

Commanding an HHC

—hidden opportunities may surprise

by CPT David M. Alegre
Unit Training Division, Directorate of
Training and Doctrine, USACMLS

Chemical soldiers probably know headquarters and headquarters companies (HHCs) of various units better than anyone in the Army. Chemical officers and enlisted soldiers have served as staff at every level of table of organization and equipment (TOE) and table of distribution and allowances (TDA) unit in the world—brigade/regiment/group, division, activity, installation, or TRADOC organization; and in all of these units, chemical soldiers have been assigned to HHCs.

Because of this and the still somewhat limited command opportunities in chemical “line” companies, chemical soldiers at the captain and master sergeant level have often been offered to take the HHC of a particular unit.

These soldiers may indeed hesitate to accept such an offer; perhaps they hope to lead a chemical TOE unit and they know what an awkward “animal” an HHC is. Opportunity in the Army, however, may knock only once. You have been offered an HHC—will you consider it?

An HHC of any type unit generally provides command, con-

trol, training, and administrative and logistical support for assigned personnel. An HHC squares away the soldier support needs of a senior commander and staff and special units (for example, scout platoon) that do not fall into the more conventional squad/platoon/line company structure.

The HHC commander and first sergeant are usually a captain and master sergeant, respectively, while the senior commander and staff usually include higher-ranking field grade officers and sergeants major. The HHC commander *is* in command of the company, yet the staff and special units report to the senior commander to perform their higher unit level duties. How can the commander and first sergeant run this company?

The HHC commander’s job may be better understood as providing *dispensability* and *soldierization* to the HHC soldiers. He commands by providing these conditions so that the senior commander, acknowledged to have already led at the company level, does not have to.

Dispensability describes all of the services a company can do “for” a soldier—look for lost awards, investigate special problems of soldiers or staff sections, or any action that takes time and effort to solve. A good HHC cadre will consider themselves to be dedicated to resolving the HHC soliders’ pro-

blems so that the soldier may work in his staff section with minimum worry.

Soldierization, HHC’s tougher job, creates and maintains a climate of order and discipline in a unit; this is especially important in a unit that lacks a normal supervisory chain conducive to discipline.

It is easy for a PFC in “A” company to visualize his bosses as the squad leader, platoon sergeant, platoon leader, first sergeant, and company commander. His buddy, the S3’s driver, however, normally looks to the S3 for orders and may forget over time that he must clean his weapon in the HHC arms room—a detail that the HHC commander will not forget as easily!

Soliderization in HHC reminds everyone—from major to master sergeant—of the traditional military climate in which a soldier belongs to a company and has responsibilities to fulfill as a company soldier. All companies provide *dispensability* and *soldierization* for their soldiers—it is a part of what puts an outfit together.

In line units, however, authority and responsibility are easy to understand. How can an HHC do these things? To command his company, an HHC commander needs *backing from the senior commander*. To the same extent that the junior HHC commander is performing company-level command tasks so

that the senior commander does not have to, the senior commander must be prepared to mediate disputes to prevent the HHC commander (if he is right) from being outgunned by higher rank.

A commander who does not have this backing is a commander only in name; a commander with this support may command his company without fear, while still developing tact and a sense of fairness with which he can solve most problems himself without having to go to the senior commander for help.

An HHC provides *dispensability* and *soldierization* by performing tasks in two categories—*operations* and *leadership*.

Operations tasks are those that support the individual soldier or the mission of the higher unit as a whole. A cadre, which usually includes a company XO, first sergeant, operations NCOs, and a supply section, conducts the following tasks as their counterparts in line companies do: administration, training, and logistics (including maintenance).

Training and maintenance management becomes an exceptional challenge in an HHC, where there are several different subordinate units and MOS densities to train, and an unusual variety of equipment to take care of. Successful completion of company *operations* tasks requires agile management skills from the HHC commander and his cadre, and cooperation from the senior supervisors in sharing manpower resources.

Perhaps an HHC can never show better than a line company in some areas observers look for; but an HHC that falls far below the other companies in functional areas either does not have cooperation

established or the cadre is not trying. The job is never easy.

Leadership binds a unit—and the HHC commander and first sergeant face an unusual challenge of pulling together a unit that is commanded by one soldier and controlled most of the time by others. A soldier often tends to resolve the dilemma of having two bosses by cutting off his responsibilities with one or the other—and it is usually not the one he reports to almost all of the time.

The commander, first sergeant,

and senior supervisors need a higher basic load of tact, cooperation, and compromise to provide the leadership that all HHC soldiers need—from general to private. Their leadership is structured chiefly from communication, discipline, and caring for the soldier.

Communication is sometimes difficult because the HHC commander is often out of the mainstream of his soldiers' daily business; however, contact is just as important in HHCs as in the other companies.



Like other commanders, HHC commanders assist in solving soldiers' problems.

A smart commander will avoid running the company from his deskside telephone—he should walk a lot, visit soldiers and supervisors at their work sites, and listen as well as speak.

Former HHC commanders often joke about all of the free advice they were offered from their field-grade staff supervisors on how to do their jobs; however, consider this phenomenon seriously—who else has free access to all that experience? An HHC commander does well to consider advice openly; of course, he alone must decide what to do.

Discipline is probably the most difficult military imperative to maintain in an HHC—particularly in a TDA unit or activity. Incidents of misconduct appear to occur more frequently in HHC than line units.

I have seen no formal data to support this theory; however, most soldiers who have attended a unit command and staff meeting recall that when the group reviewed the unit legal report, the HHC commander usually did most of the explaining.

Perhaps the offending soldiers perceive that they are performing duties away from the conventional company/platoon/squad structure—if so, they are right. Perhaps these soldiers also perceive that they are no longer bound by the same rules of discipline as in a line unit—if so, of course, they are wrong.

Disciplinary problems in an HHC vary from section to section—some staff sections police themselves to the extent that the normal military leadership environment prevails as rigidly as in a platoon.

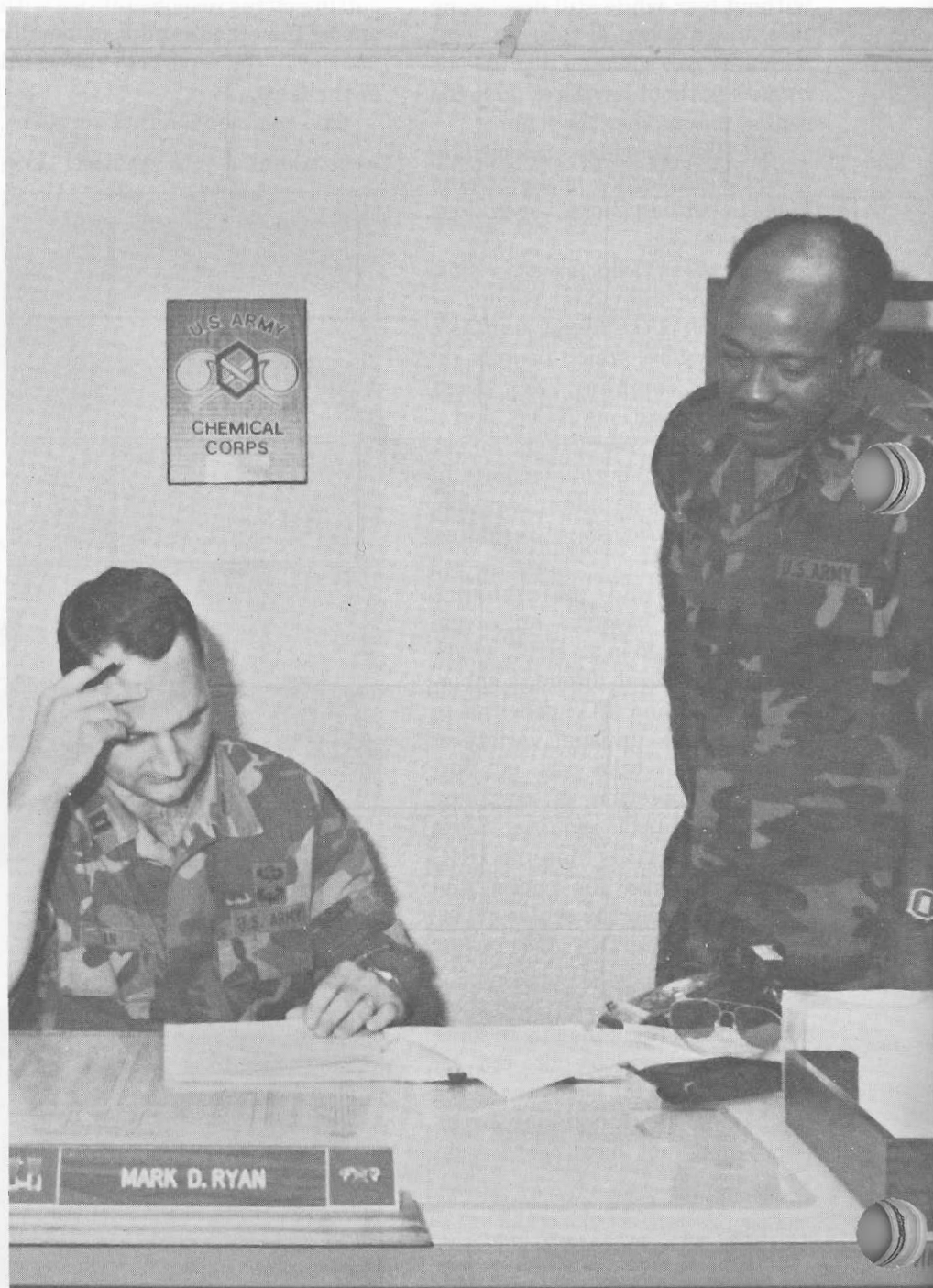
The HHC commander recognizes these sections as the ones with fewer disciplinary problems.

Conversely, a section with a rash of problems may indicate that some supervisors are not leading and supervising as closely as they should.

A misconception sometimes expressed is that a staff supervisor who outranks the HHC commander

decides what disciplinary tool is needed in a particular case, and notifies the HHC commander of what he needs.

A commander who believes this skirts his command responsibility—what line commander would allow his platoon leaders to dictate what



"Taking" an HHC offers Chemical soldiers opportunities they may not be aware of.

he will do with their soldiers?

Majors and colonels are not platoon leaders to the HHC commander—they do, however, perform a role subordinate to him for those duties that the HHC commander performs in the name of the “old man.” An HHC commander must shoulder a company’s worth of responsibility. Failure to do so leaves him little more than an OIC of a band of people.

A commander who finds and does a company’s worth of work develops as much as his contemporaries in line companies do. A commander maintains discipline in his unit with one law: “follow the rules.” He may wind up separating 10 percent of his unit to achieve it, but when he does, the other 90 percent will be top-quality soldiers, even if they were not before.

All commanders desire to maintain the quality of life as high as possible in their units as a way of caring for their soldiers. Like other commanders, HHC commanders assist their soldiers with money, personal, marital, and alcohol and

drug problems through Army Community Services, the Mental Health Clinic, the unit chaplain, and the local Community Counseling/ADAPCP Center.

HHC commanders and first sergeants are often frustrated by the volume of personal problems in their units and may wonder why line companies do not experience these problems to the same extent. HHC soldiers have sometimes defended their actions by stating that they were “stressed out” in their jobs to such an extent that the problem developed as a result.

HHC duties, however, are usually lighter than those in a line unit—so why do HHCs have more problems? I believe, contrary to some soldiers’ claims, that “busy hands are happy hands”—and that a soldier who is not challenged (or neglects to challenge himself) will likely channel his energy where he should not. Alcohol abuse, extramarital affairs, and other problems may result.

An HHC soldier who finds himself not fully challenged should seek alternatives for his self-development—for example, civil and

military schooling and extracurricular sports and community activities. A wise HHC commander will exert extra effort to make these alternatives available to his soldiers.

Some officers speak of commanding HHCs as not being real commands; they assert that there is no substitute to leading several platoons in a single outfit. Soldiers in any unit are the same, and the leadership challenge is just as real—in fact, more difficult in an HHC.

The same type of savvy and advanced leadership that is necessary to introduce legislation to a skeptical congress or to sell a bold business plan to a stingy board of directors (or a bold chemical training plan to a brigade) is a must in an HHC.

Leading a unit of platoons in a symbolic charge up the hill is always hard and glorious, but other dimensions of leadership exist.

And now, captain or master sergeant, an HHC near you is available. Will you take it? ●●●

*A wise commander will walk a lot —
visiting soldiers at their work sites.*



CPT David Alegre is a unit training project officer in the Directorate of Training and Doctrine at the US Army Chemical School. Commissioned in 1981, he holds a bachelor of science degree from the United States Military Academy at West Point. CPT Alegre's assignments have included mechanized infantry battalion chemical officer in the 4th Infantry Division, and chemical smoke generator platoon leader and company executive officer in the 172d Chemical Company (SG) at Fort Carson, Colorado. He was COBC platoon trainer and commander of HHC, 84th Chemical Battalion, Fort McClellan, Alabama. CPT Alegre is a graduate of the chemical officer basic and advanced courses, the nonresident Infantry and Engineer officer advanced courses, the Combined Arms and Services Staff School, and Airborne, Air Assault, and Ranger Schools.