

Personal Experienced Paper

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Abstract

My Personal Experience Paper contains descriptive memories from Operation Enduring Freedom, Afghanistan, SEP 03 – JUN 04. I discuss circumstances ranging from; pre-deployment, training at the MOB station, boots in country, gratification and rewards, and NCO Corp needs. Please note I respectfully express my opinion within this document and my opinion only. During my deployment I experienced a wide range of situations from gratification to frustration. I experienced the dark side from my closest battle-buddies. Thank goodness for our internal core of quality Soldiers, without them the deployment would have been all frustration and no gratification.

I recall drill weekend, AUG 03, our Unit's Family Support Group picnic party at Maumee Bay State Park. Minding my own business enjoying a cold beer on a hot day, our Motor Pool Sergeant asked, hey Huffman (no mention of my MSG rank) when are you relocating those crates of equipment from my garage bay? I replied, what are you talking about? Well...it appeared as if we finally received all of our surveying equipment. In fact, a full complement of our section's MTOE had arrived. Then, four days later we were advised of our mobilization. I thought to myself, now I understand the recent shipment of equipment. As you can imagine the rumor factory swung into full gear. When do we deploy, where do we deploy to, should I pack my swim suit? 30 days later, after hundreds of phone calls and several soldiers ranging from E-3 to O-4 manufacturing excuses as to why they were un-deployable, our unit of 66 Soldiers deployed to our mobilization site (MOB) Ft. Dix.

Answering the call to duty is the result of many critical years of training. It provides opportunities to translate knowledge into experience. Years of preparation and dedication suddenly provide a platform to accomplish something of real value for yourself and your country. The call to duty gives us the setting to demonstrate our professional capabilities to ourselves, our superiors and subordinates. I believe it's similar to the excitement of a well trained athlete who, entering the game and eager to prove his skills to coaches, teammates, family, friends and, of course – to the competition. However, duty requires an extra commitment. It requires the sense of loyalty to one's country. It involves great sacrifices in personal energy, time, health, comfort, separation from friends and family, high risk of potential injury, and even loss of life. Our earliest forefathers and patriots answered their country's call to arms in the Revolutionary War. They endured years of deprivation, suffering, shortages of weapons, materials, and other support services. There were even instances of incompetence and

misfortune caused by inexperienced or unsuitable leaders. Regardless they managed to prevail and offer us our heritage of freedom. Their response to the call offered them a sense of pride and satisfaction for serving their country that remained with them for their lifetimes. As a child I still recall and recite my Aunt's narratives of our Family's rich military heritage and history contributions dating back to 15 December 1862, the battle of Fredericksburg, VA.

Our MOB station offered mostly useless training. In fact, our O-6 requested more meaningful training to the MOB Office. We are a HHC Engineering Group (command element). Our MOB station and previous training schedules lacked critical MOS training. The State Command filled (back slotted) our Design Management Section (DMS) 21Tango (21T) vacancies with other soldiers who either volunteered or were drawn from other units. 21T poses a unique and critical role in DMS. Their Advance Individual Training is 6 months long and comprises of surveying, drafting, and soil analysis. The DMS is a critical section within the Engineer Group (EN), and 21T are the foundation for DMS. I reiterate the critical role within the section is MOS 21T, and the critical role within the EN is DMS. The void of 21T training haunted our deployment.

Our deployment of combat troops to Afghanistan is a strong and appropriate response to the 9/11 attacks on our country. Aggressive military action by the US and coalition combat units are warranted to engage areas where significant components of the enemy are located. This demonstrates the strength and political determination of our government and our democratic allies to counter terrorist. The US military should continue to deploy and fully support tactical units to seek out and strike terrorist concentration and infrastructure where ever they are positioned. Additionally, our political operatives should continue their efforts to enlist multinational, global, and regional support to increase and improve all types of military pressures

with weaponry and technology. The Islamic-terrorist must get the message that their violent strategies are extremely costly in human and political terms, we must destroy these adversaries.

We arrived in the afternoon and the temperature was blistering hot. I still recall arriving on a C-130, the visual blurriness of the heat radiating from the tarmac and stench of what I describe as a sanitary treatment plant and the eye burning effects of burnt jet fuel that saturated the atmosphere. Upon arrival our organization assumed command of all engineering efforts on Bagram Airbase and the Provisional Reconstruction Teams (PRT) at the FOB's throughout Afghanistan. Additional responsibilities included monitoring the civilian contractors that manned the asphalt and concrete plants and supplied these commodities to the constructing units. A few of the civilian contractors employed children as young as 14 years old. Many were barefooted and exposed to the dangerous of concrete poisoning and extreme heat from the hot asphalt mix from the plant. I performed the role of 21H (Construction Inspector) with the DMS. Detailed duties consisted of ensuring quality assurance and control matters during the construction projects. After duty hours, I attended aerobic classes three times a week, which enhanced my health condition holding steady at 158 pounds. Also, I worked out at the gym at least once or twice a week.

Our subordinate units were the 205th Heavy Engineer Battalion Louisiana National Guard, the 100th Engineer Company Japanese, and an Engineer Detachment from Poland. Clearly, the Japanese Engineers were the most efficient and obedient. Their cohesive actions were orchestrated with great details of movement. Collectively, they constantly displayed a role model Engineer-Soldier.

Detailed projects consisted of airfield runway expansion, B/C-hut assembly, drainage and roadway projects, force protection, and general public works / base camp improvements. Many of our missions required a “priority” review to ensure that our limited commodities were consumed with realistic and rational expense. Also, we executed camp improvements to FOBs as directed. One in particular is FOB Salerno; we performed a topographical (topo) survey of the entire base camp, which expanded daily. The Kellogg Brown and Root (KBR) folks played a huge role in the base expansion and assumed command of the new DFAC and showers/latrines. Our Italian allies built the initial phase in 2002. FOB Salerno also featured a small gravel runway suitable for C-130 aircraft only. After our topo efforts, we download the data to our computer aided drafting and design (CADD) laptops and surprisingly revealed the runway’s elevation difference of 15 feet. Thus, explaining the flooding of certain areas of the FOB. We briefed the FOB commanders with the new data and topo map and all agreed to relocate certain items and operations to higher ground.

The majority of the time our unit performed by the seat of their pants. It seemed that we were always playing catch-up. Unfortunately, back-filling vacant slots with less than qualified soldiers and neglecting MOS training at the MOB site barely provided a cohesive and marginally deployable unit. I believe critical shortfalls were in the Lieutenant, Captain, and SPC ranks. Certainly the junior officers were not technically competent, and demonstrated no interest in creating a team building effort with their senior enlisted. The junior enlisted were over worked and underappreciated. Quite often, senior enlisted self assessments recognized the need for morale improvements for the junior enlisted. This environment created further division between our unit. Often times, junior enlisted would travel alternate paths to avoid contact with their

officers. Maturity was an issue. Although our DMS had a Sergeants Major, his character attributes portrayed a very passive and isolated Soldier, we considered him “retired on duty”.

Some of the biggest successes were the base camp improvements. Clearly, the construction battalions were productive and enhanced the lives and welfare of many soldiers during the deployment. Airfield runway expansions resulted in more efficient air traffic delivery of supplies, equipment and safety. B-hut assembly offered better living conditions with the comforts of air conditioning. Drainage and roadway improvements produced easier travel and less flooding conditions after rain storms. The Marines appreciated our base camp perimeter force protection improvements such as elevated guard towers with friendlier stairways. Lastly, I found much gratification and reward to witness several subordinate Soldiers mature and become confident in performing their role. During the deployment I constantly reiterated military and civilian education to the junior enlisted. As a Soldier serving the Ohio Army National Guard, I believe my duty includes enhancing my subordinate’s military and civilian careers respectively. I insisted that my subordinate soldiers remain attentive to their college education and civilian goals, and I reiterated that I was here to assist! Perhaps the biggest gratitude was networking with the multi-national engineer forces. Both Japanese and Polish forces conducted cultural exchanges with food and beverages. The Japanese featured several fine Asian cuisines from bland to inferno tastes. The Polish, their kielbasa, chili, and cabbage reminded me of a home town ethnic festival. Both cultural exchanges were very much appreciated and provided a change from the KBR / DFAC routine. These exchanges produced more than communication, it created bonding between two Soldiers from different countries engaging in the same war and fighting the same enemy. We, Ohio Guard Soldiers, considered these exchanges as one of the most rewarding aspects of the deployment. The Japanese were the ping pong champs, and the

Polish were die-hard horseshoe and volleyball players. I found much humor in the Polish troops during their MWR activities. With their cut off short pants and sleeveless shirts, proudly smoking and joking, and consuming their beer...it reminded me of the Kelly's Heroes movie.

No doubt, our NCOs performed the role of the backbone of our unit. We supported our superiors with decades of technical proficiencies; our senior NCOs each possessed over 20 years of longevity. Also, we provided guidance and moral enhancement to our junior enlisted. Clearly our junior enlisted were the "Doers" of our unit. Our junior enlisted possessed extreme knowledge of computer repair and assistance. Our DMS section assembled our own wireless router and server network system. This allowed several 21T to perform their CADD work simultaneously on the same project rather than independently. 21T tasks such as cross-sections, plan-profile, bill of material, and construction directives were completed collectively similar to a small but dynamic civilian engineering business. Our 21T greatest strength was the ability to function autonomously. Their independent and self leading character created a priceless asset to complete our missions.

Many times I experienced the lack of leadership in our unit, specifically from the junior Officers. I firmly believe that leadership provides the focus of all Soldiers and material resources of an organization to accomplish a mission. The breakdown of the leadership process results in loss of unit morale, decline of coordination and worst of all a collapse in communication. A void of effective leadership significantly weakens unit cohesion allowing misdirection and division of unit's strengths such as esprit de corp, training, performance, and discipline. Often our 0-4 and 0-5's would bypass the 0-2 and 0-3's and communicate directly with our senior enlisted. This "bypass" became habit forming, soon the junior Officers found themselves ineffective, and most joked about their new insignificance. By the end of our

deployment, the junior officers were performing simple and irrelevant tasks merely keeping them occupied.

Overall, we experienced very little problems in our battle hand off scenario. During the last four months of our deployment, we ensured quality communication to our replacement unit, the 209th Engineer Group, South Dakota National Guard while they were at their MOB station, Ft. Carson, CO. Hand off problems were merely implied tasks or simple issues such as graphic overlays, construction project folders, and project maps that identifies completed, current, and proposed projects. We overcame these issues by properly matching Soldiers skill parameters with the engineering task. The 209th were disciplined and eager Soldiers that expressed much enthusiasm to start their missions.

I believe our NCO Corps lacks quality training in Army writing style, MOS, and stress management. Surprisingly, NCOs clearly lack proper writing skills to effectively communicate their thoughts, or more importantly, mission directives and their commander's intent through memorandums. MOS training is critical; we must enforce standards allowing our Soldiers to gain technical proficiencies that commanders will expect on the battlefield. Stress management is the end product of our historic deployments. The liberation and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan have created physiological issues sustaining an everlasting effect. Our Soldiers and their families will suffer enduring periods of discomfort all in the name of answering the call to duty. I ask... how many marital divorces are you aware of due to a military deployment?

God bless our Soldiers and families.