct reconnaissance on the terrain and then develop an OPORD before briefing the plans to the entire group. The company commander and first sergeant can assess the plans and lead discussions on the strengths and weaknesses of each.

Fourth, with the Army becoming more regionally focused, it may be wise to hold country briefings and basic language instruction amongst the officers and senior NCOs. These classes would not only improve creative-thinking skills but would also increase understanding of other regions in the world — traits our leaders need in an increasingly uncertain security environment.

Preparing subordinates for future assignments and Army schools is also a key task for any commander. In an inactivating unit, a company commander could help prepare his platoon leaders for the career course by focusing professional development sessions on the entrance exam requirements and program of instruction (both of which are listed on the course website). Platoon sergeants could, in-turn, prepare their Soldiers, team leaders, and squad leaders for their respective boards. Focusing classes on uniform standards, regulations, and general Soldier knowledge requires little outside resources and serves as quick, effective training events that have practical benefits for Soldiers and units alike.

Sustaining the Team

During inactivation, command teams must plan to sustain both the unit's logistics and morale as both can easily fade through the process. For logistics, pay close attention to automations, supply accounts, and facilities to sustain the unit. For morale, focus on unit integrity, high-risk Soldiers, and leveraging on-post agencies.

Units must plan automations availability and supply account status through unit closure. Automations and supply accounts are the fuel on which the company operates, and if a company is without computers or accounts, the inactivation will grind to a halt. Backwards plan for the number of computers the unit requires to ensure that enough computers remain in the company as long as it is operating. Additionally, close supply accounts when able (Class III after the vehicles are turned in), but not before it is necessary. It is likely that Class II accounts will need to remain open for the duration of the process in order to order supplies to sustain daily company activities, but each unit will have its own particular needs.

Units will also turn in facilities as the inactivation process draws to a close and the unit dwindles in size. While it may seem simple, facility turn-in can be quite complex because it is difficult to gauge when the unit no longer needs the facility. While facilities must be kept long enough to sustain training and administrative issues, resist the urge to hold on to facilities (and property) too long. Instead, units should prep facilities and equipment for turn-in as early as possible or else find themselves without enough Soldiers to effectively finish the task. Establish clear turn-in and paperwork standards that remain fixed and uniform to drive facility and equipment turn-in. If these standards change after the start of inactivation, it will cause confusion and drastically slow down the inactivation process. The amount of property and supplies that will appear when a motor pool or office building is emptied is astonishing — start early.

Unit inactivation is not only an administratively difficult process, it also presents unique challenges to the spiritual and mental health of our Soldiers. For this reason, it is critical to maintain unit integrity — keep the Soldiers who deployed together as a coherent unit for as long as possible during inactivation. Soldiers identified to augment the training, supply, and arms rooms must be superior Soldiers who present little or no risk in transitioning to new, first-line supervisors. When tasked with inactivation, a command team may be tempted to task organize the company according to PCS timelines. However, this runs the risk of taking a Soldier out of the squad and platoon chain of command with which he deployed and putting him with a brand new set of leaders that better match his PCS timeline. At first glance, this technique seems attractive because it streamlines the inactivation of a company. But the risk of putting Soldiers in new chains of command that do not understand their particular history and background likely outweigh any advantage. Also, it is key that units maintain an effective leader-to-Soldier ratio. During inactivation, officers and NCOs may PCS or transition out of the unit at a faster rate than enlisted Soldiers, leaving the bulk of the formation leaderless. Command teams must ensure that teams, squads, and platoons retain quality leadership

throughout the inactivation process. The last thing any command team wants during inactivation is a preventable Soldier emergency that could have been avoided if the original chain of command remained intact.

Efforts to combat rising rates of suicide within the military led many units to deliberately track and monitor high-risk Soldiers or those Soldiers who had multiple indicators or factors that might lead to self-harm. In our company, we tracked and updated our high-risk Soldier lists weekly. This became incredibly important during inactivation as we did not want our high-risk Soldiers moved out of their original units or to be in a unit with a leader PCSing or preparing to PCS. We needed our high-risk Soldiers in units where they felt most comfortable and where there was a fully engaged leader, who was focused on inactivating responsibly and not on transitioning out of the unit.

Leverage the full weight of on-post agencies to ensure Soldiers receive the best possible care and treatment during inactivation. Most command teams are familiar with the Army Substance Abuse Program, Army Community Services, Army Family Advocacy, and Military Family life counselors. These organizations provide excellent counseling and care of our Soldiers and can give invaluable advice on a wide range of Soldier issues during inactivation. Including representatives from these organizations in reviews of high-risk Soldiers or during inactivation manning meetings may be a good technique to identify special-needs individuals and prevent any potential incidents. The unit chaplain may also be an excellent source of information, and can assist in monitoring unit morale.

As the casing ceremony draws closer and the unit turns-in

equipment, it may be harder to keep Soldiers focused and engaged. Morale in the unit may take a hit, as the inactivation mission is not as fulfilling for most Soldiers as preparing for deployment or training. Be creative and forward thinking in combating complacency and declining morale. On-post agencies can help. Our company worked heavily with the local Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) office to design fun events that motivated Soldiers and maintained unit morale. While MWR offices throughout the Army differ slightly, most can offer creative alternatives to morning physical training, such as canoeing or mountain biking, or offer adventure trips, such as rock climbing and hiking. Almost all events require a small fee, but unit fundraising or donations eliminate or limit most costs.

Final Thoughts

Inactivation is a challenging mission, and if recent political developments hold true, far more companies may be involved than originally expected. Although challenging, inactivation does not have to be frustrating for company-level leaders. If proper time is spent building the team prior to inactivation, many frustrations can be avoided. Once inactivation begins, it is imperative that command teams focus their organizations to ensure that the colossal amount of work is evenly spread throughout the formation with the best possible leaders in the right positions. Finally, as inactivation takes hold in a unit, training and sustaining our Soldiers is vital to reducing risk and maintaining unit focus. While not as exciting as a deployment or a rotation at a combat training center, inactivation is just as challenging and no less important. It is critical that company-level leaders inactivate and help shape the future force in a responsible and thoughtful manner.

Notes

[1] GEN Raymond T. Odierno, "CSA Press Conference on Force Structure Reductions," 25 June 2013, http://www.army.mil/article/106433/June_25__2013____CSA_Press_Conference_on_Force_Structure_Reductions__As_Delivered___Includes_Q_A_/

[2] Kristina Wong, "Army to Cut Combat Brigades," *The Hill*, 13 March 2014, http://thehill.com/blogs/defcon-hill/army/200764-army-to-cut-combat-brigades#ixzz2vtLM6zX4.

Photo by Gertrude Zach

COL Edward T. Bohnemann, commander of the 172nd Infantry Brigade, and CSM Michael W. Boom case the unit colors during the unit's inactivation ceremony on 31 May 2013 in Grafenwoehr, Germany.

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