

WISCONSIN ARMY NATIONAL GUARD RECRUITING & RETENTION BATTALION CASE – 18 FEB. 2025

This document summarizes the turnaround of the Wisconsin Army National Guard Recruiting and Retention Battalion (WIARNG RRB) over 16 months from May 2023 to September 2024. In less than one calendar year, this battalion command team leveraged the support of the Warrior Leader Training program to complement their approach to leadership and maximize their impact on their battalion leading to transformational outcomes in productivity and command climate.

CONTEXT

As of August 2022 the WIARNG RRB was ranked 53 out of 54 in production relative to all National Guards across the country. Production is defined as recruiting outcomes relative to mission targets: percent of mission complete and percent end strength. While retention was stable, the battalion was struggling to meet recruiting targets. As a result, the end strength of the WIARNG was compromised. Further, there were known pockets of problematic and toxic leadership.

In April of 2022 the WIARNG selected CSM Chris Beron and LTC Shannon Hellenbrand to take command of the RRB. CSM Beron began in April, with LTC Hellenbrand to assume command in August.

LTC Hellenbrand and CSM Beron were tasked with turning around the performance of the battalion in support of the objectives of the WIARNG. Their focus was on creating a winning culture: a positive, high-performing command climate where soldiers would be at their best.

LTC Hellenbrand's top priority was enrolling their battalion in the Warrior Leader Training program by Jackson Kerchis & Paul Krismer at this critical transition point. In May of 2023, LTC Hellenbrand and CSM Beron along with 20 of their key leaders participated in this drill weekend experience in which they developed tools for shaping the optimal command climate and developed a command philosophy to support a new mission, vision, and values for the RRB.

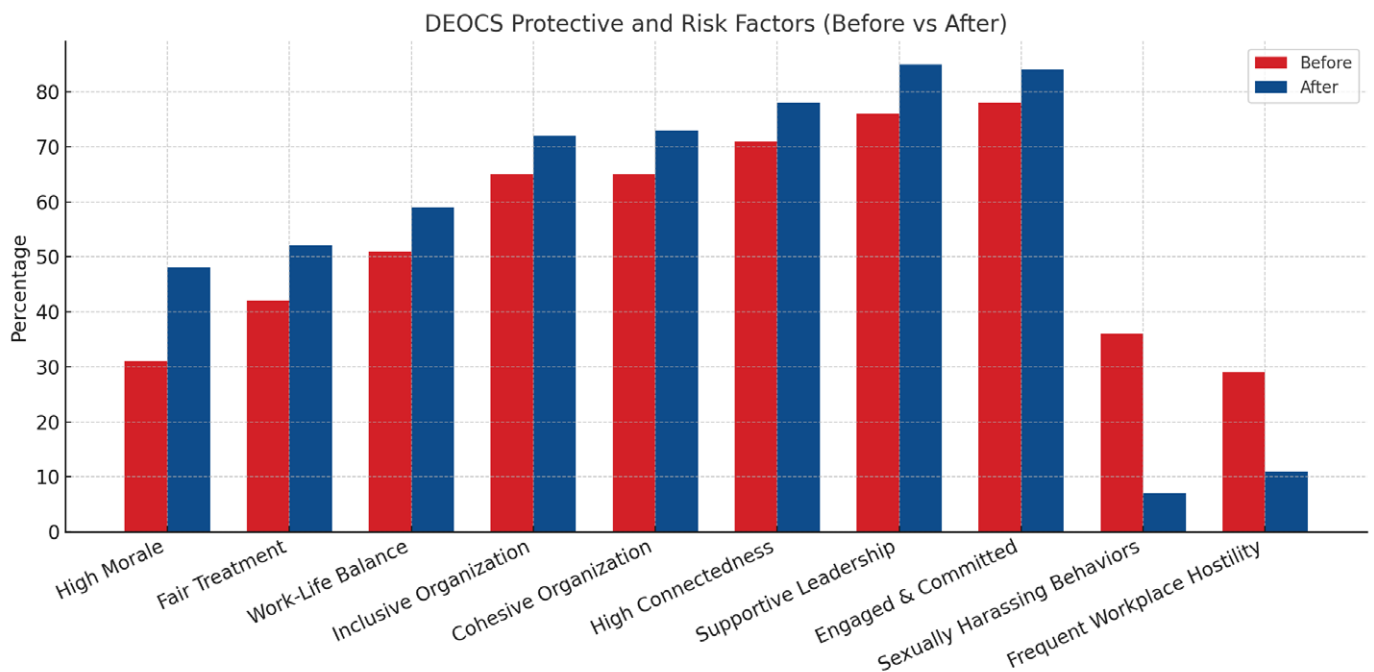
Battalion command used the tools and experiences offered in the retreat to support their already high level of leadership acumen and subject matter expertise to deliver exceptional results.

RESULTS

In comparing the period from October 2023 to September 2024 versus October 2022 to September 2023 there has been a 34% increase in production with fewer recruiters. The RRB currently has 126 more enlistments compared to last year.

The RRB exceeded their retention mission. It is worth noting the context here. During this period SFC Tera Walsh became NCO-IC and she, alongside battalion command, turned over over half of the retention team. On top of this, their mission went from 319 to 679. Despite turning over half the team and doubling their mission, they still exceeded it.

Finally, the RRB has shown significant, quantifiable improvements in command climate (DEOCS) results pursuant to the Leadership Doctrine of the US Army. Nearly every protective factor has improved, while critical risk factors have reduced.



LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES & PRACTICES

In this section we provide a brief explanation of how LTC Hellenbrand and CSM Beron led the turnaround of this battalion with the support of Jackson Kerchis and Paul Krismer of Warrior Leader Training.

This effort was really about getting the command climate (culture) right. Battalion command used training, talent management, and organizational structure to create a positive, high performing culture. This depended upon five strategies and practices listed below.

1. Set the tone and remove toxic and counterproductive leaders.
2. Maximize talents of your people.
3. Focus on cohesion.
4. Develop emerging leaders.
5. Get the ratio right to ensure quality leadership is possible.

In assuming command of the battalion, CSM Beron and LTC Hellenbrand focused on the people part of the equation. They focused on setting the tone – shaping the culture so that they could then hand it off to their core of NCO-ICs to keep it alive.

Prior to their transition, they began to assess the culture (command climate) and develop a command philosophy. The key was to define their priorities: number one was “people plus production”. They sought to create a culture of accountability while still ensuring a people-first emphasis on soldier support.

To do this they had to address long standing problems of toxic and counterproductive leadership behaviors. CSM Beron had been in recruiting for many years and LTC Hellenbrand had experience shaping the climate of other battalions. So together, they became painfully aware of the people problems in this battalion. They made a firm commitment to get rid of people who were not meeting the standard. In some cases this included instances of downright toxic behaviors. In other cases there were pockets of people who weren't doing their jobs and for years it was never followed through on. So people around them started to feel a “why even bother?” mentality.

CSM Beron got support from LTC Hellenbrand to use what we may call “good attrition” – they aggressively weeded out under performers and toxic leaders in order to rebuild the mentality of the battalion.

While doing this, they made sure to be deliberate about the climate they created. They recognized that presence is powerful when it comes to trust and cohesion, so they made an effort to travel all over the state in order to connect with their teams and role model their command philosophy firsthand. This effort included an “open door policy” – a very powerful tool for shaping a climate of trust. They addressed their teams and explained that if anyone came forth to blow the whistle on counterproductive behaviors, it would be investigated and the person who came forth would be protected.

This led to a series of intimate discussions that shed light on the critical pockets of toxic and counterproductive leadership.

This approach was an excellent demonstration of two core principles of the Warrior Leader Training program: create trust and cohesion (in the organizational psychology literature this is known as “psychological safety”) and manage more than just performance – personalities that consistently contribute to negative emotional contexts must be addressed.

This was the center-piece of turning around this battalion.

LTC Hellenbrand and CSM Beron used another Warrior Leader Training principle: strengths-based leadership. They recognized the key to productivity is getting the most out of your people. They made strategic moves to get the right people in the right roles.

Coming out of the training, LTC Hellenbrand and CSM Beron made a commitment that they themselves, and each of their leaders, would leverage their strengths. Using a tool introduced to them at their Warrior Leader Training retreat, each member of the battalion completed the Clifton Strengths Assessment which shows an individual's top abilities. They made an effort to weave these insights into their approach to problem solving and team building. Everyone in the battalion now has their strengths posted so they can reference them in their daily battle rhythm.

As a battalion command team, they illustrated this as well. LTC Hellenbrand paired her strengths around people and relationships with CSM Beron's strengths around analysis, arranging, and process improvement to complement one another in creating a climate of “people plus production”.

LTC Hellenbrand and CSM Beron point out that creating cohesion was a key success factor in this case.

This is where the timing of the Warrior Leader Training program came into play. A hallmark of the training experience is to create an environment where soldiers get in front of one another, push outside their comfort zone together, and create meaningful interactions.

When CSM Beron first arrived at the battalion it was disjointed and hyper competitive. Soldiers felt apprehensive. Generally there was not much emphasis on emotional intelligence and emotionally intelligent leadership styles were looked down upon. Following the shared experience of the training, the section chiefs started to work together. They trusted one another. There was a shift in the cohesion of the group. Additionally, a component of the training included crafting a shared mission, vision, and values.

This was codified and threaded into everything the RRB does. With some facilitation from Paul and Jackson, LTC Hellenbrand and CSM Beron got everyone rowing in the same direction what the RRB did and did not want to be.



MISSION STATEMENT:
Stewards of strength and the heartbeat of the Wisconsin Army National Guard, the Recruiting & Retention Battalion is a cohesive force of strength professionals who change lives by recruiting, training, and retaining Wisconsin's Citizen-Soldiers.

VISION STATEMENT:
We provide our Wisconsin Army National Guard units with the next greatest generation of Citizen-Soldiers and leaders.

We build strength by leading Wisconsin citizens in their call to serve, helping them realize their potential and achieve their goals.

We fight the strength war locally, so our state and nation's freedoms are preserved.

VALUES

- Investment in, and Service to:
Family, Team, Community
- TOTAL Ownership
- Mastery
- Ethically Strong
- Proud to be RRB

RECRUITING & RETENTION BATTALION



CSM Beron highlights another critical component of the training was that most of the soldiers there were E7s growing into E8s. This means they were at a key point in their leadership journey and got to have their leadership style shaped in a positive way. It is essential that emerging leaders receive the development and skills that will shape them into effective leaders at the next level.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, much of this work is not possible if the organizational structure is not right. CSM Beron explains that the loss of AGRs was a critical challenge. Early on in his role he researched peer production: how much does a middle manager drive results?

He looked at data from other states to see differences in states staffed properly (according to regulation) versus understaffed states like Wisconsin. This is based on the NCO-IC to Recruiter ratio.

At the time of his research, the regulation recommended 8 to 10 Recruiters per Section Chief. The two worst performing states in the nation had a ratio of 17 to 1. He also recognized a pattern in New York: they went from 12 to 1, then to 8 to 1, then to 5 to 1 and every year their production increased helping them to be the best in the country.

CSM Beron estimated that a leader-to-subordinate ratio which was too high: too many direct reports per leader, would account for roughly a 40% difference in productivity. He took this data-driven case to the Chief of Staff and then to the DAG. They granted him support and he was able to improve the ratio for the RRB. This helped them create rapid improvement in production.

CSM Beron's expert analysis helped shape the organizational structure to support leadership development. This amplified the strategic focus on command climate championed by LTC Hellenbrand. This, along with systematic investments in cultivating cohesion and maximizing strengths helped to ensure a climate of collaboration and high performance.



At the heart of all this was a command philosophy emphasizing people plus production to develop mission, vision, and values that support a positive, high-performing climate of trust, cohesion, and talent maximization. How important is command climate? How effective is this command philosophy? The proof is in the results.



THANK YOU

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