

Preparing for the Storm

Enlisted Leadership in Action

Story by
SSG William H. McMichael

The platoon's dusty M-60A3 tanks had clanked into position in the middle of the night. Shutting down, they stood side by side, the silence of the desert broken only by the sound of the wind. Out on the deck of the hulls, the desert-weary crew tried to rest as only tankers can. As the sun's first muted rays lit the horizon, SFC Herbert McGhee's men awoke to face their 41st day in Saudi Arabia.

The day would be a busy one — yet at the same time, a welcome change. After spending more than a month as one of the American units closest to the borders of Kuwait and Iraq, the 2nd Squadron, 4th Cavalry had been relieved by the newly-arrived 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment. Along with the rest of the squadron, Troop D, McGhee's unit, was going to take a break.

Prior to the onset of Operation Desert Storm Army NCOs tackled what was possibly the most difficult continuous training challenge in history. Certainly, American soldiers have faced arduous training in the past. One example would be the cold, wet months of repetitious amphibious training in the British Isles preparing for the World War II invasion of Normandy. And in terms of simple endurance, the Army's long winter at Valley Forge probably has no equal.

No one starved to death in Saudi Arabia, as they did at Valley Forge. But Operation Desert Shield presented its own difficulties. For one, the sense of purpose may have been less focused. Operation Desert Storm's onset, of course, has sharpened that sense. But back in August, "Liberate Kuwait," or "Stop Saddam Hussein," may have seemed rather abstract to the troops.

In addition, leaders had to cope with

the intense environment and its effect on soldiers, tactics and equipment; the near-total isolation; and the sense, after the initial rush of adrenaline, that there was no end in sight.

"We all thought we were going to get off the plane and go straight into battle," said SFC Roberto Soto, Troop A's 1st Platoon Sergeant, interviewed in October. Obviously, that didn't happen. "One thing we're having to go through right now is boredom," he said.

Any long deployment requires a lot of day-to-day contact with the troops. But the absolute physical and cultural isolation of the Saudi Arabian desert made Desert Shield all the tougher.

"In the States, we come in to work, we do our job, and we go home to our families or to whatever we do," said SSG Ben Johnson, a Bradley master gunner with Troop A. "Here, we're together 24 hours a day, for however many days we've been here."

"Being with these guys so long . . . that's where our leadership is put to the

test," said SFC Walter Bell, Troop A's 3rd Platoon Sergeant. "Compared with being back in the States, it's a totally different thing."

Baron von Steuben's Revolutionary War NCOs, while well-drilled, were a far cry from sergeants like Johnson, Bell and McGhee. Today's sergeant is a new breed — a post-Vietnam, volunteer product of the Army's Noncommissioned Officer Education System. With 15 years in service, McGhee's climbed the ladder from PLDC, the Primary Leadership Development Course, through BNCOC, the Basic Noncommissioned Officers Course, to ANCOC, the advanced course.

NCOES courses, he said, made his job in the desert easier in a couple of ways. "They give you specific input, and teach you the way you should 'train up' your subordinates," he said. And which way is that? "You should train them the way they're going to fight," he said. He credited ANCOC with helping him the most with the specifics.



A noncommissioned officer instructs a team member in mine emplacement. Leaders overcame the monotony of waiting by adding new elements to training and emphasizing the importance of their mission.

Photo by MSG GI High

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McGhee also places a lot of emphasis on cross-training his men. He voiced a lot of confidence in the ability of his gunner, Sgt Brodwick Moore, to step in and command their tank. Moore, a confident sort, is a PLDC graduate. There's something to be said for being schooled in the same system.

"Leadership goes right down the line," McGhee said. "What we normally do is give the workout to the next junior man, which teaches him leadership. And we've been giving classes on different things we learn in school — tactics, road marches, setting up hasty offenses, different things like that."

The first order of business for McGhee's men, after personal hygiene and the luxury of a hot breakfast, was to set up sand-colored camouflage netting under which the tanks could be parked and serviced. The extremely fine sand of the Saudi Arabian desert filled every nook and cranny on the tank. Track pads needed replacing, air filters had to be cleaned. At the same time, the unit's position demanded a healthy degree of tactical readiness.

The platoon, though, was in good spirits. Taking a break was certainly part of it, but morale seemed to be strong nonetheless. As work progressed, few orders had to be given. Without specifically defining his leadership style, McGhee said the platoon seemed to be reacting to his direction "in a positive manner."

"We work hand-in-hand every day," McGhee said. "You know how it gets out here in the field . . . but we pull it all together."

Desert Shield NCOs pulled it together every day, many for more than five months. Even the best leaders with the most motivated troops ran into difficulties.

"We've been out here for awhile, so everybody gets kind of grouchy," said A Troop's SSG James Blake, a mortar squad leader. "Somebody'll say something, just trying to be funny, and you might go off the handle at them," he said. "And then you have to back up and say, 'Hey, this guy said this to bring himself up, and me, too. And here I just shot him all to pieces.' What the heck am I going to go back there and say to get it straight? That's one of the rough-

est things over here."

He agreed that years ago he probably would have just thought, "the hell with him." But Blake and his fellow NCOs seem to realize that today's soldiers are a smarter group of troops. A soldier with two years of college isn't likely to respond to a constant barrage of authority.

"I think it depends on who I'm dealing with and the situation I'm in. It changes," said Johnson. "I've got a group of guys that I've been with for awhile, and I don't really have to be a hardnose to get done what needs to be done."

Soto is also a believer in flexibility and growth. He says he began his career in the "old Army," but has always used a persuasive, rather than an authoritarian, leadership style.

"You have to improve your leadership, and adjust according to the education of the people you supervise," he said. "But through the education system that we have, you're able to pick up some things, and you can adjust — phasing out the old into the new."

Blake says he fluctuates between authoritarian and democratic leadership styles. "It depends on the situation," he said. "If one of the young kids has an idea that's worth a darn, by all means, I say, 'let's go with it.' Nowadays in the Army, we've got a heck of a lot of smart kids."

There was less emphasis on leadership techniques at PLDC's predecessor, the Primary Noncommissioned Officers Course, or PNCOC. When Blake attended, in 1978, he wasn't impressed.

"At PNCOC, you were kind of treated like a private for about six weeks, no matter what your rank," he recalled. "They more or less taught you what they taught you back in basic training: You will do as you're told, exactly as you're told, and when you're told to do it."

That philosophy began to change in the early '80s. Army recruiting standards stiffened, and the experience of leaders in the field led to more flexibility in the Army's formal leadership training philosophy.

Of course, schooling isn't everything. Individual character and "learning the ropes" probably has more to do with leadership style than any schooling one can take. Most NCOs can point to one or

two prominent role models who have guided and influenced them for a portion of their careers. And the first few weeks in Saudi Arabia provided ample opportunities for learning those ropes.

"I think the first week was about the hardest," said Johnson. "After that, we learned the little tricks of the trade, and were better able to deal with it."

After those first days, he said, it was a matter of "maintaining" in the face of the situation. Squeezing down-time into the daily schedule was important to the soldiers. Writing letters, getting mail from the States, and playing football to break the monotony were some of the daily means of maintaining sanity. But the "open-ended" mission was a killer.

"Probably the hardest thing, leadership-wise, is not having a lot of news or information," said Johnson. "We're waiting for them to do something. It's hard to keep motivated to stand vigilant when the front is basically idle."

Bell said that after nearly two months, the days were starting to run together. "Everybody in the platoon wants to know: 'Sarge, when are we going home?' And the only thing I can tell them is basically what's being told to me: We'll go when our host nation tells us it's time to leave, or when the mission is done."

To deal with such an open-ended deployment, Bell said he spent a lot of one-on-one time with his troops. "I try to keep a type of open relationship with my people," he said. "We sit down and talk. Not only about our mission, but what goes on back home."

"I ask them, 'Are the kids OK? Are you having any financial difficulties or personal problems? If there's something I can do for you, let me know.'" He emphasized, though, that soldiers have to care enough about their problems to speak up. "Just don't sit back and complain and moan like a lot of soldiers do until it's too late, and there's nothing I can do about it."

"That's where our leadership is really tested," he said. "Can we actually sit down and talk to the people? Actually keep the morale up, yet still instill some sort of discipline?"

"We've got a million problem finders," Johnson said. "We need more problem solvers. I think that NCO

schooling helps along those lines. It helps to make you look for the solutions. And I think that applies everywhere."

One time-honored solution for fighting boredom is staying busy. After decades of practicing to fight in "green" environments, units were having to radically re-orient their training in terms of the flat, featureless desert. Creative NCOs like Soto made the most of what they had.

"Let's say we take our people out and move into a defensive position," he said. "You tell them to do a range card, set up the machine guns, dig foxholes, and start people scanning. You've got to add something to that."

What he added was an opposing force, an OPFOR. "I might tell SSG Blake, 'I've got my people over here, and this is what we're going to do. I want you and your men to come in and try to infiltrate our position. I want you to probe, to see if my people are awake. See if my people are doing what they're supposed to be doing.'

"That makes it interesting and challenging," he said. "You have to keep them ready, in case it happens."

Assertive, solution-oriented attitudes were the key to successfully tackling Operation Desert Shield. Over such a length of time, there was no place for a weak leader to hide.

"You need to be on top," said Johnson, "setting the example around the clock." ■

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Patriot's Pride

By SPC Jeanine Dubnicka

The value of Air Defense Artillery became apparent to the world during the first days of Desert Storm, when on Jan. 17, Patriot missiles decisively stopped Iraqi Scud missile attacks. The first Patriot was launched by soldiers of the 2nd Battalion (Patriot), 7th Air Defense Artillery, 11th ADA Brigade of Fort Bliss, Texas. For days after the unit's initial successes, the Patriot system was suddenly at the center of public attention.

But for one senior noncommissioned officer, the success of the Patriot came as no surprise. A 30-year veteran who has been a part of the growth of ADA since the branch was created in 1968, CSM Robert W. Harman heard of the Patriots' performance just days after returning from a visit with ADA soldiers serving in Saudi Arabia.

"Personally I had no fear that the Patriot system would not do what it was designed to do," Harman said. "The majority of Patriot personnel are seasoned veterans who were well trained and ready long before the deployment."

Although saving lives and equipment is the Patriot's primary mission, another more personal one developed after its initial success against the Scud attacks.

"It was a confidence builder for all our troops, because they got to see what the Patriot can do," Harman said. "The Air Force was overjoyed to have our Patriots stationed around their bases because of the Scud threat."

While in Saudi Arabia Harman traveled over 2,200 miles in a period of 10 days, visiting more than 30 units, talking with noncommissioned officers and their troops. In the days before the Jan. 15 deadline, Harman said, NCO leadership was critically important. "Some of the soldiers were stricken with boredom, so NCOs had to overcome that. They did it by looking at safety and living conditions. I guess the whole thing boiled down to the first sergeants and their NCOs going out and scrounging supplies then putting the troops to work improving their own environment." Finding television sets and VCRs may have addressed the immediate need to relieve boredom, but the more imaginative supervisors went beyond that to fashion make-shift weight rooms and organize athletic tournaments and other activities.

But more important was maintaining a fighting edge through training.

"The NCOs were deeply involved with the day-to-day operations of the site — maintaining alertness and discipline, training for all aspects of the threat, and training their junior officers to rely on their NCOs' judgment and abilities."

So as Desert Shield moved into Desert Storm NCO roles were well established.

"NCOs are supposed to train soldiers in day-to-day tasks, and most of these tasks are in preparation to go to war. Whether it be making a range card or just entry control to a unit . . . I don't see the role change from training at all," Harman said.

The key to success, among the Patriot batteries and the other units deployed in Desert Storm, is team building, Harman said. "You can see the young soldiers and NCOs over there are working together hand-in-hand. The smart NCO also knows that the young soldier has to be able to take care of his leaders.

"Teamwork is the name of the game. They have to work together as a team to look after one another. And by doing that, no one gets set up for possible failure."

While Harman characterized the Iraqi army as a determined enemy, he has confidence in all of the units he visited. "If the soldiers continue doing everything day to day by the standards they've been trained to, and if they don't deviate from those standards, things will go well for them," he said. "I'm very proud of the soldiers I visited in Saudi Arabia, and I felt very confident leaving, knowing the soldiers will do well." ■

SPC Jeanine Dubnicka toured the units in Saudi Arabia with CSM Harman.