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# The Case for a Combat Commander: Lt Col Chessani in Haditha

Bob Weimann, Lt Col USMC (Ret) | November 9, 2008 | Pdf version

*“LEADERSHIP ... trust is an essential trait among leaders--trust by seniors in the abilities of their subordinates and by juniors in the competence and support of their seniors. Trust must be earned, and actions which undermine trust must meet with strict censure.”* – FMFM-1 “WARFIGHTING” USMC

**Currently, the entire Marine combat chain of command** associated with the Haditha incident, from the commanding general to the squad leader, has either been censured or referred to court martial. My opinion is that a bad and slanted news story surprised the Marine Corps senior leadership. I say surprised because it is my opinion, they should have seen an incident like this coming and should have been prepared to handle it with an approach other than formal legal investigations and proceedings.

As we can see, Marine generals tend to “throw someone to the wolves” in these media cases. In this case, the wolf-feeding started with the battalion chain-of-command before the investigations are complete. Then it widened to an extra company commander (India Company Commander, Capt. James Kimber) and a couple of battalion staff officers (Capt Randy Stone and Lt Andrew Grayson) for good measure.

Additional self-inflicted wounds can be seen with the relief and [censure](#) of two regimental and a division level officer (Col Stephen Davis, Col Richard Sokoloski and MajGen Richard Huck). These actions represent an assault on the essential leadership trait of trust. The case against Lt Col J.R. Chessani, accusing him of dereliction of duty and violation of a lawful order, demonstrates this assault because the charges are based on opinion.

I have not been able to review the Lt Col Chessani’s actual Article 32 Investigation with attachments and enclosures, but there is considerable information about the Haditha battle he fought that day on the *Defend Our Marines* web site. Each time I read a report of his actions that resulted in the above charges, I keep thinking to myself that he made the correct decisions. I also think they are the same decisions most Marine officers would make in the same or similar situation.

Lt Col Chessani is accused of being too protective of the 3/1 Marines. Primarily, this is due to a [comment](#) he made to his operations officer that his “Marines are not murders”. As a commanding officer, Lt Col Chessani is well within his command authority to make the above statement. In conducting a formal or informal investigation, the commander and any other officer must remain impartial as mandated by the UCMJ. If another officer loses their own impartiality, the commanding officer and any other officer present should make an immediate correction.

Impartiality ensures that any event under investigation is reviewed based on the facts. Perceptions and biases are left out and cannot influence the investigation. Once the facts are established, opinions can be formed, as long as they are logically based on the facts. A commander can conduct an informal investigation at any time and it can be as simple as a statement “Sergeant, tell me what happened.” The informal investigation is a commander’s tool for quickly sorting things out, and if anyone attempts to bias that investigation, intentionally or unintentional, they should be stopped and corrected immediately.

From the investigating officer’s [public comments](#), he seems to have an issue with the battalion commander’s positioning during the battle. Whether Lt Col Chessani decided to position himself at the battalion COC (Combat Operations Center) or at the scene of the IED blast is the commander’s call. His primary responsibility is to position himself where he can best observe, control and support the battle and, again, that is the battle commander’s decision.

By Marine Corps combat doctrine, the commander, is required to take a position where he can best control his “focus of effort”. The focus of effort can be a lot of things but it is best described as the “one thing” that is going to achieve a decision in the battle. In this particular case, the battalion commander achieved a decision with air strikes. Air strikes, especially in a city, require a lot of coordination and communication in order to minimize collateral damage. Air strikes ended the battle and the best place to control those strikes is the battalion’s COC.

Lt Col Chessani, as the commander of 3/1, is charged with dereliction of duty because he “did not take personal action to fully investigate the actions leading to civilian deaths”. Lt Col Chessani, as a battalion commander in combat, takes “personal” actions every minute he commands. He takes personal actions to feed his Marines; he takes personal actions to promote his Marines; he takes personal actions to pay his Marines; and he takes personal actions to command his Marines in a battle. The list is endless because he is the commander responsible for everything his Marines do or fail to do. Because he is the battalion commander, he is the authority to exercise “personal actions” to determine if his Marines needed, or did not need, to be investigated. To be second-guessed, by the non-combat leaders breeds a state of miss trust that stifles initiative. The concern for discouraging initiative is exactly why the Marine Corps Warfighting Doctrine addresses trust and leadership.

Lt Col Chessani, is also accused of failing "to thoroughly and accurately report and investigate a combat engagement that clearly needed scrutiny." I would argue that Lt Col Chessani provided the needed scrutiny as a commander fighting his battalion in a running battle with insurgents. Lt Col. Chessani was taking casualties (1 KIA and 11 WIA) not from civilians but from insurgents. The battalion commander based this scrutiny on his knowledge of his Marines, their training and his personal observations of the battle. Again, this is a commander's call and the allegations are an attack on the the trust needed by the chain of command to operate in a challenging and changing combat environment.

The decision to proceed to a court martial against Lt Col Chessani was based on the opinions of the investigating officer. Opinions are dangerous because a different investigating officer might have an "opinion" that charges should be dropped. My "opinion" is that most former Marine commanders can look at Haditha and say, those are the same decisions I would make in that situation. Another way to say this is: Lt Col Chessani is guilty of being a commander. For that reason, I feel charges against Lt Col Chessani have no merit and those responsible for bringing them should meet with "strict censure".

Lt Col Jeffrey Chessani and SSgt Frank Wuterich, are two combat Marines, two warfighters, two lives, and part of two families still in legal limbo. Lt Col Chessani is awaiting a decision on the dismissal of his charges. SSgt Wuterich waits for a legal decision regarding outtakes of his *60 Minutes* interview. (This action still boggles my mind: the Commandant's lawyers could not find the evidence on the battle field, so they sue *60 Minutes* for help?)

I apologize to these two Marines because I cannot do more then yell encouragement from the stands. I can tell them that this is now an endurance contest; the crowd in the stands is with them and cheering, "Hold that line". Now the really good news for these Marines is that the crowd is growing. The *Defend Our Marine* web site sees it everyday. Folks, tell your friends to join the crowd in supporting these two and the other Haditha 3/1 Marines.

Semper Fi,

Bob Weimann  
Lt Col USMC (Ret.)  
Former Commanding Officer, Kilo Company 3/1



Bob Weimann, LtCol USMC Ret

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Read more on the Haditha case by Bob Weimann:

[The Sins of Generals: Undue Influence from the Start](#), October 30, 2008.

[The Sins of Generals: An open letter to General Michael Hagee, Commandant of the Marine Corps \(2003-2006\)](#), October 11, 2008

[The Case for a Squad Leader: SSgt Wuterich in Haditha](#), July 25, 2008.

[Huzzah! Huzzah! HUZAZHHH!](#), June 6, 2008.

[Open Letter to the Commandant of the United States Marine Corps concerning the 3/1 Haditha Marines](#), February 8, 2008.

Explore Haditha documents:

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