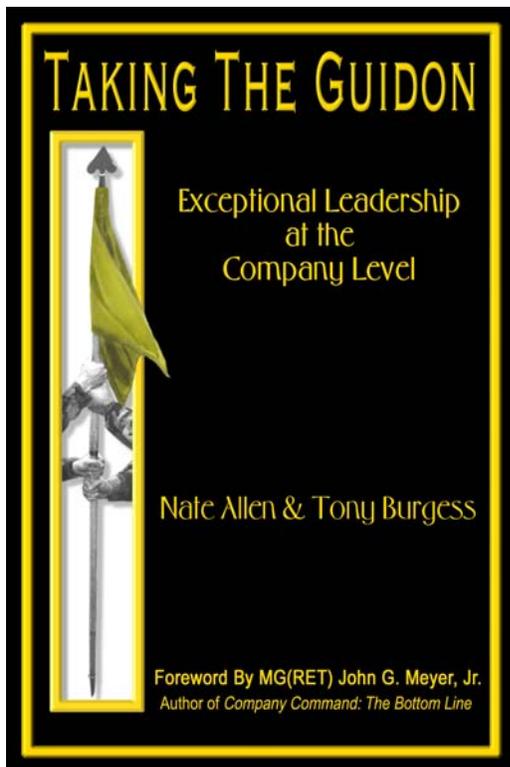


During early 2007, 1LT Kelly Jones began a monthly “author interview” series, which he publishes in the Pro-Reading topic of the Platoon Leader professional forum.

The interview series has included authors like Colonel T.X. Hammes, David Kilcullen, George Packer, Kalev Sepp, Joe Galloway, LTC Chris Kolenda, and Rick Atkinson.

Kelly’s commitment to advancing our profession is inspiring, especially considering that he conducted most of these interviews while he was leading Soldiers in combat in Iraq.



Attached here is an interview he recently completed with Nate Allen and Tony Burgess, authors of *Taking the Guidon: Exceptional Leadership at the Company Level*.

1. Can you tell us a little about yourselves? How long have you known each other?

T: We've known each other since we were 18 or 19 years old at West Point. As Captains, we ended up together in Hawaii where we were next-door neighbors and in 3rd Brigade, 25th ID (L) at the same time. Nate commanded A/2-5 IN, and I commanded A/2-35 IN and the Division LRS. We spent a lot of time talking on the front porch—or Lanai as they call it in Hawaii—and, over time, we realized that our many front-porch conversations were making us better leaders. Talking about company command—sharing ideas and bouncing issues off each other—was making a real difference for us and our units. That basic insight—that talking about what we are doing and learning with peers improves our effectiveness—has had a significant influence on us. We wanted to capture some of the things we learned about company command in a book—and, we also wanted to create an online space where it would be easy for company commanders to connect with each other and do the same. We wanted to create that front-porch conversation amongst company commanders across the Army. The book became *Taking the Guidon* and the online space became CompanyCommand.com—which eventually became CompanyCommand.army.mil.

2. How did you become interested in leadership?

T: When I was a Support Platoon Leader in 3-504 PIR (82nd ABN), my boss was then CPT Tom Hiebert. As part of my professional development, he had me read several books to include Rommel's *Attacks*, Moore and Gallaway's *We Were Soldiers Once...and Young*, and Covey's *Principle Centered Leadership*. I think for the first time in my life, I was reading books and applying insights directly to what I was doing leading Soldiers. It was noticeably different for me than reading in school, and I caught the leadership bug in the process. For me there is something really cool and energizing about reading and/or talking with others about growing an effective team—especially when you are putting what you learn into action immediately.

3. How did the idea of *Taking the Guidon* come about and what was the inspiration for the book?

N: Neither of us is quite sure how the process actually started other than it was grounded in our relationship and the ongoing conversation we were having that Tony described earlier. We felt we had learned so much and had a desire to pass that on. I think we originally thought we'd try to pull something together for company commanders in the 25th ID—maybe something that might add value to the pre-command course—and it sort of evolved from there.

4. How much of your experiences as Company Commanders shaped *Taking the Guidon*?

N: We wrote the book reflecting on our time preparing for and while in command, and the ideas shared are representative of an ongoing process of learning from others and

learning by doing. At the same time, that experience was influenced significantly by some pretty amazing leaders we've worked for and with in the past. As one example, as a junior LT I didn't fully understand or grasp the role I had as a team builder of an interdependent team, similar to that of a football or basketball coach. What I saw modeled by guys like Pat McGowan, Joe Anderson, and John Campbell equipped me with practical ideas on how to approach that.

5. Did IOBC or the ICCC influence or shape your work in anyway?

T: The career course was a really positive experience for me. I remember being impressed with the quality of my peers and the SGIs—and the incredible collective experience that was sitting in those “building four” classrooms. It made me proud to be part of our profession. Steve Delvaux, my good friend, was in my small group and so we carpooled together and had lots of time to talk about our experiences and to begin very intentionally preparing for company command. We did a lot of work laying out a “framework” for company command. Steve would later be a key part of starting CompanyCommand.com and, in fact, came up with the idea for a professional reading part of the original CC.com, which we called the “Command Reading” page. Nate was in the CCC class after mine, which overlapped, and so we also got to spend time talking about company command and thinking through how we would command.

6. MG (RET) John Meyer wrote the foreword for *Taking the Guidon*. How did this come about? Did he play an influential role in the work?

T: When we thought about who should write the foreword to the book, it seemed like a natural fit to ask MG John Meyer. His book, *Company Command: The Bottom Line*, was really the only book out there specifically focused on company command; it was a book both Nate and I had read and applied. He was really supportive and even hosted a discussion in the CC forum early on. That was really cool. Nate and I hope someone writes the next book for company commanders soon and asks us to write the foreword.

7. Where did the idea for “Big Rocks” come from? Did either one of you attend one of Steven Covey’s seminars?

T: The “big rocks” idea comes right out of Stephen Covey’s book, *First Things First*. I used to actually have a jar, sand, and rocks (see the picture of them in *Taking the Guidon*)—and used them to help share the concept. Well, I had them until the jar actually broke right smack in the middle of a company command prep seminar we were doing. It was pretty funny.

8. How much of what you both read influenced the ideas in the book? Anything thing stick out in your minds that started the ball rolling?

T: I loved Dandridge Malone’s book *Small Unit Leadership: A Commonsense Approach*. Though published in 1983, that book is filled with phenomenal insights that will never grow old. Two civilian authors that stand out to me are Peter Senge and Jim Collins.

ILT Kelly Jones, interview with the authors of *Taking the Guidon* (Nate Allen & Tony Burgess)

Here are two articles I recommend reading and applying: Senge, “The Practice of Innovation”:

<http://www.leadertoleader.org/knowledgecenter/journal.aspx?ArticleID=159>

And Collins, “Aligning Action and Values”:

<http://www.leadertoleader.org/knowledgecenter/journal.aspx?ArticleID=135>

Their books (e.g., Senge’s *The Fifth Discipline* and Collins’ *Good to Great*) are exceptional as well.

9. In Taking the Guidon DWYSYWD (Do What You Say You Will Do), DTRT (Do The Right Thing) and DSSS (Don’t Sweat The Small Stuff) are discussed. What was the driving force behind these sayings? It is footnoted from another work but, were these things you both learned before reading?

T: We wrote about these three acronyms in the context of creating a climate of trust in your unit. The first acronym, DWYSYWD, comes from a great book by Kouzes and Posner titled *The Leadership Challenge*. Kouzes and Posner call DWYSYWD their “second law of leadership” and tell us that “To be credible in action, leaders must be clear about their beliefs; they must know what they stand for...Then they must put what they say into practice: they must act on their beliefs and ‘do.’ ...People trust leaders when their deeds and words match. To gain and sustain the moral authority to lead, it’s essential to Model the Way” (*The Leadership Challenge*, p. 41).

The key is to regularly think about these three acronyms and to incorporate them into your personal leadership philosophy or way of being. Regularly ask yourself, “Are my actions aligned with what I say? Am I following through and doing what I said I would do?”

10. Are there any ideas on leading a company-level unit that need to be stressed more than the others?

N: This isn’t original but it’s essential—there isn’t a more important relationship in the company than the company commander/first sergeant relationship in the sense that if both are on the same path it’s an incredible experience and if not it can be downright miserable (for the leaders and the unit). It’s worth taking the time to develop a plan for how you will approach building an incredible relationship with your platoon sergeant or first sergeant and then setting aside time to really work at it. In a pre-command course workshop our team facilitated we started to sit first sergeants and company commanders together in pairs and ask them to interact around their expectations of each other and their team. Asking your PSG or 1SG what they are envisioning for the unit can be so energizing for both of you. He or she has come into the job with dreams and plans for the outfit they’d love to be a part of as well, and the more you can create a shared understanding around what you are both envisioning the more effective you’ll

be—and the more fun you'll have. Also, this is something that takes work throughout your time together. It's easy to let the countless meetings and insane amount of requirements get in the way of an ongoing conversation and checking in with each other. So having some intentionality about it and building it into your battle rhythm can really help. Tony and I have a friend who made it a point to walk out of the company area with his first sergeant every night. While this wouldn't work for everybody, for them it showed a sense of solidarity to the soldiers and they often stood out at their cars in the parking lot talking about something that came up for one of them that might have easily been overcome by events the following day.

11. Is there a part of the book you are most excited about?

N: The leader development and leader training concepts (starting on page 37) can have a powerful, positive impact for any unit. Leader development being more the long-term education, development and maturing of a leader, and leader training often more focused on preparation for upcoming collective training.

As a platoon leader I was blessed with a company commander who counseled me monthly—Pat McGowan. At that time I thought this was the way it was done everywhere. I'll never forget the time he hadn't gotten to monthly counseling for some reason so he pulled me aside out in the field to do it. We sat side-by-side on a log and he proceeded to share with me some things he thought I was doing well overall and some areas he wanted me to focus on and shore up. As I recall, he had especially wanted me to work on my understanding of employing the machine gun teams and working with rates of fire that month. He had a vision for growing me, and in many ways passed on his vision and passion for it.

Leader development—I started to understand that the experiences my leaders were having were the primary curriculum for their development. So our monthly developmental counseling sessions centered primarily around reflecting back on the previous month's experiences and making sense of them in a way that identified leader strengths and gaps for improvement. We would then talk about upcoming events from a developmental perspective and what the leader was doing to prepare. And finally, we would talk about the leadership team they were each responsible for developing and what their plans for this were. In this way, each developmental counseling consisted of three parts. For example, when meeting with one of my platoon leaders we would talk through (1) the previous month's events/experiences and identify things he learned about himself and key lessons learned. (2) We'd then discuss the upcoming month's events that we were aware of and what the platoon leader was doing to prepare himself and his team for them (this could include things on the calendar and other issues such as a squad leader transitioning out). And, finally (3) we'd talk about each of his squad leaders—what their strengths were and what they were working on to grow as a leader. This was then mirrored at each level. So, each platoon leader was expected to do the same with their squad leaders' developmental counseling—make sense of the past month's experience from a learning perspective, discuss preparation for upcoming experiences, and in this case talk about each team leader's development plan. This

process doesn't replace the ongoing dialogue you have with your guys, but there is something special about setting aside an hour a month to sit down in a conversation that is centered solely on their development and growth.

In regard to leader training, a breakthrough came for me one Friday afternoon when I walked around to the back of the company area and a remarkable squad leader, SSG Jon Silk (now a company commander in Korea), was running his team leaders through some drills in preparation for training the following week. We'd done leader training type events before but I'd never seen them done with such focus, sense of purpose, and practical application (next week's training)—I was mesmerized. SSG Silk—"Sir, you wanna join in?" I felt like I was watching a professional football team running through their offensive plays in preparation for Sunday's game. I joined in. And, it started a conversation around how to do this better across the unit. One cool outcome in doing this sort of thing the week prior to each event is we as leaders were improving our game and on the same page in terms of SOPs and standards.

12. What is the best advice to give to someone who is just getting commissioned or is taking a Company or a Platoon for the first time?

N: We stand in awe of today's junior officers and what they've stepped up to do. And, as we interact with leaders at the edge of combat our admiration for who they are and what they are doing just continues to grow. I guess as advice—at the end of the day we lead from who we are. Take time to reflect in an ongoing manner and unearth what is really core to you as a leader and seek out like-hearted leaders who are passionate about leading and loving their soldiers and building a team—spend time with them, learning with and from each other. Keep a notebook of your thoughts and ideas. Seek feedback from your NCOs on how you can be even more effective as a team and constantly learn and share what you are learning. There are so many great resources to tap into, to include the PlatoonLeader and CompanyCommand forums. Tony and I tried to lay out some ideas as an approach to this on pages 1-19 of the book, but it's certainly not complete. Also, pages 23-34 talk briefly to ideas on conducting an initial unit assessment and developing a 90 Day Plan as you go into your unit.

13. Any parting thoughts on *Taking the Guidon*?

T: *Taking the Guidon* is a small part of something larger. We are investing our professional lives into serving company-level leaders—doing anything we can to make a positive difference for leaders across the Army who are sold-out to the cause of exceptional leadership and growing combat-effective teams. We are seeing the platoon leader and company command forums as a living and active version of the idea sharing that you find in *Taking the Guidon*. Through the forums, leaders are connecting with each other and are creating the collective wisdom of our profession. Leaders are seeing the forums not only as a place where they can get something or even as a place where they can give back—but, more importantly, as a place where we can collectively advance our profession. Now *that* is something to get excited about!

Taking the Guidon is available online in PDF format in the Company Command and Platoon Leader forums. We would be absolutely thrilled if you read the book and it made a positive impact on you in any way. We would be MUCH more excited if you began to engage in the collective conversation of our profession via the PL and CC forums. At one time, doing so was a great idea; today, it is clear to many of us that it is an *essential* idea, an idea that can make a significant impact on our collective effectiveness.

Sharing our ideas and experiences—and tapping into the ideas and experiences of other professionals—is simply part of who we are. It is what we do.

Join the conversation!