

Introduction

During Operation Iraqi Freedom I (OIF I), Combat Service Support Group-11 (CSSG-11) provided logistical support to the 1st Marine Division as it fought to topple Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. In addition to enemy action, severe weather, and sleep deprivation, the officers and staff non-commissioned officers (SNCOs) of CSSG-11 overcame obstacles to mission accomplishment created by their commanding officer. The command investigation leading to that officer's relief-for-cause would note that the unit had performed superbly, but this performance was due almost wholly to the leadership and ingenuity of the officers and Staff Noncommissioned Officers (SNCOs) subordinate to the Commanding Officer (CO). The junior leaders understood the mission and rose in the face of adversity to see that 1st Marine Division (1st MarDiv) received the support it needed during the first large-scale combat operation the Marine Corps had seen in more than a decade.

This case study outlines the CSSG-11 commander's unique interaction with subordinates, provides an overview of the command and control structure which evolved, and describes the responses (both effective and ineffective) by the staff and subordinate commanders. Descriptions of events are based on witness statements and findings in a 1st Force Service Support Group (1st FSSG) Command Investigation. The narrative should not be interpreted as suggesting any best or worst practices. Rather the narrative is designed to support discussion of two main topics. The first is command climate. Here we explore issues related to developing and building trust with subordinates, and maintaining morale. The second theme is command and control. Here we consider how information flow and command structure can solidify or erode a leader's actual authority.

A Growing Command

In July 2002, Brigade Service Support Group-1 (BSSG-1) (which would soon be re-designated as CSSG-11) underwent a change of command. The colonel receiving BSSG-1 had served as a logistician in the first Gulf War, and was now recognized as one of the most talented logisticians in the Marine Corps. The unit, however, would

need not just technical expertise but also sound leadership as BSSG-1 grew from its skeletal staff of thirty-two personnel in the summer of 2002 to over 1,800 in December of that year, when they would deploy to Kuwait. Complicating this growth, some personnel would report directly from MOS school. Others would be serving in billets they had never filled, or be working entirely outside their MOS. Naturally, the colonel had a staff to support his efforts, and he met with them upon his arrival.

Setting the Tone

The colonel began his first meeting with his sergeant major saying, "Sergeant Major, I have had to relieve four sergeants major in my career." He then explained why he had recently relieved a gunnery sergeant from his staff.¹ In spite of this chilly start, the commanding officer (CO)/ sergeant major (SgtMaj) relationship solidified over time.

Prior to the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the Sergeants Major of CSSG-11 and CSSB-10² assembled their deployed Marines for the Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) Commander's speech. Arriving early, the colonel informed the sergeants major he was not pleased with the set-up. The sergeants major explained that the set-up complied with the Drill and Ceremonies Manual. The colonel replied, "We aren't going to do it by the manual. We are going to do it the way I want it done."

After the speech, the CSSG-11 SgtMaj spoke with the colonel regarding the need for all SNCOs to be able to act on matters for which they were responsible, without seeking the colonel's approval. The colonel made clear that he would not change the manner in which he ran his command.

The Staff

The command employed three watch officers; all were lieutenants working outside their MOS; none had a background in logistics. At the watch turnover briefs, the colonel would ask them questions of increasing depth and specificity until the watch officer could not answer (e.g. on one occasion, he asked about information he (the

colonel) had learned through a personal conversation with the Commanding General of the Force Service Support Group (FSSG)), then he would tell the officers they had failed by knowing less than he did, threaten to fire them, or ask if he needed to do their job. A running joke within the command was, “You may begin firing when your watch officer appears.”

While the watch officers’ exposure made them regular targets, other members of the staff were occasionally counseled, often in provocative terms. The colonel openly referred to one captain as a “coward” and a “candyass” because he had delayed a convoy until security vehicles arrived. Another was vilified as a “liar” after he incorrectly reported the operational status of a piece of gear. The colonel referred to the lieutenant colonel commanding his subordinate Combat Service Support Battalion (CSSB) as a “leadership failure” because the lieutenant colonel did not employ the same command style as the colonel. The colonel even informed his executive officer (XO) at a staff meeting that he had lost all trust and confidence in the XO’s abilities. (When the XO asked if this meant he was fired, the colonel said, “No”).

The colonel’s level of concern for his subordinates was apparent in other ways. Early in the war, the colonel led his forward command post (Fwd CP) team, or CSSG Fwd, ahead of tank and infantry units toward an engagement between the division’s forward elements and the enemy. The CSSG Fwd convoy was halted short of the battle area and directed back toward the rear. As they retrograded, a reporter asked the colonel if he was concerned about bringing a logistics unit so close to the front lines. The colonel replied that it did not matter to him because he had already lived a good life. His Marines overheard this.

Female Subordinates

Most officers and SNCOs of CSSG-11 were used to brusque dealings with the colonel. Several noted that when they greeted him in passing he would often ignore them. An exception to this was female Marines, whom he would not only respond to but would generally stop to converse with, as he placed a hand on their shoulder. They nicknamed this move “the Claw.”

The colonel would also travel between his CPs and to the ruins at Babylon and other interesting areas, requesting the company of specific females. He would then have pictures taken with his arms around them as a group or individually at the sights. In one instance, while his S-4 officer was updating the colonel in the command tent, she felt he was not paying attention to what she was saying. She paused.

“Are those cammies thin material?” he asked. “They sure do fit you nice.”

One female he frequently traveled with, and eventually requested by name for assignment to his command, was a flirtatious Public Affairs Officer (PAO).³ The colonel was observed following her around and having his picture taken with her during one outing. On their return from another trip, the colonel ordered his driver to unload and carry the PAO’s gear for her. He further made her the sole exception to his policy requiring the wear of complete uniforms, permitting the PAO to roam the CP and the camp wearing flip-flops and no blouse.

Outside Units and Subordinate Commanders

In talking with unit commanders of the Ground Combat Element, the colonel often promised specific support without consulting his staff to determine the availability of supplies and transportation assets. When the full amount of support turned out to be unavailable, the Combat Service Support Company (CSSC) Commanders would have to lower the units’ expectations. The colonel, in turn, would inform the unit that the shortfall was due to the CSSC Commander’s lack of ability.

Key Advisors

The colonel’s abrasive behavior affected information and advice from subordinates in the course of operations. As U.S. forces approached Baghdad, the colonel’s liaison to Regimental Combat Team-1 (RCT-1) recommended to the colonel that certain logistical assets be transferred to another unit. The colonel replied angrily, “Do not f---ing tell me what to do. Never f---ing do that again.”

CSSG-11’s XO was a major who had been at the unit for months prior to the colonel’s arrival. The XO was extremely intelligent, had played a key role in developing

the plans to support 1st MarDiv upon deployment, and had an excellent working relationship with the existing staff.

Like other members of the staff, however, the XO had difficulty advising the colonel. At one staff meeting, the XO informed the colonel that another unit was in a situation and had asked to keep a CSSG-11 rough terrain cargo handler (RTCH) container-mover longer than originally planned. He also offered that CSSG-11 could make do without the RTCH for the time being. The colonel told the XO that he was wrong, he "gets an F," and berated him for more than two minutes in front of the staff before continuing the one-sided discussion outside the tent.

Commander's Guidance and Media Relations

The colonel's guidance changed frequently. During prewar planning, the colonel would focus the staff in a new direction every few days. During the war his guidance changed more often. In a single conversation, the colonel ordered the XO to emplace at least five different quantities of supplies at a single Rapid Replenishment Point (RRP). If a Marine pointed out that the colonel's earlier guidance was different, the colonel would deny it and turn on the Marine.

Prior to deploying, the colonel had stated that he did not want to speak to the media. "They'll misquote me," he said. The colonel informed his officers and SNCOs that he wanted the press to "talk to the lance corporal and the PFC and hear their story."

Once deployed, however, the colonel held regular press briefings, and would pull reporters away from his Marines to update the newsmen. He also dispatched five Marines from al Kut to SA Anderson to retrieve satellite phones for reporters to use (It was after dark, and there Fedayeen were rumored to be operating along the MSR his Marines would traverse). During the Battle for Baghdad, he had reporters cross the unsecured Diyala River bridge ahead of him (placing them in jeopardy) so they could photograph him making the crossing.

Command and Control

Procedure

CSSG-11's staff worked from two command posts, a Forward (Fwd) and a Main. Prior to the war, the unit had rehearsed staging the Fwd CP for movement when the Main was operating. On the third day of the war, however, the colonel berated his Assistant Operations Officer for not having the Forward CP processing requests while the Main was operating. Thereafter, both CPs frequently processed requests from the division simultaneously but at different locations, leaving the specific function of each unclear and leading to the mishandling of many requests for support. While officers at the Fwd CP were often undertasked, their counterparts at the Main CP often worked shifts in excess of twenty-four hours without rest.

Positioning and Information Flow

The colonel decided that as he was the decision-maker, information should flow to him, not away. When he received information at the Fwd, he would not pass it to the Main. Since most of CSSG-11's planning and execution took place at the Main CP, two issues resulted: First, the colonel was absent from the Main when developing situations required hundreds of planning changes. Second, the colonel's hold on information made operations at the Main CP less efficient.

When the Colonel was not at either CP, operations were further hindered. When CSSG-11 was directed to relocate to Ad Diwiniya, the Colonel stated he would travel to the Forward CP to oversee displacement. Accompanied by a PAO and several reporters, he departed for the Fwd early in the morning. Six hours later he had still not arrived. Blue Force Tracker indicated he was at a village eighteen miles from the Iranian border. There, he and the press were having lunch at the home of a Free Iraqi Forces soldier. The colonel arrived at the Fwd CP too late to displace during daylight.

Subordinates' Responses

The Sergeant Major

The CSSG-11 SgtMaj later told investigators that he was unable to advise the colonel on any matter, so he would pass the colonel information when required, but if an actual issue needed to be addressed, he would work on it with the XO or the Operations officer. The SgtMaj confirmed that the XO was the “go to” person on any issue that needed resolution.

However both he and the XO were powerless where the colonel had already made a decision. Toward the end of the deployment the First Sergeant of Combat Service Support Company-115 (CSSC-115) appealed to the SgtMaj for a Marine who was no longer needed for the mission to return to CONUS to handle a personal matter. The colonel had already denied the request. “I agree with you,” the Sgt Maj told the First Sergeant, “but there’s nothing I can do.”

The Watch Officers

In an effort to minimize the humiliation from the colonel, the watch officers spent the bulk of their watch attempting to assemble “the perfect brief,” often this came at the expense of mission requirements. This was undesirable, but the reduced humiliation inflicted on the watch officers had great effect in rallying the staff. The XO directed all briefers to report early so they could collectively review everything being presented to the colonel. He additionally tasked three captains on the staff to help the watch officers prepare. Other staff members would voluntarily assist the watch officers, and members of the Surgical Company would pressure the senior physician, a Navy Captain, to attend briefs because his presence seemed to reduce the hostility displayed by the colonel.

Regardless of the length of preparation or the number of Marines involved, the colonel would probe until the briefer failed to produce an answer, and then announce the briefer’s failure to the assembled staff. His outbursts were gut-wrenching for the exhausted briefers, and finally broke the spirit of at least one lieutenant. After the occupation of Baghdad, a number of officers spent hours preparing the watch officer for every possible question. However, after the colonel’s third question, the watch officer

began to answer “I don’t know” to questions he had been well prepared for. A captain later asked why he didn’t answer the questions. The lieutenant replied, “Why bother? I just wanted to get it over with.”

At the time of the investigation, all but one of the lieutenants assigned to the staff, the subordinate battalion, and the companies planned to resign their commissions at the end of the deployment.

Sexual Harassment

The XO was aware of the undercurrent of preferential treatment toward females, but unaware of any sexual harassment. When a female officer in the surgical company eventually raised the issue of harassment, the XO spoke with the FSSG Staff Judge Advocate (SJA). He was informed that a formal complaint must precede any action.

The female officer spoke with two female staff sergeants who had reluctantly, at the colonel’s request, powdered his back after he showered; and a female corpsman she thought felt similarly uncomfortable about the way the colonel touched and spoke to her. But neither the SNCOs nor the corpsman agreed to submit statements. Because the officer did not want to go through the process alone, and because she felt her life would be easier if she did not anger the colonel, she chose not to write a statement herself.

After being told she filled her uniform well, the S-4 officer brought the issue to the S-3 Officer, who was serving as acting XO. He spoke to the colonel who expressed surprise that his words were ‘misinterpreted.’ Thereafter, he did not touch the S-4 or make suggestive remarks to her. Before the investigating officer arrived at CSSG-11, the colonel apologized to her for the incident.

Transfer of Authority

The XO attempted to ensure informed decisions by advising the colonel, but the colonel proved resistant. Shortly after combat operations began, the colonel entered the CP with several reporters, told everyone to close their computers then gave the press a situation brief. After the brief, the XO approached the colonel privately and advised him that there was a MEF order stating that media were not allowed in

command posts, and that most of the battle map was in view (two Marines had stood in front of it, trying to obscure it, but one was very short). The colonel reprimanded the XO for second-guessing him. He would bring reporters into the tent again after this.

Unable to guide the colonel, the XO attempted to shield staff members from the colonel's wrath. While in Baghdad, CSSG-11 was directed to support a task force proceeding to Tikrit. After providing guidance, the colonel departed, visiting the 1stMarDiv's operations tent before returning to his own CP where the S-3A began to brief the plan they had developed. The colonel cut him off, telling the captain his plan did not match the division's. The colonel boasted that he had more current information on division plans than the S-3A, indicating the captain's incompetence. The XO injected that division had not informed them of their change in plans but that the staff would incorporate the new information. The brief continued for a few minutes, but the colonel again silenced the briefer with fresh criticism. The XO spoke up again, taking the blame for the briefer. The colonel stated across the length of the briefing tent that the XO was a failure and that the staff was a failure. He specifically stated that their planning method was flawed.

The XO and the staff returned to planning. Less than an hour later, the colonel called the XO. Although the colonel had been out of contact with the staff since the recent upbraiding, he told the XO he and the staff had recovered themselves and were doing great.

- As noted earlier, the divided command structure of the Fwd and Main CPs meant the colonel was not at either CP when many time-critical decisions were made and orders issued. Because the XO always remained with the Main, he filled the gap.
- Because the colonel was not receptive to advice or information (e.g. when the RCT-1's advice was met with "Don't f---ing tell me what to do...") information flowed instead to the XO.
- The colonel further shifted power to the XO by giving conflicting sets of guidance. The uncertainty in the colonel's statements required the XO to provide the staff with his interpretation of the colonel's desired end state. In short, the colonel's guidance became what the XO thought it was. On

certain matters, however, the XO adopted a policy of waiting for confirmation. When the colonel directed non-punitive letters of caution (NPLCs) be given to his company commanders, or to his sole battalion commander, (which he often did, for offenses such as one of their Marines in a convoy having his sleeves rolled up) the XO would wait for confirmation. In the case of the NPLCs, it never came, so the letters were never prepared.

- A similar policy was adopted by at least one subordinate commander. CSSC-115 followed in trace of RCT-5 on the push to Baghdad. The company provided RCT-5 the necessary fuel through three overworked M970 refuelers. The colonel however demanded all three M970s be returned. The company commander, realizing the loss of the M970s would cripple RCT-5's rate of advance, decided to keep the trucks. Two days later, with the trucks still not returned, the colonel summoned the CSSC Commander on the command net and, among other things, threatened to relieve her of command. She was not, however, removed from command.

Summary

In the end, the stress level and negative command climate affected morale, but not the performance of CSSG-11. The sentiment of many SNCOs and officers within CSSG-11 was summarized in a statement made by the Sergeant Major of CSSB-10: "I would not willingly follow the colonel [of CSSG-11] anywhere." He and others credited the XO with holding up morale and being the "glue" that held the command together. Most considered the XO the actual leader of CSSG-11. A junior officer explicitly told investigators that if the colonel told him to do one thing and the XO told him to do something else, he would have followed the XO's order.

However, living in the path of the colonel's wrath drained on the XO. He discussed with the CO of CSSB-10 the option of requesting mast¹. Twice, the XO came very close to resigning. In the end he did not, fearing life would become worse for the staff or the command would become ineffective. Either was unthinkable while they were supporting a Marine division in combat.

As the FSSG prepared to return to CONUS following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, the colonel accused the Commanding Officer of CSSB-10 of being disloyal to him. This was the final straw for CSSB-10's CO, who informed the 1st FSSG Chief of Staff that he wished to be relieved of his command.

The Chief of Staff denied the request. He did, however, meet with the colonel and advise him that his command seemed to be headed toward a crisis. He instructed the colonel to meet one-on-one with the Commanding General, 1st FSSG, the next day. After leaving the Chief of Staff, the colonel accused his SgtMaj of being disloyal and going behind his back to group.

The colonel's meeting with his FSSG commander produced an unanticipated result. "Commanders have the luxury of choosing their personality," he told his assembled command. "For the last six months I chose to be like John Wayne. Well, now that hostilities are officially over, I am going to change. I'm going to be more like Kevin Costner..." Following this announcement, the colonel abruptly stopped yelling at staff meetings.

Nonetheless, a few weeks later an unsigned letter accusing the colonel of sixteen improper acts arrived in 1st FSSG's mail. The 1st FSSG launched a Command Investigation, which substantiated fifteen of the allegations and uncovered many others.

The colonel was relieved of command.

End Notes

1 The XO decided against it thinking there was no single instance where the colonel had clearly acted beyond the scope of his authority, and also the prospect of a reprisal by the colonel seemed very likely.

2 Information throughout this case study drawn from the Preliminary Inquiry into the allegations of abuse at CSSG-11 contained in an undated, anonymous letter received by 1st FSSG (Fwd) at Camp Iwo Jima, Kuwait on 29 July 2003.