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Deployment of the Only Active Duty Quartermaster Mortuary Affairs Company in the Army

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Deployment in Support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom

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Abstract

The only active duty Quartermaster (QM) Mortuary Affairs (MA) Company in the Army deploys to Kuwait in support of OIF and OEF. Based out of Fort Lee, Virginia, the company supported every major and minor conflict when called upon. The company supported each conflict using platoons/teams concept. For the first time in the history of the unit, the company deployed as an entire company. In March 2003, the entire company, augmented with 14 MA Soldiers from Puerto Rico, deployed and performed their duties with honor, reverence and respect.

Personal Experience Paper

Deployment of the Only Active Duty Quartermaster (QM) Mortuary Affairs (MA) Company in the Army

I first came to the 54th QM CO in the summer of August 2002. My job as the first sergeant for this unit was to serve as the senior enlisted for the only rapid-deployment active duty QM MA CO in the Army. I was responsible for the health and welfare, morale, readiness and training of 240 Soldiers. Our mission included providing tailored mortuary affairs support to brigade, squadron, division, and corps-sized forces capable of executing the Department of Defense Joint Mortuary Affairs Program during war, stability and support operations. We maintained a line of 159 pieces of equipment.

Prior to official notification for deployment to Kuwait, the unit provided humanitarian relief, and operations other than war (OOTW) missions' support when called upon. The unit participated in all major conflicts from the unit's existence. When President George Bush announced to the world the increased pressure on Saddam Hussein to comply with United Nations weapons of mass destruction inspection, and the rebellion of Saddam Hussein to conform, we all knew it would just be a matter of time before U.S. forces would respond.

We trained constantly preparing ourselves for the possibility of deployment. Every aspect of our war time mission became relevant. With the threat of nuclear, biological and chemical warfare, we realized not having decontamination equipment to train our Soldiers created a problem that we could not ignore. Working together with the Quartermaster Center and School (QMC&S), we immediately began identifying the requirements for operating a mortuary decontamination collection point (MADCP). Through our initiative, we realized in order to perform this mission; we needed specialized equipment. Eventually the QMC&S, with the assistance of the Army's G4, created and emergency request for the purchase of this specialized equipment. The Army's

acquisition phase of obtaining new equipment would take months. Since our civilian counterparts had the equipment, with the assistance of the QMC&S, we coordinated training of this new equipment. The civilians provided us the training we desperately needed. We participated in exercises with these trained civilians on numerous occasions. We focused our MADCP training on two platoons. The platoons trained and eventually became confident with the new equipment. Even though the training was a success, we continued to have concerns about the allocation of the equipment. We also feared the possible deployment of the two platoons. The number of Soldiers required to perform this MADCP operation minimized our ability to perform other missions.

According to FM 10-64, Mortuary Affairs Operations, The QM CO (MA) at full strength can set up approximately 20 mortuary affairs collection points (MACPs), capable of receiving, inventory, and coordinating evacuation of about 400 remains per day with accompanying personal effects (PE). The QM CO (MA) is comprised of six platoons (five forward collection platoons, a main collection platoon) and a headquarters element. The forward collection platoons are comprised of 31 personnel. The five forward collection platoons are organized into four collection sections each, with a total of about seven personnel per section. By doctrine, the five forward collection platoons provide direct support to forward units on the battlefield. The doctrinal basis of allocation is one forward collection platoon per division. They are assigned to the DISCOM. According to doctrine, this gives the division commanders the flexibility to employ the collection sections as the mission dictates, consolidating or shifting assets as needed. One forward collection section is doctrinally attached to the main support battalion and one section to each of the three brigades, or separate combat brigade. The fifth forward collection platoon would divide among four Combat Support Battalions (forward). The fifth forward collection platoon will provide direct support to Corps level units and backup support to their supported units. The main collection platoon will provide direct support to the corps. The main collection platoon is attached to the

Command Support Group (CSG). The main collection platoon sets up a corps main collection which receives remains and PE from the forward MACPs. The main collection platoon coordinates for evacuations of remains and PE to the Theater Mortuary Evacuation Point (TMEP). The main collection platoon may operate a TMEP until the Echelon above Corps (EAC) QM MA Company is deployed into the theater. If required by tactical situation, the Collection Company may have the responsibility to inter/disinter remains until the arrival of the QM MA Company (EAC) into theater. (Headquarters, 1999, pp. 2-2, 2-3)

In February 2003, we received notification to prepare two platoons for deployment. The platoons' mission: tentatively identify, recover and evacuate the remains of all United States and Coalition service members in support of the Global War on Terrorism. The platoons' deployment orders also indicated the operation of a MADCP. The two platoons consisted of 38 personnel each. Each platoon consisted of a Platoon Leader (First Lieutenant), a Platoon Sergeant (Sergeant First Class), 35 MA specialists and one light wheeled vehicle mechanic. The two platoons consisted of four teams each led by Staff Sergeants. Because the deployment orders called for MADCP operations, the Joint Mortuary Affairs Office (JMAO), now established in theater, requested the immediate delivery of the requisitioned MADCP equipment. Because of the urgent need, the MADCP equipment made its way to the theater.

The two platoons deployed the first week of March 2003 to Kuwait. The platoons loaded an aircraft and flew to Kuwait International Airport. The platoons arrived in Kuwait and met up with a Colonel assigned to the 377th Theater Support Command (TSC). The Colonel served as a field service officer and as the executive agent for mortuary affairs throughout theater. The 377th TSC deployed in the beginning phase of this operation and established a JMAO. The Colonel was in charge of this office. This JMAO provided oversight of MA support and operational guidance throughout the Theater. With the assistance of the Colonel, the platoons settled into Camp WOLF.

While the platoon's equipment was aboard a ship enroute to Kuwait, the platoons assisted the CP located in Camp Doha. Even though a team was already there supporting units from Afghanistan, the platoons assisted the CP personnel with the tentative identification and evacuation of remains and personal effects to Landstuhl Germany for final processing. At this time during the operation, the CP evacuated all remains to Landstuhl, Germany.

Within weeks of the platoon's arrival, the unit received notification to deploy the remaining company with the exception of one platoon. Because of the threat in North Korea, a platoon had to stay back in support of this contingency operation. Immediately we began to prepare the remaining unit and equipment for deployment. Within days of notification, the Army deployed a 14 member MA team from Puerto Rico to join us for deployment. We prepared all assigned equipment for the remaining unit for deployment. We deployed the equipment by trucks to the port in North Folk, VA. The equipment boarded a ship accompanied by two Soldiers to Kuwait.

On 23 March 2003, the entire company (175 personnel and the 14 MA Soldiers) deployed to Kuwait. We arrived in Kuwait International Airport and linked up with the two platoons. We began to gather our personal gear when an alarm began to sound. We quickly donned our masks and took cover in shelters nearby. The alarm continued for approximately ten minutes. Once the alarm subsided, we continued gathering our personal bags. The alarm became an everyday occurrence. For the first night, the alarm sounded on and off for the entire night. We probably received a total of two hours of sleep. The next day, the commander and I made contact with the leaders of Camp WOLF. We quickly incorporated our unit into their defense plan. We performed security within the compound while the 82nd Airborne Division provided security for the perimeter. While establishing security, the commander and I took immediate control of all assigned personnel. This included the two platoons deployed earlier. Once we got control of all assigned personnel, we met with the Colonel responsible for all mortuary operations throughout the theater.

The Colonel briefed us on our mission. The mission called for deployment of the two platoons and sliced teams forward into Iraq. Unfortunately the deployment would come before the unit's equipment arrived. The commander and I quickly coordinated with the JMAO to have excess pre-positioned and commercial equipment issued to nine forward MACP. This included the pre-positioned MADCP equipment and the contracting of civilian trucks. Even though we acquired the MADCP equipment, we still needed training on this equipment. With the assistance of the JMAO, subject matter expert civilians deployed into theater and trained our personnel on MADCP procedures using the newly acquired MADCP equipment.

On 12 April 2003, the two forward platoons received notification to deploy into Iraq. The two platoons deployed into Iraq supporting combat units heading north toward Baghdad. One of the platoons branched off and established a MACP near Tillil, Iraq. This platoon successfully processed and evacuated all remains during the initial onset of hostilities.

This platoon set up and established temporary interment cemeteries for deceased Iraqis. This was the staging point for mortuary affairs throughout Iraq. The other platoon continued north toward Baghdad. About 45 miles south of Baghdad (Forward Logistic Base Elm), this platoon established a MACP. The platoon immediately began their mission by conducting a search and recovery mission of an F-15E aircraft crash site in the vicinity of Tikrit, Iraq. The platoon performed the search and recovery mission recovering over 100 portions of human remains and personal effects. The platoon's recovery led to recovery and later identification of the co-pilot. The platoon processed two sets of enemy remains killed when they attacked a Military Police patrol only two miles from the base. The platoon conducted interment operations burying the two Iraqi nationals awaiting notification of the next of kin. When the 101st Airborne Division moved their position to Mosul, Iraq, the platoon moved with them. The platoon continued its mission by providing direct support to the 101st Airborne Division and general support to other units within that AOR.

The two forward platoons performed their missions with honor. With the possibility of increased casualties, the remaining company worked around the clock to establish a TMEP and PE Depot. A platoon of Soldiers, including the 14 MA Soldiers from Puerto Rico, worked with the initial plan created by the JMAO. The plan needed modification due to the growth of Camp WOLF. We worked with the JMAO, civilian contractors, and support from the leadership of Camp WOLF to make these modifications. Within days, the TMEP and PE Depot became operational. The TMEP and the PE Depot operated 24 hours a day and 7 days week. The TMEP and the PE Depot could process 400 remains with accompanying PE a day. The TMEP had enough refrigeration to accommodate the holding of over 400 remains if transportation was not available. With the assistance of the 5th Expeditionary Mobility Squadron, transportation was not an issue. The Soldiers assigned to the TMEP worked around the clock in shifts. They displayed the highest military bearing. They demonstrated exceptional mental and physical toughness, while exposed daily and around the clock of the horrified images and consequences of war. Chaplain assistance became an everyday occurrence at the TMEP. For many Soldiers and NCOs, dealing with death became overwhelming. Even though demands were tough, the Soldiers and NCOs performed their duties with distinction. They processed and evacuated 120 remains and accompanying PE during major combat operations.

When major combat operations concluded, the Kuwait Government requested U.S. support to aid in the search and recovery of remains of Kuwaiti Prisoners of War from the Gulf War. Due to the sensitivity of the mission, the JMAO tasked the commander and me to lead this mission. We lead a specialized team of 15 MA Soldiers to advise and assist the Kuwaiti Task Force in the excavation operations near As Samwah, Iraq. We identified the mass grave resulting in the recovery 65 remains. Our dedicated work resulted in the positive identification of remains, through DNA analysis, before their return to family members in Kuwait. The excavation led to

many more request. We assisted the Iraq foreign affairs ministry in the recovery and disinterment of remains from numerous mass graves located throughout the country.

When the company received notification to redeploy back to CONUS, the JMAO established a plan that would provide MA support throughout the theater. The plan called for operating seven forward MACPs, the TMEP, and the PE Depot. The unit redeployed back to Fort Lee, VA leaving enough personnel for the required missions. The personnel left behind performed their mission with dignity, reverence and respect. Cumulatively, the remaining personnel received, processed, and evacuated over 180 sets of U.S., Coalition, and third country national remains. The forward teams forward continued assisting the Iraqi government and the Red Cross with the processing, recovery and tentative identification of Iraqi fatalities. One team conducted a search and recovery mission recovering 15 U.S. remains from a downed CH-47 aircraft. The 54th QM CO is still present in Iraq and Afghanistan today. Families of Soldiers killed on the battlefield look to the 54th QM CO to return their loved ones home with dignity, reverence and respect.

LESSONED LEARNED

Even though the company performed their mission well, we all learned something during this deployment. We learned that your organic equipment may not arrive in theater prior to your deployment. We learned that our Soldiers had many difficulties dealing with remains. Chaplain support is mandatory for any mortuary deployment. MADCP training with required equipment is

important to maintain sustainment training. Pre-positioned equipment is important to the success of a major mortuary mission. MA training at peace time needs more hands on training.

In summary, the 54TH QM CO deployed in support of OIF and OEF. Throughout the history of the unit, the unit had never deployed as a whole. We deployed and performed our war time mission with distinction. We operated a TMEP and PE Depot around the clock. Our forward teams performed search and recovery missions. They left no one behind. They supported American and Coalition forces with direct and general MA support. Even though our equipment did not arrive prior to the forward teams' deployment, we drew from pre-positioned equipment and performed our missions. Every Soldier and leader that deployed in support of OIF and OEF performed their duties with honor, reverence and respect displayed to each and every remains. They displayed respect regardless if the remains were enemy, coalition, civilian or American.

References

Headquarters, Department of the Army (1999) Overview of Mortuary Affairs in a Theater of Operations. In *FM 10-64 MORTUARY AFFAIRS OPERATIONS* (pp. 2-2, 2-3). Washington, District of Columbia.