

Warrior basics defeat 34 AIF

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MNC-I PAO

CAMP VICTORY, Iraq, (March 23, 2005) – Leadership, training and discipline were the backbone of a mid-March firefight victory of 10 U.S. Army Reserve Soldiers over dozens of Anti Iraq Forces.

The Kentucky Army National Guard's nine Military Police and one medic ensured victory before they left the wire of their Baghdad area camp. The 617th Military Police Company squad did not realize that SOPs and training they had firmed up a just a day earlier would be validated in combat as they moved out for a routine mission of shadowing a 26-vehicle convoy early in the morning of March 20.

In a 45-minute firefight to thwart an ambush by 34 Anti Iraq Forces, teamwork, discipline, continuous training, solid small-unit SOPs, Movement to Contact Doctrine, and a dash of improvisation, netted 27 dead, six wounded and one captured Anti-Iraq Forces. No AIF escaped. The squad assigned to Fort Bragg's 503rd MP Bn, 18th MP Bde also brought in 22 AK-47 light machine guns, 13 RPKs, 6 RPGs, 16 RPG rockets, 123 full AK-47 ammunition magazines, 52 empty AK-47 magazines, one full AK-47 (75) round ammunition drum, an estimated 200 loose AK-47 ammunition rounds, 2,500 (7.62mm) belted ammunition rounds, and 40 hand grenades. Three members of the unit were wounded.

"There are four factors that helped win the day for the squad," said Sgt. Maj. Hugh Roberts, former command sergeant major for the 75th Rangers, currently a faculty advisor at the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy. "The factors are Standards/ discipline, training, leadership and luck. You can do everything right and still not be successful. But luck will not help you survive and win if you have not done all the right

things before contact. Discipline/ Standards, for example doesn't start when the bullets start flying. Discipline begins before that unit ever thinks about deploying to a combat zone. Soldiers complain about leaders making corrections about 'small things' like being in the correct uniform. But that builds discipline. The end state is success in battle."

The Richmond, Ky., based 617th sent out its fourth platoon's second squad to shadow a convoy of transportation vehicles along a supply route southeast of Baghdad. The squad's mission: provide support for the vehicles in the event of an attack and, if the need came, engage and destroy the enemy.

Staff Sgt. Timothy F. Nein, second squad leader had engaged AIF in the same area in January and had studied the area so that he knew the terrain as well as the AIF, said Joseph Shelley the Command Sergeant Major of the 18th Military Police Brigade.

"Staff sergeant Nein trained his squad for the fight to come," Shelley said. He didn't wait for the fight to happen and then come up with a plan. All of his squad knew that for their next engagement they would attack."

That day, the contractor driven vehicles, many of which were 18-wheelers, were heading south on the heavily traveled route. They were driving one behind the other like ducks in a row, with a security convoy of three military police vehicles interlaced between – one up front, one in the middle, and one in the rear. Trailing the convoy and not far out of sight was second squad in three additional heavily-armored Humvees.

Each Humvee contained a trio of Soldiers, each laden with weapons and gear, except for the trail vehicle, which also carried a medic. Gunners stood ready in the turrets with .50-caliber machine guns and Mark-19 grenade launchers. All of the Soldiers remained alert; they kept their eyes peeled and weapons at the ready.

It was a first of a long line of small correct actions that would win the day.

"Even while at war, Staff Sgt. Nein continued to train his squad members on weapons, first aid and battle drills. Everyone knew how to do each others jobs," Shelley said.

Cross training saved at least five lives.

During the firefight, the two Soldiers treating the three 617th MP wounded squad members on the ground as the rear vehicle came under sniper fire from a nearby house. Both pulled out AT-4 rocket launchers from a Humvee and nearly-simultaneously fire the rockets into the house to neutralize the shooter," wrote Maj. Dean Lewis the Brigade intelligence officer in a rough draft of the unit's After Action Review, which he attended.

One of the Soldiers who fired an AT-4, SPC Jason L. Mike, a medic, said he remembered how his squad leader forced him to train on it a week earlier. At that time, he didn't think as a medic he would ever use one.

"Cross training and battle drills are key components to victory. Battle drills trained over and over until it is second nature — though actual contact will not play out precisely like the drill — many structures of the drill are going to apply." Roberts said

Facets of drill structures such as remaining alert can become a decisive factor. The squad members' vigilance gave them a leg up on the situation that was about to unfold.

"We observed the convoy we were trailing starting to make erratic movements," said Staff Sgt. Timothy F. Nein, leader, second squad. "We saw a lot of dust being kicked up by the convoy vehicles, as if they were being engaged by an (improvised explosive device) or an ambush, so we knew something was wrong. My gunner said he could here shots being fired, so we picked up the pace." The squad proceeded directly into an ambush site.

The squad's decisiveness pushed the odds for success higher.

"We moved to contact," Nein said.

Nein's earlier knowledge of the area and continued reconnaissance edged those odds further up.

"We got the vehicles on the contact side, in between the convoy and the insurgents. As we got up on that side of the road, we realized through previous reconnaissance of the area that there was a road that paralleled the field going south," he said.

The next decision took control of the

battlespace and forced the AIF to become reactive. The squad proceeded down the main road and took a right onto the side road to flank the insurgents.

“At that time,” Nein said, “we noticed seven vehicles the insurgents had staged and ready. Doors open, trunks open; ready for a quick escape. Once we turned down that road, the insurgents didn’t have a choice but to stay and fight. We had just cut off their escape route. As we came on the scene, the insurgents’ fire all shifted. They realized who they needed to fire on. They quickly shifted all fire from the transportation convoy to us. As soon as we cut back to get in between the convoy and the insurgents, the windshield of my driver (Sgt. Dustin T. Morris) took two direct hits. The bullets failed to defeat the armored glass.”

Atop the same truck was .50-cal. gunner Spc. Casey M. Cooper. He said when they turned down the side road massive gunfire was coming their way. Rounds from small arms came towards them and impacted the rear door and its window, which yet again failed to penetrate the Humvee’s armor. What happened next shocked and stunned Cooper.

“I just saw something coming at me, and fast. It just so happened to be a (rocket propelled grenade),” he said.

The round impacted right above the rear passenger door, just below Cooper’s position in the turret.

“It knocked me out – completely unconscious,” he said.

This is where luck worked for the squad, Roberts said.

Only sustaining minor shrapnel wounds around the right eye and hand, Cooper would be fine, but Nein said his first thought was that Cooper was dead. Nein said he went up and shook Cooper, at which point he popped awake and started firing again.

In the vehicle following right behind Nein, Cooper, and Morris was 23 year-old Sgt. Leigh Ann Hester, team leader and vehicle commander from Bowling Green, Ky. Hester and her crew saw the RPG hit the lead vehicle. “Nein’s vehicle took a direct hit with an RPG as soon as we made that turn,” said Hester. “I heard it hit, saw the smoke, but we kept pushing on.

“I saw Staff Sgt. Nein jump out of the truck. As soon as I saw him jump out, I was right there,” Hester said. From there, Hester, Nein and company pressed their flanking advantage and engaged the enemy full force.

Nein and Hester demonstrated leadership by example, Roberts said. Nein was first out of the vehicle and Hester moved out right to him. The Soldiers moved right out behind them which demonstrated their highly developed discipline.

“On the right hand side was a berm. They were still shooting at us from there and from down in a trench line,” said Hester. “So we returned fire. I think I shot off three M203 (grenade launcher) rounds, and I don’t know how many M4 (assault rifle) rounds I shot. I know I hit one of the RPK (Russian-made light machine gun) gunners,” she said.

Nein and Hester were side by side, and both were being



Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Marshall P. Ware

Following the firefight the Soldiers of 617th MP Company provide medical treatment to an insurgent before taking him to the central collection point.

engaged with small arms fire. “Both Sgt. Hester’s and my vehicles were being engaged by an insurgent with an RPK somewhere out in the orchard field,” Nein said. “I could also see an insurgent with an RPG trying to get around and fire on us. We weren’t engaging him at the time, but I think he thought we were going to. He was peering out from behind a tree, so we eliminated him.”

Hester, Nein and their comrades continued to press the advantage, completely disrupting any plans the insurgents had for a successful attack.

“What their mission was in shadowing that convoy was to provide support in the event of an attack. What they were supposed to do was place themselves in between the attacking force and the convoy. This would allow the convoy to escape the kill zone while they returned suppressive fire and ultimately defeated the enemy. That was exactly what they did,” said Capt. Todd M. Lindner, 617th company commander.

“They did exactly what they were supposed to do when supporting a convoy in that situation,” Lindner said.

To do what “they were supposed to do” meant continuous training and upgrades to the squad’s SOPs.

The day before this mission, squad members took the recently issued Rapid Fielding Initiative bandoliers, and experimented with mounting them in their vehicles. Then they pre-loaded a second basic load of ammo into magazines, put them into the bandoliers, and mounted them in their vehicles—the same exact way in every vehicle, Lewis reported in a draft of the unit’s AAR.

That addition to the load-plan SOP allowed Hester to dash back to the closest vehicle under fire and blindly grab more ammo. But the SOP had existed for a time.

“From the very first engagement in January, SSG Nein continued to train and develop his squad into a lethal unit,” Shelley said. “That started with getting the crap out of his vehicles and loading all the vehicles in the same manner. He re-looked the amount and type of ammo and weapons mix he carried. During one of my talks with his squad, he mentioned that during all of his previous Precombat Inspections, he always checked to be sure the squad had a three-day supply of food and water. But from the date in January, he also ensured the squad had a three-day supply of ammo. He also made squad members clean the ammo and weapons daily.”

“It was as simple as knowing the CLS kit was under the driver’s seat or that there was extra bandoliers of ammo strapped to the back of the front seats,” said Brian Lambert the Command Sergeant Major of the 503d MP BN.

“As Hester turned to move back to the trench line, the gunner in two saw an AIF jump from behind one of the cars and start firing on Hester. He pulled his 9mm, because the .50 cal was pointed in the other direction, and fired, disabling the AIF,” Lewis wrote. ***Master Sgt. Sue Harper, NCO Journal, contributed to this report.***