

Training During an Alert

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Today's Army has to be prepared to fight and win in a "come as you are" war, and almost all of its divisions are subject to no-notice alerts and readiness exercises. This means that a great deal of the time immediately preceding an actual deployment is spent "locked in" barracks, marshalling areas, or alert holding areas. Even in rapid deployment units that routinely maintain battalions on short-notice alert, there are often times when political or command decisions can cause units to move to a high state of readiness—and then to sit and wait.

On these occasions, much valuable training time is usually wasted. Units that routinely undergo emergency deployment readiness exercises (EDREs) can and should use this time for training that will fine-tune an already well-trained unit and better prepare it for action.

Obviously, once an alert has been called, it is too late to begin collective training. But in every well-trained unit there are still individual and crew tasks that are highly perishable, that somehow have been neglected or overlooked, or that may apply only to the particular situation for which the unit has been alerted.

One task that falls into this category is something I'll call "weapons handling." Some of our allies call it "skill at arms," which, in addition to marksmanship ability, requires detailed technical knowledge, expertise in assembling and disassembling weapons, rapid reloading, immediate actions, and more than just a passing familiarity with all of the unit's organic weapons.

Other tasks are crew-served weapon drills, handling of enemy prisoners of

war (EPW), first aid, aircraft and armored vehicle recognition, fire direction center procedures, and requesting and adjusting indirect fire and close air support.

With a little imagination and a minimum of training support, time, training areas, or training aids, a unit can conduct many of these tasks during an alert.

An additional benefit of this type of training is that it profitably occupies the soldiers' time and helps to alleviate boredom and harmful speculation. It can be conducted in such a way as to maintain a calm, low-key atmosphere in the holding area. This is particularly important during a real-world contingency alert when units may be "locked down" for days on end.

GET READY...AND WAIT

During such an alert last year at Fort Ord, my unit was ordered to move, within three to five hours, from a post support role to an advanced state of readiness. This included loading and palletizing all the equipment, drawing troop weapons, making final checks of personnel records, and getting the troops aboard transportation for the departure airfield.

But as so often happens in this line of work, once we were ready, we were told to "wait for further instructions." All of our coordinated training had been cancelled, and it wouldn't have been much use to us anyway because we were not permitted to stray far from the unit area. Facing the prospect of an extended wait and then possible deployment into combat, my subordinate leaders and I saw a

training opportunity and began to devise ways to take advantage of it.

First, we found some lessons from the British experience in the Falklands War. During their mobilization and deployment, they had conducted rigorous physical conditioning and daily training on weapons and first aid. Procedures for adjusting indirect fire, preventing cold weather injury, and handling prisoners also received high priorities.

Then I recalled some lessons from my own experience in Grenada as a second lieutenant platoon leader in the areas of EPW handling and military operations on urban terrain (MOUT). Our doctrine on these areas does little to train a soldier for the situations he is most likely to encounter:

- Searching and handling large numbers of civilians and refugees in the battle area who are probably not hostile but among whom may be some weapon-bearing enemy soldiers or deserters.

- Clearing large tracts of buildings and houses that are unoccupied or that are occupied by innocent non-combatants but still must be cleared without unnecessary property damage or loss of life, and with minimum effort and ammunition expenditure.

- Requesting and controlling close air support provided by helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft.

From these examples, we devised our training. First, our physical training program continued. We changed from battle dress to PT clothing and conducted our workouts in the unit area. After determining how much time we could afford to wait for a platoon to return from PT in the event of orders to move, we also



conducted runs of limited duration and distance from the unit area.

The second task of our program was a simple talk-through review of our company tactical SOP. Items that we highlighted included basic unit standards; actions during movement and halts and upon contact; law of land warfare; operations security; reporting; and hand and arm signals.

The training continued with first aid taught by the platoon medics (who were on alert with us). This included a hands-on review of the common tasks such as cardiopulmonary resuscitation, the life-saving steps, treating penetrating wounds and sucking chest wounds, and more advanced techniques such as administering intravenous (IV) solutions. This last task is one that every combat arms soldier should know but one that we had not trained our soldiers to do because of budget constraints and a general reluctance to "waste" IV fluids. But this particular alert situation removed many of these roadblocks—every soldier received instruction in administering IVs, and several in each platoon got a chance to actually administer them.

Our weapons handling training was mainly a refresher, because we conduct this type of training regularly. It includes load, fire, clear, and reduce stoppage drills; rapid reloads from different positions; machinegun and mortar crew drills; and "down gunner" drills with the squad members taking turns manning the machineguns. For dummy ammunition, we used expended blank rounds and links.

POW and search team training emphasized handling civilians and refugees in addition to enemy combatants. We prac-

ticed some techniques of one-man and two-man "live" searches as well as our SOP for searching wounded and dead enemy soldiers.

Our final training task during that day was on methods of requesting and controlling close air support. One of the NCOs from the fire support team taught the class to all the leaders from the fire team level up. Using a sandtable, some toy soldiers, a few cotton balls, models of an Apache helicopter and an F/A-18 Hornet, he was effective in communicating the techniques of employing attacking aircraft and also some of the safety considerations. This training ended with a practical exercise in which leaders were picked from the group, given a target, and tested on their ability to "talk" to the "pilot," help him get his eyes on the target, and avoid fratricide.

In seminar fashion, we discussed the problem of clearing buildings in a third-world urban area with the additional complication of civilian occupants. Some of the ideas that we came up with for this were the following:

- Maintain a low profile; inner and outer walls can easily be fired through.
- Use a signal mirror to see around doorways and into rooms without exposing more than a few fingers to a possible enemy.
- Burst into rooms ready to engage an identifiably hostile target but without throwing a preparatory grenade or spraying the room with automatic fire. (Once it has been determined that the room contains hostile personnel, the rest of that building can be cleared in textbook fashion.)

The training planned for the next day of the alert included PT, more weapon

handling (with the emphasis on refreshing the cross-training the troops had received on weapons other than the ones they were assigned); more hands-on practice administering IVs; classes in aircraft and armored fighting vehicle recognition (concentrating solely on the aircraft and vehicles we could expect to work with or encounter if we were actually deployed); and a sandtable exercise designed to improve leaders' proficiency in calling for and adjusting indirect fire. This would be done in much the same way as the close air support class with a sandtable and a simple sketch map complete with grid lines and coordinates depicting the "terrain" on the sandtable. Finally, to provide a break and a morale boost, a period of organized athletics would be conducted, consisting of volleyball and touch football.

That evening, however, we received the order to stand down, and while the NCOs tended to the breakdown of the pallets and the turn-in of equipment, a couple of the platoon leaders and I reviewed what we had learned. With regard to the training, the alert had shown us that there were some vital tasks that needed greater emphasis in the future—more advanced first aid techniques, and techniques of clearing simple wooden buildings that are "most likely" not occupied by enemy soldiers.

During later discussions, and while collecting comments for an after-action review, the NCOs and officers of the company came to the following conclusion: Our training program for the previous year had done its job and, with the few exceptions mentioned, had prepared us for battle.

As ready and confident as a unit's leaders may feel, though, there is still plenty of room for improvement to guide its future training. Even after the next alert is called, a unit's leaders must use every minute before deployment to polish the skills that will fine-tune it for action.

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