

Check It Out!

By Command Sergeant Major Edgar W. Dahl

The desert heat beat down on the gravel parking lot as a platoon of military police Soldiers lounged lazily on their M1114 up-armored high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs). Safe on the forward operating base (FOB), they drank water; ate meals, ready to eat (MREs) or junk food; told stories; and otherwise relaxed and tried to stay cool on this day off. Weapons and equipment were mounted or strewn over hoods, leaned against tires, stuffed in open hatches, or tucked in between seats. The platoon's noncommissioned officers (NCOs) huddled nearby and looked on nervously as the command sergeant major's vehicle approached.

As the command sergeant major dismounted, shed his individual body armor (IBA) and helmet and wiped his brow, the platoon sergeant came up, offered his hand and welcomed the battalion's senior NCO. At the same time, the unit NCOs cajoled their Soldiers to wake up, fix their uniforms, and otherwise look as presentable as possible. After the customary pleasantries, the command sergeant major followed the ritual of greeting Soldiers and NCOs and asking how everything was going. The condition of each vehicle, the team leader, Soldiers, and equipment was noted as he moved down the line chatting and joking with the Soldiers.

His smile turned to a scowl as he noticed the haphazard placement of the gear and the dirty and disorganized interior of each HMMWV. Snack containers, water bottles, and soda cans were scattered around the interiors of the HMMWVs. Caked mud and loose sand covered the floors and cargo areas. Smoke grenades and witty cartoons were taped on the dashboards and loose rounds of ammunition rolled around inside. Windows were dirty, mirrors were cracked, and half a transmission filled one cargo area because the vehicle was deadlined and there was no storage area available for the mechanic's tools and parts.

Continuing to stroll down the line, the command sergeant major noticed spare weapons barrels beginning to rust, high-value communications equipment getting crushed under the weight of dusty rucksacks, and ammunition cans overflowing with muddy cartridges. Dirty ice chests occupied valuable storage space, and opened battery boxes revealed trash and batteries with corroded terminals. Tires were worn to the nub, and stacks of magazines with bikini-clad women on the covers were stuffed in between the seats.

Under the hood, dry rot had taken hold of the hoses and dirt painted the engines. Personal weapons were bone-dry and fouled with burnt powder. Maps were crinkled, dirty, and scattered with no apparent method. Field gear was sullied, and duffle bags and rucksacks were musty from being closed up for weeks. A filthy sleeping bag was rolled up and bracing other equipment in the back hatch, and the smell of grimy canvas filled the air. Grubby helmet covers were covered with writing. IBA was stained with food and sweat, and desert boots were black with grime. Magazines of rifle ammunition were polluted with sand.

It was a nice sunny day and the Soldiers counted the minutes until the command sergeant major was finished so that they could go back to their trailer, pull out video games, or take a nap in the air-conditioned confines of their temporary home. That plan got derailed. Rather than point out his displeasure with the unit's NCOs in front of the Soldiers, the command sergeant major pulled the NCOs to the side and went down the list of obvious deficiencies. He instructed them to pull out every piece of equipment in the vehicles and inventory and clean it. In addition, every weapon and spare barrel would be cleaned and every vehicle and radio would undergo preventive maintenance checks and services according to the technical manual. The command sergeant major planned to return at the end of the day and check the progress of the platoon in a full layout of field gear and personal uniforms and gear. Chagrined NCOs trudged back to their Soldiers and spread the news. Shoulders shrugged and heavy sighs signaled the arrival of the instructions.

As he departed to call the unit first sergeant, the command sergeant major wondered how it had come to this. How had a whole platoon of NCOs decided to



A squad leader conducts a precombat inspection of his unit's team members before a mission.

neglect their equipment to this degree? Had they not been trained? Had they not been checked often enough? Did they not know the consequences of their actions or how their lackadaisical attitude could cause injury or death? One thing he knew for sure was that basic NCO duties had been neglected. No one had performed proper troop leading procedures (TLP), precombat checks (PCCs), precombat inspections (PCIs), or after-action reviews (AARs) in that platoon lately.

TLP, PCC/PCIs, and AARs are basic NCO responsibilities—period. These enablers do not guarantee mission success, but they do put the odds greatly in the favor of the Soldier and NCO, especially in war. Deliberate and practiced use of these time-proven techniques saves time, hones tactical prowess, and can save lives in combat and in garrison. They reinforce NCO authority and responsibility and underpin everything that is expected of junior NCO leaders in their two basic responsibilities—accomplishment of the mission and the welfare of Soldiers.

These techniques have been written about in countless manuals, printed on graphic training aids, and sandwiched in lesson plans across numerous leadership schools. They are organic chapters in field and tactical standing operating procedures (SOPs) and known by virtually every Soldier leader who has

been graded during a field training exercise, attended an NCO school, or undergone Ranger training.

Now NCOs are leading strategic missions in a tactical setting. They have a full kit of responsibility and expectations and frequently lead without direct officer guidance. Decisions are made on the spot and the consequences speak volumes about how professional and prepared they are to handle this burden on the battlefield. For the most part, they do a great job and we can be proud of how the Army trains, selects, and promotes Soldiers to the NCO ranks. Everything the unit does or fails to do rests on the back of the units' NCOs. That is directly attributable to how well the NCOs lead and what preparations they make for each mission.

Field Manual (FM) 7-22.7, *The Army Noncommissioned Officer Guide*, outlines TLP and explains the conduct of PCC/PCIs. The manual advises conducting inspections of the weapons, ammunition, organic equipment, and mission-essential equipment of each Soldier and team. In addition, it proposes inspecting water, rations, communications equipment, and camouflage and reinspecting any earlier deficiencies. Moreover, it outlines the need to conduct a test of the Soldiers' understanding of the mission and individual responsibilities by quizzing them about it. The *U.S. Army Ranger Handbook, SH 21-76*,¹ mirrors the same requirements.



Individual inspection includes uniform and gear.

FM 7-22.7 goes on to say that, “PCCs and PCIs are key to ensuring leaders, trainers, and Soldiers are adequately prepared to execute operations and training to Army standard. PCC/PCIs are the bridge between pre-execution checks and execution of training. They are also detailed final checks that all units conduct before and during execution of training and combat operations. Conduct PCC/PCIs at the beginning of each event or exercise as part of the troop leading procedures to check personnel, equipment, vehicles, and mission knowledge... Pre-execution checks ensure that all planning and prerequisite training (Soldier, leader, and collective) are complete prior to the execution of training. They systemically prepare Soldiers, trainers, and resources to ensure training execution starts properly. Pre-execution checks provide the attention to detail needed to use resources efficiently.”²²

Following this guidance, where does FM 7-22.7 put the responsibility to conduct this part of the TLP? It puts this rock in the rucksack of NCOs. Paragraph 2-40 states: “You [the NCO] are the key to inspections, checking Soldier and unit readiness in personal hygiene and appearance, weapons, field equipment, displays, and sanitary conditions. Inspections must be done regularly to help reinforce standards and instill discipline. Regular, impartial inspections of important areas develop confidence,

teamwork, and Soldiers’ pride in themselves and their equipment.”²³

It is easy to see a direct link between how and when inspections are conducted and the performance of a unit in combat, in training, and in garrison. If NCOs are pressed for time and cannot train on anything else, they should train on the basics. NCOs should—

- Make PCC/PCIs part of the basic building blocks of leadership.
- Insist that PCC/PCIs be done every day.
- Make PCC/PCIs part of physical training.
- Make in-ranks inspections part of the daily routine.
- Incorporate inspections into unit maintenance and training programs.
- Include PCC/PCIs as part of law enforcement duties and hold subordinate NCOs accountable for their conduct.

Units should develop both generic and mission-specific PCC/PCI checklists and cheat sheets. The checklists should be laminated and placed in unit NCO leader books in place of all the useless material that some NCOs cram into these “portable filing cabinets.” A picture showing where ribbons go on the Class A uniform is not much help in Mosul or Kandahar, but a list of items to check before “leaving

the wire” at night is. Use every opportunity to use these documents. Be wary of the NCO whose checklist is neat and pristine, but praise the NCO whose checklist is dog-eared and worn from use. By using PCC/PCI checklists for the guard mounts performed before assuming law enforcement or guard duty in confinement facilities, NCOs will gain confidence in their authority and expertise in their use. In addition, Soldiers will be deliberate when they prepare to go to work. Keep the checklist viable by making it a living document that adapts to changes in the mission.

Take NCOs out to the field and train them on the basics of the TLP, especially PCC/PCIs. Under the direction the battalion’s senior NCOs, the 759th Military Police Battalion at Fort Carson, Colorado, conducted such an exercise in September 2002. More than 100 NCOs went to the field and conducted dismounted reconnaissance, ambush, and raid missions. They were divided into 30- to 35-Soldier platoons and assigned various leadership and fire team positions. The graded portion of the missions focused on how the NCOs performed their TLP, not on how tactically proficient they were at conducting the reconnaissance, ambush, and raid missions. They ate MREs and drank water exclusively for those four days and walked at night on each mission. The bonding and the confidence gained and the knowledge shared were tremendous. The NCOs saw how actions taken before and after each mission directly influenced the performance during the mission.

They were forced to use the TLP before the mission and to conduct to-standard AARs after the mission. It was the first time many of the NCOs had been the sole planner and leader for a complicated operation. Likewise, lining up their peers to inspect and quiz them before crossing the line of departure made the NCOs feel that they had done everything they could to prepare for success. Coupled with a later NCO development class that focused on the conduct of inspections in garrison and barracks, the fruits of these combined training events paid dividends in the conduct of everything that the NCOs did.

It might be easy to dismiss these musings as a blinding flash of the obvious, but then why do

many units struggle with substandard conduct of the TLP? Specifically, why are PCC/PCIs frequently neglected? Can you think of a time when you arrived at the range and some valuable piece of equipment was left at the motor pool by mistake or when a Soldier showed up at a training event without the appropriate clothing even though a pack list was published? How many times have you reached down to turn on flashlights or night vision goggles only to find the batteries dead and no spares on hand? These are simple examples that illustrate how—despite the countless resources available on how to conduct them—the PCC/PCI checklists commonly collect dust on a bookshelf or in a document protector in a spotless, unused leader’s book.

Take a look at your unit and observe how your NCOs conduct their TLP when given a mission. See what reference they use to do the PCC/PCIs. Ask them how they accomplish the task of conducting PCIs. Many units possess quality PCC/PCI checklists in their tactical SOPs, but rarely are they in the hands of the leaders who would use them. They are frequently found in the unit operations section’s footlocker or in the senior leader’s rucksack. Do your NCOs conduct a deliberate inspection of their Soldiers before going on a mission or do they pencil whip it?

Think back to the platoon mentioned at the beginning of this article. Imagine if the NCOs had done deliberate, to-standard inspections before and after each mission. My comments were based on an actual event I observed when I checked out a dislocated platoon downrange. Had they done their PCC/PCIs to standard, the platoon could have retired to the cool atmosphere of their hootches rather than sweat in a hot parking lot servicing their equipment so that I could come back and reinspect them.

Endnotes

¹SH 21-76, *U.S. Army Ranger Handbook*, Byrrd Enterprises, Alexandria, Virginia, 2000, pp. 2-7.

² Headquarters, Department of the Army, *The Army Noncommissioned Officer Guide*, U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002, pp. 2-13, para. 2-39.

³ *Ibid*, para. 2-40.