

Running head: CHALLENGES DURING OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM III-IV

Challenges During Operation Iraqi Freedom III-IV

SGM Robert Cameron

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

SMNRC Class #35 Phase II

MOS 88Z

Operation Iraqi Freedom III-IV, 22 Aug 2005-17 Nov 2006

20 Aug 2009

Unclassified

First Sergeant, 655th Transportation Company

Abstract

I have often heard it said that the hardest thing to do is talk about one's personal experience. I guess it is difficult because people have been through so many challenging experiences throughout their life. For me, it was quite easy.

The most challenging experience for me was my first combat tour, Operation Iraqi Freedom III, 22 August 2005 to 31 October 2006. From pre-deployment to redeployment, problems surfaced at multiple levels. I have spent my entire military career preparing for combat. Yet, when the time finally came, my preparation for the role would be extremely tested. For this reason the experience gained from this first combat tour was the most challenging for me.

Pre-mobilization

The ink wasn't quite dry on the orders laterally promoting me from Master Sergeant to First Sergeant (1SG) when my unit, the 465 Quarter Master (QM) Company, received mobilization orders in early 2005. Normally, mobilizing a unit for deployment is bad enough. However, 465 QM Company, a Petroleum Supply Company, received an "in lieu of" mission as a Tactical Medium Truck Company. Consequently, my unit was re-designated as the 655 Transportation Company (TC). This re-designation brought with it several challenges.

Now here is where the challenges begin. The "in lieu of" mission had me (a brand new First Sergeant) and a new unit (the 655th TC) with a new battle roster requiring 166 soldiers. I liaised with the commander to discuss the mobilization process and to re-evaluate our leadership philosophy, when instantly this became even more challenging. The Commander informed me that he would not be mobilizing with the unit. Not only did we need over 100 soldiers, but we also needed a Commander to lead them. The Battalion Commander (BC) sent me an Assumption of Command memorandum, which I signed and drove on. This was not an easy process. My responsibilities weren't easy and would last eight months. However, with the assistance of our Battalion, the 655th TC (rebuilt) started receiving soldiers from all over the nation.

The Unit received Soldiers from as far as California, New York, Washington and Florida. Obtaining the soldiers' records from the losing unit presented a tremendous challenge in coordinating expeditious response to the gaining unit. My Administrative Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) (an Air Force transplant) and I logged numerous email and telephonic hours in communication with the units. We were able to acquire a majority of the records via mail. However, we had no opportunity to screen the records or the Soldiers before placement into the unit. Therefore, we had no idea of the caliber of people the unit was receiving. For the most part,

the Soldiers had no issues, but in time issues were identified that required the removal of some of the soldiers from the battle roster. For example, I received a call from a counselor who informed me that one particular soldier needed to regularly receive methadone shots. As a law enforcement professional, I recognized that methadone shots are a treatment assisting cocaine abusers in breaking their addiction. Needless to say he was quickly dropped from the battle roster.

After eight months, in March 2005, the 655 TC eventually received a Commander. The Commander arrived in time for our first leader validation report. The report revealed a singular problem, but it was a huge problem, lack of training.

As previously stated, the unit transformed from a petroleum company to a truck company. This meant we now had one unit Commander, one 1SG, two Platoon Leaders, and three Platoon Sergeants who were non-qualified in their respective duty military occupational skills (MOS). To underscore this magnitude, 80% of the Soldiers were non-MOS qualified as well. The unit had less than five months before mobilization to Iraq. This was a leader's worst nightmare.

It was to my great fortune to have an outstanding Sergeant First Class (SFC) as my training NCO. In addition, I was placed on active duty orders allowing me, with the assistance of my high-speed full time training NCO, to coordinate the required MOS training for all personnel. This was a logistical nightmare in that we had to coordinate travel for soldiers from all over the nation back and forth to transportation school which is located at Ft McClellan, Alabama. Yet within four months all Soldier were MOS qualified. We were even able to coordinate additional convoy operations leader training. This gave the leaders and added edge.

Home Station Annual Training

Unfortunately not long after receiving the new Commander he was transferred. I signed another Assumption of Command letter and drove on with the mission. It was time to focus on the unit collectively. We had the required MOS qualified soldiers, now the next task was to build cohesiveness and continue training on the newly acquired MOS. The unit needed to pull all Soldiers together in order to build a cohesive command and team relationship. Since the unit needed to continue driver's training and licensing, I requested and received approval for "home station" annual training (AT) two weeks prior to movement to the mobilization site.

This training presented an even bigger logistical problem as our "home station" consisted of a drill hall and a three bay motor pool. The unit lacked adequate billeting and training equipment. Coordinating movement of over one hundred soldiers proved challenging enough, considering we were located in a small town and the airport was over fifty miles away. We arranged for billeting for all the Soldiers in nearby hotels. In order to maintain positive control and build cohesiveness even the soldiers that lived within close proximity to the unit were also provided hotel rooms. To prevent potential problems in discipline, a curfew was established and soldiers were counseled accordingly. Once the unit had all 166 Soldiers present for duty it looked like a company. It was time to prepare for our mission.

Since we were to conduct a line haul mission, we requisitioned several M915s (Medium Tactical Trucks with Flatbed trailers). The motor sergeant coordinated the vehicle transfers and immediately made them road worthy. I coordinated with the city to use a far end of a deserted runway to practice maneuvering trucks with trailers attached. We tasked the unit personnel to drive countless hours on the highways and roads around the small city. The "home station" annual training was extremely productive. In the end, the entire unit received licenses on all vehicles in our inventory. I was able to identify our new "Truck Master". This high-speed SFC

took control of the drivers training program and made it successful. This cohesive “home station” training also enabled me to identify Platoon Sergeants. Ultimately this annual training was exactly what we needed to prepare us to work together as a cohesive unit.

Just before leaving for the mobilization site located at Camp Atterbury, things took a turn for the worse. Not only was the full time administrative NCO not mobilizing for deployment, but I lost our full time motor sergeant as well. Both had medical issues preventing deployment. Needless to say we still did not have a Company Commander. Two days before departure to Camp Atterbury, the BC informed me that our new Commander would meet the unit at the mobilization site. On 22 August 2005 the 655th TC was transported to Camp Atterbury, Indiana from Alabama via chartered buses.

Mobilization Site

Upon arrival to the mobilization site, everything ran pretty smoothly for the first couple of days. This success was attained because I sent an advance party to prepare for our arrival. The Commander also arrived shortly thereafter. Now that our command team was finally intact, it really started to feel like a company. Psychologically it didn't feel quite so overwhelming anymore. Our new commander was a staff officer, a Major. Although he had no prior combat experience, his previous command experience was a plus for the unit.

Things were sustainable for the first several weeks but as we progressed they became more challenging. We started losing Soldiers quickly. We lost approximately 20 Soldiers through administrative, medical and dental issues. The hardest parts were filling the void on the battle roster and still getting the replacements trained to meet our deployment deadline. We made things happen with detailed planning and an aggressive training NCO.

As the days progressed I noticed that several Soldiers were stressed from being away

from their families. Also, I noticed that the constantly changing battle roster created difficulty in building unit cohesiveness. Throughout more than 20 years of military service, I have always been taught that there is one certain way to combat stress and build cohesiveness; physical training. Since misery loves company it was time to bring the pain. Physical training was scheduled around the regular mobilization tasks whenever possible. We started off slowly of course, and then gradually increased the intensity. By the time we were to leave Camp Atterbury, the Soldiers of the 655th TC had increased the overall unit physical fitness test score by 23 percent. Not only did the Soldiers have a new attitude, but their physical fitness training enabled them to continue working as a team.

First Sergeant Course

This was perfect timing because now I had to depart the unit for individual training. Prior to arrival at Camp Atterbury, I had recently completed the nonresident Phase I of the First Sergeant's Course. On top of all the stress of deployment, I had to complete the Phase II, resident course. The unit Truck Master assumed my duties and I drove to Eastover South Carolina to attend the course. I arrived in Eastover a day prior. The very first day of the First Sergeant's course we lined up on the track for a physical fitness test. That was the last time we performed physical training as a group. It was all academics from there. We put in long grueling hours in the classroom re-enforcing our research and speaking abilities. Upon completion of the course, I found out that I missed honor graduate by five points. However, what really mattered most was that I was now more prepared to lead Soldiers. I immediately drove back to Camp Atterbury and arrived in time to attend the Forward Observation Base (FOB) portion of the training.

Return to Mobilization Site

The FOB portion of the training signifies the final segment of the mobilization training. The Unit lives on a mock FOB for period of two weeks, while performing simulated combat operations. In our case, we performed actual convoy logistic patrols (CLP) from receipt of mission to completion. The Soldiers seemed genuinely enthusiastic about their mission, but I could tell something was amiss. I was briefed by the commander upon my return. He believed that the FOB Cadre were harassing our soldiers and expressed his concerns to the FOB Commander accordingly.

The very next day I was summoned to the Post Commander and informed to bring one of the unit's two First Lieutenants (1LT) with me. Upon arrival, the Post commander saw us immediately and got right to the point. He stated that our Commander would not be deploying with the unit. He further stated that the 1LT present would assume command. This caught me entirely off guard. A million things instantly went through my mind. Is the commander okay? What happened in my absence? What else could go wrong? A 1LT? Upon returning to the FOB we informed the Soldiers of the change. They initially took it hard; but this actually brought the unit closer. It gave us a "common enemy"; the cadre.

Deployment

We departed one week later and arrived in Camp Buehring, Kuwait. Camp Buehring provided no challenges mainly in part due to my high-speed Training NCO, who was a part of my advance party. We had a scaled down version of the mobilization site. We quickly acclimated to our environment. Our stay at Camp Buehring could have been even more successful had we been met by an advance party from the outgoing, demobilizing unit. This would have reduced the soldiers' stress. Nevertheless, we would be in combat shortly.

Camp Cedar II

Upon arrival to Camp Cedar II Iraq, the 655th TC hit the ground running. The outgoing unit, as expected, was ready to redeploy so each section immediately conducted their relief in place (RIP). I noticed that our Commander seemed overwhelmed with his new role. I pulled him aside so we could discuss the direction we needed to take. The very first thing I did was restate our mission. Our mission was to “on order, perform convoy logistics patrols (CLPs) within the Iraqi theater of operations (ITO) in support of combat operations”. Now that we both recognized the mission, it was time to assess what was needed to make it happen. We need drivers and vehicles. We had the drivers, what we did not know about was the equipment. We needed a thorough assessment of the vehicles.

Since we did not deploy with our experienced Senior Maintenance (NCO), we relied on an inexperienced Staff Sergeant (SSG) to lead the way. Luckily we also had a Maintenance Chief Warrant Officer (CW3). Together we assessed the vehicle status and determined that we were at sixty four percent readiness. This was not a good start. We learned that most of the vehicles were on their third rotation and were in disrepair. The maintenance section had serious work to be done. Initially, I provided close supervision of my SSG and her seventeen soldiers until I had confidence that she was up to the task. The maintenance section ran twenty four hour operations and within a short period of time we were up to ninety six percent readiness.

One of the proudest and most fulfilling moments for me was to watch our first CLP leave on the unit's first solo mission. We had a hard hill to climb and we did it. Not only were we, as a unit, rebuilt from a quartermaster company to a transportation company, but eighty five percent of our Soldiers were reclassified just for this “in lieu of” mission. Now we were performing that mission of transporting all classes of cargo successfully throughout Iraq. Not only were we

conducting CLPs, but in addition were responsible for conducting “gun truck” escort missions twice daily from Cedar II to Tallil. That first day, I made it a point to be present for the departure of each and every convoy.

One of my biggest challenges quickly presented itself. The senior NCO for the administrative section did not deploy. I was down to one enlisted soldier only with administrative background, then, unfortunately, his wife passed away and he was immediately redeployed. I requested a replacement to no avail, then immediately started interviewing vehicle operators. I was able to find two drivers within the unit with limited administrative background. With the assistance of my high speed training NCO, we were able to turn them into a topnotch administrative section. These two Soldiers were instrumental in the day to day function of the Company. They were able to complete all unit administrated actions in a timely manner to include, but not limited to, promotion, pay, and evaluations. The latter was the most difficult task as soldiers were transferred to the 655th TC lacking up to date evaluations. In the future, I highly recommended that soldiers transfer with a copy of their evaluation in hand.

People spend ninety percent of the time on ten percent of people with issues and ten percent of the time on ninety percent of the people without issues. I don't know who first came up with this premise but I can attest to its validity. We had our share of soldiers with Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) issues. The issues included drugs, theft, and alcohol to name a few. We even had a conscientious objector. The Command spent the whole deployment court marshalling eight Soldiers and dealing with these issues. Unfortunately by the end of the deployment I was equally versed in UCMJ actions. If I had it do all over again, there would be a screening process at the unit level before accepting Soldiers to our battle roster.

My knowledge of the United States Army Reserve and the NCO Corps proved

instrumental for the entire Camp. Our company was one of a few Reserve units on Camp Cedar II. Our Battalion was run by a National Guard unit, but the majority of units on Camp Cedar were predominantly active duty. Several Active Component and National Guard promotion boards were held on a regular basis, but there had never been a Reserve board prior to our arrival. I established the first promotion board for Reservist on Camp Cedar; this ensured that all qualified and recommended Soldiers had the opportunity to be boarded.

COB Adder

Another major challenge presented itself half way through the deployment. Very few, if any, units had to relocate their entire operation while deployed. The 655th TC had to relocate the company and all operations from Camp Cedar II to Camp Adder. Although Camp Adder was only twenty minutes away, it was still a serious logistical problem. We had to continue mission operations and conduct the relocation simultaneously. The unit was given a small building and a neighboring, flat piece of desert on Camp Adder to be turned into a company area and motor pool. We had one week to move. The 655th TC was able to meet the suspense as a result of detailed planning and timely execution.

Once the move was complete, I noticed that Soldiers had nowhere to practice battle drills in preparation for their convoys. Battle drills prepare Soldier for any and all emergencies that may happen on convoy. These drills are rehearsed prior to departure. I coordinated with the Mayor's Cell to have an area close to our motor pool cleared and graded. We used several hundred filled sand bags to create a sand pit. This was covered with a parachute to ward off the sun. Our soldiers with carpentry skills made benches for a sitting area. They also made model "gun trucks" and tractors with flatbed trailers to use as training aids. We now had an area big enough to park our vehicles for live battle drills rehearsals.

Once the 655th TC settled into our battle rhythm the challenges became bearable. The missions progressed smoothly. Under my guidance and mentorship the unit safely drove in excess of a million miles along the hostile and hazardous roads of Iraq. We conducted missions to fifteen different FOBs throughout Iraq and Kuwait and encountered several roadside bombs and complex attacks where vehicles were damaged. However, the best part was the 655th TC completed 260 CLPs with no casualties or injuries. In the end the unit received over 100 driver and mechanic badges, over 80 Combat Action Badges, and over 120 “end of tour awards”.

I have learned several things that would have made my first deployment smoother. This first is that a command team needs to be established well enough in advance of leaving. The second is that, if time is of essence, Soldiers’ records should be screened before assigned to a battle roster. They should also be interviewed at unit level. Another important lesson was determined while going through the acclimatization in Kuwait. Since the 655th TC was deprived of an early reception we made it a point to send an advance party to meet our replacements in Camp Buehring. The look of relief on the new Soldier’s faces was priceless as we briefed and performed battle drills for them. Now they had an idea of what to expect.

Conclusion

Operation Iraqi Freedom III, for me was the most significant and challenging experience in my entire life. It had a profound effect on me. Even though I was unprepared, I quickly learned to adapt, improvise, and overcome. In turn, it enabled me to have a profound effect on the lives of 166 Soldiers. There is nothing more rewarding than knowing that you took soldiers to combat, accomplished the mission, and brought everyone home safely to their loved ones.