Survival of the fittest

"Come in Romeo Two One, come in Romeo Two One. Alpha Five Five here, under heavy attack, come in Romeo Two One....it's no use Mike, they must be knocked out, no way to warn HQs, this could be it...the end...."

"Yea, and if you'da only checked out yer radio you'da noticed yer chord wuz broke, ya dope..."

by Col. David E. White

If you have ever been assigned to a tactical Signal battalion, I believe you will readily agree that maintenance has always been, continues to be, and will probably always be one of the major challenges facing commanders. Maintenance in tactical Signal units takes an inordinate amount of time each day. However, if not properly organized and supervised, it renders ineffective results.

Just as there are a number of reasons for poor maintenance, there are a number of methods to solve the problem. Based on my experience, here are a few suggestions for attacking these problems. Of course the solution is not likely to be found in one action; good maintenance is the cumulation of many actions and programs which all act together to achieve a common goal. The underlying premise for most of these suggestions is that you cannot effectively supervise something until you possess sufficient knowledge to know if the job is being done correctly, and our soldiers are poorly trained to perform maintenance regardless of their grade or experience. If you question the second premise, go to the motor pool and ask the first platoon sergeant you find to inspect a 2 1/2 ton truck and note his findings on a 2404. Ask a few basic questions such as proper oil level, tire pressure, and so on. Ask a platoon leader to do the same things. I predict you will be disturbed by what you find. And yet, these two leaders are directly supervising a large portion of your maintenance program. Are these individuals deliberately trying to mislead you? Absolutely not. They simply do not know. The

illustration by Mike Rodgers

noncommissioned officer learned from a platoon sergeant who did not know. Now he is passing this same lack of knowledge on to future NCOs in his platoon as well as to the platoon leader. Both individuals will carry it with them to higher leadership positions. The cycle goes on and on unless it is broken with knowledge. With that bit of background, let us move on to recommended solutions. I will use a battalion in my examples, but the recommendations can be used at any level and on all types of equipment. I use vehicle maintenance as my example because it is easy to visualize and more common to all units. However, maintenance to Signal equipment is just as important.

The first problem is to increase the level of maintenance knowledge in the unit. To do this, have the battalion motor technician and motor sergeant set up a course of instruction on how to inspect equipment and properly fill out a 2404 for every supervisor in the battalion, including the battalion commander, executive officer, and command sergeant major. The training *must* be hands-on if it is to be successful. Taking a written test does not show the location of the jack shaft nor what to look for when it's found. After instruction on a piece of equipment, each individual must inspect a similar item, noting findings on a 2404. When the inspection is completed, the instructor should go over the piece of equipment to determine the accuracy of the inspection.

If you conduct the classes on Saturday, you will be amazed at how quickly everyone learns. The key is having them actually demonstrate their level of knowledge. A certificate attesting to their proficiency should be awarded. Those individuals who fail certification should repeat the training until they meet your standard.

After the supervisors are trained, they are qualified to teach their subordinates and—equally important—they can now properly supervise maintenance. This will yield better results since they will know what and how to check the quality of the maintenance being performed by their subordinates.

The second step is to start unannounced inspections. The inspector can be any supervisor, but I strongly recommend company

commanders, the battalion commander, and the command sergeant major. By having these individuals inspect, key leaders are involved, and it demonstrates to everyone in the unit that the leadership knows what they are doing. The inspection is simple. Routinely, but unannounced, have a piece of equipment pulled over the rack and inspect it. Check your results against how the equipment is being reported. Significant differences should be explained by the immediate supervisors of the soldiers who performed the maintenance. Corrections are made immediately. Those involved should receive additional training after duty hours. Not only is this a great motivator, but the word will spread quickly that you are deadly serious about your maintenance program. Mistakes are rarely repeated a second time. Do not forget to appropriately reward those who are doing a good job. This works wonders for morale, and it is another great motivator!

Conduct regularly scheduled motor stables and require everyone to attend. There is not a better motivator than having the battalion commander and the command sergeant major always present for motor stables.

Another area you want to look at closely is the proficiency of the mechanics assigned to the unit. Just because they have the MOS and possibly a few years of experience does not necessarily mean that they possess adequate knowledge. I recommend the battalion maintenance technician interview all new mechanics before they report for duty in a company. It is especially important that mechanics demonstrate a high degree of proficiency in using diagnostic test equipment. If they cannot demonstrate an adequate degree of knowledge through hands-on performance, immediately send them through an intensive training program conducted by the battalion maintenance technician and battalion motor sergeant. Only after mechanics have been certified are they allowed to report for duty in a company. This program has several benefits:

It increases individual knowledge and will allow a better job to be done with less direct supervision.

It places the burden for this training at the battalion level and not on a company motor sergeant.

Mechanics will have more confidence in their abilities and understand the standards they are expected to meet.

The battalion maintenance technicians will know the capabilities of each mechanic and will be able to spread the talent evenly in the battalion.

Because company commanders are busy people, they frequently delegate the responsibility for their maintenance program to the newest second lieutenant in the company, or they will simply not get involved due to what they perceive as higher priorities. Either situation will hinder a successful maintenance program because it is absolutely essential that commanders at all levels become directly involved. I believe that company and battalion commanders should know and be able to explain to their bosses all aspects of their maintenance program to include excessive delays in getting requisitions filled or a piece of equipment repaired. They should know when requisitions were last checked (requisitions over 90 days old should be closely checked regardless of the status you receive because they are probably invalid) and when the commander personally talked to his maintenance support unit or requested assistance from his higher headquarters. There is a tendency to let the company motor officer or the battalion executive officer take the heat, but the commander is the one who is responsible and he should be held accountable for the status of his maintenance program. The frequency of the briefing can vary, but certainly brigades should have a monthly show-and-tell, attended by representatives from their maintenance support units. For battalions, weekly show-and-tell may work. However, it may be necessary to have them daily if you are just starting a maintenance program or the deadline rate is high or if a major field exercise is coming up.

These suggestions are not cure-alls. Nor will any one of them stand alone. They are only a few isolated examples of what can be done to improve maintenance. A successful maintenance program is the cumulation of the efforts of many people at all levels working toward a common purpose. The commander must orchestrate this effort. To do so he must have sufficient knowledge. In my opinion, there is nothing on our plate more pressing than increasing the skills of our officers and NCOs. This is especially true in the Signal Corps since many of our officers have spent too much time being technicians. For a Signal unit, there is no difference between a CPX and an FTX; both are live fire and both can be disastrous if good communications are not provided. Few commanders face this constant pressure nor are their mistakes evident to so large an audience. Good maintenance can be one of the keys to survival. If properly implemented, the suggestions in this article will reap tremendous dividends and will enhance your ability to MOVE, SHOOT, and COMMUNICATE.

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