



If I Had Known Then: Advice for New Lieutenants in the Army Military Intelligence Corps

by Captain Mason J. Aldridge

When I first stepped into the world of military intelligence (MI) as a brand-new first lieutenant, I thought I had a decent grasp of what to expect: briefings, analysis, and maybe some cryptic acronyms thrown in for good measure. But it did not take me long to realize that this branch demands more than just technical knowledge. It is about judgment under pressure, understanding people as much as patterns, and learning how to leverage some of the smartest people you will ever meet to accomplish the mission.

If you are about to enter this field, you are not just starting a new job; you are stepping into a role that supports commanders, protects troops, and influences real-world decisions. It can be overwhelming at first. I have made mistakes, learned hard lessons, and grown in ways I never expected. In this article, I want to share some advice I wish someone had given me before day one—not dry doctrine, just some nuggets of advice from someone who has been where you are now.

In the Beginning

My dream of becoming an MI officer in the U.S. Army took root in 2003 when I watched Soldiers board C-17s bound for Iraq and realized that serving America's warriors was one of the greatest callings a person could fulfill. As I grew older, I believed the best way to support Soldiers was to ensure they had the intelligence they needed to complete their missions and return home safely. Fast forward to 2018, and what started as a childhood ambition became reality. I was accepted into the Reserve Officers' Training Corps program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and, true to my

goal, I selected MI as my top branch choice. With hard work and determination, I earned it.

After completing my training at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, I joined an intelligence and electronic warfare unit at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington. My three years there were filled with awkward failures and hard-earned successes, providing invaluable lessons that shaped me both professionally and personally.

In the following paragraphs, I will share some of my most critical insights that can help you build on success and avoid the "are you serious?" looks from field-grade officers. If you do find them helpful, pass them on to others who aspire to join our community!

Lesson One: You Have No Idea What's Going on or What to Do

So, you are a brand-new officer and a brand-new member of the MI community! You may be thinking about how excited you are for your future in MI, or how little you know about MI. You may be thinking about your future platoon or the kind of people you will work with. These are all good thoughts, and you should be very optimistic. No two careers in MI are the same, and there is no "perfect path" for an MI officer, so that positivity can breed a great military adventure. However, most people start with worries. We worry about the unknown—what we don't know, who we don't know, what we don't know how to do. Let's tackle that first.

OK, brand-new lieutenant, at your first unit, someone gave you a task, and you reply (hopefully mentally, not verbally!) with something like, "I have no idea what I'm doing. I don't know anything about that." I promise we have all been there,

and there is no shame in feeling very overwhelmed when you are lost. Here is how we get around that impulse and why we do not act on it.

Ease up on yourself. The person delegating the task (along with everyone in your unit) knows that you have little to no idea what you are doing. It's not because they don't like you or that they have no confidence in your abilities; you are simply new. They were there once, too! This task is your first opportunity to show your team that you can *learn* who to go to for answers and how to apply those answers to your problem. So instead of verbalizing to everyone, "Hey, I'm the new lieutenant, and I don't know what I am doing," say something like, "I'm eager to understand how this works. Will you show me?"

Figure out who knows what. Your ability to find knowledgeable people will pay dividends as you progress in your career, regardless of the types of formations you find yourself in. Going to a Soldier, noncommissioned officer (NCO), warrant officer, or higher-ranking officer with a desire to learn and problem solve will set you apart in the unit. Instead of being the lieutenant running into walls because they think they must figure it out on their own, be the lieutenant who leverages your team's collective experience. If you approach problems knowing that you can figure them out with the aid of the Soldiers around you, people will want to help you. This does not mean you should get people to do everything for you; it just means knowing when to ask for advice and learning who the right advisor is in each situation.

Give it your best shot. You are not perfect, and you likely do not know the entire process—but you *are* smart enough. By this point, you are attacking problems with positivity and a little help from the people around you. Provide the best product or result that you can, own the work that you have done, and be open to feedback. No one respects an individual who refuses to be taught or take responsibility for their actions. It is better to miss the mark and own it than to miss the mark and be hardheaded. In the end, you are still not perfect; refusing to acknowledge that gives the impression that your growth potential is limited. Remember: we are new officers, we are progressing, and we must figure out why things are done the way they are.

To conclude Lesson One, do not act as if you "have no idea what's going on or what to do" because there is simply no need to do so. This mindset only reinforces fear and negativity, and it convinces the people around us that we truly do not know anything. Since they already know we are new and inexperienced, we should show them that we approach these opportunities with curiosity and a humble confidence that we can learn and they can teach us. We have turned a fear of ignorance into a chance to build teams (which is also your job!).

Lesson Two: You Can't Wait to Do All the Intel!

MI lieutenant, you may have built up or bought into the idea that, because you are an intelligence professional, you will be "doing intelligence." You will, but not in the way you may think you will. Most freshly minted lieutenants think they are the ones who will make the "big discovery" or run analysis on the "big problem." Let me challenge that assumption, because the truth is that while "doing intelligence" is certainly part of your job, your role is actually much broader than that.

As an officer, you are a leader, an administrator, and a manager. As an MI officer, you are a leader within the MI Corps, an administrator for MI Soldiers, and a manager of MI systems and policies. Your job is to ensure that your NCOs and Soldiers have the training and resources needed to accomplish the mission. Most of the time, that means you are not producing intelligence; instead, you are refining it and ensuring it gets done. Before you spiral into a panic, though, allow me to give you a broad explanation of why this can be so rewarding.

You are the first officer in someone's chain of command, which means you are the most accessible officer who can make a difference in someone's professional career or life. Are you an officer who helps your Soldiers grow? Do you set incentives that reward Soldiers for a job well done? Do your Soldiers know that you will look after their best interests? You are the one who can develop and inspire a team to greater heights. You are finally "the guy" with enough power to make a difference. You can set the tone for all the officers in the formation.

You are also in the first line of defense against tasks that do not align with the mission. For example, let's say your unit is tasked with processing, exploiting, and disseminating critical intelligence that could mean the difference between victory and defeat. You receive a task for one of your analysts to attend a briefing on painting rocks. Expanding our Soldiers' artistic abilities may technically count as professional development, but it does not align with the core mission. Your position gives you the authority to brief senior leaders on the negative impact on the mission if that Soldier is removed from their current task. You still must follow orders, but you can inform the orders process. In this example, you offered an effective justification for why the Soldier's priority must be conducting analysis in support of the mission and not learning to paint rocks. The senior leadership agreed with you and dropped that requirement. Your Soldier remained properly focused and produced quality intelligence. Hey, lieutenant, do you smell that? That's the smell of victory!

As an MI leader, you will certainly know how intelligence is done, but you also retain the greatest responsibility within your team. Everything that your team does (or does not do) reflects directly back on you. Of course, you should understand what and how your Soldiers are doing, but you get to

set the conditions for them to do it. Let your warrant officers guide you and help your NCOs take care of your Soldiers. Be the officer who leads their team, takes care of the administrative work, and manages the variables of the mission.

Lesson Three: You're Just a Lieutenant; Nobody Cares What You Do

One of an officer's critical roles is to "own" the organization and help set the tone for the unit's culture. I will tell you now: no unit is perfect, no matter how cool its mission or how much history it has. Organizations will always face issues with leaders, policies, circumstances, and more. It is extremely easy to be negative and get bogged down in the bad. I will give a couple of examples involving two company-grade officers I worked closely with and how their actions affected their formations.


We will refer to the first individual as "Nick." Nick possessed the wisdom to know whom to gripe to and when to walk away and vent his frustration privately. As a result, the team very rarely saw him frustrated or complicating an already tough situation. At his best, he helped guide his team through the issue. At his worst, he would turn red and lower his glasses to the bridge of his nose, which provided great comic relief in a frustrating situation. As an assistant operations officer and, later, a formation leader (two challenging positions for very different reasons), Nick dealt with many of the intricacies of bureaucracy and countless Soldiers' issues. He always chose to lead with positivity. To him, a challenging situation was an opportunity to improve the team and progress toward team goals. His meticulous planning and resourcing, though tedious, always had the silver lining of helping a Soldier somewhere down the line. Instead of getting frustrated because someone in the chain was being difficult, he took the opportunity to discuss the problem and produce a solution that worked for both parties. By the time his assignment was over, he left his teams in much better shape than he found them and created systems that outlasted his tenure in the unit. A leader like Nick leads with positivity and encourages those they lead to adopt that positivity. This does not mean sugarcoating a bad situation; sometimes it is as simple as "embracing the suck" alongside the Soldiers.

Our second example will be referred to as "Rick." Rick was a brilliant young officer, and everyone knew his talent. His ability to solve problems and innovate was second to none. Rick could take a complex concept and break it down so that everyone around him understood what was going on. There was only one problem: Rick was often openly negative about things he did not appreciate or found silly—for example, when his formation was tasked with conducting weekly maintenance on vehicles in the motor pool. In the type of formation that Rick led, the tactical vehicles under his

authority would not deploy with the unit in a time of war. To Rick, therefore, it was illogical to maintain them. He would often complain aloud, in front of his Soldiers, that it made no sense to conduct maintenance. Consider this: how much would *you* care about something that your boss thinks is a waste of time? Thanks to the example Rick set, his formation also complained about the maintenance. Despite receiving education on the strategic importance of preventive maintenance checks and services for the equipment, they continued to turn their noses up at the task, and their grumbling spread to other formations. A leader like Rick creates a culture of dissatisfaction, which can lead to formations not following orders they may not fully understand. The real issue here is not that Rick should not have complained at all; it is that he should have known whom to complain *to*.

So how do these two examples relate to owning the organization? The answer rests in a piece of advice passed along to my team: the best unit in the Army is the one you are in. *You* are responsible for improving the unit. If the unit is lacking, what can you do to improve it? While Nick took those opportunities to transform the unit into a productive organization, Rick eroded trust between his team and higher leadership. Every day when you fall into formation, you, a young officer, have a choice. Are you going to turn this dumpster fire into an effective unit glorious to behold, or will you let it burn? The change starts with you, the junior lieutenant.

Dismounting the Soap Box

Lieutenant, you are going to learn a lot over these next few years, potentially more than you ever have before. Good ideas, good advice, and good company will avail you. Do your best, even if you do not feel qualified. I promise that you will make it, and you might even surprise yourself. Embrace the positions you land in and grow where you are planted. If you are the best janitor in the building, well, you won't be a janitor for long. Embrace your positions and roles, and find ways to create meaning in your actions—then spread that meaning to your Soldiers. People want to follow others who give them something to believe in. Do not sell yourself short; your words and thoughts matter. You are the new addition to the team, and everything you do will be seen. Make what you do and say count for something. And finally, welcome to the community that is ALWAYS OUT FRONT! 

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