

Heard, Understood, Acknowledged

Maj. Aaron Lawless, U.S. Army

The word “hooah,” according to at least one version of the legend, began life as the acronym H-U-A for “heard, understood, acknowledged.” Hooah, then, implies three steps of a four-step process: receive the message, process the message, acknowledge receipt of the message, and then act on the message. The recent *Military Review* article “We Hear You!” accomplishes the first step of this process.¹ The article leads with a summary of senior captains’ published frustrations with command, indicating receipt of message. After summarizing, however, the article demonstrates that the full point is not completely understood.

Before I begin, I want to make plain what this response is not. It is not a blanket rejection of the counterpoints expressed in “We Hear You!” It is not a blanket vindication of officers for whom command has lost its appeal. Rather, what I want to propose is nuance: the idea that command is not for everyone, and even those officers who make the best company commanders get burnt out by institutional slog—and no, professional military education (PME) is not the respite described by “We Hear You!”

Transactional officers, from this author’s foxhole, aren’t really who we are talking about here. The “I joined for college money” officer, the “I wanted job experience” officer, or the “I’m just here for a paycheck and health insurance” officer are not the officers burnt out by command. In a perfect Army, those officers would likely not get into command in the first place, and making an optimistic guess in lieu of hard evidence might not be the officers seeking command at all. The four-to-six-year transactional officers may not even get much beyond the Captains Career Course (CCC), let alone become competitive for company command. Transactional officers are certainly not

the ones invested enough in the Army to write pieces like “Searching for a Purpose in Professional Military Education” or “On Command: A Confession.”²

This is where, in my view, “We Hear You!” misses the mark. “We Hear You!” argues that the intrinsic fulfillment and sense of purpose that is inherent in



Capt. Marquis R. Morris, commander of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 3rd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, salutes Lt. Col. Latoya M. Manzey, commander of the 588th Brigade Engineer Battalion, during a company change of command ceremony 31 August 2022 in Zagan, Poland. (Photo by Capt. Tobias Cukale, U.S. Army)

We Hear You!

Lt. Gen. Milford H. Beagle Jr., U.S. Army

Lt. Col. Michael Soyka, U.S. Army

Maj. Lasherdo Harris, U.S. Army

Capt. Sean Robishaw, U.S. Army

In recent months, there have been several articles published regarding junior officer dissatisfaction that should have caused many to pause.¹ To the young captains who are not sure about their desire

to command again, or who are disappointed with Captains Career Course (CCC) professional military education (PME), or those responding to surveys to explain the reasons they and many of their peers are

MILITARY REVIEW ONLINE EXCLUSIVE · MARCH 2023

In a response to “We Hear You!” from Lt. Gen. Beagle et al., Maj. Aaron Lawless’s “Heard, Understood, Acknowledged” proposes the idea that command is not for everyone, and even those who make the best commanders get burnt out. Read the original article online at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/military-review/online-exclusive/2023-ole/we-hear-you/>.

command should be reward enough. Okay, fair enough, but the point of “Searching” and “On Command” is not to argue that company command isn’t worth it. It is worth noting that the authors of “Searching” and “On Command,” like many of the officers for whom they speak, remain members of the service. The choice is not between staying in or getting out, as “We Hear You!” appears to frame it. No, the choice is whether a still-serving officer is willing to accept another round of the agony and the ecstasy that is command.

Transformational officers suffer their own brand of purgatory in command. Much ink has been spilled about risk aversion, bureaucracy, struggles to secure meaningful training opportunities, retention, military justice, and on. From personal experience, I once had a colonel tell me that it was the sergeant first class’s fault that a specialist tested positive for illegal substances because the sergeant first class was a technical expert but not a high-caliber leader. The colonel believed that with all their heart, and subsequently shelved a UCMJ packet for the specialist. Weeks later, the specialist was arrested off post for drug-related activity. I say this not to complain but to observe that not all officers who walk away from future command opportunities are the transactional officers portrayed in “We Hear You!” Some simply get tired of beating their skulls against brick walls or get tired of getting called on the carpet for issues they were denied permission to fix, or perhaps they happen to value their spouses and would like for their families to still be there when they get home.

“We Hear You!” seems cognizant and sympathetic to this last point. When the authors of “We Hear You!” cite Bruce Clarke’s eighteen rules of command, there is an implied acknowledgement of the family’s struggle while an officer is in command.³ Family, by necessity, often takes second place behind the unit, even in garrison. That is exactly the point. Officers’ calculus changes after the struggle of their first command. Kids grow up, need more time with their parent. Physical presence matters more as the years go by. The sine wave chart shown in “We Hear You!” does not support the article’s point—rather, it emphasizes the long periods spent “rowing”—putting in the hard work and long hours to make the unit successful and hopefully earning a shot at the next key development assignment. Let’s examine that sine wave for a moment. Assuming the frequency of the sine wave is accurate, the intensity—variance

between high points and low points—is not nearly as significant as the “We Hear You!” chart implies.

An officer rows for three or four years as a lieutenant and pre-CCC captain, gets four or five months of PME, then is back to rowing hard to earn company command and to excel once in command. After six to seven years (or more) of rowing against the current, with only a five-month “break” for PME, even the most dedicated officer would be justified to say “enough.” Even after command and going into a broadening assignment, the row isn’t over. Branch chiefs tell officers that a downward trend in evaluations ratings—such as two top-blocks in command followed by one or two “Highly Qualified” evaluations during broadening time—puts the officer at risk for promotion. So, officers keep rowing hard, even after command ends.

Some post-command broadening assignments are a much-needed break, but others—such as the prized observer coach/trainer assignments at combat training centers—come with another set of sacrifices away from home. And always there is the possibility of deployment—my own broadening assignment included nine months overseas and multiple weeks spent away on temporary duty. That hardly qualifies as lessened demand or family restoration time. After “re-bluing” at the Command and General Staff College—assuming the officer in question gets to attend the resident course—the newly minted field grade is back to rowing as an iron major for another six years or so. Then, and only then, might they have a chance to command again.

As an aside, I think it’s safe to say that officers view PME a couple of different ways: as another hard row to get good grades and build a reputation that will help them get into key development jobs, or as a time to “take a knee.” Either way, the structure of PME is far too often of the check-the-block,

Maj. Aaron Lawless is a U.S. Army intelligence officer. His assignments include Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar deputy mission crew commander; command of Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment, 310th Military Intelligence Battalion; and assistant intelligence officer of 2nd Battalion, 5th Infantry Regiment. He holds a BA in history from Tarleton State University and an MA in history from Sam Houston State University.

follow-the-rubric, survive-the-instructor flavor. There are exceptions, of course, and I've been privileged to know more than one, but not every PME instructor is mentor material, and officers know it. Let's not even get started on the risk-aversion mindset so prevalent at the schoolhouse that treats company-grade officers like accident-prone fifth graders.

Is it worth it? "We Hear You!" urges officers to re-frame their perception and focus on the fulfillment and positive impact that a good commander can have on soldiers. For some, that makes sense. For some, fulfillment is enough to compensate for eighteen months or more of playing Sisyphus, rolling a stone uphill but never reaching the top. Others might see themselves in the lyrics of country singer Cody Johnson: "This cowboy life might kill me, but it's the only one I know."⁴ Like a rodeo cowboy who knows the ride might extract a fatal price, some officers will gladly get back in the saddle for another round. Those are the officers the Army needs, the officers that "fill the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds worth of distance run," to quote Rudyard Kipling, but also the officers that need support and a chance to breathe without career penalties when their sixty seconds is up.⁵ Duty and fulfillment are for before and during command, not after.

If I am allowed a little hubris, I think I understand what "We Hear You!" means about fulfillment and satisfaction and purpose. If asked to recount my proudest and most satisfying moment as a commander, I wouldn't address the top marks the company got at our first Objective-T evaluation field exercise. I wouldn't immediately think of the NCO that became a warrant officer, or the NCO that became an FBI agent, or the soldiers who became NCOs. I

certainly wouldn't trot out my permanent change of station award—well, maybe the framed and signed company photo that the soldiers gave me but not the Meritorious Service Medal.

Those were good moments, yes, but another moment rose higher. My most fulfilling moment came after a unit dining out when one of my inebriated soldiers told me I was the best company commander in the Army while we stood outside waiting for his rideshare. In vino veritas, as they say. It's not a top-block evaluation, it's not a below-the-zone promotion, but the fact that a Joe thought I was doing okay—that meant the most.

I got a taste of all those things and would go back for more. I like to think that I am a transformational officer, that I am not just here for a paycheck and medical care. I think I still have more to give to the Army. Would I take battalion command, if so honored? Yes, without doubt. Do I have sympathy for a high-performing transformational officer who makes a different choice? Absolutely.

There are real problems that need solutions, problems about the very nature of how the Army works its officers. "We Hear You!" hears and partially acknowledges, but does not fully demonstrate understanding, and does not illuminate a solution. I also do not offer a solution—like the Angry Staff Officer, I lack the influence or the insight to do so, but perhaps by adding my voice to others, I can help bring understanding that the problem exists. ■

The opinions in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official positions of the United States Army or the Department of Defense.

Notes

1. Milford H. Beagle Jr. et al., "We Hear You!" *Military Review* Online Exclusive (March 2023), accessed 8 May 2023, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2023-OLE/We-Hear-You/>.

2. David Kahan, "Searching for a Purpose in Professional Military Education," From the Green Notebook, 30 January 2023, accessed 8 May 2023, <https://fromthegreennotebook.com/2023/01/30/searching-for-a-purpose-in-professional-military-education/>; "On Command: A Confession," *Angry Staff Officer* (blog), 16 February 2023,

accessed 8 May 2023, <https://angrystaffofficer.com/2023/02/16/on-command-a-confession/#content>.

3. Bruce Clarke, "So You Want to Command," *Infantry* 47, no. 2 (April 1957): 56–57.

4. Cody Johnson, vocalist, "The Only One I Know (Cowboy Life)," by Hillary Lindsey, Jeffrey Steele, and Shane Minor, track 5 on *Gotta Be Me*, Cojo Music, 2016.

5. Rudyard Kipling, "If," lines 29–30, in *Rewards and Fairies* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1910), 182.