

CONCEPT TO COMBAT

Concept to Combat: The Building of a General Support Aviation Battalion

MSG Dwight R. Altheide

Activation and deployment of 3-10th General Support Aviation Battalion Fort Drum NY, to

Operation Enduring Freedom VII, Bagram Afghanistan, from

01/01/2005 to 06/10/2006

00Z50, CSM, 3-10th GSAB

5 October 2006

Class # 57

Table of Contents

Abstract:

This personal experience paper covers some of the issues I encountered during the inception of 3-10th General Support Aviation Battalion through my return home from my deployment to Afghanistan with this unit. I came home in order to attend the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy, where you find me now writing this paper.

Phases:

Phase 1: The beginning

Phase 2: The build up

Phase 3: Training

Phase 4: Pre deployment

Phase 5: Deployment

Phase 6: Redeployment

Lessons learned

Conclusion

Appendixes: None

Phase 1: The beginning.

To understand the following personal experience paper we need to start at the beginning.

It was January 2005 when I was given the honor of standing up the brand new 3-10th General Support Aviation Battalion, as the command sergeant major. I was a first sergeant at the time and we would not receive a command sergeant major for at least six months. We were to build this new battalion from scratch and deploy it within twelve months. We were scheduled to deploy to Bagram, Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom VII starting in January 2006. When I came over from C company 10th Aviation Regiment (AVIM), I brought ten soldiers with me to add to the four officers that were already waiting to stand up the battalion. This gave us a grand total of fifteen soldiers in the battalion. We had no equipment and moved into the oldest hangar on the airfield. The hangar was occupied by the United States Army Air Ambulance Detachment, in short the MEDEVAC. This was 3-10th General Support Aviation Battalion's humble but glorious beginning.

Phase 2: The build up.

The build up started out very slow, almost as if we didn't exist. With what was going on in the world we weren't even on the radar screen outside of our little world and I mean little. The battalion commander was a major and his staff was four brand new lieutenants that acted as company commanders as well as all the staff positions. To their credit, they did a great job for what they had to work with, considering their experience level. By February we started to pick up some personnel in various Military Occupational Specialties (MOSS) and skill levels.

Most importantly I received my first first sergeant to aid in the building of this new battalion. First Sergeant Garretson was a god send, a more caring and motivated individual I have yet to meet. I put him in charge of all the enlisted soldiers so I could try and help manage the bigger picture of cobbling this battalion together. The equipment on the other hand was even slower in coming. As time went on the commander and I kept up the pressure on brigade for personnel and equipment, it started to trickle in. At times it seemed that all our concerns fell on deaf ears. It was definitely an uphill battle considering that the brigade was also transforming and we weren't the only show in town, it was somewhat understandable. Out of all the units we had the longest row to hoe. By March we received three more first sergeants and let me tell you, that was the one thing that made all the difference in the world. No matter what the issues were, those first sergeants would figure out a way to complete the mission. We were so short of noncommissioned officers that those first sergeants worked from the squad leader level up to make it happen. By June 2005 we were up to four hundred and twenty five personnel and most of our helicopter fleet. The battalion consisted of HHC, A, B, D, and E Companies and attached was E Company 1-58th Aviation air traffic services. Alpha Company was the command and control company with eight UH60A Blackhawk helicopters, Bravo Company was the heavy lift company with twelve CH47D Chinook helicopters, Delta Company was the aviation unit maintenance company, Echo Company was the forward support company and Headquarters and Headquarters Company encompassed the staff and some support personnel. Echo Company 1-58th Aviation (ATS) was the attached air traffic services company.

Phase 3: Training

Of course we started training right away. In January 2005 we trained with the limited resources and personnel that we had. Training progressed steadily, albeit slow. We made the best of it. Once we started to receive equipment that was serviceable, we would train. There were many gaps but these were filled by ingenuity of the noncommissioned officers of 3-10th General Support Aviation Battalion. The main focus was flight crew training. This was hampered by the lack of flyable aircraft. We had aircraft but as anyone can tell you that have been around the army for more than a day, when you get used equipment it's not always in the best shape or fully mission capable for that matter. The UH60A Blackhawks we received were out of Korea and the CH47D Chinooks were from the reset program all over the country. This was not going to stop a unit from the 10th Mountain Division, the most deployed division in the United States Army since 1992, especially the 3-10th General Support Aviation Battalion. We were determined to be combat ready no matter what it took. We did what ever we had to do to train. We borrowed aircraft from other units, we sent crews to fly with the Pennsylvania National Guard and we accomplished this all the while receiving new equipment and personnel. Through all this were the noncommissioned officers of 3-10th General Support Aviation Battalion making it happen, holding it all together without even the slightest complaint. The noncommissioned officers didn't have time to complain. I am proud to say that when the command sergeant major arrived to replace me he was pleased with the battalion's state of readiness.

This was all possible because of the leadership of some fine noncommissioned officers. We continued to train right through the pre-deployment and deployment. When we arrived at Bagram, Afghanistan we were nervous and a little shaky, but that soon went away because it became very clear that we were ready. We were a brand new unit with a lot of brand new people that were trained by some quality noncommissioned officers.

Phase 4: Pre-deployment

The pre-deployment phase was so busy that it's almost a blur. I was serving as the Headquarters and Headquarters Company 3-10th General Support Aviation Battalion first sergeant. My job was getting everyone through soldier readiness checks, packing, and shipping equipment out. The non-commissioned officers of the battalion really stepped up to the plate during this phase. We were spread out all over the place and if not for the first sergeants being there to direct traffic and keep soldiers pointed in the right direction, I'm not sure that we would have been successful. The credit has to go to the non-commissioned officers, without them we would have never gotten there.

Phase 5: Deployment

The advance party left on 28 January 2006 and arrived in Afghanistan on 31 January 2006. The travel time before we stopped was 42 hours. We had a total flight time of over 24 hours. We circled for hours over Kabul, Afghanistan waiting for the weather to clear enough so we could land but it never did and we had to return to Manias, Uzbekistan and wait for another flight on another day. When we finally arrived in Afghanistan, we hit the ground running.

My noncommissioned officers and I had to start the “relief in place” process (R.I.P.) with 2/6th Calvary Squadron. At this point we became Task Force Centaur as we were made up of many different units. This task force consisted of 3-10th General Support Aviation Battalion and attachments from 2-10th Aviation Battalion, 159th Medical Evacuation Company, which will become Charlie company 3-10th General Support Aviation Battalion, 7/6th Calvary Squadron from the Texas National Guard out of Conroe, Texas, E Company, 1-68th Aviation Washington National Guard, and the fixed wing detachments to round it out. My main focus was the billeting requirements for over seven hundred personnel of Task Force Centaur. During this entire time, we were still receiving personnel and equipment. We were continually training and took over the mission completely on 26 February 2006. All in all things went well. If not for a strong non-commissioned officer corps, especially the first sergeants of the 3-10th GSAB, we would have never made it.

Phase 6: Redeployment

I can not speak to the redeployment of Task Force Centaur for they are still in Afghanistan. I returned early to attend the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy. My personal redeployment went fine and I was happy to be coming home. I have mixed feelings about coming home early. Of course I’m happy to come home to my family but at the same time I feel that I should still be with my army family in Afghanistan. My prayers for a safe and successful mission completion are with my brother non-commissioned officers in Afghanistan.

Lessons learned

The number one lesson learned in my opinion is, that if you are going to start a new organization and have a mission time line already in place, you must give that unit the focus and resources to get from point A to point B in the most expedient manner possible. You must build from the top down and have the facilities in place before you bring the personnel and equipment in.

The last lesson I'd like to mention is one that I already knew but I feel needs to be reinforced is, give the noncommissioned officer the responsibility and room to work and you will be amazed at what can be accomplished.

Conclusion

In conclusion I just want to say that I would not trade this experience for anything, you live and learn.