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Accidental Discharges

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Abstract

In March 2005, 1st Cavalry Division deployed to Operation Iraqi Freedom II. Many of the units in place were having problems with soldiers having accidental discharges into clearing barrels. A blanket policy went into effect to detour the amount of accidental discharges, which included an automatic letter of reprimand and a Brigade level Article 15.

Accidental Discharges

In March 2005, 1st Cavalry Division deployed to Operation Iraqi Freedom II.

Many units deployed to Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom II had problems with soldiers encountering accidental discharges into clearing barrels while entering Forward Operating Bases and secured areas throughout Iraq. First Cavalry Division in order to detour this type of behavior put a blanket policy into effect to decrease the amount of accidental discharges, which included an automatic Brigade level letter of reprimand and a Brigade level Article 15.

The number of accidental discharges drastically decreased for the entire year of the deployment; however, there still was a considerable amount of accidental discharges throughout the theatre of operations. The three accidental discharges that my soldiers had all included the same ingredients which was continuous operations and ending a patrol for longer than twelve hours. All three received their Brigade Level Letter of Reprimand however due to the circumstances no judicial punishment would be imposed. All of these soldiers were Infantry soldiers with countless patrols in the Haifa Street area of operations and had been in numerous small arms engagements.

In January of 2006, Division put out the requirements for the coveted Combat Infantry Badge. The three requirements were as follows the soldier must be an infantryman satisfactorily performing infantry duties, must be assigned to an infantry unit during such time as the unit is engaged in active ground combat, and must actively participate in such ground combat as prescribed in Army Regulation 600-8-22 (Military Awards). The catch phrase to this is satisfactory performing infantry duties. It's deemed by first Cavalry Commanders that a soldier having an accidental discharge was performing at an unsatisfactory level regardless of their actions and contributions to the mission at hand. The ethical dilemma comes when soldiers

working in the Tactical Operations Command and other needed jobs not necessarily in direct combat who participated in one or two active patrols are awarded the Combat Infantryman Badge or the Combat Action Badge. The soldiers that had a negligent discharge are rejected for an award even though they have hundreds of patrols and been involved in countless enemy engagements ranging from Small Arms, Rocket Propelled Grenades, Grenades and Mortars attacks. This is not the end state; also, no one with any type of disciplinary action can receive an end of tour award. Therefore, a Soldier can ultimately spend a year on the streets of Baghdad and receive nothing but his Combat patch and a pat on the back for job well done. Of course, I am sure they will be more careful and proficient at the clearing barrel and ensure no round is chambered while at the clearing barrel.

These types of policies put Commanders at Company level and First Sergeants in an ethical dilemma whether to report all incidents to higher headquarters knowing that the outcome may become a detriment to the Soldier when it comes to later awards and decorations. It also puts Junior Leadership in jeopardy because they feel that an Accidental discharge is a career stopper and could ultimately ruin everything they worked for. An example of this is when my Scout platoon sergeant had an accidental discharge at the end of an all night patrol at a Forward Operating Base in the Green Zone. After the accidental discharge, his Soldiers knowing the consequences spoke up to the guards and told them they were the ones responsible for the Discharge. Their sole intention was to protect their Platoon sergeant from the severe consequences of having a negligent discharge. They felt that because of his rank and position, the Brigade Level Letter of Reprimand would affect him more severely than if; a Specialist was to receive it. Although the Platoon Sergeant should have corrected the situation, he did not because he new the result would damage his career. Of course, the truth surfaced with time and this exceptional platoon Sergeant with an untarnished record was relieved for lying and action

unbecoming of a Noncommissioned Officer. Although his behavior was unacceptable, it all stemmed off the severe consequences of having an accidental discharge. Not all situations are equal and each case has to have all facts examined separately. For example, a Soldier with one thoughtless moment even though they may have cleared their weapon thousands of times correctly is unable to receive any type of rewards for the rest of their tour in Iraq. This is extremely un motivating for the Soldiers and they always have the same question "What do we have clearing barrels for?" Most of the accidental discharges occur in clearing barrels where soldiers are required to clear their weapon prior to entering their Forward Operating Base.

Once again, the major contribution to a negligent discharge is fatigue. After all the investigations it is found that the Soldiers are exhausted and forget to drop the magazine prior to releasing their bolt forward. A simple way to reduce this risk would be to have a clearing Noncommissioned Officer whose sole responsibility is to double check the exhausted Soldiers prior to entering the Forward Operating Base.

My Soldiers spent countless hours on patrol, some of which lasted in excess of 72 hours while conducting sniper operations from abandoned apartment buildings to three-hour foot patrols through the unfriendly streets in the Haifa Street district. The hours were long and extremely dangerous. Every one of these Soldiers met the criteria beyond the written regulation requirements in Army Regulation 600-8-22 (Military Awards) to be recognized at the end of their tour with the appropriate badges and medals.

Accidental Discharges are a serious matter however; they should not affect a soldier's eligibility to an end of tour award, Combat Infantry Badge or the new Combat Action Badge. Especially if it is, a one-time event and no repeated patterns of accidental discharges are established. To be punished for a mistake is expectable, however by not taking into consideration the other three hundred sixty four days of the year; leaders will be placed into an ethical dilemma

situation and could lead to bad decisions, insubordination and false reports. To place junior leaders and Company level leadership into this position is extremely unwise and only promotes bad decisions.