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Personal Experience 1

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Personal Experience Paper

1SG Duties during OIF II

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Abstract

Fulfilling the duties and responsibilities as a Headquarters and Headquarters First Sergeant before, during, and after a major deployment is not an easy task. You have to ensure that you're Leaders, Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) and Soldiers are trained properly, there may not be enough time to do the training and you can't just check the block and say your unit is good to go. You have to ensure that the training occurs or you will lose Soldiers. Not only is the training important but you have to ensure that all of you're Soldiers, whether a leader, single, or married and their families are given time to take care of any issues they may have. If your Soldiers have unresolved issues at home then they will not focus on their mission at hand.

Personal Experience Paper

I was just recently assigned as the First Sergeant for Headquarters and Headquarters Company (HHC) 2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry, 2 Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division after a 26 month tour as a First Sergeant in Charlie Company 2-12 Cavalry. I had plenty of experience on dealing with 19K Armor Crewmen Soldiers. I was a bit nervous about taking over as the senior NCO in HHC because I would be dealing with more than just Tankers, I would have numerous Soldiers from different Military Occupational Skills (MOS) and I would have to ensure that they all were technically and tactically proficient, because if any of them could not do their required duties then the Battalion would not operate effectively. I cracked open some manuals and had some of the Soldiers teach me in an inconspicuous way. Then I would have a good idea on how to do just about all the duties in each of those MOS's.

We prepared for our deployment by conducting some extensive field training and putting in extra hours conducting individual type training. We had so much training to complete by certain dates. If we didn't meet those dates then we would hold up the entire Battalion. We had to do the training quickly and effectively. If there was a Soldier who was having issues in any of our training we would take him aside and get him on the right track, he would not leave until he was confident and his Squad Leader was confident that he could do the task correctly.

Our Battalion was given the responsibility of being the main effort in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom II. We would leave three months before the rest of the Brigade and once in Iraq we would link up with 2-70 Armor from the 1st Armored Division.

There were numerous problems that we encountered prior to the deployment and during the deployment phase. Prior to deploying we had a lot of Soldiers believing they were not going to return from this deployment and that sparked a rash of discipline issues. There were also many Soldiers who were controlled by fear; they were so scared that they could not function correctly.

Even their bodily functions were thrown out of cycle. I had a couple of Soldiers defecate on themselves because of fear. We literally drug a few of them to the staging area and had NCO supervision with them the entire time. We did take the correct action and had them see the Chaplain and other helpful agencies; it just happened that all those individuals were all in the staging area.

We had to set the bar for discipline high; we could not afford to have Soldiers out of control and getting away with it. Most of the Soldiers in the unit were good Soldiers, they did what they were told to do and did it well, and it is just that small percentage that all unit leaders have to deal with. Uniformed Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) was the resolution; it seemed like we were conducting UCMJ action or supervising corrective training just about every evening prior to our deployment. The word got around the unit that the leadership would not tolerate insubordination and that all discipline issues would be dealt with immediately. The rash of discipline problems was gone. Those Soldiers thought that by getting into trouble they would be exempt from deploying and that they would just be separated from the Army. They figured out that the only thing they did was they embarrassed themselves, lost their rank, and money.

After completing block leave and all required training we departed home station in early January 2006. When we arrived in Kuwait everyone became more serious and alert. As I looked at several NCOs within the ranks I could tell that they did not come to play, they had their game faces on. They knew that mistakes made from here on out would cost someone their life. The NCOs started taking charge, getting information out to their Soldiers, conducting inspections and more focused repetitious training. I was overcome with excitement seeing these young NCOs leading from the front. We ended up stranded in Kuwait for two weeks; the ship with our equipment had broken down and was waiting for parts, so the only thing for us to do was to keep our Soldiers busy; so from sun up to sun down they were either conducting some sort of training

or they were on details. Some NCOs were even conducting night training in the tent area. If this wouldn't have occurred, the Soldiers would have become complacent prior to entering Iraq. But after talking to most of the junior Soldiers in the unit, they actually loved the training; they believed their NCOs were doing the right thing. We conducted daily battle update briefs to track what training was being conducted. Once our equipment arrived we were able to shift focus. We were given a timeline by the Battalion Headquarters to get our vehicles ready to roll. It was day and night operations having to install armor and sandbags on all vehicles, getting all the radios back in the vehicles and every vehicle communicating with each other. The most difficult of all tasks was Force XXI Battle Command, Brigade-and-Below (FBCB2). My signal platoon did an outstanding job fixing equipment, replacing parts and ensuring that all communication equipment was up and running. I did not have my hands full because I had great Platoon Sergeants who were making things happen, they took the lead in getting each and every one of their vehicles and Soldiers ready to move into Iraq.

The day finally came, we were ready to cross into Iraq; all vehicles were loaded with equipment and Soldiers. We were just waiting for our serial movement times. Fear set in for some Soldiers, they cried without shame. Unfortunately, the Chaplain had left with one of the earlier convoys so it was up to the unit leadership to calm these individuals down and get them refocused on the mission at hand. After a grueling 308 mile trip into Iraq, we finally reached Baghdad and conducted link up with 2nd Battalion, 70th Armor. Their scouts led us into Camp Victory where we linked up with our Brigade CSM and the NCOs from our Battalion Advance Travel Party (ADVON). The excitement of having just traveled along dangerous roads and made it to our destination safely was overwhelming.

There was no time for rest; our counterparts from 2-70 Armor had set up a timeline for our senior leadership to attend briefings about their Area of Operations which was on the western

edge of the capital in the Abu Ghurayib district. We spent a week going through briefings and right seat rides with our counterparts while our Soldiers conducted maintenance on vehicles and had added on armor put on the vehicles. Once the briefings were complete it was right seat ride time with our counterparts, we rode throughout their sector for several days trying to get oriented and familiarized with all the locations.

We were given the go ahead for the Transfer of Authority; it was conducted at a Forward Operating Base belonging to 1st Armored Division. Once we were complete with the Transfer of Authority; the Area of Operations became our responsibility. No one stayed to make sure we were doing things correctly. 2-70 Armor wasted no time, they were ready to go home after a long year in country.

Our mission in this sector was three fold; as a Battalion, we had to maintain security on certain routes to allow military convoys to move without incident. We would establish checkpoints along all major routes within our Area of Operations (AOR). We would conduct random checks of vehicles to deter insurgents from smuggling in weapons. We would escort vehicles in and out of sector while provide security to a National Guard Medical detachment on Log Base Seitz a small Forward Operating Base (FOB) just north of Camp Victory. We also had to secure a small Iraqi police station (known as Raider Base) in the center of Abu Ghurayib and keep it manned 24/7. From there, we could maintain visibility on downtown Abu Ghurayib and the market district. We also had to take over one of 2-70th Armors Iraqi military training facility. We would be the ones who would continue to teach, train and mentor these volunteers. This was not an easy task, we had to screen each individual medically, physically, mentally and conduct a back ground check on them with what information we could collect. We had to establish a training team to continue the training; this team consisted of four SSG's, two SGTs and a couple of Soldiers. Their task would not be an easy one; they would have to trust their Iraqi counterparts.

Together they would have to maintain security of the FOB (known as FOB Thunder) and continue the training as a team.

Our NCOs and Soldiers responded to all mission requirements and situations very professionally. Their personal feelings were kept to themselves and they adapted quickly to the climate and environment, there was so much pride and confidence in their abilities that they were ready to respond to anything. This deployment was groundbreaking for many, most of the NCOs had grown a tighter bond with their Soldiers, and they built a wall of trust with one another knowing that each could count on the other. In a Garrison environment, NCOs take care of their Soldiers daily, but the bond they build in Garrison is not a strong one. NCOs in Garrison might build a tighter bond of respect with some of their Soldiers they believe will be great NCOs.

NCOs who we thought to be weak ended up being strong leaders and those who we knew were strong leaders became even stronger leaders. There were junior Soldiers who were forced into positions of leadership who performed outstandingly. In this environment there is no room for failure and all the NCOs knew this. Everything that they were responsible for was done correctly, no shortcuts were allowed. Even though myself and other leaders conducted periodic inspections and platoon precombat checks, the NCOs and Soldiers could always be counted on to do the right thing.

The NCOs in my unit were responsible for conducting many different missions. Route security, personal security detachment support, cordon and search missions, raids, detainee processing and detainee transfer were just a few. They also had to operate the Joint Land Attack Cruise Missile Defense Elevated Netted Sensor (JLENS) twenty four hours a day. They had to conduct route reconnaissance and outpost security every night.

The NCOs and Soldiers performed well in every task given. Every one of them was a go to guy. There were some instances where a few NCOs and Soldiers did participate in

unprofessional behavior and they were reprimanded verbally and in most cases UCMJ action was imposed on them. Many believe that because they are deployed that you don't have time for UCMJ action or that you should let things slide or sweep it under the rug. You cannot do that because if you let something go without addressing it or taking immediate action, behavior like that will become a disease and spread quickly within your ranks.

Most of my platoon sergeants were proficient in what they did. I did have one or two who were not as strong as the others, but their weakness allowed their stronger subordinate NCOs to take charge. My scout platoon sergeant (SFC Helton) and my mortar platoon sergeant (SSG McBride) were always on top of their game. They always made sure that their Soldiers were ready to move and fight at a moments notice and that they were proficient in all that they did.

NCOs have to be proficient in their duties and responsibilities. If they are not then the Soldiers will not trust their NCOs to get them through the toughest of times. An NCO has to be put to the test occasionally, he must prove that he can accomplish the mission and take care of his Soldiers. You have to give NCOs as much responsibility as you can, it will help them grow professionally and mentally. As a senior leader you should just have to sit back and observe, mentor and coach your NCOs. You have to develop them the right way.

We were fortunate to work with three scout platoons from Estonia attached to our Battalion. We actually only had one scout platoon at a time, they were there for only 6 months and then they rotated out. We ended up working with three different Estonian scout platoons. These Estonian Soldiers were not the first foreign Soldiers I have worked side by side with. These Soldiers were definitely the most professional and disciplined Soldiers I have worked with. You do not have to explain things twice to these Soldiers. Of course we did have some communication barriers, but hand and arm signals and demonstrations worked wonders between us. Another responsibility put on me was to ensure that the Estonian scout platoon was resourced

and ready. I had adopted them as an additional scout platoon in Headquarters Company. Their first sergeant attended all our meetings and I was always there to help him or answer questions.

There were no shortfalls during our deployment but we did have a small amount of equipment interoperability problems while there. Most issues dealt with were trying to disarm insurgent weapons. After repetitive training on insurgent weapons the problems ended.

Once we started our process to depart the theater of operations, the only issues we had were equipment issues. Transferring ammo and equipment over to incoming units proved a difficult task because of paperwork. Completing the transfer paperwork is what took the longest. But once we were complete with all paperwork everything went smooth.

I would make recommendations to deploying units to improve on tactical and technical training. Conduct marksmanship and reflexive fire training as much as possible with iron sights and scopes. NCOs and Soldiers need lots of training on the procedures for cordon and search, raids, snap, and deliberate Traffic Control Points. One of the doctrinal lessons we learned while there was conducting cordon and search procedures.

Despite having had seven fallen Soldiers our unit did an outstanding job accomplishing all tasks that were given to us. We were always given difficult missions because the higher leadership always knew they could count on us to get it done. Some of the lessons learned from this deployment were to ensure MEDEVAC procedures are taught and rehearsed down to the lowest level. While in theater there were no First Sergeants riding out in to sector to conduct casualty evacuation. Getting wounded Soldiers out of a hot zone was up to all members in each vehicle. They had to call for a MEDEVAC bird or call nearest base informing them they were bringing in wounded.

Conclusion

We learned many lessons while deployed in a theater. The most important lesson learned was to ensure that your Soldiers down to the lowest level knew how to conduct casualty evacuation. For a Soldier to perform at 100%, you have to ensure that he is ready. You must train and retrain Soldiers to ensure they can accomplish any task even in the most difficult situations. You must also make sure the Soldiers and their families are taken care of. If there are issues at home then the Soldier will focus on the issues instead of the mission at hand. Don't just focus on the subordinate Soldiers, make sure Leaders and Senior Leaders have time to take care of any issues that they may have. Prepare your Soldiers physically, mentally, and spiritually for deployment. If you can cover all these areas your Soldiers will do anything you ask. Even give their life for you because they know that everything is taken care of at home.

Appendix