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What Happened to the 507th Maintenance Company?

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Abstract

On March 23, 2003, the 507th Maintenance Company (originally from Ft. Bliss, TX) while on convoy to An Nasiriyah in support of Iraqi Freedom, received enemy fire killing 11 soldiers as well as the capture of seven Soldiers. Many factors led to this tragic and failed convoy. This report will identify the lack of training and the incompetency of the senior leadership as the reason for the failure, not the actions of the Soldiers.

The 507th Maintenance Company, stationed at Ft Bliss, TX, provides maintenance and support to the 5th Battalion, 52nd Air Defense Artillery. In the late months of 2002 and early months of 2003, the company was preparing for their deployment in support of the global war on terrorism. In 2003, the unit consisted of 88 Soldiers, 82 of which deployed to Kuwait. . Their commanding officer, CPT Troy Kent King, was a combat service Support Soldier whose background is in the logistics field, took command of the 507th just 10 days prior to the company's ambush. The most senior NCO, 1SG Robert J. Dowdy, originally from Cleveland, OH, well very well respected by the soldiers of the 507th. Often called "the old timer" because of his age and had a teenage daughter, 1SG Dowdy had trained and prepared his Soldiers the best way he knew how prior to their deployment.

The unit was located on Ft. Bliss and traveled to Kuwait on February 20, 2003. On top of the training they received prior to deployment, additional training at Camp Virginia included rules of engagement, weapons qualification, communications, force protection, unit rehearsals (movement, actions on contact, ambush procedures), weapons and vehicle maintenance. The unit was to be under the tactical control 3rd Forward Support Battalion (3^d FSB) out of Ft Stewart, GA. The original plan was to move V Corps units along predetermined routes and the 507th, under the control of the 3^d FSB, was to be part of those convoys. "During this time, all Soldiers received their basic combat load of ammunition for their personal weapons (210 rounds for M16A2, 1000 rounds for M249 SAW, 45 rounds for M9). The company commander ordered issue of ammunition for the unit's crew served weapons (.50 caliber and MK-19, 40mm) prior to movement, however, all pyrotechnics, hand grenades, and AT-4 Anti-tank weapons were consolidated and secured" (<http://www.deta114.org>).

Prior to the 507th deploying into theatre, the Soldiers went through 6 months of predeployment training. Training events such as weapons qualification, electronic warfare Training, Law of War, Detainee Operations at Point of Capture, Personnel Recovery Training, Media Awareness Training, Hot and Cold Weather Conditions Training, Combat Stress/Suicide Prevention, Battlemind Training, MTBI/PTSD Training Awareness and Response Training, Comply with the Law of War and Geneva/Hague Convention, Country Orientation Brief, Level I Anti-Terrorism Awareness Training, Rules of Engagement Training, Rules for use of Force Training, Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Training, Identify Visual Indicators of an IED, React to a Possible IED, Conduct Wheeled and Track Operator Training, and Understand Desert Environment. The training events listed above only scratch the surface as to what the Soldiers worked on prior to their deployment. The military attempts to cover all the bases before the unit deploys to a potential hostile environment. The idea that lessons learned from previous deployments aid in the survival rate of a deploying Soldier are good in theory, the military cannot train on everything. For this reason, Soldiers rely on qualified senior leadership to fill in the blanks the Army misses. For example, making wrong turns of road with large vehicles, weapon malfunctions due to bad weather, or reacting to a situation under extreme duress. Soldiers gain this knowledge through experience. When senior leaders, placed into positions without experience, the potential for disaster exists. The Soldiers of the 507th were well prepared before they left for Kuwait. They were even more prepared after additional training prior to the disastrous convoy. It was CPT King, the 507th Company Commander that contributed to the deaths and capture of Soldiers.

On or around March 20, 2003, a massive convoy was underway towards southern Iraq. The speed in which the convoy was moving was the fastest on record considering the amount of vehicles, equipment, and personnel moving at the same time. Due to the speed of the convoy, smaller units were constantly trying to keep up because communication was difficult when so far apart and the weather conditions made it even worse. The 507th Maintenance Company, tasked with providing support to a Patriot Missile Battalion, prepared to convoy as part of a 33-vehicle convoy with 64 Soldiers. After 60-70 hours with little to no sleep and fear of the uncertainty, the Soldiers of the 507th found themselves on the outer boundaries of An Nasiriyah. At about 7 am, the 33-vehicle convoy of the 507th came under fire by the Iraqi enemy.

Prior to the move on March 20, 2003, CPT King received intelligence information that contained orders, route information, a map, and GPS. Among the 33-vehicle convoy, only five vehicles had the issued GPSs inside. CPT King, relying heavily on the GPS and map given, followed prescribed routes along rough terrain. Once leaving Camp Virginia on March 20th, the convoy reached its first destination, Attack Position Dawson. There the convoy refueled and performed PMCS and attempted to get some sleep. On March 21st, the convoy moved from Dawson to link up with the 3^d FSB at Attack Position Bull and then from Bull with the 3^d FSB to Attack Position Lizard. The convoy had traveled about 115 kms and through the night on the 21st into the morning March 22nd. Poor visibility, traffic control, and the heavier vehicles stuck in the sand, caused vehicles to start separating from one another. Ultimately, the 33-vehicle convoy now separated into two groups. On March 22nd, both groups of vehicles arrived to attack Position Lizard, 22 hours after leaving Bull.

Carrying on with the mission, the 3^d FSB moved on from attack point Lizard. Because CPT King had waited on the second wave of vehicles from the 507th led by 1SG Dowdy, CPT reorganized the 507th convoy. Now, a convoy of 18 vehicles and 33 Soldiers, the convoy departed Attack Position Lizard in attempt to catch up to the 3^d FSB. Using only the GPS, CPT King attempted to take a straight-line direction to the convoy and took them off the road marked on the map. This resulted in the convoy separating again due to the bad terrain, (all sand) and weather. 42 hours now have passed since the 507th originally left Attack Position Dawson. The convoy eventually reached a traffic control point in which a Soldier manning that point pointed out the direction in which the CPT wished to keep moving. Believing the CPT was on the correct road, the convoy continued moving. When they came upon another intersection the CPT didn't recognize based on the GPS and the map, he decided to remain straight taking the convoy off the road he believed was the one he was suppose to be on. With the CPT in the front of the convoy and 1SG Dowdy in the rear, the communicated through the rough terrain with SINCGARS and Motorola radios. After another few wrong turns the CPT finally figured out he was off the road he was suppose to be on. In knowing this error, the CPT ordered the convoy to do a u-turn. In doing the u-turn, the ten-ton wrecker ran out of fuel. After refueling the vehicle, the convoy moves back the direction it was coming from. During this period, CPT King missed a turn recognized by the 1SG as a turn back onto the road the convoy was suppose to be on. By this time, civilian vehicles with armed Iraqis had been passing the convoy. Initially, they had not been a threat there for according to the rules of engagement (ROE) they were not engaged.

When in radio communication, the 1SG radioed to the CPT the convoy was under attack and that they were to follow ambush procedures. As the stress level starts to increase and the

vehicles speed up to leave the small arms fire, the vehicles in the convoy start to separate. Once again, a u-turn was attempted to get back to the main road. Meanwhile, a vehicle in the center of the convoy becomes disabled. Another vehicle retrieves the soldiers because vehicles are still receiving fire. During the u-turn, another vehicle is stuck in the sand. The 1SG traveling in the rear, picks up those Soldiers. During the second u-turn and now only 15 vehicles (one vehicle in tow), the 18 vehicle convoy is now separated into three groups. The first group, while driving around obstacles attempts to return fire but cannot because their weapons are jammed from lack of cleaning and the amount of dust and sand built up. The second group had the only crew served weapon but it failed. By now, Soldiers in this group start taking heavy fire from small arms and rocket propelled grenades wounding five Soldiers. The third group of vehicles had most of the heavier ones with the 1SG in the rear. Through the confusion and the taking of small arms fire, one the vehicles avoids a civilian truck blocking the road and loses control resulting in the vehicle getting stuck off road. Receiving heavy fire to his vehicle, the 1SG orders his driver to speed up out of the kill zone. In doing so, the vehicle crashes into the vehicle that lost control and was stuck on the side of the road, killing the 1SG on impact. The remaining Soldiers in the 1SG's vehicle and the stuck vehicle attempted to return fire but could not because of malfunctions with their weapon, ultimately surrendered to the enemy. Group one led by CPT King, was the only group of vehicles that made it out of the kill zone to call for help. No attempt was made by CPT King to turn around and help the convoy behind him.

Conclusion

From March 20 to March 23, the Soldiers of the 507th only had ten hours to rest, maintain their vehicles, eat, and perform PMCS on their weapons. Due to the high stress of battle, most of them did not sleep and a rest plan not enforced. CPT King failed to use the map and other intelligence given to him to stay on the roads the convoy was suppose to stay on. The continued use of the GPS was his only tool. In the 18-vehicle convoy, only five radios were available. The continued wrong and missed turns led to the vehicles stuck in bad terrain and the running out of fuel. The Soldiers of the 507th received the required training prior to deployment and did as taught. They attempted to follow the ROE as instructed, reacted to indirect and direct fire as instructed, and the combat lifesavers did everything they could to save the lives of their fellow Soldiers. CPT King did not have the experience to lead this convoy in combat environment. Nor did he use the simple principles taught when he went through Officer Basic Course. He relied on the technology, though accurate, he did not take into account the poor terrain, lack of sleep of the Soldiers, and the simple TTPs such as PMCS of weapons given the environment. 11 Soldiers of the 18-vehicle convoy were killed and nine captured. The Army continues to recall lessons learned from this tragedy in hopes it never happens again.

References

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