

# A SUPPORT PLATOON IN IRAQ



Specialist Teddy Wade

*HEMMTs carry equipment back to a forward operating base in Iraq.*

**CAPTAIN MARCO J. LYONS**

After finishing the basic infantry officer course at Fort Benning, I looked forward to a career of what I thought would be distinctly infantry experiences such as maneuvering M2 Bradley fighting vehicles and conducting dismounted patrols. The Global War on Terrorism was already underway so I was prepared to contribute in whatever way I could.

What I never expected when I left Fort Benning for U.S. Army Europe was that in a couple of short years I would be leading a platoon of truck operators and fuel specialists in a combat zone. The purpose of this article is to share my experiences with other infantry officers preparing to deploy as support platoon leaders. I wanted to provide a vehicle commander's view of events leading up to and through the majority of this platoon's deployment.

My personal preparations began shortly before being assigned to support platoon six months prior to the battalion's deployment. My company commander directed me to an old acquaintance of his, who was then assigned to the U.S. Army Transportation School. He was responsible for both assembling and developing many of the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) coming out of Afghanistan for truck units operating in tactical convoy operations, and he had also begun turning his attention to the latest lessons learned from OIF.

I learned early on that established doctrine would be of very little use to me in Iraq, and that the best platoons would learn through aggressive use of after action reviews (AARs), experimentation, and as a result of bold leadership at the lowest levels. My plan for success involved a commitment to tireless innovation, experimentation, and inculcating an aggressive, success-orientated climate within the platoon. An exchange of e-mails with a mentor made me feel comfortable that I was on the right track in attempting to develop a "fully tactical" support platoon. This initial contact began a long and detailed process of learning and preparation, both at the individual and platoon levels.

My self-study began with consulting doctrinal materials on truck platoon and convoy operations. I quickly found established transportation doctrine inappropriate to the OIF operating environment because of its obvious emphasis on safety geared more for a training area and movement along built-up, Western-style freeways such as the autobahn in Germany. As a Bradley platoon leader, I had already discovered how I could use Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) resources to improve tactical operations in a training environment. I consulted CALL on tactical convoy operations and stability and support operations which proved a good general

train-up and yielded some useful TTPs.

After some initial, fast-paced study I determined that the next logical step would be to develop an initial SOP specifically designed for the support platoon in a combat zone. I went to my infantry roots with FM 7-8 Rifle Platoon and Squad and FM 7-7j Mechanized Infantry Platoon and Squad (Bradley) as well as the Ranger Handbook, but it was clear that light and mechanized infantry doctrine would not serve my purposes. Although infantry doctrine remains the premier foundation for small unit tactical operations, it is not flexible enough to encompass SOSO and support platoon operations. Also, infantry doctrine is based on levels of communications capability, firepower, and maneuverability that a support platoon will not normally have or easily be able to achieve. After examining SOPs that had been designed for other kinds of units such as scouts, engineers and heavy mortar platoons, I concluded that the best foundation for my platoon SOP would be the Convoy Leader Training Handbook. In my experience, completing an SOP prior to deploying paid great dividends, focused my preparations, and gave the Soldiers an added confidence that their leader was actively preparing for future operations. The importance of a platoon leader writing an SOP is that he has thought through the mission, the operating environment, and possible problems — a requirement of

successful combat leadership.

In the months leading up to our departure for Kuwait and after consulting with the platoon sergeant, I held several platoon-level sensing sessions in order to gauge the Soldiers' concerns and field questions quickly before they festered into debilitating rumors. I made a point of incorporating the battalion chaplain into some of these. The focus of my remarks during these sessions was to explain to the Soldiers as clearly as possible (based on the information I was getting from various sources including from our S2 shop and counterparts in theater who we would be replacing) what was happening in our future sector as well as trends across Iraq. My experience was that the platoon was solid, confident, and felt immensely empowered by having the "truth" and knowing their leader was leveling with them. Had I really believed we were unprepared — which I never did — I could not have stood in front of them and ensured them that every reasonable measure was being taken to ensure success in the mission. It was always stressed that success was in our hands more than a function of "higher's" actions or lack thereof. I always remained confident that there is strength and confidence in knowledge and attempted to impart that attitude to the Soldiers of the platoon.

Taking a cue from the 1st Infantry Division, I stressed from the outset that there are no "convoys," only combat operations. From the line of departure (LD), the platoon would be organized tactically to maximize combat power and not organized simply to facilitate movement from point to point. The Soldiers would receive every possible advantage especially with respect to the benefits of the latest TTPs and other lessons learned (i.e., training would never cease but only become better refined in theater). I made an extra effort to learn as much as possible from the departing unit,

although I declined to incorporate all of their lessons learned. I had already learned that high performance units have know-how, will, and teamwork — and that is what I was determined to achieve within the support platoon. I was determined to develop a "winning culture" that would sustain the Soldiers through high optempo, enemy contact, friendly casualties, and collateral damage. As things turned out, the Soldiers and subordinate leaders excelled in this regard better than I ever could have expected or hoped for. Through the efforts and professionalism of the Soldiers, my aim of being prepared was realized.

From day one of joining the platoon, I insisted on implementing a leadership professional development (LPD) focusing on the upcoming deployment. I was emboldened by the observation, made in a major unit AAR, that Soldiers felt unprepared for OIF. Even though they knew what to expect in a superficial way, they still believed they were unprepared for the strains of full-up combat operations. I would counter this trend by specifically developing combat leaders first and foremost, regardless of MOS or duty position. The LPDs began during a month-long deployment train-up at the Combat Maneuver Training Center, which also included a convoy live-fire training exercise. I took full advantage of the captive audience and used most evenings in the training area barracks to present briefs on tactics and discuss related issues with the squad and section leaders. We discussed the nature of continuous operations, the importance of casualty and mass casualty evacuations, the Troop Leading Procedures, and weapons maintenance in a desert environment, among numerous other topics. Without an exception, and somewhat to my surprise, the sergeants turned into eager students. They approached the topics with a seriousness completely appropriate to the situation. The

coming months would prove that they had taken those initial lessons to heart. The LPDs allowed me to establish a mind-set — offensive, confident, flexible — in the platoon's leaders before we ever left home station. It was as important for them to have confidence in me as it was for me to have confidence in their combat leadership capability.

The platoon's leaders were junior in almost every way. Only one was serving correctly in rank and MOS according to the modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE). All the others were serving one or two grades above their rank. Despite this, my statements early on and my actions later in theater made it clear that individuals would be kept in all-important leadership positions only by merit of demonstrated competence, which in my mind meant also a willingness and capability to constantly learn and improve. Within the platoon we could draw on only a small amount of relevant experience. The platoon sergeant was a Desert Storm veteran and a section sergeant had served with the 4th Infantry Division (Mechanized) during OIF.



Staff Sergeant Alfred Johnson

*A Soldier mans the turret of an HMMWV during a convoy mission in Iraq.*

Considering this gulf between experience and expectation, it became essential to the success of the platoon that every available NCO be trained as a competent and flexible assistant patrol leader (APL). Not only did the APLs serve a key role in mission preparation and execution, but they also assimilated and passed on the “winning culture” to every Soldier in the platoon.

The most important of the tactician’s tools, the Troop Leading Procedure is time-tested and is based fundamentally on the practices of winning units. The TLP proved its worth to the platoon tenfold and was the single most influential action we took in theater, by admission of the headquarters and headquarters company commander and many within the platoon. The TLP — done to standard — simply served as a concrete tool for assuring every mission was well planned, rehearsed, prepared for and executed properly. It gave subordinate leaders a detailed direction, and useable standards, in how to successfully prepare for and execute missions. The TLP began with the initial warning order and did not end until the lessons learned in the AAR had been incorporated back into the platoon’s SOP and training plan.

In the fast changing and asymmetric operating environment of Iraq, the successful platoon must have a system for capturing and implementing lessons learned as quickly as possible. The mission of the support platoon in Iraq can be so diverse and rapidly changing that to be successful, second only to forward looking leadership, the organization must be mentally flexible and adaptive. We conducted an AAR immediately after each mission when we returned to the forward operating base. Lessons learned from AARs in theater resulted in five distinct editions of the SOP over the course of a year. The SOP spread over time through the task force in bits and pieces, proving that every kind of unit can learn from the experiences of others without respect to MOS or combat function. The AARs allowed me and the other leaders to learn from the Soldiers, from their unique perspective, and with time the Soldiers saw that their leaders listened and sometimes incorporated their ideas into the SOP, and this led them to observe even more closely overall mission execution and their own individual actions

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within that execution. The cycle between observation, discussion, recommendations, and implementation was kept as tight as possible — lessons learned from the AAR were sometimes incorporated into the very next mission. I prepared the leaders early on to expect to have to learn fast and “adjust fire” often, to expect change as a constant—the AAR process that I insisted on merely reinforced that expectation. I believe the net result was that every leader in the platoon understood intuitively that we were a “learning organization,” learning as proactive students as we went along. We learned that AARs, done correctly, not only progressively improved unit operations but served to empower Soldiers and leaders in just the right way; they became critical of their own performance and comfortable with making on-the-spot corrections of others no matter the situation or the ranks of those involved.

The platoon’s mission remained relatively stable. The platoon conducted more than 120 missions over a year, encompassing every major form of support platoon operation, from class of supply pulls and pushes, refuel-on-the-move (ROM) missions, emergency class of supply and backhaul missions, to logistics resupply point (LRP) missions. We drew all classes of supply from the brigade support area that was to the north of our FOB along a relatively well maintained main supply route (MSR). For several periods, each lasting several weeks to months, we pushed logistics packages (LOGPACs) to patrol bases on a 24 or 48-hour basis. The support we received from the line companies in securing the trucks during movements proved essential; however the AIF still attacked with IEDs and mines despite the

presence of escorting M1s and M2s. We also conducted LRPs during large task force and higher operations but these actually proved to be the easiest to plan and the most straightforward to execute. The platoon was able to execute an essentially doctrinal mission even if the operating environment dictated that most of our methods were anything but standard.

The platoon’s command M1114s came equipped with Force XXI Battle Command Brigade and Below (FBCB2) which turned out to be essential for enhancing situational understanding during all phases of mission execution. Leaders were able to focus on key tasks such as making necessary radio linkup with adjacent units and units in support, as opposed to being tied up just trying to figure out exactly where they were and where they were in relation to everyone else in the battlespace. FBCB2 also enhanced mission planning and preparation because it enabled mission leaders to rehearse from “screenshots”—the soldiers could visualize the terrain, they could “see” danger areas and potential ambush sites. The benefits of FBCB2 as both a mission planning and execution tool came down to leaders exploiting the technology to enhance traditional tools such as the TLP, actions on contact, and battle drills. FBCB2 was a combat multiplier by enabling our leaders to actually focus on soldiers and lead during mission execution.

The goal of the platoon was for every vehicle crew to be equipped with a handheld radio for inter-unit communication. This goal was only met after a civilian electronics business was convinced to donate over twenty units to the platoon. The importance of the radios proved to be more psychological than anything; the power of the crews to communicate during mission (something truck operators are not used to having) should not be overlooked.

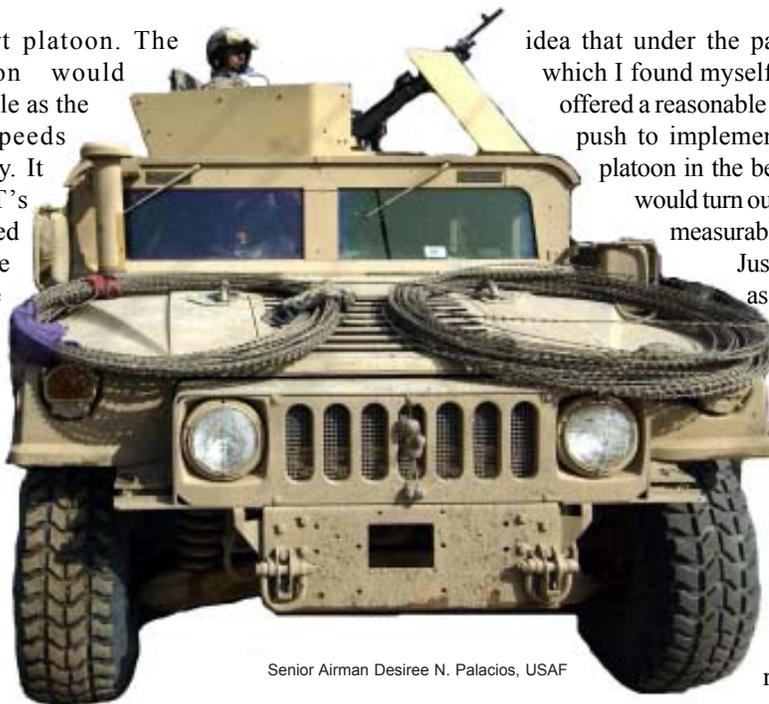
The platoon gained extensive experience operating both along MSRs and in an urban environment. These two operating environments were very different and required very different approaches. Naturally the MOS-trained truck operators were most at home on the MSRs in situations that resembled their training experiences.

The initial response from subordinate leaders was that the urban environment was

“no-go” terrain for the support platoon. The assumption was the platoon would automatically be far more vulnerable as the HEMTTs traveled at slower speeds winding their way through the city. It was assumed that the HEMTT’s turning radius and supposedly limited maneuverability would preclude effective operation amidst the chaotic urban sprawl, and that local national traffic and pedestrians would nullify the benefits of the platoon’s heavy firepower. Experience turned this assumption on its ear. The second half of the deployment — once the task force had reentered the city — saw the platoon executing most of its operations in and around urban environments. As the mission changed and the platoon’s leadership continued the process of aggressive AARs, the so-called dangers of the urban environment were de-mystified in the minds of the soldiers. They learned that urban environments are not necessarily more dangerous though they do require specific preparations and TTP. The three hundred and sixty degree, three dimensional fight in urban operations requires vigilant security, overlapping fields of fire, concise and rapid communications, and a level of situational understanding far above what is usually required on an open MSR.

The qualities of the anti-Iraqi forces (AIF) in our sector changed noticeably over the course of the deployment. During the early months of our operations the AIF launched mass, but horribly uncoordinated attacks. Around the time of the Transfer of Sovereignty (28 June 2004), the composition and operations of the AIF changed. More foreign fighters appeared and attacks began to show some resemblance to fire-and-maneuver tactics. It was apparent that they were attempting to learn from their experiences and it also appeared that they were spreading their own lessons learned throughout parts of Iraq. AIF tactics which were seen as successful in Baghdad, for example, soon appeared in our sector.

The aggressive and imaginative leadership of this platoon internalized a long list of lessons learned. We learned to AAR everything—there was something to learn in most of what we did no matter how routine it appeared at first. We learned what all successful small unit combat leaders know: trust in and execute faithfully the Troop Leading Procedure during every mission. Train all leaders to a level where they can either lead or assist in the leading of all kinds of combat patrols. The success of our mission came down to flexible thinkers and versatile actors. In general, all the lessons learned that we identified over the course of our deployment pointed to emphasizing an offensive mind-set and stressing the basics. The basics are many but they include proper radio operation, battle drills, land navigation, casualty treatment and evacuation, and weapons maintenance. I was guided by the



Senior Airman Desiree N. Palacios, USAF

idea that under the particular circumstances in which I found myself, I would try anything that offered a reasonable degree of success—I would push to implement a dozen changes in the platoon in the belief that three or four ideas would turn out to work especially well and measurably contribute to our success.

Just as important to this topic as all the successful actions we took are the things that we were, for whatever reason, not able to achieve. I believed in the utility of a very large, walk-able terrain model, detailed, durable, and all weather, but lack of physical space on a small, crowded FOB precluded this. A large terrain model was also not realistic since the ability for us to operate freely outside in

the open was severely curbed by the fact that we were constantly under threat of indirect fire attacks. I also wished for but never succeeded in acquiring a dedicated mission preparation/debrief room, with air conditioner (necessary in the hot summer months), completely sealable for OPSEC reasons, and not used for any other purpose. Both the mission leaders and the soldiers deserved a physical space where they could focus their attention on the mission free of distractions, and where all needed supplies and resources were on-hand, such as satellite images, vehicle models for rehearsing actions on contact, and a table for thoroughly inspecting mission essential items. The need for this was felt throughout the deployment.

General George S. Patton was lucky enough to be in position to oversee the early formation of the 2nd Armored Division and its transformation into a highly disciplined unit of high esprit de corps. What he was able to accomplish with the division helped greatly to solidify his reputation as a superb trainer, strict disciplinarian, and aggressive combat leader. A man of no small ego, Patton had to be reminded by General Eisenhower that he had not made the 2nd Armored Division, but that the 2nd Armored had made him. Likewise, whatever I was able to accomplish was due to the capabilities, professionalism, and all-American drive of the Soldiers in this platoon. They exemplified the confident warrior and displayed excellent, mature judgment each and every day. They served their country proudly and expertly. They maintained a very high level of morale and always remained mission focused. This article is dedicated to the fighting Soldiers, America’s youth, who accepted and trusted in their leadership to a degree that I never could have imagined possible.

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