# Get the Hell Out of Dodge:
Techniques for Company-Level Alerts

by MAJ L. Burton Brender

One of the first things that impressed me when I was assigned to the Republic of Korea was "the alert." An alert is the rapid, usually-no-notice readying of a unit. Though I had heard of such things, my then-six years in uniform had not prepared me for the rigor and speed of a well-executed alert, especially one conducted only 18 miles from the Demilitarized Zone.

As madcap as my very first iteration seemed, it eventually became second nature by virtue of two things: planning and preparation. As I was learning all this the hard way, I noticed that those who did it the best focused on three areas: the arms room, the motorpool and the headquarters.
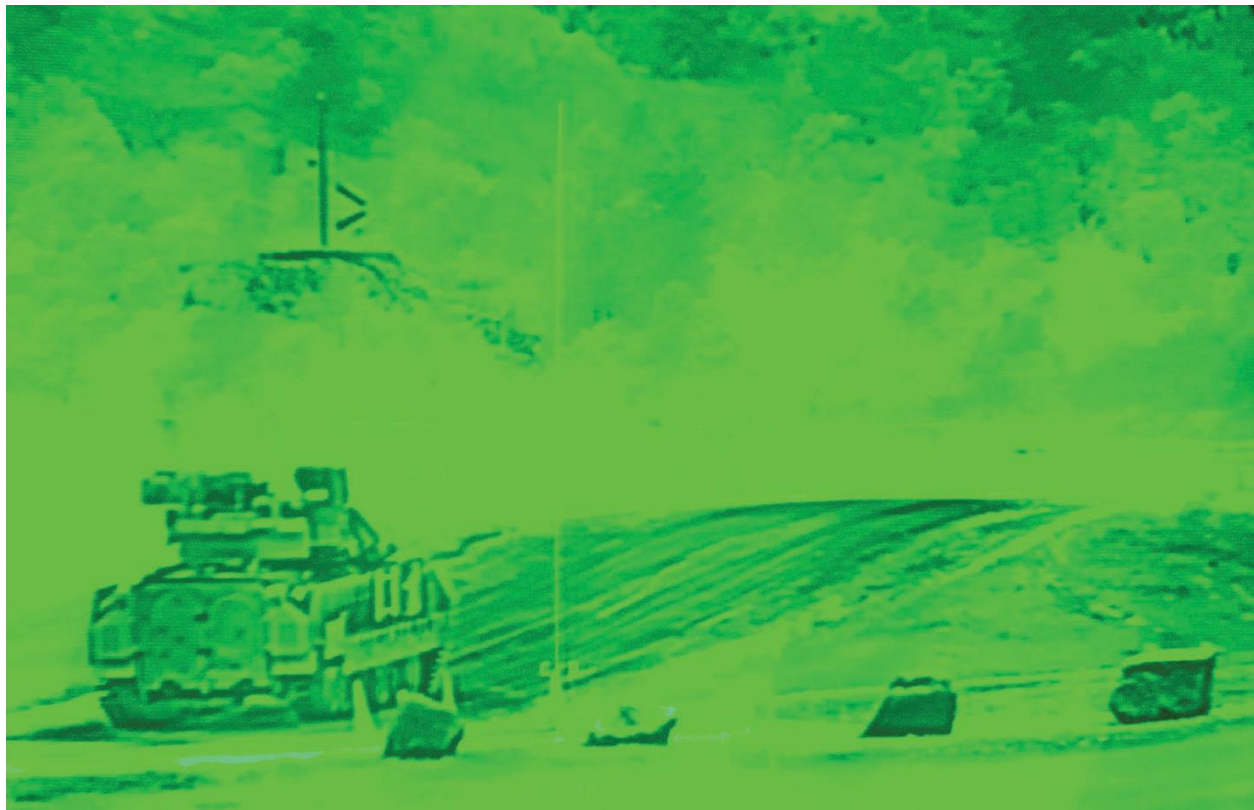
Figure 1. A Bradley Cavalry Fighting Vehicle engages targets on Rodriguez Range in Korea.

Arms room

Perhaps the most important area to prepare for an alert is the arms room, which is the platform from which the unit rapidly equips itself when called to mobilize. Its ability to do this is predicated upon basic organization, and for me this was a system I called "packetization." This is the grouping of like items into easy-to-manage groups. For example, many humvees are armed with a machinegun. However, for the weapon to function, it requires other items like its night sight, tripod and headspace and timing tool, etc. Since these things must be used together, why not store them together? And, if they are they stored together, why not draw them as a packet?

Using a heavy-duty case or bag, combine commonly-drawn-together items and then print ahead of time their hand receipts, storing everything inside the container. Then, expand that concept. Group the equipment of crews, squads and platoons together, partitioning off different areas of your arms room as much as space and equipment

permit. This process arranges your arms room into several near-identical sections, each of which is composed of little "go bags" of frequently used items.

Admittedly, since like items aren't all in a single row anymore, you may realize certain inefficiencies when conducting inventories or services. However, in my experience, this is an acceptable price to pay for the speed of drawing this process affords, which can be offset by manning the arms room slightly differently.

To make up for the shortage, have your platoons appoint (in writing) their own arms-room assistants. These people's job, in an alert, is to report to the arms room and begin issuing their organization's equipment, freeing the armorer to handle other problems. These platoon armorers are empowered to know their unit's needs and sign out and receive back platoon equipment with familiarity. They become the subject-matter expert about the platoon's equipment.

Unfortunately, chances are your unit will have more equipment than it does people to carry it (and, even if you don't, you *will* have times when you need to store unattended sensitive items). To account for this, units must bring miniature versions of their arms room with them.

Most companies have a cargo truck in complement, such as a light medium tactical vehicle. Reserve about an eighth of its cargo bed for the unassigned sensitive items you must take and an additional eighth for temporary storage of item, while people are doing other things.

As such, plan to take about a quarter of your sensitive-item containers (rifle racks, equipment cages, lockers). Never make the assumption you can do without them. If you were to find yourself unexpectedly operating for a month, you will quickly find you need them. Have the armorer sketch ahead of time how he or she will arrange and strap down each of these items in the cargo truck.

Figure 2. SGT Jonathan Chappa, Blackfoot Troop, 4th Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment, inspects his troops prior to an air-assault training mission.

Motorpool

The second place a commander needs to plan for is the motorpool. The first thing to do is plan for "alert dispatches." Dispatching is a commander's way of giving official permission for a vehicle or towed item to leave a military post. During training, this process can afford to be slow and deliberate. In an alert, however, units do not have that luxury. For this reason, the Army permits alert dispatches, which are documents that allow vehicles to be immediately and legally put on the roads.

Coordinate with your unit's maintenance leadership to generate these documents *en masse* at the beginning of each month, signing all of them in advance ***whether you anticipate needing them or not***. Then, divide these documents by subordinate elements to relieve tedious organizing when you are trying to marshal your forces. Keep them in a secure but accessible place for rapid distribution.

After that, the next best thing you can do is maintain your crew roster. Review your crew or manning rosters monthly and ensure that everyone assigned to the unit is accounted for by seat. Make sure you fill recent losses, plan for anticipated personnel moves and decide where extra people will go (should you be lucky enough to have them). Lists of vehicles with the duty positions or passenger seats listed will often be sufficient.

Lastly, prepare Soldiers' individual equipment. In a perfect world, "alert bags" containing everything on a Soldier's packing list would be ready to go and secured in a central area all the time. Of course, most Soldiers do not have enough equipment, personal or issued, to maintain alert bags and still participate in daily training.

To mitigate this, create a generic, standardized field packing list based off your anticipated deployment needs. Then, when preparing for a training exercise, deviate from this list as minimally as possible. Enforce this list, even when you know you won't need everything on it. Everyone needs to become accustomed in training with how much they will have to carry, load on vehicles and live with in war.

Figure 3. Blackhawk helicopters arrive for an air movement on Camp Casey, Korea.

Headquarters

The No. 1 tool I used to determine how good my unit was at alerts was a three-by-five foot whiteboard in my troop training room. I drew a matrix on this board that listed all my subordinate elements on one axis and everything they needed to do on the other. I specified and sequenced the tasks I wanted done and left out everything I didn't want the unit to waste its time on.

My list looked something like the following. Is the unit:

- **Notified.** Has leadership made telephonic contact with every Soldier, minus those otherwise accounted for?

- **Mustered.** Is everyone who ought to be there present?
- **Equipped.** Are weapons and other arms-room items drawn, properly stowed on their vehicles and tested? Are radios installed and talking; digital mission-command systems operational; and alert dispatches distributed? Are personal bags correctly stowed?
- **Armed.** Is ammunition, if applicable, drawn and distributed?
- **Ready.** Are Soldiers at their vehicles, at the weapons-control status the commander has set, with communications fully operational and prepared to receive orders to move?

Have subordinates write the time they complete each task on the matrix, allowing you to see how long each step takes and where you need to apply resources.

Several documents will be useful when going through these steps. The first is a call roster. People come and go, as do telephone numbers. Only regular updates can keep this product anything like a worthwhile use of paper. I found that the right regularity to update this was monthly, and occasionally it took me (the commander) personally to remind key leaders to make sure they and the company headquarters had current phone numbers.

Another important item was a list of all the vehicles and towed equipment in the unit and their maintenance status. A simple "roll or no-roll" status for the purposes of an alert is usually sufficient, and it keeps leaders of big organizations from forgetting something.

A third item is the unit training calendar. Alerts should be surprises, but conducting them completely without warning is often counterproductive. To balance these two, put on the training calendar the week in which an alert will occur but keep the day and the hour secret.

This permits units to know when **not** to schedule a major training event, a ball or a key-leader retreat 200 miles away. Knowing the general timeframe an alert will occur allows leaders to plan resource-intensive activities for the weeks they know they will not be alerted.

Lastly, after an alert is over and everyone settles down, conduct an after-action-review (AAR). A prudent commander ensures the unit has had many opportunities to practice this demanding task in a consequence-free environment and to repeatedly reflect on how they do. If at all possible, conduct the AAR the same day as the alert. Begin with the conclusions from the preceding iteration's AAR. What did the group discover last time? Did you make the improvements you identified before and avoid previous pitfalls? Thoroughly review your performance in light of where you want to go and refine your processes.
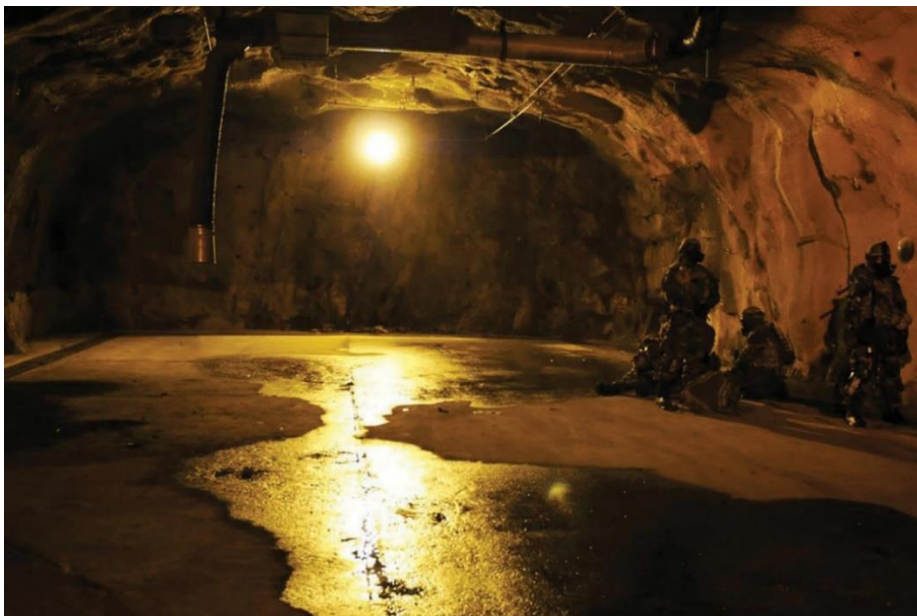

Figure 4. Blackfoot Troop, 4ᵗʰ Squadron, 7ᵗʰ Cavalry Regiment, Soldiers clear an underground facility on Camp Stanley, Korea.

Conclusion

After applying these ideas, do one thing more: practice. Repetition in a learning environment allows experimentation, underwrites honest failures and rewards improvement. This process builds the skills and confidence to be proficient at alerting.

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Acronym Quick-Scan

AAR – after-action review
JBLM – Joint Base Lewis-McChord