

GUARD PLATOON ASSISTS WITH HURRICANE RELIEF EFFORTS

FIRST LIEUTENANT PAOLO SICA

My intent is to provide a narrative and analysis of my platoon's operations in Louisiana in support of Hurricane Katrina and Rita relief activities during September 2005. At the time, I was serving as the platoon leader for the Reconnaissance Platoon, HHC, 2nd Battalion, 112th Infantry, 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, Pennsylvania Army National Guard.

Background

Expediency and some similarities encourage the equivocation of reservist and full-time Soldiers. However, guardsmen, both officer and enlisted, join and remain at their home stations for reasons readily distinguishable from the typical Regular Army (RA) enlistee or academy graduate. Phrases and concepts such as a "standing army" and "(Constitutional) militia" don't frequently enter into Army banter, but are germane to the comparison. To mistake guardsmen for being RA Soldiers of a different tempo or caliber would be a grave error. For example, until recently, we held the reasonable and popular expectation of accomplishing far different tasks than the RA; peace-enforcement and brief disaster relief come to mind, missions at which reservists are naturally proficient and best-suited.

For 36 nonconsecutive days out of an average year, I am directly responsible for the training and welfare of the 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team's Reconnaissance Platoon (Pennsylvania Army National

Guard). There's a milk crate packed with loose-leafed FMs and a duffel bag stenciled "DRILL" in my trunk for the "one weekend a month" I get to go train. It's an ideal arrangement since I relish life as an American civilian, yet admire our country's military tradition and am proud of my forebears' service.

Task organization

My platoon sergeant, Sergeant 1st Class Randall Diehl, is a Vietnam veteran and retired police officer. He was the Recon platoon sergeant when it was the Scout platoon and before it moved from Tyrone, Pa., to the Lewistown armory, which makes him at once the senior NCO and platoon historian. Our muster includes a plumber, a photographer/meteorologist, corrections officers, and assorted wage-workers; most were born and raised within 50 miles of the armory. This diversity of skill

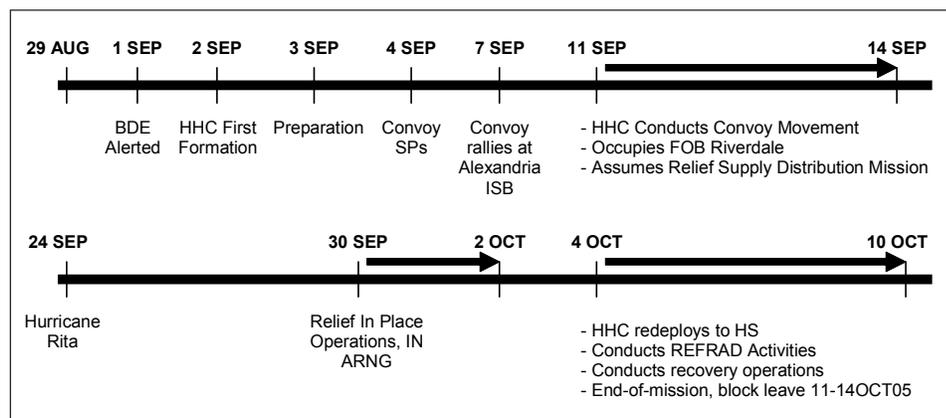
constitutes a transparent attachment to the platoon in that almost every Soldier has a civilian skill.

In September 2005, the platoon was missing six of its best men, all of whom volunteered to accompany the 55th Brigade to OIF when the opportunity arose in February. This left us with 18 scouts, our individual equipment, and sufficient crew-served weapons to mount on however many turtleback HMMWVs are available for training in a given month.

Timeline

On Thursday morning, Sept. 1, 2005, I was four days into law school at Widener University, when 1st Sergeant Michael Carper called me and told me to be at the armory the following morning. I explained things to Dean of Students Elizabeth G. Simcox, who promised I would be welcome back next year, and my academic

Figure 1 — Deployment Timeline



scholarship would carry over. (It is very important that guardsmen select a university that is military-friendly.) At home, my wife, Sue, was ready to assist with a quick pre-combat inspection (PCI) of my rucksack and duffel bag as I double-checked the lock on the gun cabinet, the locks on the windows, and backed up my laptop to DVD+R, much the same routine as leaving for vacation. The following morning at 0700, the armory at Lewistown was alive with excitement; a series of Emergency Management Assistance Contracts (EMACs) had been triggered by Hurricane Katrina's Aug. 29 landfall, and we were to send troops and equipment south to the area of relief operations (ARO). All junior officers were expected to deploy, although there was no stoploss in effect, and Soldiers enrolled in academic programs could be exempted on a case-by-case basis.

Situational awareness

Having completed 16.5 continuing education credits of distance learning through the Emergency Management Institute, I was able to explain to my peers and subordinates what was occurring, in terms of how the ARNG fit into the National Response Plan and emergency management protocols. As per the brigade warning order, Task Force Paxton (2nd Battalion, 112th Infantry) of Task Force Griffin (56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team), would conduct relief operations of an unknown nature in the vicinity of New Orleans.

First Lieutenant Luke Shinskie, our S2 and an aspiring minister, began the Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB) and used various commercial computerized mapping services to generate maps for the trip. Forecast threats to the force included roving hooligans and the more realistic threat of disease and spilled industrial toxins. First Lieutenant Cara Walters provided me with a summary of chemical and biological threats likely to be encountered, which I relayed to 1LT Shinskie, aiding in the IPB. The medics scrounged for as many vaccination doses as were available to catch everyone up before entering New Orleans, which they eventually succeeded in doing. We were fortunate to have Sergeant Edward Corcelius, an ordained minister in the "real world," as the chaplain's assistant. Absent a permanently assigned chaplain, he provided consistent and effective support to our Soldiers, as two substitute chaplains did consecutive stints with us.

Packing list/PCIs

We packed as we would for annual training (AT), that being the point of reference for extended operations. In addition to battalion SOP "battle rattle," shrewd additions included folding cots, rechargeable batteries, power inverters, cell phones, laptops, FRS radios, and ample quantities of tobacco, paperbacks, and cash to sustain us no matter the conditions. I bought hip waders, although they were never called to action and were later returned for refund.

Preparation

In the last days of August's AT, Captain Shick had tasked my platoon to make over the motor pool and dispose of accumulated decades' worth of detritus and that summer's wasps' nests. Mortar Platoon pitched in with gusto, and the treasure we unearthed (c.1966 ring mounts, brand-new slave cables, M2 .50 flash hiders, and barrel gloves) was appropriately allocated before pitching the

rest of it into a closely monitored bonfire. Within a few days, we'd managed to match mystery keys to locks, logbooks to vehicles, and we PMCS'ed everything that moved (or refused to). CPT Shick tasked the remainder of HHC to clear out common areas; organize and stencil individual lockers and platoon cages; unpack, clean, and label tents of all sizes and eras; and conduct individual showdown inspections before calling annual training a wrap. Less than a month later, our commander's tenacity and exertion was paying off in spades. This prescience alone could be credited with our successful execution.

Of course, there were briefings to endure; personnel files to review; state active duty forms to fill out (until Federal funds kicked in and we became Title 10); heat casualties and nonswimmers to segregate; and HMMWVs (from HHC, 3-103rd AR in neighboring Lewisburg) to borrow, inventory and assign, so it was not until Sunday morning that half of the company was hurtling south, buckled up and wearing patrol caps at a jaunty cant. The rest of HHC would ride down on chartered buses because there wasn't any room remaining for them in the tactical vehicles.

Deployment

As convoy commander, I had three M1025s, 15 M998s, seven M35A2 Vietnam-era 2 1/2 tons, five M923s 5 tons, and assorted trailers, in addition to the Combat Repair Team's (CRT's) organic vehicles to account for. The trucks were without SINCGARS, so we sandwiched them between HMMWVs. I led from near the front, while the medics and CRT trailed, to service any breakdowns or accidents. Within 10 minutes of departure, CPT Shick's HMMWV made the ultimate sacrifice and gracefully coasted to the side of Route 322S, crackling out of SINCGARS range. He caught up with us later that day. This would not be the last vehicular casualty of the 1,200-mile convoy, but owing to a thorough convoy briefing and rehearsal of vehicle breakdown procedures, the convoy made its hard times, and we kept accountability.

Fueling

An SOP for best managing fueling stops was developed on the fly: SFC Diehl and Sergeant 1st Class Robert Megahan, Mortar platoon sergeant, traveled 10-15 minutes ahead of the company convoy and assessed the brigade's planned fuel stops. Often,



Photos by 1st Lt. Paolo Sica

Nearing the hurricane-affected region, telecommunications failures made our Voyager cards useless. Once in New Orleans, we had our own fuelers.



During the convoy down to New Orleans, the brigade had its first bivouac at a truckstop in Marion, Va.

brigade elements would jam up the planned location, and our lead element would, instead, guide us into an alternate truck stop that would accept our Voyager card. Sergeant 1st Class Russell Hunt, HHC's senior medic and a civilian truck driver, gave us a useful primer on truck stop culture, and a small group of NCOs, led by Staff Sergeant Joseph Rogal, assumed responsibility for directing traffic into fueling lanes, maintaining convoy integrity, and safely moving tactical vehicles among anxious civilian POVs and 18-wheelers.

Maintenance

Vehicle safety, security, and sensitive items accountability were leaders' intuitive concerns, and for four days, we traveled, dominating the interstates, staying over in Marion, Va.; Hurricane, Tenn.; and Pearl, Miss. Brigade HQ led the way and contracted for hot meals on the local economies so that we were always well-fed and in high spirits as dusk fell, and we cordoned off our vehicles with folding cots.

The battalion CRT, recently reduced in size from a mechanized organization to a more spartan SBCT table of organization and equipment (TO&E), worked tirelessly into the night, arranging for the evacuation of what was irreparable and had been left behind. Inarguably, CRT set the mark for motivation from day 1. Despite a drought of Class IX (repair parts), which would persist throughout the entire deployment, the wheels kept turning.

Simultaneously, there arose a zeal for PMCS unlike ever before. CPT Shick had taken the Boy Scout motto to heart in his review of load plans, so that his Soldiers could encamp, become self-sufficient anywhere, and be a net asset to any relief effort. This level of preparation involved a lot of equipment, including concertina wire, pickets, cots, kitchen equipment and tents. This was equipment that had to be cross-loaded whenever a truck broke down, so PMCS was fastidiously performed.

Comms

Our communication was primarily commercial cell phone, from H-hour to mission complete. This was for a number of reasons, none owing to improper maintenance or lack of equipment. While the 2 1/2 tons had no radios, I soon learned that they needed to be kept between vehicles that did, or would travel on, independent of the convoy, long after the rest of us had taken an exit. The road noise, compounded by temporary hearing loss resulting from the truck's routing of exhaust directly into the passenger's right ear, was such that I had to keep my cellphone's "vibrate+ring" flush against my beltline, to notice an incoming call. I wore foam earplugs and encouraged all Soldiers to do the same, explaining the irreversible effects of dangerous decibel levels.

When my phone rang, I had to activate the speakerphone and hold it flush against my ear to hold an intelligible conversation with the caller. To keep my phone charged,

I permanently married a 12V car charger and a set of alligator clips to one of the two 12V batteries under my seat. This worked well for three weeks, until one day the entire arrangement ignited, and I had to henceforth rely on intermittent AC power in the rear. Regardless, cell phones were our lifeline, and at the earliest opportunity, CPT Shick ordered a phone directory by bumper number (driver & assistant driver), noting commercial carrier; same-carrier calling was usually free, and the financial impact of the deployment on Soldiers needed to be minimized. From H-hour to H+18, I received 31 separate calls, averaging two minutes each.

In urban terrain, the SINCGARS' limited range was further diminished, until eventually, it was used only to report departure and return from the FOB. Certain cellphone networks were operational on our arrival, and their coverage improved daily. Toward the end of our relief operations, phones were issued briefly before being collected up again, and HQ's phone provider changed. This introduced minor confusion and emphasized the need for detailed handovers and daily meetings. Needless to say, without the use of civilian communication networks and, particularly, personal cellphones, operations would have been greatly hampered.

Alexandria ISB

We threw down chock blocks Wednesday evening, Sept. 7, at Alexandria Intermediate Staging Base (ISB), 190 miles northwest of New Orleans. The next four days were fraught with anticipation, as higher HQ labored to find out who was in charge and how to get us out of the open-air hangers and to work as soon as possible. The other half of the company, along with the acting battalion commander, Major Eric Zimmerman, caught up with us later that night, after having been deposited at the northern edge of the Slidell Airport runway. It was obvious that the operation here was amply-funded. While at Alexandria, we were fed well by contractors, the dining hall was outfitted with air conditioning, and a kiosk with washers and dryers was constructed across the street from the barracks.

CPT Shick seized this opportunity to fit in company-wide training that wouldn't ordinarily squeeze into the mission essential task list (METL); we qualified

every last man on the HMMWV and 2 1/2-ton and 5-ton trucks and delivered refresher classes on SINCGARS operation, rollover drills, and other germane topics.

Meanwhile, familiar with the crippling malaise that accompanies indeterminate lengths of “dead time,” I kick-started Recon PLT’s PT program. The program persisted throughout the deployment and may be at least partially credited with pushing every scout to pass November’s APFT. The rejuvenating effects of PT cannot be overemphasized, and it is a valuable regrouping activity when conducting decentralized, squad-sized operations in addition to numerous garrison duties.

Alexandria à New Orleans

Our brigade was eventually understood to be organized under Joint Task Force Pelican, a collection of Guard units peaking at 50,000-plus Soldiers. We got the word to move Sunday morning, Sept. 11, and were back on the road just after noon. Nearing the city, a military checkpoint had been established at Luling, and the convoy slowed to a halt. My HMMWV was third from the trail element when we heard screeching tires rapidly approach from our rear — I told my crew to brace themselves. We heard metal crumple once, twice, and then our own vehicle was struck. We were all OK, and I raced to the rear of the convoy to find Staff Sergeant Joshua Thompson’s vehicle crushed at the right rear passenger side. SSG Thompson had made it out through the front passenger-side window, and as soon as we had Specialist Jeremy Hyatt’s door off, SFC Hunt was on the scene with his medics.

The driver and left passenger were OK, but SPC Hyatt had taken the brunt of the impact and was bleeding from the head, moaning semi-coherently. The HMMWV’s plastic fuel tank ruptured, diesel making the roadway slippery wet, while the drunk driver’s vehicle, a white Ford F-150, was situated a few feet away at a right angle. Smoke was curling up from under the dash, and the elderly man held up a limp, broken wrist when I demanded he unlock his door. A pickup truck with four Hispanic men neared the scene, and I gestured for them to assist. With little hesitation, they took to prying his door open, and were soon joined by our

medics, who extracted, stabilized, and treated the man.

Major Christopher Reed, S3, had calmly assessed the situation and made several phone calls. An ambulance arrived within 20 minutes, along with firefighters and Louisiana state police.

The convoy pressed on past refineries and offshore rigs, across the antediluvian Huey P. Long bridge. After a few right-hand turns, we were happy to find a mountain of unattended box lunches at our FOB, the Riverside Middle School in Jefferson Parish, situated at the western fringe of metro New Orleans, adjacent to the northern bank of the Mississippi River. SPC Hyatt was stitched up and back among friends before we laid down cots that night, and nobody wanted to go to sleep.

FOB Occupation

While exploring our surroundings the next morning, we found the city bore a strong resemblance to a MOUT training facility over drill weekend; an assortment of uniformed personnel and vehicles were present, wielding a variety of weapons and claiming all manners of authority, but no civilians in need of rescue could be found. A slight disappointment did set it in, similar to that of well-intentioned blood donors in the days after 9/11, in the realization that we would probably not be saving anyone’s life.

The Superdome had long since been evacuated, and streets were abandoned, with the exception of a festival-like media cluster at the riverfront edge of the French Quarter. The maroon-bereted 82nd Airborne Division had taken ownership of New Orleans’ most recognizably stricken areas and inhabited a sophisticated Emergency Operation Center (EOC) in the Hyatt hotel. We were free to roam the barren city and its outskirts. Vehicles sat parked helter-skelter on medians and front yards in a futile effort to obtain refuge from now-receded waters.

Despite the grounded pleasure boats and toppled infrastructure less than a mile to our east, the school campus had sustained only minor damage in the hurricane, and most of the work that lay ahead was removing debris and fallen trees and mitigating water damage. CPT Shick was designated the mayor of our living area and established his own priorities of work, absent higher orders. After obtaining permission from a visiting school official, we moved into the air-conditioned elementary building, careful to move desks into the hallway and displace furniture in such a way that it could be precisely repositioned.

First Lieutenant Josh Herr, S6, and his assistant, Specialist Ronald Mack, persuaded the school’s computer network to come alive, and those of us with wi-fi laptops made them available for common use. Previously, I had been using my cellphone and a USB cable to connect to a wireless internet network with limited success.

Our NCOs enthusiastically set to work with chain saws and squad-sized elements, clearing the school of fallen trees, while the CRT began renovating the on-campus cottage of a hearing-impaired woman. A Montana-based tractor-trailer outfit called Big Sky Catering had established a superb dining facility at the southern edge of the football field, and with it came showers and associated laundry services, but we still lacked a bona fide mission.



In Luling, La., the trail vehicle of the convoy was struck by a drunk driver.



As the unit approached the Superdome, a hearse bears evidence of the high-water mark.

Relief Distribution: Gretna 1 POD

We didn't wait long — on Sept. 14, battalion issued the operations order (OPORD) for Operation Independence Relief, and Recon Platoon went to work at Gretna 1 Point of Distribution (POD), north of I-90 and off Rt. 23 (AKA the Bingo Palace parking lot). Gretna 1 was one of 18 PODs operated by the brigade. A drive-through POD is most similar to an Army "service station" resupply point. At first, we alternated workdays with the Mortar Platoon, until 1st Lieutenant Joseph Reffner, the Mortar platoon leader, was put in charge of Gretna 2 a mile south. The "palace" was a WWII-era Quonset hut, housing the presumed bingo king's collection of motorboats and soggy, displaced insulation. The front windows had been blown in, but at least the parking lot had a thin layer of macadam. With the new mission of relief distribution came a lexicon of improbable acronyms and phrases, not to be found in FM 1-02 or any all-encompassing dictionary. Every government agency and non-governmental organization (NGO) had its own terminology, so I made it a point to politely ask for a definition of anything I didn't understand fully.

Texas LSSIM & POD equipment

The POD came equipped with two 10K propane-powered forklifts, one diesel-

powered skid-loader, nine portable toilets, two gasoline-powered lightsets, two pallet jacks and various traffic-control devices. It had been operated by the Lone Star State Incident Management Team for the previous two weeks, and I was given a briefing on operating hours and procedures by a representative of that organization, "Jeff," who would check back every couple of days to see what we needed. Jeff was the first personality to fit into our daily operations, and by his ability to conjure critical tangibles (propane fuel, FEMA newsletters, spraypaint, EZ-UP sunshades) and services (trash pickup, portable toilet maintenance), he came to embody the fast action and frank manner of his agency, the Texas Forest Service. Of equal utility was Don Royal, a retired NBA player, local celebrity and liaison to Gretna's mayor. As an infantry unit, we lacked military-licensed forklift operators. However, as a National Guard unit, we had more than one professional forklift operator among us and many willing amateurs.

Supply

Our resupply was by semi-truckload from the regional staging area (RSA) located northwest in Harrahan, operated by the men of B Company; they in turn received supplies from a receiving and distribution (R&D) site farther north.

Truck-driverland

Almost everything was transported by commercial truck-drivers. These drivers were single-minded in their intent: to "get (their) paper signed!" By my signing their paper, I attested that they had arrived with quantity *X* of item *Z* and had remained on-site until their payload was depleted. This created some interesting arrangements. As I learned in a series of conversations, the truck-drivers made their livelihood by contracting with "brokers" to carry trailers from point to point. The brokers kept up to 50 percent of the contract for themselves and would occasionally cheat the drivers altogether.

Still, the money to be made in this time of crisis was astounding. Some drivers at my POD, remaining there for as long as five days, were earning as much as \$800/day, regardless of mileage. So for those drivers being paid daily, there was a powerful incentive to remain static as long as possible. To that end, drivers being paid by mileage sought to swap full trailers for empty with those paid by the day and "get their paper signed" more or less immediately, so they could grab another trailer, sometimes on a "trip to nowhere." The per-mile drivers would also pressure me to cross-level their trailer with the daily drivers, provided they were hauling the same commodity.

Accountability

Nobody was sure who was paying for what — while a local fuel company arrived infrequently to fuel our mobile light sets, they weren't allowed to provide fuel to the "reefers" (refrigerated trailers). However, since the reefer trailers were often blocked in by other trailers, and the \$5,000 worth of ice in each reefer would soon melt if the belly tanks weren't kept full, I made allowances. I also advised the drivers as to the location of our FOB, where it appeared absolutely anyone ambulatory could be well-fed and showered. I didn't have to sign for anything on the site, so we secured the pallet jacks by locking them in the reefers overnight and the forklifts by taking the keys at the end of the day. As a result of this refreshing disinterest in paper shuffling, there were minimal distractions from the mission, which we interpreted to mean "Distribute As Much Stuff As Possible."

Need for speed

At first, the Mortar and Recon platoons, reinforced with the fire support element (FSE) and sniper section respectively, alternated days at Gretna 1. This fostered a good-natured competition: who could run through more vehicles in a day? We experimented with four to five ‘stations,’ one to two lanes of oncoming traffic, and various opening statements, doubling and eventually tripling our volume of customers. The criteria for distribution was based on FEMA planning factors and refined according to Soldiers’ good judgment.

Guidance on how to distribute supplies wasn’t emphasized, so whereas another company’s POD took to distributing “one each” food, water, ice, tarp to every vehicle, regardless of claimed need, my NCOs took an active role in ensuring a more equitable distribution of supplies. If a beat-up Chevy truck from Plaquemines asked for enough food and water for a family of seven, no problem. If a brand-new BMW 740il came through with a mumbled request for MREs only, he might bear some scrutiny. The lack of established TTPs for this type of noncombat operation was much less confounding than it was stimulating. Undoubtedly, doctrinal publications governing the assumption of civilian relief operations could be published, illustrated in detail and disseminated. But on “one weekend a month,” there exists time only to train on the barest essentials of your unit’s wartime mission. Anything else would be another distraction and dead weight in the rucksack. All we needed to bring to this “fight” was our Army Values and the ability to adapt.

Unannounced arrivals

Numerous NGOs, generally Christian faith-based, were attracted by the buzz and would send their leader to seek me out, to see what they could do for the locals and for themselves. Depending on what they came bearing, we could achieve synergy; one church-group, without any coordination, began distributing baloney and cheese sandwiches in the incoming traffic lane, at great danger to themselves and to the impediment of our operations. I moved them to a safer location and gave them instructions on when and how to distribute their sandwiches, and all was well. One organization brought with them an assortment of baby-care products. I situated them to the right of our exit lane. Two nonaligned female physician assistants arrived, offering free vaccinations and a useful prescription-writing service, since a pharmacy was open down the block. I emplaced them to the front of the baby-care station. A men’s Christian group came BBQ’ing, and I put them right on the corner, to attract wary pedestrians. I tried to maintain a clear separation between my own operations and those of NGOs to avoid the appearance of endorsement, but this was challenging due to our close confines.

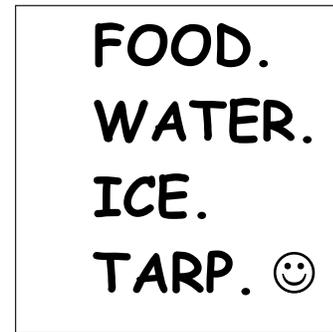
On occasion, we would be the ones receiving aid; in an awe-inspiring sleight-of-hand, one drive-through customer had to “clear out some room in (his) trunk” by setting two ice-cold cases of beer on the curb and driving away with a thumbs-up before we understood what had happened. Accustomed to General Order #1’s damnable abjuration, I gave it to the truck-drivers. Future gifts included cases of indigenous Zatarain’s rice, bushels of malodorous beads, and very sweet little old ladies bringing us baked goods and ice cream. The Bingo King made a brief appearance, and rewarded us with still more beads, the peculiar

currency of the region. Back at FOB Riverdale, a lucky few sampled illicit, authentic gumbo before higher HQ found out and declared it (rightly) unsanitary.

POD TTP

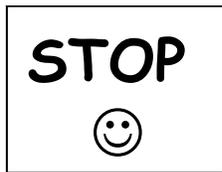
In determining what each vehicle would receive, we adopted a “tell, don’t ask” approach. After having waited in line for 5-10 minutes, drivers tended to slow as they rotated through the line, eyeing up everything we had, careful to not miss out on anything. And if you made the mistake of asking “Whaddaya need?” a truly thought-out response could ensue, with follow-up questions like “What do you have?” or “What can I get?” or “Oh, can I get some of those too?”

After a few days of enduring window-shoppers, I took steps to abbreviate the relief transaction, starting with a prominent spray-painted sign at the entrance, duct-taped to the traffic barrier, declaring:



The theme was consistent, as SFC Diehl, Staff Sergeant George Webb, Sergeant Philip Schratweiser and Sergeant David Plummer ensured that our Soldiers declared “Food, water, ice, tarp. Whaddaya need?” at every vehicle’s halt. The customer might reply “Well, I need MREs for my family of five, we’re good on water, and some ice in the cooler please.” The Soldier would confirm “OK you’re getting food for five, ice in the back, and no water, no tarp,” at which point the customer would vacillate and say “Yeah, I better get two of them tarps” as he/she saw bright blue imported tarps flying into other customers’ SUVs. At once, doors and tailgates flew open, and a couple of Soldiers would rush to fill the order, instilling shock and awe in the gracious customer. Noting the success of the improvised signage, I added more signs to the service lane, including:





The smileys were not in jest; I made them uniform throughout our signage and encouraged friendly demeanors among the Soldiers to defuse short tempers in the sultry weather. The end result was that customers commented on how much more pleasant we were to visit than some other PODs.

When asked to capture the TTP for the Paxton Relief Lessons Learned (AAR), 1LT Reffner and I made separate submissions, combined and edited by CPT Shick:

POD Operations

(1) Discussion. There is little to no doctrine on how to establish and operate a food or supply distribution point. The platoon operated the distribution point similar to a traffic control point. The only difference was that there was no searching of vehicles. As our POD operations became more efficient or we were able to send more Soldiers to operate the PODs, we were surprised to find out that the length of the lines of cars waiting at the PODs did not change very much. After several days of operations, we discovered that people that were truly in need were willing to wait no matter how long it took us to serve them. People who were not so much in need, but merely wanted additional supplies or support would be less likely to wait in a long line. Therefore, in the early days our lines were mainly made up a very needy people. Later in the operation or on days that we had more Soldiers working the PODs to speed up the process, we found the lines to be just as long, but made up of people who were less needy or those who were simply stockpiling relief supplies at their homes. Therefore, “sustainability” must be the watchword for continuous POD

ops. Focus on the reliability of your supply lines and the workload management of your Soldiers as the keys to supporting extended operations, (emph. added) and not so much on the average length of the lines at the PODs. Many days there were different NGOs arriving at our PODs desiring to distribute different relief supplies then we offered. These NGOs could be easy to integrate or difficult, largely depending on their organization and the amount of space available at the POD.

(2) Recommendations. The first Soldier a civilian seeking aid will meet is a road guard. Road guards were used to control the flow of traffic coming in and out of the POD and to ensure vehicles do not attempt to enter into unauthorized areas. The number of road guards depends on personnel and traffic considerations. The next person the civilian meets is the “greeter”. This Soldier is placed about 50 meters before distribution stations. He ensures traffic does not “rush” a distribution station. The greeter can also be used to engage personnel in vehicles with IO topics, identify personnel with special needs, provide a calming effect on already stressed civilians, and give directions to civilians if they do not understand the process. The greeter directs civilians to move forward as distribution stations become available. The number of stations depends on personnel available and facility constraints. Each station consisted of a four-man team and distributed food, water, ice, and tarps. PODs also need to have Soldiers identified as forklift operators and load supervisors. The load supervisor (E-6) ensured trucks were unloaded and supplies were distributed to stations. The load supervisor also communicated with civilian truck drivers on when to stage their trucks and unload trucks. The platoon sergeant ensured enough supplies were on location to continue operations. The PSG also placed orders for supplies to RSA or BN TOC, ensured rest plan was implemented, and ensured distribution points were distributing proper amount of supplies to each vehicle. The platoon leader ensured the distribution point was established and operational, ensured enough supplies were on location to continue operations, communicated with local governments or Federal agencies for any needs or resources, ensured POD wait line did not interfere with local community

traffic flow. Soldiers should be polite but firm in dispensing relief supplies. Don’t ask civilians what they want, tell civilians what they have to choose from; i.e. “Food, water, ice and tarps, sir. What do you need?” If you *ask* them what they want, they’ll start to really consider that and will window-shop all the way down the line for things they feel they could have gotten or missed out on, real or imagined. Use your best judgment; contractors coming through our POD were getting 30x40’ tarps for free, while Home Depot was charging \$116.97 for one 40x50’ tarp. Many out-of-state opportunists were charging the very people we sought to relieve exorbitant amounts for temporary roof repair, using the tarps we gave them. Avoid waste and abuse; identify repeat visitors for the day and inform them they are limited to a certain number of visits daily. If NGOs wish to operate at your POD location or there were NGOs already operating the POD before your arrival, try to stay on good working terms with them. The NGOs and the Army are all working for the same cause. Therefore, identify a liaison person within their organization that you can go to with questions or issues.

The bad & the ugly

If one had to capture a still portrait of our relief operations, it would include two late-model SUVs accompanied by a decrepit sedan and a pickup truck in the traffic lane, and perhaps one pedestrian from the surrounding neighborhood, dragging along a grocery cart. While many motorists were eager to take all they could, the modest and cordial people of Gretna came on foot and asked only for what they truly needed, sometimes a single bag of ice for a feeble grandmother. We wished for a better way to deliver aid directly to these earnest people, as the irony of relief operations became apparent; those in need are least aware of the efforts being made to assist them.

Unfortunately, profiteers abounded. One frequent flier, nicknamed “Snaggle-Tooth,” was number one on our black list. He would arrive alone in an aged Mercedes, claim to be distributing aid to up to seven families in another county or state, and request only high pay-off items such as MREs (no ‘Jimmy Dean’ refrigerated meals) and tarps (the big ones). Just as contemptible were the private contractors, eager to be confused with charity workers. Absent any

accrediting authority, we had only our good judgment to rely on, when distinguishing good Samaritans from vultures. The latter came two or three to a pickup, always with out-of-state tags, dolefully eyeing up cases of MREs and tarps, which they assured were destined for some stricken family somewhere. Such was the preponderance of opportunists that we eventually began playing a guessing game called “Family or Contractor.”

There were two to three-man teams with ladders and pickups using our PODs to obtain free tarps, while charging elderly and otherwise disabled residents usurious amounts to staple that tarp to their roof. Reports from Gretna residents confirmed this bastardry. We had little patience for these types and gave them only the minimum when they came through the line, indifferent to their overtures. A less common spectacle was a box truck filled with more than a dozen workers. Rather than pay for their workers’ subsistence, white contractors and foremen drove the laborers through our POD, where they received a day’s ration for every man.

ROE: nothing worth killing anybody over

All Soldiers were in possession of the Louisiana Rules on Use of Force (RUF) card; however, there also existed a separate card for officers, one that didn’t make its way down to me. The officer’s card delegated peace officer’s duties to any National Guard officer. While I was unaware of this delegation of authority, I would have assumed most of it, had the occasion arisen.

Martial law?

Classifying fellow Americans as “civilians” wasn’t a great mental leap; given boots, a rifle and a bit of mental conditioning, one easily assumes a confident, take-charge attitude, and we experienced negligible friction with the locals. When you’re in the business of giving away stuff as fast as humanly possible, there tends to be few dissatisfied customers. Our ARO was utterly docile,

so I consolidated the platoon’s weapons and ammunition in the medic’s vehicle, within his reach and my sight. The exit gate guard retained his weapon and ammunition. On my first day at the job, an African-American motorist beckoned me to the curb to ask, “where can I buy a gun?” He explained that his neighborhood was being looted, and he was powerless to resist. I offered him some provisions and urged him to stay clear of hostile areas, unable to provide any information of where to obtain an affordable firearm. At that time, we were unaware that the city of New Orleans was confiscating firearms en masse.

Integrating local support

Along with the POD came Clebert Bourgeois, a disabled, wiry volunteer firefighter, whose steadfast work ethic and infectious grin were well-known to the community. He was there every morning, and we gave him a ride up the block at the end of the day, sad to see him go. I incorporated him into the line (not that he gave me much of a choice), to give the operation a ‘Cajun face,’ and he never let us down.

Ultimately, CPT Shick, 1LT Reffner and I realized that we had chosen a false measure of effectiveness for our relief operations, inasmuch as they were truly ours, or we were being judged against any standard. We came to this realization almost by accident, making the observation that no matter how rapidly the vehicle line was moving, it would never be backed up past a certain point. Our conclusion was that the truly needy would patronize our POD regardless of the wait time, and moving the line quickly only encouraged passersby to stock up.

Forays outside of the limelight

On only one occasion did I venture outside of the New Orleans metropolitan area and as far south as Lafitte, La. CPT Shick had dispatched me in that direction to scout out areas that would benefit more from our presence. A Missouri ARNG unit was periodically overseeing the POD operation at the Lafitte City Hall, which served a very different demographic than Gretna 1. What I found was that, by mid-September, the MREs and bottled water were ubiquitous, but what troubled residents most was an uncertain future. Shrimp-boating was the signal enterprise in this region, and fears of contamination from sewage overflow could cause an industry collapse. I was unqualified and unable to answer the questions of national policy that were posed to me, but gave the mayor and chief of police my cellphone number in case they ran out of rations. On the way out of town, I detoured to examine out the storm-damaged middle school. Adjacent to the school sat an open-air garage, covering at least 100 pallets of MREs. I never got a call from Lafitte.

Land of plenty, redeployment

Back at the FOB, life was good. Because we’d availed ourselves of a vacant public building, rather than pitch tents and wait for



Clebert Bourgeois, a Gretna firefighter and de facto civil-military liaison, keeps the line moving at the Gretna point of distribution (POD).

POD	Unit	Vehicles	Walk-ups
Gretna 1	HHC	14323	522
Gretna 2	HHC	4879	120
Alerio	A	11648	0
Sam's Club	B	2814	68
Bus Station	B	9015	138
Kineer	A	10785	0
TOTAL		53464	848
Escort Missions		TF Paxton conducted more than 500 mission from Sept. 12 - Oct. 2 including:	
Trucks Water	28	■ Public assistance; tree cutting, debris removal	
Trucks Ice	32	■ Food distribution	
Trucks MRE	15	■ Security missions	
Trucks Tarps	3	■ Convoy escort missions	
Total	50	■ Recon missions	

Figure 2 — TF Paxton Distribution Roll-up

Hurricane Rita, we had operable plumbing and window A/C units. When teachers returned in late September, we moved into giant, 500-man FEMA tents on the football field for the concluding week of our deployment. The tents had electricity and air-conditioning, powered by diesel generators outside. FEMA operated a “general store” at the southeastern end of the track, where we could pick up cots, sunscreen, buckets, chainsaws and straw hats. Everything was free and nearly everything was made in China. The last few days were a time of good feelings. We PT’ed on the banks of the Mississippi and packed our duffle bags into 53-foot trailers. Commercial busses drove us home, and the tactical vehicles were convoyed back by stay-behind volunteers — Soldiers who could use the extra money. Everything went according to plan, and although our cellphone bills for September weren’t reimbursed, 1SG Carper got Family Separation Allowance (FSA) for those us with dependants, so it was a wash.

Afterword

Not a single scout, or HHC Soldier for that matter, sought to avoid duty on account of his collegiate studies. While this speaks to a profound sense of duty and well-developed unit cohesion, it is unfortunate that much-touted and perishable military education benefits were recouped as a result of it; Federal Tuition Assistance, Education Assistance Program (EAP) disbursements, and GI Bill checks are often what Soldier-students rely on to pay both rent and tuition, and when we came off Title 10 orders on Oct. 10,

students were at a loss and off track.

In my case, law school would wait another year, and I was doubly fortunate to be offered an Active Duty Special Work (ADSW) job by MAJ Timothy Gwinn, at the Pennsylvania Joint Emergency Operation Center, and subsequently a course reservation in ICCC, lobbied for by my battalion XO, Major Eric Zimmerman.

Take-away

If Hurricane Katrina relief was an instant and unqualified “success,” we would not have had to endure a springtime renaissance of exploitive news coverage. Some commentators even questioned the value of the relief efforts as a whole, given the seemingly plodding and problematic progress toward an unclear endstate. However, I have no doubts as to the value of this operation.

Since the very first PowerPoint briefing introduced the “Stryker” vehicle to the Men of Iron in 2003, and while our sister brigade (the 55th) braved the “Sunni Triangle,” we’ve been planning and training for our piece of the GWOT. The prospect of our nation “calling up the Reserves” is now far from abstract, and weekend drill is in all ways a more sober occasion than in decades past. Owing to the duration of this disaster relief operation, SFC Diehl and I were able to make forward-looking determinations concerning future leadership; we came to judgments about our Soldiers’ character that would have otherwise come out late in a train-up for a combat tour.

Moreover, Guard tenure is measured in ATs, and it is not uncommon for a Soldier to spend a 20-year career at the same armory; being a guardsman has always been considered a mark of civic merit among PA’s close-knit rural communities. Not until I made first lieutenant, and had accrued five years in the battalion, could I begin to count on my relationships with the “full-timers,” those NCOs and few officers who execute the day-to-day business of the armories. These men have a tremendous personal investment in a single armory (duty station), making the RA’s schedule of perpetual and unpredictable reassignment seem frenetic by comparison. Shrimp gumbo and gritty truck drivers aside, what I carried home from Louisiana can only be measured in handshakes and nods: the product of an assiduous, incremental development of trust among career-long colleagues. Someday, this alone will culminate in the decisions made and promises kept that will bring my Soldiers back alive, from wherever our governor sees fit to send us.

“Strike Hard!”

At the time this article was written, **First Lieutenant Paolo Sica** was a student in the Infantry Captains Career Course and assigned as a recon platoon leader in Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 112th Infantry, 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, Pennsylvania Army National Guard. Sica previously served as an anti-armor platoon leader while a cadet at Pennsylvania State University Army ROTC and as a rifle platoon leader in Kosovo.
