

IRAQI FREEDOM III

OIF III

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OIF III: NEVER FORGET

Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry, the unit that I was assigned to on 4 January, 2004. I was the First Sergeant (“Hardrock 7”) of the best company in 3rd Brigade Combat Team. The unit was redeploying back from the National Training Center where there rotation was very successful. My vision of what this company needed in order to prepare for deployment to OIF III was just that, a vision. I couldn’t have picked a better group of men to deploy to Iraq with. The unit lost one Soldier, (SSG Hemingway) during OIF I and the thought that went through my head was that how many men are we going to lose during this rotation. This very thought was the driving force that the commander and I used to motivate Soldiers. It also helped develop a training plan that we thought we needed for a successful mission in Iraq. However, no matter how much training you execute, the real test will not hit home until we are in country and we experience the real threat in the new Iraq. The price we paid as a company will always linger in my mind on whether we did everything that we could to prepare the Soldiers for combat. Did we train as hard as we could have? Did we prepare the Soldiers physically and mentally? Did we help prepare their families to deal with different situations while their Soldiers were deployed? Did we make sure that all their finances we taken care of prior to deployment? Did we set-up the Family Readiness Group to help support the families while we were deployed? These are all the questions that were going through my mind as we prepared the “Hardrock” company for the year long deployment.

PRE-DEPLOYMENT TRAINING

The Shootouse was the first training to prepare Alpha Company. This was the first time that the Soldiers were intimately involved with training in an urban environment without any distractions. During the same week, we trained and certified every Soldier in Level I Combatives. This was the first time that I was involved with Combatives. This was the first time that I experienced combatives and this was outstanding training for the Soldiers in the company. We stayed out on the range for the whole week and executed some of the best training in ground fighting techniques that I've been involved in. This training period was one of the most enjoyable times of my career.

The following month, we went out to the McKenna Mout site where we spent four days training in an Urban environment. We incorporated mounted operations into the urban training. This was the first time that some of the Bradley Commanders saw first hand how effective support that the Bradleys were able to bring to the table. We also conducted training on setting up a Tactical Check Point (TCP), vehicle search, individual search techniques, and language training. This was also the first time that the Soldiers in the company utilized Simmunitions, a realistic training tool over live ammunitions. This training was another step in the process of getting the Soldiers prepared for combat.

In May, we executed small arms and Bradley Gunnery. We set up the basement of the company for the Soldiers to execute man-up drills. Utilizing the small arms trainer (computer set up for simulation training) and local training sites for squad evaluations was important in their preparation for small arms gunnery. Small arms gunnery was executed without a hitch. We found it very hard to continue focusing on small arms and at the same time, start our focus on Bradley Gunnery. Unit Conduct of Fire Trainer (UCOFT) and Bradley Gunnery Skills Test

(BGST) was the focus for the mounted crews. We managed to get qualified in the UCOFT and Bradley Gunnery was a big success, ending with the company earning the streamer for Top Gun company in the Brigade.

Validation of our training was paramount at the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, Louisiana. The training at Fort Polk was definitely not set up for mounted as much as it was for dismounted Soldiers. Shuttgard Gordon was the best urban environment training site that we had encountered since we started putting this company team together. Every move we made in the training site was video taped so we could actually see our sustains and improves. The actual field exercise was very educational, however, this was the place that made us look at our biggest fault to date, Bradley maintenance. Our combat power was cut in half because of all the deadlines that we encountered before deploying out into the training area. This was definitely an eye opener. The Executive Officer and I worked hard at setting up our maintenance Standard Operating Procedure (SOP), something sorely needed in helping the platoons maintain there equipment. We successfully redeployed back to Fort Benning with the thought that we only had two months left before flying across the pond.

We spent the next two months preparing our equipment for deployment and executed some Arabic classes that were paramount to our success during OIF III. Packing of our Bradley's (BFVs) and our connexes were very important, knowing exactly what to take and what to leave. During this time period, contact with Anvil Company would have been a big help because we filled our connexes with supplies that we didn't need. The biggest lesson learned here was the importance of each Soldier knowing the basics about the Arabic language and feed back from the company that we were replacing. We also learned the importance of training with all our equipment on (nomax gloves, ballistic goggles, throat guard, crotch protector, etc.,)

(TRAIN AS YOU FIGHT). We executed block leave and returned in time for deployment. The big surprise to me was that everybody returned from leave, nobody went AWOL.

Some of the lessons learned here were:

1. Language training is paramount and you can never get enough language training. We should've lived, breathed, eat, and sleep with Arabic language on our minds. We should have made it mandatory to speak Arabic in the company area.
2. Be ruthless about enforcing wear of proper gear. Make sure that every Soldier is aware of how this gear could save their life.
3. Maintenance, maintenance, maintenance. Soldiers can't patrol if we can't get them there.
4. We shot more rounds than most battalions shot during pre-deployment, however, you can never shoot enough in preparation for deployment.
5. Good time to test rear-d and FRG support procedures.

MOVEMENT INTO KUWAIT

It was a brisk morning in January, 2005 when we boarded a bird for Kuwait. Advanced Party did an outstanding job of setting things up and making our transition into country smooth. We had a good two weeks of preparation, re-zeroing individual weapons and other classes. One of the most important classes was the Improvised Explosive Device (IED) class, something that we could have probably used more of back at Fort Benning rather than in country. Getting armor on our wheel vehicles was a big priority. We were determined to deploy into Iraq with Up-Armor on all our vehicles. We placed a lot of emphasis on physical training. We also took advantage of the simulated small arms trainer that nobody was utilizing. Climatizing was also a major concern because half the company came down with a cold. Once again, we still didn't have contact with Anvil Company, something that was utterly needed from First Sergeant on

down to the Squad Leader level. Convoy preparation out of Kuwait was a major headache, especially for our convoy escorts. We did not get clear guidance on escort duties so getting a clear picture for the Soldiers that executed escort duties was little to none.

Some lessons learned were:

1. You can never get too much IED classes.
2. Training never stops, you train all the way up to deployment into country.
3. Be prepared to do your own convoy escorts into country.
4. Make sure that all soldiers get acclimatized to weather and conditions.
5. Was a good place to test our knowledge of the Arabic language with all the interpreters on the base.
6. We lost two Soldiers to injuries sustained there during physical fitness training. We can't afford to lose anyone out of the fight. We were already deploying at 89% strength and that was the last thing we needed.

FIRST 90 DAYS IN COUNTRY

It was a cold and rainy night in February when we flew into Iraq. We immediately fell in with Anvil Company and started our Area of Operation orientation. Our first time out in sector, we encountered our first IED. Nobody got hurt; however, the hole that was left after detonation came up to my chest. It was a rude awakening of what we were about to encounter throughout the year long deployment. Anvil Company redeployed two weeks later and we were now on our own. Our first ninety days in country was greeted with IED, RPG, and small arms fire contact. First contact for the company was when Red-1 was hit with two RPGs. The reactive armor on the Bradley held-up and we only suffered two casualties with minor shrapnel wounds. They were back in the fight a few days later. During this time, we developed a rapport with some of

the Sheiks, Police Chief, and the commander of the Iraqi army. We were also prepping ourselves for a change of command. The new commander was coming from the S-3 shop.

Some lessons learned during this phase were:

1. Never change out commanders in the first 90 days in country. Continuity is what you need to maintain.
2. Develop Intel as soon as possible, even if it's Intel from the outgoing unit. Something we learned was that the outgoing units Intel was not as accurate as we thought. Intel needs to be accurate because Soldiers' lives depend on its accuracy.
3. Hard time establishing PLL (parts for BFVs), better handover from the outgoing unit
4. Hard time with sand fleas in living quarters.
5. Establish a good SOP for company TOC operations and ensure you have competent soldiers in the TOC, not your cast offs.

CASUALTIES OF WAR

In May, we suffered our first fatal casualty, Specialist Givens. He was shot with an armor piercing round that went through his Kevlar and through his OTV. This was a dark moment in the company and it was the grim reality of war. We continued to try and develop a rapport with the people of this town; however, the Givens incident had put a bad taste in our mouths. We did not suffer another fatal casualty until October of that year when we lost four Soldiers to injuries from burns in a Bradley that was hit with an IED. In one quick flash, we lost a PSG, SL, Chief Medic, and a driver. The company went through a rebuilding phase in country and we were able to do this while running missions in sector. The insurgents continued to attack us with IEDs and

small arms. We picked up the pace on our raids in the town, gaining more Intel than we would ever imagine.

Intel gathering was a major factor in our success. We managed to gather so much Intel from low to high that the data we had as a company was detailed down to the grandkids. We managed to tie in friends, families, and hierarchy. It was a major breakthrough for the battalion because the Intel that we gathered as a company influenced a lot of the commands decisions.

Rest and Relaxation (R&R) was also a big factor in trying to maintain combat power in sector. We were already at 90% strength when we deployed into country and were losing anywhere from 10-15% to R & R every month. This was also a critical time for the new commander to learn the AO and lead the company in this volatile area of Iraq.

Lessons learned:

1. Develop a good R&R plan from day one.
2. Develop a good Intel base and ensure that every soldier knows how important that Intel is to our mission.
3. Ensure that soldier's personal data is constantly updated for notification purposes.
4. Maintenance, maintenance, maintenance!

POST DEPLOYMENT

We celebrated Christmas with as much tradition as possible, setting up a Christmas tree in the Company Command Post (CP) and exchanging gifts on Christmas Eve. At this time, we still didn't know who was replacing us or when. Once again, another unit went through the same thing that we did, no Intel from the unit that they are replacing, us. It was not until the New Year when we finally made contact with the incoming unit. I could see it in their eyes, the same glare that we had when we took over the AO. We transferred all our stay behind equipment and

additional supplies to the incoming unit. This period was just as intense for us as it was for them because of my fear of losing any more Soldiers in the company before redeployment.

Redeployment out of country was great except for one fact, we did not redeploy as a company. We redeployed company minus one platoon, which was Second Platoon. Dirty Deuce was there nick name and they were the best platoon that we had during the deployment. Flying back into Fort Benning was a smooth transition. Landing at Lawson Army Airfield on Fort Benning was one of the saddest moments of my life because all I could think of was the soldiers that didn't come back with us. We had lost 5 Soldiers in the company to fatal wounds and over 10 to injuries sustained while in sector. I didn't know how to face these Soldiers families.

We immediately took some time off and reported back to work after a couple of days. The rear detachment (SSG Collins) did an outstanding job receiving us and in processed the Soldiers back into the billets without a glitch. The smooth transition was almost too good to be true and it had me worried. The first ninety days back in country was critical and we managed to get through it with no problems. We kept a close eye on the Soldiers that were injured in country that redeployed back before the company. It seemed like they were feeling guilty about not redeploying back into sector after they healed. On the fourth month, a soldier from our sister company committed suicide in the orderly room and this really put everybody on edge. This was the biggest fear that I had as a First Sergeant is that these soldiers were not able to adjust to life of normalcy back in country. Two months later, a soldier in the company suffered a heart attack caused by the medication that he was taking for injuries that he suffered in sector. This incident was so hard to take because he had made it back to civilization and then lose him to something like this was almost too much to take.

Lessons learned:

1. Train them hard as soon as you get back, take them out to the ranges and have them shooting as soon as possible. They need to hear the sound of weapons going off.
2. Continue to monitor soldiers even when they get out of the army. Some soldiers might have ETSed with PTSD and didn't know it. Ensure that they know that they can get help at the VA after getting out of the service.
3. The first ninety days back is critical; however, the fourth month is even more critical because this seems like the month that all the crazy things happen. We had 2 soldiers commit suicide in the battalion.
4. NEVER FORGET THE FALLEN SOLDIERS!