

*No Second Chances, No Exercise Pauses...*

# Lessons from CASEVACs During Exercise Rubicon

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From 12 to 25 November 2014, C Company, 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Battalion, 173rd Airborne Brigade, conducted a bilateral training exercise as part of Operation Atlantic Resolve with the Romanian Mihai Viteazul 6th Special Operations Brigade in Câmpia Turzii and Cincu, Romania. Exercise Rubicon was notable for being the first U.S. Army training exercise of Operation Atlantic Resolve conducted in Romania and for the crash of a military helicopter which killed eight Romanian soldiers. During this time, I served as the platoon leader for C Company's 3rd Platoon and conducted the casualty evacuation of four of my Soldiers during the exercise.

## **Background**

Operation Atlantic Resolve began in late April 2014 when the U.S. Army ordered the unscheduled deployment of 1-503rd IN to Poland and the Baltic States in a demonstration of continued commitment to its NATO obligations following Russia's intervention in Ukraine. Over the following months, Operation Atlantic Resolve grew in scope with an expanding area of operations and increasing number of U.S. military forces deployed to multilateral and bilateral training exercises across the alliance's eastern flank. In mid-summer 2014 after returning to its home base, Caserma Ederle, in the small town of Vicenza in northeastern Italy, the 1-503rd IN refitted and prepared to deploy again in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve, this time to NATO's southeastern flank.

I arrived in Italy as a second lieutenant and reported to the 1-503rd IN on 8 October 2014 after graduating from the Infantry Basic Officer Leaders Course (IBOLC) and Ranger School at Fort Benning, GA. Following in-processing, my battalion commander, LTC Patrick Wilkins, assigned me as a platoon leader in C Company, which continued to



**Paratroopers from the 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment and Romanian 6th Special Operations Brigade conduct a combined parachute operation at the beginning of Exercise Rubicon at Luna Drop Zone in Romania on 14 November 2014. (Photos by SGT A.M. LaVey)**

bear its Vietnam War moniker “March or Die.” On 27 October, within my first five minutes serving as a platoon leader, 1-503rd IN leadership activated my platoon on an emergency deployment readiness exercise and deployed my platoon to San Giorgio di Brunico Training Area in northern Italy’s Dolomite Mountains, where I quickly got to know my NCOs and assessed my platoon’s readiness.<sup>1</sup>

The last time my company had conducted a continuous, multiple-day, tactical field training exercise was three years prior in Hohenfels, Germany, during pre-deployment training for its upcoming deployment to Afghanistan. By the time I arrived in October 2014, most of the platoon’s Soldiers and NCOs with combat experience from the previous deployment had left the unit. My Soldiers’ lack of field experience, particularly among the junior NCOs and privates, was exacerbated by the absence of the platoon sergeant, who was attending Ranger School at the time.

### **Deployment**

During late October and early November 2014, C Company conducted exercise planning and preparation for a two-week deployment in mid-November to central Romania to conduct Exercise Rubicon in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve. The exercise would consist of one week of airborne operations and troop leading procedures at the Romanian Air Force’s 71st Air Base in Câmpia Turzii, followed by a week of marksmanship ranges and a 72-hour field training exercise at the Romanian Joint National Training Center in Cincu. C Company would conduct the exercise with an ad hoc company assembled from airborne and mountain platoons of the Romanian Mihai Viteazul 6th Special Operations Brigade. By 7 November, the company was ready to deploy, its weapons and equipment packed in shipping containers.

On 12 November, C Company — along with the battalion’s sniper section, mortar section, and S6 communications section — deployed to the Romanian air base in Câmpia Turzii. Upon arriving in country, company and platoon leadership immediately met their Romanian counterparts and began pre-execution planning and coordination for scheduled training.

### **Airborne Operations and Planning**

C Company and the Romanian Special Forces Company conducted pre-jump training on 13 November and then conducted a high-profile parachute jump onto Luna Drop Zone on 14 November. Immediately after the parachute jump, Romanian Prime Minister Victor Ponta held a press conference on the air base runway, backed by Romanian aircraft and U.S. and Romanian forces in formation. On 16 November, both companies moved all personnel and equipment to the Cincu Training Area. From 17-19 November, U.S. and Romanian forces conducted small arms firing and began the planning process and rehearsals for the 72-hour field exercise. By midday on 19 November after weather forecasts projected rain and high winds, U.S. and Romanian leadership cancelled the original plan to



**A Romanian 6th Special Forces Brigade soldier gives guidance to a paratrooper from C Company, 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, on the operation of a rocket-propelled grenade launcher prior to a combined arms range on 18 November 2014 in Cincu, Romania, as part of Exercise Rubicon.**

conduct an airborne insertion into the exercise via a combat equipment parachute jump.

Our combined U.S.-Romanian task force was task organized into two combined company teams for the field exercise. The commander of the Romanian Special Forces Company led Team Griffin, which comprised two Romania Special Forces platoons and C Company's 2nd Platoon. My company commander, CPT Teddy Borawski, led Team March or Die, which comprised C Company's 1st and 3rd Platoons and a Romanian airborne platoon.

### **Field Exercise**

At 1130 on 20 November, U.S. and Romanian forces initiated the field exercise by conducting a mounted insertion into the Cincu Training Area on Romanian trucks. Upon dismounting, Team Griffin marched towards Objective (OBJ) Saber in the south. Team March or Die proceeded to march northeast towards its assigned objective, OBJ Sword, which consisted of three separate platoon objectives, each approximately one kilometer apart. My platoon reached the company release point, separated from the company's main body at about 1800, established my platoon's objective rally point (ORP) one kilometer from my assigned objective, and waited for the order to attack. By 1900, both 1st Platoon and the Romanian platoon had successfully completed their attacks on their respective objectives, and at 1930, CPT Borawski ordered 3rd Platoon to attack the remaining objective.

My platoon successfully conducted a raid on OBJ Sword at 2000 and then retrograded one kilometer to the platoon ORP. My platoon's movement was slowed due to the dense underbrush and steep terrain, conditions which worsened under steadily increasing rain, 30-degree Fahrenheit temperatures, and five-percent illumination which severely limited the effectiveness of our night vision devices (NVDs). We conducted link up with my security team at the ORP at 2030, collected ruck sacks, reorganized, and prepared to conduct the final movement of the night to rejoin Team March or Die at the company patrol base, which was located in a bunker complex a half kilometer northeast of the ORP through a hilly and dense forest.

Just prior to 2100, my platoon — cold, wet, and fatigued from the raid and the retrograde to the ORP — departed the ORP and began its final movement. Less than 10 minutes into the movement, one of my Soldiers in the rear of the formation passed a halt signal forward. Looking back, I saw white lights, an immediate indicator of a real-world emergency. Upon arriving at the scene with my radio-telephone operator (RTO), I found my acting platoon sergeant and my platoon medic removing the uniform off one of my machine gunners, who had collapsed, unconscious from heat stroke. He had failed to remove his waterproof jacket during our 30-minute rest in the ORP and had overheated, despite the rain and freezing temperature.

The medic explained to me that the Soldier required immediate evacuation or would possibly suffer permanent brain damage. As the platoon sergeant and medic prepared the Soldier for movement, I immediately assessed possible evacuation options from my current location. The weather and dense forest precluded the possibility of using the Romanian medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) helicopter, and the closest road to our position to conduct a non-standard casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) using a Romanian truck was 400 meters northwest through difficult terrain. Using my RTO's hand microphone, I sent a 9-line MEDEVAC request on his radio over the company net for a truck CASEVAC.

After I received confirmation of my request, I immediately organized the evacuation detail, which consisted of my platoon sergeant, platoon medic, RTO, and six Soldiers to rotate carrying the Soldier on a folding litter, along with my best team leader to navigate us to the road. I ordered the team leader of 2nd Squad's Alpha Team to my position, and we hastily created a simple route using dead reckoning. There was insufficient light for either NVDs or headlamps to quickly and reliably terrain associate, and our global positioning system devices lacked signal in the poor weather. I needed a certain path out of the woods, even if we had to push through harder terrain. I placed the squad leader of 2nd Squad in charge of the rest of the platoon during our evacuation and gave him my five-point contingency plan.

The evacuation detail immediately began movement, and I suppressed my urge to take point when movement slowed as we passed through the dense brush. I maintained contact between the team leader and the litter team, double checked our azimuth and distance, and through my RTO, reconfirmed that the CASEVAC truck was en route and that the aid station was prepared to receive the injured Soldier. As movement further slowed heading uphill and forcing a path through the brambles, I decided to replace the team leader and take point to maintain speed. I ordered him to keep me from moving too far in front of the littered casualty, told my RTO to stay at my heels to



**Romanian 6th Special Forces Brigade soldiers and paratroopers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade conduct a patrol together on 20 November 2014 in Cincu, Romania, as part of Exercise Rubicon.**

maintain radio contact with the CASEVAC, and continued to dead reckon. I broke through the tree line and into the clearing of the road at the pick-up site, just as 1st Platoon's platoon leader crested the road leading the MEDEVAC team in search of my evacuation detail. We loaded the Soldier onto the CASEVAC truck, which evacuated him to the Romanian aid station.

The evacuation detail and I then moved back through the woods to link up with the rest of my platoon, and together we finished our movement to the company patrol base. The next morning at approximately 0400, I evacuated my platoon medic, who discovered upon waking that his cornea had been severely scratched by a branch the night prior while evacuating the injured Soldier. Later that morning at approximately 0730, another Soldier in my platoon experienced a severe anaphylactic reaction while eating a field ration and was only saved from suffocation by an epinephrine shot and then again by a nasopharyngeal airway, initially inserted as a precaution, when the epinephrine wore off on the hour-long MEDEVAC drive from the training area to the Romanian aid station. After stabilizing the Soldier at the aid station, the Romanian medics evacuated him to the closest hospital in Sibiu via the Romanians' IAR-330 PUMA MEDEVAC helicopter. At 0830, I also evacuated a fourth Soldier in my platoon as a low priority due to immersion foot.

After the Romanian MEDEVAC helicopter dropped the one Soldier off at the hospital in Sibiu, it suffered engine failure on its return flight to the Cincu Training Area and crashed at approximately 1040. Members of my company closer to the suspected crash site and their Romanian counterparts immediately formed a search party, which eventually found the wreckage near the Romanian town of Malancrav and evacuated the two surviving passengers. The crash killed eight Romanian soldiers on board and prompted the decision by the Romanian military to cancel the remaining portion of the field exercise. My company and the Romanian Special Forces Company conducted a farewell ceremony and a memorial service for the eight Romanian soldiers on 24 November. C Company and its attachments redeployed as scheduled to our home station in Italy the following day, 25 November.

### **Conclusion**

My experiences during Exercise Rubicon facing real-world emergencies and casualties reinforced several lessons with searing clarity — lessons which made me a better officer and leader. The first lesson is that leaders must quickly grasp the situation they are facing, rapidly form a plan, and then aggressively execute, often under adverse conditions. The second lesson is that there are no second chances, no exercise pauses, no one, or nothing that will save Soldiers or the mission in combat or training except for the actions and decisions of leaders.

The final lesson is that training for war must be difficult and dangerous because war itself is difficult and dangerous.

Soldiers cannot learn leadership in warfare from a textbook alone. Leadership must be practiced in the manner in which it will be executed — in the mud and cold and darkness, weary with exhaustion and weight, and confused by the sounds, smells, and flash of gunfire. My training at the U.S. Military Academy, IBOLC, and Ranger School epitomized this lesson, and it truly prepared me for the trying situations my platoon faced in the cold and rainy conditions in Romania in November 2014.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Emergency deployment readiness exercises are no-notice training exercises designed to test the ability of a unit, usually airborne infantry, to deploy without warning into a combat zone and be prepared to fight.

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