

Combat Preparedness of NCO's within the 144<sup>th</sup> Military Police Company,  
Michigan Army National Guard

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Abstract

The Michigan Army National Guard has experienced an increase in combat operations that is unparalleled since the Vietnam War era. With this surge in combat operations, is our Noncommissioned Officer Corp up to the difficult task of training, preparing, and leading subordinates in combat? In the Personal Experience Paper that follows, I will cover several lessons learned with regard to some NCOs within the 144<sup>th</sup> Military Police Company during its deployment for combat operations to Iraq. Topics that will be covered in depth will be mobilization issues, deployment issues, administrative issues, and getting back to the basics of Soldiering. Although I see the mission of the 144<sup>th</sup> Military Police Company as a complete success, our NCO Corp within the Michigan Army National Guard must take steps to better prepare for the rigors of combat.

The 144<sup>th</sup> Military Police Company out of Owosso Michigan was given 90 days to mobilize for a combat deployment after the Connecticut Army National Guard was unable to assemble a Company of qualified Military Police Soldiers to deploy. The established TASKORG for the 144<sup>th</sup> Military Police Company became three Platoons and a Headquarters element from Michigan and one MP Platoon provided by Connecticut. With the strength of the 144<sup>th</sup> Military Police Company at about 50% prior to the mobilization order, the task of gathering MOS qualified Soldiers and NCOs from around the state of Michigan began. Cross leveling from over fifteen different units was the result. I as the First Sergeant was transferred to the 144<sup>th</sup> Military Police Company from another Military Police Company within our Battalion. The entire Company of 180 Soldiers would meet in late July 2006 at Ft. Dix New Jersey for mobilization training.

#### Mobilization Issues

The cross leveling of Soldiers from around the state of Michigan and Connecticut brought with it some unique challenges. A few of the senior NCOs were ill prepared to lead their particular sections due to their previous duty assignments. Some came from Brigade and higher Headquarter elements while others came from instructor positions and or units where their Military Police MOS was not their primary MOS. Throughout the three month long mobilization training process, errors in judgment committed by these senior NCOs were dealt with by mentoring and counseling by me as the First Sergeant. I felt that with three months of mobilization training, these types of errors in judgment would not be repeated once we were in Iraq.

As a result of what I later saw and experienced in Iraq regarding ill prepared senior NCOs, I should have taken more time prior to and during mobilization training to screen my senior NCOs. I should have taken more time to understand their backgrounds, look at a few of their past NCOER's and speak with their previous supervisors regarding their leadership qualities. Having a Military Police Platoon Sergeant that was never a Team Leader or a Squad Leader in a Military Police unit should have been a red flag to me during mobilization. I assumed these NCOs could operate efficiently in the positions they were selected for and that Soldiers of the same rank routinely hold. I was wrong.

Along with the cross leveling of Soldiers, full integration should have been completed with regard to the Connecticut Soldiers. I brought this issue to my Commander early on during mobilization, but he and the Platoon Leader from Connecticut assured me that this would not be an issue. During the initial days of mobilization training, the Connecticut Platoon should have been fully integrated into the other Michigan Platoons. The result would have been four fully integrated and independent Platoons with none having ties to original units back in Michigan or Connecticut. Although the integration was not necessarily an issue during mobilization training, it would later be an issue in Iraq. Many NCOs within the Connecticut Platoon began complaining that they were being alienated. Many of the same NCOs would complain that details that arose on the Forward Operating Base were delegated to their Platoon because they were from Connecticut and not Michigan. This was of course not the case. The negative attitude of these NCOs quickly spread like a cancer throughout the rest of the Connecticut Platoon. Not fully integrating the Connecticut Soldiers eventually became a distraction to the harmonious running of the unit.

### Combat Operations

After three months of mobilization training and theater immersion training in Kuwait, the 144<sup>th</sup> Military Police Company was tasked with Police Transition Team (PTT) training in Mosul, Iraq. The 144<sup>th</sup> Military Police Company was tasked with training Iraqi Police at twenty-six Police Stations, five District Headquarters, and the Provincial Headquarters in the city's center. The line Soldiers would conduct PTT at their respective sites five days a week, have one maintenance day, and have a scheduled down day.

### Deployment Issues

During the twelve months in Iraq, some NCOs showed a lack of discipline that I would never have expected from even a new Corporal. From the Team Leader and Squad Leader level, some NCOs failed to ensure that their Soldiers weapons and other equipment were cleaned on a daily basis. PMCS of vehicles and other individual equipment was not being completed according to the prescribed standard and at times became an issue while on patrol. In instances such as these, I started making surprise weapons inspections during the Soldiers down time and walked the motor pool when PMCS of vehicles was being completed. Fortunately for me, I had a good Motor Sergeant who kept the Team Leaders and Squad Leaders focused on proper maintenance of their vehicles and some of their other equipment. I didn't think I had to perform the Platoon Sergeant's responsibilities, but at times I did.

This brings me to the Platoon Sergeants. I had three Platoon Sergeants that failed to enforce the standard prescribed by regulations and orders. One specifically told his

Soldiers that they were not supposed to drink, but if they were going to drink, he didn't want to know about it. That is definitely not the message that the Commander and I wanted the Soldiers to have. Many Soldiers in that particular Platoon received article 15's due to their consumption of alcohol. A second Platoon Sergeant failed to properly report a General Order 1B violation. After finding out that one of his Soldiers had been drinking, this particular Platoon Sergeant determined that a counseling statement was the correct punishment and chose not to bring the incident to the Commander's or my attention. A third Platoon Sergeant failed to ensure that his Soldiers wore the required Personal Protective Equipment while on patrol. This issue was not discovered until the end of the deployment and fortunately none of the Soldiers were hurt as a result of this Platoon Sergeant's inability to enforce the standard.

What I found out by continued counseling and mentoring of these NCOs, is that many of them were not given the proper mentorship and guidance by their previous superiors. These three above Platoon Sergeants were only doing what they had been allowed to do back in Michigan and Connecticut. One specifically came to me and questioned why alcohol was such a big issue even though he knew it was a General Order 1B violation. Not having any of these three Platoon Sergeants as a subordinate prior to the deployment shed some light on the issue for me. We truly do need to train as we fight and prepare these Soldiers for the rigors of combat. Leading by example may not be enough. We must coach and mentor. We as leaders do not need to be our Soldiers friends and hope that they will do well when the time comes to deploy. Enforce the standards at all times and hold poor performing NCOs and Soldiers accountable for their

actions early on. Two of the three Platoon Sergeants from above ended up being relieved of duty for their actions.

#### Administrative Issues

The administrative issues that we encountered while in Iraq prevented me from concentrating on other important Soldier issues. I was advised by my Battalion back in Michigan that I had nearly one hundred NCOER's that were past due. Now I knew that the Company I came from was all caught up, but what I was unprepared for was the fact that all these cross leveled Soldiers needed NCOER's from their former units. Now I could have fought the issue claiming that it was not my responsibility, but then the Soldier would suffer the consequences of not having an up to date NCOER for promotion purposes. My Platoon Sergeants stepped up as well as my Readiness NCO and we got them all completed. I know that is not the way the NCOER system is supposed to be handled so we as Senior NCOs need to enforce the standard and ensure that NCOER's are completed on time and prior to Soldiers transferring to other units for deployment.

The 144<sup>th</sup> Military Police Company submitted over 400 individual awards for Soldiers during the deployment. This accomplishment was headed up by my outstanding Readiness NCO. SFC Kent was unmatched in getting awards together, getting them to me and the Commander for review, and getting them submitted to our Battalion. I can not emphasize enough how important a good Readiness NCO is to a deployed unit. If the current Readiness NCO(s) in your unit struggle with regular M-Day responsibilities, then they will ultimately fail in a combat zone. The administrative workload was extremely heavy for our Company. Our Battalion had more than ten Companies under their control

so you can imagine the workload for their S1 section. As with training a line Soldier in their MOS, we need to expect more of our low density MOS NCOs so they are prepared. To quote a phrase heard many times by my Battalion CSM in country, “the stakes are too high to do on-the-job training in Iraq.”

#### Getting back to the basics

When I had a chance to reflect on the deployment after I returned to Michigan, I wondered if it was a complicated task to get NCOs to perform the way they should and to enforce the standard which is our ultimate goal. I determined it wasn't. I was going through a field desk from the deployment and found an Army Values card. As we all know, the Army Values are the way we should live our lives as well as train and lead Soldiers. Some NCOs have used the Army Values as a punch line in a joke and lead their subordinates in much of the same manner. Having been in combat now and seeing the importance of the Army Values and Warrior Ethos, I hope that many NCOs that deployed with me will reflect on their experience as I have and change their perspective on training and leading Soldiers. It is not about being friends as I have mentioned earlier. We as NCOs enforce the standard. We train and lead Soldiers. No where in those two statements does it say that we can look the other way so our subordinates can do what they want. The stakes are too high for us not to expect more of our NCOs and Soldiers. Work them hard in training and reward them with awards, passes and other recognition. Having the experience of dealing with the above stated issues, I now take more time to sit with subordinate NCOs and offer mentorship and guidance. We as senior leaders must not under estimate the power of or positions. Take time and mentor those NCOs. I feel

that many of them have been failed in the past and still many others are uncomfortable to come to us and ask for guidance.

### Conclusion

The reason why Soldiers fail to enforce the standard is because we as their superiors have failed them at some point. We either failed to guide them or failed to hold them properly accountable. I have made mentorship my mission for the rest of my career to ensure that future deploying First Sergeants and senior NCOs expect the unexpected and plan for some of the above listed issues. I myself was unprepared for senior NCOs to be unable to enforce the standard. I was unprepared for alcohol to be such a serious issue for Soldiers that must be ready at all times and I was unprepared for NCOs not being able to perform the basic job description that is required of their respective grade. That will never happen again with regard to Soldiers under my charge.

ATSS-MH (870)

MEMORANDUM FOR Commandant, United States Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas 79918-8002

SUBJECT: Access Agreement for Personal Experience Papers

1. I, SGM TERRY D. BERDAN, have submitted a Personal Experience Paper to the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy archives regarding events and experiences from my participation in OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM that may be of historical significance to the United States Army and the Noncommissioned Officer Corps.

2. I understand the manuscript and attached documents will be accessioned into the historical holdings of the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy archives and will belong to the United States Government to be used in any manner deemed in the best interests of the United States Army as determined by the Chief of Military History or his representative. I also understand that I may retain a copy for my own use subject to classification restrictions.

3. I hereby expressly and voluntarily relinquish all rights and interest in the paper to the United States Army with the following caveat/exception:

- (  ) None
- (  ) Other:

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I understand that the information in this paper may be subject to the Freedom of Information Act, and therefore, may be releasable to the public contrary to my wishes. I further understand that, within the limits of the law, the United States Army will attempt to honor the restrictions I have requested to be placed on this material.

Date: 8-26-08

Printed Name: SGT TERRY D. BERDAN

Signature: 

Accepted on behalf of the United States Army by:

Printed Name/Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

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