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15th FSB, Task Force Baghdad

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Abstract

While assigned to the 15th Forward Support Battalion, 2nd Armored Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, our mission, was to sustain the 2BCT twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The unit alone would perform over one-hundred sixty wheeled re-supply convoy operations throughout Baghdad. The Supply Support Activity would provide all classes of supply to supported units at a rapid pace. Force protection at Camp Black Jack was a priority and 15th FSB assumed responsibility for this mission as well. This gave maneuver commanders the ability to focus on operations outside the wire.

15th FSB, Task Force Baghdad

The training of Soldiers was my top priority, as the First Sergeant for Headquarters and Distribution Company. I was responsible for ensuring the unit could execute all assigned tasks, as the Battalion relied on Headquarters Company to spearhead all requirements. As the unit First Sergeant, I felt as if I was the right noncommissioned officer (NCO) for the job. I believed that I brought a lot to the table and could see the confidence in me from my Soldiers and NCOs.

My unit consisted of fuel handlers, cooks, water treatment personnel, communication specialists, administration clerks, truck drivers and numerous other specialties. After seventeen years of service in the military, I was confident in my abilities to lead my unit. My assignments included tours with Infantry Battalions and Signal Brigades, an Airborne Pathfinder Company at the Aviation Center in Fort Rucker, Al., 3/325th Airborne Combat Team in Italy and five years with the 5th Special Forces. My Soldiers would receive my best and deserved nothing less.

The 1st Cavalry Division, received orders to deploy to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom in the fall of 2003. The 2nd Brigade Combat Team (2BCT) would spearhead the deployment. The 15th Forward Battalion supported the 2BCT and was critical in the deployment phase. The unit train up process took about six months conducting several Field Training Exercises (FTXs) and one NTC rotation. The most beneficial training we received occurred during SGTs Time Training. The unit would go to training areas and continuously drill on convoy operations. The training included react to direct and indirect fire, actions from the halt, react to an improvised explosive device while at the halt and several other tasks. The training occurred in three phases, crawl, walk and run, which was extremely beneficial as Soldiers became comfortable and confident in the training, themselves and each other. We qualified all Soldiers several times in weapon marksmanship with individual and crew served weapons.

I felt confident the unit was trained and prepared to deploy, and immediately following the New Years Holiday of 2004, we started the initial deployment on 8 Jan 04, with the last Soldier arriving into Kuwait on 22 Jan 04. Additional training in Kuwait occurred and after completion of that training, orders to go forward followed, with my unit to wheel convoying into Iraq.

The convoy in which I traveled consisted of approximately thirty vehicles of which none had the standard up armor available today. The only modification made to the vehicles were to sand bag the floors, not exceeding the vehicle capability and mount crew serve weapons, if modifications could be made to accommodate that particular vehicle. After seventeen years of service, I had entered a combat zone facing an able and willing enemy, who was lurking and waiting for a chance to take my life and any of the one-hundred forty-seven Soldiers in my company.

Trained for the mission, both anxious and nervous, we traveled over six-hundred miles without incident. Our arrival into our Forward Operating Base took approximately thirty-six hours by wheel convoy, resting overnight twice in route to the city of Baghdad. We met the advance party, which departed thirty-six hours ahead of us, but forty-eight hours behind the pre-advanced party. Their mission was to receive and integrate the main body. I could feel the tension and nervousness in the air as we traveled along the highway. Soldiers did not know what to expect, and for the first time, many had a basic load of ammunition in their possession, and a round chambered in their weapon. Soldiers had permission, in accordance with the rules of engagement, to defend themselves, their friend and Army property by the use of deadly force, if needed.

The unit's mission and tasks was clear; provide all the logistical and life sustainment for the 2BCT. Our Brigade was the lead element for the 1st Calvary Division, and we would secure and

establish an operational Forward Operating Base (FOB) prepared to receive three additional Brigades with attachments and detachments.

My company, HDC, 15th FSB, would be operational and prepared to receive and distribute Class I-IX, in forty-eight hours. The unit we replaced was a support company assigned to the 1st Armored Division out of Germany. This unit had very little to offer us. Their supplies were depleted and their equipment was not to standard, however my right seat ride with the unit First Sergeant was en lightning and informative. Through the First Sergeant, I gained some insight to the unit mission, the challenges they faced, and issues they dealt with.

Soldiers discussed death, wondering if they would see their loved ones again. What was our true purpose for being in country? Exactly who was the enemy? Were the local nationals on the FOB creditable or did they have an agenda that was not in our best interest? Could I really trust my buddy, with my life? There seemed to be more questions than answers.

The 15th Forward Support Battalion would provide all the force protection for the site, which was approximately a four-mile perimeter. To set-up a defensive perimeter would not be as difficult as you would imagine, we were inside of one of Saddam Hussein's private hunting grounds fully equipped with thirty-eight guard towers. The towers surrounded the FOB, making it ideal for the task.

The Coalition Provisional Authorities (CPA) were in place as the former regime was in hiding, captured or on the run, to include Sadam Hussein. A primary mission for the Task Force was to set the conditions for national elections that would lay the groundwork for a functional government. Sectarian violence was on the rise given the number of roadside bombings, suicide car bombings, assassinations, and kidnappings. The violence was an intimidation tactic used to discourage any support for the CPA, Coalition Forces or anyone who supported our cause.

Training was the key to our success, nothing we encountered was a total surprise. We anticipated 99 percent of the missions conducted. Uncertainty was something that existed in us all. HDC, 15th FSB primary mission was logistical support to include wheeled vehicle convoy re-supply. The Battalion Commanders guidance was that convoy commanders and assistant Convoy Commanders would be NCOs; this was the confidence that the commander had in the NCO Corps. The Officer corps in the unit at the time was young to the military, which may have explained his rationale.

Convoy re-supply operations were our focus, with each convoy consisting of an average of ten wheeled vehicles and the appropriate gun trucks. The unit would conduct re-supply missions almost nightly, using all Soldiers at one point or another. Operations would start with a warning order from the Battalion Headquarters, identifying the cargo, location and time of execution.

All convoy operation would take place after midnight as intelligence provided to us showed a startling trend. Statistics showed that only about five percent of the roadside bombings occurred between the hours of 2400 and 0400, and because of this information all convoys conducted in the Battalion would occur within this window, unless totally unavoidable. This thought process and the undisputed facts reassured the Soldiers. The staff had definitely done their homework, giving the leadership the tools and information to prepare for the mission. In my opinion, intelligence played a key role in the 100 percent success of convoy operations in my unit

The first step was to assign a senior NCOs as Convoy Commander and as Assistant Convoy Commander. Each unit in the Battalion provided logistical support. A Co. Forward Support Company's provided the 5 K Tankers, HDC contributed lowboys loaded with class IX supplies, EFSSMC provided medic support, B Forward Support Company provided the material handling

equipment, and D Company provided the gun trucks. This consolidated effort was successful, and allowed for the rotation of personal. The process also gave the command the flexibility to conduct simultaneous missions, ensuring all supported units could maintain their combat readiness posture and allowed the Battalion to conduct other required tasking without interruption.

Pre combat (PCCs) checks prior to mission execution consumed the leadership. Convoy Commanders had approximately thirty hours of notification prior to mission execution; this was standard operating procedures and provided the maximum preparation time. Unit convoy operation were in a matrix type format and as far out as possible. We had some predictability based on the consumption of supplies and equipment, and scheduled missions accordingly. The best NCOs available performed duties as Convoy Commanders; there was simply no room for error on this type of operation; Our Soldiers deserved the best. PCCs started with mission notification, and then every vehicle went through a preventive maintenance checks and services conducted by the maintenance company. Each vehicle would receive a “go” or “no go” in accordance with the appropriate technical manual.

The process would normally take anywhere from eight to ten hours. The Convoy Commander would give his official Operations Order briefing, with all participants present, including the chain of command. With the Operations Order briefing complete, the equipment staged and ready, a sleep plan would go into effect. Two hours prior to departure pre combat inspections would occur again. Every First Sergeant in the battalion was required to be present, for last minute inspection of vehicle loads, and personnel.

First Sergeants conducted personal inspections of Soldiers, checking for the proper uniform and wear, a full basic load of ammunition, medic bag if applicable, knowledge of situation, based on the intelligence briefing, and the Soldiers state of mind.

Convoys departed only after the Senior NCO leadership, including the Battalion Command Sergeant were satisfied that Soldiers and equipment were ready to go. You might think that this would be micro managing or undermining a Convoy Commanders authority, but to the contrary, I believed it just reassured the Soldiers of the importance of the mission and concern of the leadership for their welfare.

The Supply Support Activity (SSA) performed superbly, the demand for Class IV, VII and IX was great. This SSA would receive and process on an average of 1500 military request orders (MROs) a day, in contrast to ninety a day, given normal operations. Soldiers in the SSA would work around the clock to keep up with supply and demand. I had the SSA Platoon Sergeant devise a work schedule that allowed for only five hours of sleep for each SSA Soldiers and with all meals provided at the work site. This scheduled allowed minimal work disruption. Soldiers also performed tower and gate guard contributing to the FOB force protection requirement, which was a tremendous display of physical and mental stamina for the Soldiers and NCOs. The Assistant Division Commander (Supply) would publicly recognize the SSA platoon for a superb performance on many occasions throughout the deployment.

The unit would not be without some social and personal issues. Considering that the Battalion had its mix of male and female Soldiers, both NCOs and Officers. Fornication and adultery became a major issue that affected combat readiness. The command evacuated several pregnant Soldiers. Sexual relations, both heterosexual and homosexual was evident, adultery was rampant, although easily prosecuted once identified. Mutual sex amongst Soldiers occurred

although highly discouraged due to the possibility of unplanned pregnancy and the extreme environmental conditions. Environmental conditions were conducive to sexual transmitted diseases and all Soldiers were educated on this subject by medical personnel.

After fourteen months in theater, the unit returned OCONUS, but only after the re-deployment operation would take place. The unit did a right seat ride with the 256th Support Battalion, the incoming unit, identified and laterally transferred millions of dollars of supplies and equipment. My unit left over 70 percent of its rolling stock in Iraq, to include up armored vehicles. No item acquired in country could return stateside, it became property of the incoming unit.

After completion of this phase of redeployment, the 2BCT relocated to a holding area for outbound units. The command produced exhaustive and constantly changing manifests for both wheeled convoy, and airlift operations to Kuwait. The process ensured that the 2BCT re-deployment would synchronize and be conducive to the incoming unit. With all re-deployment requirements met, my unit began re-deployment in the middle of Feb 05 with the last Soldier returning in Mar 05.

Fortunately, I can say that my unit did not lose a single Soldier, not to the enemy or by accident, which so many did. I fully understand that other units, having different missions, and conducting them under different circumstances, casualties probably were unavoidable. I believe that much of our success was a result of good leadership, and the difficult and realistic training that took place prior to and during our deployment. My opinion is that leadership at all levels performed superbly. We all realized that nothing could take the place of our greatest asset, the American Soldier. My hats off to the Officers and NCOs that made it happen.