

Convoy Ambush Case Studies

Volume II - Iraq and Afghanistan



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The US Army Transportation School publications cover a variety of military history topics. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Department of the Army or the Department of the Defense.

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Front cover photo: M1151 of the 600th Quartermaster Company at Tallil with the Ziggurat of Ur in the background in 2008.

Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

Back cover photo: Convoy escorts of D Troop, 4th Cavalry at FOB Speicher in 2007. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

Title page photo: Gun truck of the 1836th Transportation Company (TX NG) test firing its M2 in March 2004. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

Contents page photo: Convoy along MSR Tampa in southern desert of Iraq in November 2004. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane



Contents

Operation Iraqi Freedom, Iraq	5
507th Maintenance Ambush	
An Nasiriyah, 23 March 2003	6
Tiger Team/Convoy Rat Patrol, June 2003	19
OIF 2 Al Sadr's April Uprising	21
Complex Ambush, 8 April 2004	22
Good Friday Ambush, 9 April 2004	32
HET Ambush, 9 April 2004	64
10 April 2004	70
Ambush at Iskandariyah, 11 April 2004	74
Green Zone Ambushes, 11 April 2004	82
Battle of Broken Chains, 17 April 2004	90
1018 Firefight, 18 October 2004	110
ASR Heart Firefight, 30 January 2005	116
Palm Sunday Ambush, 20 March 2005	133
Ambush at Ad Duluiyah, 20 September 2005	172
Suse Ambush, 26 October 2005	180
ASR Sword, 25 October 2006	190
Don't Mess with Texas, 23 February 2008	200
 Operation Enduring Freedom, Afghanistan	 208
Regay Ambush, 13 June 2006	208
14 April 2007	220
TK Ambush, 29 July 2009	222
 Observations	 249
Bibliography	283
Index	287



Operation Iraqi Freedom

On 20 March 2003, coalition forces crossed the Iraqi border heading straight for the heart of Baghdad. It had been 30 years since the US Army had pulled truck companies out of Vietnam and had forgotten all lessons on convoy security from that war. Having accepted much of the media myth about the Americans losing the war, many senior Army officers were reluctant to accept any solution from that war. In fact the major lesson learned from that war was that the United States would never again find itself fighting an insurgency. On the contrary, the US Army had defeated the insurgency by 1969 and was fighting North Vietnamese Army Regulars. The war had changed from an insurgency to an invasion, but in appearance it still resembled a guerrilla war. After the United States forced the North Vietnamese to sign a peace treaty, two years later South Vietnam fell to an invasion of tanks rolling down from North Vietnam - not insurgents coming out of the jungle. While the US Army had not been defeated on the ground, the American public had lost their resolve to intervene further on behalf of South Vietnam.

The US Army was extremely successful in Vietnam especially in terms of convoy security. With the exception of a few days during the 1968 Tet Offensive when the 8th Transportation Group did not yet have gun trucks, the enemy never closed down the supply route. The advent of the 5-ton gun truck with three to four machineguns proved invaluable in ambushes. Because the 8th Group encountered the most intense and savage convoy ambushes along Route 19, its convoy doctrine proved the best. The convoy commanders had learned to keep their convoys to less than 30 vehicles with a gun truck to a task vehicle ratio of 1:10 with gun trucks placed somewhere up front, center and rear. Convoy commanders had learned to ride somewhere between the middle to the rear of the convoy so they could better respond to any contact ahead of them. The US Army would relearn these lessons the hard way in Iraq.

Going into the Iraq War, there were few references to convoy security in the past. Timothy J. Kuta had taken COL Joe Bellino's "1968 History of the 8th Transportation Group," added photos from the Army Transportation Museum and published it as Gun Trucks. James Lyles, a Vietnam gun truck veteran, published a series of photo studies on gun trucks in his series, Hard Ride. These and two internet web sites, Guntruck.com and the Transportation Museum web page were the only sources of information on gun trucks in Vietnam. Fortunately, the Army National Guard still had a few aging Vietnam veterans in their ranks who remembered gun trucks. Otherwise, most truck companies completely reinvented gun trucks and convoy security doctrine from scratch. Unable to find adequate solutions in the first year of the war, most senior leaders relied on their NCOs and company grade officers for solutions. Remarkably, they would come up with very similar solutions as their predecessors had during the Vietnam War. However, there were differences between the two wars. As one Vietnam veteran told LTC James Sagen, Commander of the 106th Transportation Battalion in 2004, while the Vietnamese ambushes were more intense, the Iraqi ambushes were more sophisticated.

Another problem that hindered development of any convoy security doctrine was that Americans saw the insurgency of the Vietnam War as an anomaly in history and incorrectly assumed that its wars would continue be broad front wars like World War II. Oddly, the broad front concept of war that began during World War I and ended with Desert Storm was the anomaly, and armies advancing into enemy territory bypassing enemy resistance had been the norm before and would be again in Iraq. Even the convoy ambushes during military operations in Somalia did not inspire anyone to develop convoy security doctrine. In fact support troops only fired the minimum 40 rounds per year on weapons qualification with no cross training in other weapons. They were not seen as needing any additional weapons training as a cost cutting measure. The death of four MPs due to a mine explosion did result

in the development of the up-armored HMMWV M1114, but it was initially just issued to MPs and Cavalry units, or - not transportation units for convoy security. Surprisingly, the ambush of the 507th Maintenance Company in An Nasiriyah still did not inspire any

for speed of execution and depth of penetration, designed to unhinge the Iraqis' ability to mount a coherent defense.

The rapid advance of coalition troops in thousands of vehicles and hundreds of aircraft was made possible



6th Transportation Battalion convoy right after crossing the berm. Photo courtesy the 6th Transportation Battalion

changes. The last element of a 600-vehicle column, the 507th had missed its turn and drove into a town controlled by militia as the 3rd Infantry Division advanced to Baghdad. The ambush unfortunately was interpreted as an accident and not a precursor of things to come.

Attack on the 507th Maintenance Company, 23 March 2003, An Nasiriyah, Iraq¹

Overview

In the early morning hours of 20 March 2003, US Army, US Marine Corps and coalition ground combat forces crossed from Kuwait into southern Iraq and attacked northward, beginning the ground phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom. By dawn on 23 March, major US ground combat units had advanced more than 200 miles into Iraq and were approximately 130 miles north of An Nasiriyah, an advance historically unprecedented

by the determined, aggressive support of scores of logistics, medical, and maintenance units, many moving constantly to maintain contact with their supported units. One such unit was the 507th Maintenance Company, tasked to support a vitally important asset – a Patriot missile battalion.

At about 0700 hours (local time) on 23 March 2003, while moving through the outskirts of the city of An Nasiriyah in southeastern Iraq, an element of the 507th Maintenance Company was attacked by Iraqi military forces and irregulars. There were 33 US soldiers in the 18-vehicle convoy. All but two soldiers in the convoy were members of the 507th Maintenance Company from Fort Bliss, Texas. The other two soldiers belonged to the 3rd Forward Support Battalion (FSB) of the 3rd Infantry Division from Fort Stewart, Georgia, and were traveling in their 10-ton wrecker with the 507th.

The Iraqi forces in An Nasiriyah conducted fierce

attacks against the convoy. Of the 33 US soldiers in the convoy, 11 were killed in combat or died as a result of injuries, seven were captured by Iraqi forces, and the remaining 16 soldiers were able to rejoin friendly forces. Of the 22 US soldiers who survived, nine were wounded in action. Although all details of the battle could not be determined with certainty, it is clear that every US Soldier did their duty.

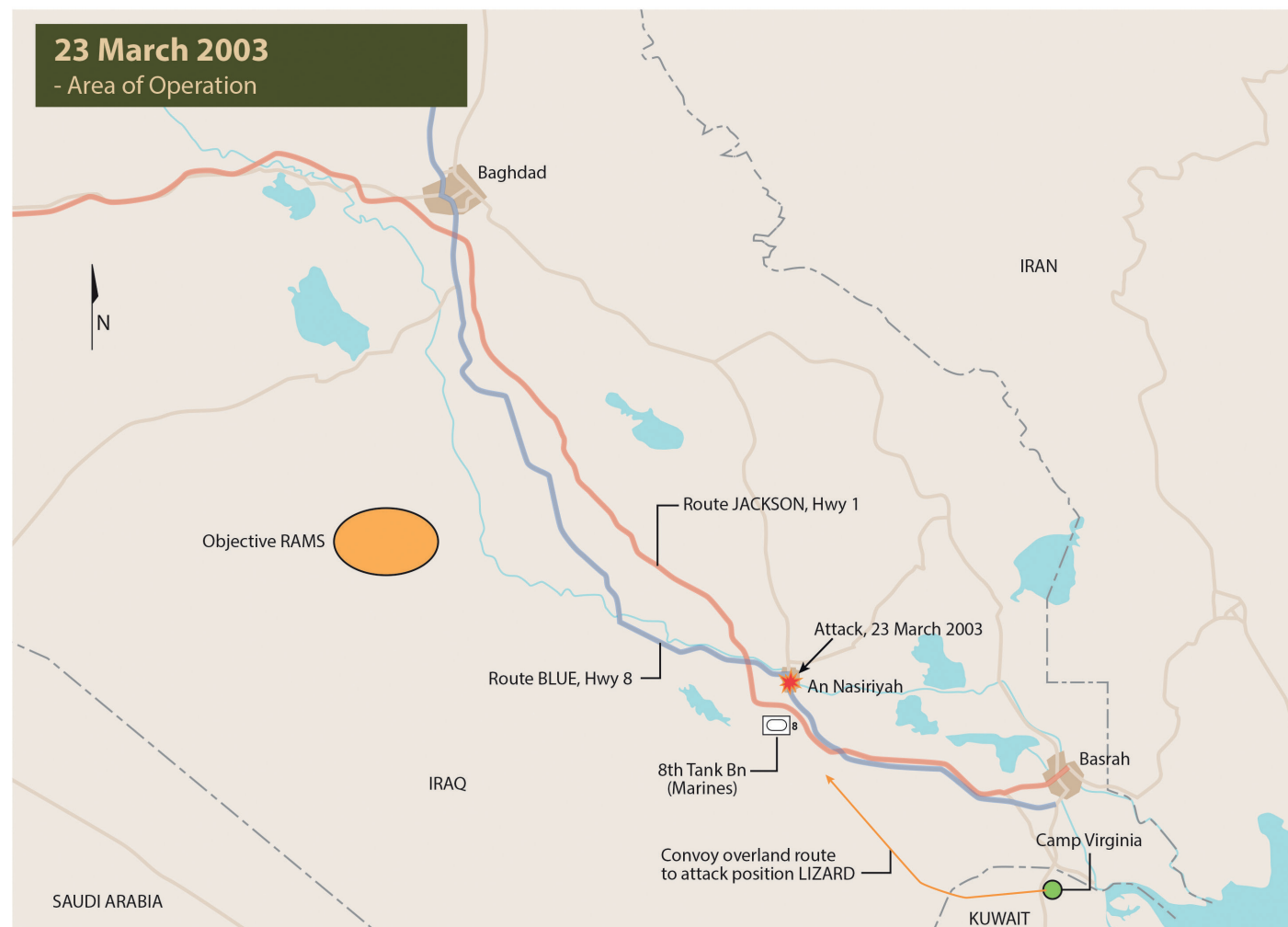
It was not until 31 March 2003, that elements of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) would take control of the city of An Nasiriyah.

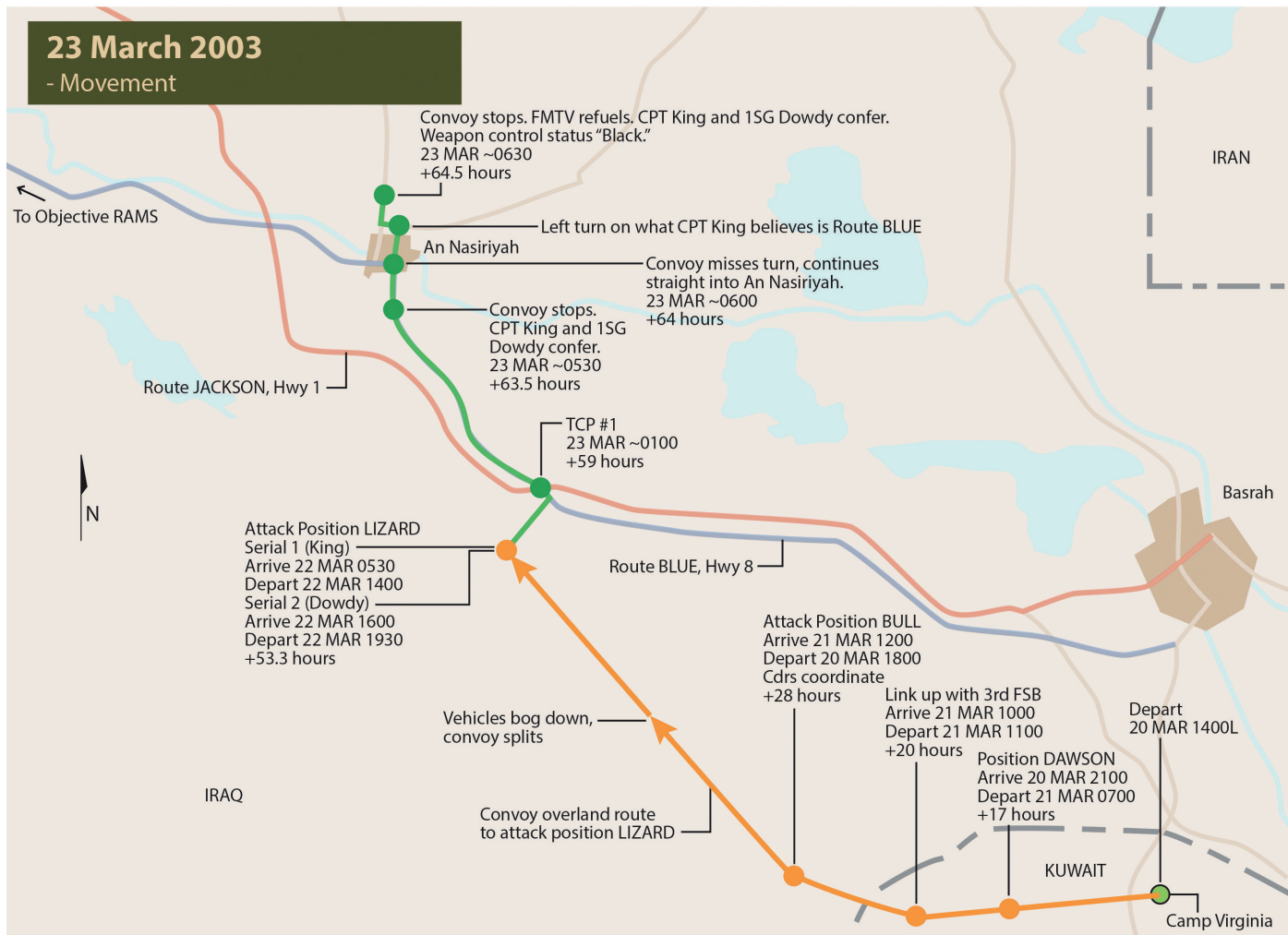
Arrival in Kuwait & Preparation for Movement to Iraq

The 507th Maintenance Company arrived in Kuwait from Fort Bliss on 20 February 2003. The company consisted of 82 soldiers and their assigned vehicles. The unit became a part of US forces under the operational control of V Corps, which was located at Camp Virginia in Kuwait. From 22 February until 20 March, the 507th prepared for its mission in support of

Operation Iraqi Freedom –to repair and maintain vehicles and equipment of the 5th Battalion, 52nd Air Defense Artillery (Patriot), supporting the Central Command (CENTCOM) battle plan.

Unit preparation at Camp Virginia built on training that had been conducted at Fort Bliss, which included individual and crew-served weapons qualification, tactical communications, land navigation, Nuclear, Biological and Chemical (NBC) defense tasks, first aid, spot reporting, equipment maintenance, leader certification, force protection, deployment and redeployment operations, tactical employment, and sustainment operations. Once deployed and in Camp Virginia, soldiers of the 507th conducted additional training and preparations at Camp Virginia that included rules of engagement, unit rehearsals (movement, actions on contact, ambush procedures), and weapons and vehicle maintenance. During this time, all soldiers received their basic combat load of ammunition for their personal weapons (210 rounds for M16A2,





1,000 rounds for M249 SAW, 45 rounds for M9). The company commander ordered an issue of ammunition for the unit's crew served weapons (.50 caliber and MK-19, 40mm) prior to movement, however, all pyrotechnics, hand grenades, and AT-4 Anti-tank weapons were consolidated and secured.

The plan to move V Corps units from Camp Virginia to Objective Rams involved the organization of convoys and movement of those convoys along designated routes – initially on Route Blue, then Route Jackson, then returning to Route Blue – and through three intermediate attack positions: Dawson, Bull, and Lizard. The 507th Maintenance Company was under the tactical control of the 3rd Forward Support Battalion (FSB) for this movement. According to the 3rd FSB Orders Brief, the 507th Maintenance Company convoy would be directed from Blue to Jackson by soldiers at a manned tactical control point (TCP) at the site where the routes separated.

The Operations Officer of the 3rd FSB gave CPT

King, the commander of the 507th, a CD-ROM disc that contained orders and route information. Route information consisted of the battalion orders briefing and annotated large-scale maps. The 507th had commercial Global Positioning Systems (GPS) (Garmin, Etrex Vista), which had been issued in the United States prior to deployment. The GPS gave CPT King directional signals via a display arrow that indicated the direction and distance the convoy should go. Five additional GPS were distributed to other leaders in the company. The unit was also issued 1:100,000 scale maps of the area of operations – the theater standard. The review of this incident revealed that CPT King relied primarily on his GPS and one of the annotated maps from the orders brief while traveling in his HMMWV. CPT King had highlighted only Route Blue on the annotated map, and believed in error that Blue was his assigned route.

On 20 March, at approximately 1400 hours, 64 of the original 82 soldiers of the 507th departed Camp Virginia in 33 vehicles and moved northwest as part of



a larger convoy. Their ultimate destination was Objective Rams more than 350 kilometers distant. The other 18 soldiers (maintenance contact teams and medics) from the 507th were attached to and moved with other units.

Movement to Attack Position Dawson

During the first leg of the route, from Camp Virginia to Attack Position Dawson, while still in Kuwait, the 507th traveled off-road over desert terrain. At 2100 hours on 20 March, the 507th arrived at its first stop, Attack Position Dawson, located just south of the Iraqi border. While at Dawson, the soldiers refueled and serviced their vehicles, ate and attempted to implement a rest plan. Most soldiers got some amount of sleep in the 10 hours at this location.



Movement from Dawson to link up with 3rd FSB at the Line of Departure (LD), to Attack Position Bull

At 0700 hours on 21 March, the 507th departed Attack Position Dawson to link up with the 3rd FSB. They crossed the line of departure into Iraq at 1000 hours. The convoy moved approximately 35 kilometers, arriving at Attack Position Bull at 1200 hours on 21 March.

Movement from Attack Position Bull to Attack Position Lizard

At 1800 hours on 21 March, the 507th departed Bull with the 3rd FSB enroute to Lizard, 80 kilometers northwest. The convoy continued to travel off-road and some of the heavier vehicles bogged down in the soft sand. Drivers from many units became confused due to the darkness, causing some vehicles to separate from their march columns. Poor trafficability and mechanical problems resulted in the fragmentation of the 507th convoy into two groups. The first group consisted of those vehicles that did not break down or get stuck in the sand and were capable of keeping pace with the 3rd FSB convoy. The second group consisted of those vehicles that had mechanical problems or were stuck in the sand, along with those vehicles used to tow or pull other vehicles free. CPT King took personal charge of the first group and arrived at Lizard at about 0530 hours on 22 March, after an all-night movement. 1SG Dowdy was charged with recovering the second group and leading it to Lizard. Working through the night of 21 March and into the next day, 1SG Dowdy recovered and repaired



Thin skinned HMMWVs and 5-ton of the 3rd Infantry Division prior to crossing the berm on 20 March 2004.

Photo courtesy of Jeffrey Skinner

Thin skinned HMMWVs and 5-ton cargo trucks like those of the 507th Maintenance Company.

Photo courtesy of Paul Nelson

M915 5-ton tractors hauling milvans up MSR Tampa.

Photo courtesy of Paul Nelson

vehicles not only from the 507th but from the 3rd FSB as well. The 1SG and the second group of 507th vehicles would eventually arrive at Lizard at 1600 hours on 22 March, 22 hours after departing Attack Position Bull.

Decision to Split the 507th Convoy at Attack Position Lizard

After arriving at Lizard, while awaiting 1SG Dowdy's arrival, CPT King contacted his battalion commander to inform him of the 507th's situation. LTC Joseph Fischetti, Commander, 5th Battalion, 52nd Air Defense Artillery (Patriot) acknowledged the report. CPT King also recalls reporting his status and confirming with the 3rd FSB staff that the overall situation, to include route, was unchanged. The 3rd FSB staff advised CPT King that the convoy would depart at 1400 hours as planned. Based on that information and with the intent to push support forward, CPT King directed his executive officer, 1LT Jeff Shearin, to lead all the available 507th vehicles and remain with the 3rd FSB convoy. Shearin departed with 32 soldiers in 17 vehicles at 1400 hours with the main 3rd FSB convoy. King remained at Lizard and waited for 1SG Dowdy and the remaining soldiers and vehicles of the 507th.

At about 1400 hours on 22 March, 1SG Dowdy radioed CPT King to report that he had all of the remaining vehicles running or in tow and was 10-12 kilometers away from Lizard. He arrived at Lizard at about 1600 hours. Along with 1SG Dowdy were the two soldiers from the 3rd FSB, SGT George Buggs and PFC Edward Anguiano. Buggs and Anguiano were driving a 10-ton wrecker and had become separated from the rest of 3rd FSB while recovering 3rd FSB fuel trucks stuck in the sand between Bull and Lizard. Apparently, 1SG Dowdy coordinated with Buggs and Anguiano to tow a disabled 507th 5-ton truck after they completed their recovery of the 3rd FSB fuel trucks.

At 1930 hours on 22 March, 3 ½ hours after 1SG Dowdy closed on Lizard with all remaining 507th soldiers and vehicles, CPT King organized them into a new march unit. This second element, led by CPT King, departed Lizard with 33 soldiers, including himself, Buggs and Anguiano. The convoy was comprised of 18 vehicles, two of which were being towed.

Intersection of Routes

Jackson (Highway 1) and Blue (Highway 8)


Unable to communicate with the 3rd FSB, CPT King attempted to catch up with the 3rd FSB main convoy by deciding to take the most direct route (a straight line azimuth) to Highway 8. This route proved to be extremely difficult, over rough terrain, once again resulting in vehicles becoming bogged down in the sand. It took the unit five hours to reach Highway 8 [Route Blue] about 15 kilometers away. At this point, 42 hours had passed since the 507th had departed Attack Position Dawson. Except for a 10-hour stop at Dawson, the 507th had been continuously moving. Most soldiers had slept only a few hours since the morning of the 20th and were in their second consecutive night of movement.

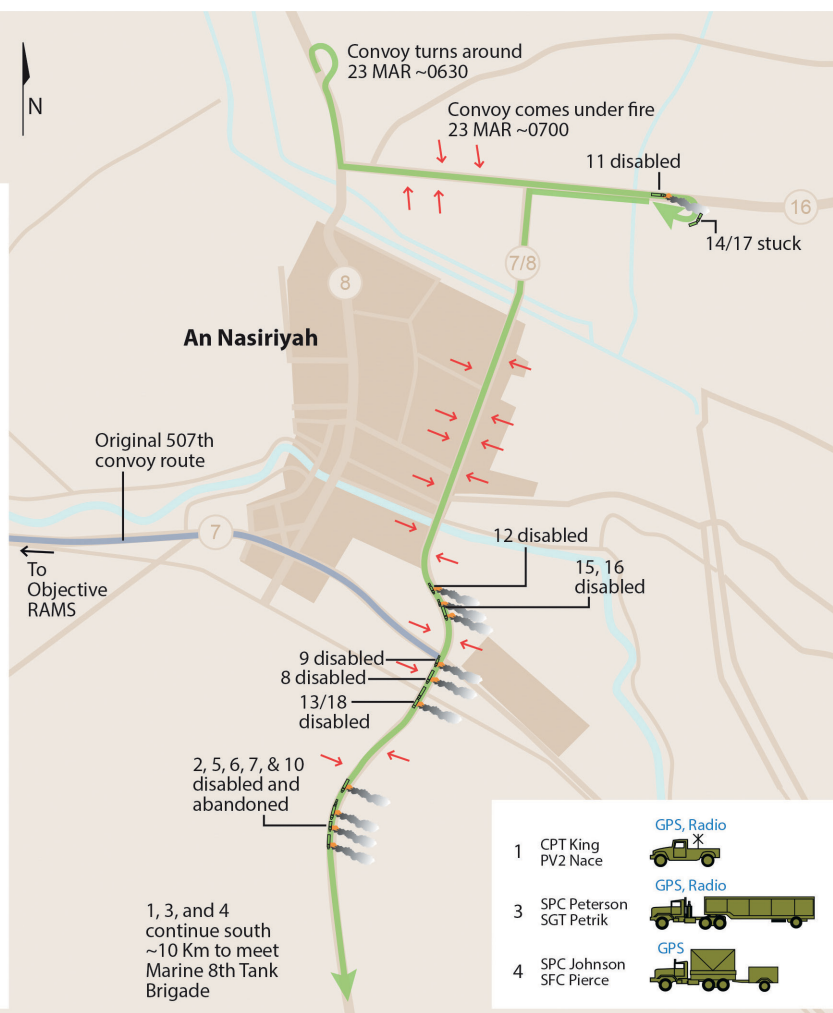
After traveling west on Highway 8, the convoy reached the intersection with Highway 1, Route Jackson, the assigned route for 3rd FSB. The road on which Route Jackson was designated led southwest of An Nasiriyah, eventually intersecting again with Route Blue, east of Objective Rams. The initial entrance to Route Jackson required a left turn at this intersection, where a manned Traffic Control Point (TCP) was planned to direct traffic. When the convoy arrived at this intersection, US personnel were present, but by this time there was no formal TCP. CPT King states that the personnel that were present confirmed that Blue continued north. Believing Route Blue was his assigned route, CPT King led his convoy through the intersection and headed north on Highway 8, towards An Nasiriyah in the general direction indicated by his GPS receiver – the waypoint west of An Nasiriyah.

At about 0530 hours, the convoy stopped when CPT King saw lights ahead, which he believed to be an industrial complex or an oil refinery. He conferred with 1SG Dowdy and decided to continue. At an intersection south of An Nasiriyah, Highway 8 – Route Blue – turned west, requiring a left turn. CPT King did not recognize this and led his convoy straight north through the intersection and on to Route 7/8, exiting Route Blue. Route 7/8 led the convoy across the Euphrates River into the eastern outskirts of An Nasiriyah. An Nasiriyah is flanked by the Euphrates River in the south and a series of man-made canals in the north. It is a city characterized by buildings no greater than four to five stories in height, with many narrow streets and

23 March 2003

- An Nasiriyah

8	PFC Johnson, H. KIA PV2 Estrella KIA	
9	SPC Kiehl KIA SPC Addison KIA	
11	PV2 Sloan KIA SGT Walters KIA	
12	PFC Miller POW SGT Riley POW	
15	PFC Piastewa POW/KIA PFC Lynch POW 1SG Dowdy KIA	 GPS, Radio
16	SPC Hernandez WIA/POW SPC Johnson, S. WIA/POW	
14/17	SGT Buggs KIA SPC Anguiano KIA	
13/18	SPC Hudson WIA/POW CW2 Mata KIA	 Radio GPS
2	SPC Zhang SGT Campbell WIA	 ISU9 ISU9 ISU9
5	PFC Dubois CPL Luten WIA	 ISU9 ISU9 ISU9 Crew-served Weapon
6	CW3 Nash SSG Jackson WIA	 GPS, Radio
7	SPC Grubb WIA PFC Elliot	
10	SGT Rose CPL Carista WIA	



alleyways. The surrounding areas of An Nasiriyah, including the roadsides along the route taken by the 507th, are marshlands that have been partially-drained, consisting of soft sand and mud.

Movement through An Nasiriyah

Five vehicles in the convoy had SINCGARS radios and could communicate with one another. SINCGARS communications were augmented by handheld radios in each vehicle, but because of the extended duration of the convoy, the batteries had expired. CPT King and 1SG Dowdy were communicating about their location and situation frequently as the convoy moved through An Nasiriyah.

Several soldiers in the convoy, including CPT King, observed armed civilians and what appeared to be armed Iraqi soldiers at two checkpoints – one upon entering and the other exiting the town. None of these people fired or indicated hostile intent against the convoy. In fact, the Iraqi soldiers at the checkpoints waved to the convoy.

One or more civilian trucks with armed civilians and mounted machine guns (some reports refer to these as “technicals”) drove past the convoy several times during its travel through the city, but again, no hostile intent was shown towards the 507th convoy and personnel.

Statements from 507th soldiers indicate that rules of engagement issued by higher headquarters would only permit firing on personnel that exhibited hostile intent. Soldiers had also been warned to expect possible “happy fire” – shots fired in celebration and not intended to cause harm, which is a common practice. Additionally, they had been informed that the carrying of weapons by uniformed or civilian personnel would not, by itself, constitute hostile intent. The Rules of Engagement (ROE) in effect were summarized on a card issued to soldiers. The ROE were issued by the Coalition Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC).

On its way through the city, the convoy crossed a bridge over the Euphrates River and then another over a canal before coming to a “T” intersection with Highway

16. CPT King led the convoy left at this intersection, believing that he was still on his assigned route. The convoy soon reached another “T” intersection with Highway 7, at which time CPT King turned right, heading north with the rest of the convoy following. CPT King continued to move the convoy north and out of the city for approximately 2 kilometers. At this point, King realized, for the first time, that the convoy was off Route Blue. CPT King stopped the convoy and set up security. His GPS indicated that the main convoy route lay due west. There appeared to be no hard surface roads leading west from his location. After conferring with 1SG Dowdy, CPT King decided to retrace their route back through An Nasiriyah to find Route Blue/Highway 8. Realizing that he was off the convoy route, he instructed his soldiers to “lock and load” their weapons and to be vigilant. SFC Pierce reiterated these instructions to all soldiers. In some of the vehicles, soldiers took the halt as an opportunity to change drivers. King then began turning the convoy around. This would be the first of two U-turns by the convoy.

While turning around, the 10-ton wrecker, crewed by SGT Buggs and PFC Anguiano, ran out of fuel. CPT King stopped all vehicles and ordered the wrecker refueled. Soldiers refueled the wrecker using 5-gallon cans, as the only fuel truck in this convoy was emptied over the course of the 507th’s extended movement. After refueling was completed, CPT King resumed turning the vehicles around and headed south on Highway 7. CPT King was at the head of the convoy and 1SG Dowdy was in the rear. At the intersection with Highway 16, the convoy turned left (eastward) and headed back towards the city.

Attack on the Convoy

As the convoy turned left on to Highway 16, at about 0700 hours, it began to receive sporadic small arms fire, the source and direction of which could not be determined. The 1SG radioed CPT King that the convoy was being fired upon and they needed to speed up to get away from the small arms fire. The 1SG directed the vehicles at the end of the convoy to increase their speed, consistent with unit procedures for reacting to a convoy ambush. Due to dissimilar vehicle size and acceleration rates, spacing between vehicles in the convoy began to increase.

In the speed and confusion, CPT King, who remained at the head of the convoy, passed the intersection with Highway 7/8, missing the right turn going south. 1SG Dowdy radioed CPT King to alert him that he had missed the turn. SFC Pierce, in a 5-ton truck driven by SPC Timothy Johnson, sped up to catch CPT King, to tell him that he (SFC Pierce) knew the way back to the turn. CPT King ordered SFC Pierce to lead the convoy back to the intersection. At this point all drivers had passed by the Highway 7/8 turn going south.

Midway in the convoy a 5-ton tractor-trailer driven by PVT Sloan with SGT Walters became disabled. The vehicle behind it, a 5-ton wrecker with water trailer, driven by PFC Patrick Miller, with SGT Riley in the passenger seat, executed a combat pick-up of Sloan while moving and under fire. It is unclear whether SGT Walters was picked up by others in the convoy or remained in the area of the disabled tractor-trailer. There is some information to suggest that a US Soldier, that could have been Walters, fought his way south of Highway 16 towards a canal and was killed in action. SGT Walters was in fact killed at some point during this portion of the attack. The circumstances of his death cannot be conclusively determined by available information.

The remaining vehicles of the convoy had to travel almost three kilometers past the intersection before finding an area large enough to allow the vehicles to execute a U-turn. The convoy pulled off of Highway 16 to turn around and head back to the missed turn. While attempting to make the U-turn, the 10-ton wrecker driven by SPC Anguiano with SGT Buggs, towing the 507th’s disabled 5-ton supply truck (originally driven by PFC Jessica Lynch with SGT Matthew Rose), got stuck in soft sand. While the rest of the convoy turned around and headed west, soldiers continued to receive fire.

1SG Dowdy, in a HMMWV at the rear of the convoy, conducted a combat pick-up of Buggs and Anguiano along HWY 16. Also in that HMMWV were PFCs Lori Piestewa and Lynch. Piestewa was the driver, and Lynch was seated in the rear. 1SG Dowdy radioed CPT King, informing him that he had picked up two soldiers and advised King that they needed to get the convoy out of the city as quickly as possible. SGT Buggs or PFC Anguiano began returning fire with an M249 Squad Automatic Weapon (SAW) from the rear of the

HMMWV as they continued south.

CPT King regained the lead position in a convoy that had disintegrated into smaller groups and independent vehicles. In the dust and confusion and still receiving fire, the larger, slower moving vehicles required additional space to turn around while smaller vehicles turned around inside of them. This rearranged the convoy's march order and further extended distances between vehicles. The remaining 15 vehicles, including a tractor-trailer being towed by a wrecker driven by SPC Hudson with CW2 Mata, sped south on Highway 7/8. The 507th convoy became divided into three smaller groups as it attempted to move south out of the area.

Group 1

The first group consisted of the following vehicles and occupants: #1 - a HMMWV, driven by PVT Dale Nace with CPT Troy King in the front passenger seat, #3 - a 5-ton tractor trailer driven by SGT Joel Petrik with SPC Nicholas Peterson in the passenger seat and #4 - a 5-ton truck with trailer, driven by SPC Timothy Johnson with SFC Anthony Pierce in the passenger seat. As this group fought its way south through the city, it received fire from all directions, primarily from the west side of Highway 7/8. Iraqis attempted to block the road with vehicles and debris. While under fire, PVT Nace, SPC Johnson, and SGT Petrik successfully maneuvered their respective vehicles around and through obstacles and continued all the way through the city. Soldiers in this group returned fire while moving. Most of the soldiers in this group report that they experienced weapon malfunctions. These malfunctions may have resulted from inadequate individual maintenance in a desert environment. About 10 kilometers south of the intersection of Highway 8 and 7/8, this group met elements of the 8th Tank Battalion, Task Force Tarawa, US Marines. After CPT King briefed the Marines on his unit's situation, the Marine unit immediately sent elements north on Highway 8 to attempt to rescue the remainder of the 507th.

Group 2

The second group consisted of the following vehicles and occupants: #2 - a 5-ton tractor trailer driven by SPC Jun Zhang with SGT Curtis Campbell in the passenger seat, #5 - a 5-ton tractor trailer driven by PFC Marcus Dubois

with CPL Damien Luten in the passenger seat, #6 - a HMMWV with trailer, driven by CW3 Nash with SSG Tarik Jackson in the front passenger seat, #7 - a 5-ton fuel truck, driven by PFC Adam Elliot with SPC James Grubb in the passenger seat and #10 - a 5-ton tractor-trailer, driven by SGT Rose with CPL Francis Carista in the passenger seat. CPL Luten, in the tractor-trailer driven by PFC Dubois, attempted to return fire with the 507th's only .50 cal. machinegun, but the weapon failed. Luten was wounded in the leg while reaching for his M16. The group took increasing small arms and rocket-propelled grenade fire from all sides; and like the first group faced attempts to block the road with debris and vehicles. The tractor-trailer immediately in front of CPL Luten's tractor-trailer, crewed by SPC Zhang and SGT Campbell, was hit multiple times and became inoperable about 5 kilometers south of the city - but short of CPT King's final location further south. Zhang jumped out of the disabled tractor-trailer and got on the tractor-trailer rolling immediately behind, occupied by Dubois and Luten. SGT Campbell was shot while attempting to fire Zhang's M16/M203. The HMMWV crewed by Nash and Jackson stopped to pick up Campbell, and was disabled a short distance further south. SSG Jackson had received multiple wounds prior to stopping to rescue Campbell. Dubois, Luten, and Zhang turned around and returned to the disabled HMMWV.

SPC Grubb returned fire with his M16 until wounded in both arms, despite reported jamming of his weapon, while PFC Elliot maneuvered their fuel truck through the ambush. SGT Rose, driving a tractor-trailer, maneuvered through obstacles in the road while under fire. CPL Carista, who was riding with Rose, was wounded by shrapnel. The fuel truck, crewed by SPC Grubb and PFC Elliot, and the tractor-trailer, occupied by SGT Rose and CPL Carista, linked up with the soldiers already at the disabled HMMWV. This group formed a defensive perimeter, while Combat Lifesavers (Carista, Elliot, Rose, Zhang) under the leadership of SGT Rose tended to the wounded soldiers (Campbell, Carista, Grubb, Jackson and Luten). The Marines arrived at the scene and rescued the 10 soldiers at this location.

Group 3

This group consisted of the following vehicles: #8 - a 5-ton tractor-trailer, driven by PFC Howard Johnson with

PVT Ruben Estrella-Soto in the passenger seat, #9 - a 5-ton truck with trailer, driven by SPC Jamaal Addison with SPC James Kiehl in the passenger seat, #12 - a 5-ton wrecker, driven by PFC Patrick Miller, with SGT James Riley and PVT Brandon Sloan as passengers, #13 - a HEMTT wrecker towing a 5-ton tractor trailer (vehicle #18), driven by SPC Joseph Hudson with CW2 Johnny Mata in the passenger seat, #15 - a HMMWV with trailer, driven by PFC Piestewa with 1SG Robert Dowdy in the front passenger seat, and PFC Jessica Lynch, SPC Edward Anguiano and SGT George Buggs in the rear, and #16 - a 5-ton tractor-trailer, driven by SPC Edgar Hernandez, with SPC Shoshana Johnson in the passenger seat. At the point north of the city on Highway 16 where CPT King ordered the convoy to turn around and go back to the missed turn (south on Highway 7/8), this group had difficulty turning around, probably due to the large size of vehicles and the fact that all were towing a trailer or disabled vehicle.

At about 0720 hours, the 5-ton tractor-trailer, occupied by SPC Hernandez and SPC S. Johnson, came under heavy fire. SPC Hernandez tried to avoid hitting an Iraqi truck blocking the road in front of him and lost control of the vehicle, veering to the right and off the road. To their rear, 1SG Dowdy, in the HMMWV driven by PFC Piestewa, reached Miller's 5-ton wrecker and ordered him to increase speed and keep moving. The 1SG's HMMWV was then hit by direct or indirect fire and crashed at a high rate of speed into the rear of the stopped tractor-trailer, still occupied by SPC Hernandez and SPC S. Johnson.

There were five soldiers in 1SG Dowdy's vehicle: 1SG Dowdy, his driver PFC Piestewa, and three soldiers in the back - PFC Lynch, SGT Buggs and PFC Anguiano. 1SG Dowdy was killed on impact. Piestewa survived the crash, but was seriously injured and died in captivity. Lynch was also seriously injured and captured. The circumstances of Buggs' and Anguiano's deaths remain under investigation.

PFC Miller's truck, with SGT Riley and PVT Sloan as passengers, was disabled by enemy fire about 400 meters north of where 1SG Dowdy's HMMWV hit SPC Hernandez's tractor-trailer. PVT Sloan was killed by enemy fire before the vehicle came to a stop. PFC Miller and SGT Riley dismounted from their truck and moved to assist the occupants of the HMMWV and

tractor-trailer just ahead of them. The occupants of the HMMWV appeared to be dead or beyond help. SGT Riley attempted to secure 1SG Dowdy's M16, since his own rifle had malfunctioned, but was unsuccessful. SGT Riley then directed SPC Johnson and SPC Hernandez to take cover. Riley also attempted to fire Johnson's and Hernandez's M16s, but both jammed. Johnson and Hernandez were both wounded.

Consistent with the Code of Conduct, with no means to continue to resist, SGT Riley made the decision to surrender the two soldiers (Hernandez and Johnson) and himself. PFC Miller, however, moved beyond the crash-site and made his way to an Iraqi dump truck with which he hoped to escape; but as he approached the truck, he spotted enemy soldiers attempting to fire a mortar. He realized they would kill his comrades, so with average shooting skills he hid behind a sand dune and sniped at the mortar crew. Each time his weapon jammed, he ducked down, cleared it and then shot another Iraqi. One-by-one he killed seven men trying to load the mortar and shot another who approached it but was eventually surrounded and captured. Although unconfirmed, Miller may have killed as many as nine Iraqi combatants.²

In the HEMTT wrecker towing a 5-ton tractor-trailer, SPC Hudson attempted to fire his M249 SAW while driving, but it malfunctioned. After he had driven past obstacles and debris, including an Iraqi tank blocking the road, his vehicle was disabled on the southern edge of the city. Iraqi forces continued to fire on the vehicle after it stopped. CW2 Mata, in the passenger seat, was killed, having sustained multiple wounds. Hudson, also wounded, was immediately surrounded after the shooting stopped, and was pulled from the vehicle by Iraqis and captured.

The 5-ton tractor trailer (#8), crewed by PFC Howard Johnson and PVT Ruben Estrella-Soto, and the 5-ton truck (#9), crewed by SPC Jamaal Addison and SPC James Kiehl, attempted to drive out of the city. After both vehicles maneuvered several miles under fire, and nearly out of the city, both were destroyed. There are few details to describe what happened to the soldiers in these vehicles. Both vehicles were stopped: #9 overturned at the Highway 8-7/8 intersection, possibly hit by direct or indirect fire, and #8 was disabled south of the intersection. There is some evidence to suggest



Hudson's HEMTT wrecker destroyed in the kill zone. Photo courtesy of We Served Together

that vehicle #8 struck the barrel of an Iraqi tank. All four soldiers were killed in action.

Conclusion

Of the 33 soldiers who entered An Nasiriyah in 18 vehicles (including two that were being towed) on 23 March, 11 soldiers were killed, seven were captured and nine were wounded (including some of those captured). Sixteen soldiers in eight vehicles emerged from the attack. The number of Iraqi casualties inflicted by soldiers of the 507th and 3rd FSB could not be determined. From start to finish, the attack on the 507th lasted an estimated 60 to 90 minutes.

In reviewing the actions on the morning of 23

March 2003, it is clear that the soldiers of the 507th Maintenance Company, including two soldiers from the 3rd FSB, were attacked for a sustained period of time. Fatigue, stress, the asymmetric nature of the threat, and the environment contributed to the events leading up to and during this attack. Every soldier performed honorably and each did his or her duty. The battle for An Nasiriyah would last until March 31st when the Marine Corps ultimately gained control of the city.³

Lesson

This attack on the 507th Maintenance Company would at best be classified as a hasty ambush. There were a number of mistakes made but the soldiers and leaders performed as they were trained. The problem was that

support soldiers did not receive the same emphasis on basic weapons training as combat soldiers. The major problem with the weapon malfunctions during the ambush was dust. The dust in Kuwait and Iraq was like a fine talcum powder that was easily stirred up and filtered through even the tiniest crack. For weapons to operate in that kind of environment required the owners to check and clean their weapons several times during the day. Even during the Vietnam War, truck drivers routinely wiped down their crew-served weapons during a convoy just from the dust kicked up by the vehicle traffic on the road. Since survival depends upon the weapon, good leaders in the Infantry continuously inspect their soldiers' weapons for cleanliness. In the event of a malfunction, soldiers needed to instinctively know how to clear a jam; and if needed, completely field strip a weapon even under fire. This was the reason WWII soldiers placed so much emphasis on being able to disassemble and assemble their weapons fast and even blindfolded. If necessary, a soldier would stop to quickly field strip and clean his weapon to get operational. It would be better to take the time to fix the problem than fight with a malfunctioning weapon. The reason they practiced this procedure blindfolded was so they could do this in the dark. This kind of training became a lost art.

Always considered "in the rear with the gear," support units did not need much firepower and did not have that many crew-served weapons. This war would teach the truck drivers the same lessons as the truck drivers had learned during the Korean and Vietnam Wars - or: nothing commands respect like the M2 .50 caliber machinegun. The gunners of this war also had an even nicer weapon at their disposal - the MK19 automatic grenade launcher, but these were in short supply or left behind by the 507th during this movement.

Amount of basic load was another lesson truck drivers would have to relearn. Support units had a considerable smaller basic load than combat units because they were once again seen as in the safe rear. Ambushes taught gunners a very important lesson - you can never have too much ammunition in a kill zone. The great thing about vehicles was that they could carry lots of ammunition and made great mounts for crew-served weapons, but the idea of heavily armed and armored vehicles would not catch on until the ambushes began in June of that same year.

Finally, units needed rehearsed procedures for any contingency. These would evolve from Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) of old to Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTP) of this war. TTPs would continue to evolve with the enemy's ever-changing TTPs. Just like clearing a jam or field stripping a weapon, reaction to enemy combat had to be rehearsed to the point it was instinctive.

This attack sent shock waves through the support units by reminding them that there was no longer a safe rear. What the soldiers and leaders assigned to the truck units failed to learn from this ambush, the Vietnam veterans did. Immediately after this ambush hit the news, Vietnam veterans called the Transportation Corps Historian telling him that gun trucks would have prevented or reduced the loss of life. This attack was a precursor of what was to follow but few recognized it.

America's enemies study our history to look for weaknesses, but most do not research further back any further than the Vietnam War. The misconception of this history was that the best way to defeat the American Army was to inflict casualties. American media focused on the loss of life to a point that overshadowed any victories on the ground. Of all the heroic battles in this ambush, the media focused more on the prisoners from the 507th and elevated PFC Jessica Lynch to hero status. The initial reports of a blonde soldier fighting until he or she ran out of ammunition may have actually been SGT Donald Walters who was posthumously awarded the Silver Star Medal. Less attention was paid to SPC Patrick Miller whose heroic actions during that ambush earned him the Silver Star Medal. This focus on loss versus gain by the media was not lost on the enemy. All they had to do to make the Americans go home was kick up the body count. So for the next year, the enemy would improve their ambushes.

¹ This narration is taken from the Executive Summary, "Attack on the 507th Maintenance Company, 23 March 2003, an Nasiriyah, Iraq," n.d. "1486th Transportation Company Easter Week Firefight."

² Patrick Miller, Silver Star Medal Citation; Chris Moon, "Kansan of the Year - Patrick Miller," the Capital-Journal, January 04, 2004, http://cjonline.com/stories/010404/mid_miller.shtml.

³ This ends the Executive Summary.





Left: HEMTT gun truck, Battleship.
Photo courtesy of the Transportation Museum

Left Middle: M1098 gun truck.

Photo courtesy of Eric Hedlund

Right Middle: HM998 gun truck.

Photo courtesy of David Hanselman

Left Lower: Mad Max armor.

Photo courtesy of Eric Hedlund

Left Bottom: M915 gun trailer, Eve of Destruction II.

Photo courtesy of Adam Dumont

Right Bottom: BG Ennis Whitehead and 1LT Bradley Lavite in front of M915. Photo courtesy of Eric Hedlund



Right:
Sit and spin HMMWV
gun truck of the 1836th
Transportation Company.

Photo courtesy of Steve Ruggiero

Left Below:
M998 HMMWV with gun box.

Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

Right Below:
M998 HMMWV with
add-on-armor kit.

Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane



Left: 5-ton gun
trucks of the 7th
Transportation
Battalion with "dog
house" roofs built
by the Skunk Werks.

Left Below:
M1114 Up-armored
HMMWV of the
623rd Field Artillery.

Right Below:
PLS gun truck.

Photos courtesy of
Richard Killblane



Tiger Team/Convoy Rat Patrol, June 2003

From the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003, the MPs had the responsibility to escort convoys. Combined Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC) required two HMMWVs to escort a convoy regardless of its size. The problem was most of them were unarmored and armed with nothing more than an M-249 squad automatic weapon (SAW). The convoys they escorted had more fire power than that. At first, the attacks mostly targeted individual trucks with small arms fire, rocket propelled grenades (RPG) and improvised explosive devices (IED) along Main Supply Route (MSR) Tampa. The shortage of MP escorts and the increasing threat to convoys in Iraq beginning in May 2003 inspired the rebirth of the gun truck.

That early in the war, some officers actually believed gun trucks would not have any effect on this level of threat. In war, tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) were always evolving. As the TTPs on one side evolve, the TTPs of the other reciprocate. In tactics, nothing remains constant, yet some of those responsible for doctrine and technology saw each step as an end rather than a progression. Not only that but the normal process for research, development, test and procurement was painfully slow. While those responsible for doctrine and technology debated over the appropriate solution, the truck drivers and mechanics took matters in their own hands. The threat was real to them and they saw the gun truck as an immediate solution to their problem. Once again, the development of the gun truck was a Transportation Corps initiative.

The initial threat in the summer of 2003 challenged the 181st Transportation Battalion at Logistical Support Area (LSA) Anaconda, which had responsibility for the convoys along MSR Tampa. In June, the insurgents killed a civilian contract driver of Kellogg, Brown and Root (KBR) and the rest refused to drive in Iraq without military escort. The battalion commander, LTC Chuck Maskell, tasked CPT Isaac Bristow, commander of the 2632nd

Transportation Company, to build 30 gun trucks to provide command and control over the civilian convoys. Again the issue came down to armor and armament. There already was an M1114 armored HMMWV with a ring mount in the inventory, but not enough to meet the demands of convoys in Iraq. Not until early 2005, would the commercial industry produce enough M1114s or add-on armor kits to fulfill the increased demands of the war.

Instead mechanics welded sheet metal to the sides of M998 HMMWVs and because the soft tops could not support ring mounts, they constructed gun boxes on the backs of HMMWVs. The welders of the 181st Battalion experimented with gun truck designs in a section of the maintenance area known as the "Skunk Werks." As the ambush threat spread to other areas later that year, so did the development of HMMWV gun truck designs. There was a wide variety of designs, some good and some bad. This led to the term "hillbilly armor." Because



Rehearsing box formation at Udari Range, Kuwait.

Photo courtesy of 518th Gun Truck Company

the cabs of the HMMWVs did not have ring mounts or support the weight of a ring mount, the HMMWV designs primarily consisted of an armored box and mounted machinegun in the back. Machinegun mounts were either pedestal or ring mount welded on a box or swivel seat. Some HMMWV gun trucks even mounted machineguns on swivel arms hinged to the back doors like helicopter door guns. Any vehicle with an M-249 (SAW) was considered a gun truck.



Lead HMMWV gun truck of a convoy of the 1864th Transportation Company. Photo courtesy of 1864th Transportation Company

While history does not always repeat itself, this is where it rhymed, as Mark Twain joked. The Vietnam gun jeep could not support the weight of full armor protection as could the 5-ton gun truck; and, since the HMMWV was designed to replace both the jeep and the 2 ½-ton truck, the HMMWV gun truck combined the best attributes of both in terms of armor and armament. Like the gun jeep, the HMMWV had the room for the communications equipment that made it an ideal convoy commander vehicle. Although it could accelerate and maneuver like a gun jeep it could not carry the number of crew-served weapons as the 5-ton gun truck. So there was still the need for bigger gun trucks.

The larger gun truck designs either consisted of a machinegun mounted on a ring mount over the cab or



Rat Patrol blocking road. Photo courtesy of Steve Ruggiero

for those vehicles that could not fit a ring mount, the crews constructed a sandbag and plywood box on the back of the 5-ton truck. Many built roofs over their gun boxes to provide shade from the sun, thus giving the appearance of a “dog house.” It did not take long to figure out that sandbags fell apart with the beating of the rough road. Crews then began to experiment with steel walls. Remarkably some would find their inspiration for gun trucks from photos of Vietnam gun trucks on the internet. Their only limitation was the availability of steel. Yet they had taken the same first steps as the 8th Group had in Vietnam.

Inspired by Dean Dominique’s article, “Convoy Rat Patrol,” CPT Bristow developed a doctrine around the HMMWV gun trucks he called “Tiger Teams.” Two

HMMWV gun trucks ran ahead of convoys to block traffic at intersections so the convoys could pass without slowing down or stopping. In the event of an ambush, they could respond to the threat with fire power. Other units adopted this doctrine. The Tiger Teams performed like scouts out ahead of the convoy and security for



Early in the war, gun trucks employed cavalry tactics of dismounting to fight.

Photo courtesy of 1158th HET

the convoy if hit. The dog house and ring mounted gun trucks just maintained their positions in the convoy. The idea spread to other units in Iraq and some returned to the name, "Rat Patrols."

The private military contractor, Military Professional Resources Inc. (MPRI), also took the initiative to develop a convoy live fire training program at Camp Udari, Kuwait. JTF7 saw the need to send units back to Kuwait for this training. MPRI began by teaching the drivers to dismount their vehicles and fight when in the kill zone. Taking feedback from drivers, MPRI continually evolved their training. They quickly changed the ambush doctrine to clear the kill zone. One of their most significant contributions was the concept of the floating rally point, where convoys would form a box a couple miles beyond the kill zone. As gun trucks evolved, so did the MPRI training program making them the proponent for convoy ambush battle drills.

OIF2 Al Sadr's April Uprising

In 31 March 2004, four civilian contract body guards of the Blackwater Security Consulting, which provided security for food deliveries, drove into Fallujah and their vehicle was attacked. The contractors were killed, their bodies mutilated beyond recognition, burned and what was left was hung on the bridge over the Euphrates. BG Mark Kimmitt, Deputy Director for Coalition Operations, pledged to hunt down those who carried out killings, but added that he would not send forces into Fallujah to retrieve the remains of the victims. He instead asked the Iraqi Police to recover the remains. Kimmitt feared that any coalition forces entering the city would encounter ambushes where the insurgents would use civilians as human shields and any pre-emptive attack into the city could lead to a bad situation and make it even worse. The US military would instead act on the time and place of its choosing. This hesitancy seemed to encourage the insurgents and violence spread to other regions in the Sunni Triangle.

At 1300 hours on Tuesday, 5 April 2005, the Mosques in the Sunni Triangle relayed Muqtada Al Sadr's call for Iraqi people to take up arms in a jihad against the coalition forces. A car bomb exploded next to a patrol of three US armored vehicles and two HMMWVs

in Al Ramadi at 1700 hours that day. A series of attacks would escalate to the worst weekend of convoy ambushes in the history of the Iraq War.

A platoon from the 1486th Medium Truck stationed at Cedar II escorted a KBR Class IX (repair parts) Sustainer Push convoy to LSA Anaconda. On 5 April, SSG Dan Studer's squad escorted a KBR convoy returning from Anaconda. At 0745 hours, three insurgents fired small arms and an RPG from a dump truck. The convoy continued to move and did not return fire. At 0750 hours on Alternate Supply Route (ASR) Sword, the same convoy received more small arms fire bowing out the rear duals on a KBR truck. The convoy continued to a rally point without returning fire. At the rally point, the KBR truck changed its tires. At 0905 hours, an orange and white vehicle approached from the rear at a high rate of speed and two passengers fired at the convoy. The convoy returned fire and injured one of the insurgents. SGT Hubert applied first aid until a medevac arrived. At 1130 hours, a taxi with five insurgents fired on the convoy. Upon reaching Convoy Support Center (CSC) Scania, KBR pulled their convoys off of the road and the squad returned to Cedar. The convoy had been ambushed four times in four hours. Still these were small kill zones of no more than 100 meters.¹

On 6 April, a fuel convoy of the 724th POL escorted a KBR convoy from Anaconda through the town of Hit. As CPT Terrence Henry's lead vehicle drove through the traffic circle on ASR Bronze, the SAW gunner, SPC Russell, noticed the absence of ICDC in the circle. As he turned to look back, he saw Iraqi gunmen come out from behind cars just as an IED exploded on the right side of the road. They had detonated it too early and it missed the trucks. Russell fired off 13 rounds at the insurgents as they opened fire. SGT Bailey and SGT Watson in the approaching 5-ton gun truck saw the exchange of gun fire and also engaged targets with their Mk-19 automatic grenade launcher. SGT Bailey began picking off insurgents hiding in the doorways and behind cars. The 724th POL had its first ambush and suffered no casualties or had any trucks damaged.²

On 7 April, IEDs closed the southbound traffic. The Muqtada al Sadr's Mahdi Militia clashed with elements of the 1st Cavalry Division and attacked a convoy on ASR Cardinals. The next day, the emboldened Mahdi Militia

attacked convoys and again clashed with elements of the 1st Cavalry Division on ASR Sword and Cardinals.³

Since 7 April, the 2/12th Cavalry, based out of Camp Victory at BIAP, fought with the Mahdi Militia to reassert control over their area of operations. The Cavalry patrols were frequently attacked by insurgents on ASR Sword and Cardinals. The buildings along the streets provided excellent concealment for the insurgents to fire down upon the passing vehicles. Some insurgents felt so bold as to drive right up to the tanks and Bradleys and fire RPGs at them. At 0300 in the morning of 9 April, CPT Munz ordered his patrol of C, 2/12 Cavalry to take the Dairy Milk Factory from which the insurgents had launched their attacks. The Cavalry patrol settled in to a defensive perimeter for the rest of the morning.⁴

On Thursday night, 8 April, the Militia dropped eight bridges and overpasses surrounding CSC Scania, thus severing northbound traffic into Baghdad International Airport (BIAP) where the newly arrived 1st Cavalry Division drew its supplies. The stage was set for the culmination of the attacks on Easter weekend. With all the violence flaring up around the Sunni Triangle, the combat arms leaders failed to see what the logisticians saw. The enemy knew the soft underbelly of the Abrams tank was the trucks it depended upon for everything it needed to fight. Starting Thursday night, the enemy launched large scale ambushes, which would be later referred to as complex ambushes.

Complex Ambush, 8 April 2004

1486th Transportation Company

On the desert, an overpass is high ground. 2LT James McCormick II had earned the Bronze Star Medal as a scout squad leader with the 24th Infantry Division during Desert Storm the hard way; it came with the Purple Heart. He had just graduated from the Air Defense Artillery (ADA) Officers Basic Course, but realized if he wanted to see combat in this war, he would do better to go with a truck company, so he joined CPT Pat Hinton's 1487th Medium Truck Company (Medium Truck) National Guard from Eaton, Ohio, in time to deploy with them to Operation Iraqi Freedom II. Hinton recognized the need for a combat arms mentality in a truck unit, which at first caused friction with the NCOs

who saw the convoy's mission as merely delivering the cargo to its destination. Whether gun trucks should be aggressive and take action to deter attacks on future convoys or just get the convoy safely through the kill zone and onto its destination was a subject of debate that was never resolved during this war.

The official policy in OIF had been to rotate units upon completion of one-year boots on the ground (BOG). The problem was that within a few months, the Army had all new units fighting the war. They had a short right seat/left seat ride period before the transfer of authority, and then the new units had to learn how to fight the war all over. Each year the Iraqi insurgents gained more experience fighting the Americans, yet the American units on the ground only gained one year experience fighting the Iraqis and then left. The replacement of OIF I units was pretty much completed by March 2004.

The 1487th Transportation Company had arrived in Kuwait on 3 February 2004 where it was sent to Cedar II and conducted its right-seat-ride with the 740th Medium Truck Company, from South Dakota, in February. The 740th had conducted routine sustainment missions from Kuwait to Camp Cedar II and had never been hit during its year tour. The 1487th Transportation Company's first right seat ride with the 740th, however, was a five to seven-day trip to the Syrian border.⁵

2LT McCormick's convoy departed Cedar II for BIAP. They rested overnight at BIAP and departed the next morning at 0600 hours. A pair of Apache helicopter gunships escorted the convoy on ASR Mobile when an IED exploded next to an M915. The explosion damaged the truck and wounded both drivers. SPC Jacob Bach became the first soldier of the 1487th to become wounded in action.⁶

McCormick asked the platoon leader, "What next?" She looked at him and said that this had never happened to her convoy before. Most of the problems occurred north of CSC Scania and the 740th usually just ran convoys to Cedar II near An Nasariyah and back. This was also their first run beyond Cedar. The platoon leader pulled out her folder with the radio frequencies and medevac procedures. McCormick was surprised that no one had memorized the frequencies but him. They called for the medevac but since a helicopter had been shot down near Fallujah, they told the convoy to bring the wounded in. When McCormick walked back

to the damaged truck, he saw soldiers milling around and taking pictures as if it was a traffic accident. They were still in the kill zone. So he yelled at the drivers to get back in their trucks. They continued to Camp Champion near Al Ramadi and finished the six-day run without further incident.⁷

2LT McCormick believed in the aggressive approach and after that convoy, his crew painted their HMMWV gun truck, with alternating black and tan stripes so the enemy would know it was coming. McCormick wanted to name it something more fitting of its offensive role, like “the Striped Avenger” or “the Raptor,” but SPC Thomas A. “Mojo” Salemme jokingly called it, “the Zebra.” McCormick asked, “Have you ever seen a zebra turn and fight?” The rest of the crew thought the name was funny and reminded him that it looked like a zebra, so he let them call it that. McCormick and his HMMWV crew would have plenty of opportunity to prove themselves. His platoon also added a ring mount to the top of an M915 5-ton and constructed a steel gun box on the back.⁸



Zebra gun truck before the .50 caliber machine gun was added. At the time of the ambush it had no door armor.

Photo courtesy of the 518th Gun Truck Company



M915 tractor with sheet metal door armor. Photo courtesy of the 518th Gun Truck Company

On 22 March 2004, the 1487th Medium Truck escorted a 70-plus convoy west toward Al Asaad when an IED exploded just past the second bridge on ASR Mobile, disabling an M915 and wounding two civilian drivers in the last half of the convoy. 2LT McCormick had his Zebra, the M915 gun truck and gun trailer turned back to secure the damaged vehicle. Meanwhile, the 5-ton gun truck with an M60 machinegun led the rest of the convoy out of the kill zone, but SSG Robert Mata's M915 maintenance truck remained in the kill zone where he fired his SAW then ran back to recover the wounded civilian drivers. The Zebra crested the overpass from the south side and surprised four insurgents on the overpass. The Zebra did not have any crew-served weapons, so the crew dismounted, except for the gunner on top, and laid down suppressive fire with their M16s and SAWs.

The Iraqis then fled to the safety of their white pickup. The crew of the Zebra ripped the vehicle and insurgents apart with small arms fire and then McCormick spotted a white truck with a mortar tube in the back firing at them from behind a berm to the south. SPC Bryan Noble fired a 40mm round from his M203 grenade launcher but the truck was a little out of range so SPC Salemme opened up on it with his squad automatic weapon (SAW) and the truck exploded into

pieces – definitely secondaries. That was typical of most small - scale ambushes before the April Uprising of 2004. McCormick had learned the success of turning the fight back into the enemy. During ten minutes of fighting, the Americans had killed at least two insurgents.⁹

When McCormick turned to talk on the radio, rounds hit around his feet and suddenly he felt something hit him in the calf. It was the copper jacket of a bullet. He refused medevac fearing that he would not be allowed to accompany the convoy on the rest of its journey. After the damaged M915 was towed away, the Zebra returned to where the convoy had staged in a defensive posture under the Platoon Sergeant, SFC Tim Haggard. McCormick's leg was treated by a Navy doctor at Al Asaad earning him his second Purple Heart Medal. McCormick then led the convoy back to Camp Champion near Ar Ramadi and dropped off the damaged truck. While waiting, the camp received mortar fire for two days. Upon his return to Navistar on 26 March, Hinton advised the lieutenant to stay off the road and let the leg wound heal. McCormick felt any enemy he killed in that kill zone was enemy who would not ambush any other convoy. The NCOs felt differently and protested to their commander that he had recklessly endangered the rest of the convoy by not continuing the mission.¹⁰

On April 5, 2004, the radical young cleric Muqtada al Sadr flexed his muscles and called for a jihad against coalition forces in Iraq. The intelligence community just expected this to be just a lot more of the same, which



SPC Bryan Noble pointing to where rounds hit the Zebra during the Battle of BIAP on 11 April 2004 .

Photo courtesy of Thomas Salemme



2LT James McCormick, SPC Brandon Lawson and SPC Ralph Blue in front of the Zebra right before the mission.

Photo courtesy of the 518th Gun Truck Company

translated for truck drivers into a lot of small - scale convoy ambushes. No one outside the Vietnam veterans had anticipated the size and sophistication of the ambushes. Up until that time, the prevalent response was to push pedal to the metal and race out of the kill zone while returning fire.

Having learned that anyone dressed in the black uniform of the militia or wearing their green and yellow colors was enemy and coalition forces had authorization to shoot without being fired upon, SSG Rick Gruver of the 1st Platoon, 1486th Medium Truck Company went over to ask 2LT McCormick to join his convoy, "I would really like you to go. I've got a bad feeling. I hear you kick ass." McCormick went to his company commander to ask permission to augment Gruver's convoy, since he had been grounded after his last convoy.

CPT Pat Hinton had used James' leg wound from that previous ambush as an excuse to keep him in to see how well the NCOs would do on their own. James pleaded with his commander to let him go and Hinton finally relented but the lieutenant could only take volunteers. This was no problem since he attracted likeminded warriors.

McCormick managed to get the six-foot four-inch SPC Bryan Noble back as his driver. Noble was a part-time bounty hunter and absolutely fearless in combat. CPT Hinton asked SPC Brandon Lawson to go as the radio operator. McCormick ran into SPC Ralph Blue, from the 812th Battalion staff, and he volunteered to go. He had spent six years in the US Marines but when the terrorists attacked on 9/11, he enlisted in the Army

Reserves. McCormick was glad to have him. That gave him a crew of four. As he had done before every mission, he offered his crew the opportunity to back out. In jest he told them that he would understand if they did not want to go because he knew they wanted to go with him.

McCormick's gun truck was a soft-skin HMMWV with squad automatic weapon (SAW), but he believed had he had a .50 caliber machinegun during his last ambush the outcome would have been significantly different. Thirty minutes before they were to leave, McCormick visited SGT Peacock, of C Battery, 201st Field Artillery (West Virginia National Guard), and said, "I need a .50 cal worse than a dead man needs a casket." Peacock responded, "Well, yeah buddy, I'll give you one of ours. Pull it over to the shop." They drove the Zebra over to the shop and cut out a hole in the turtle shell top where Peacock's mechanics installed a pedestal mount for the M2 .50 caliber machinegun. They also found some old Kevlar ballistic vests and hung them over the doors for added protection. Because McCormick was the only member of his crew who had any real experience on the .50, he was the gunner with 1,000 rounds of .50 caliber ammunition. Each man carried seven 30-round magazines of 5.56mm ammunition for their M16s. Noble carried the M203 with 30 rounds of high explosive and about ten smoke rounds in his vehicle. The crew also stored a few extra ammo cans with M16 magazines and a mixture of smoke grenades, fragmentary grenades and flares in the vehicle.¹¹

Three gun trucks escorted Gruver's convoy of approximately 40 vehicles across the Iraqi border from Kuwait up MSR Tampa. This was a regularly scheduled sustainment push hauling anything from food, water, and ammunition to toilet paper. SPC Kray Holloway drove the lead HMMWV gun truck with SPC Brian Coe, SPC Justin Miller and SGT Tracy Dyer as SAW gunners in the open box, fourth in line of march. Dyer was the company clerk but wanted to go out so this was his first run. This HMMWV had add-on ballistic armor kit with ballistic glass. The Zebra drove in the middle of the convoy as the "floater," which moved up and down the convoy keeping trucks in line and raced ahead to block traffic at intersections. An M915 tractor in the rear had a gun box constructed on the back with an MK19 automatic grenade launcher.

Gruver's convoy started off without any mishaps until it reached "Dirt Tampa." Then the Zebra crew received a call that an M915 driven by Coe and Delany had rear-ended another truck, the HMMWV gun truck driven by Holloway with Justin Miller and Dyer. The



Top: Pedestal mount for the .50 caliber machine gun was added to the Zebra right before the mission.

Bottom: Later view of the Zebra showing the 50 caliber machine gun on top after door armor was added.

Photos courtesy of the 518th Gun Truck Company

M915A3 was damaged and could not be towed. The Zebra and the M915 manned by Williams, Prather and "Meat" Mealer remained with the damaged truck. The rest of the convoy continued on to the Convoy Support Center Scania and remained until after dark. While waiting on Tampa, the gunners discovered that Mealer had placed the firing pin in backwards in his M60 machinegun and also "jacked up" the MK19 automatic grenade launcher. The locals came out and watched them like buzzards, so they test fired their weapons which kept the locals at a distance, but all through the night trucks would drive around them in



SGT Kray Holloway's HMMWV gun truck with vinyl cover rolled back for the three gunners. Photo courtesy of Tom Stewart

the desert. When finally someone came up from Cedar and recovered the wrecked M915, the rest of the convoy hurried to Scania. This seemed like a bad omen.¹²



Rear view of the gun box on the M915 tractor.
Photo courtesy of the 518th Gun Truck Company

On Thursday April 8, SSG Gruver's convoy departed Scania for BIAP. From there, they would push supplies to the 1st Cav in the Green Zone. Everything was smooth sailing up the main highway until the convoy approached the final turn into BIAP around 1900 hours that evening. The crew of the Zebra saw some Iraqi kids playing soccer and then Blue saw one of the kids pick up a cell phone and make a call. They knew that kids playing soccer would call ahead and warn the insurgents that a convoy was coming. Right after that, the lead elements of the convoy drove up the ramp of the interchange and headed for the south gate a few miles away. The crew of Holloway's HMMWV gun truck could see the gate off in the distance. Dyer sat on the left side, Coe stood in the middle with the SAW and Miller sat on the right side of the gun truck. Coe pointed to the right and said he could



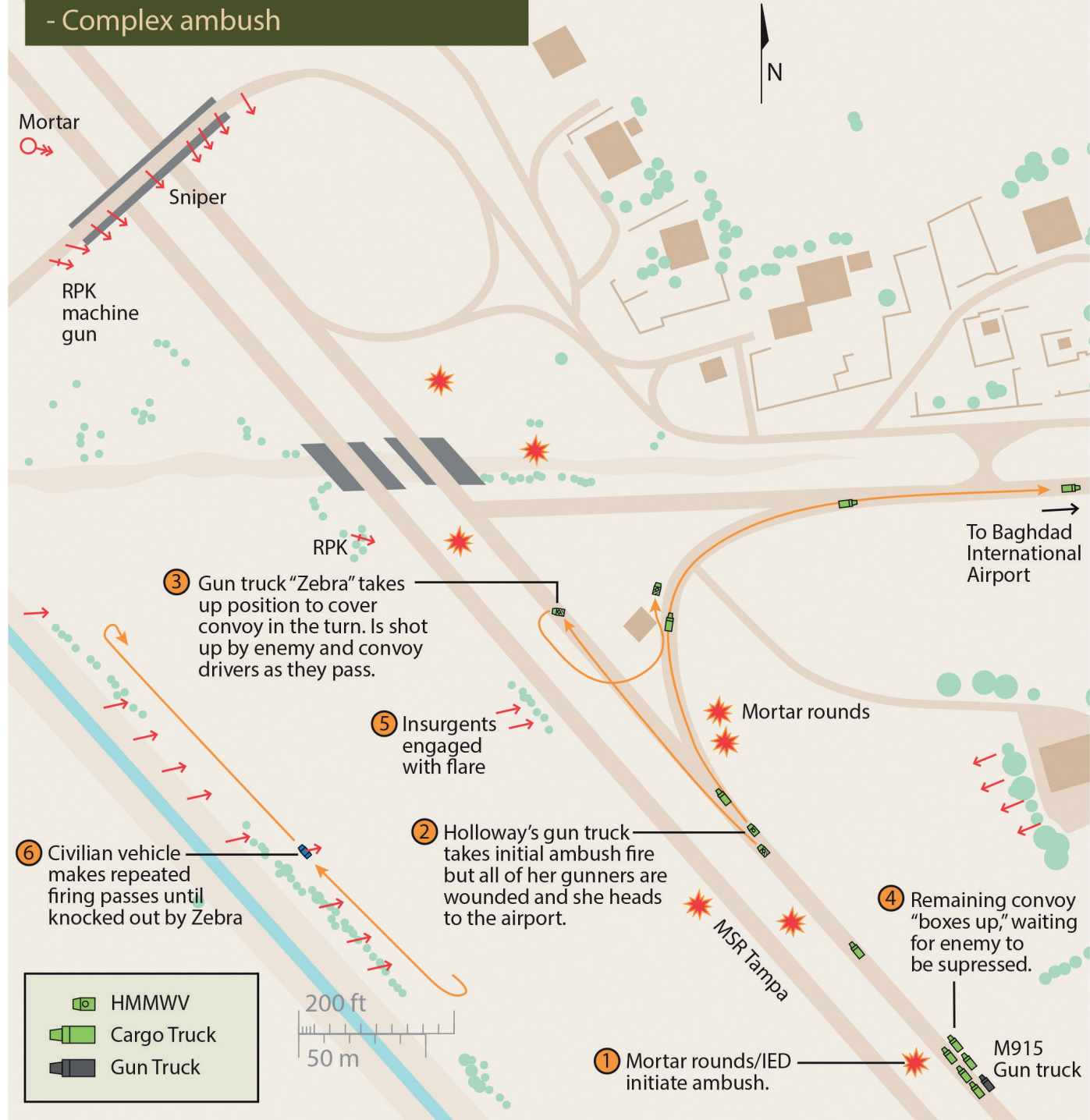
Later view of the M915 gun truck, but with a .50 caliber machine gun instead of the Mk19.
Photo courtesy of the 518th Gun Truck Company



Damaged M915 on the way to Scania.
Photo courtesy of the 518th Gun Truck Company

8 April 2004

- Complex ambush



even see one of Saddam's' palaces off in the distance to the left, which overlooked the entrance to BIAP. Dyer and Miller looked over Coe's shoulder to see the palace when they heard SSG Gruver yell over the radio, "Contact on the right side."¹³

Just as SSG Tom Stewart's tractor, third in the line of march, made the turn onto the onramp, two mortars

rounds exploded about ten meters just in front of his vehicle to his right. It was as if the rounds were intended to block the route heading north. His driver, PV2 Hillary Suter, instinctively hit the brakes and when Stewart felt the truck slow down, he yelled at her, "Go, Go, Go, don't stop, keep going!" Stewart then turned to his right and pointed his M16 out the window to fire, but could not

see any enemy in the tall reeds. The HMMWV gun truck behind his truck opened fire on the enemy in the reeds. As his truck completed the turn, Stewart looked back and recognized the Zebra further back on Tampa.¹⁴

After the first few vehicles had made the turn onto the service road, everyone heard two loud explosions in front of the convoy. SSG James D. Martin and Elaine F. Coleman saw a mortar round land in the median and then they received small arms fire. Coleman called on the handheld radio that they were taking fire from both sides of the road and Martin started returning fire. Dyer, Miller and Coe in the HMMWV gun truck turned around and grabbed their weapons.¹⁵

SPC Holloway steered her HMMWV gun truck onto the right hand side of the road just short of the on ramp to provide cover for the passing convoy. Dyer saw three Iraqis, with weapons and dressed in black, running off to his left towards cover. Dyer fired his SAW at them and they received return fire from the left and front. A round severed Coe's thumb and he collapsed into the vehicle. SPC Robert A. Delaney immediately went to work treating Coe's wound. He yelled to Holloway to get to the gate because Coe needed medical help. As the HMMWV began to roll forward, a round hit Dyer in the right triceps and twice in the right forearm. As they turned down the road to BIAP, a round hit Miller in his left arm. He fell down but stood back up to fire, all the while cursing at the enemy. Dyer also continued to fire his SAW. A mortar round landed on the left side next to the HMMWV and shrapnel peppered Dyer from his right wrist to his shoulder and hit Coe in the arm and face while he was lying down in the vehicle. Just as Dyer nearly expended all the ammunition in the drum of his SAW, a round penetrated his right forearm and exited his elbow causing his arm to go limp. Unable hold his SAW, he moved his left hand back to fire his weapon when another round hit the hand guard. Unable to hold the weapon, he fell back into the HMMWV. In three minutes all three gunners were wounded and Holloway screamed this on the radio.¹⁶

Over in the Zebra, McCormick ordered Noble, "Pull up there next to their HMMWV and see what's going on." The Zebra stopped just 20 feet from Holloway's gun truck. Noble noticed the trucks were pulling over to stop as if they were going to "box up." The box formation was used for security like circling the wagons in the



SSG Tom Stewart. Photo courtesy of Tom Stewart

Old West and formed by the first trucks stopping in a row right behind the lead gun truck and the next row of trucks pulling up next to it. The lead and rear gun trucks would close off the ends like a box. The doctrine called for the box formation to be formed outside the kill zone, not in the middle of it. McCormick told Lawson to tell those drivers to "knock that shit off and get in the gate." Forming a box in the kill zone was suicide!¹⁷

By then all of Holloway's three gunners were down. McCormick saw Miller get back up and fire at an insurgent on the bridge but recognized the terror on Holloway's face. There was one RPK machinegun behind a berm just beyond the overpass that had the onramp completely covered and could also shoot down Tampa. A second RPK had a perfect shot up the onramp and road to BIAP. The two machineguns had interlocking fire on that onramp. Unknown to them there was one lone militiaman with a SPD sniper rifle on the overpass that probably took out most of Holloway's crew and a mortar somewhere beyond the overpass. The bulk of the enemy with AKs were concealed in ditches on the left side of the Tampa leading to the overpass. In all, there were about 30 insurgents in either black militia garb or civilian attire forming a perfect L-shaped kill zone. The truck drivers had never experienced an ambush this size or as well planned as this before.¹⁸

Meanwhile, SSG Gruver, meanwhile, led the lead elements of his convoy to safety while the gun trucks withdrew and returned fire. There was no serpentine so the lead elements of the convoy did not have to slow down. Once in BIAP, Gruver set about trying to get a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) out to the kill zone. Once inside the gate, Stewart instructed his driver to pull off to the right in a staging area. He dismounted, walked to

the guard shack where he informed the guards about the ambush and counted trucks as they came in. He heard some of the trucks had stopped and were waiting for the Zebra to suppress the enemy before they would move. Evidently a contract driver had halted his vehicle short of the kill zone blocking the remainder of the convoy and the M915 gun truck remained with that part of the convoy.¹⁹

Knowing they could no longer fight, McCormick yelled over to Holloway, "Get in the damn gate, get in the damn gate!" Holloway then raced to the gate where her crew could receive medical attention. As rounds pummeled the gun truck, a ricochet hit Dyer behind the right ear knocking his head forward. Miller continued to fire his weapon until they reached the safety of the compound. SSG Stewart watched Holloway's gun truck come flying through the gate and heard her jump out screaming, "Help, help, they've been shot!" Stewart ran over and opened the left back door of the HMMWV and found the three gunners lying on top of each other with blood all over the place. He grabbed the guy on top, Dyer, by his flak jacket and put him out onto the ground. Stewart went into his medic mode and started to take the body armor off him, but he screamed in pain, so Stewart cut the body armor off at shoulders and sides straps. He could then just peel the body armor off. Someone had brought him a combat life saver (CLS) bag while he searched the body and found two or three bullet wounds to the right arm. Stewart had another man start bandaging the wounds while Stewart and SSG Martin continued to calm Dyer down. Stewart luckily found the vein first time and inserted an intravenous solution. SPC Keith Miller and Hillary Suter cut Coe's Kevlar vest off in search for more wounds. An ambulance pulled up and the medics carried the wounded away. Stewart remembered it was still daylight. About the time Stewart finished working on the wounded, the QRF, a patrol of Air Defense Artillery HMMWVs, arrived and stopped at the gate before heading out. The Zebra still remained in the kill zone fighting it out with the enemy so that the remaining 16 trucks could reach the safety of the concrete walls that surrounded BIAP.²⁰

McCormick noticed three cars filled with Iraqis driving up and down the convoy firing at it, so he ordered SPC Bryan Noble to drive a little past the onramp entrance and pull over to the left facing into the enemy so the convoy would have room to pass behind the Zebra.

The lieutenant had to jump up and sit on the top of the HMMWV since there was not enough room in the hole to turn the .50 and fire at the cars. The Zebra stopped just 70 yards from the overpass in the apex of the kill zone. McCormick then popped yellow smoke and tossed it to the enemy to the left. He then told Lawson to let everyone know the yellow smoke marked the enemy position and SPC Brandon Lawson yelled over the radio, "Enemy position is marked by yellow smoke!" Trucks passed behind them firing at the enemy and unintentionally at the Zebra. Noble and Lawson dismounted and automatically began firing in their sectors from behind their soft-skinned doors as if they might provide some cover. SPC Blue fired out the window until Noble yelled at him to get out and fire. Noble fired 40mm grenades out of his M203 as fast as an Mk19 automatic grenade launcher. He pounded the RPK to the left rear of the Zebra until it went silent but neither he nor McCormick's .50 could silence the other up ahead. Noble had fired a total of thirty 40mm grenades.²¹

McCormick knew the most effective enemy fire came from the overpass and sprayed it with his .50. Suddenly one enemy round punched through the mount and hit the ammunition belt sending pieces of the shattered round into McCormick's left hand. He was trying to reload when suddenly another hit his ceramic plate knocking him down into the floor of the Zebra like he had been hit in the chest with a sledgehammer. He sat there momentarily stunned when a voice inside his head told him to get up. That same moment, Noble opened the door and said, "Get the hell out of there, LT; you have been shot." James yelled back, "Fuck No, I am getting back up and killing these bastards." He picked himself up from the floor of the vehicle and saw two Iraqi insurgents coming in his direction. The .50 was out of ammo so he grabbed another belt but the blood made the brass slippery and he could not hold it. Remembering the advice of an old Vietnam vet, he picked up a flare and fired it like a rocket at the insurgents. It started a fire in the brush and caused the enemy to flee. He then grabbed his M16 and dropped both of them. He saw rounds hit one in the head, blowing a chunk of his skull away and then the man bounced on the ground twitching in convulsions. James had never seen a man die that way from gunfire. At that moment a sudden revelation came over him. A round

had hit him square in the chest and he had lived. He realized he had no control over whether he lived or died. All he could do was just take the fight to the enemy. From then on, he no longer feared death and could think clearly under fire. He then reloaded his .50 and saw the sniper on the overpass leaning over trying to take aim on Noble. Evidently the sniper had thought he killed the lieutenant so McCormick fired a ten-round burst at the bridge blowing out chunks of the concrete and splattering the sniper²²

McCormick then wondered why the last half of the convoy was not driving through the kill zone. Unknown to him, they had boxed up and were waiting for the enemy fire to die down before they proceeded. As it was getting darker, the lieutenant saw tree branches a couple of hundred yards away light up and move every time the mortar fired. He started working that tree line with his .50 until the mortar ceased firing. Noble then drove the Zebra off of the road and the crew dismounted to return fire while Lawson called for the Quick Reaction Force (QRF). After 20 minutes of fighting, the QRF still had not arrived. At last, the remainder of the convoy started driving through the kill zone. Soldiers fired out the windows as they drove by and one driver not looking where he aimed shot up the Zebra with rounds zipping in between the crew. One round grazed McCormick's calf.²³

McCormick then told Noble, "Let's get ready to go into the gate," but Noble informed him, "We've got flat tires." The Zebra had three tires shot out so McCormick asked, "Will it still roll?" Noble answered, "Yeah." "Then get ready to roll in the gate," McCormick told him. Just then they received a radio call, "We have a TCN [Third Country National] and his truck is missing." McCormick then instructed Noble, "Pull over behind this building. We have got to find this guy." The bulk of the fighting had died down but there was still some sporadic small arms fire. As Blue climbed in, the barrel of his M16 was so hot it cooked off a couple rounds. Noble then drove the Zebra behind the building where they might find one spare tire but did not have the time. They then saw the blue car race by shooting at them and they poured so many rounds in it that it slid off the road and caught fire.²⁴

McCormick then saw the glimpses of light reflecting off of the windshields of vehicles speeding his way down the dirt access road from Abu Ghraib - the same

direction as the enemy. It took him a second look to recognize the vehicles were HMMWVs of the QRF and about that time the truck with the TCN blew past them heading for BIAP. The QRF drove between the Zebra and its target, the blue car. An aggravated McCormick ceased fire and yelled, "What the fuck are they doing?" The HMMWVs then pulled around and lined up behind the Zebra and they drew fire from where the blue car had stopped behind a building. The Zebra crew and the QRF returned fire and after about three minutes of intense fire, McCormick could tell the car was no longer a threat so waved his hand in front of his face giving the signal to cease fire. The night then became quiet. That last fight had not lasted more than three minutes.²⁵

About that time, the M915 gun truck and a M915 bobtail pulled up with SPC Dan Baird, PFC Mealer and two other soldiers. Adrenaline had McCormick still pumped up. He walked around cursing, yelling commands and asking how every was, "God, I hate these mother fuckers." That was when he learned that Lawson had been shot through the leg. One of the soldiers of the QRF bandaged his leg. Another saw the lieutenant's bloody hand and said, "Well sir, you've been wounded. We'll take you back to the compound." The combat lifesaver climbed out of the HMMWV with his medical aid bag. McCormick yelled at him, "Get your ass back in that truck." With accountability of the missing TCN, McCormick wanted to get everyone back in the gate to assess the damage to his convoy. The soldier replied, "Yes sir," and did as he was told. The lieutenant then wrapped his olive green "drive - on rag" around his hand.²⁶

The M915 bobtail hooked up to the Zebra and the QRF then escorted them to the Iraqi National Guard compound adjacent to the palace. By then McCormick had calmed down. There SSG Stewart placed a pressure bandage on McCormick's wound and checked Lawson's wound. In the compound a female driver stepped out of the bobtail pale as a ghost. McCormick walked up to her and asked her some questions but she just looked around as if she was in shock. She started to cry, "I've got babies. This is crazy. I cannot do this." The lieutenant looked at her with the compassion that a father would his daughter and gave her a hug and told her it would be okay. She looked at him and exclaimed, "My God, look at you guys. All of you have been shot and there is

blood everywhere.” She then sat down and cried more. McCormick consoled her wondering if his daughter would ever have to face this.²⁷

The entire fight had lasted 45 minutes resulting in five wounded soldiers, but the insurgents lost 18 confirmed killed in action. The ambush took place a mile from the gate at BIAP and a local national convoy escorted by HMMWVs was also ambushed on Route Sword a few miles to the north in downtown Baghdad. That was the beginning of the Easter Weekend Ambushes. That night the militia dropped eight bridges and overpasses around Scania thus cutting Baghdad off from all northbound traffic. The next day, Good Friday, the enemy would ambush any convoy that tried to get in or out of BIAP. They knew the Achilles Heel of the 1st Cavalry was its dependence upon trucks for everything they needed to fight. That Easter weekend would result in the worst convoy ambushes of the war and the Zebra crew’s ordeal had only started. They would lead the defense of BIAP against a determined enemy attack and escort three convoys through extended kill zones on their way to the Green Zone.

Lesson

By this time in the war, gun trucks had little to no armor and employed cavalry tactics of dismounting to fight. This brought all weapons to bear against the enemy. The enemy laid out an L-shaped kill zone with the overpass as the key terrain with a sniper. The two RPK machineguns had interlocking fields of fire on the onramp and the mortar provided support. In the desert, any high ground, whether an overpass or two-story house, provided key terrain. The sniper on the overpass inflicted the most damage on the two gun truck crews.

The lead gun truck turned in the direction where the crew assumed the fire came from and was facing away from the apex. Within three seconds, all three gunners were wounded and the gun truck was no longer able to provide effective fire support. McCormick instinctively ordered his gun truck to turn into the apex of the kill zone. His .50 machinegun and Noble’s accuracy with the M203 grenade launcher took out three of the four key enemy weapons. McCormick believed that the sniper had assumed he was dead and was taking an aim on Noble when McCormick killed him. The key to one gun truck defeating the enemy was the accuracy of their fire.

Easter weekend was a turning point in the war in Iraq for truck drivers. The enemy had shown great sophistication in the planning and scale of their attacks. By the end of April, the coalition had suppressed the uprising; but for the rest of the year, truck drivers would slug it out with the insurgents for control of the road. After that Easter weekend, a new term entered the Army vernacular – “complex ambush” - to distinguish any large - scale ambush from a simple one.

This was not only one of the first complex convoy ambushes of the war, but also one of the overlooked ambushes in terms of acts of valor. Not since the Vietnam War had truck drivers become front line combat soldiers and their senior officers had little idea that truck drivers could be heroes. For that ambush, the crew of the Zebra received the Bronze Star Medal, with the exception of Blue. His was downgraded to an ARCOM with valor device. Yet their actions, however, exceeded those of SSG Timothy Nein and his crew of Raven 42 for their acts of bravery during the Palm Sunday Ambush on 20 March 2005. Nein deservedly earned the Distinguished Service Cross and two other soldiers earned Silver Stars in the largest convoy ambush of the next year. Both crews spent the same amount of time in the kill zone. Both Nein and McCormick had made the key decisions that saved the convoys. Nein’s Raven 42 faced 50 insurgents while McCormick’s Zebra faced about 30, but Nein entered the kill zone with three fully up-armored M1114 HMMWVs with six more up-armored HMMWVs on the main road. McCormick entered the kill zone with two HMMWVs and only one had plate steel on the doors. It left the kill zone after three minutes when all three gunners were wounded. Unlike Nein, McCormick was hit twice and kept fighting. In fact, McCormick would pick up another volunteer for his crew at BIAP and all but one of his five-man crew would be wounded before the mission was completed. The MPs immediately recognized valor when they saw it in Raven 42, awarding two Silver Star Medals and one Distinguished Service Cross, but the valor of many truck drivers would go unrecognized that weekend. One captain did recognize McCormick’s valor and recruited him to develop the tactics of his provisional gun truck company. When the 1487th returned to Ohio many of the soldiers would bring their families up to McCormick to introduce them to the man who kept them alive.



Add-on-Armor Kit on M998 HMMWV of the 1158th Transportation Company (HET). Photo courtesy of 1158th Transportation Company



OIF 1 Sit and Spin design HMMWV gun truck of the 1836th Transportation Company (HET). Photo courtesy of Stephen Ruggiero

¹ "1486th Transportation Company Easter Week Firefight."

² SSG Paul L. Marsh and SSG Victor L. Febus, "On the Move with the 724th Transportation Company: Patriots in the Middle East," n.d., and "Historical Narrative, 724th Transportation Company," n.d.

³ Power Point, "April 9th Ambush."

⁴ SSG Paul L. March, "On the move with the 724th Transportation Company: Patriots in the Middle East," unpublished.

⁵ 1LT James L. McCormick II, "The 518th Combat Gun Truck Company (Provisional) 'US Regulators,'" *Transportation Corps Professional Bulletin*, Winter 2004.

⁶ McCormick, "518th Gun Truck."

⁷ McCormick, "518th Gun Truck."

⁸ McCormick, "518th Gun Truck," and telephone interview with McCormick by Richard Killblane, 23 July 2005.

⁹ McCormick email and "518th Gun Truck."

¹⁰ McCormick email and "518th Gun Truck."

¹¹ McCormick telephone conversation, 18 April 2005 and "518th Gun Truck."

¹² McCormick email to Killblane, July 26, 2007.

¹³ Sworn Statements, DA Form 2823, Dec 1998, SSG James D. Martin, 8 April 2004; SPC Robert A. Delaney, 9 April 2004; SPC Elaine F. Coleman, 4 June 2004; SPC Stephen D. Heinmiller, 4 June 2004; SGT James Dyer,

10 June 2004; Ralph Blue email to Richard Killblane, July 27, 2005.

¹⁴ SSG Thomas Stewart interview by Richard Killblane at Ft Eustis, VA, 6 August 2007.

¹⁵ Sworn Statement of Martin, Coleman, and Dyer.

¹⁶ Sworn statements of Delaney, Heinmiller and Dyer.

¹⁷ McCormick conversation with Richard Killblane, 3 January 2009.

¹⁸ McCormick conversation with Richard Killblane, 3 January 2009.

¹⁹ Stewart interview, 6 August 2007.

²⁰ Sworn Statements of Martin and Dyer. Statement by 1LT James McCormick, n.d.; McCormick conversation, 3 January 2009; and Stewart interview, 6 August 2007.

²¹ McCormick conversation, 3 January 2009.

²² McCormick, "518th Gun Truck," and telephone interview with McCormick by Richard Killblane, 18 April 2005 and 3 January 2009.

²³ McCormick, "518th Gun Truck," and telephone interview with McCormick by Richard Killblane, 18 April 2005.

²⁴ McCormick, "518th Gun Truck," and telephone interview with McCormick by Richard Killblane, 18 April 2005.

²⁵ McCormick telephone conversation with Richard Killblane, 11 October 2005, McCormick email to Richard Killblane October 13, 2005.

²⁶ McCormick, 11 October 2005, McCormick email October 13, 2005.

²⁷ McCormick, 11 October 2005 McCormick email October 13, 2005.

Good Friday, 9 April 2004

Ambush at Abu Ghraib



























724th Transportation Company (POL),
7th Transportation Battalion

On the evening of 8 April 2004, Mahdi Militia demolished eight bridges and overpasses around Convoy Support Center Scania nearly

severing Baghdad International Airport (BIAP) from resupply from the south. Scania was the last truck stop on the main supply route from Kuwait to BIAP. This was part of the military plan for Muqtada al Sadr to gain control of the suburbs in south Baghdad named after his father, Sadr City. This 30-year old, cleric had declared a jihad against coalition forces on 5 April. His Mahdi Militia had already driven the Ukrainians out of Al Kut and he

9 April 2004

- Convoy Vehicles

200	SPC Church 1 LT Brown WIA SFC Hawley SGT Blankenship WIA		M249 SAW	GT 12	SPC Bachman WIA SGT Watson WIA		MK 19
26	SFC Adams 1 LT Howard			11	Ross		
1	Howell Hamill WIA/POW			12	Sanchez WIA SGT Krause KIA		
2	Zimmerman WIA			13	Stanley		
3	Wood			14	Stannard WIA PFC Walsh WIA		
4	Tollison SSG Hollingsworth WIA			15	Bell MIA		
5	Bradley KIA			300	SPC Lamar SFC Groff SPC Pelz		M249 SAW
160	SPC Row SPC McDermott		M2 Browning .50 Warlock Jammer	16	Blackwood WIA		
6	Peterson PFC Slaughter			17	Brezovay		
7	Hulett KIA			18	Fisher KIA		
8	Johnson KIA PFC Maupin KIA			19	Lester		
9	Parker KIA			356	SPC Kirkpatrick WIA SPC Bohm WIA		M2 Browning .50
10	Montague KIA PFC Goodrich KIA						
102	SSG Grage WIA SPC Brown		M2 Browning .50				



M915 tractor and 5,000-gallon tanker trailer of the 660th Transportation Company (POL), a sister company of the 724th POL also at Logistic Support Area Anaconda.

Photo courtesy of James Word

already had control over An Najaf. All that stood between him and control of Sadr City was the 1st Cavalry Division with its headquarters at the nearby Green Zone. Sadr's planners realized that the Achilles' heel to the Abrams tanks was their dependency on trucks for fuel and ammunition. By severing the supply line, his militia could stall the armored offensive raging in Sadr City. The Green Zone pulled fuel from BIAP and with the main supply route cut from the south, the 13th Corps Support Command made the decision that night to start pushing fuel from the bag farm at Logistic Support Base Anaconda, near Balad. Al Sadr's plan to cut off the 1st Cav from resupply would result in the single worst convoy ambush of 2004.¹

LTC George Akin's 7th Transportation Battalion provided security for many of the convoys operating out of Logistical Support Area Anaconda. An active component headquarters from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, it commanded nine Army truck companies, an Air Force truck company and a Navy welding detachment which called itself the Skunk Werks. Only two of its companies hauled fuel, the 660th Transportation Company (POL) a Reserve unit from Zanesville, Ohio, and the 724th POL another Reserve unit from Bartonville, Illinois. The original intent of using civilian contractors as drivers was to reduce the need for soldiers in Iraq, but the attacks on commercial convoys required the military to remain in force and escort the civilian convoys. In this war, unarmed civilians would assume a greater role in combat alongside soldiers. In Iraq, Kellogg, Brown and Root (KBR) had the contract for hauling fuel and supplies in Iraq. Since the insurgents had killed the first contract driver in June 2003, these unarmed civilian truckers required an armed military

escort and the 724th Transportation Company had inherited the mission. At that time, an escort vehicle or gun truck was any vehicle, regardless of armor, with a crew served weapon. Thanks to the Skunk Werks, the 7th Battalion fielded HMMWVs and 5-ton tractors and cargo trucks with plate armor on the doors, referred to as "hillbilly" armor, and mounted either the M249 squad automatic weapon (SAW), Mk19 automatic grenade launcher, or the venerable old M2 .50 caliber machinegun that had been in service since 1919. Soldiers carried M16A2s or M249s as their individual assigned weapons while riding in the vehicles. By April 2004, gun truck technology was still in its infancy since attacks on convoys had been primarily harassment fire and improvised explosive devices, called IEDs.

KBR drivers signed up out of patriotism to support their country and the money, many having served or wanted to serve in the military. Some were financially destitute and the high wages would help them get back on their feet. Thomas E. "Tommy" Hamill had been turned down by the Marines for seizures, and signed up with KBR to serve his country and save his dairy farm. He had been driving in Iraq since September 2003 and was a KBR convoy commander. Randy Ross had served in the US Air Force but received an early release. So he felt he had not fulfilled his military obligation and even tried to reenlist for Desert Storm but was too old. When he heard about the need for contract drivers in Iraq, he signed up. Ross wanted to complete four years driving in Iraq, and was assigned to the bulk fuel department. Having arrived in March, this mission was his third convoy in Iraq.²

On 8 April, CPT Jeffrey F. Smith's 724th Transportation Company (POL) had received a routine task to escort KBR drivers on a fuel push from Anaconda to Camp Webster, about a hundred miles west of Baghdad. The next morning³ 9 April was Good Friday and, coincidentally, the first anniversary of the fall of Baghdad. For an enemy that preferred to attack on significant dates or anniversaries, this weekend had plenty of significance. More importantly, these jihadists believed they would receive a greater reward in heaven for killing infidels on their religious holidays.

At 2330 hours, the convoy destination changed to BIAP due to the Mahdi Militia activities that day, which broke from the 7th Battalion routine since it had never

delivered to BIAP before. CPT Smith, curious about the change, went to battalion operations to find out what was going on since BIAP normally received its supplies from northbound traffic out of Scania. The convoy would travel along routes code named Milton, Tampa, Force, Sword to Cardinals, finally arriving at Entry Control Point 1, the north gate at BIAP. Since no one in the company had driven to BIAP, except when they passed through there on their way to Anaconda in March, Smith requested a guide. Battalion tasked the 2632nd Transportation Company, an Army National Guard unit from San Bruno, California, which provided SFC Mark A. Hawley to meet them in the staging area at 0700 hours the next morning. The 2632nd was due to rotate home soon so this would be Hawley's last convoy.⁴ CPT Smith also asked for air cover along the route and the battalion forwarded the request.⁵

1LT Matthew R. "Matt" Brown, of the 2nd Platoon, would lead the convoy. Brown was a 27-year old Military Intelligence officer "cross-leveled"⁶ to the 724th. After two years of ROTC he discovered he liked the challenge of the military and considered making it a career. Brown had formed a strong friendship and trust with PFC Jeremy L. Church during their mobilization. Church was a 25-year old bartender and Wal-Mart security guard from St. Louis, Missouri who wanted to become a police officer. He also wanted to serve in the military, so he combined both loves and joined the Military Police in 2000. Both had laid back personalities, so they hit it off from the start and Brown asked Church to become his driver. Brown also felt that if anything ever happened to him, his driver would have to take over and make decisions; therefore, Brown had Church accompany him to all his

meetings. This was one of the most critical policies that affected the outcome of the next day's events.⁷

Around 0100 hours, Brown and his platoon sergeant, SFC Robert D. Groff, made some changes to the mission. Groff had four years active duty before joining the Reserves in 1994. They selected drivers for their mission in whom they had the most confidence in. The mission changed to escorting M915 military tractors driven by KBR civilian contract drivers pulling 5,000-gallon fuel tankers, and the 724th had received a requirement to provide soldiers to ride shotgun with the contract drivers. This was also their first time to provide "shooters" for KBR. In the past, Akins had resisted doing so because he felt it would make the commercial trucks targets, but coordinated attacks on contract convoys in recent days required the change.⁸

The 7th Transportation Battalion had planned for two separate convoys that day and had plenty of gun trucks available so they "bulked up." The Combined Joint Task Force 7 (CJTF7) policy required a minimum ratio of one-to-ten escort vehicles to prime movers, but that day the 724th would run with five gun trucks: two M998 HMMWVs, two M931 5-ton tractors and one M923 5-ton cargo. One M915 tractor carried a Warlock electronic jamming system to counter remotely detonated IEDs. The 644th Medium Truck Company also provided an M988 HMMWV to accompany the convoy to gain familiarity with the route that brought the convoy to a total of 26 vehicles, increasing the gun truck ratio to one-to-three. For a little extra punch, the 7th Battalion would double the basic load of ammunition in each truck from 220 rounds to 440 rounds of M16.⁹

Critical to security was the need to communicate,



Escort vehicles of the 724th POL on 9 April 2004. Photo courtesy of Jarob Walsh

but the communications setup was bewildering at best. Three escort vehicles had short range Single Channel Ground and Airborne Radio System (SINCGARS) but the lead vehicle could not even talk to the rear vehicle a mile or two away. Instead the lead vehicle had to relay messages back to the rear vehicles. Throughout the convoy there was a mixed bag of short-ranged handheld radios, citizen's band radios, and movement tracking system. The latter provided text messaging via satellite, as well as access to global positioning system data. Some vehicles had two or three of these systems. So this hodgepodge and the limitations of each type of equipment would make it difficult for the vehicles to communicate effectively.¹⁰

Brown had decided to let their drivers sleep and inform them of the change in mission the next morning. At 0500 hours on 9 April, Brown and Church reported to the 7th Battalion tactical operations center for the intelligence update on the route. Intelligence accurately tracked the increase in enemy activity, but all it could predict was more of the same - that the Mahdi Militia would attack convoys with IEDs, RPGs and small arms fire by four to seven insurgents as they always had. Although the transporters realized the enemy was getting more sophisticated with his attacks, the intelligence community did not predict the insurgents would increase the size of their attacks to large scale ambushes. They were informed the Mahdi Militia would be wearing some semblance of a black uniform with a green or yellow headband or armband and this would constitute positive identification as enemy, since soldiers had always needed positive identification before they could engage. In addition, CJTF7 employed four colors to classify threat levels on any route. Black referred to imminent or ongoing enemy contact, and the route should be avoided if at all possible. Red warned of the existence of a serious threat. Amber indicated some threat existed, or that enemy contact had occurred on that route within the last 24 hours. Green indicated little to no threat. The 49th Movement Control Battalion had coded the route to BIAP as black.¹¹

Tommy Hamill, the convoy commander for the KBR drivers, likewise reported for his security briefing at 0600 hours. The KBR security advisor told him that all routes were red, which meant they could not drive, but said he would check again with the military and see if the

roads were still closed. Hamill then reported to the Total Safety Task Instruction (TSTI) with the rest of the drivers to learn who was going out with him that day. He then gathered the 19 contract drivers assigned to his convoy to talk about the road conditions. About that time, the security advisor walked up and informed him that the routes had been cleared and route status improved to amber. Hamill sensed the security advisor was still apprehensive. Of the 19 "green" military tractors, 17 hauled 5,000-gallon tankers and two were bobtails, tractors without trailers used to pick up any systems in case of a break down. The KBR trucks were assigned numbers in the order of their lineup, KBR 1 through KBR 19. After the meeting, the contract drivers climbed into their tractors and fired up the engines.¹²

Church had not slept a wink that night and neither did many of his friends. Like them he had a weird nagging feeling in his stomach warning of impending danger or disaster. Brown had a bad feeling, too. The premonition of impending danger was more common than one would think during this war. In almost every complex ambush, someone would have a unexplained sense of apprehension. Nonetheless, the 724th soldiers drove their escort vehicles out the motor pool to link up with the KBR drivers.¹³

At 0900 hours, 1LT Brown received word of the opening of the routes between Anaconda and BIAP, though his departure time would be delayed until 1100 hours.¹⁴ At 0954 hours, due to a suspected IED along the route leading to the airport's south gate, the 172nd General Support Group Chief of Highway Operations contacted the 1st Cavalry Division for an update. The battle captain on staff informed the chief that Alternate Supply Route (ASR) Cardinals had been closed for two days due to intense fighting. The chief then sent an email to the 49th Movement Control Battalion: "Sorry, it looks like [the route] is closed until further notice. I am trying to deconflict." The 49th never received this message as it was later learned the chief had inadvertently sent the email to himself.¹⁵

Just before 1000 hours, 1LT Brown assembled his 2nd Platoon and the contract drivers for the convoy briefing.¹⁶ He had one change to the rules of engagement. Anyone wearing their distinctive green and yellow colored head or arm band and black clothing of a Mahdi Militia would be considered an insurgent

and the soldiers could engage without waiting to be fired upon first.¹⁷ At the end, SFC Hawley drew the route to the airport's south gate on the ground with a stick.¹⁸ It was only then the civilian contractors learned they were going to Baghdad instead of Camp Webster.¹⁹ When the sergeant asked if anyone had questions, someone inquired: "Is that the route to the north gate?" Hawley replied in the negative. It was his turn to be surprised when 1LT Brown explained that they would be entering through the northern entrance. Hawley informed Brown he could only vaguely remember approaching the airport from that direction once.²⁰ CPT Smith, 1LT Brown, and SFC Hawley left the group to verify the route change. Upon receiving confirmation via radio, Hawley asked battalion headquarters for, and received, the highway exit number for ASR Cardinals. He then briefed the revised route to the assembled contract drivers and soldiers, drawing it out in the sand and gravel of the staging area. The trip, he explained, would take about two hours.²¹

The first convoy serial scheduled out that morning was escorted by the 2632nd Air Expeditionary Force, one of three "in lieu of" gun truck companies provided by the US Air Force. They had been recruited from Air Force truck drivers, coincidentally, all three replaced truck companies with gun truck missions. They had received barely enough training to qualify them to drive



724th POL Convoy waiting to leave. PFC Slaughter was the shooter for Peterson's truck. Photo courtesy of Randy Ross

trucks let alone crew gun trucks. In time, the Air Force Detachments would provide some of the best gun truck escorts out of Anaconda, but that Friday was one of their first missions. The serial rolled out the gate at 1000 hours but had problems with its military radios and turned back. By a twist of fate, they missed rolling into the ambush. As LTC Akin reflected on it later, he feared what would have happened had the airmen been first. This experimental Air Force unit had drawn attention from the Pentagon on down. Had anything bad happened, it could have pulled the plug on their entire participation. As the first serial returned, the rest of the 724th escort arrived and Brown gave another convoy briefing. In it, he told the drivers they would head southwest out the gate on ASR Milton to Main Supply Route (MSR) Tampa, then proceed south through Taji to ASR Force (later renamed Vernon) where the convoy would turn west on ASR Sword (later renamed Huskies) then after two miles turn south on ASR Cardinals and drive right into the north gate of BIAP.²²

The Battalion Executive Officer, MAJ Mark Pagent, was at the staging area and made the decision to send Brown's convoy serial out first since it was ready. PFC Keith M. "Matt" Maupin walked up to Church and said, "I have a bad feeling about this one. I don't think I am going to make this one." Church asked, "Do you want to switch spots? I know you aren't too keen on riding with that KBR guy." Maupin answered, "No, you are the LT's driver. You'll get us through this." Church consoled him by saying, "Well then I will see you at BIAP." When Brown climbed in his HMMWV, Church said, "I have a bad feeling about this one, like something's going to happen." Brown replied, "I have a bad feeling, too. Route, mission, we still have to go." It is not uncommon for soldiers to have an apprehension of disaster. Maupin, Church and Brown confirmed each other's feeling of impending doom but the important thing about the dedication of truck drivers was none hesitated to go out the gate. They knew others depended upon them for what they hauled on their trucks.²³

SPC Craig V. McDermott and SPC Dustin L. Row's M915 gun truck, like most, had steel doors with no ballistic glass windows so they could shoot out. It also had a steel plate in back of the cab and narrow one just above the front windshield. McDermott manned the .50 cal on the ring mount above the cab. They were on



The 724th POL convoy on the elevated road (ASR Force which would later be renamed ASR Vernon) leading into Baghdad.

Photo courtesy of Randy Ross



Passing an armored convoy on MSR Tampa.

Photo courtesy of Jarob Walsh

loan from the 1st Platoon. Row was a landscaper and McDermott was a 22-year old facility manager. Although Row also had the gut feeling something bad was going to happen, the extra 400-600 rounds gave him "a warm

and fuzzy feeling." They hit the front gate at 1030 hours. Meanwhile, the 2632nd convoy resolved its problem and departed at 1055 hours as the second serial.²⁴

The 724th convoy headed west on ASR Milton. Brown liked to ride at the front of the convoy so he could see where he was going, since nearly every convoy commander at that time feared making the wrong turn in the crowded streets of Baghdad. SFC Hawley rode with him as the route guide and SGT Terry Blankenship was the SAW gunner. SPC Darrell Adams and 1LT Gregory Howard, from the newly arrived 644th Transportation Company, rode along in the second HMMWV for training. Tommy Hamill followed in the M915 tractor driven by Nelson Howell. The next M915 gun truck with SPC Dustin L. Row and SPC Craig V. McDermott on the M2 .50 caliber machinegun followed behind four KBR trucks. Five KBR vehicles behind it, SSG Donald C. Grage drove a M931 gun truck with SPC Jacob P. Brown manning



The 724th POL convoy on ASR Force passing through Baghdad. Photo courtesy of Jarob Walsh



Burnt out truck on ASR Sword near overpass. Civilian traffic began to drop off after that. Photo courtesy of Jarob Walsh

the convoy brief the military had instructions to shoot anyone wearing Mahdi Militia colors, so that was when things started to get scary for him.²⁹

ASR Sword

At 1230 hours, the convoy had turned southwest onto ASR Sword, a stretch of highway located on the outskirts of northwest Baghdad known as IED Alley for the frequency of such attacks. They passed burnt-out trucks as reminders of the danger. After turning onto Sword, Ross heard sporadic gun fire behind him. Jackie D. Lester and Steven Fisher drove the two rear bobtail tractors. As the convoy approached the intersection of Force and Sword, Lester saw a crowd of Iraqis on the right hand side of the road and then heard gun fire up ahead. He began weaving his bobtail past the crowd and saw Iraqis running in confusion. He later heard the lead gun trucks had fired at the enemy in the crowd.³⁰

A further two miles down the road, there was absolutely no traffic or pedestrians, a clear sign they were going to get hit. Lester then saw a four-door car with two Iraqis riding in front and one in the back drive up along the convoy. They slowed down next to his truck to look at him and then smiled. So Lester called on the radio warning the others of the intruder vehicle. He then swerved his tractor over to push them away from the convoy but they sped up. Someone later said the car pulled over to the shoulder of the road. Far up ahead they could see black smoke rising in the air.³¹

ASR Sword was a six-lane highway divided by a median flanked by guard rails that went through the suburb

of unfriendly Abu Ghraib, a predominantly Sunni town which had been the scene of fierce fighting over the past two days. Mahdi militiamen had attacked Americans to relieve pressure on their brethren in Sadr City as did the Sunnis to assist their comrades in Fallujah.

Tommy K. Zimmerman, driving KBR 2, radioed Hamill that his truck was losing power, and the trucks behind drove around him. The standard procedure was to have a gun truck come up to a disabled vehicle and pull security until a bobtail could hook up and tow the



Above: This M1A2 Abrams tank was engaging the enemy when the convoy passed, another indicator of the danger ahead. Below: The convoy passed more burnt out civilian tankers on ASR sword. Photos courtesy of Jarob Walsh



tractor and trailer system off. Hamill radioed Brown “I’ve got a truck that is breaking down. We need to get gun support there with him.” Hamill urged Brown, “We need to get this man picked up. Get the gun truck to pick him up. Let’s leave the truck, just get the men.” SSG Grage drove his M931 bobtail gun truck up from the middle of the convoy and told Zimmerman to hang on because he would push the tanker. Lester and Fisher also heard Zimmerman call that his engine died but did not hear Hamill call for anyone to come up and push. The problem was the range of the radios did not reach from the front to the rear of the convoy so Fisher drove his M915 bobtail up to push the tanker, but there is confusion about which truck actually pushed Zimmerman.³²

About that same time, the 5-ton cargo gun truck (Gun Truck 12) in front of Randy Ross slowed down and came to a stop thus blocking the road and causing the rest of the convoy to stop. Ross yelled at the gun truck to go and it did but created a gap with the rest of the convoy. When Lester in the rear finally caught up with Fisher, they were passing the Minister of Transportation compound on their left. The lack of traffic and the black smoke billowing up ahead warned Lester that something was not right, so he told Fisher to pick up the driver and abandon the truck. He felt they could stay in front of the fortified compound for protection. Fisher kept moving and the rear escort told Lester to keep moving, but Lester warned them, “You don’t know what you’re getting into.” A few seconds later, he heard on the radio the lead vehicles were under attack.³³

Less than a mile down the road, Church’s lead HMMWV passed an M1A2 Abrams from Company B, 2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry on the other side of the road firing south into Abu Ghraib. One of the tank crew members waved at the trucks to turn back. That was an obvious clue the route was not clear, yet the truck drivers



The scene entering the kill zone. The black smoke of the burning civilian tanker obscured the path beyond it forcing the trucks to choose to drive through it or turn through the opening in the guard rail to the right. IEDs were often hidden in trash in the road. Photos courtesy of Jarob Walsh

pressed on. Randy Ross remembered convoys passed tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles engaging the enemy regularly so this was not unusual.³⁴

Up to that time, kill zones had not been more than few hundred meters long with a few IEDs and handful of militia men firing wildly; so the drivers did not think of turning back because speed was their security and in the past they had just driven right through the small arms fire. Suddenly, the trucks began dodging rocks, mounds of garbage, blocks of concrete and tires - all placed in the road intended to slow them down. These were normal places the insurgents hid IEDs yet the drivers saw no detonating wires. As Church and Brown approached the burning fuel tanker, black smoke obstructed the entire road and their view of what lie beyond it. All the clues leading up to this point indicated they were entering a kill zone. Church thought to himself, “This can’t be good.” Brown similarly realized, “We’re in trouble. This is going to be bad.” Brown turned back to his guide and warned, “Hey, Sergeant Hawley, I think we’re in trouble here.” The sergeant responded, “Yes, sir,

I think we're going to get hit." Adrenaline started pumping as the soldiers and civilian drivers braced for what would come next.³⁵

Before they reached the burning tanker, there was a break in the guardrail leading to a frontage road adjacent to the houses. Brown faced the dilemma that confronted many convoy commanders during this war. In combat the most important decisions in one's life are made in seconds or less. The choice between life and death can be as arbitrary as turning right or left, and neither offer a clue as to which is the right choice. Church thought the burning tanker was placed there to canalize his convoy onto the other road. He thought there was enough room he could still drive past the burning truck and told Brown, "Sir, I can try it." Brown thought differently, "There is a road right there, take it." "Okay" replied his driver who turned through a gap cut in the guardrail and four vehicles behind them followed.

Suddenly rounds pummeled Brown's HMMWV from the houses across the far left side of the main road. The hail of gun fire was loud and the rounds hitting his HMMWV sounded like rain hitting a tin roof. SGT Blankenship immediately returned fire with his SAW. Brown warned the other trucks over the radio, "Small arms fire to the left." He then yelled back, "There's a truck on fire up ahead, we've gotta get off this road." According to policy, the passengers and military drivers fired out their windows.³⁶

Suddenly a white sports utility vehicle pulled out about 30 meters in front of Church heading the same direction and then the first IED exploded on the right side of the road killing the Iraqi driver. Church thought it was ironic that an Iraqi IED killed one of their own. A hundred meters further down the road, small arms fire came from the houses on the right and by then they were taking fire from both sides of road. The IEDs indicated this was a deliberately planned ambush and the burning fuel truck had been placed there to canalize them into

that side road. Brown and Hamill had little idea how bad the situation would become behind them.³⁷

The HMMWV of the 644th and three of the next five tankers followed Brown's onto the frontage road. The rest of the convoy missed the detour and drove around the left of the burning tanker thus remaining on the main road.



LT Brown's HMMWV. Photo courtesy of Jarob Walsh

Lester was still stopped a mile from the overpass in his bobtail and the rear escort told him to keep moving. Lester radioed back, "We're making a big mistake and we're going to pay for it." The rear gun truck again urged him to drive, and realizing he was keeping the gun truck from responding to the ambush, Lester drove forward with great apprehension. About

halfway to the overpass, he caught up with Fisher who was managing about 25 mph pushing the tanker. Lester again told Fisher to drop the truck and about that time they passed the Abrams tank.³⁸

Driving the armored HMMWV gun truck ahead of the two bobtails, SFC Groff heard over the radio, "We're taking fire," then his radio went dead. He then saw the first burning tanker on the right side of the road and the wind blew the smoke across the road. As soon as he passed the burning tanker, he received small arms fire from both sides of the road. Lamar and Pelz fired to the left side. Groff meanwhile tried to radio the lead vehicle but received no response. When he did get contact, he could barely hear anyone. Pelz initially saw a man in black knelt down behind a rock to his left and then two more behind a pile next to him. When he began to fire on the next group of four he heard a pop about 200 meters behind him and it felt like someone had slapped him on the back. He yelled down to Groff that he thought he had been hit, but when he knelt and checked for blood, he found none. So he stood back up and engaged the enemy.³⁹

Behind him, Lester could see the gunner on the .50 on the rear gun truck (behind him) searching for targets but not engaging. By then the rear of the convoy was in

the kill zone passing burning trucks littering the road and Lester wondered when the gunner was going to fire.⁴⁰

By then everyone reported on their radios receiving enemy fire. The enemy initiated the ambush with small arms fire and RPGs from both sides of the road. The convoy stretched over a mile and the entire length was under fire and they were not even near the end of the kill zone. The standard response was to “put pedal to the metal” and drive through as fast as one could, which was about 45 miles per hour towing a 5,000 - gallon load of fuel. What they did not know was that they had entered a nearly five-mile kill zone with several hundred of Sadr’s black-clad militia. Burning fuel trucks along the road would create a scene imagined only in hell and the wind blew the smoke across their path blinding the drivers and crews. The drive through the hail of small arms and rocket fire seemed endless. They drew enemy fire from both sides of the road but the houses on the right were the closest. The fact that IEDs were planted along that side road indicated that the militia had time to prepare the kill zone.

Up front, Church drove aggressively to avoid enemy emplaced obstacles, such as guardrails, concrete barriers, and vehicles, intended to slow down the convoy. Thirteen IEDs had already exploded behind him. After warning the trucks behind him, Brown dropped the handset and turned his body to the right facing outward to return fire. Suddenly two AK rounds smashed through the windshield and one hit his Kevlar helmet. The shattered glass hit Church in the face knocking his head backwards and at the same time an IED exploded on his side of the HMMWV. He felt the blast and the rocks come



A burning tanker can be seen on the frontage road.

Photo courtesy of Jarob Walsh

through his driver’s window. Had his head not been back, the blast probably would have killed him.⁴¹

Brown instinctively reached up to his face. His fingers went into his bloody scalp and he felt his left eye hanging out of its socket on his cheek. The blunt force of the impact had blown his helmet into the back seat peeling his scalp from just above his left eye around to below his left ear. The feeling grossed him out and he quickly pulled his hand away then put it back. He wondered, “Is everything else okay?” He turned toward Church. Church saw the weird look on his bloody face



One of the tankers slowing down and leaking fuel on ASR Sword. Photo courtesy of Jarob Walsh

like he wanted help but could not speak. While still driving with one hand, Church popped his first aid pouch out, ripped it open with his teeth and handed it to Brown, instructing him to place the bandage over his left eye. Church then returned to firing his M16A2 out the window with one hand while navigating through the obstacles all the while encouraging his platoon leader to prevent him from slipping into unconsciousness. He saw an obstacle of boulders and guardrails and did not think his HMMWV could jump over it. He angled his HMMWV to the right then turned to the left around the obstacles. He had told Brown to close his ballistic window to prevent further injury just moments before an IED hidden in the obstacles detonated on the front right side of the vehicle and blew out the front right tire. Continuing to fire his weapon with his right hand, Church kept his left hand on the steering wheel and pushed the vehicle ahead on three inflated tires. Church worried about getting his lieutenant to medical attention. After a few minutes, Brown blacked out and PFC Church realized he had to make the decisions as the convoy commander.⁴²



Possibly Bradley's tanker burning on the ramp.

Photo courtesy of Randy Ross

Church later remembered, "I had a reality check. It's now up to me to get these guys through here." It was strange but he then relaxed. Everything began to move slowly and his thoughts remained clear. He knew what he had to do. After that last IED the surrounding area opened up with fewer buildings. Small arms fire slackened. There was less small arms fire as he approached the overpass. Church thought to himself, "It's finally over." Church had reached the exit ramp, turned left up onto the overpass and drove down ASR Cardinals. For 30 seconds after he made the turn on overpass he received no more fire.⁴³

Meanwhile, the remainder of the convoy bore the brunt of the enemy's wrath. Small arms fire riddled the sides of the fuel tankers causing them to spill their contents like water sprinklers, consequently making the road slick. RPGs slammed into four tankers causing their liquid contents to explode into flames blanketing the road with thick black smoke. Some of the tractors still managed to drive even with their loads on fire. The enemy had also detonated their own fuel trucks alongside the road turning it into an inferno.

Following right behind Brown, Hamill grabbed the Qualcomm on-board satellite computer and typed out a message warning the serial behind them, "Convoy under attack." Just then a bullet slammed through the door striking his forearm, knocking the computer out of his hands. The round blew a huge chunk of meat away, so he wrapped a clean sock around his arm to stop the bleeding. He then handed the radio to his driver, Nelson

Howell. Just then, Hamill's truck began to have its own mechanical problems and slowed down. Other trucks began to speed past them on both the frontage road and highway.⁴⁴ As Hamill's truck slipped further behind in the convoy, he saw the tanker system a half a mile ahead of him begin fishtailing on the slippery road. Then slid off onto the median, flipped over and exploded. The driver did not have a chance to escape.⁴⁵

Behind them, a heavy volume of small arms fire riddled the M915 gun truck driven by SPC Row, blowing out the mirrors. All the while, McDermott blazed away continuously with his .50 caliber machinegun as brass cartridges piled up at his feet. Every time McDermott had to reload a can of ammunition, PFC Jeffrey Slaughter riding in KBR 6 behind him laid down suppressive fire with his M249 SAW. Row simultaneously fired out the window with his M16A2 but only saw a few Iraqis running from bush to bush or coming out of the ditches. He then drove past a burning red and white tanker and then through the black smoke of another burning tanker. He believed he was going to die and was literally waiting for the sting of the round, but kept on driving. He steered with his left hand and shot over the elbow with his right hand. He kept leaning farther and farther to the right until he was almost lying sideways.⁴⁶

Just ahead in KBR 4, SSG Arthur Hollingsworth initially returned fire to the left and then started taking



Rounds through Ross' windshield. Photo courtesy of Randy Ross

fire from the right. Row and McDermott saw an RPG hit KBR 5 ahead of them driven by William Bradley. It exploded on fire and splattered fuel all over their windshield. Hollingsworth remembered, "It felt like a sledge hammer hitting me in the head." A round struck the rear part of the door behind his head and pieces of metal hit his cheek and nose. Blood shot all over his



Rounds through Ross' windshield. Photo courtesy of Randy Ross

windshield. About that time rounds started hitting their trucks. The burning tanker flipped over on its side and slid off the road spilling fuel over the road. Row's M915 gun truck almost slid off the road at the same spot and came to a complete stop.⁴⁷

SGT Bryan Watson, behind in Gun Truck 12 on the main road, heard a large explosion and also saw Bradley's fuel truck explode. As he entered the kill zone, Watson received small arms fire from the left side of the road and immediately returned fire with his Mk19, but the black smoke prevented him from seeing the enemy.⁴⁸

Meanwhile up ahead, Row found the fuel-slicked ramp "like driving on ice." He almost lost control of his M915 gun truck but skidded to a stop, then drove onto the overpass, turned left and headed for the airport. By that time McDermott had expended over 400 rounds.⁴⁹ Bill Peterson, driving KBR 6 right behind Row's gun truck, had to turn on his wipers to clear the fuel off his windshield. His shooter, PFC Slaughter, kept up a heavy rate of fire with his SAW. KBR 6 and 10, the only survivors of the second five, made it to the exit as well and negotiated the smoke and slippery road onto Cardinals. Steven Hulett's KBR7, Tony Johnson's KBR 8 with PFC Maupin as his shooter, and Jeffrey Parker's KBR9 caught fire and crashed on the right side of the main road. Jack Montague's KBR 10 did not travel much further before enemy fire destroyed it. His shooter, PFC Gregory R. Goodrich, escaped alive but Montague

apparently did not. The smoke from these burning trucks obscured the road.

SSG Grage's M931 had pushed the tanker for about a mile with both he and SPC Brown returning fire. The fuel leaking from holes in the fuel trailer sprayed across Grage's truck. Upon reaching the overpass, they could not push it any further, because Grage's own vehicle had taken a beating. The radiator was overheating and one round went through the side window and out the front, the next round penetrated the left door and hit Grage in his left leg.⁵⁰

SPC Bachman drove Gun Truck 12 on past Grage's to keep the rest of the column moving. SGT Watson fired off a box of Mk19 rounds, grabbed his M16 and emptied it, then reloaded the grenade launcher. A round then struck Bachman in the neck, but he kept driving. Another bullet hit Watson, and Bachman tried to help him tie off a field dressing while they kept moving. Distracted amid the swirling smoke, Bachman missed the exit to Cardinals and continued down the freeway. Soon Bachman realized the rest of the convoy must have turned off and he was alone except for Ross' KBR 11, which blindly followed. Ross did not know the routes, but when he saw the Baghdad International Airport sign, he followed the gun truck. He only had one thing to do - keep the gas pedal on the floor and get out of there so he would not get captured and get his head cut off. He remembered seeing the undercarriage of Bradley's overturned rig on the overpass but it was not

yet on fire. After he passed Bradley's truck, Ross also received small arms fire from the overpass. He hunkered way down in the seat and a round came through the driver's side windshield and then another passed through the passenger side. A 12-pack of bottled water stopped one round from hitting his leg.⁵¹

When Bachman saw the road ahead blocked by a pile of guardrails, he feared going around it and running into an IED, so he drove right over it and went airborne for a moment. The radios fell on the floor. Behind him, Ross drove around the barricade of junk in the road. The right steering tire blew out causing his truck to swerve into the median and then he could only make 35 mph. He then received fire from the right side. He pulled back onto the road where he could speed back up to 55.⁵²

Back when he arrived in Iraq, KBR taught the new drivers that fear can be their best friend or their worst enemy. If it paralyzed them then it was an enemy, but if it made them angry then it could be a friend. As soon as he took rounds through the window, he prayed to God to let him get out of there to see his kids again. His fear then turned into anger. The gun truck taking off ahead of him pissed him off even more. He caught back up with it as it was only doing 45 mph, and drove right up to the gun truck's rear bumper. The gunner poked his head out truck and looked around. Ross drove around the truck and asked, "Why ain't you shooting? Why ain't you shooting?" The gun truck was losing power, so Ross drove past him. He regretted it later and felt he

should have pushed them.⁵³

Ross drove down the road and saw three HMMWV gun trucks parked on an overpass not returning fire, which pissed him off even more. He thought if he only had an American flag he would fly it out the window in defiance. Instead he decided to moon the Iraqis and was trying to pull down his pants when he realized it was not such a good idea. With his luck, he would get shot in the ass and then have to explain to the doctor at the Combat Support Hospital (CSH) why he had a bullet wound in the butt and no hole in his trousers.⁵⁴

By taking the wrong turn, the two vehicles had cleared the kill zone and drove on for several miles until they eventually came upon military police and a HET convoy stopped not far from the west gate of Baghdad Airport. The soldiers and the civilian were soon on a medical evacuation helicopter - ending their ordeal.⁵⁵

Back in the kill zone, PFC Jarob Walsh, riding with Raymond T. Stannard in KBR 14, had heard Brown on the radio, "We are taking rounds - everyone get ready!" Not even a minute later, someone else incorrectly reported, "The LT's truck just blew up and I don't know where to go or what to do!" Walsh looked at his driver and said "Oh shit, it's about to get bad." They continued past the first burning tanker on the main highway and then Walsh saw a smoking truck, what he thought was KBR 8 driven by Tony Johnson, with PFC Maupin as the shooter, lose power and drop back to a hundred meters in front of his then explode into a ball of flames.



The overpass where KBR14 and 17 were burning. Photo courtesy of Daniel Petrik

It swerved off the right side of the road, through the ditch and into buildings.⁵⁶

After passing the burning tanker, KBR 14 came upon the tanker flipped over on its side in the median. Walsh had been taking photos of everything of interest up until the fighting began then traded his camera for his M16. He then came upon another tanker ahead on the right where he saw a man lying prone raising his head up and down to watch them. He then propped his weapon on the side mirror of his truck and took aim for the man's head thinking he was an insurgent intending to blow up both trucks as they passed. He then saw that the man was holding up something white in his left hand. Walsh's heart was pounding so hard, that he was sure it was a remote detonator, but he kept looking and held his fire. The closer they approached; Walsh recognized that the man was an American holding his identification card in an effort to let them know he was one of their KBR drivers. Unfortunately, their heavily laden tanker unfortunately could not stop to pick him up.⁵⁷

Meanwhile, Lester's bobtail kept pace with Fisher's but he suddenly felt his tractor pummeled by rounds. He knew he could not stop after that. When his truck cleared the dense black smoke of burning tankers, he saw Steven Hulett squatting in front of his burning rig and then heard him scream on the radio to come back, "Jack, you bastard, you passed me! Come back and get me!" Lester could not stop and could not bring himself to answer him. The situation had become a desperate life and death struggle for the drivers, and then Hulett's radio went silent. Hulett's unanswered cry for help would haunt Lester for years afterwards.⁵⁸

After his truck passed Hulett's, Walsh looked in his mirror and saw Timothy Bell's truck behind him explode, roll over and slide down the highway. He had never seen anything like it before, "It really shook me up, it was just like something you would see in the movies." His driver, Raymond Stannard, who had been a machine gunner in the Marines, was impressed by Walsh's calmness as this soldier traded fire with the insurgents.⁵⁹ They then drove blindly through the smoke of two more burning Iraqi tankers, with Walsh praying that they would not run into anything. The fire made it extremely hot and Walsh could hardly breathe with the smoke.⁶⁰

Coming up Sword, Walsh and Stannard's truck cleared the smoke from the burning tankers and saw a

truck in front of them traveling about 20 miles per hour with its trailer on fire. In an attempt to help, they slowed down. Walsh yelled at the driver to stop so he could pick them up. It was Hamill and Howell. Walsh's tractor pulled ahead of them a little and at that moment, Hamill's truck shook violently from the explosion of an RPG, which also blew the Walsh's truck sideways. Stannard luckily kept his tractor under control. Howell yelled to Hamill, "We've been hit by something – something big!" Hamill yelled back, "We gotta keep going!"⁶¹

Walsh recognized the overpass further ahead. One truck was already traveling over the bridge, and another was behind about a mile or two back with Groff's HMMWV trailing behind it. Walsh's rig drove up the ramp, but as they turned left to towards BIAP, his driver started yelling.⁶²

The Overpass

Having made the turn onto the overpass, Walsh leaned forward and saw behind him the smoke trail of an RPG flying toward his truck. The next thing Walsh knew, his truck rolled over onto its passenger side and Stannard, who had not fastened his seat belt, fell on top of him, kicking and screaming trying to get out of the truck. Walsh knocked out the windshield with the butt stock of his weapon and Stannard climbed out through it, turned around, and grabbed Walsh's Kevlar helmet to pull him out of the truck, but Walsh's knee was stuck between the seat and dashboard, and his seatbelt was still fastened. Walsh told him to get down and take cover, because they were still under fire, but Stannard pulled harder and harder on the helmet until Walsh could not breathe. Walsh felt like his driver was going to pull his head off. Finally, Walsh unsnapped his chinstrap causing Stannard to roll backwards. Walsh then yelled at the driver to climb back in and lie down. Then Walsh unfastened his seatbelt, pulled his knee out of the dash, and wiggled out the opening feet first.⁶³

Stannard came back and pulled on his shooter's ankles to which Walsh again yelled at him to get down. Finally, Walsh kicked him in the chest with his left foot and in the face with his right propelling Stannard backwards and blood splattered across his face. Assuming his driver had been shot Walsh feared, "Damn, he's dead and now I'm alone." But Stannard just sat there causing Walsh to think, "That's weird;

he's not dead." Suddenly, Stannard's eyes grew big and he exclaimed, "Oh my God, you've been shot, I'm going to die, I'm going to die." Walsh searched for any bullet holes, and not seeing any then ordered Stannard, "Lay the fuck down and do not get up."⁶⁴

Walsh then stood up but his right foot hurt so bad he thought it was broken. When he looked down, he saw a bloody boot and realized the blood on Stannard's face came from his foot. Evidently, while kicking Stannard, a round hit his foot shattering two of the toes, but pumped up on adrenaline, Walsh could still stand. Looking back at his tanker, he saw fuel spilling out a six-foot hole and a small fire growing inside and on the tires. As he turned towards the front of the truck, something hit him hard in the chest like a baseball bat, knocking him back into the truck. Stunned, Walsh looked down and saw a smoking round buried in the SAPI plate of his body armor. He picked it out of the vest burning his hand, and then pulled himself back to his feet. He looked about a 150 meters up the road and saw two Iraqi kids, one about ten years old and the other was about seven, armed with AK47s on the bridge. The youngest held his weapon upside down by the magazine and the older one fired off three-round bursts, the first round hit right next to Walsh's head. Walsh turned around to grab his weapon and was hit two more times; the rounds passing through him.⁶⁵

Infuriated, Walsh grabbed his weapon, jumped out, and fired two warning shots over their heads. The two scared youths then ran down the ramp. Walsh then fell down onto his hands and knees unable breathe or move, with his head pounding hard. Walsh painfully looked up and saw Stannard running frantically behind the truck, the opposite direction from where they were supposed to go. Shot several times, Walsh feared he would either be captured or killed.⁶⁶

Determined not to quit, Walsh stood up, grabbed his weapon, and limped over to the guardrail. He looked down at the horrible inferno of burning trucks scattered along the highway billowing black smoke. There were still two M915 systems heading toward the overpass. While surveying the devastation, about 20 or 30 rounds hit the guardrail next to him causing the young soldier to throw himself backwards into a prone position. He then low-crawled towards the end of the bridge, in the direction of BIAP, while bullets followed him the entire distance. Then

to his surprise, Walsh realized he was crawling toward the middle of Abu Ghraib. Bullets continued to strike the pavement around him as he stood up and ran back towards his burning fuel truck, which ironically was the safest place.⁶⁷

Coming up behind them, Michael Brezovay in KBR17 did not know the route, but saw the other vehicles take the exit. With no rubber left on his front tires he was unable to make the on ramp, so he tried to make a run for the exit ramp. His truck slid over the ramp and ran into Stannard's overturned tanker. He then jumped out of the cab as his tanker burst into flames. Spotting Stannard nearby, the two drivers joined up and crawled away from the tangled wreckage. Brezovay then saw a KBR tanker, bobtail and two gun trucks pass him.⁶⁸

Fisher continued to push the tanker up the onramp that was by then covered with slippery JP8 fuel. The tires on Fisher's bobtail began to smoke as they spun on the slick pavement and Lester, still beside him, yelled, "Quit pushing, I'll get him out!" They then came to a stop right on the ramp. SPC Kirkpatrick drove the rear gun truck up alongside Grage's Gun Truck 102 and all four vehicles were stopped on the same ramp. Lester stopped on the overpass for one reason; he did not want to die alone. He saw enemy fire tear up the guard rails and trucks while Zimmerman just sat there. So Lester screamed at Zimmerman over the radio to get out of his truck. SPC Kirkpatrick and SPC Bohm also yelled at Zimmerman, who seemed stunned as he methodically tried to gather his personal gear from his cab while bullets pummeled the guard rail, pavement and truck. The urgency of the moment grew more apparent when Kirkpatrick's gunner, Bohm, killed an insurgent carrying an RPG launcher.⁶⁹ Meanwhile Zimmerman walked in front of Lester's truck and stood there while rounds hit all around him. Lester yelled out the window for him to get in his truck and then leaned over to open the passenger door. The driver, either in shock or no longer caring, then climbed into Lester's cab and the bobtail drove off. By waiting, Lester had unwittingly blocked the trucks behind him. During the wait, Fisher was shot through shoulder and upper torso. Once Lester started moving, the others could also drive off.⁷⁰

Lester made the left turn onto Cardinals and saw two overturned tankers spilling their liquid contents onto the road. Flames and black smoke leapt from the right

hand lane across onto the left hand lane. Lester's bobtail slid across the fuel covered pavement into the flames and stopped. He then backed out and crossed over the median into the opposite lane. After emerging from the black smoke, he nearly ran over Stannard and Brezovay crawling across the overpass. Lester then drove to the end of the overpass where he stopped to wait for gun truck escort. He saw rounds hit the guardrail to his left evidently aimed at him. He looked down the road and as far as he could see were overturned burning fuel trucks.⁷¹

As SPC Kirkpatrick's gun truck cleared the overpass, he weaved around the destroyed tankers. SPC Bohm, manning the M2 machinegun above him, had to shrink back from the intense heat of the burning fuel. An IED on Sword had already shattered the windows in their truck and wounded Kirkpatrick in the legs, as well as giving him temporary hearing loss. Bohm had been shot in the foot. Now the gunner saw an American lying on the side of the road trying to flag them down. Bohm screamed down to Kirkpatrick to stop, but the driver neither saw the civilian in the midst of the swirling smoke nor heard the pleas of his fellow soldier. Bohm looked back as they drove on, probably registering the look of horror that Lester saw.⁷² The handful of Americans stranded around the overpass had watched with dismay as a couple of escort vehicles drove past them. SFC Groff's HMMWV, the last gun truck still on the main road, was their final hope.

SFC Groff's armored HMMWV, driven by SPC Lamar

with SPC Pelz manning the SAW, had originally been just ahead of the two bobtails. His vehicle began losing power as it drove through the gauntlet of small arms fire and smoke and then slowed down to the last. On the way up, they pulled up behind a bobtail and Fisher climbed out. His left side was drenched in blood. Groff stopped and his crew pulled the screaming Fisher into the back. Once inside Pelz began alternating between treating the wounded and laying down suppressive fire, since he was also the combat life saver. Looking down the road, Lamar saw tankers and trucks scattered across the road torn up by bullet holes and RPGs.⁷³

Those were the last elements of the convoy to make the turn onto ASR Cardinals. Of the 26 vehicles that had left Anaconda that morning, only 14 survived the ordeal of the first kill zone on Sword. That included all seven military escorts, which presented smaller targets than the tankers and were protected by some measure of armor and firepower. Eleven of the 17 tankers and one of the two bobtails now littered the freeway, ramps, and overpass. Of the four men whose vehicles never made it off Sword, one was already dead and the others would not make it back alive to friendly hands. Four others had already died on or near the overpass. Bachman and Watson in Gun Truck 12 and Ross in KBR11 were wounded but had continued down Sword to the relative safety of another convoy. The first three vehicles driven by Church, Danny Wood, and Rick Tollison were the first to drive through the second kill



Burning tankers on ASR Cardinals. Photo courtesy of Daniel Petrik

zone and reach safety followed by Row and McDermott in Gun Truck 160 and Peterson and Slaughter in KBR6. The rest prepared to leave the overpass but their ordeal was far from over.

ASR Cardinals

The first to make the turn onto Cardinals, Church thought he was safe but a little further down the road small arms fire started and intensified. Houses closely flanked both sides of the road. Church remembered seeing the enemy standing and running at them from 30 meters on both sides. These were the militia driven into the neighborhood by the cavalry sweep. He had driven into a hasty kill zone and the enemy was just as surprised as the truck drivers. For the next three to four miles, Blankenship began spinning and firing his machinegun in 360 degrees. Church heard what he thought were a couple IEDs exploding behind him. There were mounds that looked like dug fighting positions where RPG teams would pop up and fire. About a mile and half before the Dairy Milk Factory, he saw a berm mound on the left side of the road. Church thought he heard a heavy caliber machinegun. The small arms fire was continuous all the way to the palm trees about three-quarters of a mile from the Dairy Milk Factory, and then it slackened. Church had expended six to seven magazines on Cardinals and Blankenship was down to his last 100 rounds. Suddenly, Church saw an Abrams tank and thought, “Hey, what’s that doing here?” The tank then aimed its main gun at him and Church’s heart dropped “all the way to the floor.” That was his scariest moment

because he knew the tank would not miss. He then thought, “Dude, I make it all the way through this to get shot by a tank.”

SSG Thomas Armstrong’s Abrams tank and three HMMWVs from SFC Michael A. Klein’s 2nd Platoon were providing security on Cardinals just outside the Bilady Dairy Milk Factory after noticing the columns of smoke ahead. Church had luckily reached the outer security perimeter established by Company C, 2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry, call sign “Cold Steel,” which had occupied the site during the night of 8 April. After 15 minutes of driving through a hail of enemy fire, Church’s battle damaged HMMWV finally ground to a halt just five feet outside the concertina wire. All the while, enemy fire continued right up to the gates of the Dairy Milk Factory. The cavalry troopers aimed in on the approaching HMMWV, being cautious in the wake of recent reports of insurgents stealing five HMMWVs from LSA Anaconda. Armstrong held his fire and after a few seconds, recognized the vehicle’s occupants were Americans and visibly shaken.⁷⁴

SGT Hawley jumped out and pulled back the concertina and motioned Church, Wood, Tollison, and the 660th HMMWV forward. Guides led the tankers the few hundred meters into a safe area inside the dairy compound, while Church’s HMMWV remained near the checkpoint for the time being. Church exited his vehicle, ran inside and quickly described to the cavalry the ambush he had just driven through. Church then ran back out the wire, pulled Brown out and threw him over his shoulder, then aided by SSG Donovan D. Simpson,



Keith Stanley’s tanker at FOB Daisy, the Dairy Milk Factory. Photo courtesy of Keith Stanley



Keith Stanley's tanker at FOB Daisy, the Dairy Milk Factory. Photo courtesy of Keith Stanley

carried him ten feet to a medical vehicle. By then Brown had regained consciousness. He thought if Church was carrying him and laying him down then it must be a safe area. Brown then recognized he was surrounded by other soldiers and assumed that he was in BIAP. In the next few minutes, KBR 3 with Danny Wood and KBR 4 with Rick Tollison and SSG Hollingsworth pulled into the compound. Hollingsworth had been hit in the tip of the nose, which bled profusely. As they arrived, an insurgent mortar round landed and set fire to a pool of fuel. The first four vehicles onto Cardinals had reached safety.⁷⁵

Church looked back down the road and saw another truck about 60 to 70 meters outside the wire with KBR drivers lying down. Church, SFC Klein and SSG Simpson went out to them only to discover one was playing dead. The cavalry platoon leader assisted in medevacing the wounded drivers that had reached safety. Inside the Dairy Milk Factory, 1SG Charles Q. Taylor and his medics, PVT James M. Meaney, PFC Ronald J. Kapture, SPC Justin B. Onwordi and SGT Casey J. Blanchette established a casualty collection point and treated the wounded.⁷⁶ The troopers thought the civilians looked shaken by their experience, while the contractors felt the cavalry troopers had no idea what the convoy had been through. Danny Wood was amazed when one soldier asked him where his spill kit was to deal with the fuel leaking from his shot-up tanker.⁷⁷ Meanwhile Hawley made a report of the ambush and tried unsuccessfully to get air support, while SGT Blankenship kept his weapon trained out over the concertina and attempted to raise SFC Groff on the radio.

Back down the road, SPC McDermott kept up a high rate of fire from his .50-caliber machinegun, killing one

RPG gunner for sure and causing others to duck away as his gun truck passed. Bullets smacked into his ring mount and the ammunition can attached to his M2, but he fortunately was not hit. SPC Row drove as fast as he could, but with the tires shot out and the highway slick with fuel, he was barely making ten miles per hour. He was firing his rifle, as well, and thought he hit one Iraqi before he ran out of magazines. When the gun truck reached safety at the dairy, Row, a trained combat life saver, went to work helping with the casualties. McDermott checked his ammunition supply. Out of the thousand rounds he had started with that morning (more than double what he normally would have had), he had less than a hundred left.⁷⁸

Edward Sanchez, driving KBR 12, had also passed Grage's gun truck pushing the tanker. When Sanchez saw the exit to Cardinals, he thought it would lead to safety, but the enemy fire only intensified as his rig climbed the ramp and made the left turn onto the overpass. He heard what he thought was a heavy caliber machinegun firing and his vehicle shook each time a round hit it. With his front tires now shot out, his truck slowed down even more. As Sanchez' tanker passed by Stannard, the stranded driver saw his chance, ran to the vehicle and jumped on the driver's side running board. Brezovay did the same on the passenger side. Their rescue was short-lived, as the tanker caught fire and ground to a halt on Cardinals. The two civilians bailed off the cab, and Sanchez briefly got his feet hung up in the steering wheel as he tried to climb out the window while bullets smacked around him. SGT Elmer Krause, his shooter, was hit as he tried to follow and the tractor was

soon engulfed in flames. The three drivers crawled along the exposed pavement away from the burning hulk.⁷⁹

James Blackwood, driving KBR 16, navigated through the hazards of spilled fuel and wrecked vehicles littering the ramp and overpass. He saw a soldier and a couple of his fellow contractors on the ground as he drove away from the overpass, but the convoy pre-brief had stressed that contract drivers were not to stop for anything, because the escort vehicles would handle breakdowns and other problems. He already had dropped his radio on the floor when he was shot in the hand. As he drove through the fire along Cardinals, he was hit again in the left leg, right arm, and back. He had served as a door gunner on a Huey in Vietnam and swore he “had never been under attack as on this day.”⁸⁰ Blackwood along with Keith Stanley in KBR 13 managed to make it to safety at the milk factory, but had to be carried from his cab.

Meanwhile, Lester shifted his body armor to his head and shoulder because of the fire coming from both sides of the road. A hundred yards down the road his truck took cross fire from both sides of the road and Lester swerved his bobtail back and forth across the median to avoid the maze of concrete barriers dragged into the road. Small arms fire sounded like a string of firecrackers going off as the enemy fired through holes in the concrete sound barriers and from two story houses that flanked the road. One round punched through the passenger door and hit Zimmerman’s lower ankle. He then dropped his head into Lester’s lap. Lester kept weaving between barriers when he then heard the swish of a rocket miss his truck and hit a concrete barrier. He heard another rocket heading his way and then the rear of his bobtail lifted up and deposited his truck sideways in the median. Lester’s foot was pushing the gas pedal and the engine was racing. With rounds still flying around him, he thought, “Oh my God, I’ve lost my rear drives.” He then reached down and pulled back on the transmission shifter then his truck took off again. He was driving on the left side of the sidewalk so close to the insurgents he felt the muzzle blast inside his truck as insurgents were firing just over his cab. Driving with his head tucked down, a 20mm round split his sun visor in half just missing his head by inches. Driving through a gauntlet of enemy fire Lester feared his luck would soon run out, but after a few hundred yards further the enemy

stopped firing. Zimmerman’s head was still in Lester’s lap and he thought he was finally out of the kill zone when he heard another swishing sound and a rocket hit the front of his truck but fortunately did not explode. Lester’s truck slid another 30 yards down the road and came to a halt. Then the small arms fire picked up again. Lester told Zimmerman to get out and then fell out himself crawling under the truck. He saw the front end was nearly on the ground. He saw Zimmerman hit the ground and then told him to get under the truck. He crawled toward Lester saying, “I’m bleeding to death.” His ankle was bleeding badly. Lester then handed him a Hajaib to tie around his ankle. Zimmerman continued to talk about bleeding to death while Lester saw insurgents moving around through the holes in the sound barriers. He told Zimmerman to be quiet fearing it would not be long before the insurgents killed them. Waiting to die, Lester had an unreal sense of fear and hoped a burst of full auto would kill him quickly rather than get captured and be beheaded.⁸¹

About that time, Hamill’s tanker system came crawling up the ramp at about five to ten miles per hour. Hamill saw the first tanker flipped on its right side with its cab crushed. Hamill wanted to stop and check for the driver, but if he did his rig would have blocked the exit for the trucks behind him. As Howell negotiated the ramp, their truck began to fishtail causing Hamill to shout, “Nelson, we can’t block this ramp. Try to get over to the guardrail as far as you can. If we spin out by the guardrail maybe another truck can still get by.”⁸²

As they reached the top of the ramp, another truck, probably KBR 15, swerved off the freeway, drove past them, and made the left hand turn onto the overpass. Hamill then saw Stannard and Walsh’s tanker system, which appeared to have been hit by an RPG and flipped over against the guardrail. Hamill’s truck began to crawl across the bridge past the disabled truck where about a hundred yards ahead of them, the fuel truck that had just passed them exploded shooting flames in the air. By then, Hamill’s truck was making even less progress. Walsh looked over and saw all of the tires had been shot out, the trailer was on fire, and fuel was spilling out of the many bullet holes. Completely trashed, Hamill’s tractor slowed down just enough so that Walsh, hobbling on his wounded foot could catch up and jump on the passenger’s side running board. Hooking his arm around

the side mirror, Walsh looked in and saw the passenger was wounded, but not badly. Hamill was hyperventilating while holding his right arm. Walsh then told the driver to speed up and Hamill also remembered him yelling, "We've got to drop this trailer." Howell yelled back, "We are losing air pressure, must have happened when that big explosion hit us, must've knocked out our brakes."⁸³ They were dragging the fuel trailer along like an anchor.⁸³

Completely exposed and wounded in the foot, Walsh stood on the running board firing away while trying to hold on as the truck crawled along on rims. A couple of times the soldier grabbed another clip, bumped it, and slammed it in his M-16. He sprayed his weapon back and forth, not really picking his targets. Walsh remembered, "I fired into the city buildings and just about everywhere trying to keep the suppressive fire down. Unfortunately, it wasn't working. The more I fired, the more rounds were fired at us." He could not take good aim and realized he needed a more stable position; so he decided to climb on the hood of the truck.⁸⁴

Using the side mirror Walsh pulled himself up on the hood, but the mirror broke off. As Walsh was falling, Hamill reached out and grabbed the handle on the back of his flak jacket. Reaching back, Walsh then grabbed the passenger window, pulled himself back up onto the truck, then crawled up onto the hood, lied down and fired left and right into the city. The crowd of Iraqis along the street fired at the passing truck and Walsh wondered how he did not get hit in the hail of gunfire. He heard a weapon fire very close by on the driver's side of the truck. He looked and saw the same two kids that had shot at him on the bridge. The older one was firing at the vehicle while the younger was firing two to three-round bursts directly at Walsh, who fired another round over their heads but they did not budge, and apparently were not about to. He then aimed at the younger kid's chest and fired. The round entered his throat and exited the other side, dropping the kid to the ground dead. The older kid looked down at him, then up at Walsh, and started spraying 20 to 30 rounds. Walsh rolled over, trying not to get hit, then took aim and fired at the kid's head, but hit the wall behind it. Luckily, it knocked enough debris on him to drop him to the ground, which was good enough for Walsh.⁸⁵

Approaching one of the burning tankers, Howell yelled, "We can't go by the truck. We'll catch fire, too."

Their tanker was spilling fuel from both sides. Howell added, "This truck's fixin' to die. It's fixin' to quit." Their truck finally ground to a halt propelling Walsh off the hood. As he rolled to a stop in front of the truck, rounds were hitting around him. He thought if a round hit the contractors, they would not make it, so Walsh stood up and ran about 50 to 75 meters away from the truck and lied back down then fired into the buildings wherever he saw anyone.⁸⁶

Hamill realized they had no other choice but to bail out. Walsh looked back and saw the driver climbing out. Walsh feared if the driver got out, it would draw attention to him and he would end up being shot. Walsh yelled at him to get back in the truck, but Howell did not listen. Walsh then aimed and fired a round into his door handle. Howell jumped back into the truck and closed the door. The passengers just sat there looking at the soldier who hoped they did not think he was going to shoot them. After about ten minutes, they saw Groff's HMMWV coming towards them.⁸⁷

Lamar drove Groff's HMMWV down the road to catch up with the convoy while trying to avoid guardrails and giant rocks placed in the road, but the fuel covered road felt like driving on ice. Their HMMWV also continued to lose power. When Groff's HMMWV rolling on rims approached, Walsh recognized his chance for rescue, jumped up and flagged it down. The HMMWV pulled around about 100 feet in front of Hamill's truck and stopped. Walsh ran for it with Howell right behind him. They dived through the right side door. Meanwhile Hamill ran as fast as he could, but wounded and loaded down with body armor and Kevlar helmet, he was about ten feet from the HMMWV when it sped off. He yelled but they did not hear him. Howell screamed at Lamar that he had left Hamill behind, but they did not turn back.⁸⁸

Hamill was left standing in the middle of the road with bullets still flying. He remembered the advice of his Vietnam veteran roommate in Kuwait, "If you are ever under fire, you get down on the ground as quick as you can and stay down." Hamill did just that. He examined his escape routes but saw several Iraqis running toward him. He tried crawling toward one of the houses with his good arm, but not long after, he was a captive in enemy hands.⁸⁹

Groff's heavily damaged HMMWV headed towards the safety of north gate of BIAP and after a little ways

picked up Goodrich, Brezovay, Sanchez, and Stannard. Groff's four-passenger HMMWV was then packed with 12 people. Goodrich had jumped in and sat on Walsh's lap, who was sitting behind the driver. Goodrich fired out the window then Walsh felt a thump - Goodrich had been shot. He started yelling, "Ah..ah..ah..I got hit, I've been hit!" Fisher was begging for water, and would die enroute. Sanchez yelled he was a medic and asked for a first aid kit. Walsh pushed his wounded comrade forward so he could climb back and pull out a first aid pouch. He then leaned back up to help Goodrich, but blood was coming out of Goodrich's mouth and he was not moving. SPC Pelz, the gunner and also a combat life saver, helped with the wounded. Others yelled for him to get back on his SAW, the vehicle's primary means of defense. Sanchez placed someone's fist into Goodrich's wound to slow the flow of blood, then bandaged Fisher's arm. Walsh meanwhile jammed a rifle into Howell's hands and told him to start firing. Crawling along at a top speed of about ten miles an hour, they were still under heavy fire.⁹⁰

Groff's HMMWV had reached the western edge of the Abu Ghraib Market about 500 to 700 meters from the safety of the cavalry barricade when a round finally went through the radiator. The HMMWV rolled about another hundred meters before it came to a halt about two to three miles from the north gate of BIAP. Pelz saw Iraqis advancing to trees around them and began firing back. The rest sat in the HMMWV looking at each other for what seemed like a "life time." SFC Groff radioed for help, but no one answered. It seemed hopeless. They just sat there listening to the bullets bounce off the HMMWV, hoping no RPG would hit them. They feared they were going to die since that HMMWV had been their last hope but it was out of commission. After about ten to 15 minutes, Groff again tried calling anyone on either the military or KBR radio then SGT Blankenship, gunner in the lead HMMWV, answered on the KBR radio that a couple tanks were on their way. They heard a loud screaming sound like a banshee. Pelz looked up the road and saw tanks emerge from the compound ahead. Three others stood up and looked out the top of the HMMWV and to their delight saw a Bradley racing towards them firing at anything that moved with two more tanks following right behind it.⁹¹

Rescue

Hiding under his damaged M915 bobtail, Lester turned down the volume of squelch on his hand held radio and called for help. A voice replied, "Where are you?" Lester answered, "I'm under a truck. Where are you?" "I made it in," stated to voice on the radio, "We're coming to get you. Just hang in there." Lester looked down the road in the direction he had come from and saw a gun truck followed by a HMMWV, most likely Row's gun truck and the 660th HMMWV. He thought they were saved, but the crews might not see him. So when the trucks were 150 yards away, he rolled out from under the truck and played dead so he would not get shot. As the trucks approached closer, Lester began waving but the trucks kept going. They passed within five feet from him. Both gunners spun their turrets around and watched him as they passed out of sight. Lester rolled back under his truck and began to lose all hope of rescue. Pale and unresponsive, Lester assumed Zimmerman was near death from his loss of blood. Minutes passed and then he looked back down the road toward the milk factory and saw a Bradley and two up-armored HMMWVs coming his way.⁹²

Church guided SFC Klein accompanied by SSG Simpson and SGT Eric J. Mehall's two M1114 HMMWVs, and SFC Christopher H. Kowalewski's M2 Bradley, attached from Troop A, 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, back into the kill zone. Klein's small rescue force pulled up beside Lester's disabled bobtail to discover two KBR drivers playing dead under it. The ramp of the Bradley dropped down and two troopers loaded Zimmerman into their vehicle while Lester climbed in one HMMWV. About that time, Kirkpatrick's bobtail gun truck nearly sideswiped them.⁹³

Kirkpatrick and Bohm in the last gun truck kept firing as they headed east on Cardinals. When Kirkpatrick ran out of M16 rounds, he picked up the SAW in the cab and fired it. Spotting the small cavalry rescue group led by Klein, Kirkpatrick jumped his truck over the highway median to head in their direction. As he did so and began braking, the vehicle hit spilled fuel, spun 245 degrees and then tipped, finally slamming into a pile of dirt. The careening gun truck just missed Klein's HMMWV. The wild maneuver threw Bohm backwards against his turret, knocking the wind out of him and he collapsed in a heap. Klein then led his group back to

the dairy and passed 1SG Taylor and SSG Armstrong's Abrams tanks heading in the opposite direction in search of survivors. Kirkpatrick managed to get going again and make it to the milk factory, where cavalry troopers pulled the injured gunner from his mount.⁹⁴

As soon as Klein dropped Lester and Zimmerman off at the milk factory, he turned his platoon around and raced back up Cardinals with Church still as a guide. After traveling a half-mile, the small force received intense fire from gunmen concealed in houses along the right side of the road. With short, accurate bursts targeting all visible muzzle flashes, the experienced cavalry turret gunners eliminated or suppressed the enemy fighters. Klein continued for another mile before spotting Taylor and Armstrong's tanks parked on either side of Groff's damaged HMMWV.⁹⁵ Klein's vehicles pulled in front and behind, forming a protective box around the convoy survivors. Walsh remembered, "It was cool as hell!"⁹⁶

Church recognized the assistant convoy commander's HMMWV amidst heavy black smoke and flaming wreckage of burning fuel tankers. He dismounted, ran over and pushed his head in the window then exclaimed, "Sergeant Groff." Surprised to see him, Groff responded, "Church?" "Yeah, it's Church," replied the young driver. Church looked in the back of the HMMWV and saw a pile of people. 1SG Taylor and SSG Armstrong's tanks then pushed past Klein's two HMMWVs to establish a blocking position and then engage enemy. The tanks bore the brunt of the RPG and small arms fire that rained in from both sides of the road while the dismounted soldiers quickly sorted through the bloody mess. Pulling people out of the vehicle, they discovered two wounded soldiers and four wounded KBR drivers.⁹⁷

Church and Pelz set up a hasty triage, identifying the most critically wounded while Klein's men provided medical assistance and helped the wounded to the rescue vehicles. The small reaction force attracted a lot of small arms fire during the evacuation. While Church was carrying Goodrich to lay him down between the vehicles, something grabbed his foot and he fell. His helmet was knocked off and rounds passed right over his head. If he had not fallen, he would have gotten shot in the head. Someone then yelled at Church to put his helmet on. Church then bandaged PFC Goodrich's

sucking chest wound and performed CPR on him, to no avail. Church then carried him over to one of the HMMWVs. Lamar saw Church put Goodrich in the back of the HMMWV; body armor covered his face so Lamar knew Goodrich was dead. Once Church and Pelz had carried all the wounded over to the HMMWV, it became apparent that there was not enough space for all ten, so Klein arranged to link-up with SFC Kowalewski's Bradley halfway toward the milk factory.⁹⁸

Church insisted the cavalry troopers evacuate the wounded back to the casualty collection point while he and Pelz wait for their return. Groff did not know anyone had been left behind until he reached the safety of the compound and started counting the people in his convoy. After the vehicles left, Pelz started yelling that they were left behind. Church reassured him the cavalry would come back and they could hold out. He pushed Pelz inside the HMMWV, since he was a better combat life saver. After the cavalry vehicles left, the small arms fire surprisingly dropped off. Church assumed that the militia thought no one remained behind. Church then took cover behind the left rear side of the HMMWV where he heard a couple Iraqis walk up behind him yelling back and forth. Evidently they had not seen him. Just as surprised to see them, Church turned and fired, killing both of them.⁹⁹

When the first black columns of smoke from burning tanker trucks had appeared in the sky, CPT Aaron J. Munz was in a meeting with his battalion commander at Logistics Base Seitz. He had departed immediately for the dairy, assuming anticipating trouble and reached his company around the time Klein returned with the survivors from Groff's HMMWV. CPT Munz and SSG Charles Armstead then quickly raced out the gate of the milk factory in their Abrams tanks and headed into the kill zone. As they came upon the disabled HMMWV, a sergeant pointed to the enemy and other vehicles. They continued on toward the burning fuel tankers with Munz' tank in the lead and dodged over 15 RPGs. AK rounds bounced off the armor of his tank and over his head. They found no survivors. Three times, Munz halted and oriented his tank of the south waiting for the rest of his tanks and Bradleys to catch up.¹⁰⁰

After ten minutes, the recovery team returned to pick up Church and Pelz. Before leaving the area,



Inferno of the overpass. View looking west on Cardinals.

Photo courtesy of Daniel Petrik

Church initiated a sensitive-items check and weapons sweep to prevent capture by enemy forces. In spite of the extreme danger to himself, he maintained a clear presence of mind. His training had paid off. Once Church and Pelz climbed in the vehicle and left, an RPG hit their disabled HMMWV. Upon his return to the milk factory, Church immediately rendered medical assistance to two more civilians with minor wounds and loaded them into vehicles for ground evacuation to Log Base Seitz where all available medics had been assembled to treat them.¹⁰¹

Up the road, CPT Munz radioed 1SG Taylor to assemble a tank team to recover the vehicle. Taylor led the team out the gate for the third time. Munz and Armstead had pulled up to the intersection of Cardinals and Sword and as they crested the overpass, Munz saw 50 to 70 males of fighting age gathered on the soccer field west of the intersection and north of Cardinals. As soon as the Iraqis saw the tanks, they ran away. They were unarmed so the tanks did not engage. Munz saw another crowd of Iraqis gathering around the Janah Al Salayn Mosque, which began firing on the tanks. About that time, Taylor arrived with three tanks, a Bradley and two M1114s. Kowalewski engaged with his 25mm chain gun and 1SG Taylor fired a 120mm high explosive round. They drove the distance of Sword looking for survivors and encountered a minimum of seven different RPG teams and multiple shooters. CPT Allen and SFC Franklin's two tanks from B Company were ordered to up to assist Munz. Enroute they received and returned fire. A convoy from the 20th Engineer Battalion pulled up to which Allen halted it, turned it around and sent it

back south on Sword. Once they determined there were no survivors in the kill zone, Allen and Franklin returned to Check Point 7 to set up a screen line. Unable to find any survivors of the ambush, Munz returned with his force to the Dairy Milk Factory. The Iraqis had prepared an ambush by moving concrete barriers into the road. As they approached the obstacle, the lead Bradley was hit by multiple RPGs and an IED. The tracked vehicles formed a box around the M1114s and continued toward the milk factory.¹⁰²

Safely back at the milk factory, Munz asked SFC Groff for an accountability of his men, Groff reported that he had could account for all his men except Krause and Maupin. He expressed concern about the SINCGARS in his HMMWV falling into enemy hands. CPT Munz radioed his first sergeant and told him to take care of it. They left the safety of the milk factory for the fourth time and 1SG Taylor, SSG Armstrong and SFC Christopher H. Kowaleski reached the HMMWV they were supposed to recover where they saw 60 to 70 Iraqis dancing in celebration around it. Taylor fired a high explosive round at the vehicle destroying the vehicle, its secure radio, and everyone around it. His gunner, SGT Persinger, fired into the crowd with his coaxial machinegun. They continued west and came across one 5-ton tractor that was not completely ablaze, so they parked two tanks on either side and Kowaleski backed his Bradley up to it. They then hooked their tow cables to the tractor and dragged it. When they reached the other vehicle that Groff had told them about, it was engulfed in flames. The heat from the flames was so intense that Taylor could feel it through the crack in his open commander's hatch. After almost an hour in the kill zone they returned



Looking west across the overpass. KBR 14 and 17 are burning on the left and the smoke from Bradley's tanker is on the right. Photo courtesy of Daniel Petrik



Looking east. Abrams tank driving across the overpass past KBR 14 and 17. Photo courtesy of Daniel Petrik

to the safety of the milk factory.¹⁰³

While Taylor was out, CPT Munz spoke with the drivers of the 724th and they looked “absolutely awestruck.” They stood there bloodied but asked about their buddies who had been evacuated and the two drivers still missing. The concern for their buddies brought tears to Munz’ eyes. Munz told them the wounded had been evacuated to Log Base Seitz and would be pushed higher up the ladder of medical treatment. Almost to a man, they expressed their gratitude for their rescue. One expressed, “I thought we were all going to die and then we saw your tanks. I was so happy, because I knew we had a chance.”¹⁰⁴

7th Transportation Battalion TOC

Meanwhile at 1230 hours, CPT Michael E. Ludwick called via telephone to inform the 7th Battalion that the 724th convoy had been ambushed. His serial was supposed to depart ahead of the 724th but had radio problems causing it to delay and depart behind the second serial. After they saw the columns of smoke rising up where the 724th convoy was and heard the activity on radios, they took Route Vernon to Irish to the main gate, instead of Route Sword and encountered no ambushes. Having avoided the ambush, Ludwick assumed the worst.¹⁰⁵

LTC Akin was at the 172nd Corps Support Group Headquarters when he first learned of the ambush. He did not believe it but thought it prudent to return to his headquarters. His first report of the ambush came from Ludwick who reported he could see the columns of smoke and that the entire convoy had been destroyed. This captain was prone to exaggerate, so Akin did not

believe the extent of the damage but assumed something had happened. What fueled his fear was that he could account for every convoy but the 724th and could not raise anyone in Brown’s convoy on the radio.

Every battalion commander wants to accomplish the mission and bring all of his soldiers home alive. The first emotion that George Akin felt was disbelief. There was no certainty the ambush had happened to one of his convoys. Akin like everyone else hoped for the best. The accumulating reports increasingly indicated it was one of his convoys. Both battalion and CPT Smith made calls throughout the day and into the night to determine the extent of the injuries. Finally CPT Smith walked in and admitted his convoy had been ambushed. Akin’s fear was confirmed. Smith was 45-years old nearly the same general age as Akin and prior service enlisted in the infantry and Special Forces. Smith was mature and level headed. So Akin looked to him more as a peer than a subordinate. SFC Groff had called Smith at 1800 hours to confirm the death of PFC Goodrich and that PFC Maupin and SGT Krause were missing.¹⁰⁶

Akin realized that soldiers under his command had been killed. Disbelief turned into anger. He realized that anger would not solve anything. So he calmed down and began to think rationally again. He resigned himself to the realization of the loss and started focusing on the next steps. First he called all the commanders together and had them put the word out that no one would call home about the ambush until he had a full accounting of the losses. He had learned from a previous mortar attack that if one person called home to even mention there was an attack and they were all right, this would

incite rumors and excite the worst fears that other family members who had not heard from their loved ones. The reports varied about how many soldiers were killed and missing.¹⁰⁷

Akin later pulled CPT Smith aside and told him he had to push fuel out to Al Asaad, but Smith could not go on the convoy until the battalion commander said he could. Akin needed Smith to step away from his company to help with both the Article 15 - 6 investigation and notification. Akin had great respect for CPT Smith and felt that he was always “a brain cell ahead” of the situation. Fortunately, the 181st Battalion had walked the 7th Battalion’s chaplain through the conduct of a memorialization ceremony. The problem was that this would not be the last one. From then on the 7th Battalion would have soldiers killed every month. Fortunately, the 724th POL would not lose any one else killed after this ambush.¹⁰⁸

Smith went back to his company, then assembled his soldiers and told them to take seats on the ground. The soldiers were in a state of shock because of the rumors. Smith then told them everything he knew at the time, which was Goodrich was killed, eight were wounded and Maupin and Krause were missing. The commander asked everyone to bow their heads and pray. Afterwards, he asked if anyone did not want “to go outside the wire.” No one raised his hand. In spite of the tragic loss of life to their comrades, the rest rolled out.¹⁰⁹

Lessons

Never before had any convoy in Iraq encountered an ambush this large or intense. At the end of the day on 9 April, there were seven known dead - SGT Krause and PFC Goodrich and civilian drivers Hulett, Johnson, Parker, Montague, and Fisher. In addition, eight soldiers and four KBR drivers were wounded.¹¹⁰ Four men were initially missing in action. The insurgents had captured Tommy Hamill, SGT Krause and SPC Maupin, but Hamill would escape after 27 days of captivity. Driver William Bradley’s remains were recovered in January 2005, Krause’s remains were recovered 23 April and American troops located Maupin’s body in late March 2008. One missing civilian, Timothy Bell, has never been found.¹¹¹

This ambush experienced similar losses to the first large scale convoy ambush in Vietnam on 2 September

1967 where 30 out of 37 vehicles were damaged or destroyed, seven drivers killed and 17 wounded. The 724th POL convoy lost 16 out of 26 vehicles damaged or destroyed with ten civilian and military drivers killed, one still missing in action and 12 wounded. In Vietnam, the truck companies would adopt gun trucks and evolve their convoy tactics, while the ambush of the 724th POL already had gun trucks, but without appropriate reaction to contact procedures for a complex ambush. So the participants of the Good Friday Ambush did the best they could with the training and resources they had. The planners had made mistakes in route planning; but even with the best planning, convoys will still end up driving into kill zones. SPC Row summed up the experience best, “It wasn’t anyone’s fault, it was just hell.”¹¹² But if anyone had to fight that battle again, there were some things that could be done differently.

The first and most common mistake was thinking in the present tense. The intelligence community had no templates that explained how to predict insurgent behavior. Even though the lessons of all previous attacks indicated that the enemy was becoming more sophisticated, the best the intelligence community could do in anticipation of the Al Sadr Uprising was predict more of the same – in other words, lots of small ambushes, not big ones. The Vietnam veterans watching these ambushes from the sidelines of the United States had recognized the same pattern as in their war and predicted large - scale ambushes.¹¹³ The best of minds cannot prevent every ambush from happening, but a better understanding of the scale of attack can help the convoys develop more appropriate tactics for them. The 724th convoy drove into that kill zone with tactics designed for smaller ambushes - just drive through and return fire. Had anyone anticipated a worst case scenario of a large scale ambush, they might have had the forethought to pull out the old standard operating procedures from the 8th Transportation Group during the Vietnam War. Surprisingly, they would have read that any vehicle not in the kill zone should not drive into it. Lester had the right idea when he stopped at the compound. While the soldiers of the 724th performed as well as they could with the training and equipment they had, the best lessons come from comparing this ambush with what worked in the past and future.

Unable to predict the future, the intelligence

community throughout the war in Iraq just force-fed the convoys with a list of previous attacks without analysis. What was missing that Friday was knowledge of current operations. There were so many convoy ambushes that day that the 724th would have been lucky to have avoided one, but had planners been aware of current operations, that convoy would not have driven down Cardinals that day. Part of this failure was that convoy operations have historically been seen as logistical operations rather than combat operations and therefore have not been integrated with current operations. Both the convoys and the battle space commander need situational awareness of what is in their area. When in contact, the convoys and maneuver units on the ground become part of a team.

Mistakes were made that sent the 724th into that kill zone, but despite the best of preventive efforts, convoys will continue to drive through kill zones. To better understand what they could have done differently, one must examine other ambushes. Fortunately, Iraq had not yet experienced ambushes on this scale, so the Vietnam War might have provided better insight. The level of gun truck armor and armament as well as enemy weapon technology in Iraq in April 2004 was almost identical to that of the Vietnam War, so the two wars separated by 30 years make fair comparisons. Because of the complexity of the different routes, nearly every convoy commander's greatest fear was getting lost in downtown Baghdad, so they rode up front during the first couple of years of the war; but if a convoy was caught in an ambush, the important decisions needed to be made in the rear of the convoy where the majority of the action took place. In both this war and Vietnam, convoy commanders started out riding up front but learned to ride near the rear of the convoy.

In this ambush, however, key decisions were made up front. As the convoy approached the kill zone, there were more signs of danger ahead, especially the tank engaging enemy and a crew member waving them off. Stopping or turning back was not a consideration by the military based upon recent experience. The next decision point was whether to continue through the burning smoke or turn off onto the side road. In combat tactical decisions are made in seconds or less, and this convoy commander had little information to determine which road was the safest. As it turned out, because

of the IEDs on the side road, the burning tanker was intended to canalize the convoy into the road where the kill zone was planned. The next key decision was whether to continue straight or take the left turn and follow the planned route to the north gate. The planned route unwittingly led them into the neighborhood into which the militia had been forced. That became the second kill zone, and many trucks were lost just trying to make the turn onto the overpass. However, an armored cavalry company was not too far down the road, which was what rescued most of the drivers from the disabled vehicles. Going straight ahead was relatively safer, but there were no clues to indicate which route was safer. On average, a large kill zone consists of not more than 50 guerrillas because of the difficulty coordinating fires. So having cleared one kill zone the convoy commander would feel reasonably safe. Unfortunately, the Cavalry had driven insurgents into the neighborhood flanking the rest of the route to BIAP. So the leader with the best tactical skills should be in the rear of the convoy to control the fight and recovery while a good leader needed to be up front to make decisions about the route and whether to continue or stop.

The design of the initial kill zone may have been either an L-shaped or Z-shaped kill zone since the enemy was engaging from both sides of the road. Because of the risk of hitting fellow ambushers on the opposite side of the road, strict control measures for sectors of fire need to be established. Most of the truck drivers described initially receiving fire from the left side and then the right. Most of the houses were on the left side of the highway with two small neighborhoods on the right. Since in the desert key terrain is any overpass or two story building, the distribution of the houses most likely shaped the first kill zone.

The main lesson from the Vietnam War was that ambushes were won by overwhelming firepower. Almost every large scale ambush in Vietnam ended with four to five gun trucks in the kill zone or the arrival of the nearest armored quick reaction force or attack helicopter. Keep in mind that every Vietnam gun truck had at least three .50 caliber machineguns, which would add up to 12 to 15 heavy machineguns in the kill zone. Unfortunately in Iraq, the standard for armament was one machinegun per gun truck. Over time, escort units in Iraq would learn nothing commanded respect

like the M2 .50 caliber machinegun; and similar to the Vietnam War, this would become the primary weapon of choice for gun trucks. The concern for collateral damage caused some gunners to search for identifiable targets and others fired short bursts. McDermott blazed away with his .50 and expended over 900 rounds (nine cans) of ammunition by the time he reached safety. During the Vietnam War, unable to identify targets, the gunners on gun trucks of the 8th Transportation Group used spraying fire; in other words, pressing the butterflies (triggers) on the .50s and not letting up except to change ammo cans. They fired at anything that looked like the enemy or where they thought the enemy might be. One escort unit that arrived years later in Iraq said they used the spraying fire when hit by IEDs and the frequency of attacks dropped because the trigger men knew with all that lead flying around, there was a greater chance of getting killed. McDermott would have made a great gunner in the 8th Group in Vietnam.

During the Vietnam War, gun truck drivers were usually armed with M79 grenade launchers, which provided the gun trucks a short range indirect fire capability. The Mk19 automatic grenade launcher was a significant improvement over the M79 and, in time, each escort team would have at least one gun truck armed with it. The key to winning fire fights is overwhelming and accurate firepower. This leads one to assume no convoy can ever have too many heavy machineguns or too much ammunition in a kill zone.

Going into this war, the Army saw convoys as logistical moves from one point to the other so only the convoy commanders and assistant convoy commanders needed radios. The shortage of issued radios and their short range did not allow the leaders and, most importantly, the gun trucks to communicate effectively. To make up for the Army issue radios and the need to talk to contractors, the truck drivers acquired a variety of radios from commercial citizen band (CB) radios to the Government Issue SINCGARS. Without adequate communication, the gun trucks could not coordinate their fight and efficiently maneuver. Gun trucks were the only maneuverable elements of the convoy, so unable to coordinate their efforts they could only return fire and act independently. As learned during the Vietnam War, the gun truck's primary role was to suppress enemy fire, defend disabled trucks and ensure the drivers escaped

the kill zone. Had there been effective communication throughout the convoy, drivers could have warned the following gun trucks of enemy locations, disabled vehicles and drivers who needed rescue. As the war progressed, the Army would improve the radios and issue radios to every military vehicle.

This convoy had five escort vehicles, and clearly they did not have the fire power to stand and fight it out with hundreds of insurgents. Groff's HMMWV gun truck made a noble effort to rescue as many drivers as it could, while others continued to return fire. Consequently, many drivers fell into enemy hands. The policy in Vietnam was that gun trucks would defend all disabled vehicles in the kill zone and ensure no driver was left in the kill zone. The gun trucks' reaction in the Good Friday Ambush was to return suppressive fire against the insurgents so vehicles could clear the kill zone. The obvious lesson was that all vehicles needed armor; the gun trucks needed more armor and fire power, and the convoys needed procedures for how to react to large scale ambushes.

Randy Ross continued driving in Iraq until the US forces pulled out in December 2011. His later advice to other KBR drivers was not to stop in a kill zone but to keep driving because it was the job of the escorts to stop and rescue drivers. However, if the driver saw a burning truck with a driver outside it, he should slow down enough for the driver to jump on board the passing truck. This was the same policy during the Vietnam War. Ross also advised them if they abandoned their trucks to jump on another and leave the door open on their downed truck so the escorts would see the cab was empty.

During the Good Friday Ambush, the drivers of the fuel systems did exactly what they were trained to do, kept driving and returning fire, because it was the job of the gun trucks to defend the convoy. The question that persisted throughout the war was whether gun trucks should adopt passive or more aggressive tactics. The 724th followed a passive doctrine of returning fire and clearing the kill zone. This passive doctrine also included defending disabled vehicles or recovering the disabled vehicles. A more aggressive doctrine would have the gun trucks to stop and fight until a handoff with the ground combat force or everyone in the convoy had cleared the kill zone. The mission of the convoy is to deliver the cargo to the customer on time, not

finish the fight, yet, a few gun truck units felt inflicting casualties on the attacking force would discourage them from future ambushes. In fact, the Iraqis would try for a repeat of their success from Good Friday with another large-scale ambush on Palm Sunday, 20 March 2005, nearly a year later. The mistake the enemy would make in the later ambush would be halting two convoys in the kill zone, which doubled the number of gun trucks, and unbeknownst to them, one convoy was shadowed by a patrol of three HMMWV gun trucks. An enemy force of 50 insurgents faced up to nine gun trucks with improved armor and consequently lost nearly all their number killed, wounded or captured. This forced the enemy to abandon large-scale ambushes in favor of improved IED attacks. With the lack of large-scale ambushes, senior leaders would favor the passive doctrine in the Iraq War.

Employing a more aggressive doctrine, the gun trucks in Vietnam stopped near each disabled vehicle to fight until they were sure the driver was rescued. Had the 724th understood Vietnam gun truck doctrine, as soon as a gun truck saw a vehicle get hit, it would have stopped and laid down suppressive fire. Other gun trucks would have joined it, multiplying the effect of the suppressive fire until the crew of the disabled vehicle was recovered. Then the gun trucks would have moved to the next disabled vehicle. SFC Groff did his best but his HMMWV operated alone. M915s had the advantage of height but did not have the room to recover wounded drivers. The 5-ton gun trucks of Vietnam with their armored gun boxes provided the best extraction vehicles for wounded. They had the firepower and enough ammunition to stand and fight next to a disabled vehicle so no truck driver during the Vietnam War was captured with a convoy that had gun trucks.¹¹⁴ In comparison with other convoy ambushes that Easter weekend, most performed the same way as the 724th but fortunately did not encounter such enemy opposition. The one exception was the ambushes with the Zebra, because its gun truck crew that weekend had strong combat arms background, and the leader, 2LT James McCormick had earned his first Bronze Star Medal the hard way during Desert Storm – with a Purple Heart. They employed aggressive tactics during ambushes on 8 and 11 April to defeat the enemy rather than just suppress enemy fire, which produced a different outcome.

The last lesson that was learned in both Vietnam and

Iraq was that a guerrilla force fears air power. Any convoy in Vietnam or Iraq that rolled with air cover usually did not get ambushed. When convoys were ambushed, it usually ended when the combat aviation arrived. The lesson is when anticipating an ambush, call for air support.

PFC Church had performed heroically as the convoy commander under fire and for his actions that day he received the first Silver Star Medal awarded to a truck driver and a US Army Reserve soldier during the war. 1SG Taylor received the Bronze Star Medal with V for his leadership under fire that entire weekend. Because ASR Force and Sword became synonymous with ambushes, their names were changed to Vernon and Huskies; but drivers continued to refer Sword by its old name so the name Huskies only lasted but a few months. This ambush would go down in the history of the Iraq war as the worst.

¹ BG (P) James Chambers, former commanding general, 13th Corps Support Command, interview by Richard Killblane at Ft Lee, VA, May 2007.

² Randy Ross telephone interview by Richard Killblane, 20 June 2014.

³ CPT Jeffry Smith, "Historical Narrative; 724th Transportation Company," n.p., n.d.

⁴ SFC Mark A. Hawley Sworn Statement, 172nd Corps Support Group, Commander's Inquiry regarding the 724th TC Convoy on 9 April 2004, 14 April 2004. This was the second of two sworn statements provided by Hawley.

⁵ Smith, "Narrative."

⁶ Cross-leveled referred to soldiers laterally transferred from one unit to another to fill shortages for the deployment.

⁷ Video, "Battlefield Dairies: Baghdad Convoy Attack," Military Channel, 2006; and Interview, SPC Jeremy L. Church interview by Richard Killblane, 14 February 2007.

⁸ Smith "Narrative," and Video, "Battlefield Dairies: Baghdad Convoy Attack," Military Channel, 2006; Church interview; Memo, MAJ Mike W. Caraballo, for Commander, 172nd Corps Support Group, 2 August 2004, Report of Commander's Inquiry of 724th Transportation Company Hostile Engagement, (henceforth referred to as Commander's Inquiry).

⁹ Thomas Hamill and Paul T. Brown, *Escape In Iraq; The Thomas Hamill Story*, Accokeek, MD: Stoeger Publishing Company, 2004; LTC George Akin interview by Richard Killblane at Ft Bragg, NC, 5 November 2005; and "Battlefield Dairies." CSM Otis Pate, who had worked in 7th Trans Battalion, remembered the basic load in 2014.

¹⁰ Commander's Inquiry.

¹¹ SFC Robert D. Groff Sworn Statement, 172nd Corps Support Group, Commanders Inquiry regarding the 724th TC Convoy on 9 April 2004, 24 April 2004. This was the first of two statements made by Groff.

¹² Thomas Hamill and Paul T. Brown, *Escape in Iraq; The Thomas Hamill Story*, Accokeek, Maryland: Stoeger Publishing Company, 2004; and "Battlefield Dairies."

¹³ "Baghdad Dairies."

¹⁴ Groff Sworn Statement.

¹⁵ T. Christian Miller, "US: Iraq convoy was sent out despite threat", *Los Angeles Times*, 3 September 2007. This account is based on the 172nd Corps Support Group Commander's inquiry augmented by follow-up interviews by the author.

¹⁶ SPC Craig V. McDermott Written Statement, 172nd Corps Support Group, Commanders Inquiry regarding the 724th TC Convoy on 9 April 2004, 22 April 2004. McDermott noted that 2nd Platoon linked up with the KBR drivers at 1000, followed by an 1100 departure time. Several other statements have placed departure time between 1040 and 1100 hours.

¹⁷ LT Brown Sworn statement, 13 May 2004.

¹⁸ Randy Ross described this was how routes were briefed at that time. Randy Ross telephone interview by Richard Killblane, 20 June 2014.

¹⁹ Hamill, *Escape*.

²⁰ SFC Mark A. Hawley Sworn Statement, 172nd Corps Support Group, Commanders Inquiry regarding the 724th TC Convoy on 9 April 2004, 11 April 2004.

²¹ Smith, "Narrative," and Hamill, *Escape*.

²² Smith, "Narrative;" Hamill, *Escape*; and Akin interview.

²³ Smith, "Narrative" and Hamill, *Escape*; "Battlefield Dairies," Church interview; and James Bretney email to Richard Killblane, June 1, 2006. Bretney had also interviewed Church.

²⁴ "Battlefield Dairies."

²⁵ SPC Shawn E. Kirkpatrick Sworn Statement, Commander's Inquiry, Jeffrey Slaughter, updated April 2004; Sworn Statement, 172nd Corps Support Group, Commanders Inquiry regarding the 724th TC Convoy on 9 April 2004, 13 May 2004; Follow Up Serious Incident Report, 172nd Corps Support Group, Commanders Inquiry. The report contains a diagram listing each vehicle's position in the convoy.

²⁶ Donald C. Grage Sworn Statement, 9 April 2004; Jacob P. Brown Sworn Statement, 11 April 2004; Craig V. McDermot Sworn Statement April 2004; and SGT Bryan C. Watson Sworn Statement, Commanders Inquiry.

²⁷ Hamill, *Escape*.

²⁸ March, "On the move;" "Battlefield Dairies;" and Watson Sworn Statement.

²⁹ Randy Ross telephone interview by Richard Killblane, 20 June 2014.

³⁰ Ross telephone interview; and Jackie D. Lester, "Good Friday Attack April 9th 2004," unpublished, Transportation Corps History Archives.

³¹ Lester, "Good Friday Attack."

³² Hamill's version came from his book, *Escape in Iraq*. There is confusion about who pushed which truck. Jackie Lester wrote Richard Killblane on 10 June 2014 that Hamill never told anyone to pick up Zimmerman. He made this part up for the book. Lester stated there was a difference between Hamill's deposition to the court and what he wrote in his book. Tommy Hamill's sworn statement (DA Form 2823) to the Army dated 23 May 2004, stated he called for a gun truck to come up and pick up Zimmerman's truck because it was losing power. Lester claimed Fisher drove up to push Zimmerman's truck, but Donald Grage claimed in his sworn statement on 9 April 2004 that he pushed Zimmerman's truck. Jacob Brown also wrote they pushed Zimmerman's tanker. Edward Sanchez Sworn Statement 28 May 2004 verified Grage pushed Zimmerman's truck, and Michael Brezovay's Sworn Statement on 20 May 2004 claimed Fisher came up and pushed KBR 5 driven by Bradley. Randy Ross, however, remembered Fisher pushed Zimmerman's truck. It is possible two trucks lost power. Grage pushed one and Fisher pushed the other. If so, both came to a stop right next to each other on the onramp which would explain why both stories are so similar.

³³ Ross telephone interview, and Lester, "Good Friday Attack."

³⁴ "Battlefield Dairies;" and Church interview, 14 February 2007.

³⁵ "Battlefield Dairies;" Church interview, 14 February 2007; and Lisa Burgess, "I'm just glad I didn't get shot," June 14, 2005, <http://www.stripes.com/article.asp?section=104&article=28915&archive=true>.

³⁶ March, "On the move."

³⁷ Church interview, 14 February 2007.

³⁸ Lester, "Good Friday Attack."

³⁹ SPC Patrick Pelz Sworn Statement, Commander's Inquiry, April 2004; March, "On the move;" and "Battlefield Dairies."

⁴⁰ Lester, "Good Friday Attack."

⁴¹ SPC Jeremy Church Silver Star Citation; March, "On the move;" "Battlefield Dairies;" Church telephone interview, 14 February 2007; and Burgess, *Stars and Stripes*.

⁴² Church Citation; March, "On the move;" "Battlefield Dairies;" Church telephone interview, 14 February 2007; and Burgess, *Stars and Stripes*.

⁴³ Church Citation; March, "On the move;" and "Battlefield Dairies."

⁴⁴ Hamill, *Escape*.

⁴⁵ Hamill, *Escape*.

⁴⁶ McDermott Sworn Statement; Row Sworn Statement; March, "On the move;" and "Battlefield Dairies."

⁴⁷ SPC Dustin L. Row Sworn Statement, 9 April 2004, Commander's Inquiry; SSG Arthur Hollingsworth Sworn Statement, 26 April 2004, Commander's Inquiry; March, "On the move;" and "Battlefield Dairies."

⁴⁸ March, "On the move."

⁴⁹ Hamill and Brown, p.41; Row Sworn Statement, and McDermott Sworn Statement.

⁵⁰ March, "On the move;" and Grage's Sworn Statement.

⁵¹ SPC Michael J. Bachman Interview, 14 May 2004, Commander's Inquiry; and Ross telephone interview.

⁵² Bachman Interview, and Ross telephone interview.

⁵³ Ross telephone interview.

⁵⁴ Ross telephone interview.

⁵⁵ Read HET Ambush, 9 April 2004 in this book.

⁵⁶ March, "On the move."

⁵⁷ In his later testimony, Jarob Walsh mistakenly assumed that man was Tommy Hamill.

⁵⁸ Lester, "Good Friday Attack."

⁵⁹ Raymond T. Stannard interview, Commanders Inquiry, 21 May 2004.

⁶⁰ Jarob Walsh, "The Real Story Behind the April 9th Insurgency in Iraq," 17 May 2004, <http://www.thefinalrollcall.us/stories/ambush.htm>.

⁶¹ Walsh, "The Real Story;" and Hamill, *Escape*. Hamill thought the soldier who jumped on his running boards was Gregory Goodrich and Walsh's colleagues claim that he had a reputation for exaggeration so many did not believe that he did all he claimed. However, Hamill's version was published long after Walsh wrote his and neither knew who the other was when they wrote their accounts. The AR15-6 investigating officer told Hamill the soldier was Goodrich.

⁶² Walsh, "The Real Story;" "The Real Story."

⁶³ Walsh, and Stannard interview. Stannard remembered pulling Walsh's body armor.

⁶⁴ Walsh, "The Real Story."

⁶⁵ Walsh, "The Real Story."

⁶⁶ Walsh, "The Real Story."

⁶⁷ Walsh, "The Real Story."

⁶⁸ Michael Brezovay Interview, Commanders Inquiry, 20 May 2004.

⁶⁹ SPC Shawn E. Kirkpatrick Sworn Statement, Commanders Inquiry, 13 May 2004.

⁷⁰ Lester, "Good Friday Attack."

⁷¹ Lester, "Good Friday Attack."

⁷² Kirkpatrick Sworn Statement and SPC Matthew W. Bohm Sworn Statement, April 2004, Commander's Inquiry.

⁷³ SPC Patrick Pelz Sworn Statement, Commander's Inquiry, April 2004; SPC Karon Lamar Sworn Statement, Commander's Inquiry; SPC Karon G. Lamar Sworn Statement, Commander's Inquiry, April 2004; March, "On the move" and "Battlefield Dairies."

⁷⁴ "Rescue of the 724th Trans-9 April 2004 (Extract from TF 2-12 CAV draft history);" extracts from 2-12th Cavalry AAR, "The Holy Week Battle of Abu Ghuraib;" Church Citation; Church interview, 14 February 2007; March, "On the move;" and "Battlefield Dairies."

⁷⁵ Danny Wood Interview and Rick Tollison Interview, Commander's Inquiry, 28 May 2004.

⁷⁶ "Rescue of the 724th Trans;" Church Citation; March, "On the move;" 1SG Taylor Narrative; 2-12 AAR; and "Battlefield Dairies."

⁷⁷ "Rescue of the 724th Trans - 9 April 2004 (Extract from TF 2-12 CAV draft history);" extracts from 2-12th Cavalry AAR, "The Holy Week Battle of Abu Ghuraib;" Church Citation; Church interview, 14 February 2007; Wood Interview; March, "On the move;" "Battlefield Dairies."

⁷⁸ McDermott and Row Sworn Statements.

⁷⁹ Sanchez's congressional testimony was that Goodrich was his shooter and escaped from the cab with him, but all the witness statements much closer to the event show that it was Krause and he did not make it out of the cab. Interview Summaries, Commander's Inquiry, Edward V. Sanchez, 28 May 2004, Stannard Interview, SPC Brown and Church, Sworn Statement, Brezovay Interview; Edward V. Sanchez, Former KBR/Halliburton Employee, Testimony to Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing, "An Oversight Hearing on Accountability of Contracting Abuses in Iraq," 18 September 2006.

⁸⁰ James Blackwood Interview, Commander's Inquiry, 20 May 2004.

⁸¹ Lester, "Good Friday Attack."

⁸² Hamill, *Escape*.

⁸³ Hamill, *Escape*; and Walsh, "The Real Story." Hamill thought that the soldier was SPC Gregory Goodrich, but everything he described matched with what Walsh described.

⁸⁴ Hamill, *Escape*.

⁸⁵ Walsh, "The Real Story."

⁸⁶ Walsh, and Hamill, *Escape*.

⁸⁷ Walsh, and Hamill, *Escape*.

⁸⁸ Lamar sworn statement; Walsh, "The Real Story;" Hamill, *Escape*; and March, "On the move."

⁸⁹ Hamill, *Escape*.

⁹⁰ Walsh, "The Real Story." Groff confirmed that Goodrich was firing out the window and was mortally wounded.

⁹¹ Walsh; March, "On the move;" and "Battlefield Dairies."

⁹² Lester, "Good Friday Attack."

⁹³ Walsh, "The Real Story;" "Rescue of the 724th Trans;" Church SSM citation; Church interview, 14 February 2007; 2-12th Cav AAR; and "Battlefield Dairies;" and Lester, "Good Friday Attack."

⁹⁴ Kirkpatrick Interview, Bohm Sworn statement, and SFC Michael A. Klein Sworn Statement, Co C, 2nd Bn, 12th Cavalry, 13 April 2004.

⁹⁵ SFC Michael A. Klein Sworn Statement, Co C, 2d Bn, 12th Cavalry, 13 April 2004.

⁹⁶ Walsh; "Rescue of the 724th Trans;" Church SSM citation; Church interview, 14 February 2007; 2-12th Cav AAR; and "Battlefield Dairies;" and Lester, "Good Friday Attack."

⁹⁷ "Rescue of the 724th Trans;" Church SSM citation; Church interview, 14 February 2007; 2-12th Cav AAR; and "Battlefield Dairies."

⁹⁸ Church SSM citation; and Church interview, 14 February 2007.

⁹⁹ Church interview, 14 February 2007.

¹⁰⁰ "Rescue of the 724th Trans;" and 2-12 Cav AAR.

¹⁰¹ Church SSM citation and March, "On the move."

¹⁰² "Rescue of the 724th Trans;" and Taylor, Narration.

¹⁰³ March, "On the march;" Taylor Narration; and 2-12 Cav AAR.

¹⁰⁴ 2-12 Cav AAR.

¹⁰⁵ Smith, "Historical Narrative."

¹⁰⁶ Akin interview and Smith, "Historical Narrative."

¹⁰⁷ Akin interview.

¹⁰⁸ Akin interview and Smith, "Historical Narrative."

¹⁰⁹ March, "On the move," and Smith, "Historical Narrative."

¹¹⁰ Web page, Purple Heart Recipients for 724th Transportation Company, Historians Files, CMH.

¹¹¹ T. Scott Allen Jr., Testimony given before Senate Democratic Policy Committee Meeting, "An Oversight Hearing on Accountability for Contracting Abuses in Iraq," 18 Sep 06, Historians Files, CMH.

¹¹² Row statement.

¹¹³ A number of Vietnam veterans had warned Richard Killblane, the Transportation Corps Historian, the enemy would escalate the scale of ambushes a year before April 2004.

¹¹⁴ A convoy of the 7th Transportation Battalion escorted by eight MP gun jeeps (no organic gun trucks) was ambushed on 25 August 1968 and had two drivers captured.



M1070 Heavy Equipment Transporter (HET) of the 766th Transportation Battalion in Kuwait. Photo courtesy of MAJ Kelley Hissong

HET Ambush, 9 April 2004

96th HET Company

2 LT Renina Miller was the 1st Platoon Leader in the 96th HET on a six-month rotation in OIF 2 during the deployment of the 1st Cavalry Division. Her convoy of 15 HETs hauled M1 tanks of CPT Peter Glass' Company C, 2-8th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division north to Taji. They had waited at Scania for several days because the roads were coded black, meaning enemy attack highly likely.¹ On Good Friday, her platoon sergeant, SFC Samuel Powell, Jr., had heard on the radio that other convoys had been hit by IEDs or his convoy would receive instructions to go to another location on account of an IED. This made them alert.²

The alternator in Miller's HMMWV wore out while at Scania so she decided to ride in the lead HET with SSG Wardale as her driver.³ The platoon had five MTS, which allowed satellite text messaging, and five SINGARS radios; and Wardale's HET had an MTS. A 2½-ton gun truck with a ring-mount machinegun followed behind the lead HET with SPC Sean McEndree, the gunner and SGT Rivera, the driver. Miller's HMMWV driven by PVT Ronald Gallet and SPC Walsh, assistant driver, followed behind it. They joked, "With us two in the HMMWV, something is bound to happen." The 2½-ton with a ring mounted M2 .50 caliber machinegun was the third vehicle. SFC Powell rode in a turtle shell soft skinned HMMWV with two M249 SAWs sticking out the windows in the rear of the convoy. So on Good Friday, they departed from their RON

location at CSC Scania enroute for Camp Taji.⁴

Around 1130, they approached to within three to four kilometers of BIAP when a HET broke down. The guys were talking about lunch on the radio. They had halted for about 15 to 20 minutes before they fixed the HET. 2LT Miller asked if they wanted to stop at BIAP for lunch or push on to Taji, another 30 minutes away. For some reason, they chose to go to Taji. They had never failed to stop at BIAP before. It was a good place to relax, use the internet or phones. As the convoy started, they saw black smoke off in the distance but did not think anything about it. Smoke was not unusual in Iraq. Ten minutes later they saw five buttoned up Bradley fighting vehicles race past them heading south. They realized that something was seriously wrong. Normally they did not see Bradleys on the road nor buttoned up. Powell thought to himself, "What's going on?" The others asked themselves the same question. They began to make the connection between the smoke and the urgency of the Bradleys. About that time, a message came over the MTS, "MSR Sword is Red and closed. All convoys head to BIAP." The convoy was about 15 minutes away from ASR Sword.⁵

SFC Powell called 2LT Miller on the SINGARS and asked, "LT did you get the same MTS message?" She answered, "Yes. We're going to turn around and go to BIAP." They halted where they were. Powell switched his SINGARS to the Sheriff frequency and heard the message, "No convoys go north of BIAP. Insurgents attacking military and civilian trucks." Sheriff was

the equivalent of a 911 operator in a war zone which coordinated for medevacs or the Quick Reaction Force (QRF) from the battle space owner.⁶

The convoy had just passed the turn to south gate (ECP7) at BIAP and stopped just prior to reaching the overpass. Miller remembered the MPs had stopped her convoy because of an IED had been spotted. Next to them was a KBR convoy driven by American and Third County Nationals (TCN), which was heading south on a northbound lane. Evidently, they had turned around and driven back down the same lane. Guard rails in the median prevented them from crossing over into the next lane. There was also another civilian fuel convoy in the southbound lane.⁷

Powell's attention was focused on the black smoke ahead. Powell ran past his convoy to look for a place to turn around. A three-foot deep ditch paralleled the outside of the highway. Powell needed a flat place for his HETs to turn around. They were too big to turn around just using the width of the road. He could not find a place.⁸

Some MPs in HMMWVs provided security above them on the overpass. The MP HMMWV drove down to ask Powell what he was doing so Powell told them that he was looking for a place to turn around. So the MPs drove ahead looking for a place wide enough to turn loaded HETs around. There was one break in the guard rails in the median but it was not wide enough to drive the HETs

through. While the MPs were looking for a place to turn around, SGT Donald Heard spotted an IED on the side of the road.⁹

Gallet was used to seeing lots of civilians alongside the road, but this day he only saw one, a woman hanging laundry. Everyone climbed out of their vehicles and pulled security. SSG Hurd looked down and spotted an IED hidden in the carcass of a dog. He ran up yelling, "We are stopped right beside an IED. We need to move!"¹⁰

CPT Glass was a very confident Armor officer, and while the MPs were looking for a turnaround point, he called Miller that one of his tanks reported seeing small arms fire but it was too far off to get positive identification. She told them that without positive identification they could not fire. A few minutes later, Glass reported back that the small arms fire was closer and they had positive identification, so she told them to go ahead and engage the enemy. The gunner then fired his .50 caliber. The situation was worsening.¹¹

The MPs found a circle driveway that ran in the front yard of two houses on the west side of the road that would allow enough room for the HETs to turn around. The MPs led the civilian convoy first and it turned around facing south in the northbound lane. After the civilian convoy turned around, the MPs led Miller's convoy around. Miller waited for her convoy



M1000 Heavy Equipment Trailer of the 766th Transportation Battalion hauling an M1 Abrams tank.

Photo courtesy of SFC Vanderwerf

to catch up and saw the Iraqi woman gathering clothes off a clothes line with children in the yard and a couple men around.¹²

The KBR trucks were parked in the inside of the lane and the HET convoy in the center lane both facing south in the northbound lane. The MPs returned to the bridge. As soon as all Miller's HETs had turned around, she planned to drive to BIAP. Meanwhile, Powell ran back to his HMMWV, turned it around where it was and fell in behind the 2½-ton truck after it passed him and stopped. They were ready to head for BIAP.¹³

About that time, the MPs escorting the KBR trucks pulled their HMMWV right up in front of Miller's HET, blocking its path. They halted the convoy because they had learned about the second IED Hurd spotted alongside the road. This was standard procedure if an IED was spotted ahead. In a state of high anxiety, they could not rationalize that the policy was intended to prevent convoys from running into IEDs. In carrying out the policy, these MPs had halted the convoy right beside the IED and would not let them pass. Their strict adherence to the instructions endangered lives. At the same time, SGT Hurd jumped out of his truck and jogged up to Gallet's HMMWV yelling, "You stopped us next to the IED!"¹⁴

Powell called up, "What's going on?" Miller responded, "They don't want us to pass because of the IED." Powell could not believe what he was hearing. They were deliberately parking the convoy right next to the danger instead of letting them pass. Powell said, "We will go around them."¹⁵

When the convoy stopped, the Iraqi woman hanging clothes ran inside. At that moment Hurd realized things had gone from bad to worse. Miller also saw the civilians disappear, a clear sign of trouble. Miller then got the MPs on the radio and yelled at them to get out of the way and let her convoy go or she would push them out of the way.¹⁶ Miller's lead HET had to back up to drive around the MP HMMWV. The other trucks had to do the same to give Miller room. SPC McEndree, the driver of the 2½-ton truck, climbed out of his truck and walked back to make sure he had enough room behind his truck to back up. Miller saw that McEndree had climbed out on the same side as the IED so she climbed down from her HET to warn him. At the same time, they started receiving a small amount of small arms fire.¹⁷

Miller ordered her drivers out of their trucks and into the ditch on the west side of the road. She and Wardale exited their HET and heard small arms fire hit on both sides of the truck. As she started for the ditch she saw



M1000 Heavy Equipment Trailer of the 766th Transportation Battalion hauling an M88 tank recovery vehicle.

Photo courtesy of MAJ Kelley Hissong

out of the corner of her left eye, SPC McEndree and a TCN taking cover between two vehicles. A TCN driver had jumped out of his truck and pointed in the direction of the firing making a gesture with his hand to indicate shooting. The KBR drivers yelled at him to get back in his truck. Miller ran back to get them when an IED exploded. It blew her and McEndree airborne for a couple feet with McEndree landing on top of her. The IED had exploded just as the TCN started to turn wounding him also. Shrapnel also hit the machine gunner of the 2½-ton in the back.¹⁸ Miller tried to get up and run for the ditch but her legs would not move, so she yelled for SSG Wardale. Wardale came over and asked where she was hit. He panicked a little. He then ran over to the MPs who came back with him to help load her in the back of their vehicle. Since she was wounded in the back of the leg, they laid her on her belly. They loaded McEndree in the next MP HMMWV and the TCN in another vehicle. Miller then told Wardale to find SFC Powell and have the drivers dismount.¹⁹

Powell was standing outside his HMMWV with the handset to his ear when the IED went off. He immediately notified Sheriff that he needed a medevac and helicopter gunships. An Apache gunship arrived on station within two to three minutes and the pilots talked with Powell on the Sheriff frequency. They circled high overhead and claimed that they could not see any enemy to engage. The enemy fire continued.²⁰

Powell then passed the word to his drivers, "We've got to get these tanks off loaded." The drivers and tank commanders rode in the tanks while they were chained to the trailers. The remainder of the tank crews had flown up to Taji. As soon as the ambush began, they buttoned up their hatches. The truck drivers climbed back into their HETs to maneuver the trailers so that the tanks could drive off. Powell ran up to the nearest tank and banged on the turret yelling at the gunner to put up a fight. Gallet could hear him yelling from his position several vehicles ahead.²¹

Powell then ran back to his HMMWV and called the cavalry company commander and said, "Get 'em off the trucks." The commander had planned to off load just one tank, but Powell said, "You have permission to drop all of them." The commander responded, "That's what we're here for."²²

The HET drivers began maneuvering the trailers

then the TCs ran back to unshackle the chains so the tanks could drive off. SPC Bill Adkins' HET was right behind Gallet. Gallett ran back to unshackle one chain while Adkins loosened the other, all while under fire. Walsh pulled security. Gallet could hear the gun fire but did not know how close it hit until paint chips from the tank fell on him. He thought to himself, "Just get the shackle off." His focus on undoing the shackle kept his mind off of the enemy fire.²³

Once they freed the tank, SSG Wardale, the driver of the HET, called Gallet forward to treat the wounded. Gallet was the combat life saver. He ran to the most critically wounded person first, the TCN driver. The wounded man's helmet was blown off. The man had taken the blast in the front and was punctured by shrapnel. The metal was still hot and he had not started to bleed. His left arm was also dislocated and twisted around like a contortionist. Gallet bandaged him up. As soon as Wardale had left his truck, a mortar round landed on his trailer destroying the M88 that he was transporting.²⁴

When Wardale returned, he was told Miller and Powell had already gotten the drivers out of their trucks and was engaged getting the tankers out in the fight. As soon as the small arms fire began, Wardale covered Miller from fire and then yelled for help. She was still conscious but had received two wounds to her lower back. Wardale then jumped up and pulled her in between the MP HMMWV and her HET. The MPs came over to help. Wardale then ran over to McEndree, who was just trying to stand up. The round had penetrated his left side, but the body armor deflected it back into his body. Wardale wrapped an arm around McEndree and helped him to the casualty collection point between the MP HMMWV, lead HET and lead KBR truck.²⁵

While all this happened, the tanks rolled off of the trailers. The cavalry commander's tank was the first off of the trailer. He was up behind the .50 caliber blazing away. He drove his tank down the median to flatten the guard rails so vehicles could have more room to maneuver. The second tank backed off into the ditch and got stuck. The third tank threw its right track. The driver climbed out of his tank and looked at the broken track, then threw his Kevlar helmet at the tank in rage forgetting that he was under fire. Powell yelled at him, "What are you doing? You are getting shot at." The

tanker realized his peril then took cover. To Powell the tanks drove around in confusion and circled around the disabled tanks to provide protection. CPT Glass told Powell that they had just crossed the border and this was their first action.²⁶

Two medevac helicopters arrived and Powell talked them in. The helicopter landed on the southbound lane and the other landed in front of the MP HMMWV on the northbound lane. Two more Apache helicopters arrived.²⁷

Gallet, SPC Cruz and the two MPs lifted the stretcher with the TCN and carried him fifty yards ahead to a gap in the guard rail, then across the median to the medevac helicopter. They climbed back over the guard rails. By this time the shrapnel in Rivera had cooled down and his wounds started bleeding. A medic from the medevac helicopter came over and pulled Rivera's flak vest off and laid him face down on the stretcher. Gallett and picked up one end of the stretcher and the two MPs the other end and they carried Rivera over to the helicopter.²⁸

By this time the insurgents were firing at them from the east, north and west. The white van that Powell had seen to the east side of the road was then north of him heading west. He realized that it was dropping off insurgents. Since the MPs blocked the south, the insurgents surrounded the convoy from the other three directions.²⁹

Powell saw a military fuel tanker racing down the southbound lane on its wheel rims leaking fuel behind it. The tires had been shot out and an M923 5-ton cargo truck followed behind it. They stopped in the other lane a little behind Powell. They were the trucks driven by Randy Ross and SPC Michael J. Bachman from the 724th that had missed their turn. The Cavalry commander pulled his tank up to provide cover for the fuel tanker. A soldier walked around the HMMWV with his weapon up and lowered it when he saw Ross' truck. He had the look like "where did you come from?"³⁰

Ross bailed out of his truck and ran to a KBR tanker

and HET then sat behind a HET tire. A soldier asked if Ross knew how take shackles off tanks. He started loosening the shackles when they began receiving small arms fire from the house where the woman had been hanging laundry. Ross was about to grab one of the weapons lying against the HET but the male and female drivers picked them up first and returned fire. He then went back to the turn shackles on the tanks.³¹

The MP HMMWV pulled over to pick up the wounded soldier. He was already dead. The drivers

raced back to their cabs, climbed in and sped off down the road. The MPs drove back and loaded the dead TC into the helicopter.³²

The driver of a KBR truck next to the HET told Ross, "Man, get up here. We're getting ready to go to BIAP." Ross asked if they were still fighting at BIAP, and he said, "Yes," to which Ross replied, "I had just about enough. I'll stay here." The driver insisted Ross get in his truck and he finally did. The driver

then told him, "I never saw a truck shot up that much and keep moving." Ross remembered every time he had stopped the warning lights went off.³³

After the helicopter lifted off, the KBR trucks pulled out. Then the MPs drove off and with the road finally clear, Powell's convoy mounted up and drove toward BIAP. The four tanks also drove to BIAP and provided base security. Because the roads were rated black, the 1st Platoon, 96th HET remained at BIAP for 12 days.³⁴

Lesson

War is chaos. Overwhelmed by fear, some soldiers are incapable of rational thought. When they do not know what to do, they do what they know or have been trained to do. Everything is a programmed response, yet in combat, one needs to think tactically, which depends upon the changing tactical situation. In this case, the MPs instinctively stopped the HET convoy upon learning of the second IED even though they stopped the convoy



M1083 5-ton guntrucks of the 25th Transportation Company pulling security.

Photo courtesy of Pablo Santiago



M923 5-ton gun trucks with gun boxes designed by Skunk Werks.

Photo courtesy of Pablo Santiago

right next to it. They did not realize that the policy was intended to prevent convoys from approaching IEDs. Instead, their failure to think through the situation further endangered the convoy.

The convoy commander had several options. She could have pushed the MP HMMWV out of the way and led her convoy to safety or waited. Most likely, if she had damaged the MP HMMWV in the process, she would have been reprimanded or punched. Fear of not knowing how the senior commanders will react causes commanders on the ground to avoid conflict. This is not an unusual scenario. Sometimes doing the right thing in peacetime is the wrong thing in war. Leaders at all levels need to know how much latitude their chain of command will allow.

There are so many unpredictable things that happen in combat and when they go bad, they tend to compound quickly. Just as SPC McEndree left his truck to see if he had enough room to back up, Miller got out to check on him, and a TCN got out of his truck, which unfortunately was next to the IED. With her convoy blocked, Miller quickly made the decision to dismount everyone. Powell's decision to dismount the tanks had great potential but the performance of most of the tanks failed to inflict heavy casualties on the enemy. 2LT Miller earned the BSM with V device and Purple Heart for her actions that day.

¹ CPT Renina Miller interview by Richard Killblane at Fort Eustis, VA, 5 December 2007.

² Summary of interview with SFC Samuel Powell, Jr. and SPC Ronald Gallet by Richard Killblane at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait, 12 March 2005.

³ Miller remembered it was an alternator, but her driver remembered it was the MTS that broke so she changed to a lead vehicle that had a functioning MTS.

⁴ Miller, Powell and Gallet interviews.

⁵ Powell and Gallet interview.

⁶ Powell and Gallet interview.

⁷ Miller, Powell and Gallet interviews.

⁸ Powell and Gallet interview.

⁹ Miller, Powell and Gallet interviews.

¹⁰ Powell and Gallet interview.

¹¹ Miller interview.

¹² Miller interview.

¹³ Powell and Gallet interview.

¹⁴ Miller, Powell and Gallet interviews.

¹⁵ Powell and Gallet interview.

¹⁶ Miller, Powell and Gallet interviews.

¹⁷ Miller, Powell and Gallet interviews.

¹⁸ Powell and Gallet interview.

¹⁹ Miller interview.

²⁰ Powell and Gallet interview.

²¹ Powell and Gallet interview.

²² Powell and Gallet interview.

²³ Powell and Gallet interview.

²⁴ Powell and Gallet interview.

²⁵ Miller, Powell and Gallet interview.

²⁶ Powell and Gallet interview.

²⁷ Powell and Gallet interview.

²⁸ Powell and Gallet interview.

²⁹ Powell and Gallet interview.

³⁰ Ross, Powell and Gallet interview.

³¹ Ross telephone interview.

³² Powell and Gallet interview.

³³ Ross telephone interview.

³⁴ Powell and Gallet interview.

10 April 2004

227th Transportation Company (Medium Truck)

The 3rd Platoon, 227th Medium Truck Company convoy had spent three to four days in BIAP because the routes were coded black. The convoy had equipment bound for the US Marine camp near Fallujah. MAJ Mark Greene was the convoy commander. SFC Polee Love was 56 years old with 33 years in the US Army. He had just ridden on his first mission north. At 1545 hours on Saturday, 10 April, the day before Easter, his convoy of 14 M915s carrying supplies for the US Marines left for Camp Milam, near Fallujah. The Marines provided 13 gun trucks, which consisted of nine or ten armored HMMWVs, LMTVs and a 5-ton gun truck.

The convoy headed north on ASR Irish. The Marine policy for reaction to an ambush was to dismount and fight through the kill zone. The Marines considered every Marine a rifleman first. In this convoy, however, they were escorting Army truck drivers.¹

They saw burning fuel tankers but kept on driving.

A mile after they reached MSR Tampa, the convoy received small arms fire from the left side of the road then it started coming from both. For the next ten miles, the ambush consisted of daisy chained IEDs mortars and small arms fire. The convoy lost one truck. The .50 caliber machinegun in the HMMWV in front of SPC Shareese McPhee's truck jammed. The Marine dropped down, came up with an M-16 and returned fire.²

SFC Love called in the contact and two helicopters flew down the road. Suddenly, he felt something like a wasp sting in his right leg. He reached down and grabbed the copper jacket of an AK round and pulled it out. A few seconds later he felt a sting in his left leg. He reached down and pulled back a bloody hand. Evidently, the round had passed through his left leg and stopped in his right.³

SFC Love called and told the convoy commander that he was hit. MAJ Green then told Love to stop. Love responded, "Hell, no. We're getting shot at." He continued driving for about 10 to 15 minutes then started to lose consciousness. He fell over with his hand still on the steering wheel. His truck commander,



Brand new M1114 up-armored HMMWVs issued to the 1544th Transportation Company. Photo courtesy of 1544th Transportation Company

PFC Donzie Haynes, grabbed Love and moved him out of the driver's seat then took his place all while driving at 55 mph. That woke Love up then he reached down and picked up a bandoleer. He cut the strap and made a tourniquet around his left leg to stop the bleeding.⁴

While the convoy was still in the kill zone, it slowed down. A TCN driving a white truck drove past McPhee and stopped. The HMMWV gun truck in front of McPhee also stopped, blocking her way so she had to stop. The TCN driver was wounded. Another TCN truck came up and stopped on the left. Since the convoy traveled down the center of the road, McPhee was boxed in, so she climbed out of her truck to pull security. Meanwhile the rest of the convoy ahead of the Marine HMMWV had driven off. She thought, "Oh shit." While under fire, she ran over to the white truck with the wounded TCN driver to move it out of the way but could not drive it. The other TCN driver on the left also started to move his truck. By that time, a Marine told her to get back in her truck. She saw her truck commander had taken her place as the driver, and when she climbed in the passenger side of the truck, the last

half of the convoy drove off. They received small arms fire for eight more minutes.⁵

When they arrived at Camp Milam, drivers pulled



M1083 FMTV 5-ton gun trucks of the 25th Transportation Company with Tea Cup design gun box. Photo courtesy of Pablo Santiago

Love out of his truck. McPhee saw SFC Love and the wounded TCN driver. Since she was a combat life saver, she treated Love and they took him to the TMC tent. He



Convoy of the 1544th Transportation Company passing exploded gas line near Abu Ghraib prison. Photo courtesy of 1544th Transportation Company

was the only US driver wounded in the convoy and the TCN died of his wounds.⁶

Love remained there for two days then flew to the CSH at Anaconda. By that time, he was able to walk around. Evidently, it was a clean wound and there were no complications. There were 11 wounded soldiers at the CSH and the medical personnel would not wait on them. Love then asked if he could come in and change his bandages, but they refused. He complained and they sent him back to Navistar. Love asked to go back to the airport of debarkation (APOD) in Kuwait. Once there, the medical staff at the APOD wanted to send him to the medical hospital in Landstuhl, Germany, for further treatment. Love refused to leave and wanted to rejoin his soldiers. MAJ Greene sent Love down to Doha for treatment and he remained there for four and a half weeks.⁷

As it turned out, the round had touched the artery in

his right leg and cauterized it. Had it punctured, he would most likely have bled to death. Love had carried a box of Johnson and Johnson Handiwipes in his left cargo pocket and the round entered it first. He believes that the Handiwipes slowed down the round just enough to save his life. He also joked with the doctor that the wipes had also cleaned the round when it entered his leg.⁸

Lesson

Again, war is chaos. The plan was not to stop, but invariably the unpredictable happened and the convoy stopped. McPhee took appropriate action to get the convoy moving again and for that reason she was submitted for the Bronze Star Medal. The drivers praised the US Marines for their performance, and the Marines had a reputation for following the instructions given them. They had to get the convoy through. They stayed with the convoy and did not run off to fight the enemy.



Letterkenny gun box on FMTV. Photo courtesy of 1544th Transportation Company



After Easter Weekend all convoys began with a group prayer. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

¹ Summary of interview with SPC Shareese McPhee by Richard Killblane, 8 March 2005 and summary of interview with SFC Polee Love by Richard Killblane at Camp Arifjan, 12 March 2005.

² McPhee interview.

³ McPhee and Love interview.

⁴ Love interview.

⁵ McPhee interview.

⁶ McPhee and Love interviews.

⁷ Love interview.

⁸ McPhee and Love interviews.

**Ambush at Iskandariyah,
Easter Sunday, 11 April 2004**
172nd and 1486th Transportation Companies
(Medium Truck)

Northbound convoys were clearly aware of the increase in enemy attacks on convoys around Baghdad that Easter weekend. A convoy of 44 M915s from the 172nd and 1486th Medium Truck Companies out of Camp Navistar, Kuwait along with 43 civilian contract tractors and trailers, driven by Third Country Nationals (TCN) from various countries in the region, hauled the equipment of the 1st Cavalry Division up to the Green Zone. About 30 of the M915s belonged to the 172nd Transportation Company. Four HMMWV gun trucks with add-on-armor kits from the 172nd Transportation Company escorted the convoy. The resourceful commander of the 172nd, CPT George Petropoulos, had managed to get his HMMWVs armored through barter, also known as a “drug deal,” with a friend at Camp Arifjan. Kuwait-based companies were lower on the priority for add-on armor than Iraqi-based units. The escort vehicles had SINCGARS for communication among gun trucks and commercial citizen band radios for communication with the military trucks. These four gun trucks provided a gun truck to task vehicle ratio of about 1:22, but at this time the minimum standard was just two gun trucks regardless of the size of the convoy. They would be evenly spaced throughout the convoy. Up until that Easter weekend,

no convoy had driven through a large kill zone. The best defense had been to speed up and drive through. In other words, “Drive that truck like you stole it.”

CPT Amanda R. Gatewood, of the 172nd, was the convoy commander. SFC Richard “Rich” A. Bartlett was the NCO in charge (NCOIC) of the 1486th Transportation Company drivers, but SSG Aaron Brown had asked to be the convoy commander for the 1486th trucks. CPT Gatewood was a weak and ineffective convoy commander, so the NCOs would compete as to which of them was really in charge. The 1486th Transportation Company had arrived in country before the 172nd and was instructed to pass on their experience to the later arrivals. Brown may have misinterpreted this guidance. He did not have much confidence in Gatewood and seemed intent on undermining her authority. The awaiting convoys also learned there was a credible chemical threat within 25 miles of the area that they would have to drive. So SFC Bartlett gave classes on and distributed chemical detection paper to each driver and conducted training in battle drills. When the convoy departed, CPT Gatewood rode in the lead up-armored HMMWV with SSG Steve LeClair. Because of his superb land navigation skills, SSG Brown chose to ride in the lead M915.¹

The convoy of 87 vehicles rested overnight (RON) outside of Convoy Support Center Scania on Saturday night, 10 April, where they learned of the complex ambushes up north around BIAP. The convoy departed at 1345 hours the next day heading up Main Supply



M915A3 of the 1486th Medium Truck Company.
Photo courtesy of the 1486th TC



HMMWV gun truck of the 1486th Medium Truck Company.
Photo courtesy of the 1486th TC

Route Tampa with an escort of MPs. A convoy of over 90 vehicles with a 100-meter interval stretched about nine kilometers, or five and a half miles! Because the insurgents had blown several bridges and overpasses, the convoy had to take a detour onto Alternate Supply Route (ASR) Cleveland through an urban area. SPC Michael “Mike” P. Shugrue recorded in his journal,



SFC Richard Bartlett was the NCO in charge of the 1486th drivers. Photo courtesy of the 1486th TC

Northbound on Tampa, midday. Sunny. “American Soldier” stuck in my head. A perfect circle of missing paint at the front of the trailer [on the bulkhead] ahead of us — [SGT] Nancy [Donelson] and Willy [SPC Ryan Gearheart]. Riding with Berl Brown, bobtail, tow bar strapped to the catwalk. [Stephen King’s] Four Past Midnight on the dash. An MRE casserole in our bellies — meat loaf (no. 24) and Alfredo pasta (no. 14). Nothing over the CB (Vernon “Dammit, Driver” [SSG Steve] Wells even quiet) until Baxter came over, garbled, spitting the same fragmentary message at us two or three times — “BIAP...under attack...heavy attack...proceed...caution.”

Any incomprehensible feeling I’d had that morning seemed affirmed; I’d jotted a quick endnote to a letter to Marisa on second thought. There wasn’t really fear, but I was pretty sure, I just didn’t expect anything till BIAP. Toby Keith continued to wail in my head. Following winding Tampa, the convoy — 66 strong, TCNs and all² — didn’t flinch.³

Two miles after the convoy made its turn, the MP advance party halted and warned the drivers they had received fire further ahead. SSG LeClair and Gatewood came to the same conclusion. He said, “We can’t turn around,” and she agreed, “Let’s push on.” SFC Bartlett calmly relayed that information to the rest of the convoy. He also knew that any attempt to turn the convoy around would lead to devastating results, so he agreed to continue on. The convoy proceeded with caution and made the turn onto ASR Jackson at a crawl. Two miles ahead the MPs halted and did not proceed

any further. The convoy sped up by the time it reached the town of al Iskandariyah one mile further.⁴

Shugrue described what happened,

We approached MSR (or ASR) Jackson by way of Cleveland. A green, tree-lined route. Narrow; pitted shoulders. Not long, maybe five miles. Wells came back over the CB. MPs (escorts) engaged for the

second time. We’d wait, boxed up, for one minute, then haul ass onto Jackson. “If your weapon isn’t on semi, you’re wrong.” [Wells.] Driving, I left it on safe but shoved it through the window. Burst, an option at which others had their selector levers set, never occurred to me.⁵

LeClair in the lead HMMWV rammed into the civilian cars to get them off of the road. Shugrue continued his description,⁶

We came around the corner. Booms, fairly distant. Mortars or RPGs (one, I later learned, ripped through Bartlett/Sallee’s Conex, the first truck; another, a dud, smacked into [SPC Tara] Sauer and [SSG Robert] Carter’s trailer). Muffled, firecracker sound of small arms. Rounds from the truck in front of us kicked off a sand pile near the road. At some point Berl [SSG Aaron B. Brown] began to return fire to the right. I scanned buildings and windows to the left, searching for a source of fire. Vaguely, strongly terrified of being shot in the face. Loud; a din. How long? Passage of time? We [had] reached Jackson at around 1500 Iraqi time (I’ve figured out how to set my watch); 0600 Cleveland time — kids still asleep.⁷

As the convoy entered the town at 1430 hours, insurgents on both sides of the road opened fire with small arms, mortars and rocket propelled grenades (RPG). The insurgents fired from the yards, building corners and roof tops. Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) exploded next to LeClair’s HMMWV and the enemy



SSG Steven Wells and his M915 gun truck.

Photo courtesy of the 1486th TC

fired mortar rounds at a low 45 degree angle trajectory at their HMMWV shredding the driver's side tire. SGT Anthony Hernandez, the machine gunner, kept the RPG gunners pinned down while SSG LeClair "hammered down" on the gas pedal to speed ahead of the convoy. They cleared the kill zone before their battle-damaged HMMWV finally ground to a halt. Their HMMWV had received a lot of small arms fire and LeClair admitted if it had not had the add-on armor, they would have been killed.⁸

As soon as the crew learned the lead gun truck was disabled, the second HMMWV gun truck, driven by SPC Lloyd, raced up front while the last two gun trucks held their original positions in the middle and rear of the convoy. All the gunners did their best to suppress the enemy fire. SPC John D. Delaney, in the second HMMWV gun truck, fired his Mk19 automatic grenade launcher from the ring mount while SSG Steven G. Wells kept the rest of the convoy informed of the actions of the insurgents and fired his M16A2 out the window. The rest of the convoy followed through the cross-fire as both the drivers and assistant drivers fired out of their respective windows. Shugrue described his personal experience of this fight,⁹

A target to the left: a rhythmic muzzle flash laying fire to our rear. Just a flash; movie-like weapons fire (for some reason, a sunny day that would reappear at St. Mike's went behind the clouds for this chunk of the afternoon; I remember this as if it had

happened in the gloom). "There it is," I said, and I think my voice suggested wonder.

Berl just yelled, "Shoot!" I let the muzzle flash [meant flash suppressor] slide off the windshield [door], past the mirror assembly and into my field of fire. I fired off six or seven rounds at it. My weapon didn't jam; I went deaf almost instantly. Ringing; I thought of the stone-deaf Nelson of Black Hawk Down.¹⁰

An RPG penetrated the Conex of SSG Bartlett's load narrowly missing the oxygen and acetylene bottles by a foot or two. Shaken by the possibility of the explosion, Bartlett and SPC Brandon E. Sallee continued through the kill zone. An RPG hit the front Conex of SSG Carter's load, but it was a dud which bounced off and landed in the median. Delaney, the Mk19 gunner in SSG Wells' lead gun truck, fired at the rocket and caused it to explode. An RPG did disable a truck driven by a driver from the 172nd. SGT Heather M. Blanton and SGT Kirk W. Brown stopped their truck long enough so that the dismounted driver could jump on the running board and then they exited the kill zone. Signd Mahamd, from Pakistan, hauled two M113 Armored Personnel Carriers with two soldiers from the 1st Cavalry Division. An RPG hit his truck, tore out his hip and caught his cab on fire, but he kept on driving out of the kill zone. At the far edge of the kill zone, his truck came to a halt where he then fell out of the burning vehicle.¹¹

As soon as SGT Ronald "Ron" C. Hicks and SPC Andrea Motley's truck turned onto ASR Jackson, they heard an explosion followed by small arms fire from both sides of the road. The kill zone then extended from the intersection with ASR Cleveland to the town. Motley drove through the kill zone firing in both directions and came upon Mahamd crawling away from his burning truck. Motley pulled his truck up in front of the other and halted. Hicks dismounted to treat Mahamd's wound. The two 1st Cav soldiers provided covering fire while Hicks dragged Mahamd out of the way of passing trucks and then bandaged his wound. About that time SPC Shugrue pulled up and stopped. As the senior NCO for the 1486th trucks, SSG Brown rode in an M915 bobtail in the middle of his convoy. He came upon Hicks and jumped out to help load the Pakistani driver into his cab while Shugrue dismounted to pull security.¹²

Meanwhile, the two Cavalrymen jumped into the seat vacated by Hicks. Hicks reassured Motley he would be safe and then Brown and Motley's trucks drove off. Shugrue described the selfless act of valor for a fellow driver,¹³

We jockeyed through the fight. Smoke, then a Haji¹⁴ truck ahead, engulfed, two APCs on his trailer. (1st Cav, for whom we were hauling, had two men riding; they made it out, catching a ride with [SPC Andrea] Motley.) Pulling up alongside, I saw an image I won't forget, and Chester will be my first son's middle name — [SGT] Ron Chester Hicks dragging a wounded Haji away from the flames. (His co-driver, Motley[,]) would take Haji's human cargo to safety; I don't know how Hicks got back.)

Berl jumped down; I stopped, continuing to watch to the left. Just windows and architecture. If there was fire then, I couldn't discern it. My ears rang, but I heard Berl, dragging the wounded Third Country National driver into the cab: "Get the fuck in there! Stay the fuck down!" To me, softer, "Let's go." I popped off four or five more rounds at the windows and we went. I went where he said to go (Haji wailed). Turning and jockeying. I got my arm tangled up in the sling once, maneuvering through smoke, around this and that.¹⁵

SSG Charles M. Schrack and SGT James Dominguez followed the convoy inspecting each disabled vehicle to make sure no drivers were left behind. They arrived in time to see SSG Brown and SGT Hicks load the wounded Pakistani driver into Brown's truck. Schrack stopped his M915, Hicks jumped in next to Schrack and began firing at the enemy while they drove off. They later stopped near some MPs pulling security. SSG Schrack then jumped in a HMMWV to go back and recover disabled vehicles.¹⁶

SSG Jeffery A. Drushel with SPC Colby Leonard as his assistant driver drove an

M915 in the middle of the convoy. Drushel saw LeClair's disabled HMMWV ahead, just outside the kill zone. He stopped his truck where it did not impede traffic, and then both dismounted. Drushel ran forward to provide covering fire while LeClair changed the tire.

As SSG Michelle Zaremba and SGT Mike Mullen listened to the radio, they realized both the front and rear of the convoy was under fire. Suddenly a mortar exploded on the driver's side of their truck and then an RPG hit on Mullen's side tossing them both to the left. As smoke billowed out of the front of their M915 another explosion rocked the left side of their truck. They passed the charred remains of other trucks as their truck slowly ground to a halt. Both wounded from the explosions and no radio contact with the rest of the convoy, Zaremba and Mullen exchanged fire with the enemy above them. Trapped in the kill zone they feared the worst.¹⁷

SSG Brett A. Baxter and SPC Joanna Kim came upon a disabled contract truck and observed the driver was still in the cab. They stopped to help him into their cab and then drove off. As they drove further, they saw the disabled M915 belonging to SSG Zaremba and SGT Mullen. Baxter stopped to see if they needed help but did not see anyone in the cab. An RPG had hit SSG Zaremba's truck and set it afire. Both were slightly wounded and had abandoned their vehicle. Baxter's truck came under small arms fire and SPC Kim returned fire from the right side. Seeing no one inside the cab, Baxter then drove to the rally point while engaging the enemy.¹⁸

Shugrue also described seeing the same truck,¹⁹

We pulled up on [SGT Mike] Mullen and [SSG Michelle] Zaremba's (at that time unknown) truck. A DCU top draped over the passenger seat — Zaremba's. Too hot for that and the flak, though Berl and I wore both. So did Baxter. A hole, too big to be a bullet hole, center-mast [meant center-mass] of the passenger-side windshield. The truck, in a grainy, gunfire-popping, newsreel Solitary Reaper,



SPC Andrea Brooks, SGT Robert Hupp, SSG Michelle Zaremba, and Rich Bartlett with SPC Andrea Motley behind them. Photo courtesy of the 1486th TC



Container hit by RPG. Photo courtesy of the 1486th TC

was empty. I was sure we'd taken KIAs. That hole seemed to guarantee it. But I saw no bodies.

"They're gone."

Berl said, "Keep going."²⁰

SGT Robert Hupp and SGT Brian Hawk picked them up.

SPC Thomas F. Shaw drove the last M915 in the convoy. He had to negotiate around the damaged vehicles in the kill zone and maneuver his truck in order to prevent civilian traffic from entering the kill zone all while returning fire.²¹

SSG Wells had selected a floating rally point about two to four miles outside of the town for the convoy to assemble. There he positioned his HMMWV so as to pull security and block southbound traffic from driving into the kill zone. At the rally point, the rest of the trucks formed into a box formation where the trucks parked in two parallel rows usually with gun trucks closing off the front and back ends thus forming a rectangular box. The drivers then dismounted and took up firing positions from behind their vehicles while the NCOs checked for casualties and ammunition status. SSG Baxter pulled up, dismounted and took charge of the box. While still receiving sporadic small arms fire, he made sure the drivers had a 360 degree perimeter. He calmly waited at the end of the box for the last of the trucks to catch up, and his relaxed demeanor calmed the other drivers.

SPC Kim treated the wound of the Third Country National and then placed him in a foreign national bobtail. Shugrue wrote,²²

So we boxed up three or four miles down the road, wounded Haji still wounded in the cab. Jumped down to pull security. Baxter flummoxed at the sight of wounded Haji bleeding all over the cab — and really bleeding...Baxter set about getting him out of the cab.

"Hey Shrug!"

"Yeah."

"You know Haji's bleeding all over the cab?"

"That's where Berl stuck him."

To Haji, "American truck. Get down outta there." A sobbing moan.

"I know it hurts, get the fuck out of the truck."

Boron pulled security with me while Haji's buddies helped him down; [SPC Curtis] Cook on the other side. A puff of dust out to our side (driver's) 150 meters. RPG? Cook reminded me to take cover, that the fire was coming from his side, from buildings 400 meters away. Behind a Conex, I scanned for targets. Found none, we pulled into St. Mike's twenty minutes (and through a town) later. Marines charged out as we pulled in; Lauthers and I smoked cigarettes, sweating.

Once safely within the confines of St. Mike, I set about cleaning out the cab. A bloody footprint on the bottom step. A dried puddle-smear in the seat, some of which ended up a dark stain on Berl's pants. A smear on the glove-box panel, crusted into rubber rivulets of the floor matting. Chunks of it in the grating of our milk crate. And a little river of it flowed when I moved the garbage bag, draining according to the folds onto the floor. It was a bit of a job.²³

The insurgents were aware of the practice of forming a box several miles down the road and had prepared a second ambush. Ten minutes after the trucks started forming a box, an orange civilian dump truck with a mortar in back drove to within 1,000 meters of the rally point from the left side of the northbound road and fired rounds into the formation of trucks. Delaney returned fire with his Mk19 grenade launcher and scared the assailants away. Without waiting for the remainder of the convoy to arrive, the drivers mounted up and pulled out. SSG Rich Bartlett made the decision to halt at Forward Operating Base (FOB) St Michaels, since not all of the trucks had caught up. "Saint Mikes" was a US Marine Corps base.

The ambush had lasted around 45 minutes. The Marines at Saint Mikes sent a quick reaction force (QRF) into the kill zone and counted 29 insurgents killed by the truck drivers. The QRF also reported the insurgents had mortar positions dug along the dirt road that ran parallel to ASR Jackson. The convoy lost four Third Country National vehicles and two green trucks with only two Third Country Nationals wounded. Hernandez was the only American in the convoy wounded and he received the Bronze Star Medal with V device.²⁴

CPT Gatewood did not seem to know what to do. LeClair asked her for the Alpha Roster so he could get an accountability of the drivers. He lined the drivers up and called out the names with each soldier responding when his or her name was called. When he asked those to raise their hands whose names had not been called, ten raised their hands. He realized the roster was incorrect and he would have to question the soldiers to determine if anyone was missing. The camp commander of St Michaels asked CPT Gatewood if she had all her soldiers accounted for. She did not know for sure and

the colonel was livid. He informed her that if she was a Marine, she would be on the next plane home. Keep in mind the Marines had suffered badly in the press when a young Marine died in the desert because the company commander did not know he was missing at the end of the training day. There was no inter-service rivalry as the Marines provided the Army convoy any help they needed or wanted. While LeClair took his wounded soldier to the aid station, the Marines changed all the tires on his HMMWV.²⁵

Lesson

The key decision was whether to go through the kill zone. The MPs had no doubt about the kill zone and refused to drive through it, but the truck drivers made their decision based upon the past experience when it was better to drive through the kill zone than try to turn around. The unnecessary delay could set them up for a hasty ambush as seen with the previous HET ambush. The policy during the Vietnam War was that any trucks not in the kill zone should not drive through it. This lesson would be relearned in Afghanistan with the TK Ambush. Another important lesson is not to count on external escorts like the MPs. Truck drivers told numerous stories of MPs abandoning them in kill zones that weekend. External escorts sometimes have different policies and tactics than the convoys they are escorting.

The enemy laid out what appeared to be a linear ambush and employed mortars and RPGs as the casualty producing weapons. Interestingly, they had anticipated the convoy boxing up at a rally point down the road and had a mortar in a dump truck waiting for them. The accurate fire from the grenade launcher, however, scared off the dump truck and a subsequent decision was made to move the convoy to the security of the nearest camp instead. There, the security force returned to the kill zone to police up any disabled vehicles and crews. Convoys later abandoned the practice of boxing up at the rally point because of the mortar threat. The box formation parked too many trucks close together allowing a mortar round to damage more vehicles.

Legends had been created that Easter weekend. Drivers would recount the act of heroism of the truck drivers that defended the wall at BIAP. In particular, they

described the heroic defense by a lone black and tan striped HMMWV, the Zebra. Similarly, stories spread about Gatewood's performance. Most claimed she had left drivers in the kill zone. This claim was unfair, for the mere fact that she was not in charge although she was the convoy commander. Two senior NCOs had to step up and make all the decisions in the kill zone. While there was talk, no one wanted to come out and outright call her a coward, but she definitely did not have a good day.

The Army had an identity crisis with its warrior ethos. Senior leaders had their values shaped during a time in the "feel good" Army of political correctness and stress cards. That was in strict conflict with the warrior ethos though. The Army as a whole avoided the issue of cowardice. Gatewood's performance was not the only officer's performance that was questionable during this war or even this weekend. The Marines, however, had never violated their core values and minced no words on the subject. Because of her lack of personnel accountability they told her, "If you were a Marine, you would be on a plane home." They then sent an email message to CPT Petropoulos that if he ever sent her north again on another convoy, they would kill her. Because of her performance, he could not keep her in the same company so he made a deal to

hide her in the newly formed 518th Combat Gun Truck Company. There she would get a second chance to lead a convoy and would abandon a HMMWV gun truck broken down on the road near Safwan at night, a place known for criminal attacks on vehicles. As soon as she returned to base and learned of the missing truck, she went to get something to eat while the company and battalion commander went looking for the lost gun truck. Interestingly, the commander of the HMMWV crew was 1LT McCormick, the hero of the Battle of BIAP and four ambushes that weekend.²⁶

It was about this time that the Army adopted its Warrior Ethos code and instituted training to reflect it. Similar to the Marine Corps, the Army began training all soldiers in skills needed in combat. There were a number of acts of heroism during this convoy ambush, but the award recommendations read like each soldier was just doing his or her job. To no surprise, the majority of recipients of the Medal of Honor explained they were also just doing their jobs. It was the level of risk that made these acts of valor. Another problem was the award packets were submitted late to a new chain of command that had no memory of what happened that weekend. Consequently, the Transportation Group Commander turned down all the awards.



Shrapnel damage to trailer. Photo courtesy of the 1486th TC



M915 of the 1486th hauling a HMMWV north.

Photo courtesy of the 1486th TC



SGT Ronald Hicks behind the Mk19 grenade launcher.

Photo courtesy of the 1486th TC

¹ Narrative recommendation for the award of the Bronze Star with Valor to SFC Richard A. Bartlett and interview with CPT George Petropoulos and SSG Steve LeClair by Richard Killblane at Ft Eustis, VA on 5 May 2005.

² "Officially, the convoy was pegged at 87. Where I got 66, I don't recall, but I was a part of enough northbound convoys to know that anything over 30 or 35 trucks would have registered a significant blip on the radar for anyone who'd have cared to take a shot at us." Mike Shugrue email to Richard Killblane.

³ Entry in journal of SPC Mike Shugrue recorded 19 April 2004 after his return to Navistar.

⁴ SSG Aaron Brown, "Supplemental Narrative for Awards, 11 April 04 – Iskandryia, Iraq." Sworn Statement by SPC Brandon E. Sallee, 11 April 2004 and Narrative recommendation for award of the Bronze Star to SFC Richard A. Bartlett.

⁵ Shugrue Journal.

⁶ SSG Aaron Brown, "Supplemental Narrative for Awards, 11 April 04 – Iskandryia, Iraq." Sworn Statement by SPC Brandon E. Sallee, 11 April 2004 and Narrative of Bronze Star to Bartlett.

⁷ "Kevin and Dana Shugrue, my brother and sister, at that time seven and six years of age, respectively. I often found myself thinking of what they might have been doing at a given time." Shugrue journal.

⁸ SGT Anthony Hernandez interview by Richard Killblane, at Arifjan, Kuwait, 8 March 2005.

⁹ Sworn Statement by SPC John D. Delaney, 16 April 2004; and Narrative recommendation for award of the Bronze Star to SSG Steven G. Wells.

¹⁰ Shugrue Journal.

¹¹ Narrative from SGT David Boron, Narrative recommendations for the award of the Army Commendation Medal with Valor to SGT Kirt W. Brown and SGT Heather M. Blanton.

¹² Sworn Statement by SGT Ronald C. Hicks, Jr., 11 April 2004 and SSG Aaron B. Brown, 14 November 2004, Narrative recommendation for award of the Army Commendation with Valor to SGT Ronald C. Hicks and SSG Jeffery A. Drushel.

¹³ Sworn Statement by SGT Ronald C. Hicks, Jr., 11 April 2004 and SSG Aaron B. Brown, 14 November 2004, Narrative recommendation for award of the Army Commendation with Valor to SGT Ronald C. Hicks and SSG Jeffery A. Drushel.

¹⁴ It should be noted that "Haji," as we used it, applied to anyone not wearing an American flag on his/her shoulder. Dining hall personnel, laundry help, civilian drivers, the enemy. If one happened to be a British, sometimes American, contractor, he was simply "white Haji." In this case, I am referring to a friendly civilian driver.

¹⁵ Shugrue Journal.

¹⁶ Sworn Statement of SSG Charles M. Schrack, 14 November 2004 and Hicks.

¹⁷ Michelle Zarembo with Christina Sima, *Wheels On Fire; My Year of Driving...and Surviving...in Iraq*, Ashland, Oregon: Hellgate Press, 2008.

¹⁸ Sworn Statement of SSG Brett A. Baxter, 14 November 2004., and Accident Report/Serious Incident Report, 812th TC BN, APO AE09304, Camp Navistar, Kuwait, 12 April 2004.

¹⁹ Sworn Statement of SSG Brett A. Baxter, 14 November 2004, and Accident Report/Serious Incident Report, 812th TC BN, APO AE09304, Camp Navistar, Kuwait, 12 April 2004.

²⁰ Shugrue Journal.

²¹ Narrative recommendation from the Award of the Army Commendation Medal with Valor for SPC Thomas F. Shaw.

²² Sworn statement of Delaney, Sallee, Brown and Narrative from SGT David Boron and Narrative of Bronze Star to Wells, Narrative recommendation for the Award of the Bronze Star with Valor to SSG Brett A. Baxter.

²³ Shugrue Journal.

²⁴ Hernandez interview.

²⁵ Interview with Petropoulos and LeClair.

²⁶ Interview with Petropoulos



Green Zone Convoy Ambushes, 11 April 2004 **1486th and 1487th Transportation Company** **(Medium Truck)**

The night before Good Friday, 9 April 2004, Muqtada Al Sadr's Mahdi Militia had dropped anywhere from four to eight bridges severing the main supply route south of Baghdad International Airport (BIAP). They overran both An Najaf and Al Kut and blocked the alternate supply route to the west. On Good Friday they then laid ambushes for convoys coming to BIAP from the north. The vast number of ambushes caused the movement control authorities to close down the roads and code them black – attack imminent. The trucks were locked down until authorities considered the roads safe to travel, so the enemy had shut down the supply line. The militia had finally isolated BIAP, which supplied the 1st Cavalry Division at the Green Zone eight miles to the east. The Green Zone was an

enclosed area of Baghdad considered safe where the 1st Cav had taken up residence.

The 1st Cav was all that stood between Al Sadr and control of Sadr City. His militia knew it could not defeat the American armor and infantry as easily as it had the Ukrainians in Al Kut so it went after the convoys instead. Without fuel and ammunition the 1st Cav could no longer fight, and by Easter Sunday, 11 April, the 1st Cav was 48 hours from mission failure on fuel and ammunition. With the roads around Baghdad coded black, convoys were only allowed to haul priority cargo. The 1st Cav desperately needed ammunition and fuel but any convoy venturing out of BIAP knew it would run a gauntlet of enemy fire.

2LT James McCormick II and his platoon sergeant, SFC Tim Haggard of the 1487th Medium Truck Company, volunteered to escort a convoy of 56 M915 flat beds from both the 1486th and 1487th Medium Truck Companies, with 2LT Wade Danforth of the 1486th,



The Hands of Victory in the Ceremony Square of the Green Zone. This was where the 1st Cavalry Division established its headquarters. Photos courtesy of 518th GT Company

to the Green Zone. 2LT Danforth would be the convoy commander and 2LT McCormick would be the escort commander. Danforth's M998 HMMWV, armed with a M249 squad automatic weapon (SAW) in a swivel seat and pedestal in the back, would lead the convoy. The other three gun trucks had just helped McCormick defend the southwest wall at BIAP during an intense 40-minute battle where the enemy hammered the wall with rocket propelled grenades (RPG), mortar rounds and small arms fire. SSG Thomas G. Stewart, Jr. of the 1486th had taken over a gun truck after the ambush on Thursday. His M998 gun truck had add-on-armor plating and his crew, SGT Thomas Butler and SPC White, were armed with an M16A2 and a handheld SAW. SGT Christopher "Chris" M. Lehman and SGT Matthew D. Eby's HMMWV gun truck from the 1486th was armed with an Mk19 automatic grenade launcher in an armored box on the back. Haggard's armored M915 gun truck, called the Street Sweeper, was armed with an

M60 machinegun. The convoy would haul a mixed load of ammunition and unessential cargo in containers so the enemy would not know which loads were critical. Because they had expended most of their ammunition defending the wall, McCormick told Haggard to police up all the extra ammunition that could be spared and give it to his crew of the Zebra. Stewart, Butler and White also drove their HMMWV around the camp asking other drivers for ammunition and water.¹

The Zebra, a black and tan striped thin skinned HMMWV was armed with a pedestal mounted M2 .50 caliber machinegun. 2LT McCormick manned the M2 because as a former scout squad leader he was the only one with experience on the .50. CPL Bryan Noble, the driver, was deadly accurate with his M203 grenade launcher. The other three crew members carried M16A2s. Their HMMWV carried a double combat load of 560 rounds of .556mm for each M16; Noble had 30 rounds of 40mm; and McCormick had 6,000 rounds of .50 double-linked into 200-round belts loaded into a Mk19 40mm ammo can mounted on the M2. The previous two fights had taught the crew to double up on ammunition.

The Zebra had fought its way into BIAP the previous Thursday night and just defended the southwest wall at BIAP. Three of the crew members included their leader,



M915 tractor with steel plate welded to the door. Photos courtesy of 518th GT Company

2LT McCormick, had been wounded during the fight at the wall and also the convoy ambush coming into BIAP. McCormick's crew consisted of former combat arms soldiers who were just as aggressive as him and expected to get hit when they rolled out the gate. Having just come off the defense of the wall, his men were emotionally exhausted and only had 30 minutes to get ready to roll out the gate. When the convoy finally received authorization to roll to the Green Zone, McCormick pulled his crew aside and told them if they were too tired, they would not have to go, but they told him they wanted to roll.

Danforth divided the convoy into four serials of 14 trucks each, which provided a gun truck to task vehicle ratio of about one-to-three. His HMMWV would lead with Stewart's HMMWV gun truck somewhere behind it. The Zebra would ride in the middle because McCormick liked the ability to float around the convoy, Lehman's HMMWV gun truck would follow between the Zebra and Haggard's M915 gun truck in the rear. Danforth gave the convoy brief and then McCormick briefed them on actions on contact. In case of contact, the gun trucks would break to the contact side, set up a rolling screen, lay down suppressive fire, and then throw smoke to cover the movement of the trucks. All the gun trucks had plenty of smoke, since the Iraqis were terrified of yellow smoke because Saddam Hussein had used mustard gas on both the Iranians and his own people. If the wind blew the smoke into their faces, they would run away.²

As the first serial pulled out of the staging area, CPL Bryan Noble turned on some music to motivate everyone in the Zebra. At that moment something just felt different. SGT Anthony Richardson remembered, "Up until now everything was pretty laid back for my entire trip, but everything got really tense all of the sudden." When they pulled up to the north gate, everyone warned each other on the radio to stay alert and what to watch for. Richardson thought they were just

a little nervous from their experience in the previous ambush.³

The convoy rolled out the north gate of BIAP with two M1114 up-armored HMMWVs of the 1st Cav in the lead as scouts. The Zebra took the lead of the convoy searching for IEDs and signs of an ambush. As the convoy pulled out the gate, Richardson pointed out an Iraqi man on a roof wearing a red shirt talking on a cell phone as he watched the convoy pull out the gate. He then began waving his arms to signal others, but the convoy continued moving through a slum area along Alternate Supply Route Irish.

Irish was a four lane highway separated by a median and flanked mostly by two - story thick adobe dwellings and wrecked cars.

As soon as Richardson heard the last vehicle cleared the gate, he heard a round dropped into a mortar tube very close by. The round exploded roughly 50 meters away from the Zebra and then shots rang out along the right side of the road. They were about three miles from their destination. SFC Haggard yelled over the radio, "Contact right!" The Zebra crew then saw muzzle flashes from a heavily damaged 10 - story building about 100 meters off the right side of the road so they returned fire.



SSG Thomas Stewart's M998 HMMWV gun truck with add-on armor kit. Photo courtesy of Thomas Stewart



SSG Stewart took over the gun truck after the original crew was wounded in the ambush coming into BIAP three days before. Photo courtesy of Thomas Stewart

Richardson also saw flashes from windows in numerous buildings lining the adjacent street that paralleled the one the convoy traveled on. SPC Brandon Lawson and Richardson returned fire with their M16s while their lieutenant fired his .50 cal in that direction. Because of the fear of hitting civilians, they had to fire only at areas they drew fire from. As soon as the ambush began, the Cavalry M1114s raced to Green Zone without firing a shot and evidently failed to warn the gate guards about the ambush.⁴

Stewart and Butler were the gunners in the back of their HMMWV and had agreed that whatever side the contact came from, one would drop down to fire while the other fired over his head. With contact right, Stewart dropped down and the sound of Butler's gun fire resonating off the steel wall hurt Stewart's ears, so he yelled at Butler to cease fire. Stewart then shifted his position but could not stand up, so he fired with his right hand, using his right arm and left hand to cover his ears. Their gun truck pulled out to the right and slowed down so the convoy could pass.⁵

The convoy rolled for a couple of hundred meters further, all the while taking fire. The Zebra pulled off to the right side of the street and the crew dismounted to allow the convoy to clear the kill zone. That maneuver put them in the crossfire between the shooters in the trucks, who did not stop firing as they passed by, and from the insurgents. Someone in the Zebra threw out a smoke grenade. After a few minutes of fighting, the crew climbed back in the Zebra and tried to regain their position in the convoy.⁶

The Zebra crew then saw an orange and white bus about the size of a city transport bus driving along a street that paralleled their convoy with its passengers firing from nearly every window. McCormick fired a full 200-round can of .50 caliber ammunition some Special Forces soldiers had given him, called "slap rounds." They passed clear through the bus and hit the wall of the building behind it, McCormick remembered,⁷ "Man, we tore that thing up. I fired the fifty and the rounds stitched the front glass and I walked those rounds all down the side of this bus nailing it about half way down the side so no one could get down far enough to escape those rounds. That bus stopped and a guy staggered out the door and fired and he was blown away by about a 4 to 6 round burst of my fifty and Noble kept



Top to bottom: SGT Chris Lehman and SGT Matthew Eby's M998 HMMWV gun truck with steel plating on the doors. Photo courtesy of Adam Houck
Lehman's gun truck was armed with an Mk19 automatic grenade launcher mounted in a steel box. Photo courtesy of Thomas Stewart
Front view of the 1486th Medium Truck Company's M915 gun truck, The Street Sweeper. Photo courtesy of 518th Company

dropping 203 rounds all over this thing until it burst into flames.”⁸

The Zebra rolled a little past the bus and then McCormick again positioned it on the contact side. The Zebra slowed down to stop so Noble could dismount and fire his M203 at the bus and surrounding area. All hell then broke loose as the convoy came to a stop. McCormick yelled over the radio to ask what was wrong. He learned the gate guards had stopped the convoy, asked for identification, then made the crews get out and ground guide their vehicles in. The rear of the convoy was still under fire and the gate guards could hear it.⁹

At that point they started receiving rocket propelled grenades (RPG). McCormick saw the RPG gunner and two other Iraqis come out from cover to fire at the convoy. The lieutenant remembered a Vietnam veteran telling him to throw smoke to obscure the enemy vision, and he then tossed out a yellow smoke grenade. He then fired his M2 .50 caliber machinegun into the smoke screen at the insurgents and Richardson saw the Iraqi fire the RPG, but the rocket flew up in the air as if the gunner was hit when he pulled the trigger.¹⁰

SGT Chris Lehman's gun truck blew its horn to notify the Zebra that they were coming up. Lehman then pounded the area around the bus with his Mk19 which



Rear view of the 1486th Medium Truck Company's M915 gun truck, The Street Sweeper. Photo courtesy of the 518th GT Company

completely engulfed the bus in flames. As Lehman passed by, the Zebra crew remounted their vehicle and followed the convoy to the Green Zone. Noble also lobbed 40mm grenades on some emplacements dug less than 50 meters from the road. It was a shooting gallery as the Zebra crew took fire from the roofs of buildings, from cars and ditch along the road. The crew poured suppressive

fire back into the enemy until the last truck cleared the kill zone.¹¹

When the Zebra reached the gate, the NCO said, "ID and ground guide." McCormick asked him if he "could hear the fucking firefight going on!" They were still receiving small arms fire from the surrounding buildings. The gate guard said, "This is policy," to which the lieutenant responded, "This is Bullshit!" McCormick told the drivers not to get out and ground guide their trucks. He did not want them exposed unnecessarily to enemy fire. The Zebra pulled off to the side of the road to watch for enemy activity while the convoy slowly entered the compound. All vehicles of the convoy made it through the check point safely with no fatalities. The Zebra then followed behind Lehman's. While they were moving to the staging area, not five minutes after they had cleared the gate, they heard the gate come under attack. The Zebra crew felt the gate guards deserved it for their stupidity for keeping the convoy exposed.¹²

When they reached the staging area, SGT Byers came up and showed the Zebra crew where he had been hit by shrapnel in his hand. They took him to the medic station to get the wound treated. The Zebra crew also watched soldiers unload a container of miscellaneous cleaning supplies and garbage cans. They did not talk about this with anyone else because they did not want the drivers to know some had almost died delivering that "mission essential" cargo.¹³

Haggard's M915 gun truck remained in the Green Zone while the others returned to BIAP to pick up the next convoy serial. Obviously everyone expected to get hammered hard during the second trip. During the



The Zebra gun truck before the M2 .50 caliber machinegun was added. Thomas Salemmé who named the truck is behind the SAW. Photo by Dennis Bubnovsky courtesy of the 518th GT Company



The Zebra showing battle damage from defending the wall at BIAP. The M2 .50 caliber machinegun can be seen on top.

Photo courtesy of the 518th GT Company

next convoy brief, McCormick told the gun trucks to turn their vehicles toward the enemy putting their engine blocks between them and the enemy fire, which would provide them some protection. Then the crew should dismount and fire all their weapons at the enemy. When the next gun truck came up to replace them, they would mount up and displace with the convoy to the next enemy position.¹⁴

As the second convoy left the gate, the Zebra crew watched for the spotter in the red shirt. They saw him briefly wave his arms and when the first enemy round was fired the crew of the Zebra opened fire on him. The convoy again received fire, but the “turn, fix, and fire” tactic worked. Instead of just suppressing enemy

fire, the gun trucks and crews inflicted serious damage on the enemy.

After the gun trucks returned to pick up the third convoy serial, they again watched for the spotter and when he stood up to wave at his fellow insurgents, nearly every gunner in the convoy shot at him. The building was so riddled with holes it looked like it would collapse. The third time the enemy fire was less than the second trip indicating there were not as many enemy shooters as there had been before. The convoy received sporadic fire and in one occasion while returning fire, McCormick hit a power lines and saw the transformer blow up in sparks. At an intersection, the passengers of a passing white car fired at them. McCormick hit it with the .50 and it slammed into another car. When the gun trucks picked up their fourth and final convoy serial, it was only shot at once. They remained overnight in the Green Zone to escort trucks back.

Lesson

The enemy set up a linear kill zone the entire eight miles from BIAP to the Green Zone waiting for anything coming out the gate. The first key decision was to increase the gun truck ratio to one-to-three. It would have been higher had the three Cavalry M1114s not left the convoy. Again, convoys cannot always depend upon external escorts.

Those gun trucks had to run the gauntlet of enemy fire three times. Each time they put their gun trucks



Factory built fully armored M1114 HMMWV gun truck.

Photo courtesy of the 518th GT Company



CPL Bryan Noble, SPC Ralph Richardson, 2LT James McCormick, SPC Brandon Lawson and SGT Anthony Richardson posing at the Green Zone right after the first convoy on Easter Sunday. Photo courtesy of the 518th GT Company

between the enemy and the convoy, but quick and accurate return fire reduced the threat each time. Just driving by and returning fire with one or two

weapons did not seem to discourage the enemy. Dismounting and firing all weapons available at the enemy had the best effect. Again superior and accurate fire power reduced the enemy threat so by the time they left on the fourth run, there was almost no enemy resistance. Using cavalry tactics these gun trucks had beaten the fight out of the enemy.

For most of the truck companies ambushed that Easter weekend, that was their first serious exposure to convoy ambushes and they learned the hard lessons of not anticipating the worst case scenarios. The crew of the Zebra, on the other hand, demonstrated during this and the ambush on Thursday night how a more aggressive stance could defeat the enemy. McCormick would refine his “turn, fix, and fire” tactic when he helped form and train the 518th Combat Gun Truck Company. These cavalry tactics of dismounting and engaging the enemy with all weapons instead of returning fire from one side would gradually decline once the crews of other units received fully armored gun trucks with ballistic glass. Then, either because of higher policy or preference, crews became more reluctant to dismount.

During this ambush, Richardson was wounded by bullet fragments in the right arm, making him the fourth crew member of the Zebra to be wounded that weekend. For their actions defending the wall and the three convoy ambushes, SFC Haggard, SSG Stewart, SSG Butler, SGT Lehman and SPC Blue received Bronze Star Medals with V device, while 2LT Danforth,



812th Transportation Battalion award ceremony for the Easter weekend ambushes. Photo courtesy of Thomas Stewart



SPC Lawson, CPL Jacob Bach, 2LT McCormick, and SGT Richardson after receiving their Purple Heart Medals for the fighting on Easter weekend. Photo courtesy of James McCormick

SGT Richardson, SPC Eby, and SPC Lawson received ARCOMs with V device. 2LT McCormick finally received the Silver Star Medal in November 2014. As of 2015, CPL Noble's Silver Star Medal was still pending approval.

That was the third time McCormick was wounded, which earned him a reputation as a bullet magnet. On his way out on a convoy one day, CPT George Petropoulos jokingly asked him whether he had done a risk assessment on himself. MSG Ani Tavai rode in a route reconnaissance with McCormick through ad Diwaniyah when kids started throwing rocks at them. Tavai joked, "If they are not shooting at you, they are throwing stuff at you." Regardless of his reputation, many of the men who had volunteered to go out the gate with him that Sunday also followed him into the 518th Combat Gun Truck Company when it was formed the next month.

¹ James McCormick telephone interview by Richard Killblane, 5 April 2012; Bryan Noble email to Richard Killblane, October 4, 2005; and SSG Thomas G. Stewart, Jr. interview by Richard Killblane on 9 August 2007.

² James McCormick telephone interview, 5 April 2012.

³ SGT Anthony Richardson Account of Easter Weekend 04 emailed to Richard Killblane, 2 August 2005.

⁴ Richardson Account, 2 August 2005; Noble email, October 4, 2005; and McCormick email to Richard Killblane, June 7, 2005 and June 8, 2005.

⁵ Stewart interview.

⁶ Richardson Account, 2 August 2005; Noble email, October 4, 2005; and McCormick email, June 7, 2005.

⁷ McCormick email, June 6 and 7, 2005 and Noble email, October 4, 2005.

⁸ McCormick email, October 5, 2005.

⁹ McCormick email, June 7, 2005.

¹⁰ McCormick email, June 7, 2005, and April 3, 2012.

¹¹ Noble email, October 4, 2005; McCormick email, June 1 and June 7, 2005 and October 5, 2005.

¹² Noble email, October 4, 2005; McCormick email, June 1 and 7, 2005.

¹³ McCormick email, June 8, 2005 and SGT Anthony Richardson account, 2 August 2005.

¹⁴ McCormick telephone interview, 5 April 2012.

Battle of Broken Chains, 17 April 2004 Ambush at Ad Diwaniyah

**1175th HET Company, 2123th HET, 1452nd HET,
2nd ACR and 2/37th Armor**

T he Mission and Task Organization

Task Force 2-37 Armor (Iron Dukes) had served in Iraq since early June 2003 and was completing its transfer of authority with the 1st Cavalry Division in early April 2004. The Iron Dukes had been assigned responsibility for the northeastern portion of Baghdad, including the overpopulated slum area, Sadr City. After twelve months of boots on the ground, the Iron Dukes and its parent command, the 1st Armored Division, was preparing to redeploy to their home station in Germany when on 4 April 2004, the radical young cleric Muqtada Al Sadr ordered his followers to conduct a jihad against the coalition forces.¹

Al Sadr's Mahdi Militia did not have sufficient strength to drive the coalition forces out of Iraq so at best he just wanted to flex his muscles and establish himself as a contender with the elder clerics. To do this, he wanted control of three towns. He already had control of An Najaf. His militia would drive the Ukrainians out of Al Kut, but the Baghdad suburbs named after his father, Sadr City, belonged to the newly arrived 1st Cavalry Division. Like a brush fire, uprisings spread across

several cities in Central Iraq, such as An Najaf/Kufa, Karbala, Al Hillah/Babylon, and Al Kut. Al Sadr's Mahdi Militia captured local police stations and government offices, allowing his followers to set up their own governments and courts under Islamic law.

At 1600 hours on 4 April 2004, the Mahdi Militia attacked an Iraqi Police station, isolating Alpha Company, 2-5 Infantry (Lancer) of 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division. C Company, 2-37 Armor (Crusader) was still under tactical control to Lancer Battalion and was immediately dispatched as a Quick Reaction Force to Sadr City. Crusader Company, followed closely by the remaining combat power of Task Force 2-37, attacked into Sadr City to rescue the 2-5 Infantry, which had already suffered seven killed at the police station. After successfully repelling the Mahdi Militia that night, Task Force 2-37 braced itself for the inevitable.²

With a transition of authority only days away, Task Force 2-37 focused on redeployment. 1LT Colin Cremin, Executive Officer (XO) of Alpha Company, 2-37 Armor, was preparing to ship the bulk of his company's supplies and equipment south to Kuwait, with the majority of their combat vehicles to make the journey a few days later. These plans changed with the announcement that the 1st Armored Division was extended in Iraq for an additional four months.³

With the extension official, Task Force 2-37 fought



M1070 Heavy Equipment Transporters and M1000 trailers of the 766th Transportation Battalion.

Photo courtesy of SFC Vanderwerf

with the Mahdi Militia in Sadr City over the next 11 days before turning control over to the 1st Cavalry Division. Task Force 2-37 then received orders to move southwest to assist the Ukrainians regain control of Al Kut. Within days of their arrival, Al Kut was secured and power restored to the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), so on 16 April, the Iron Duke's orders changed to move to An Najaf with the simple task to destroy the Mahdi Militia and capture or kill its leader – Al Sadr.⁴

When the 766th Transportation Battalion received the transportation movement request (TMR) back at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait, it was to haul the tracked vehicles of the Task Force 2-37 to Al Kut, not An Najaf. The 766th provided command and control over all Combat Heavy Equipment Transportation (HET) companies based in Kuwait and assigned the mission to both the 1175th Transportation Company of the Tennessee National Guard, and the 2123rd Transportation Company of the Kentucky National Guard. The 1175th Transportation Company provided 16 HETs, three HMMWVs configured as gun trucks, one wrecker, and one contact truck. The 2123rd Transportation Company also provided HETs and gun trucks.⁵ Coincidentally, the 1175th had also been in country for a year and was similarly extended. Once the convoy arrived at Al Kut, they received a change in mission from the 2nd ACR to transport the Task Force 2-37 to An Najaf.⁶

The task force set about preparing to move its base of operations from Camp Delta 175 kilometers west to An Najaf. On the night of 16 April 2004, CPT Erik Peterson, Assistant S4, arrived with the last of the unit equipment from Baghdad and found his battalion making extensive preparations for the road march to An Najaf. Erik had just pinned on captain bars a few months earlier and left his job as a tank company executive officer. He became the battalion “redeployment” officer possessing nothing more than his computer and a rucksack.⁷ One third of the battalion's equipment was already in Kuwait. So he departed Baghdad with the remaining 14 tanks of 2-37 by HETs to Camp Delta at Al Kut. His move to Al Kut had been slow, because the insurgents had destroyed major bridges between Baghdad and Al Kut the previous week.⁸

When he arrived at Camp Delta in the dark, Peterson radioed his battalion tactical operations center and was told to stay in position because the battalion executive officer wanted to talk with him. Around 2100 hours,



HMMWV gun truck of the 766th Transportation Battalion with first pattern add-on-armor kit, gun shield and turret armor. Photo courtesy of MAJ Ressel



Thin skinned HMMWV of the 766th Transportation Battalion with a SAW gunner in back. Photo courtesy of MAJ Ressel

the executive officer spread out a map on the top of his M998 and explained that the battalion had been ordered to An Najaf. The only restriction was to not travel at night.⁹ All the wheels in the battalion to include the commanders and all staff would roll out at 0700 hours. Peterson had one map set of the route with satellite graphics of the turns. The HETs were already loading, but Battalion did not know how many HETs were available, or how much equipment was actually on the ground. There was just an urgency to move.¹⁰

During his early Operation Iraqi Freedom I experience working with HETs, however, Peterson learned the HET convoy commanders jealously guarded their role as the convoy commanders and the tanks and convoy escorts fell under their control for the movement. If a maneuver officer, regardless of rank, tried to take



Convoy of the 1836th HET hauling M1 tanks of the 1st Cavalry Division forward. Photo courtesy of James Wood

charge, it usually resulted in shouting matches and almost always the Transporter won. The reason was that most combat arms officers riding in their HMMWVs did not know what a HET could or could not do. Peterson figured it made no sense to try to take charge of the convoy. He thought he was dealing with just one HET company, which was how most missions were assigned, but for some reason the 766th Transportation Battalion had not designated a single convoy commander.¹¹ Instead CPT Thomas Jerry Moore II, commander of the 1175th HET, and 1LT Robert L. Henderson II, 2123rd

HET, agreed each would command their own march units and Peterson would be the serial commander.¹²

The escort platoon came from elements of 1st and 4th Platoons of Apache Troop, 1st Squadron, 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR), which was equipped with four M1025/26s HMMWVs armed with machineguns and dual radios. Peterson's battalion also provided four of the new M1114 up-armored HMMWVs.¹³

All 65 of the battalion's tracked vehicles were finally loaded onto the HETs for the trip. The vehicles included 39 M1A1 Abrams tanks. Hauling tanks on trailers conserved fuel, reduced the wear and tear on the combat vehicles and allowed the crews to focus on security during the convoy. Most vehicles kept two crewmembers inside the tanks with any excess soldiers riding inside the cab with the two HET drivers. The crews riding in the tracked vehicles could man the crew-served weapons, turning each HET into a firing platform thus augmenting the security provided by the Apache White scout vehicles.¹⁴

CPT Peterson task organized the convoy of 53 HETs, four M1114 and four M1025/26 scout gun trucks from the line companies into two serials of roughly 33 vehicles each,¹⁵ because it was easier for the gun trucks



1LT Henderson and NCOs of the 2123rd HET Company standing next to one of their HMMWV gun trucks.

Photo courtesy of 766th Transportation Battalion

to support smaller serials of that size. Since the 2nd ACR gun trucks had dual radios, Peterson assigned one with a map to lead each serial; another to the rear of the convoy for security; and kept two gun trucks together in the middle of the convoy to respond to any situation. Peterson consolidated the four 2-37 Armor M1114s into a platoon. Because two did not have radios, he assigned them in pairs with ones that did. Peterson did not know the HET convoy consisted of two different companies



HET hauling a M1 Abrams tank. Photo courtesy of James Wood

and assumed CPT Moore was the company commander of all the HETs. So he let Moore pick the order of march of the trucks. CPT Moore chose to lead with the 1175th and have 1LT Henderson follow with the 2123rd approximately 45 minutes behind the lead serial.¹⁶

The 2nd ACR and 2-37th Armor planned the route in conjunction with the two officers of the HET convoy. The convoy would move north on Alternate Supply Route (ASR) Bismarck to ASR Kiev, then west to Main Supply Route (MSR) Tampa, south to ASR Evansville, east to ASR Miami, north to ASR Boston, and then south to Forward Operating Base (FOB) Duke with a stopover at Convoy Support Center (CSC) Scania escorted by a security element from the 1st Armored Division. The plan was briefed and approved by the 2nd ACR.¹⁷

This early in the war, only a few of the HETs had SINCGARS military radios and the rest used privately or unit purchased citizen band (CB) radios. There were five different units in the convoy and each monitored their own internal frequencies. The company commander and executive officer of the tanks had Blue Force Tracker systems, but no headquarters to talk to on the other end, since their battalion was also enroute and had not set up. Neither did anyone in the convoy have satellite phones. The HETs had some mobile tracking systems (MTS),

which gave them an email texting capability. In the event the convoy ran into trouble, these trucks had better access to texting for help.¹⁸

Ssg Vancleeve's Apache Two led the first march unit followed by Apache One, led by 1LT Joel Schuh.¹⁹ Concerned about the convoy getting lost, CPT Peterson rode in one of his battalion's M1114s, pretty close to the front of the lead serial. During the trip he would primarily maintain radio communication with the Apache Troop escorts, but would have radio problems throughout the journey. By the time the fight came, his radio communication failed.²⁰ At Start Point (SP) time, CPT Moore, call sign Warrior Five, radioed 1LT Henderson, call sign Saber 25, to notify him they were ready to move.²¹

Move to Scania

By dawn, most of the HETs were loaded and the leaders started to work out what was left for future load requests. Meanwhile, the Moore and Henderson were highly resistant to moving on the route Task Force 2-37 had planned to take, which traveled around Al Hillah. The HET commanders understood the 1st Armored Division would provide the escorts, but the addition of the 2nd ACR was a change. This was significant because the convoy escorts from 1st Armored Division had been briefed and helped plan the route from Al Kut to FOB Duke.²² The 2nd ACR security element told CPT Moore and 1LT Henderson that a deviation from the original plan had been approved by the Movement Control Team (MCT) at CSC Scania.²³ The new route, however, was not an approved route so the HET commanders were appropriately worried about bridges and weight restrictions. HETs loaded with tanks could not always travel the same places other vehicles could. In addition, they did not have route maps to Camp Echo near Najaf. That was when everyone assumed the MCT at Scania probably had route maps to An Najaf. Peterson knew convoys needed march credits, meaning presumably, an MCT was going to select their route. Due to the urgency of the fight in An Najaf, the mentality at the time was to go and get into the fight as fast as they could and "Don't worry about the formalities."²⁴

The wheeled vehicles departed Camp Delta first early in the morning. Then after re-fueling and a morning of delays and confusion over the exact route to be taken, the HET convoy finally departed Al Kut around 1230



Convoy of HETs of the 766th Transportation Battalion hauling tanks with their baggage and crews.

Photo courtesy of SFC Vanderwerf

hours on 17 April.²⁵ As the convoy approached Scania, the new escorts from the 2nd ACR had little knowledge of the original route plan and wanted to head north to Baghdad.²⁶ 1LT Henderson and CPT Moore halted the convoy just south of Scania at 1530 hours to explain to the Apache Scouts and CPT Peterson that it was not the route they had agreed on. So Moore and Henderson told Peterson they would not go that way due to roadway height and weight restrictions.

Only one map with poor graphics and limited data on major intersections was provided for this route. Coalition forces had not traveled through areas of this route in several months. So CPT Peterson sent two of the scout vehicles ahead to the Movement Control Team (MCT) in Scania to verify the route and get coordinates. There the scouts received a threat brief and the new route. This route deviation would take the convoy east on ASR Orlando, then east on a route south of the city of Ad Diwaniyah to ASR Miami, and onward to ASR Boston. After about 30 minutes, the scouts returned with the approved route and one set of 1:50,000 maps for the entire route. Henderson and Moore agreed on the route, briefed their march units and departed.²⁷

The Transporters claimed the handoff of convoy escorts should not have resulted in a change in route unless dictated by the current enemy situation. Changing the escorts led to confusion about the planned route. No strip maps were available to the truck drivers of the route change or of the immediate area. The movement control team at Scania was unable to provide the status of the route or any recent intelligence about enemy

actions in the immediate area.²⁸ The wheeled vehicles and the bulk of the battalion leadership, however, had departed for An Najaf in a series of convoys early in the morning and encountered absolutely no enemy contact along their route. This provided no warning as to what awaited the main body.²⁹

The new route would take them into the southern portion of Iraq. Over Easter weekend, 9 to 11 April, the insurgents had for the first time launched large-scale complex ambushes throughout the Sunni Triangle. The subsequent counter-offensive by the armored units seemed to put an end to this threat and Intelligence claimed there had been very little activity this far south along this route.³⁰ Intelligence also reported that if enemy contact was to occur, it would most likely take place on the roads outside of Al Kut.³¹ The convoy rolled out around 1600 hours heading south on ASR Orlando.³² Once beyond Al Kut, the HET convoy had escaped what it thought was the danger area. Coincidentally, a HET convoy from the 1452nd Transportation Company from the North Carolina National Guard happened to stop behind the 1175th and 2123rd HET convoy at Scania and was heading the same way, so it fell in behind the 2123rd as a third march unit.³³

Ad Diwaniyah

The convoy had very few problems for the first few hours, traveling through some small towns, stopping periodically to fix flat tires on the HETs.³⁴ The convoy continued west and approached the main supply route where it was to turn south. The lead scouts providing convoy security

found the traffic ramp closed and impassable to HETs. Likewise, it was impossible for the HETs to turn around, so Peterson decided to continue driving west, which led to the city of Ad Diwaniyah where two alternate supply routes merged and the convoy could get back on the designated route.³⁵ During the confusion of the April Uprising, it was not unusual for an MCT to not know a road was blocked, forcing the convoy commander to find an alternate route.

At approximately 1715 hours, the lead march unit reached the outskirts of Ad Diwaniyah.³⁶ The escort element, Apache White One, radioed back for Moore's march unit to halt because an overturned semi-trailer blocked the main road through the city. A large crane was on hand but it would take some time to clear up. Waiting any length of time near a populated area was a seriously bad idea, so they needed to find another way around the wreck. Peterson saw a local Iraqi Police officer on the scene give the scouts directions for a detour and the scouts left to reconnoiter it.³⁷

The city had looked like any other Moore had driven through. The gas station adjacent to where the convoy waited had over ten cars lined up in the road. Children had been running around playing soccer and were beginning to walk up to the drivers asking for food and water. All of this was a common and reassuring sight in Iraq. One small child about seven or eight years old told Moore his convoy was heading to An Najaf. The other drivers similarly reported young children telling them the same thing and one young boy added the "convoy would be taken care of soon." Moore thought it was very strange how this young Iraqi child knew their destination. Moore had been in country 366 days and never experienced this before, but did not consider it to become alarmed about.³⁸

The scouts returned after about 15 minutes saying they had found an alternate route through the city that was passable for HETs but tight. One of the reasons Transporters do not like to give up control of their convoy to non-Transportation Corps officers is that they do not





The eagle statue with the photo of Al Sadr and the traffic jam in the background in Ad Diwaniyah. Photo courtesy of MAJ Ressel

know the capabilities and especially the limitations of the vehicles in the convoy. CPT Peterson and Moore approved the route, and Moore radioed back to his elements and Saber 25, whose march unit had caught up by that time, that they had to drive around the accident ahead.³⁹

As the convoy entered the city, the situation changed dramatically. The fuel station began to close up and the cars left in a hurry. Iraqi policemen began stopping civilian traffic to allow the convoy to pass and herded Iraqi citizens away from the convoy to side streets. An eagle statue on a pillar at the entrance of town had a picture of Al Sadr and a crowd started to gather around the statue as if they were protecting the statue. Many flags with the same design and writing were hanging on homes as the convoy rolled through the city. Moore believed the flags might have been Al Quaida flags. A small group of men appeared to be arguing over an auto accident, but no one noticed any damage on either vehicle causing the soldiers did think the argument was staged. The vehicles disappeared along with the men after the lead element of the convoy passed them. At least two individuals were spotted on top of a building overlooking the convoy with what looked like binoculars. These were all clear indicators that something bad awaited the convoy down the streets of Ad Diwaniyah.⁴⁰

Contact Lead March Unit

Moore led the convoy deeper into the city down a main street with opposite lanes separated by a median. He noticed a group of around 60 to 70 men dressed in black on the right side of the road listening to a

man, possibly a cleric, agitating them through a mega phone. The man looked upset and did not seem to want the Americans there, so Moore relayed back on his SINCGARS radio for everyone to pay attention to the group as they drove by. Near the end of the city, the convoy made a left turn down a street that looked more like an alley with low hanging power lines stretched across the alley from house to house. The first two HETs made their way cautiously down the alley trying not to hit the lines and they saw a familiar sight, kids running out along the streets waving at the drivers along with an unusual number of adults coming out standing on the sidewalks. Moore radioed back that the Iraqis seemed friendly so the drivers should try to not tear down the power lines. This caused the traffic to slow down to a crawl, bunching the two march units into one long convoy on the first road. Moore had an uneasy feeling negotiating the cramped alley with large HETs and no room to maneuver. It was every HET driver's nightmare. The Iraqis grew restless with the convoy taking so long and began motioning for the drivers to roll on and not to worry about tearing down the lines. Upon closer examination, the lines were very small wire and not attached to any source of electricity, more like something used to hang clothes; so Moore told his drivers to just roll on that the Iraqis did not mind them tearing the lines down. Then the adults began gathering their children up and returned inside their buildings, similar to a scene in any Western movie before a gunfight. Moore searched for any sign they would reach their designated route soon. The convoy turned into a traffic circle beyond the overturned truck and then took a right-hand turn heading back down another alley. Moore radioed for his lead gun truck to set up a traffic control point there to make sure everyone made the correct turn as there was actually two right turns out of the circle.⁴¹

Apache elements led the convoy down an alley flanked on both sides by apartment buildings. There were no longer any pedestrians on the streets. To the scouts' surprise, the next street ended a short distance in at a T-intersection. About 1830 hours, as the convoy approached the end of the alley, Moore heard 10 to 15 rounds fired from what seemed to be his right. He then radioed, "Contact right, contact right." The lead HET, Tango One, also radioed there was contact left.⁴² As the rest of the convoy followed, several soldiers saw a green



HETs rolling through town. Photo courtesy of MAJ Ressel

flare in the sky and then the convoy began to take small arms fire. Some drivers from both the 1175th and the 2123rd indicated they saw at least three flares and the volume of fire increased as each flare was launched.⁴³ A large volume of fire erupted behind Moore and drivers radioed him they were receiving small arms fire.⁴⁴ Upon hearing the initial reports of contact on the battalion net, 1LT Colin Cremin, A “Aggressor” Company Executive Officer, likewise warned the tanks not yet in contact about the imminent threat along the route.⁴⁵

SSG Joshua D. Martin had monitored both his company and the drivers’ frequencies on his two radios in his tank. After seeing children further down the road running away, he heard on the HET drivers’ frequency they were in contact. He then charged his .50 while his loader brought his M240 to a red status - ready to engage. Within minutes he saw weapons pointed out every door, window and rooftop. Significantly outnumbered, Martin ordered his loader to button up the hatch, and he could operate his .50 from inside the commander’s turret.⁴⁶

The ambush began with sporadic small arms fire from both sides of the street. The HETs in contact reacted by stopping their vehicles and returning small arms fire causing the rest of the convoy to a halt.⁴⁷ After suppressing the targets, the HETs moved on but continued to receive more small arms fire. The sporadic small arms fire erupted into a full-scale ambush as more insurgents arrived to the fight. Armed with automatic

weapons and rocket propelled grenades (RPG), the insurgents lined multi-story residential buildings and factories to fire down on the convoy.⁴⁸

The drivers and the armor crewmen returned a heavy volume of fire, but the units in the convoy had difficulty talking to each other due to two reasons. First, there were no less than three separate radio systems within the convoy. Several trucks had SINCGARS, several had citizen band (CB) radios, and others had hand-held systems. Second, the entire convoy was not on the same frequency. Each serial operated on a different frequency that forced soldiers to constantly switch channels to talk to other serial. This not only made coordination difficult, but also enhanced the confusion as to why the convoy was stopped.⁴⁹

In spite of these difficulties, the enemy made one very big mistake; they ambushed a HET convoy hauling tanks. Each HET provided a firing platform armed with anything from a .50 caliber machinegun to a 120mm cannon. These could inflict some serious damage and the only limitation was fear of collateral damage. At the end of the street, Moore’s serial halted while the scouts again searched for the correct route out of the city. While stopped, insurgents continued to pour small arms fire into the convoy while the gunners and drivers returned fire with M2s, Mk19s, SAWs, and M16s. When the volume of fire became too intense, CPT Moore finally authorized the tank crewmen to return fire with their main guns.⁵⁰



M1 tank on back of HET traversing its main gun and tank commander behind the M2 .50 caliber machinegun in search of enemy. Photo courtesy of SFC Vanderwerf

Halted at the T-intersection, Moore radioed back asking if his HETs were all together and Wrench One, his maintenance section, replied they had caught up to the march serial. He also said he had the 2123rd element with him. About that time Saber 25, Henderson's vehicle, called over the radio and announced 1LT Henderson had been hit. Moore switched his radio over to both the Sheriff and medevac frequencies, but could not raise anyone. Sheriff was the equivalent of a 911 operator in a war zone which coordinated for medevacs or the Quick Reaction Force (QRF) from the battle space owner. He then radioed his NCOIC, SSG Lee, call sign Warrior Two, who was bringing up the rear of his march serial and told him to keep calling for medevac, since he could not contact them. Moore had to monitor the command frequency to stay abreast of the tactical situation. Moore told Saber 25 to keep moving. SSG Grimes, who was with Saber 25, calmly radioed back and stated he needed a medevac immediately. Henderson had been shot in the femoral artery and would bleed out and die if he did not receive medical attention quickly.⁵¹

About three HETs back from the front, Moore could not see anyone in the buildings, nor did he see any muzzle flashes coming from the buildings ahead. The lead HET, Tango One, radioed back that one of the crewmen on the tank he was hauling was killed and emphasized the convoy needed to move.⁵² SGT Jonathan Hartman, in tank A66 commander's cupola, was shot

in the right abdomen and dropped into the turret. PFC Eric Mullins, the loader and the only other crewmember on the tank, immediately assessed Hartman's wounds and rendered first aid, while at the same time still firing back at the attackers. "It took me awhile to determine what had happened to John. I just thought he was reloading when I noticed his face had gone white." For Hartman to receive proper medical treatment the convoy had to get out of the kill zone, so while defending his tank and caring for Hartman, Mullins threw anything within arm's reach at the cab until he was able to gain the attention of the drivers.⁵³

Monitoring the battalion "Warrior" frequency, 1LT Cremin was clueless as to why they had stopped for an estimated 15 to 20 minutes. He assumed the HET drivers did not know how to properly react to contact and had merely stopped in place until they received guidance from higher authority. The scout HMMWVs continued to suppress the enemy and facilitate movement, but the HETs continued to remain in place. Cremin realized unless they rapidly cleared the kill zone, all hell was about to break loose. So, he quickly scanned his map and then ordered all vehicles to consolidate across the southern bridge. It took some time to disseminate this information from his battalion net to the individual companies and finally to the transportation units. By then the HETs had started moving forward again, and the enemy poured heavy small arms and RPG fire from

both sides of the street and rooftops.⁵⁴

At that point, the HET hauling Cremin's tank was halted at an intersection and receiving heavy RPG and small arms fire. His driver, Welch, remembered, "I looked back and saw 20 to 30 tracer rounds bounce all around the executive officer as he was out of the hatch firing his M4." There were numerous enemy combatants on the rooftops of both residential and commercial buildings firing at the convoy, creating an in-depth kill zone. While engaging enemy in a nearby window, an RPG fired towards Cremin's location exploded in the street and showered his tank crew with gravel and asphalt. A few seconds later, a second and third RPGs impacted with an enormous explosion into the right rear of his tank's hull. Shaken by the impact, Cremin quickly assessed any damage or injury to his tank and crew. With everything still in working order, Cremin immediately identified the attacker's position about 300 meters down the main street to the east and then killed him with .50 caliber fire while his gunner, SGT Shaun Ellertson, continued to fire the loader's M240 machinegun on insurgents on the rooftops from the western side of the street. The enemy would momentarily step out from behind alleyways and pop up over rooftops while they fired then drop back behind cover. While this made it difficult for the tankers to acquisition targets, it also decreased the enemy's accuracy, but once the tankers identified the main threat in the alleys, they poured overwhelming firepower onto the attackers. Cremin's tank fired small arms fire at the nearest targets, and his crew-served weapons at more the distant attackers, RPG teams, and any buildings the enemy used for cover.⁵⁵

At one point his M4 carbine malfunctioned, so Cremin switched to his AK-47. Cremin caught a white flash out of the corner of his eye and a 7.62mm round penetrated his backpack directly in front of him. It was only then that Cremin had the stark realization that the enemy was trying to kill him, which seemed surreal up to that point. While still in contact, Cremin did his best to encourage the convoy to move to the designated reconsolidation point. After what seemed like an eternity, his HET finally began to move.⁵⁶

By then the .50 cal gunners on the M1 Abrams and M88s were tearing up the buildings with heavy suppressive fire. Tango One, lead HET, said he was at an intersection and did not know which way to turn. Moore

radioed for one of the Apache elements to come back and lead them out of there. Moore could hear gunfire everywhere and every driver throughout the convoy radioed him they under attack. He realized this was a very large kill zone.⁵⁷

Ten to 15 minutes after they had departed, the scouts returned with a new route and Moore's serial began to roll out of town.⁵⁸ Apache scouts made a right-hand turn and the lead serial traveled about 50 yards where it came upon a low overpass that fully loaded HETs could not drive under, so it stopped again. Moore could hear and see the battle raging the full length of the convoy. The situation was turning into a nightmare as there seemed no way out of the city. The scouts then found another alley that led back to the main road. Moore's serial then turned right and drove down a very narrow alley paralleling the bridge. This brought them out onto a four-lane road and they could finally see their way out of town. With Apache back in the lead, Tango One made a U-turn and headed out of town across the bridge. Moore looked ahead for any possible signs of another ambush. The convoy passed through an Iraqi checkpoint in the road and there was a clearing with just a few houses about 1200 meters off both sides of the road. Moore told Apache to stop and set up a perimeter. He then ordered the lead trucks to turn and form the box formation blocking both lanes of traffic so no one could get near the convoy.⁵⁹

As Moore approached the bridge, he made the U-turn and heard his maintenance element, Wrench One, radio it had separated from Moore's convoy and did not know which way to go. Moore told him to stay in place and describe what he saw around him. Moore recognized his maintenance element was halted at the last traffic circle. The maintenance element was the rear of his march serial, which meant the 2123rd and the 1452nd serials were also stopped in the city. Moore knew stopping a convoy in the kill zone violated their doctrine and training. He could also tell that everyone was very excited and feared if they started to drive in different directions he would not be able to get them out of the city alive. So he positioned his truck on top of the elevated bridge hoping the HET drivers, when they came out of the alley, would see it. He informed them over the radio his truck was sitting on the bridge and he was not going to leave until everyone could see it.⁶⁰

While his march serial continued to pass him toward the box, Moore could hear the battle raging in the alleyways of the city and hear on the radio the coordination and movement of his four gun trucks. Those gun trucks repeatedly drove back and forth laying suppressive fire until all his vehicles had cleared what appeared to be three kill zones. It was frustrating to sit on top of the bridge listening to his men screaming they had to move while still receiving fire from the front to the rear. Feeling the lead element was safely out of the city, Moore called his Apache element to go back into the firefight to help get the rest of the convoy back together so they could move. Moore heard Wrench One radio Wrench Three to make that right turn because he could see the tail end of the convoy. Moore then felt as if he had everyone going in the right direction and they could move out.⁶¹

Inside the city, the convoy was still taking fire from both sides of the road. Each tank's crewmen poured massive amounts of fire into the buildings with their crew serve weapons. Some of them fired their main guns into the buildings knocking out personnel firing RPG's. No matter how much fire was coming into the buildings, the insurgents kept firing.

Second Serial

When CPT Moore's serial made the right turn onto the highway heading west, 1LT Cremin noticed that there were no other HETs behind his.⁶² In a convoy with few radios and maps, the hail of enemy gunfire just added to the confusion about the route. Several HET elements accidentally split off and drifted around the city. The scouts drove back into the kill zone to round up these vehicles and attempt to keep the HETs moving toward safety. The HETs for various reasons repeatedly stopped, allowing the enemy to relocate and concentrate their firepower.⁶³

The 2123rd had not turned down the same route as the 1175th. When the convoy commander, 1LT Henderson, Saber 25, saw the 1175th's vehicles moving over the bridge he ordered his serial to follow. As the 2123rd drove down the street, the serial came under intense enemy fire. At that point Henderson was shot in the thigh severing his femoral artery. His crew did not realize the extent of his injury at the time. Henderson continued to drive his HMMWV leading his serial down the street, eventually drifting into consciousness and



M1 Abrams tank of the 2-37th Armor in the streets of Iraq.
Photo courtesy of SFC David Neuzil

lost control of the vehicle, which came to a stop at the end of the street. At that time SSG Grimes called for an immediate medevac. Meanwhile, the enemy fired small arms and rocket propelled grenades at the passing convoy from prepared positions within alleys along the road. Tiring of the delays, the crews fired up their tanks, broke the chains, backed off the trailers and turned this into a tank battle.⁶⁴

Cremin made a guidons' call to all his Aggressor tanks to gain situational awareness and determine where his platoons were. Aggressor Blue Three, SSG Americana Mulitauopele, told him that part of the convoy with the rest of his platoon had taken a wrong turn at the traffic circle and was traveling away from the main body. Realizing the mistake, Aggressor Blue One, 1LT Joe Rhyne, had to get his HET driver to turn around. Without any communication with the truck, he crawled out of the safety of his tank's turret onto the back of the HET to bang on the window of the cab. Once he gained the driver's attention, Rhyne directed him to turn around and head back to the traffic circle.⁶⁵

Simultaneously, the HET carrying Aggressor White Two became disabled just south of the engagement area. The crew dismounted and joined another vehicle. The truck was then struck by two rocket propelled grenades destroying it.⁶⁶ The 2123rd serial continued down the street and the M1114 gun truck that had been following behind the disabled HET continued past it while engaging enemy in the alleys and on the rooftops. About 100 meters down the road, the crew realized the convoy had stopped behind the disabled HET,

so they turned their gun truck around and drove back to provide cover.⁶⁷ Aggressor White Two, SSG Kevin Morton, refusing to allow his tank to fall into enemy hands, ordered his gunner into the driver's compartment, and together they broke the tank free of its tie-down chains, drove the tank off of the trailer, and fell back into the convoy.⁶⁸

As the lead HETs continued to move south towards the consolidation point, a traffic jam formed at the traffic circle because the drivers were confused as to which street to take. Still under constant small arms fire, the HET convoy halted to sort out the traffic jam. Realizing the extreme danger of the situation, Cremin ordered his driver to break the tie-down chains on his HET and back his tank off the trailer and get into the fight. Cremin then radioed his company and stated he needed the first three tanks that could provide him with full tank crews. Aggressor Red Four, SSG Antonio Costa, immediately volunteered his platoon; Aggressor Red Two, SSG Ronny Coleman; and Aggressor Red Three, SSG Jeff Yager, formed his counter-attack force to rescue the stranded HETs.⁶⁹

A total of 13 tanks dismounted to assist the HET movement.⁷⁰ The serial continued over the bridge under fire and linked up with M1s from the 1175th. The M1s laid down suppressive fire with crew served weapons and cannons to lead the rest of convoy to the 1175th's perimeter.⁷¹ SSG Martin's HET had stopped at the bridge waiting to move forward when a HMMWV raced past him screaming for a medic. He engaged targets of opportunity for the next four to five minutes while waiting to move, switching from his main gun to .50 since he did not have a gunner.⁷²

Rally Point

As SSG Grimes, Saber 25, pulled into the rally point with his seriously wounded platoon leader, he pleaded on the radio for Moore to send help back into the city because the rest of his 2123rd was still in the kill zone. Moore immediately exited his vehicle and motioned for the front tanks to dismount. The executive officer, Battle Five, was riding in the tank on Moore's HET. Moore told him to send some tanks back into the city to get everyone out of there. Some tanks took the time to disconnect the chains on their tanks while others just pushed the gas pedal, breaking the chains as they drove down the ramps heading into the city. Every tank crew climbed out on their tank wanting to go back to the fight. Martin's

tank had just arrived at the rally point and offered to remain to pull security since all the other tanks had charged back into the city.⁷³

Moore then radioed he wanted a casualty collection point set up at the front of the box formation. Warrior Two had finally contacted the medevac, and it was enroute. Saber 25 informed Moore that he was then in charge of the 2123rd element and asked very calmly what Moore needed him to do. The CPT told him to park his vehicle next to his and keep him updated as to where his personnel were. At that moment, Moore had operational control over both HET companies. Moore asked the Apache elements to keep trying to get air support in there as well as a quick reaction force deployed to their location since they were still taking fire. Moore also told Apache Two, SSG Vancleve, to look for the route out of there because as soon as the casualties were lifted out Moore wanted to leave.⁷⁴

Cremin's Counterattack

Meanwhile, Cremin, in control of the Aggressor Red platoon returned to the traffic circle to find the convoy at a standstill. Vehicles were bumper to bumper, all looking for guidance from anyone who could direct them out of this kill zone. Cremin drove his tank over the curbs and around the HETs to head to the bridge on the northern side of the circle. Aggressor Red Four and Aggressor Red Two went through the center of the traffic circle to reach the bridge. It was there that Red Two's tank ran into soft ground and immediately became mired. Not wanting to leave him alone, Cremin ordered Aggressor Red Three to remain with Red Two and provide security while they assessed the situation and attempted to self-recover.⁷⁵

Cremin then had to choose between defending in place and continuing the counter-attack with only a tank section. With little time for consideration, he pushed his tank forward over the bridge and back into the initial kill zone with Red Four, SGT Ellertson. As soon as the two tanks crested the bridge, Cremin saw the disabled HET swarming with jubilant Iraqis who were quickly surprised to see two tanks heading their way. The tanks immediately began to receive heavy small arms fire again as the enemy scattered to more concealed positions. After confirming all personnel to their direct front were enemy, the tanks engaged with coax and .50 caliber machinegun fire. The number of enemy was

astounding, estimated at well over one hundred, and their volume of fire was increasing as the tanks moved forward. Once Cremin's tank had cleared the bridge, the enemy began to displace down the main street to the east, using the buildings and alleyways as cover. An RPG fired from a near alley grazed the front slope of his tank. Cremin spotted the enemy sighting in another RPG and immediately opened fire with his AK-47. Only after eliminating this threat did he realize the enemy was just three boys, maybe ten or twelve years old.⁷⁶

The two tanks continued to maneuver to the same intersection where the convoy took the initial brunt of the ambush. Cremin's tank turned right heading east and Red Four took up a position behind his facing north. Cremin instantly identified several attackers with AK-47s still on rooftops and hiding in alleys to his direct front. He could also see a large number of insurgents around the building about 400 meters down on the northern side of the street, but his tanks had to focus on the threat within their immediate vicinity. Cremin fired his .50 cal onto the rooftops while Red Four was busy clearing the enemy on the street to the north, protecting Cremin's blind flank. Fortunately, the enemy was unable to coordinate their attacks or concentrate their fires towards the tanks.⁷⁷

The building 400 meters away was buzzing with enemy activity. Cremin saw two bright flashes of light as two RPGs flew high over his tank and exploded about 100 meters behind him. SGT Ellertson identified the Iraqi's location and instantly fired a 120mm Multi-Purpose Anti-Tank (MPAT) round into the building, eliminating that RPG threat. Another volley of RPGs

streaked toward their location, impacting low and to the left of Cremin's tank. After some creative loading, Ellertson eliminated that RPG team with another 120mm MPAT round neutralizing that threat and demonstrating the crew's willingness to use all available combat firepower, quickly destroying any arrogance on the enemy's part and any attempt at organization. At that point, any remaining attackers fled the immediate vicinity down the alleys and side streets. Fearing a possible flanking attack, Cremin ordered Red Four back to the traffic circle to provide security for the HET drivers while they continued to work their way out of the traffic jam and while Aggressor Red Two tank continued to recover itself from the soft soil. Aggressor White Three, Aggressor White Two, and Battle Cat White One arrived from the rally point and joined the fight providing returning fire against the small arms fire coming from rooftops and from the roads leading off of the traffic circle.⁷⁸

Cremin pulled back from the main streets, took up a position near the disabled HET and requested guidance through Crusader Blue Four about what to do with it and Warrior Five's intent. While awaiting the order to either recover or destroy the HET, another RPG slammed into the driver's side door of the HET causing it to burst into flames. That seemed to be a rallying cry as the enemy armed with small arms swarmed back out into the streets. Cremin's crew-served weapons engaged the insurgents as they attempted to maneuver against his tank through the alleys and around parked vehicles. Their chaotic and uncoordinated attack made it easier for Cremin's crew to identify and eliminate each threat as it appeared. All the while, he continued to monitor both the battalion and company nets to determine the disposition of the convoy.⁷⁹

Rally Point

Meanwhile as dusk arrived at the rally point around 1900 hours, the truck drivers could still hear Cremin's fierce firefight in the city. Realizing they were going to remain in the box formation for a long while, CPT Moore instructed his NCOs to tell everyone to pull out their night vision goggles and scan the perimeter. SGT Carlson, the medics and other soldiers were trying to keep pressure on the wounds of the three casualties. 1LT Henderson and PFC Clayton W. Henson, Apache White, both shot



If the .50 caliber machine gun atop the turret could not defeat the threat then the 120mm main gun could.

Photo courtesy of SFC David Neuzil

in the femoral artery and SGT Hartman was wounded in the abdomen. Henderson's condition was rapidly deteriorating. As a Registered Respiratory Therapist, CPT Moore could see the lieutenant was crashing fast and soon would need an artificial airway to survive. Moore grabbed Gun Smoke One, SSG Cross, and told him to take his place on the radio. Moore then grabbed his oxygen and medic bag and ran to Henderson. Henderson was still struggling to get up but just barely conscious. Moore leaned down and told him who he was and what he was going to do. If Moore could get the airway in and give him oxygen, it would help to ensure the lieutenant would not have brain damage and also help protect his lungs should he aspirate. On the other hand, if Moore tried to place the tube in his airway and he did regurgitate before the tube was in place, his lungs would be filled with the vomit causing him more harm. Moore prepared his equipment and decided to quickly try one time. He opened Henderson's mouth and placed the larynga scope into the back of his throat. Moore could see where the tube needed to be but his vocal cords kept collapsing on the tube. Henderson then started to gag and Moore realized he needed to stop so as not to cause further harm. Moore said he was sorry and to hang in there because the chopper was enroute. Minutes later Moore saw the soldiers performing CPR on Henderson.⁸⁰

CPT Moore ran back to his truck for an update on the situation. Apache Two told him a Spanish quick reaction force was coming from the south and should arrive anytime. Moore then radioed the rear of the box warning them know not to shoot the quick reaction force as they should arrive there soon. Warrior Two was talking to the medevac, call sign Medicine Man 23. Moore was still receiving reports more HETs were still joining the rear of the formation. Battle Five told him there was a disabled HET left in town and wanted to know what he wanted the tankers to do with it. Moore ordered it destroyed as it was not worth the risk of recovering.⁸¹

Rescue

As darkness fell, about three hours after the initial ambush, Cremin's tank had secured the bridge leading out of the city. This allowed the HETs to finally work their way to the HET consolidation point and out of harm's way. His primary concern was local security for Aggressor Red Two while he worked to free his tank from the soft

soil. Cremin noticed a second bridge to the east, about 400 meters away, and still concerned about a flanking maneuver, ordered Aggressor Red Three and Aggressor Red Four to secure that bridge. After realizing that self-recovery would not work, Aggressor White Three was sent back to the HET consolidation point to retrieve the M88 recovery vehicle.⁸²

At this point, Battle Cat White One and a second Battle Cat tank assumed the security mission for Aggressor Red Two. On Aggressor White Three's return, Battle Cat White One pushed north towards the bridge and provided rear security for Cremin's tank while he still engaged a number of insurgents and cars that would try to attempt drive-by shootings. Since these engagements were no more than 500 meters away, they were able to destroy these threats immediately. Evidently, the enemy did not understand the capabilities of the thermal and night vision devices, because once the sun set, a large number of Iraqis attempted to walk freely out in the streets to reposition on his tank or to retrieve the dead and their equipment. The thermal sights enabled Cremin's tank to quickly and easily identify combatant from non-combatant and engage.⁸³

For a few minutes the city went quiet, providing them with the hope this engagement would soon come to an end. However, two RPGs were fired from behind some buildings to the northeast in an attempt to use them as indirect fire, but they were very inaccurate and detonated harmlessly away from the vehicles. These RPGs, however, did start a new wave of small arms fire, as Iraqis tried to engage from across the first bridge. Aided by the cover of night, these attackers could not accurately identify the location of the tanks so their fire was very imprecise and wild, but the muzzle flash betrayed their locations. The thermal night vision enabled the tanks to place overwhelming and accurate firepower to neutralize these threats.⁸⁴

Finally Cremin received the call from Aggressor Red Two that his mired tank was operational and they were ready to move to the rally point. Cremin ordered Aggressor Red Two, Aggressor Red Three, Aggressor White Two and Aggressor White Three to escort the M88 recovery vehicle back to the consolidation point while his tank and Aggressor Red Four provided cover. Once the recovery team moved, Aggressor Red Four and Cremin's tank similarly fell back to the consolidation

point covering the withdrawal. As they made their way around the traffic circle, Cremin's driver crossed the road to provide rear security for Aggressor Red Four and in doing so became mired in the soft ground. Cremin immediately notified Aggressor Red Four to stop while he appraised the situation. He then called the M88 back to recover his tank. Red Three returned with White Two and White Three to aid in local security. Within five minutes, the M88 had successfully pulled Cremin's tank out and they returned to the consolidation point at approximately 2230 hours.⁸⁵

Rally Point

SFC Handy, call sign Scooby Doo, then came forward and said he was now in charge of the 2123rd. Moore told him just to remain nearby. Moore then told Gun Smoke One to get his landing zone kit and prepare to receive the medevac helicopter. There were houses on both sides of the roads but the soldiers did not see very many people stirring about the area. They marked the landing zone with chemical lights placed on a side road in front of Moore's truck. As the medevac helicopter descended, it came under fire from the houses to Moore's right. All the soldiers on the right flank fired into the houses but the helicopter still flew off. Medicine Man 23 radioed he had to leave, but suggested they move the landing zone further down the road. Apache One and Two drove about one mile down the road and located a safer landing zone. Moore instructed everyone to mount up in their vehicles because they had to move down the road. They placed the casualties on an empty HET trailer and then Moore gave the order to move out. They traveled about one mile where they formed another box formation and Warrior Two called the medevac back in. Gun Smoke One again laid out another landing zone to the front of the formation. To everyone's surprise the helicopter quickly flew in and landed at the first landing zone. More radioed for Gun Smoke Three to run out and tell the pilot they needed him to fly to the front of the new formation. Within three to four minutes the helicopter had relocated to the correct landing zone. They lost no time loading the casualties and then the medevac helicopter flew away.⁸⁶

At the rally point, Cremin learned three soldiers had been killed and medevaced to a Spanish camp a few miles away.⁸⁷ The only thing preventing them from departing was getting complete accountability

of all personnel and the dismounted tanks. Someone reported to CPT Moore they had more than 60 HETs in the formation. It was then Moore realized the 1452nd had followed the 2123rd through the kill zone. Moore radioed for someone in the rear to find out who was in charge of that march unit and have them contact him on his radio frequency. Moore, Apache One and Two then made a quick assessment as to what they had to do to depart. Moore told the leaders of all the units to update him on the status of their personnel, equipment, and ammunition. The tank commander said he had to download an M88 to go back to the rear to recover a disabled M1. The time was around 2100 hours.⁸⁸

Moore and his scouts pulled out their maps to find a route to the nearest coalition base. SSG Grimes informed Moore he had a soldier that had flown out with the medevac at a coalition base near their location. Moore told him to find the grid coordinates. Apache Two had also located a base near Hilla to the north, but it was a hot spot and dangerous. Grimes finally gave them the coordinates, which they plotted on the map. The base was to their rear but would force the convoy to drive back through the edge of the kill zone. There was no way Moore would ask his soldiers to go through that again. Their only other option was to continue on to the original destination, Camp Duke near Najaf, 120 kilometers away. Apache Two plotted a route and briefed it to Moore who approved it. The drive would take four to five hours and they would arrive at Duke early in the morning hours.⁸⁹

From the map reconnaissance, the convoy had to drive through just one city; so Moore told Apache Two he wanted air support when driving through that city and also wanted FOB Duke to have a quick reaction force on alert in case of another ambush. All tanks with enough fuel would escort the HETs for security. Moore wanted pairs of M1 Abrams in the front, middle and rear of the convoy in case of any trouble. He then briefed the leaders on the route and the support they would have. Moore knew his drivers were mentally and physically drained by then and knew the leaders had to convince their soldiers they would be safe so they could concentrate on driving. The units reported back over the radio they had everyone accounted for. That was the first sigh of relief Moore had since escaping the kill zone. He had feared some soldier was left back in the city and the

enemy would mutilate the body as they had done with four Blackwater security guards on 31 March.⁹⁰

As 2300 hours approached, Moore walked around checking the physical and mental status of his troops. Some were praying while others asked when they were leaving. The captain told everyone he met they were continuing their mission to the drop point. Moore described the route and the support, ensuring they would not be attacked again. He asked several drivers if they were up to completing the mission and surprisingly not one professed needing any help driving. It was hard to ask them to keep driving on after they had survived a fire fight that lasted over an hour and a half and been in a defensive position for over three hours. They would have to drive another four to five hours, which would keep them awake for over 24 hours.⁹¹

Around 2315 hours, the M88 was loaded and all vehicles were either ready to move or being towed. The HETs had plenty of fuel to make the trip and all light wheeled vehicles had added ten gallons of fuel to ensure they could complete the journey. The skillful mechanics of the 1175th and 2123rd had performed temporary repairs on all vehicles in the convoy, which then included over 70 vehicles. If not for their quick work and extensive knowledge of the HET systems, the convoy would have had to wait longer, putting it at even greater risk of another attack. With everyone ready, Moore sent word for every element to monitor his frequency throughout the convoy. Moore then asked for one last status check to verify everyone was ready to roll, and the reply came back, "Apache element ready," "Battle Five ready," "Warrior Two ready," "Scooby Doo ready," and "1452nd (T-Dog One) ready." Moore assigned Scooby Doo to bring up the rear and keep him abreast of any problems back there. The convoy finally pulled out along the planned route and all along the route they saw men carrying flags along the side of the road. Moore was sure everyone in his convoy kept a bead on every Iraqi they passed because their main concern was survival.⁹²

The radio remained quiet; causing Moore to fear his drivers might drift off to sleep. He tried to maintain a check on personnel by talking with everyone he knew that had a radio in the entire convoy. There was a Ranger One, Viper, and several Tango elements of his unit that would check on each other to help stay awake. Everyone was pulling together to help each other make it through

this mission. As the convoy drove into the city, Moore could hear the air support overhead just as the Apache element had requested. That was the last choke point causing Moore to finally feel safe. The convoy made one last turn heading north with only about 45 miles to go. Battle Five called him on the net; some of the tanks were down to 1/8th of a tank of fuel and needed to be loaded up on the HETs for the rest of the journey. The convoy halted and Moore instructed Warrior Two and Scooby Doo to supervise the loading. About 30 minutes later, the convoy was again ready to move. Moore pleaded over the net for everyone to hang in there that they were near their destination.⁹³

Finally around 0430 hours, the convoy made a left turn and rolled into FOB Duke. Elements from each company met the convoy and directed their vehicles into the FOB. The sand was of fine powder and several of the HETs became stuck. They downloaded the tracked vehicles and Cremin immediately found his commander, CPT Maynulet, briefed him while the rest of the company refueled and then prepared for follow on combat missions.⁹⁴

Moore held one more formation to ensure he accounted for all of his personnel. He then thanked them for the job they had done over the last 24 hours and had them bed down for six hours. Scooby Doo had done the same for his troops. Ranger One, Saber 25, Scooby Doo and Moore sat around discussing the last 24 hours and then started planning for the next day. They came to the conclusion; this group would stay together and would always be one family and share this bond they had developed due to the unfortunate circumstances they had encountered. The sun was starting to rise when CPT Moore finally laid his head down on his cot.⁹⁵

Lesson

From appearances, the enemy had executed a deliberately planned but hastily executed ambush, similar to those that caught the Dalton Gang in Coffeetown, Kansas and the James-Younger Gang in Northfield, Minnesota. Members of the militia or any local who wanted to participate were assigned a place to fight only to wait for the prearranged signal, in this case green flares. Upon seeing the signal, the fight began sporadically indicating its hasty execution

and grew in intensity.

The first key decision for the convoy was whether to wait for the Iraqis to clear the roadblock or take a detour through the city. Neither was a good idea. Waiting could just as likely have invited a hasty ambush, but waiting outside town possibly allowed more maneuver room. The question was whether that traffic jam was deliberate or the result of an accident. A road block can be used to channel a convoy into a deliberately prepared kill zone. Some truck companies after Easter weekend added large pushing bumpers to their 5-ton trucks and put them out front to push right through any road blocks.

The rules of engagement did not change after the April Uprising but as LTC Akin said, “the interpretation of them did.” Where before, drivers were more sensitive to civilian traffic, this changed. Civilian traffic was no longer tolerated in or near US convoys. Lead trucks would bump cars off the road to get them out of the way and rear gun trucks would not hesitate to put a round through the engine block of any car that would not keep its distance. The Iraqis quickly learned the rules and pulled off to the side of the road and halted when a convoy approached.

The urgency to get Task Force Duke into action out west left not enough time to properly prepare the move as a combat operation. All the participants found plenty of areas for improvement. At this time of the war, radios for trucks were in short supply and no single net was established for command and control. But when the ambush began down the narrow streets of Ad Diwaniyah, the fight was at crew and team level. NCOs and officers stepped up and established common communication, which ensured everyone cleared the kill zone and made it to the safety of the rally point.

The HET drivers were provided with copies of a hasty route sketch from Al Kut to An Najaf, not a detailed military map, or later computer maps, which revealed the streets of Ad Diwaniyah. With one, the trucks might have done a better job negotiating their way out of Ad Diwaniyah and going around choke points. Mobile Tracking System also provided onscreen map display of the surrounding area. Once trucks received more of those, they could navigate through congested areas or around road blocks better. But in this case, once the HETs had committed to driving down the streets of Ad Diwaniyah, they had no other choice but to follow the truck in front of them regardless of the danger.

The Al Sadr Uprising of April 2004 taught the lesson that convoys should not exceed 30 vehicles yet units arriving the next year would violate that policy and learn this same lesson the hard way. This convoy was divided into smaller march serials, but bunched up when they ran into a choke point. When the convoy turned into Ad Diwaniyah, three march serials had combined into a super convoy of 70 vehicles significantly complicating command and control. The advantage, however, was the combined firepower.

A centralized command and a separate command and control net are crucial to success on the battlefield, but this convoy had elements from eight separate companies and all operating on different frequencies, some even in plain text or on citizen band radios. When contact was made, there was no unity of command and elements began to defend themselves according to their individual leaders' guidance. CPT Moore was on his citizen band or plain text radio talking to the HETs and Apache White, while 1LT Cremin was operating off of FM 102, Battlecat on FM 202, Crusader on FM 302 and Headhunter on either FM 650 or 651. To facilitate the transfer of information, there needs to be one commander and one command net to which leaders from all companies monitor. Once established, net discipline must be enforced to keep this command net clear and for companies to then operate on internal nets.⁹⁶

During this four hour fight, there were incredible acts of heroism by the drivers of three HET companies, and the troopers of Aggressor, Battlecat, Crusader, Head Hunter and Apache White elements. In spite of the things that went wrong, the training of the soldiers who had never worked together before caused them to pull together and do the right thing under the most extreme circumstances. Consequently, the officers had nothing but praise for their soldiers and especially their NCOs. 1LT Cremin received the Silver Star Medal for his action, and SGT Ellertson and SSG Costa both earned Bronze Star Medals with “V” devices.

The HET convoy accomplished its mission and delivered the tanks of the 2-37th Armor, which combined with the 2nd ACR took back An Najaf from Al Sadr's followers in bitter fighting. But there is another way to look at this fight than getting from point to point. The mission of Task Force Dukes was to defeat Al Sadr's

resistance and the fight was brought to their convoy. Since that was where the fight was, Cremin's decision to go back into the kill zone took the fight to the enemy. This brings up the relationship between the maneuver forces and the convoys that support them. In the big picture of things, the battle space owner's mission is to defeat the enemy and secure the area, if the enemy wants to ambush convoys, then the convoys provide the bait to draw the enemy out into a fight. In this type of war, anyone who ventures outside the wire is a combatant and should be a part of that combined arms team.

There were no shortage of things that could have been done better in this convoy at all levels internal and external; but even when everyone does everything right, convoys still drive into kill zones and all that matters then is how the participants perform. None of the mistakes cited by any of the critics resulted in the death of the three soldiers out of 300 or the loss of the only HET. The enemy was waiting for a convoy and sooner or later one was going to drive through Ad Diwaniyah. On the other hand, the enemy made the biggest mistake of all – of all the convoys to ambush, they ambushed a HET convoy hauling main battle tanks with their crews. Every HET was in essence a gun truck. If the tank crew could not destroy the target with the .50 caliber machinegun, they had the 120mm main gun and were not afraid to use it. The key to success was overwhelming fire power. In the end, the insurgents of Ad Diwaniyah paid the highest price for their mistake.

Peterson reflected, "In the lens of if I got to do this again. I would have probably waited one more day prior to movement. Most of the issues would have been resolved, chiefly, I didn't understand that I needed to take charge of the executing phase of the movement. I thought I was coordinating everything up to the move, not the move. That would have led to a lot better mission analysis when it came to maps, routing, communication, and actions on contact. The only solace I have is that I was able to execute most of my lessons learned successfully as the commander of C/2-12 CAV when I went back for my second tour. This whole operation was a textbook case on leadership, troop leading procedures, and how not to do it."⁹⁷

MG Martin Dempsey, Commander of the 1st Armored Division, wrote, "A day after this fight, I received

an email from CPT Thomas Moore, of the 1175th Transportation, who was the convoy commander. He wrote: 'Were it not for the courage and actions under fire of the 2ACR and 2-37 soldiers that day, he is certain all of his men would have been killed.' He asked me if he and his soldiers engaged in that fight with us could wear the 1AD combat patch. I told him I'd be honored."

Both the 1st Armored Division and 1st Cavalry Division commanders recognized the valor of truck drivers delivering critical supplies of ammunition and fuel as well as equipment during the Al Sadr April Uprising. Consequently, both authorized the truck units that supported them to wear their division patches as combat patches. This started a new tradition. Customarily, veterans waited until they returned home before sewing on the combat patch on their right shoulder, but with the recognition by these two tank divisions, the truck drivers sewed on the patches in theater, which inspired other units to do likewise. After the second rotation, units would then hold combat patch ceremonies after 30 days in country.

April Uprising Lessons

The Al Sadr Uprising had run its course by the end of April and subsided under the pressure of the Marines and Army attacks. The Marines pulled out of Fallujah on 30 April and the Mahdi militia turned in their weapons for money. A lull followed as the insurgents reorganized and regrouped for their next offensive. When they resurfaced, they focused their attacks on civilian targets or the Iraqi military and police in an effort to disrupt the national election set for January 2005. The threat against convoys reduced to IEDs and small arms fire. On 15 May 2004, the Combined Joint Task Force 7 (CJTF7) was redesignated as Multi-National Corps-Iraq (MNC-I), under the command of LTG Thomas F. Metz. MNC-I similarly made its plans to recapture Fallujah in the fall of that year.

The obvious lesson to the general officers in both Iraq and Kuwait was that the convoys needed gun trucks and a convoy security doctrine. BG James Chambers, Commander of the 13th Corps Support Command at Logistic Support Area Anaconda, established the policy that convoys traveling north of Convoy Support Center (CSC) Scania could not exceed 30 vehicles and had to have a one-to-five ratio of gun trucks to task vehicles.

Kuwait-based convoys could travel with a 1:10 gun truck to task vehicle ratio. The military truck companies would no longer provide shooters for the contract vehicles but would integrate one green (military) truck with every three white (contract) trucks for KBR convoys and one to five for Kuwait contract convoys. The 7th Transportation Battalion at Anaconda would redesignate certain truck companies as gun truck companies. The 372nd Transportation Group in Kuwait would receive the 125th MP Battalion to conduct convoy security but would also organize a provisional company from volunteers. CPT Robert Landry would recruit, organize and train the 518th Combat Gun Truck Company. He only recruited one person by name though, 1LT James McCormick. He wanted McCormick to develop the company's Tactical Standard Operating Procedures (TACSOP). Based upon his recent experience and what McCormick had learned from the infantry manual, he came up with the turn, fix and fire concept. The following was his instructions to the gun truck crews for reaction to contact.

The first thing that must be remembered during any contact with the enemy is to maintain your composure and report the direction of contact. At the first sign of contact be it IED, RPG or small arms fire it is important to locate the source, this can be very difficult especially in a built up area where sound will echo off of buildings and in alleys. The first sign to look for its flashes and the next would be dust and sound, you will hear fire and your first reaction must be to SCAN, once the location is determined whoever has the information must send up the report. EXAMPLE: (This is Regulator 2 CONTACT Right 200 Meters, Small Arms Fire, IED, Mortar Fire, RPG) The use of smoke and flares on the contact side in the direction of enemy fire is also effective in helping Gun Trucks to spot the enemy. The use of yellow smoke seems to have an intimidating effect on the enemy they seem to fear it and believe it may be a form of chemical agent "GET YELLOW SMOKE". Flares seem to make the enemy nervous, at night I have seen some insurgents stop shooting to look up at the flare, make sure you shoot it at a slight angle toward the enemy fire. At this point vehicles in the convoy will proceed out of the kill zone even if they are not in the kill zone you

MUST NOT STOP, push through the fire, do not allow your convoy to be split up or it will be a disaster. Return fire!! Effective, Aggressive fire on the enemy, the enemy you face here is much more aggressive than any we have seen they will only displace if you make them displace. Gun trucks must not be a shoot on the go element, gun trucks must turn and face the contact and deliver effective fire, soldiers in the vehicle must get out of the gun truck using the doors as cover and delivering suppressive fire. The gunner on the top is a target, gunners should not be sky lighting themselves and they must get down behind the gun at name tape level. In the event the gunner is hit the TC must get on the gun and continue the fight. Gun trucks must stay in the kill zone and not leave until after they have accounted for all trucks in the convoy. If you have a down vehicle gun trucks must maneuver into a defensive position to defend the down vehicle and make a decision to do recovery or extract driver and leave down truck behind, this decision is made by convoy commander if he is available. The destruction of abandoned US and coalition equipment has been suspended although the destruction of equipment is a long in use practice that has been written in doctrine for years, you must obtain permission to destroy and equipment you can't take with you. Actions by convoy and gun trucks not engaged will be to move out of kill zone to move forward to a position that is varied between 2 to 5 miles remember that the enemy is very aware of the 2 mile rule and most times you will run into a secondary ambush or IED at that point so push beyond that point it is also important to remember the convoy can be up to 4 miles long so the last vehicle has to be out of that 2 mile range and not the first this has caused some convoys to have the first 10 trucks out of the line of fire but still have the rear of the convoy in the kill zone, the last truck should mark the mileage. The box formation is not a difficult maneuver but when you add civilian drivers in that convoy it can be a total disaster, make sure if you are using the BOX everyone is briefed and understands how to do it prior to moving out. Ambushes are varied and in most cases they are initiated at the 4th to 10th truck back this is done to help split convoy the divide and conquer theory.

There was renewed emphasis on the design of “hillbilly” armor for trucks and gun trucks until the factory-built add-on-armor kits and M1114 up-armored HMMWVs arrived. Gun truck designs ranged from “sit and spin,” pedestal and ring mounted machineguns. There was great imagination in all designs. Some units used M998 and M1032 HMMWVs as gun trucks while others used M923 5-ton or M1083/1087 FMTV gun trucks. Many saw height as an advantage and like using M915s as gun trucks. The 233rd HET actually came up with a design for a HET gun truck that was not fielded until 2005.

¹ CPT Erik Peterson email to Richard Killblane, June 9-July 6, 2009; and CPT Colin Cremin, “Ad-Diwaniyah, 17 April 2004,” draft report, n.d.

² Cremin

³ Ibid

⁴ Cremin, “Ad-Diwaniyah;” and Peterson email, June 9, 2009.

⁵ 766th Transportation Battalion, After Action Review – Attack in Ad Diwaniyah, 17 April 2004, 13 May 2004.

⁶ CPT Thomas J. Moore II, “Ambush at Ad Diwaniyah,” description of the battle emailed to Richard Killblane, June 11, 2009.

⁷ Peterson email.

⁸ Cremin, “Ad-Diwaniyah;” and Peterson email.

⁹ Peterson email.

¹⁰ Peterson email.

¹¹ Peterson email.

¹² Moore, “Ambush at Ad Diwaniyah.”

¹³ Peterson email.

¹⁴ Cremin, “Ad-Diwaniyah.”

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Peterson email.

¹⁷ 766th AAR.

¹⁸ Peterson email.

¹⁹ Moore, “Ambush at Ad Diwaniyah.”

²⁰ Peterson email.

²¹ Moore, “Ambush at Ad Diwaniyah.”

²² Moore, “Ambush at Ad Diwaniyah;” and Peterson email.

²³ 766th AAR.

²⁴ Moore, “Ambush at Ad Diwaniyah,” and Peterson email.

²⁵ Moore remembered the convoy departed at 1230 hours and Cremin remembered 1300 hours.

²⁶ Moore, “Ambush at Ad Diwaniyah.”

²⁷ 766th AAR; Moore, “Ambush at Ad Diwaniyah;” and Peterson email.

²⁸ 766th AAR.

²⁹ Peterson email.

³⁰ Moore, “Ambush at Ad Diwaniyah.”

³¹ Peterson email.

³² Moore, “Ambush at Ad Diwaniyah;” and 766th AAR.

³³ Moore, “Ambush at Ad Diwaniyah.”

³⁴ Cremin, “Ad-Diwaniyah.”

³⁵ Peterson email.

³⁶ Moore, “Ambush at Ad Diwaniyah;” and Peterson estimated that the drive to Ad Diwaniyah took about an hour, while Cremin believed the convoy arrived a little later closer to 1800. The 766th AAR also reported the convoy reached the town at 1715 hours.

³⁷ Peterson email; Cremin, “Ad-Diwaniyah;” Moore, “Ambush at Ad Diwaniyah;” and 766th AAR.

³⁸ Moore, “Ambush at Ad Diwaniyah;” and 766th AAR.

³⁹ Peterson email; and Moore, “Ambush at Ad Diwaniyah;” and 766th AAR.

⁴⁰ 766th AAR.

⁴¹ Moore, “Ambush at Ad Diwaniyah.”

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ 766th AAR

⁴⁴ Moore

⁴⁵ Cremin

⁴⁶ SSG Joshua Martin email to Richard Killblane, July 6, 2009.

⁴⁷ Cremin

⁴⁸ Peterson

⁴⁹ 766th AAR

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Moore

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Cremin

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ 766th AAR

⁵⁸ 766th AAR

⁵⁹ Moore and 766th AAR

⁶⁰ Moore

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² Cremin

⁶³ Peterson

⁶⁴ 766th AAR

⁶⁵ Cremin

⁶⁶ Cremin and 766th AAR.

⁶⁷ 2LT Michael Russo email to Robert Cameron, June 19, 2009.

⁶⁸ Cremin

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ Peterson

⁷¹ 766th AAR

⁷² Martin email.

⁷³ Moore and 766th AAR.

⁷⁴ Moore

⁷⁵ Cremin

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ Moore

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² Cremin

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ Moore

⁸⁷ Cremin

⁸⁸ Moore

⁸⁹ Ibid

⁹⁰ Ibid

⁹¹ Ibid

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ Ibid

⁹⁴ Cremin

⁹⁵ Moore

⁹⁶ Cremin

⁹⁷ Peterson email, June 10, 2009

1018 Firefight, 18 October 2004

518th Combat Gun Truck Company, 1487th Transportation Company

After the Al Sadr April Uprising, the 13th Corps Support Command at Logistics Support Area Anaconda, Iraq required all Kuwait-based convoys to have a minimum of three gun trucks per convoy and no convoy to exceed 30 vehicles. The 372nd Transportation Group subsequently organized the 518th Combat Gun Truck Company in May from volunteers and some soldiers the companies just did not want. Born in battle, its gun truck crews, regardless of their motivation and level of discipline, had already been baptized under fire and wanted a chance to give something back to the enemy. The escort company was the brain-child of CPT Robert Landry, a battle captain on the 372nd staff who had already commanded both an infantry and transportation company. Landry specifically recruited 1LT James McCormick to develop the tactical standard

operating procedures (SOP) who instilled in the crews the “turn, fix and fire” doctrine. McCormick believed that gun trucks should be aggressive. Instead of continuing through the kill zone and returning fire, they should respond to enemy fire by going after the insurgents and shoving the fight back down their throats. He believed that by making the enemy pay a price for attempting to kill American drivers, they would seek other game. The company came together at Udari Range in May and was trained by Military Professionals Resources, Inc. (MPRI), a contract company of retired military personnel.

Since April until 18 October, the convoys of the 372nd Transportation Group had only encountered small arms fire or improvised explosive devices (IED), no complex ambushes. Their response was always quick. The enemy would fire at a convoy, and then the nearest gun truck would quickly pull out of the convoy and head toward the enemy blazing away with its M2 .50 caliber machinegun. That was usually all it took to silence the insurgents. After each convoy, the crews would sit





SFC Steve Mikes' escort crew of the 518th Combat Gun Truck Company. Photo courtesy of Steve Mikes

around in an informal AAR and discuss what happened and what should have happened. McCormick, the originator of their tactical doctrine, was usually involved in these. Through this process, the crews trained their tactics. Because of their experience during the April Uprising, each knew how he or she would perform under fire. With the informal AARs, they knew what to do in the event of a complex ambush.

Early in the morning on 18 October 2004, three gun trucks of the 2nd Squad, 1st Platoon, 518th Combat Gun Truck Company escorted SSG Robert Mata's Iraqi Express convoy from the 1487th Medium Truck Company from Scania to Anaconda. Eight military "green" trucks were evenly spaced between every three "white" commercial trucks for a total of 20 white trucks. The third green truck back in the convoy was hauling ammunition and safety requirements required it to have appropriate panel marking on the rear of the trailer. The 5-ton gun truck, Heavy Metal, with call sign Regulator One, led the convoy

with Regulator Three 20 trucks back and Regulator Two in the rear. SGT John O. Williams was the driver and NCOIC of the 5-ton gun truck named Big O, call sign Regulator Three. SPC David Wallace was his radio operator and SPC Roger Bartz was his gunner. That 5-ton gun truck could get up to 82 mph so it could race ahead from the middle of the convoy to block any traffic. The 518th kept the HMMWV gun trucks in the

rear because they could accelerate faster. CPL Richard Swenson III was the commander and driver of Regulator Three, SPC David Gregory was his radio operation and SPC Steven Lourigan was the gunner. SFC Stephen "Steve" Mikes was the commander of Regulator Two, SGT Dale Harshbarger the driver and SPC Michael Robinson the gunner. SSG Mata positioned his command and control



CPT Robert Landry and SGT Jon Henley standing next to a M998 HMMWV gun truck with turtle shell top and mount for M2 .50 caliber machinegun. The 518th painted a marshal's star logo on their doors. Photo courtesy of Robert Landry

HMMWV, Whiskey 11, in the middle. He had an internal gun truck, Whiskey 133, out in lead of the convoy.¹

SFC Mikes' platoon of the 1486th Medium Truck



“Big O” was a M923 5-ton gun truck with a pushing bumper designed for busting through road blocks.

Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

Company had conducted convoy escort before and, upon their release from the mission in July, he and his gun truck crew joined the 518th Gun Truck Company. They had arrived too late to attend the training at Udari so they were not trained in the tactics developed by McCormick. They continued to use their own instead.

By then, the insurgents had changed their tactics again. With experience, the Americans became much better at identifying IEDs. Once an IED was discovered, the instruction would go out over the Sheriff net or Mobile Tracing System (MTS) for all convoys to halt until Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) personnel came up to detonate the IED. Knowing this, the insurgents decided to set up IEDs and wait for the EOD personnel to arrive, then kill them. Unfortunately, there was always some convoy that did not get the word to halt.

As the 1487th convoy approached the turn onto Alternate Supply Route (ASR) Sword from Main Supply Route (MSR) Tampa around 0650 hours, Big O raced ahead and blocked traffic on the right side. In accordance with normal procedure, SFC Mikes called into Pegasus Romeo, the unit in charge of the area security and was informed the route was clear. After the convoy proceeded up ASR Sword, Whiskey 133 ran into a security element of the 1st Cavalry Division on route patrol, which had the road blocked off at an overpass. The MPs informed Whiskey 133 that an IED had been found on the overpass and the EOD element was inbound. Whiskey 133 radioed back to SSG Mata who stopped the convoy just short of the overpass. Likewise, Wallace in Regulator One radioed the information back

to SFC Mikes. SSG Mata had the convoy wait in a linear formation. After talking with Mata on the radio, Mikes instructed his gun trucks to take up security positions for the convoy. Regulator One pulled to the right of the convoy for right security and started falling back to protect the ammunition trailer. The middle gun truck, Regulator Three, pulled out to the left and took up a screening position near a cross-over area in the median where the guard rails had been knocked down. There Swensen and Gregory dismounted. Regulator Two pulled rear security with Mikes and Harshbarger dismounting to direct civilian traffic down a side road to the right of the convoy.²

This section of ASR Sword was the enemy’s favorite place for convoy ambushes. Two story dwellings flanked both sides of the road with thick adobe walls to provide cover from enemy fire. Guard rails in the median separated the east and westbound lanes, but intermittently had rails removed for vehicles to cross over. Around 0655 hours, the HMMWV with the EOD personnel finally pulled up on the overpass. Suddenly the truck drivers heard an explosion. An RPG had hit the bridge. SFC Mikes and Harshbarger spun around towards the sound of the explosion in time to see the smoke trail of a second RPG streaking past the convoy toward the overpass. The RPGs were fired from outside a yellow two-story building near the end of the convoy on the left hand side. To everyone’s surprise the rockets had evidently intended to kill the arriving EOD personnel. An entire convoy was sitting in the open and the insurgents fired at the HMMWV on the overpass and the rockets exploded harmlessly on the bridge. This attack was immediately followed by small arms fire from the buildings across on the north side of the road.³

Immediately the crews mounted their gun trucks while the truck drivers returned fire. Regulator One drove back around the convoy and headed down left side of the convoy to the ammunition trailer. Swensen and Gregory had mounted Regulator Three and Swensen drove his gun truck across the median into the westbound lane then turned west. He did not know where the fire was coming from. He could see the drivers returning fire and made contact with SSG Croley who pointed in the direction of the fire. Swensen positioned his HMMWV between the enemy fire and the convoy using his gun truck as a shield. Lourigan began pouring

.50 caliber fire into the enemy in the houses. Swensen then radioed Regulator Two to let the crew know where they were.⁴

Upon mounting Regulator Two, SPC Robinson, the gunner, yelled down to Harshbarger, "Let's Go, Let's Go, I got them, Let's Go, I got them." He spotted the insurgents about 400 meters to his front. Upon a positive identification of six to seven insurgents in front of the tan building while on the move, he opened fire with his .50 knocking one down and the rest retreated into the houses. Once in position in the middle of the convoy, he saw more muzzle flashes coming from the windows and doors of the tan house. While Robinson returned fire at the muzzle flashes, the rest of the crew dismounted and engaged the enemy. Robinson spotted one to two insurgents either hiding behind or trying to get into an orange and white car. He emptied the rest of his belt of ammunition into the car, nullifying that threat. The crew of Regulator Three saw Regulator Two driving up from the rear of the convoy and they automatically shifted their fire to the left. Robinson quickly switched to the SAW since the ammunition cans were down at his feet. So Williams drove Big O back to the rear of the convoy and fell in to

cover an ammunition trailer. He removed the ammunition placard so the enemy would not know which trailer had ammunition.⁵

Within a minute after the fight began, a flight of Blackhawk gunships, OH-58Ds and one F16 arrived overhead. The gun truck crews continued to engage the windows and doors of the buildings until the enemy fire ceased. The entire fight ended three to four minutes after it started. All the gun trucks had essentially pulled out onto the road between the enemy and the convoy to create a gun shield for the trucks, then returned fire. A sweep of the area provided several dead insurgents, numerous caches of bomb making materials, piles of weapons and ammunition.⁶

Lesson

This provided an example of the detailed planning and rehearsal of the ambush and inflexible execution. The enemy evidently did not know what to do when the convoy pulled up so they did what they had trained to do, fire at the overpass. This was a mistake the gun trucks took advantage of. The truck drivers turned gun truck crew members of the 518th had been waiting for



Rear view of "Big O" showing the fabricated steel gun box for the M2 .50 caliber machinegun. It also had mounts for M249 SAWs on the fabricated door armor. Photo courtesy of the 518th

a chance to give the enemy back a little of what they had received in April. Three gun truck crews had their chance and acted without hesitation. The drivers and gun truck crews performed almost exactly as they had trained.

The enemy plan seemed to have been to ambush an EOD patrol by planting the IED out as bait and then wait for the EOD vehicles to arrive. By policy, once an IED was identified, all convoys on that route had to stop before reaching the site. In this case, the unexpected happened and a convoy pulled up to the overpass with the IED. The enemy had to choose between ambushing the convoy or following the plan.

The insurgents in Iraq operated very much like the insurgents did in Vietnam. They evidently operated in small cells of four to seven which did not allow them to conduct large scale collective training. They had to do everything in secret. Consequently, they conducted detailed planning and rehearsal of their ambushes but were inflexible in the execution. They could not change the plan and take advantage of the convoy that had halted in front of them. The advantage of an ambush is the element of surprise enables the ambushers to



SFC Mikes' convoy was stopped before this overpass on ASR Sword due to the discovery of an IED.

Photo courtesy of Steve Mikes

destroy targets with their opening volley. That was one reason the attackers initiated with the most lethal weapons first. After the opening rounds, then chaos reigns and the battle can go to either side. The enemy was probably counting on the fact that when an IED was spotted, convoys were usually stopped where they were. The enemy had not accounted for a convoy reaching the

kill zone. The fact that the enemy was inflexible in the execution of their plan was their weakness.

The gun trucks of the 518th did exactly what they were supposed to do when halted. They pulled out and established a gun wall. They were alert and were in the perfect position to return fire when the enemy fired at the approaching HMMWV. Having lost the element of surprise, the fight went quickly to the side of the 518th and it was a very one-sided fight.

The members of this convoy held an after action review upon return to Navistar, and SFC Jody Cuthbertson, the first sergeant of the 518th Gun Truck, pointed out that the gun trucks were so eager to get into the fight, they rushed in rather than remain on the flanks. Crossing in front of the convoy prevented other drivers from engaging the enemy, and leaving the flank to enter the kill zone allowed the enemy an opening to escape. Had they remained on the flank, the range of their weapons would still have suppressed the enemy and they could have seen if any enemy tried to escape. Raven 42 would employ the flanking maneuver the next year in the Palm Sunday Ambush for the very reason Cuthbertson described. Cuthbertson attributed this to SFC Mikes' crew not having attended the same training as the rest of the company at Udari.

The US Army tends to reward inefficiency when it comes to issuing out awards for valor. If everyone in the organization performs exactly the way they should then there is no opportunity for any one person to stand out. Only when things go wrong does the burden



Two-story house from which the RPGs were fired.

Photo courtesy of Steve Mikes



Top: View of kill zone from rear of the convoy. The smoke is rising from the two-story house. The HMMWV in the photo belonged to the MPs that responded to the ambush. **Bottom:** The gun trucks shot up this car parked next to the house from where the RPGs were fired. Photo courtesy of Steve Mikes

of success fall upon individuals. History will show that the most chaotic operations produce the most heroes. In this case, the 518th executed their reaction to ambush drill exactly as they were supposed to. Only SGT Williams earned the Bronze Star Medal with V device for using taking risk to protect the explosive cargo. The 18 October ambush, referred to by the participants as the 1018 Firefight for the numerical date, provided an example of efficiency.

¹ SGT John O. Williams interview by Richard Killblane, 8 March 2005; SFC Stephen Mikes' sworn statement, 21 November 2004; and "Firefight 1018," Green Tab AARs, 106th Trans Bn.

² "Firefight 1018," Williams interview; Mikes sworn statement; SGT Austin John O Williams sworn statement, 22 November 2004; and CPL Richard David Swensen III sworn statement, 23 November 2004.

³ Mikes, Harshbarger, Swensen and Williams sworn statements.

⁴ Williams and Swensen sworn statements.

⁵ "Narrative for Award of the Bronze Star Medal with Valor to SPC Michael E. Robinson," and Williams interview.

⁶ Williams interview.

Firefight on ASR Heart, 30 January 2005

178 Route Security Element (RSE), Navistar

By November 2004, the replacement crews for the 518th Gun Truck Company had arrived and were going through their training at Udari Range. LTC James Sagen, Commander of the 106th Transportation Battalion, wanted the new crews to ride with the veteran crews as long as they could. They completed their left-seat rides on both Christmas and New Year's Eve. By January 2005, a few of the 518th Gun Truck veterans remained at Camp Navistar.¹

In Mid-December, 1LT James McCormick had visited Sagen in his office to say he could no longer work with CPT Thelonious McLean-Burrell, the new 518th Commander. McCormick wanted out of the 518th but not the battalion. He then asked Sagen if he had ever thought about having his own personal gun truck force, something that would support him and McCormick would not have to argue with the commander, like he did McLean-Burrell. McLean-Burrell had replaced CPT Robert Landry as the new commander of the 518th and brought a new command philosophy to the company that differed significantly from that of the previous commander. McCormick needed to leave and wanted to take the remaining 18 members of the original 518th before they returned to their parent companies. McCormick had already heard some of his former soldiers were not well received by their parent truck companies.²

Since October, there had been an increase in criminal activity just across the border, especially a hijacking on 15 October. Locals would lay unexploded ordnance (UXO) in the roads to stop the convoys or metal spikes to cause flats then hijack some of the trucks. Some kid could drag an old artillery shell from the previous war out into the road and the Movement Control Team (MCT) would shut the road down for hours to find out if it was a real threat or for Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) to clear it. The Movement Control Team would not immediately get the word the road was cleared and meanwhile, convoys sat on the road vulnerable to attack waiting for clearance to drive. Too much valuable driving time was lost. LTC Sagen felt this was ridiculous and he needed his own set of eyes out on the road to determine if the debris in the road was a real threat and to eliminate it. The 518th had discovered large

quantities of ammunition and received small arms fire within a mile of the border. McCormick believed the Iraqis were building up for something big. The road south of Convoy Support Center (CSC) Scania had always been considered relatively safe for traffic in comparison to the Sunni Triangle. The British had responsibility for the area but were spread thin. Their patrols came down to the midway point to Safwan. The Danish military patrolled Safwan but not aggressively so convoys were increasingly being fired on and hijacked just across the border. To assess the problem, LTC Sagen went out on that road with McCormick looking for an alternate route. At first, Sagen was impressed with the lieutenant's intimate knowledge of the road networks throughout the town. Along the way, they saw RPGs stacked on the side of the road. Sagen anticipated that the insurgent threat was moving south. Since the Brits could not cover the entire area, he wanted his own route security patrols. Its mission would be to conduct day and night patrols on Alternate Supply Route (ASR) Circle-Heart and Main Supply Route (MSR) Tampa with the purpose of locating insurgents and protecting the flow of military traffic. LTC Sagen would place command and control of this element under his Operations Officer, MAJ James Brady. This was a perfect assignment for 1LT McCormick and the former 518th members.³

Sagen realized that the 518th soldiers had been away from their parent companies too long and might not be welcomed back. Many of them had been discarded of their companies in the first place. After everything they had been through in the 518th, this was no way to treat them. They were battle hardened, just the kind of soldiers he needed for this mission and McCormick was the ideal leader for them. Besides his knowledge of the area, the soldiers respected him. He was fearless and Sagen knew he could trust him to make the right decisions out there on his own. Sagen also knew that McCormick was an adrenaline junkie and it was not fair to make him to come off his addiction by going "cold turkey" and sending him back to his parent company. Sagen wanted to wean McCormick and his 518th soldiers slowly off adrenaline before they went home and this route security patrol was a good way to do it. It would get them back out on the road with great latitude but he did not expect much combat this far south. The coincidence of the release of the 518th veterans and the

need for the route security worked out best for everyone.⁴

On 1 January, a white truck was hijacked on ASR Circle. The 1-178 FA escorting the convoy did not have enough assets to chase after the hijacked truck. MAJ Brady sent McCormick out to find the truck. Brady also informed McCormick it looked like they were going to create the gun truck platoon to secure the routes and added the lieutenant would be working directly for him. McCormick was elated for several reasons; he was getting away from McLean - Burrell and he was getting to take his guys back out on the road. They never recovered the hijacked truck, but found the driver on the side of the truck. McCormick felt they had lost too much time talking about it. McCormick ran some back roads and did receive some gun fire and saw a large explosion in the distance.⁵

Watching what happened to the 518th and his conflict with McLean - Burrell wore away at McCormick's morale. The chance to get his guys back together and work directly for MAJ Brady and LTC Sagen brought new life to the lieutenant. There was one person he definitely wanted back on his team. SFC Jody "Cut" Cuthbertson, the acting first sergeant, had been shipped to Camp Arifjan but held no job for a couple of weeks. McCormick asked LTC Sagen for him and it just so happened they had yet not moved him to the Group headquarters. He actually was assigned to the 106th Battalion South Tactical Operations Center (TOC). It took McCormick two weeks to sneak him back to Navistar and assign him to the route security mission. They then worked the 518th

and recovered all their soldiers they wanted except SPC Ford, of the 227th. His former leaders worked very hard to get him back but he remained the last whipping boy of the old 518th.⁶

So McCormick and Cuthbertson had a new challenge to stand up, equip and crew this specialized unit. Sagen placed the route security platoon under his Headquarters Detachment, commanded by CPT David Boland, who picked up all maintenance and logistical support functions for the newly formed unit. The platoon received four of the old 518th HMMWVs with add-on-armor kits for two patrols. Each gun truck crew was armed with a M249 Squad Automatic Weapon (SAW). Each team had one M203 grenade launcher with 30 rounds of ammunition. Each soldier carried double basic load – fourteen 30-round magazines for their M16s, and 1,000 rounds for SAW. In addition, the vehicles carried smoke grenades, parachute flares, and flash-bang grenades. Each crew member carried either a bayonet, hatchet or other large knife and many carried Iraqi pistols, which fired 9mm ammunition. They found the Iraqis feared a pistol pointed at them more than any other weapon. The HMMWVs had SINCGARS, citizen band radios, cell phones and commercial handheld radios. The mission began on 1 January 2005.⁷

Sagen had not cleared this with his higher command, the 7th Transportation Group. It was something needed to be done and he just did it. There was some tremendous risk in that since COL Jeffrey Miser was strict on procedures. At first Sagen named it



SPC Joe Lane stands in front of his HMMWV. The 178 Route Security Element (RSE) used HMMWVs turned over from the 518th Gun Truck Company. The 518th kept the M2 .50 caliber machineguns and the RSE mounted M249 SAWs on top instead. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

the 106 Convoy Escort and Liaison Team (CELT). During the first two days of operation, the CELT found thousands of unexploded rounds and, due to these finds they developed a joint mission with British EOD. The British obviously did not like the name CELT and the 7th Group called down telling the 106th they would not have CELTs any more. So Sagen changed it to 106 Route Security Element (RSE). Over the next five days, the RSE and British security force traveled up and down the roads finding all kinds of ammunition and bombs for the EOD to come along and destroy. During this time the criminals and Anti - Iraqi Forces (AIF) started to run when the RSE came up on them. About mid -January, the RSE patrols drove up and surprised several Iraqis setting up ambushes at night, captured five Iraqis and scared the rest away.⁸

The 7th Group command and staff became upset when they heard Sagen had his own gun trucks out patrolling the roads. To Sagen's surprise, 7th Group had no conflict with the mission just did not think it was the mission of the 106th. The 1st Battalion, 178th Field Artillery had responsibility for convoy security within the 7th Transportation Group. So Sagen made a deal with its battalion commander to officially attach the RSE to the 1-178 FA and the changed its name to 178 Route Security Element so they could go out on missions, but unofficially it would still answer to Sagen. The 1-178 FA had authorization to patrol the area north of the border, but not enough assets to do it. Sagen's solution worked for everyone including 7th Group. 7th Group just wanted everyone to stay in their lane. That was essentially 7th Group's blessing on the operation. Unofficially, everyone in battalion referred to them as the RSE.⁹

On 23 January, two RSE HMMWVs were out on patrol looking for a hijacked truck when a red vehicle pulled up. Several Iraqis with weapons stepped out and fired at the RSE. CPL Bryan Noble and SPC Steve Lourigan shot two Iraqis. The RSE also thwarted six hijackings and chased down the hijackers who had stolen trucks and equipment. One of Iraqis they captured had a cell phone that kept ringing. The RSE had a Kuwaiti interpreter with them that day. He answered the call and the Iraqis on the other end asked if he had the truck. He said they did and told them to come and get it. The RSE detained them when they arrived. The RSE also found caches of weapons and detained over 48 Iraqis in less than a month. The RSE assisted convoys that had

broken down, cleared the routes and maintained crowd control and stopped kids from throwing rocks. They also gave out food, water, clothes, footballs and soccer balls to the children in Safwan. It was McCormick's hope to win the hearts and minds and inspire fear in the enemy. It proved exactly what Sagen had hoped for. However, 7th Group saw it differently. After every incident with the capture of a hijacker or insurgents, the Group S3 would call down and ask what the 106th Battalion was up to. They were a transportation battalion so why were they running combat operations. Sagen had correctly guessed that after the Battle of Fallujah, enemy activity had been pushed further south.¹⁰

ASR Heart Firefight on 30 January 2005

The Route Security Element (RSE) ran two patrols a day. Cuthbertson ran the day missions and McCormick ran night missions. McCormick liked to go out at night because that was when most of the trouble occurred. When the other was in, they would be the quick reaction force (QRF) for the ongoing mission. If there was trouble, the RSE needed an officer to coordinate with the British who owned the sector to deploy a reaction force, but McCormick knew if he needed help he could count on Cut to rally the troops to get his own QRF out there. Cut would not second guess whether he had permission to go. He would think only that his lieutenant was in trouble and he would let nothing stop him. That was the kind of trust that McCormick had in Cut.¹¹

Since the 106th Battalion could no longer keep the vehicles uploaded with ammunition, this lost time in getting the QRF ready to roll. To reduce time, the RSE did not keep their vehicles in the motor pool which was a considerable distance away, but parked them on the barracks side of the battalion headquarters. They also stored the ammunition in a CONEX near the vehicles to reduce the upload time. In Vietnam, the gun trucks similarly remained uploaded and parked right next to the barracks at night so they could respond to attacks on the perimeter on short notice.¹²

The night patrol usually left prior to dark, around 1800 hours. Normally, McCormick took eight people out on his mission, four for each HMMWV gun truck. Prior to departure, someone would pick up "To Go" meals for everyone from the Dining Facility and the RSE soldiers would eat around their vehicles. They would also take

chow out to the other RSE shift and meet at the Bridge 1A where they would exchange information. Because 30 January was the day for the Iraqi national elections, McCormick had sent out three vehicles that day with Cut. The extra HMMWV came in to pick up the dinner meals and would go back out with McCormick.¹³

His soldiers were sitting around eating when McCormick noticed SGT K'ray Holloway appeared ill. He walked over and asked, "What's going on girl?" She replied that she was feeling sick and did not want to go out on patrol. She added she had a feeling something bad was going to happen. Upon hearing that another soldier said he was also sick. It was very unusual to have two crew members sick at the same time. At first McCormick thought there might be a flu bug going around, but he remembered that Holloway was like a barometer for impending trouble. She had no problems going out on convoys but whenever she was sick something bad happened. In combat soldiers become very superstitious and pay close attention to any remote indicator of impending contact. Some soldiers also develop a heightened intuition of impending danger. After what Holloway said, the lieutenant also had a gut feeling that something bad would happen but he had no idea how bad it would be.¹⁴

Since each vehicle had an extra crew member, McCormick did not feel he really needed to find replacements, but he asked for volunteers from the third HMMWV. SPC Travis Stantz said he would go out and was volunteering for a 24-hour patrol. The others in his

HMMWV said they were tired. Stantz was tired too but did not want to sit around camp all night long doing nothing when there might be some sort of action. If something did "go down," he felt he could help protect other convoys.¹⁵

SGT K'ray Holloway and SPC Travis Stantz had not been members of the original 518th Gun Truck Company but had volunteered to join the RSE from 1486th Medium Truck Company. CPT Doug Wilhelm, the commander of the 1486th, was very supportive of the RSE mission and offered McCormick his good soldiers. Both of them had driven on gun trucks in their company. Stantz liked the responsibility of protecting other drivers and fighting against terrorism.¹⁶

Holloway was an assistant gunner on McCormick's gun truck and the guy was the driver on the other truck. PFC Timothy Parsons was the driver of McCormick's vehicle and asked to replace Holloway on the SAW. Stantz replaced Parsons as the driver. Before they left Holloway warned them to be careful because something bad was going to happen. The RSE team consisted of 1LT James McCormick's M998 crew (Bastogne 1) of SPC Travis Stantz, driver, and SPC Brandon Whisenant, SAW gunner, and SGT Steve Lourigan's M1025 crew (Bastogne 2) of SPC Joseph "Joe" Lane, driver, and PFC Timothy Parsons, SAW gunner. Bryan Noble missed this mission because he had volunteered to ride on one last convoy of the 1486th into Iraq anticipating it might encounter contact.¹⁷

The night patrol met with Cut's day patrol to discuss what they had seen that day. They saw a lot of Iraqis out



Bridge 1A at the intersection of ASR Heart and MSR Tampa. The southern desert of Iraq was flat and open.

Photo courtesy of the 106th Transportation Battalion



Two RSE HMMWVs usually provided overwatch on Bridge 1A. Photo courtesy of the 106th Transportation Battalion

voting. Many of them were happy and had come up to his vehicle to show them the purple ink on their fingers. Cut said one Iraqi came up and told him there was a white Chevy Capri with armed Iraqis just outside Safwan near Bridge 1A telling people not to vote. The RSE soldiers had a great rapport with an Iraqi family that lived near the bridge. The soldiers even called the parents “Mom” and “Dad” and gave the kids toys and food. The family was a tremendous source of useful information.

After Cut’s patrol left, McCormick’s vehicles patrolled their sector watching for that white Chevy Capri. Because a pipeline fire had burnt a bridge, the convoys took a detour up ASR Circle through Safwan to ASR Heart and then rejoined MSR Tampa. It usually took McCormick’s patrol two hours checking the route up to the last bridge in their sector. They found a few road spikes and trash which they picked but otherwise it was unusually quiet. The Iraqi thieves placed metal spikes in the road to cause flats and would then hijack the truck when the driver stopped to replace the flat tire. For an election day they expected to see people out firing their weapons in celebration. The two HMMWVs then took up an overwatch position on Bridge 6A at the intersection of ASR Heart and MSR Tampa. It was pitch black and cold that night. The crews could see no moon or stars making the night very spooky.¹⁸

Off in the distance on Tampa north of their position, Whisenant saw a couple of vehicles with his night vision goggles turn off their lights then approach to within a hundred meters of the bridge and halt. He told McCormick about them but the lieutenant assumed they were either Iraqi Army or Iraqi Police since they also patrolled the area. The vehicles turned around, backed away and then drove off to the right into the desert.¹⁹

The RSE then saw the lights of a HET convoy approaching in the distance. The 1158th HET had only been in country a few weeks and 1LT Kim Kleiman was the convoy commander on her first convoy. She had completed one right seat/left seat ride with the 1836th HET, which they replaced. Her convoy consisted of 25 military “green” HETs and 40 contract “white” trucks with four gun trucks as escorts. Since 7th Transportation Group was new to Iraq, it did not see the need for keeping the convoys smaller than 30 vehicles. Not only that, but because of the shortage of gun trucks in theater, Group had not given her the recommended



McCormick’s patrol pulled the night shift.

Photo courtesy of Joe Lane

1:10 ratio of gun trucks. With only four escort vehicles, Kleiman did not want to divide her convoy into two serials thus reducing the protection to only two gun trucks per serial. Her internal gun trucks were the last vehicles in the convoy. She also had three HMMWVs in the middle of the convoy from the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment whose equipment they were hauling north to Forward Operating Base (FOB) Kalsu. While the unit rotation maintained good cohesion, it lost continuity. The new units arriving had not learned the hard lessons of the April Uprising. The biggest challenge facing 7th Group was accomplishing the “surge” (rotation of units) with an extremely limited number of trucks. The replacement units had little comprehension of the intensity of what had happened before they arrived.²⁰

The 1158th convoy had linked up with its escorts from the 1st Battalion, 178th FA at Navistar. For this convoy, the Field Artillery provided two M998 HMMWV gun trucks and the 1158th had two internal gun trucks. SSG Heggie, from the 1-178 FA, was the escort commander. The convoy pulled out of Navistar at 1600 hours. After crossing the border, the convoy turned off of MSR Tampa and followed the detour along ASR Circle through the border town of Safwan. Just a few miles across the border, the convoy stopped to change a flat on a Third Country National (TCN) HET. The convoy had just cleared the town of Safwan on ASR Circle when it stopped to change 32 flat tires, just two miles short of ASR Heart, the last turn before rejoining Tampa again. One TCN had abruptly halted separating the last nine vehicles from the convoy. This left one 11th ACR HMMWV as front security of this last section and SGT Michael A. Olivas’ HMMWV gun truck from the 1158th



HMMWV of the 1-178th FA with add-on armor kit, local purchased turret armor and gun shield. They escorted the 1LT Kleiman's HET convoy. Photo courtesy of the Richard Killblane

in the rear. The two gun trucks provided security while the drivers and maintenance teams changed flats. Some of the drivers said they had seen children throwing road spikes in the road.

While the maintenance personnel and drivers changed tires, two or three unmarked white civilian pickups with unlit rotating amber lights approached the convoy from Safwan. New to the country, SPC Aaron J. Ingham, in the rear gun truck, had no intention of letting them pass even though it had been pounded into his head that the Iraqi Police and National Guard were friendly and to treat them as coalition forces. Ingham had too many soldiers working on the ground and not enough security. He did not care who they were, he was not letting anyone pass his convoy. So he told them to turn around. A short time later, the 11th ACR HMMWV called back reporting they had several pickup trucks up front wanting to pass from the other direction. The Cavalrymen thought they were either Iraqi Police or Iraqi National Guard. They wanted to let them through, but the rear security again said not to let them

pass. The same Cavalryman called his squad leader in the other HMMWV and asked if they could let the Iraqis pass. He explained the Iraqis were a little pushy even attempting to drive past without permission. The squad leader answered, "I don't care if he is the President of the fucking United States, he ain't coming through my sector." The 11th ACR HMMWV almost had to fire a warning shot to get them to leave.²¹

Once the tires were changed, the rear element joined up with the main convoy and SPC Michael L. Bennet in the rear gun truck informed Kleiman the convoy was together again. She then gave the order to move out. The lead gun truck of 1158th convoy came driving down ASR Heart to make the right hand turn onto Tampa but took a wrong turn on a dirt road

right before the on-ramp.²²

McCormick could see the lights of Kleiman's convoy back about five miles on ASR Circle. McCormick told the Lourigan to mark the turn with chemical lights. Lourigan drove down the ramp, broke some plastic chemical lights and threw them so the convoy would see the



HET convoy coming off of exit ramp showing 100 meter interval. Photo courtesy of SFC Vanderwerf

correct turn. McCormick then had his crews put chemical lights on their antennas so they could be identified as friendly and reported back to his battalion TOC that the gun truck was making the wrong turn. The lead gun truck had stopped and then one soldier climbed out looking around as if he was lost. McCormick and his crews joked, "How are these guys going to find their way through Baghdad if they are lost out here?" After five minutes of waiting, the convoy caught up with the lead gun truck. The soldier then climbed back in his vehicle and drove onto Tampa across the strip of desert from the dirt road and the convoy followed its exact trail. As they were slowly creeping onto Tampa around 2100 hours, McCormick then sent a text message through his mobile tracking system (MTS) to the battalion TOC that the convoy had made the wrong turn but was getting back on Tampa.²³

Once on Tampa, a contract truck had a problem with its trailer and Kleiman again ordered the convoy to stop. The lead gun truck continued driving further up the road. The rear gun truck with SGT Olivas, SPC Bennett and SPC Ingham, halted about 100 to 200 meters from the off ramp. SSG Lane Wright in the last HET turned to see the headlights of another convoy approaching 1,000 meters behind him. Because of the blackout conditions and no illumination, Bennett and Ingham wanted to prevent a collision. So they grabbed three breakdown triangles from Wright's HET, hung three chemical lights from their body armor, told their gunner, SGT Olivas, that they were going out to place the triangles and chemical

lights in the road a few hundred feet behind them. Ingham informed Bennett he was going to break the chemical lights at the last possible moment since he did not want to be walking down the road in the dark with a couple glowing light sticks in his hands. Just as Ingham was setting up the triangles and lights, Olivas yelled that their convoy was getting ready to roll. The two soldiers quickly picked up their chemical lights and triangles and then returned to the convoy discussing how they were going to warn the rapidly approaching convoy of their presence and not violate light discipline.²⁴

After about a 20 minute wait, Kleiman was confirming the head count with her assistant convoy commander, SSG Carl "Mo" Morabito, when her handheld radio beeped indicating the battery was growing weak. Kleiman rode in the second green HET in the convoy and SSG Mo rode in the rear. She told Sergeant Mo, "My battery's going." He answered, "No problem, ma'am," and within moments, ran up and threw her a new battery. Just as she caught the battery, her convoy came under fire. At 2115 hours, she heard the whoosh of an RPG fired from the right side of the road that landed short of the convoy and exploded. Her rear internal gun truck also reported RPGs from the right. The RSE saw the explosion at the rear of the convoy. The RPG was immediately followed by lots of small arms fire from both sides of the road. The front of the convoy took fire from the left and the rear from the right, more like a Z-type kill zone. SSG Wright had just climbed back into the cab of the last HET in the convoy when the small arms fire broke out. This ambush caught everyone by surprise as no one expected any ambushes that far south on Tampa. The area had been considered relatively safe except from theft.²⁵

In the rear of the convoy, the drivers looked to their right to determine the source of the explosions. They saw a large amount of tracer fire and heard a heavy volume of small arms fire from the approaching convoy. That was when Bennett reported the small arms fire and approaching convoy to Kleiman on his SINCGARS. Upon hearing small arms fire, Olivas spun his turret toward the east side of the road and fired his .50 in the direction of the enemy fire. As tracers passed over the hood and turret of their HMMWV, Bennett fired out the passenger window and reported contact on the radio while Ingham fired over the hood of his gun truck. The muzzle flashes

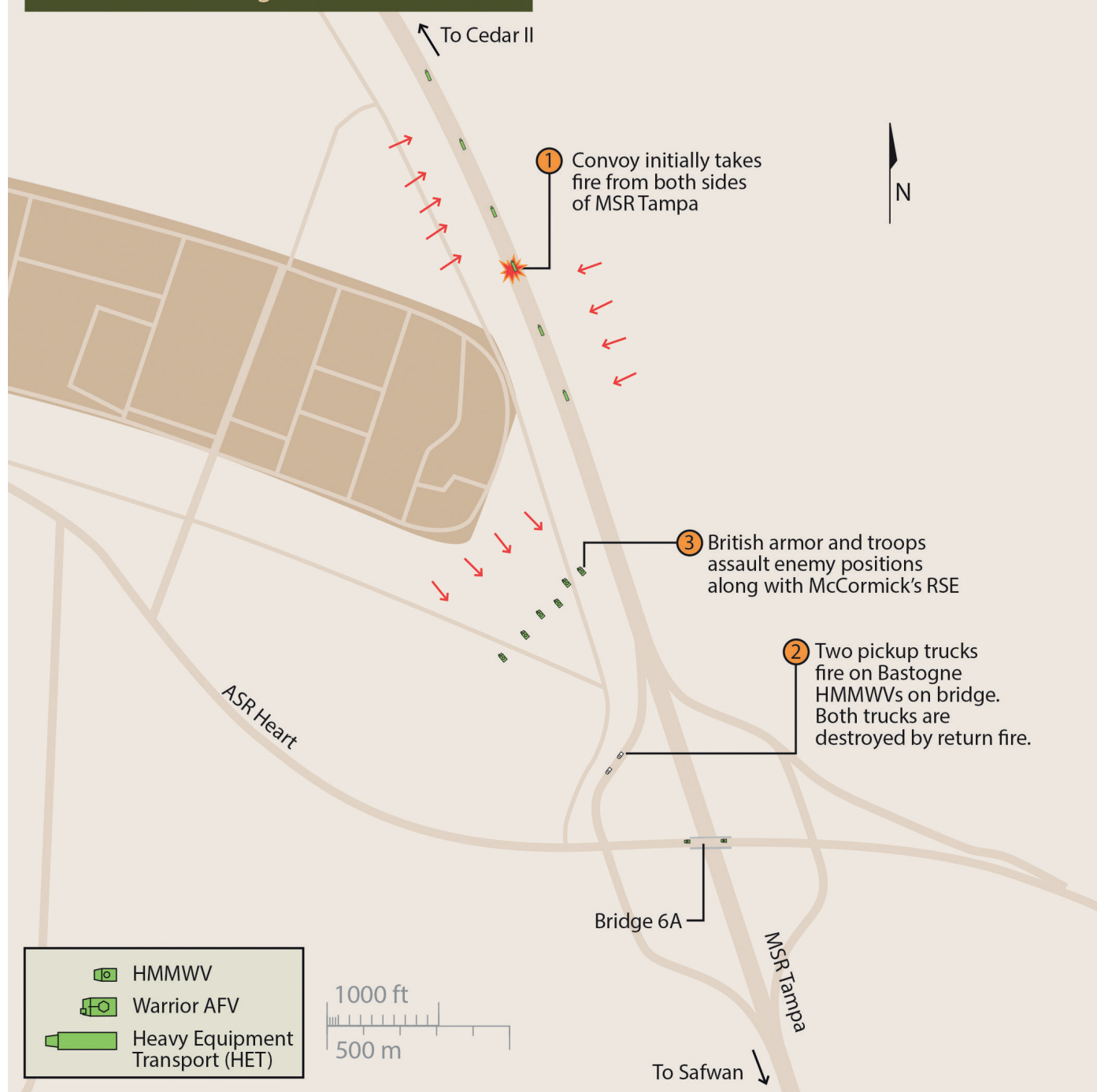


HET convoy halted on the side of MSR Tampa. When a convoy halted, it usually closed up the interval.

Photo courtesy of SFC Vanderwerf

30 January 2005

- ASR Heart Firefight



spread out over 100 to 125 meters from approximately seven to ten three-foot high prepared fighting position about 50 to 75 meters from the road and the enemy fire concentrated on the rear of the convoy.²⁶

The drivers returned the enemy fire with a heavy volume of their own. SSG Wright remembered seeing the M88 tank recovery vehicles on the trailer ahead of

and behind him open fire with their .50s. With the lead gun truck further out front, her front was exposed and Kleiman did not have full accountability from all her gun trucks. The lead gun truck upon hearing the gunfire turned around and headed back to the convoy. Kleiman knew her assistant convoy commander was still not in his vehicle. The soldiers returned fire until SSG Mo told

her he was unable to get back to his vehicle due to the volume of fire – from both the insurgents and the drivers. He was worried about getting hit by friendly fire.²⁷

The second convoy came to a stop right behind the last gun truck of Kleiman's HET convoy. The vehicle commander of the lead 5-ton opened his door, leaned out and yelled to Ingham asking if he was on Tampa. The rest of the convoy continued to engage the enemy. Ingham answered that he was on Tampa. The vehicle commander then asked if he was heading north on Tampa. Ingham again said he was and asked if their destination was Cedar II. The vehicle commander said yes and Ingham then told him that his convoy could follow them out of the kill zone as they were heading to Cedar II. The guy closed his door and Ingham turned back to firing over the hood of his HMMWV. Then the convoy pulled out around the HET convoy and headed north, not wanting to wait in the kill zone.²⁸

As soon as the fight began, McCormick reported it to battalion and told his guys to mount up and go down to investigate. He saw muzzle flashes on both sides of the road, most of which came from his right. McCormick's two HMMWVs met up with the rear internal gun truck, which was a HEMTT or 5-ton. As soon as the two RSE HMMWVs arrived, the drivers stopped firing even though the enemy kept firing. McCormick's vehicle pulled up next to the last gun truck of the second convoy. Whisenant yelled up at the gunner, "What's happening?" Their gunner yelled back, "We're taking fire from both sides." The RSE fired flares at the muzzle flash to drop them behind the enemy. This would silhouette the enemy and McCormick had learned in an earlier ambush that the flares disrupted and confused the enemy. This time it did not. McCormick walked up to the rear of the gun truck and asked where the fire was coming from and the gunner said they were taking fire from the right and some from the left. James then fired some more flares at the enemy positions on the right. Off in the distance, McCormick saw a civilian pickup. Then the gunner in the last gun truck told McCormick, "Gotta go." McCormick asked, "Everything good?" They exchanged thumbs up and the gunner answered, "Everything was good." At 2120 hours the HET convoy was on the road again.²⁹

When the lead gun truck had returned, SSG Heggie screamed at the top of his lungs over the radio for Kleiman to move her convoy out of the kill zone and that

they were firing at friendly soldiers at a rally point on the left. He did not realize that in the excitement, he had become confused about directions. Since he was traveling southbound, the rally point was actually on his right, but he would not stop yelling. Kleiman knew she had a rally point on her left, however, it was farther up the road and she was drawing fire from both sides of Tampa. Her soldiers returned fire until she realized Morabito might be hit. He was alternately ducking behind tires as he ran. Kleiman called "cease fire" over the radio twice, which caused the external gun truck to become extremely upset. It was her call, which may not have been right, but she could not live with herself if Morabito was hit by one of her own.³⁰

The drivers began to cease firing but the enemy continued to fire at the rear of the convoy, but with less intensity. The drivers hoped they had inflicted some casualties on them. Olivas on the .50 and a few of the drivers at the tail of the convoy continued to return fire in spite of the order. Heggie's gun truck drove the length of the convoy to the last gun truck. Heggie again called a cease fire citing friendly fire problems. Since the last gun truck only had one SINCGARS, Ingham advised Heggie they were going to "toggle" back and forth between the internal frequency and Sheriff net. Sheriff was the equivalent of a 911 operator in a war zone which coordinated for medevacs or the Quick Reaction Force (QRF) from the battle space owner. Heggie made contact with McCormick's RSE who informed them they had been watching the fight and their fire had not come close to them. They asked Heggie if he wanted them to send a spot report up the chain of command. He said, "No." About that time, the enemy quit firing. Morabito had called Kleiman that he had climbed into his HET. She got a full accountability and told everyone to roll. As the convoy pulled out, the crew of the last gun truck saw two HMMWVs with dim or no lights about 50 meters behind them popping flares. Ingham sent situation reports to Kleiman on what transpired in the rear. As they progressed a few miles up the road, they passed the convoy that had passed them. The soldiers appeared to be pulling wounded out of their trucks.³¹

The entire firefight had lasted no more than five minutes but the volume of fire was intense. Kleiman had learned from her drivers and the rear gun truck that what they thought was a convoy behind hers had

left soldiers in the kill zone. For a long time, she worried about those soldiers left behind and wondered if they thought she had left them on purpose. To her relief, she learned a couple years later that it was not a convoy but McCormick's RSE. That was only the beginning of the RSE battle that night.³²

The RSE team remained in the kill zone for about ten minutes to make sure the convoy was safely out of the area and the enemy fire had stopped after the convoy left. After the convoy was out of sight, the two HMMWVs drove back up on the overpass and then reported back to the battalion TOC they saw four civilian trucks around the ambush site. Around 2140 hours two white pickups approached down both lanes of the highway. The Iraqis may have thought the two HMMWVs on the bridge were damaged and left behind. Both the pickups had unlit amber rotating lights so McCormick assumed they were Iraqi Police. One drove south on the northbound lane and stopped 50 meters short of the bridge and flashed his head lights. McCormick waved at them so the Iraqis knew they were Americans. The other pickup drove up and halted on the southbound on-ramp 80 to 100 meters from the HMMWVs and turned off its lights. Lourigan remembered this was spooky. At 2200 hours, the pickup in the northbound lane drove back to the on-ramp and halted 50 to 75 meters behind the other pickup. It then turned off its lights and the people in the back of the truck got out. It was so dark that night the Americans had difficulty counting exactly how many Iraqis were in each truck, but generally they packed them with passengers with about five to six in the front and as many as they could hold in the back. It was so dark that the Americans only saw silhouettes moving around. This activity caused McCormick to become more suspicious



View of MSR Tampa looking north from Bridge 1A with HET kill zone on the right and the onramp to the left.

Photo courtesy of the 106th Transportation Battalion

and he worried they might have an RPG. Suddenly the Iraqis opened fire with small arms at the RSE team hitting one of the HMMWVs several times.³³

Whisenant suspected they were enemy all along and opened fire with his SAW without any hesitation. Parsons had never engaged the enemy before and fired his SAW a second or two after Whisenant. McCormick jumped out and took up a firing position over the hood of his HMMWV while Stantz jumped out on the enemy side and returned fire completely exposed to the enemy. Parsons fired controlled six to nine round bursts at suspected targets as he was taught to do in Basic Training. Whisenant just sprayed first hitting the vehicles then dropped to grazing fire sweeping in a zigzag pattern. McCormick believed that was what drove the enemy back from their trucks. The lieutenant searched in the dark through his scope for targets and fired off 27 aimed shots. The six Americans returned much more accurate and overwhelming fire than they received, thus, eliminating the enemy fire within a couple minutes. As soon as the enemy fire stopped, McCormick yelled, "Let's go, let's get on them." He acted with a fighter's instinct and did not want to give the enemy a chance to recover and attack again. The two HMMWVs were facing the other direction and the drivers spun them around in seconds then raced down to the pickup trucks.³⁴

Lourigan stopped in front of the first truck and Stantz drove past him to secure the second vehicle. When McCormick jumped out, Lourigan yelled, "Be careful, sir!" Only the interior lights of the pickups were on. McCormick walked around then noticed one man lying face down on the side of the road as if he was dead. He had a rifle close to him and then another man came out with his arms up and surrendered. The lieutenant almost shot him but pushed him down to the ground and had SGT Lourigan, who had followed him, take him into custody. Because it was so dark they searched the surrounding desert with a spot light and located seven more Iraqis hiding behind a dirt mound on the far side of the on-ramp. They immediately surrendered increasing the number of detainees to eight. One of the detainees spoke English and said another was out in the field by a berm. McCormick then heard someone crying. He and Stantz walked over to what resembled a fighting position bermed up on three sides facing out about 50 meters from the on-ramp. They picked up numerous dropped weapons

along the way and saw evidence of blood and lots of drag marks heading into the desert toward an industrial complex 700 meters to the northwest. At the berm, they found one Iraqi with multiple gunshot wounds to his upper torso. McCormick believed there were more Iraqis from the vehicles that had escaped into the desert, so they carried the wounded Iraqi back to their vehicles and had Lourigan treat his wounds. They also picked up six AK47s and one RPK machinegun. Lane grabbed his video camera and started filming the detainees and weapons to remove any doubt about what happened. Since they always turned over the detainees and weapons to the British, they wanted a record of what happened that night. McCormick then ordered his vehicles to tighten up between the two pickups and dismount the SAWs to establish a perimeter around the nine prisoners. He estimated that with the overloaded capacity of the two pickups there might have been as many as 15 Iraqis in this fight.³⁵

Having trouble making radio contact with battalion, McCormick had to back walk up to the bridge to call battalion on his cell phone to report this incident. Lourigan also sent multiple MTS text messages requesting assistance, but the only reliable source of communication with Camp Navistar was the cell phone and it was at the limit of its range. MAJ James Brady had reported into the TOC as soon as the TOC NCOIC notified him of the first Situation Report (SITREP). LTC Sagen was north on a convoy, so Brady was in charge of the battalion. Upon receipt of the initial SITREP, Brady called the British equivalent of their Rear Battle Command Post at nearby Basra on a land line telephone number they had just for such situations. The initial call just informed them of the ambush. Upon receipt of the call for the quick reaction force (QRF), Brady sent a TOC NCO to wake the rest of the RSE and have them move to McCormick's position. An RSE soldier who was pulling Charge of Quarters at the battalion TOC called SFC Cuthbertson on his cell phone and told him insurgents had attacked a convoy and McCormick was requesting assistance. Having worked closely with McCormick for ten months, Cut knew if the lieutenant asked for assistance, the situation was serious. Cut reported to the TOC to get briefed on the situation. After telling Cut all he knew, Brady told him to try to get the MTS working when he arrived. Cut assembled his standby RSE element of five soldiers and had them load double basic load of SAW and M16

ammunition into their two HMMWVs then left.³⁶

The 106th Battalion TOC then informed Sagen of the situation, sent an MTS text message to all convoys, updated the Brits, notified 7th Group, alerted the Navistar quick reaction force, and requested their use since they were under CFLCC release authority. CFLCC denied the request since it was at the extreme range of the RSE quick reaction force range and well outside the Navistar quick reaction force. While others debated over whether to reinforce, Cuthbertson's two HMMWVs raced to the rescue. He could not reach anyone in McCormick's party on his radio which only heightened his concern. Brady monitored the battle all through the night. The battle belonged to the British as soon as they arrived on the ground, but Brady was prepared to send ambulances and fire rescue if needed.³⁷

Around 2220 hours, six more civilian trucks came from the west and turned down the on-ramp toward their location. Usually friendly Iraqis came from the direction of Safwan, not the desert. This was suspicious. McCormick popped flares in the sky to alert anyone in the area to come to his assistance. The civilian trucks drove away only to return twenty minutes later. Although McCormick was suspicious, he was not definitely sure they were unfriendly. He did not want to accidentally shoot up any civilians and yet, if they were enemy, they already had the high ground and could overwhelm his men. In every other situation, he acted with a fighter's instinct; this was the one time he was not sure what was the right thing to do. He walked forward along and halted them away from his perimeter. One Iraqi walked toward the Americans and stated in English he was a fuel protection service worker and wanted the Americans to release the detainees and weapons to them. McCormick refused and told him to not approach any closer. McCormick informed him the relief was on its way and he would turn the detainees over to them. The Iraqi returned to his vehicle and then they drove off toward the industrial complex.³⁸

2LT Power of the 2nd Prince of Wales Royal Regiment was the commander of the Rear Operations Battle Group (ROBG) Quick Reaction Force (QRF) that night. At approximately 2230 hours,³⁹ he received orders that his QRF had been tasked so he went to the battalion operations room. There he was informed that an American convoy had come under fire along MSR



The berm in front of McCormick's position with the Industrial Complex off in the distance. The RSE and British QRF took fire from this direction. Photo courtesy of the 106th Transportation Battalion

Tampa and that the RSE had left the junction of ASR Heart and Tampa and also come under fire. He learned the RSE had inflicted two casualties and requested the QRF to bring an ambulance. His 20 -man platoon in five Land Rovers under the call sign "30A" and one ambulance departed at approximately 2250 hours and rendezvoused with McCormick ten minutes later.⁴⁰

They came down from the bridge and parked just above the RSE. As 2LT Power walked by the Iraqis, he said hello and they said hello in return. They appeared to be extremely friendly. Meanwhile, the British soldiers dismounted their vehicles and faced out in the direction of the desert. Power met with McCormick who briefed him on the attack on the convoy and this latest fight with the Iraqis. Since this was their area of responsibility, control of the fight belonged to the British, but Lieutenant Power, however, referred to 1LT McCormick as "Sir" and deferred to his advice. In the American Army, there was no rank among lieutenants. McCormick walked him out toward the berm to show him the blood trails supporting his belief that there were more out there. Suddenly they started receiving an intense hail of small arms fire from the direction of the industrial complex.⁴¹ The British lieutenant rushed back to his platoon while McCormick and Stantz ran for cover behind the berm. Both the Americans and Brits returned heavy and accurate fire. Meanwhile, SGT Lourigan and SPC Lane maintained control of the detainees and administered first aid to the wounded detainee. SPC Whisenant and PFC Parsons monitored the radio and blazed away with their SAWs. From the berm, McCormick could see everything in front and behind him. He was close enough to the on-ramp to yell instructions to his men and the gunners on the Land Rovers could fire over his head. Besides, the old

infantryman in McCormick did not like to give up ground to the enemy even if it was only a few meters.⁴²

The enemy fire came from two berms about 200 to 300 meters out from the on-ramp. McCormick saw silhouettes moving around. Suddenly rounds started to come in from the south as if the enemy was trying to flank them. McCormick and Stantz had nearly exhausted all their ammunition, each firing six of their seven magazines. Running low on ammunition, Stantz asked his lieutenant what they would do next. McCormick fixed his bayonet on his rifle indicating that they were not giving up any ground. He was prepared for an all-out assault on his small perimeter that had then extended to 75 meters. Stantz, however, was not looking at McCormick when he made his heroic gesture; the soldier's attention was on the enemy. McCormick was not too worried about being outflanked because there was no one he trusted better than Cuthbertson and the lieutenant knew Cut was on his way. After Stantz fired off his last round, he ran back under fire to the HMMWVs to pick up an ammunition can filled with loaded magazines.⁴³

The RSE was outgunned, alone in the dark, and yet Stantz entertained no thought of withdrawing from the battlefield. He later described what the rest of his team felt, "Americans don't withdraw - we stand up and fight. The flag on our right shoulder is backwards so it resembles us running into battle and not retreating. I would rather die for my country than to run from protecting it." McCormick felt a great privilege in leading the finest caliber of fighting men that night.⁴⁴

Suddenly two HMMWVs popped up over the on-ramp on McCormick's left. One of McCormick's radio operators yelled out, "That's Cut, Sir! He's on his way!" As Cut's two HMMWVs drove up over the bridge looking for the RSE,

they made the right turn down toward the other vehicles when a flare went up. Suddenly the two vehicles received fire from their left. The gunners immediately returned fire and while the flare burned out, Cut saw muzzle flashes and three to four personnel maneuvering to his far right. After receiving an Ammunition, Casualty and Equipment (ACE) report over the radio from his other HMMWV, he repositioned his HMMWVs to the left of the last British vehicle to secure the flank. Wanting a clear view of the battlefield, he ordered his men to pop flares. As the battle raged, he ordered his men to aggressively return fire. SFC Cuthbertson had pulled his two HMMWVs up on line into a flanking position creating a perfect L-shape kill zone trapping the insurgents in between the cross fire. Cut had maneuvered instinctively without any communication between him and McCormick.⁴⁵

Cuthbertson then ran down to the RSE to get updated on what had happened so far and issue them more ammunition. While the firefight continued, he ran out to McCormick's position and landed hard on the side of the berm then immediately returned fire in the general direction of the enemy. While reloading his M16, Cut glanced to his left and noticed McCormick was sweating. Cut asked, "What the hell is going on?" He then saw the lieutenant had several empty M16 magazines on his right and as a flare illuminated the area Cut noticed the bayonet. "Oh shit, you got your bayonet on your rifle!" Right then and there Cut knew that there was no way he was going to convince McCormick to leave this fight. About that time, the British lieutenant and his radio operator joined them. Through the British radio they heard that helicopters were on their way. McCormick and Cuthbertson then coordinated with the British lieutenant to expand the perimeter. Cut then returned to his vehicles and the enemy fire erupted again.⁴⁶

The British grenadier came up with three rounds and started scanning for targets. They saw some Iraqis running between a gap in berms about 200 meters out. They were silhouetted by a light behind the berm. The next time the grenadier saw someone running past the hole, he fired. His first round hit the berm on the right and then his last two landed in the gap and just behind the berm - very accurate shooting. Stantz finally returned with more ammunition. They fired at the attackers while giving commands, directing friendly forces and redistributing ammunition and water to both the RSE and

British platoon. The tenacity of the 11 American and 20 British soldiers' return fire fixed the Iraqis in place.⁴⁷

During the fighting, McCormick ran back to the HMMWV to answer some of the MTS messages that had come in but it was hit and miss. He had to walk out in the open to call back to Navistar on his cell phone and ask Brady for additional assistance. Brady instructed McCormick to help the British forces if he felt he could. McCormick then started walking along their perimeter with Cuthbertson while under intense fire, repositioning their troops. Then McCormick returned to the berm where Stantz, the British radio operator and grenadier remained. Battalion then called the British on the phone for assistance. After quickly sharing information, the British launched another force. After the battle the British installed a secure radio system in their TOC.⁴⁸

That last contact lasted for five minutes, then McCormick and Power gave the command to cease fire and the British lieutenant told his men to watch closely for further enemy activity. During the lull in the enemy fire, the British lieutenant and a corporal came up to the berm, knelt down and told McCormick "Sir, I'm going to have my corporal take charge of the prisoners if that is all right with you." McCormick warned him, "These guys are sneaky. They posed as Iraqi Police when they attacked us." Corporal Mills responded, "Not a fucking problem, sir." McCormick then yelled back and told Lourigan and Lane the British corporal would take charge of the prisoners. He told them the prisoners were no longer their concern and they needed to focus on the enemy to their front. CPL Mills pulled the prisoners back to the ambulance that had just arrived and kept them on the ground while Power called in the contact report to his headquarters.⁴⁹

About five minutes after that fight ended, CT40 arrived with four Range Rovers. Just as they did, enemy fire erupted again from the same two positions. CT40 moved slightly north of Power's position to flank the enemy. This fight lasted for approximately ten minutes and ceased again. Because Power was uncertain about the size of the enemy strength and also whether they had RPGs, he requested Warrior reinforcements.

A civilian vehicle approached from the north and CT40 took no chances and stopped the vehicle, removed the occupants and searched the vehicle. SGT Farenden then called Power and said there was open ground along the east side of Tampa where the ambush had taken place

that would make a good enemy approach. He wanted to take his force and reconnoiter along that route to establish a forward security position against any possible attack. While this took place, the quick reaction force came under attack from the same positions for a third time. Power called his headquarters to say that his force was prepared to move but he was told to stay firm that CTOA was enroute and would take command when he arrived.⁵⁰

Each time the firing died down, McCormick and the British officer attempted to recover wounded insurgents they heard crying to their front, but every time they started to move forward, the fire erupted again. The lulls usually lasted about 10 to 15 minutes. The battle continued with intensity in waves and each attack was driven back with accurate and intense fire. Stantz estimated from the muzzle flashes that between 20 and 25 insurgents were firing at their position. Power estimated considerably less - from six to ten. During the lulls in the firing, the five men in the berm smoked cigarettes and passed water around. This type of fighting continued for a little over an hour. The fight had become a stalemate but the tenacity of the enemy indicated that they either desperately wanted to rescue the prisoners or expected reinforcement, because they knew the collation forces could always bring more forces up.⁵¹

Time seemed to drag. Then at 0015 hours, a company-sized British force arrived along with two helicopters. The British helicopters using thermal imaging reported seeing bodies directly to McCormick's front and some fading heat signatures in the complex. After McCormick returned to the berm, he listened to the radio traffic between the ground and the helicopters and heard the pilot report, "I see three fading heat signatures and some trucks in the compound." Then someone asked what was in front of McCormick's position and the pilot responded, "Bodies are lying all around the area." Then the person asked if he could tell if they were moving or not. He answered, "They look deceased." When someone fired a flare, the pilot cursed, "Stop firing the damn flares! It is messing up my IR."⁵²

McCormick heard the British were bringing up armor to assault the complex. MAJ Bedford, the British commander, asked McCormick if his RSE would remain and provide them flanking fire for their assault on the compound to which McCormick agreed. The British commander then asked them to tighten up their forces

behind that berm and prepare to provide covering fire. McCormick called his RSE soldiers over to the berm. At 0200 hours, the British assault force took up positions and spread out along ASR Heart and MSR Tampa. McCormick remembered feeling the ground shake when the six Warriors armored vehicles rolled in and then he received the order to fire. The combined US and British force lit the compound up with small arms and flares while the armored and dismounted British troops of the British Prince of Wales Royal Regiment maneuvered across 700 meters of open terrain. Upon request from the British, the supporting force shifted their fire as the assault force overwhelmed the compound. The British then called for a cease fire.⁵³

The British detained 25 more civilians with lots of weapons. The British lieutenant told McCormick his lieutenant colonel wanted to meet him. When McCormick approached, the British colonel was cordial, they shook hands. The lieutenant in front of the colonel presented McCormick with the 2nd Prince of Wales Royal Regiment crest and said how pleased they were with their courage and performance.⁵⁴ Upon investigation, the Iraqi detainees had proper identification so the British turned them loose, and investigated it no further. The British considered this a green (civilian) on blue (friendly force) incident.

Lesson

There are four roles in convoy security. The battle space owner has responsibility for protecting the supply routes through its area and providing the quick reaction force in the event of an ambush. Route security has responsibility for reconnoitering the route for possible attacks and providing a quick reaction force in the event of ambush. The engineer sweep teams have responsibility to clear the roads of mines and obstacles ahead of the convoys. The problem is that no matter how well the others perform their roles, the enemy will always find a place to conduct an ambush. In the event the others fail to prevent an ambush, the convoys have responsibility for immediate security in the form of escort vehicles – gun trucks. While the Military Police Corps has doctrinal responsibility for route security, in the absence of either Military Police or patrols by the battle space owner, the Transportation organizations have to provide route security. This firefight and the Palm Sunday Ambush

provide examples of ambushes involving route security.

In a guerrilla war, the enemy did not always wear a uniform clearly identifying them as enemy. Subterfuge and deception are common traits of guerrilla warfare. It was not uncommon during the Vietnam War, or the American conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, for insurgents to dress as friendly forces to gain an advantage. With multiple host nation factions, some friendlies were not always friendly. The threat in the southern part of Iraq had been primarily motivated by theft so very likely the attackers could have easily worked for the government and had their paperwork in order, but in a war where the enemy was not identified by a uniform, or had the habit of masquerading as friendly forces, Multi-National Corps-Iraq policy was that Positive Identification (PID) was established when the enemy fired on coalition forces. Even after the attack on 1LT Kleiman's HET convoy, McCormick's RSE held its fire on the approaching vehicles until they opened fire. The lesson was to remain vigilant and suspicious of everyone.

This was the first time an entire convoy was ambushed this far south, but there were plenty of indicators of increasing activity. So convoy commanders should pay attention to trends and anticipate changing enemy threat. Once attacked, the delay resulted from lack of handheld radios in gaining accountability. The Army later adopted the Harris AN/PRC-117G Wideband Tactical Radio with the 152A handheld component that could be dismounted.

Timing is critical in battle just as it is in a fight. In boxing there are just three main types of punches, straights, hooks and uppercuts, so fights are won by speed and timing. Intentionally capturing enemy soldiers during a firefight is a difficult task, and again McCormick had an instructive feel for the battle. As soon as he sensed the enemy fire slackening, McCormick immediately ordered his men to charge them, which resulted in eight detainees, instead of eight dead. The speed with which his men reacted reflected great training and teamwork.

In capturing his attackers though, McCormick gave up the advantage of the high ground; so when the Iraqis later approached from the direction of the overpass, the lieutenant for the first time in all his battles was doubtful about what to do. He could not allow the Iraqis to get too close to his men, in case they turned out to be enemy

and attacked; so he approached them alone trying to keep some distance between them and his vehicles. Luckily the ploy worked.

The entire battle from the time of the first attack on the HET convoy to the end had lasted for a total of five hours. The enemy clearly knew the RSE was out there but conducted a hasty ambush on the stalled HET convoy. From there, the battle grew piecemeal and each side committed a larger force in an effort to destroy the other, very similar to the Battle of First Bull Run in 1861. The winner was the one who tenaciously held ground and reinforced the quickest. In that respect, the RSE, 106th Transportation Battalion and the British 2nd Prince of Wales Royal Regiment made no mistakes. Each acted without hesitation. The battle was initially fought by six American soldiers who held their ground while detaining nine Iraqis against well-armed Iraqi insurgents for 40 minutes. McCormick performed as heroically as he always had. His seasoned crews of combat veterans had the utmost confidence in his leadership and never questioned whether they should withdraw. Similar to Stonewall Jackson, McCormick inspired his men to hold their ground against clearly superior odds until the arrival of a British platoon. Even then, the enemy force proved larger than the 26 defenders as they were about to flank them.

In any battle a commander has to have a reserve handy to react to any changing situation on the battlefield. In respect to convoys or mounted patrols such as route security, that reserve is the quick reaction force. The problem with this scenario was the area the RSE operated was not only across the Corps boundary, but it was in the sector owned by an international partner. Since the British and Multi-national Corps-Iraq had responsibility for this battle space, and the 106th Transportation Battalion belonged to CCFLC in Kuwait, they 106th officially could not launch a quick reaction force across the border but had to ask permission first. Consequently, to launch the quick reaction force required coordination at the three-star command level and because of the number of layers of command and protocol, this resulted in unwanted delays. The 106th Battalion took great risk in launching its quick reaction force in the form of SFC Jody Cuthbertson. Cuthbertson and McCormick had split the route security mission and the lieutenant preferred the night shift because that was when he expected problems. He wanted Cuthbertson

back at camp as his quick reaction force in case his team got in trouble, because he knew his trusted sergeant would not wait for permission to cross the border. Evidently neither did MAJ Brady. Cut's timely arrival prevented the flanking movement

by the enemy. The RSE mission continued for years until Navistar

was abandoned and a

new military route opened up further to the west. A year later, the RSE found itself in a situation where they requested permission to launch their quick reaction force, and it took 45 minutes to receive a denial. In 45 minutes, McCormick's RSE would have been outflanked and possibly overrun. Had he counted on anyone other than his loyal NCO to reinforce him, the RSE might have lost lives.

After the elections, the senior leaders of the Army changed the policy on the road to a less aggressive stance to show that they were turning the security of the country over to the Iraqis. The gun trucks could no longer point their weapons at the civilians unless they felt threatened. They had to travel with the barrels of their .50s and SAWs pointed upward.

Cuthbertson's quick arrival and sound judgment caused him to instinctively deploy on the flank of the enemy snatching any hope the enemy had for destroying the small force of defenders. From then the fight turned into a stalemate as each side tried to inflict damage in the other. The final action destroyed the Iraqi force, resulting in the capture of a total of 34 Iraqis as well as over 75 weapons. No one swept the area between the berm and the complex to count the "fading heat signatures," but the next day local children said some people came by and picked up the bodies. As was his custom, Sagen conducted a detailed after action review and put together another of his "Green Tab AARs" on this battle. The 106th Transportation Battalion then



Author and SFC Jody Cuthbertson flanking the logo of the 518th. These were the remaining members of the RSE after 1LT McCormick left.

Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

briefed this fight all the way to CFLCC Commander, LTG John A. Wickham, earning everyone's praise.

Knowing the 7th Transportation Group Commander held a higher standard for what constituted valor, LTC Sagen had to wait until 7th Group redeployed to award the

participants any medals and then he could only issue them Army Achievement Medals and Army Commendation Medals, peace-time awards that are given out to soldiers who do a good job but never hear a shot fired in anger. SFC Cuthbertson received an Army Commendation Medal with V device for his actions. SGT Lourigan managed to get his award later upgraded to a Bronze Star Medal. 1LT James McCormick already had the Bronze Star and Purple Heart Medals he had earned during Operation Desert Storm and earned two more Purple Heart Medals, two Bronze Star Medals with V Device and two Meritorious Service Medals for his service during OIF. In 2014, he finally received the Silver Star Medal for his actions during the Battle of BIAP and the ambushes on the way to the Green Zone. He was later submitted for a Silver Star Medal for his actions during this firefight, which as of early 2015 was still pending. No one Transporter participated in as many complex ambushes or so heroically as McCormick, which made him the Audie Murphy of transporters. He was an officer who truly embodied the Warrior's ethos.

Before he left, 1LT McCormick convinced LTC Sagen to not assign a new officer to the RSE but to make Cuthbertson the commander of the RSE, which Sagen did. SFC Cuthbertson was rated as a commander of a company level command, a rare opportunity for an NCO. In a few weeks the remaining companies of OIF 2 departed. Ironically, while this RSE mission was supposed to have weaned McCormick off of adrenaline, this turned out to be his most intense firefight.

¹ James McCormick telephone interview with Richard Killblane, 23 July 2005.

² McCormick telephone interview with Richard Killblane, 9 November 2006.

³ 106th Transportation Battalion, "Route Security Element (RSE)," unpublished report, no date; McCormick telephone interview with Richard Killblane, 23 July 2005; LTC James Sagen interview with Richard Killblane, 2 February 2006.

⁴ Sagen interview, 2 February 2006.

⁵ McCormick telephone interview, 23 July 2005 and 9 November 2006.

⁶ McCormick email to Richard Killblane, March 22, and July 23, 2005.

⁷ "Route Security Element."

⁸ "Route Security Element;" McCormick email to Richard Killblane, June 6, 2005 and telephone interview, 23 July 2005 and 9 November 2006.

⁹ McCormick telephone interview, 23 July 2005, and 9 November 2006; and Sagen interview, 2 February 2006.

¹⁰ "Route Security Element" and McCormick email, June 6, 2005 and telephone interview, 9 November 2006.

¹¹ McCormick telephone conversation with Richard Killblane, 6 November 2006.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ McCormick telephone conversation 6 November 2006 and Travis Stantz email to Richard Killblane, November 7, 2006.

¹⁶ McCormick telephone conversation 6 November 2006 and Stantz email, November 7, 2006.

¹⁷ Power point presentation, Green Tab AAR, "ASR Heart Firefight," 106th Transportation Battalion; and McCormick telephone conversation, 6 November 2006.

¹⁸ McCormick telephone conversation, 6 November 2006.

¹⁹ David Whisenant interview by Richard Killblane, at Hurricane, WV, 12 November 2005; and McCormick email, November 11, 2006.

²⁰ 1LT Kim Kleiman email to Richard Killblane, 30 April 2006; SSG Lane Wright interview by Richard Killblane at Arifjan, Kuwait, 8 March 2005; and SPC Aaron Ingham, "Report of Combat Action on 30 January, MSR Tampa at ASR Heart in the vicinity of ASR Circle, Safwan, Iraq," no date.

²¹ Ingham, "Report;" and Ingham email to James McCormick, December 4, 2006.

²² Green Tab AAR, "ASR Heart Firefight;" and Ingham, "Report."

²³ McCormick telephone conversation with Richard Killblane, 3 May 2006.

²⁴ SSG Lane Wright interview by Richard Killblane, in Arifjan, Kuwait, March 2005; and Ingham, "Report."

²⁵ McCormick telephone, 3 May 2006; Whisenant interview; Wright interview; and 1LT Kim M. Kleiman email to James McCormick, 30 April 2006.

²⁶ Ingham, "Report."

²⁷ Kleiman email, 30 April 2006.

²⁸ Ingham, "Report."

²⁹ McCormick telephone, 3 May 2006; Green Tab AAR, "ASR Heart Firefight;" Whisenant interview; and Kleiman email, 30 April 2006.

³⁰ Kleiman email, 30 April 2006; Ingham, "Report;" and Wright interview.

³¹ Kleiman email, 30 April 2006; and Ingham, "Report."

³² Kleiman email, 30 April 2006.

³³ "Route Security Element;" Green Tab AAR, "ASR Heart Firefight;" McCormick email, April 7, 2005; telephone interview, 14 November 2006; and Whisenant interview.

³⁴ CPT James McCormick, "Description of events on Easter Sunday 2004 and January 30th 2005; Terrain, conditions and situation," November 2006; "Route Security Element;" Green Tab AAR, "ASR Heart Firefight;" Whisenant interview; and McCormick telephone conversation, 8 and 15 November 2005.

³⁵ McCormick, "Description of events;" "Route Security Element;" Green Tab AAR, "ASR Heart Firefight;" Whisenant interview; and McCormick telephone conversation, 8 November 2005.

³⁶ MAJ James Brady email to Richard Killblane, November 8, 2006; and Jody Cuthbertson email to Richard Killblane, November 13, 2006.

³⁷ MAJ James Brady email, November 8, 2006; and Cuthbertson email, November 13, 2006.

³⁸ McCormick, "Description;" Green Tab AAR, "ASR Heart Firefight;" and McCormick, 8 November 2005 and telephone interview, 15 November 2006.

³⁹ Power reported this as taking place at 2130 hours, however, the 106th recorded that they received the call from McCormick for assistance at 2220 hours. Both Kleiman and the 106th AAR recorded the ambush as taking place at 2100 hours. By adding one hour to Power's times, all the times match.

⁴⁰ LT Power, hand written after action report, no date. Power's report has him meeting up with McCormick at about 2200 hours when the 106th Bn AAR records it an hour later.

⁴¹ LT Power reported this time as 2215 hours.

⁴² "Route Security Element;" Green Tab AAR, "ASR Heart Firefight;" Power, report; Stantz email, November 11, 2006; and McCormick telephone conversation, 14 November 2006.

⁴³ "Route Security Element;" Green Tab AAR, "ASR Heart Firefight;" and Stantz email, November 11, 2006.

⁴⁴ Stantz email, November 12, 2006.

⁴⁵ "Route Security Element;" McCormick telephone conversation, 9 November 2006; and Cuthbertson email, November 13, 2006.

⁴⁶ McCormick email, November 11, 2006; and Cuthbertson email, November 13, 2006.

⁴⁷ "Route Security Element;" and McCormick email, November 11, 2006.

⁴⁸ MAJ James Brady email to Richard Killblane, November 8, 2006; and McCormick email, November 11, 2006.

⁴⁹ McCormick telephone interview, 15 November 2006; and Power report.

⁵⁰ Power report.

⁵¹ "Route Security Element;" McCormick email, November 11, 2006; and Stantz email, November 12, 2006.

⁵² McCormick, "Description;" "Route Security Element;" McCormick email, November 11, 2006; and Cuthbertson email, November 13, 2006. Power also agreed the British force arrived shortly after midnight.

⁵³ "Route Security Element;" McCormick, "Description;" and McCormick email, November 11 and 13, 2006.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Palm Sunday Ambush, 20 March 2005

1075th Transportation Company, 518th Gun Truck Company, Raven 42, & 1-623rd FA

The doctrine for reaction to a convoy ambush is very simple, clear the kill zone. For gun trucks the question is whether to be passive and just return fire or be aggressive and shove the fight down the throat of the enemy. During Operation Iraqi Freedom there were many convoy ambushes where the convoys and their escorts reacted exactly the way they were supposed to. The worst thing to do during a convoy ambush is stop in the kill zone, but sometimes this is unavoidable. It is times like these that those caught in the kill zone have to make quick decisions where lives hang in the balance. One such ambush occurred on Palm Sunday, 20 March 2005 near where Alternate Supply Route (ASR) Bismarck intersected with ASR Detroit. This ambush is of great interest not because everything went well but because of what went wrong from the outset. There were as many as five different units involved this ambush making it probably the most complicated ambush of the war. Therefore this ambush provides a case study of decision making during the worst case scenario with plenty of examples of individual heroism that usually occur during such times of intense chaos. War is chaos and there are no set solutions for reacting to chaos, but the study of battles teaches warriors how to react.

After the 7th Transportation Group replaced the

375th Transportation Group in Arifjan, Kuwait it had every intention of continuing the 518th Gun Truck Company even though it had received the 1st Battalion, 178th FA as its convoy escort battalion. The 7th Group selected volunteers from the arriving companies of the OIF 04-06 rotation to replace the OIF 2 veterans of the 518th. The replacements arrived at Udari Range the day after Thanksgiving 2004 and underwent two weeks of training. In mid-December, they fell in with the one remaining platoon of the 518th that would train them with a couple of right-seat, left-seat rides. Although many of the original 518th crews would not leave with their parent companies until February and March of the next year, the emphasis on getting rid of the “cowboy” attitude of the original members and starting over caused the new company commander and 7th Group leadership to return the original members to their parent companies as soon as possible. The original members of the 518th had placed greater emphasis on maintenance of vehicles and weapons but little else. They often left ammunition in their vehicles upon return because they saw it as a waste of time to take the ammunition out at night when they would just have to load it up again the next morning. Keeping the vehicles uploaded, however, gave them a quicker response time if needed. They often left trash in their vehicles, but their previous performance in combat validated the saying that good combat units do not pass inspections. They were battle hardened veterans of the April Uprising. They may not



Three M1025 HMMWVs of the 518th Gun Truck Company with add-on armor kits waiting at CSC Scania.

Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

have looked pretty but they had proved they could fight. The new regime, however, wanted a higher state of discipline. Vehicles would be cleaned and ammunition would be returned to the arms room at the end of each mission. They followed the philosophy that if the leaders paid attention to the little details the big things would take care of themselves.

While the new crew members were highly motivated, they had not been blooded in combat as had the original members. They were well-trained by Military Professional Resources Inc. (MPRI) at Udari; but unlike the original company, whose two officers were heavily involved in the coaching and leading of the company, the new 518th had a company commander, CPT Thelonious McLean - Burrell who believed officers were managers. A rift grew between him and 1LT McCormick, and CPT McLean - Burrell did his best to keep the aggressive lieutenant off the road. McCormick was a warrior leader who had proven his courage during the Easter Weekend ambushes and the Battle of BIAP. He had also developed the original tactics of the 518th. To compound matters, Combined Force Land Component Commander (CFLCC) in Kuwait also denied the gun trucks use of the open desert to test fire their weapons and had not found a suitable replacement test fire range. So they would not know how well their weapons worked until they engaged the enemy. Essentially the burden of training and leading the gun truck crews fell to the NCOs, but no one except a few older NCOs like SFC Louis Cass, platoon sergeant, had any combat experience.

Because the transition between the original and new crews was so short, the replacement gun truck crews did not carry on the practice of conducting nightly after action reviews after each convoy and war gaming ambush scenarios.

With the myriad of different types of armor, CLFCC categorized armored vehicles into three types. Locally produced "hillbilly" armor was called Level 3 armor. Factory-built add-on armor was called Level 2 and factory-built armored vehicles such as the M1114 or M1117 Armored Support Vehicle

were called Level 1 armored vehicles. By the end of 2004, enough add-on armor (AOA) kits for HMMWVs had arrived and all the old M998 gun trucks of the 518th were replaced with M1025 and M1026 HMMWVs with the Level 2 armor that Iraqi-based units had traded in for brand new M1114s. Units in Iraq still had priority for M1114s. So vehicle design and armor in the 518th was standardized. Most had M2 .50 caliber machineguns mounted on rings with turret shields and gun shields. Because these did not have any armor around the engine compartment, the new 518th abandoned the "turn, fix and fire" doctrine. They did not want to expose the front of their gun trucks to the enemy fire. Most gun trucks also employed dual weapon systems, a M2 and a M249 Squad Automatic Weapon (SAW).¹

The 7th Group commander, COL Jeff Miser, seemed to show an affinity toward anything that resembled the 5-ton gun trucks of the Vietnam War with their black paint and elaborately painted names on the sides of the gun boxes. Like many other field grade officers, he respected the achievements of the gun truck crews of Vietnam and believed they did the best with what they had. However, COL Miser had ordered the 518th to dismantle all four of its 5-ton gun trucks, regardless of how much they liked them. The current senior leaders' version of professionalism, however, frowned on the individualism of the Vietnam gun trucks especially exemplified by their elaborate art work. Consequently, a Multi-National Corps-Iraq (MNC-I) and CFLCC policy



M915A3 of the 1864 Transportation Company. It had the same improvised door armor as the 1075th. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane



Kuwait-based trucking companies hired Third Country Nationals. It was common for a convoy to have drivers who spoke several different languages and English was not one of them. Photo courtesy of the 106th Transportation Battalion

restricted art work of any kind on trucks but 7th Group did cast a blind eye to the company logos spray-painted on the doors. In keeping with this anti-Vietnam gun truck attitude, both MNC-I and CFLCC wanted to come up with a new term to call their gun trucks. MNC-I coined the term convoy protection platform (CPP) while 7th Group came up with the term convoy escort platform (CEP) - both the same creature by a different name. The crews continued to call them gun trucks.

After the April Uprising the previous year, the gun truck escort ratio south of Convoy Support Center (CSC) Scania was set at 1:10 and supposed to be 1:5 north of Scania. The 13th Corps Support Command (COSCOM) established this ratio based upon the idea that Kuwait-90 based convoys would hand off regular sustainment convoys to Iraq-based escorts at Scania. This policy did not account for common user land transportation (CULT) convoys that originated in Kuwait and delivered directly to their destinations throughout Iraq. However, there were not enough gun trucks to go around so many Kuwait-based convoys ran with only three gun trucks per convoy regardless of the size of the convoy. The goal was to keep the convoys below 30 vehicles. The 518th had asked for addition HMMWV gun trucks so they could run with four per convoy, but again there were just not enough available.²

So on Saturday, 19 March 2005, three HMMWVs of the 518th escorted an Iraqi Express convoy of the 1st Squad, 1st Platoon, 1075th Medium Truck Company, a Nebraska National Guard unit, led by SSG Jeffrey M. Uhl from Camp Navistar to Logistic Support Area (LSA) Anaconda just north of Baghdad. The last truck



Contract trucks were for obvious reasons referred to as white trucks and military as green. Photo courtesy of the 106th Transportation Battalion

companies from OIF II had redeployed and the 1075th had been in country since October 2004. Because of the ratio of one green military truck to every four commercial white trucks, convoys were organized by squads. Uhl's six M915A3 tractor and trailer systems and two bobtails accompanied 22 IAP Worldwide Services and Department of Defense (DOD) contract trucks. The IAP drivers were mostly drivers hired from English speaking countries, but there were also Third Country Nationals (TCN) who spoke different languages. The contract trucks had no armor or radios. Because of the language barrier, they were not included in the convoy briefs, so they were entirely unpredictable in an ambush. They liked to keep the English speaking drivers in the back half of the convoy in case there was an ambush, they could communicate with them. Unfortunately, the Army only issued SINCGARS radios to the convoy commander, assistant convoy commander and escorts. The 1075th purchased commercial citizen band radios for everyone else. The problem was that these truck drivers had no training in radio discipline and procedures.

Although the company had previously trained in the United States with the convoy commander in the middle of the convoy and his assistant riding up front, SSG Uhl rode up front as recommended by the company they replaced. They explained that often the security guards at the gate of each destination would stop the convoy and want to speak with the convoy commander. Not only that but every convoy commander's biggest fear was making the wrong turn and getting lost in downtown Baghdad. So his assistant convoy commander, SGT Anthony Bloebaum, rode in the middle of the convoy. The

problem was that most ambushes happened somewhere behind the lead vehicle and at that time the NCO Academy did not train NCOs on how to run convoys. They learned this through hands on experience, because officers were schooled to be convoy commanders.³

When their convoy crossed the border at Safwan, a road spike ripped out the oil pan of one M915. Uhl hooked his lead bobtail up to the trailer and would leave the damaged tractor at Convoy Support Center (CSC) Scania for repairs, so the convoy only had one remaining bobtail. The 518th Gun Truck Company provided the escort for the convoy with the call sign, "Regulator." Their three HMMWVs with add-on-armor were armed with .50 caliber machineguns. Regulator 1 and 3 were manned by active duty volunteers from the 567th Cargo Transfer Company trained by SFC Cass. The crew of Regulator 2 came from the Reserve companies.



M915 bobtail truck at the end of the convoy. These spare tractors were used to pick up a trailer from a disabled M915.

Photo courtesy of Jonathan Kennedy

Other than a few IEDs, none had been under fire yet. The convoy rested overnight at Scania and would finish the run to Anaconda on Palm Sunday.⁴

That Sunday, 20 March, the 3rd Squad, 3rd Platoon, B Battery, 1-623rd FA, an Kentucky National Guard unit whose call sign was "Stallion 33," escorted 30 Army Air Force Exchange Service

(AAFES) vehicles driven by Third Country Nationals, primarily Turkish, in the opposite direction from Anaconda to Scania. Stallion 33 led by SFC Rickie D. Hammons consisted of three M1114s, two with M2 .50 caliber machineguns and one Mk19 automatic grenade launcher. They had been in country since December 2004. Following behind them were three M1114s of 2nd Squad, 4th Platoon, 617th MP Company, another Kentucky National Guard unit led by SSG Timothy F. Nein, call sign "Raven 42." Likewise they had two M2s



M1114 of the 623rd Field Artillery had dual weapon systems, M2 .50 caliber machinegun and M249 SAW.

Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane



Rear view of M1114 of the 623rd FA.

Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane



M1114 of the 617th MP Company. Photo courtesy of the

Army Women's Museum

and one Mk19. Raven 42 had experienced several ambushes and habitually discussed the day's events and what they could do better. The 617th MPs based out of Camp Liberty, Baghdad had responsibility for route security and had been in country since November 2004.⁵

Because of the April Uprising, there were only three routes between Scania and Anaconda and the movement control battalion changed the routes every few days to confuse the enemy, but it did not work. After the convoys quit running one route, the enemy knew it would be about seven days before convoys would return. This gave them plenty of time to prepare IEDs. On Palm Sunday all convoys would follow the eastern route which was about a nine hour drive. The wide open desert of the eastern route provided ideal cover with its scattered trees and irrigation ditches and consequently had a bad reputation for enemy attacks. The drivers called one stretch "IED alley" because of the frequency of IED attacks.

The MPs performed route security by reconnoitering the routes prior to convoys hitting the road and then patrolling the roads afterwards. The MPs did not have a good reputation with the truck drivers for standing and fighting but the 617th MP was an exception. The company commander, CPT Todd Lindner, enforced high standards of discipline, training and uniformity. SSG Nein was on his second tour and understood the enemy tactics. While the enemy usually attacked in small cells of 7 to 10 men, in the open desert of the eastern route he had seen them ambush convoys with larger forces of over 20 insurgents. What he may not have understood

was that large ambushes usually consisted of 40 to 50 insurgents, significantly more than 20. Although not very coordinated, their tactic was to hit the convoys fast and hard before anyone could counter-attack. The attacks were usually initiated with rockets or machineguns and, once in a while, mortars then followed up with small arms fire that would last three to four minutes. They would escape in vehicles that ran faster than the up-armored HMMWVs and before the nearest quick reaction force could arrive. Because of the secrecy in which they operated and the disconnection between cells, the ambushes showed detailed planning but inflexible execution, very similar to guerilla ambushes during the Vietnam War.⁶

Raven 42 had been ambushed twice before. The first time was on the night of 27 January. As the three gun trucks were driving by, the enemy opened fire and the M1114s returned fire then called in the cavalry. Early one morning on 29 January, Raven 42 was out scouting for IEDs and ambushes an hour or so before the convoy window opened when they surprised seven to twelve insurgents setting up an ambush behind small berms, a concrete barrier wall, a couple of cars and a concrete block building. That day, SGT Dustin Morris' vehicle was in the lead and he had a senior ranking NCO driving his M1114 who was not his regular driver. The insurgents opened fire on Raven 42 with small arms and RPGs thinking they had been discovered. Instead of reacting according to SSG Nein's instructions, Morris' driver reacted the way he thought best and failed to either

act in unison or react fast enough. The fight lasted for 15 minutes until five of the seven insurgents escaped on foot through dense vegetation in the canal system leaving two wounded to fall in the hands of the MPs. The MPs of Raven 42 learned to react faster and act in unison. In addition, they found situations where the crews needed to dismount and others where they did not. They had to be flexible.⁷

On 18 March, Raven 42 had been sitting in an observation post along ASR Detroit. About ten minutes after they moved out, they heard a call for assistance from a white convoy that reported it was hit in the very same place Raven 42 had just vacated. Nein could not believe it. When they returned, sure enough, around 50 insurgents had opened fire with RPGs and small arms fire destroying or disabling 16 out of 30 vehicles.⁸

Raven 42 liked to shadow white convoys, since at that time the enemy targeted civilian trucks most. Following behind the convoy allowed the escorts to focus on clearing the kill zone while the MPs engaged the enemy. Nein's 2nd Squad had driven the same routes for three to four months and knew them well. At night after they returned, they would sit around a dry erase board, reviewing what they had done, map out most likely ambush spots and war game what each crew would do, thus perfecting their battle drills. Each crew member

was encouraged to participate and suggest what he or she could do better. In the end, each crew member knew exactly what he or she would do and that would become their new tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP). They also improved upon their vehicle load plans. Nein did not like clutter. His company commander, CPT Todd Lindner, had emphasized setting and maintaining standards. In combat, each crew member needed to know exactly where everything was and they could afford to have nothing in the way like coolers and trash. In the heat of combat, there was no time to waste moving things around. Nein took pride that his team leaders, SGT Joe Rivera, SGT Leigh Ann Hester and SGT Dustin Morris, maintained the standards no matter how long they had been on the road. They performed their preventive maintenance checks and cleaned out their vehicles rather than just go straight to bed even if they only had nine hours before they would go back out on the road again. Nein lived what he preached and had earned the utmost confidence of his soldiers.⁹

It was around 1030 hours on the morning of 20 March, when Raven 42 fell in behind the convoy of Stallion 33 after it entered their sector. Raven 42 notified the convoy on the Sheriff net they would shadow the convoy to the end of their patrol sector where ASR Detroit met up with ASR Bismarck. The



HMMWV of the 1-178th FA stopping to refuel on the eastern route because the up-armored HMMWVs consumed fuel faster and fuel tanks did not carry as much fuel as the M915s. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane



The kill zone was just south of the plowed field and power plant. Photo courtesy of the Army Women's Museum

area was vast open desert cut by irrigation canals and dotted with scattered groves of trees and houses. The convoy radioed back they were going to stop to refuel. Because the eastern route took nine hours to complete, the up-armored HMMWVs did not have enough fuel in their tanks to complete the run so they carried four extra gas cans and stopped along the route to refuel. The stop also allowed drivers to get out stretch their legs and relieve their bladders. Completing the refuel, the convoy continued south again at about 1135 hours. Stallion 33A was the lead gun truck, Stallion 33B was the sixteenth vehicle in the convoy and Stallion 33C brought up the trail. Raven 42 trailed about 200 to 300 meters behind the convoy. About five minutes down the road, SSG Nein in the lead vehicle of Raven 42 noticed that the trucks in the middle of the convoy starting to maneuver to the left and right as if under fire. Suddenly one of the lead tractors was hit by an RPG, came to a halt and began to burn. The Stallion 33 convoy was under fire from their right.¹⁰

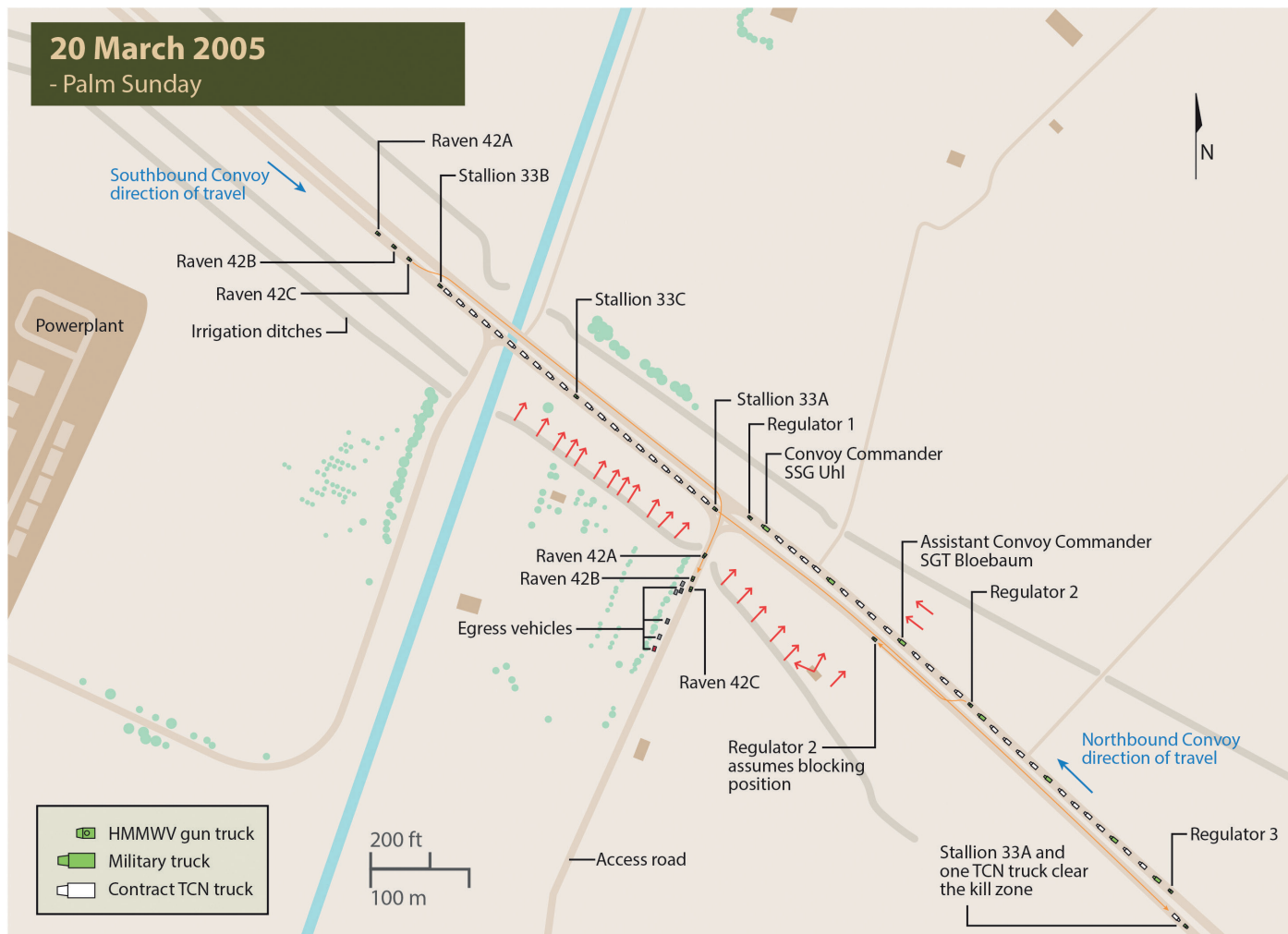
The southbound AAFES convoy had just passed a large open plowed field with a power plant on the right, then over a wide irrigation ditch that ran east and west. A smaller irrigation ditch paralleled the west side of the road to the right of the convoy. Stallion 33A, the lead vehicle, came adjacent to an access road leading off ASR Detroit to the west. The area in between the large irrigation ditch and access road was covered by fields lined with groves of trees. SGT James R. Baker, the vehicle commander of Stallion 33A, saw two Iraqis stand up in the field to his right and fire an RPG and small arms at the convoy. He yelled at his driver, SPC William P. Young to clear the kill zone. Stallion 33B, the 16th vehicle in the convoy, and Stallion 33C, the trail vehicle, heard Baker call contact over the radio. Shortly after that the entire convoy came under fire. The lead gun truck sped up as per doctrine and SPC Patrick T. Malone began firing away with his Mk19 automatic grenade launcher at the enemy on his right. Baker and Young



Kill zone looking northwest with the burning truck.
Photo courtesy of Aaron Castro



Overturned bus in the kill zone. Photo courtesy of the 106th Transportation Battalion

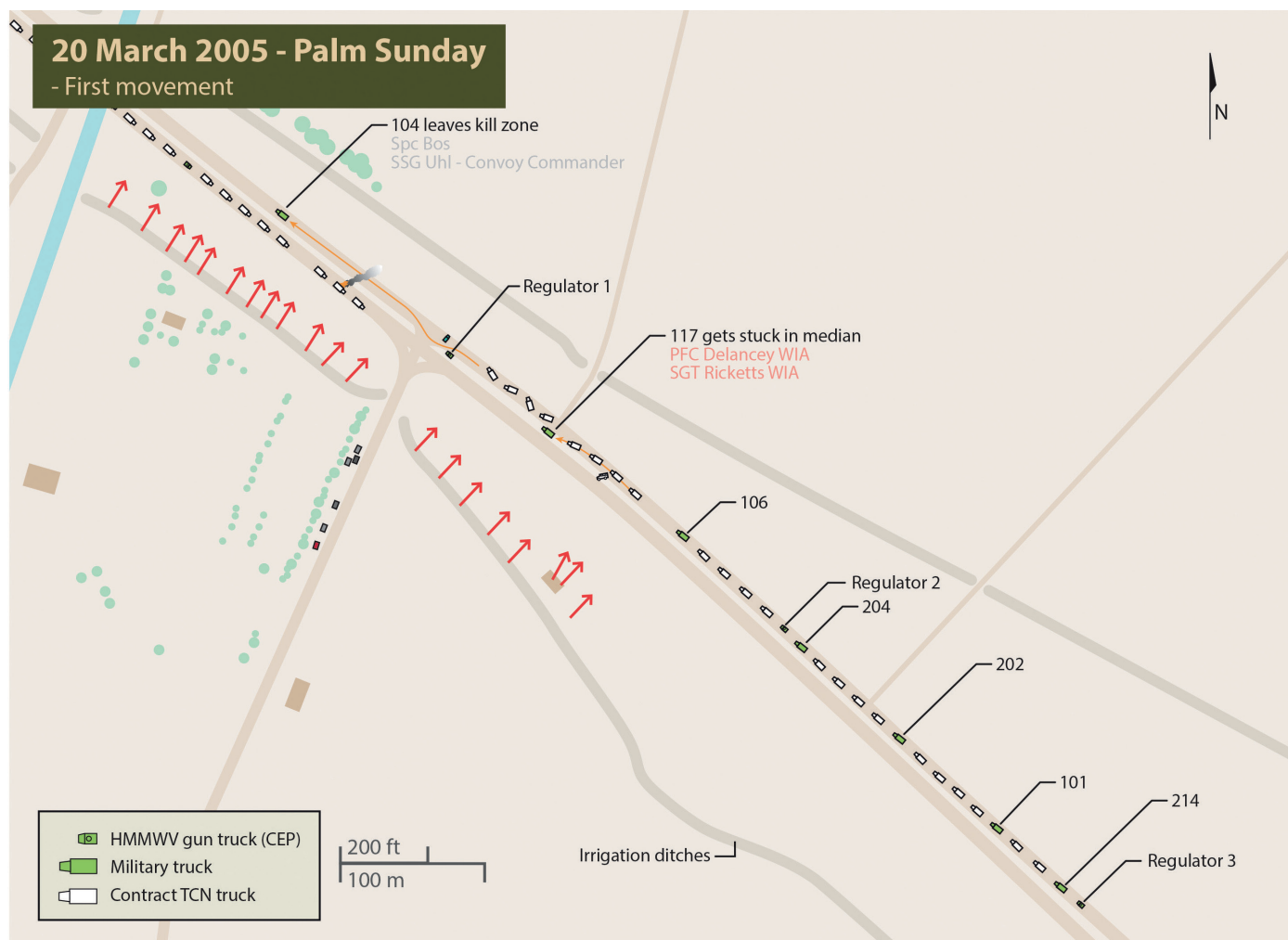


heard explosions and looked behind them just in time to see the bus flip over what looked to them like eight times. A Ford sport utility vehicle (SUV) raced up beside them on their left as if using their M1114 for cover. Young saw rounds stitch the side of the vehicle and window hitting the driver and causing it to crash. Another SUV was also damaged in the initial fire and careened across the median. An RPG hit a tractor behind them, setting it on fire. Stallion 33A drove through a gauntlet of enemy fire for approximately one and half miles then reached the Iraqi Check Point about two miles down the road. Upon reaching the safety of the check point, they realized only one Third Country National (TCN) truck had followed them. The rest of the Third Country National drivers behind them had swerved and stopped their vehicles, climbed out of the cabs and hid behind the tires. With the convoy halted, Stallion 33B moved around while 33C defended the rear of the convoy.¹¹

At the check point, SGT Baker told the Iraqi National Guard to go help the convoy. As the Iraqi headed for the

kill zone, the crew of Stallion 33A checked their vehicle for damage and checked the Third Country National driver. Stallion 33A waited for the rest of the convoy to clear the kill zone. About 15 minutes after the ambush began, it became clear that no one else was able to escape, so SGT Baker called Stallion 33B and asked if they wanted him to come back into the kill zone. They said, "Yes." Baker then instructed the contract driver to remain at the check point and his M1114 turned around and headed back into the kill zone passing the northbound 1075th convoy, which was also under fire.¹²

Earlier that morning, SSG Uhl of the 1075th Medium Truck was warned there would be a demonstration in a town along the way and that insurgent activity had increased around a bridge south of Anaconda, but nothing about an attack that had occurred on Detroit two days prior. Uhl left one of his 22 M915s at Scania due to an oil pan ripped open by a road spike near Safwan so his lead bobtail pulled the trailer. This would limit his maneuverability. SPC Jenny Beck had an



unexplained nervousness about the trip that day and that morning she had told her fiancé, SPC Tim Bos, “I don’t want to leave. Can’t we stay here?” Bos was driving for SSG Uhl in the lead truck and Beck drove for Bloebaum, the assistant convoy commander in the third military truck. SPC John Harris, driving the next military truck in line also felt nervous after he learned they were taking the notorious eastern route. Leaving Scania, the convoy traveled along the eastern route where it turned from ASR Bismarck onto ASR Detroit and headed north.¹³

The demonstration in the small town on the Tigris River was peaceful with a multitude of Iraqis walking around waving black flags. Most of the military drivers noticed nothing unusual, but Ron Hart and William Cross, veteran contract drivers, saw the Iraqis making the cutting gesture across their throats or bringing their hands together like they were praying, then pointing to the drivers. They knew the significance of the gestures. The first was obvious and the second meant that they were going to meet God soon, a clear indication there

was something bad up the road.¹⁴

Around 1120 hours, the convoy had slowed down to snake its way through the Iraqi check point. Civilian traffic backed up as the Iraqi National Guardsmen waved the convoy through. The drivers saw an Iraqi National Guardsman standing there with an RPG on his shoulder, which was shock since they had not previously been allowed to carry RPGs. The lead vehicles continued on up the four-lane paved road separated by a median while the rest accelerated coming out of the check point to catch up. There was the typical civilian traffic parked along the side of the road to let the convoy pass, nothing to raise suspicions. Both sides of the road were open fields with small groves of trees.¹⁵

Shortly after clearing the check point, the lead vehicles saw none of the indicators of an ambush when around 1140 hours, gun fire broke out from a two-story building to their left rear in the open field about 150 to 200 meters from the road. Uhl saw the lead gun truck start swerving then SPC Barbara Higgins, driving



SUV of the southbound convoy damaged in the kill zone. Photo courtesy of Combat Studies Institute

Regulator 1, screamed on the radio, “Contact left.” The excitement in her voice surprised and confused SSG Uhl who asked his driver, “What did she say?” Bos answered, “I don’t know.” This was not like her. Higgins was a no-nonsense soldier who normally did not get excited. Her HMMWV then swerved toward the center median and stopped for a few seconds. Bos tried to drive around to the right but did not think he had enough room to pass and hit the brakes, subsequently stopping the entire convoy like an accordion. Higgins had pulled Regulator 1 out into a blocking position in the median as she had been taught but not far enough. Her gunner, SSG David Van Roekel, fired off an eight to ten-round burst of his .50 then waved at the lead vehicle to keep going.¹⁶

Uhl then heard what sounded like fire crackers and told Bos to drive around the right of Regulator 1. Three RPGs hit the road and exploded right next to them. Then from the southbound lane a SUV came veering across the median slamming into a parked car in front of him. He and Bos assumed that SUV was an insurgent vehicle designed to block the road. Unknown to them, it was from a southbound AAFES convoy escorted by Stallion 33. The two convoys had literally run into each other in the middle of a large kill zone. Uhl again told Bos to keep going. He then called over the radio, “Action left. Keep moving.” Bos accelerated and rammed the SUV, spinning it around. He then drove around the SUV into the median which surprisingly was full of water. Mud splashed over his windshield while rounds pinged off the armor. The lead M915 cleared the kill zone as doctrine dictated and drove about a mile down the road before Uhl looked in his side mirror and realized no one had followed him. All he saw

was smoke beginning to rise from the burning truck.¹⁷

According to their policy, the lead gun truck was supposed to accompany the vehicles out of the kill zone but since only one vehicle escaped, Regulator 1 remained in the middle of the kill zone just past the overturned bus and dueled with the enemy. They saw an AAFES tractor and trailer stopped up ahead in the southbound lane about 20 meters from the grove of trees that lined the access road with two more white trucks behind it and the third one that had just started to burn. Van Roekel saw four or five Iraqis in blue shirts and black pants, the uniform of Iraqi Police, pop up about 100 meters off the road to his left rear. One was wearing a black Kevlar. One was standing straight up while the rest walked, fired, crouched then stood up and fired again walking toward the convoy. He fired another eight-round burst of his .50 but it kept misfiring. The timing was off. They would have known this if they had



Van in northbound convoy struck by RPG.

Photo courtesy of the 106th Transportation Battalion

been able to test fire their weapons. He switched to the SAW also mounted on his turret shield and fired. PFC Jairo Torres, sitting behind the driver, saw five insurgents around the two-story building to his left and one had an RPG. He and Higgins fired their M16s out windows on the enemy side, dropping three enemy insurgents to the ground and the other two ran around the building. This was their first time under fire. SFC Ramiro, from the 1864th Medium Truck Company, was the NCOIC of the gun truck on his first right-seat ride. Van Roekel, who was normally the NCOIC, manned the machineguns.¹⁸

The gun fire was intense and RPGs were impacting up and down the convoy in rapid succession. There was excitement in the vehicle as they yelled out where they saw the enemy. Most of the fire was coming from the two-story house and direction of the warehouse a couple of hundred meters behind it. At 1256 hours, around 15 minutes into the fight an RPG flew within feet of their HMMWV and struck the van that had halted behind the overturned bus. The driver of the commercial tractor either jumped out or was blown out the window, but he looked uninjured. Van Roekel yelled at Higgins, "RPG! Get back, get back!" It punched through the white trailer stalled in the southbound lane. A second RPG came flying at them. He believed a moving target was harder to hit and yelled, "Let's get moving, let's get moving!" Higgins backed the HMMWV up 20 meters. By then, Van Roekel was out of SAW ammunition and had to try and get his .50 working. He would fire a few rounds, pull back the charging handle and fire again. For 15 minutes, Regulator 1 had maneuvered and fired waiting for the convoy to move out of the kill zone but nothing happened.¹⁹

When the ambush began, the next four white trucks swerved violently and slowed to a halt at odd angles completely blocking the road. SGT Terrance Ricketts in his M915 behind them pulled over to a halt near the median. Small arms fire bounced off his door armor. He then inched his truck forward when the AAFES bus hit the Improvised Explosive Device (IED) and was thrown thirty to forty feet before it came to rest on its side in front of his M915. Ricketts then turned his truck into the median to go around the left of the burning bus and became mired in the mud. Immediately his truck became engulfed in small arms fire. Rounds ricocheted off the door and shredded his left tires. They were trapped.



Top: View of kill zone from the tail end of the north-bound convoy. The woods on the left flank the access road. **Middle:** Battle damage to Ricketts' M915A3. **Bottom:** The black mark on the door was made by the armored piercing round that hit Ricketts.

Photos courtesy of the 106th Transportation Battalion



Damage to Regulator 2. Photo courtesy of Jonathan Kennedy

Two well aimed armored piercing rounds penetrated the door; one hitting Ricketts' left leg stopping short of his testicles. It filled his body with searing pain and he screamed to his co-driver, SPC Ricky Delancey, "I'm hit." Ricketts and his co-driver made an odd pair. Ricketts was a muscular prison guard who played a guitar in a rock and roll band while the younger and shorter Delancey reminded his friends of Sleepy in the "Seven Dwarfs." The athletic Ricketts could not move his legs and his survival then depended upon his friend. Delancey grabbed the microphone and handed it to Ricketts who then screamed into the radio with pain, "I'm hit. I'm hit. It hurts."²⁰

That pleading voice coming from a pillar of strength sent shock waves through the convoy. Beck and Bloebaum's M915 had come to a halt at the left edge of the pavement and could see Ricketts' truck. At first, Beck assumed the worst and thought the voice was her fiancé's. She then recognized whose voice it really was and thought it was the worst screaming she had heard in her life. SPC Michael Shrapels in the second to last M915 thought "it was scariest thing in the world. It sounded just like a child screaming for his mother." SSG Uhl by then isolated from his convoy heard the voice and felt completely helpless to do anything. Not only had Ricketts demoralized the other drivers but he had inadvertently tied up the radio so no one else could talk.²¹

Further south in the northbound convoy, contract driver Ron Hart watched the spectacle ahead of him. Ahead of him, he had seen a big cloud of dust of the IED that flipped the AAFES bus, and then the convoy came to a halt and bunched up. William Cross, who was pulling a flatbed about three or four trucks from the rear somewhere behind Ron Hart, saw the contract truck ahead of his turn on its left blinker, which was the signal for contact left. He then heard the gun fire and saw the rising black column of smoke from the burning tractor attesting to the beating the vehicles in the front of the convoy were taking. Suddenly, a bullet shattered his left



Regulator 2. Photo courtesy of Jonathan Kennedy

mirror and side door window passing just an inch above his left shoulder. It was one single round. Ron Hart was a retired infantry man and his military training caused him to assume it came from a sniper. He thought, "I better lay down here." He wanted the sniper to think he had hit him. He summed up what every unarmed civilian driver felt at that moment, "I was scared shitless." Hart then saw Regulator 2 drive forward with its gunner firing his .50.²²

SPC John Harris and SPC Jacob Graff listened to Ricketts in the military truck right behind Regulator 2 in the middle of the convoy. They were wondering what was going on and why the other drivers were not trying to get out of the kill zone as they were supposed to. Sitting in the kill zone was definitely not a good idea. Graff and Harris debated over what to do next when looking past his buddy, Harris saw an insurgent popping up and down. He pointed him out to Graff sitting in the driver's seat closest

to the enemy side. Graff turned and did not see him. Then Harris saw gun smoke rising from a patch of tall grass and, as he pointed Graff fired off seven or eight shots into the area and that put a halt to any small arms fire coming from that direction. Looking ahead of them, they saw the civilian drivers climbing out of their vehicles and either hiding behind the wheels or in the ditch alongside the road. Suddenly rounds from their left front struck their truck. One passed through the windshield and just missed Graff's ear. Then Graff realized, "This is real. Oh my God, is this really happening?" He could not believe what was happening. He could also see SPC Brandon Dettman on Regulator 2 having trouble firing off more than two or three rounds with his .50 before it jammed as they drove ahead.²³

Dettman in Regulator 2 was the first to hear the cracking of small arms up ahead. SGT Jonathan Kennedy, the NCOIC of Regulator 2, then heard over the radio, "Contact left," and acknowledged the message. He then

told his driver, SPC Ryan Hubbard, to pull over in the southbound lane and drive forward into position to form a gun shield for the convoy. Regulator 2, the seventeenth vehicle in the convoy, drove across the median ahead of Beck and Bloemaun's vehicle, five vehicles ahead of his. The crew asked Dettman where the shots were coming from. All the enemy fire seemed to be concentrating on the military trucks and gun trucks. He saw muzzle flashes originating from the two-story brick house to his left and fired his .50 in that direction.²⁴



An AK round penetrated the gap between the add-on-armor and engine and struck Hubbard. Photo courtesy of Jonathan Kennedy

The HMMWV gun truck stopped and the crew heard the pinging of rounds hitting their armor as Regulator 2 took a beating from small arms fire. Its add-on armor was unlike that of the M1114s; there were gaps and one was in front of the dash. One round penetrated that gap and hit Hubbard in the abdomen just below the body armor. He said he was hit and Kennedy began checking for the

wound but could not find it. When Hubbard slumped forward the body armor covered it. He passed out so Kennedy poured water on him and Hubbard woke up. He said he was shot. Kennedy lifted up the body armor and saw a pool of blood. Meanwhile, Dettman fired off bursts of his .50 at the two-story house, but the timing was also off and the .50 jammed, so he picked up his M16 and fired. He saw black-clad militia crouching around the two blue-green warehouses which were several hundred meters behind the two-story house. Dettman reloaded another magazine in his M16 when white smoke came pouring out from under the dash. At that time, Graff further back saw Dettman disappear from the turret.²⁵

Another round had penetrated a gap in Regulator 2's armor and hit the fire extinguisher filling the compartment with white smoke and greater confusion. Kennedy thought the rounds had hit his engine and set it on fire. He made the decision to get his gun truck out



Fire extinguisher struck by round made the crew think they had an engine fire. Photo courtesy of Jonathan Kennedy

of there. He told Hubbard to put the HMMWV in reverse, but Hubbard kept fading in and out of consciousness. Hubbard started backing the HMMWV up when he passed out. Kennedy then reached over with his left leg, straddling the center of the HMMWV, pushed down on the accelerator and steered. Kennedy also heard a grinding noise from the transmission as they backed down the southbound lane. Dettman had fired off two magazines from his M16 and about 60 rounds of .50 caliber ammunition. Ron Hart saw the gun truck moving backwards with smoke coming out of the turret. He asked himself, "Where's the gunner?" That was not a good sign and he thought, "The shit is getting to hit the fan. Awe shit, what is going on now?" The same exact thoughts occurred to Cross behind him. Regulator 2 drove all the way back to the rear bobtail and stopped while still facing the enemy.²⁶

Meanwhile up ahead, Delancey heard the low thud of an explosion followed by a second explosion closer to his vehicle.

"Mortars," he thought. The third round exploded on the hood right in front of his windshield. Beck, five vehicles back, saw the cloud of smoke rise up from his vehicle. The blast had blown the console into Delancey's lap, knocking him back and out of his seat. He then felt



The mortar round impact on Ricketts' truck. After wiping the blood from his eyes, Delancey kicked out the rest of the windshield to engage the approaching Iraqis. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

burning pain in his right shoulder and the shattered glass cut his face. The detached console had also landed on Ricketts' leg pinning him to the floor. He could not feel his legs any more nor could he move. He heard Delancey screaming that he could not see. Just as Delancey sat back up, a round pierced the left front of his helmet, grazing the skin just above the left eye and exited out the back of his helmet. A second round punched through the right rear of his helmet. He

screamed he was shot in the head. Ricketts saw that his friend's face was covered with blood.²⁷

Delancey looked at Ricketts and said with despair, "We are going to die." Ricketts looked back at him and acknowledged, "I know." With the blood cleared from his eyes Delancey looked out the window and saw four or five insurgents bounding from berm to berm toward his disabled truck. He grew angry at the prospect of dying and thought he might take a few of them with him. He said, "Fuck,"

leaned back and kicked out the rest of the shattered windshield then crawled out onto the smoking hood. He saw between four and five insurgents shooting at him from a berm. He then opened fire with his SAW and not as many fired back after that. He fired another burst with



The scar on Delancey's left eyebrow is where one round struck him and his helmet shows the evidence of two rounds that penetrated it.

Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

anger until there was no more return fire. Witnesses said he hit two to five insurgents. In spite of their losses, the insurgents still had both the northbound and southbound convoys trapped in the kill zone. Success was still within their grasp.²⁸

Over across the median, only two gun trucks defended the stalled southbound convoy. Within the first two minutes of the ambush, the enemy had fired over 12 RPGs but fortunately only hit two trucks. Stallion 33C guarded the rear of the convoy and Stallion 33B sat in the middle. It would be a matter of time before the insurgents destroyed most of the trucks by fire and assault. Several insurgents maneuvered past Stallion 33B toward the front half of the convoy to the irrigation ditch that paralleled the road and yelled out a loud, "Alla Akbar!" as they prepared to overrun the stranded white trucks.²⁹

As soon as SSG Nein saw the ambush from behind the southbound convoy, he rushed his Raven 42 patrol across the median to the northbound lane to race past the convoy, passing Stallion 33C parked on the shoulder of the road where they returned fire on the enemy. Nein's intent was to take the initiative away from the enemy. He recognized this was the exact same location that a convoy had been hit two days before. He knew there was an access road up ahead. As he approached the turn, he only saw about ten insurgents hiding behind a little scrub of orchard trees that paralleled the access road. He assumed that the access road was the flank of the kill zone and told his driver, SGT Morris, to take the right hand turn and they would flank the enemy. Morris passed the halted tractors and trailers until he found a gap. As they passed,



SSG Timothy Nein was the squad leader of Raven 42.

Photo courtesy of the Army Women's Museum

the MPs saw the civilian drivers climbing out of their vehicles. The MPs then pulled out between the convoy and the enemy and drove down the southbound lane at about three minutes into the ambush. Ahead of them trucks were twisted and turned in a herringbone manner. Raven 42's gunners blazed away at the enemy as they raced ahead. SPC Jesse Ordunez in the second M1114, Raven 42B, had the choice

of the Mk19 grenade launcher, M240B or M249 SAW. He was firing his M240B. An Iraqi seeing them yelled out in Arabic, "Here they come." Unknown to Raven 42, they drove up right after the insurgents had yelled, "Alla Akbar," thus disrupting their assault.³⁰

Raven 42C raced to the intersection through a hail of RPK machinegun fire and RPGs. RPK and AK rounds hit the windshield and grill of the HMMWV. Nein realized there were far more than just ten insurgents. Immediately after assessing the situation, he called the relay station, call sign "Handcuff," for close air support. He wanted Apache attack helicopters as back up. When Raven 42C reached the road to make the right turn, an RPG struck the passenger door and the explosion lifted the vehicle up off the ground and moved it sideways. Nein turned around to check on his gunner, SPC Cooper. Cooper had collapsed face down behind Nein's seat with

his head hanging in the foot well. SPC Ashley Pullen, driving Raven 42B behind them, saw the explosion and hit her brakes. She thought, "Oh shit! Cooper's there and I don't see him." Cooper was usually the gunner of her truck. Nein shook Cooper but he did not answer. Assuming he was dead, Nein started to climb over him to get up in



SGT Dustin Morris and SPC Casey Cooper of Raven 42C.

Photo courtesy of the Army Women's Museum



Left: SPC Cooper stands next to the RPG impact that wounded him.

Photo courtesy of the Army Women's Museum

Below: SPC Ashley Pullen drove Raven 42B. Photo courtesy of the Army Women's Museum

the turret and man the .50. Suddenly, Cooper jumped up and said he was alright then climbed back into the turret. Seeing that Raven 42C was still moving, Pullen thought, "Okay, they're fine," and followed. As soon as Raven 42C turned west on the dirt road, Nein turned back to facing the front and saw seven parked cars with all four doors open and four of their trunks open. He quickly did the math and realized that there could be up to 28 insurgents in the area. He again called Handcuff telling them he needed close air immediately and then told Morris to drive about 200 meters down the road and stop. Raven 42B followed closely about 30 yards behind followed by Raven 42A with Ordunez blazing away with his SAW. SGT Rivera in Raven 42A had also seen the insurgents in a canal that paralleled the main road fire the RPG at Nein's vehicle.³¹

Heading down the access road, Nein told his driver, SGT Morris, to stop next to the main ditch so they could lay down flanking fire. When Raven 42C came to a stop, Nein saw his HMMWV was pretty shot up and oil was spraying on the windshield. He then saw an insurgent in the field getting ready to fire an RPG at them, so he and



Morris climbed out of the vehicle to fire back with their M4 carbines. Nein heard rounds ping off his vehicle. SGT Hester's Raven 42B with the Mk19 had halted about 50 meters behind Nein and SGT Rivera's Raven 42A armed with the M2 halted about 50 meters behind Hester's. The access road was flanked by tall berms of earth and an orchard and smaller canal paralleled the north side of the access road. Rivera's team had the best field of fire down the main canal that paralleled the main road and began engaging the insurgents. They likewise received the fury of the enemy's fire.³²



Egress cars parked along the access road leading away from ASR Detroit. Photo courtesy of the Army Women's Museum



Access road looking toward ASR Detroit. Photo courtesy of the Army Women's Museum



Access road looking toward the kill zone of the 1075th and 518th convoy. Photo courtesy of the Army Women's Museum

The gunners in the turrets began engaging the enemy while SSG Nein, SGT Hester, and SGT Morris came on line along in front of their vehicles to return fire. This was a drill they had rehearsed. SPC Pullen climbed out and went behind the left rear of her vehicle to fire as she had been taught. She was relatively new to the unit. She fired off a magazine and tossed the empty through her open door because she had been told the insurgents liked to rig explosives to dropped magazines.³³

Some of the insurgents behind the irrigation ditches realized they had been flanked and tried to escape. Nein saw about four in the canal and one behind a car parallel to the road shooting at SPC William Haynes, the gunner in Rivera's gun truck. Then SGT Casey Cooper in the turret of Raven 42C yelled down that there was an Iraqi firing from the berm behind them, "Somebody throw a grenade

over there." Nein went over and climbed up the 10-foot high berm. At the same time, Pullen passed him going to Hester's side. She asked her team leader, "What are we doing?" Pullen then heard yelling on her handheld radio in the HMMWV and told Hester she was going to find out what the noise was. She reached through the passenger door and picked up the radio then stood there listening to SPC Jason Mike yelling he needed help and that everyone was down. She looked down the road and so no one but Rivera rolling on the ground in the mud. She then looked up and saw Nein throw a grenade over the south berm.³⁴

Pullen was having trouble understanding Mike and told him to go to his SINCGARS. At the same time, Hester came back for more 40mm rounds. Pullen then saw Nein climb back up the berm to make sure the insurgent



Damage done to Raven 42C in the kill zone. Photo courtesy of the Army Women's Museum



Rear view of Raven 42C in the kill zone with the embankment to its left. Photo courtesy of the Army Women's Museum

was dead. The insurgent was missing, but Nein saw spent cartridges where the insurgent had fired an RPK. Nein assumed he had fallen into the wet canal that paralleled the access road, so his rear was clear. Nein then turned back to the main fight north of the access road all the while enemy fire continued. Pullen finally heard Mike clearly and told him she was on her way. Hester had returned to the berm so Pullen yelled over to SSG Nein, “SGT Rivera is down, everybody’s down and Mike needs help. I’m going.” Nein looked down the road to Rivera’s location but saw who he thought was PFC Brian Mack, Rivera’s driver, lying on the ground. They were taking a beating from enemy fire. He told Pullen, “Okay, you do what you got to do,” then went running back to Hester’s position on the north berm.³⁵

Right after Raven 42A had stopped adjacent to the irrigation ditch that paralleled the main road, SGT Rivera, SPC Mack, and SPC Mike dismounted and took cover behind their vehicle to engage the insurgents in the irrigation ditch while SPC Haynes blazed away with his .50 in the turret. Mack, the combat medic, fired all his 9mm rounds then picked up Mack’s M4 and fired it. Mack was firing Haynes’ SAW. Shortly after, Mack was shot in the arm. Mike then pulled Mack to cover halfway under his vehicle. Moments later, Rivera was hit in the lower torso. Since both had been behind the vehicle, Mike realized that they were taking fire from the south side of the road. At that distance from the two-story house, the

berm did not offer Raven 42A as much cover from fire as it did the other two gun trucks closer to it. Mike also pulled Rivera to a covered position under the vehicle and returned fire in that direction. While he was engaging to his rear, a round similarly hit Haynes in the back. Haynes stopped firing to bandage his own wounds. Mike picked up the SAW and fired into the irrigation ditch until Haynes could get back up behind his .50. It was at that time Mike radioed Pullen that nearly everyone was a casualty.³⁶

Upon hearing the news of casualties, Nein realized that his small force was severely outnumbered and it occurred to him there was a good chance his force could get overrun. He feared if the enemy overran Rivera’s position so far away, they could then turn the .50 on his two crews. The situation looked grim. He grabbed the radio and told Handcuff they were fighting a platoon-sized force or larger and needed close air support immediately. The situation looked so desperate he even considered destroying his Blue Force Tracker. Nein returned to the firing line and began to take fire from the two-story house behind him to the south of the access road. It finally dawned on him that he was not on the flank of the enemy but in the middle of the kill zone.³⁷

After what seemed like 10 to 15 minutes fighting on the access road, the situation looked desperate and Nein considered a bold and audacious attack on the enemy to throw them on the defensive. Nein went over and told SPC Ordunez, the gunner on Hester’s vehicle,



The two-story house is almost hidden by the embankment of the access road. Photo courtesy of the Army Women’s Museum



SGT Leigh Ann Hester standing near the irrigation ditch with ASR Detroit in the background. The HMMWVs are parked at the intersection. Photo courtesy of the Army Women's Museum

to fire his Mk19 into the house. He fired off between 10 and 15 rounds but it had no effect on the enemy gunner. Ordunez then fired his SAW until a round knocked it out of his hands into the HMMWV. Ordunez looked behind him and saw an Iraqi with an RPK machinegun pointed at him about 15 meters away on top of the berm. Ordunez thought, "This is end, there is no way out." He then spun his 240B around and fired it at him. Meanwhile, Nein walked back to the firing line, stood up and then jumped into the canal that paralleled the access road and yelled, "I need a 203 down here!" Hester with the M203 joined him. Morris intuitively followed along the road knowing they needed overhead cover.³⁸

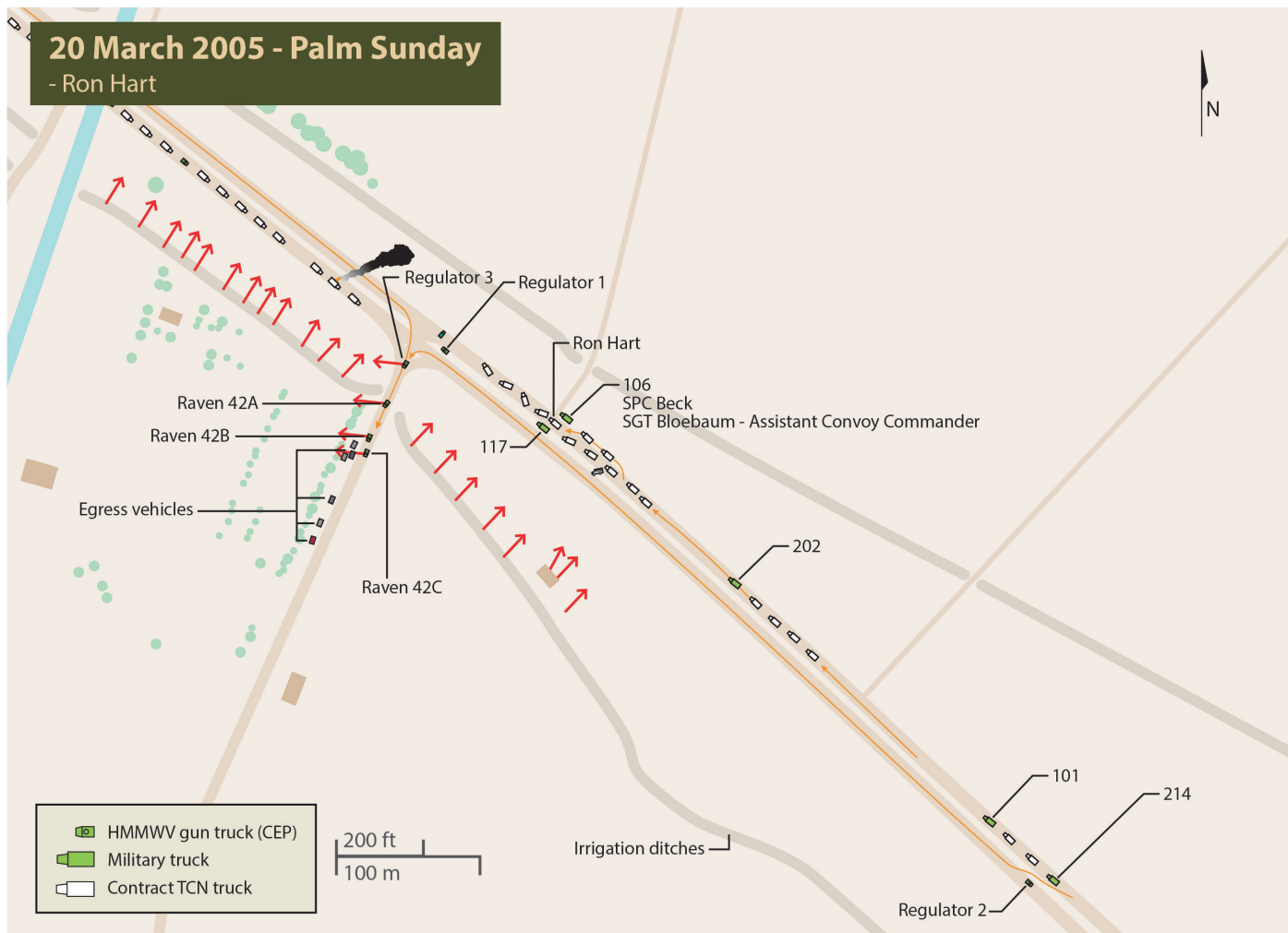
Nein with an M4 on the left and Hester with an M203 on the right advanced along the ditch. Both had two hand grenades each. Something else they had discussed before was if they ever had to go head-to-head with the enemy square up that way the body armor would protect them. The side of the body armor was weak where the Kevlar material overlapped. Hester fired two grenade rounds from M203 at the enemy about 50 meters away but the rounds went over them. Nein told her they had to keep going forward.

They would have to throw hand grenades instead. Hester would fire over Nein's shoulder while he threw grenades then advance and clear out the ditch. He threw his two grenades and Hester handed him one and ended

up throwing one herself. At one point an Iraqi 20 yards away sprayed his AK at them from the hip. Rounds hit all around them but Nein could not believe he missed. It usually took four rounds of 5.56mm (just a little larger than a .22 caliber) to drop the Iraqis. They killed four Iraqis in the canal that led to the main canal.³⁹

Meanwhile, Pullen had climbed back in the driver's seat and yelled up to her gunner, Ordunez, they were going to help Rivera. She then put the vehicle in reverse; spun back around facing the opposite direction then put it in forward and drove closer to Rivera. While Nein and Hester approached the main canal, Raven 42B paralleled them with Ordunez firing over Morris' head. They halted when they reached Rivera's vehicle.⁴⁰

Pullen then climbed out of her vehicle on the contact side and ran to Rivera with her M4 in hand. They were still under heavy enemy fire so she sat next to Rivera with the back of her body armor toward the enemy. She saw Mike and asked, "Mike, what do you need me to do?" He told her, "Tend to Rivera. I've got everything else covered." She then looked at Rivera and asked where he hurt. Pullen realized she needed bandages and since Rivera did not have his weapon she left him hers. Armed with her 9mm Beretta, she ran back to her vehicle and brought back her combat life saver bag not thinking there was one in the vehicle next to her. She dumped the contents out on the road. Rivera screamed



he could not feel his legs. She told him to calm down and that he needed to help her. He helped her take off his body armor and she pushed up his shirt. She saw he was bleeding from a hole in his stomach and saw a lot of blood everywhere. She told him she needed to roll him over and check for an exit wound. She found one. She then heard Mike yell into the radio, "AT4! Backblast area! Clear!" Pullen threw herself over Rivera's body to shield it because she was so close to Mike she could reach out and touch him. He fired the AT4 at the two-story house that was causing most of the trouble.⁴¹

As the evidence would later reveal, around 50 insurgents had laid an L-shaped ambush oriented to the north with the base of the "L" across the road about where the middle of the 1075th convoy halted. The access road divided the kill zone in two parts and Nein was looking at about 35 insurgents to the north engaging the southbound convoy and about 15 behind him to the south engaging the northbound convoy. The south half of the ambush began with a couple of insurgents

firing from a different two-story house to the west of the road followed by fire from about five insurgents behind berms to the south of the house. After a while, about six insurgents behind the house began to fire on the rear half of the 1075th convoy. There were two insurgents across the street forming the "L." The bulk of the enemy fire was concentrated near the access road where the two convoys met. Amazingly, in the heat of battle the soldiers of the two convoys had not even seen each other.⁴²

From the south part of the kill zone, the 1075th convoy heard the intensity of the gun battle on the access road, but still had fight of their own. Bullets zipped through Ron Hart's truck. He was drawing fire from his left, so he decided to drive around to the right and get behind the container trucks. The only trucks with containers were Army green trucks. The commercial white trucks pulled thin-skinned vans or flat bed trailers. Ron pulled up and stopped beside the green truck but saw drivers behind him had followed. Cross and others were thinking of self preservation and also wanted to pull up beside a military

truck to use it for cover. Where Hart had stopped left the others exposed and the enemy fire had increased. So he decided to drive further up to the forward-most green truck to allow the others to also find cover behind the other green trucks. He passed two more green trucks and pulled up to right of Ricketts' truck.⁴³

Four other trucks edged up right behind Hart's truck and could go no further. Cross, in the third vehicle behind Hart, saw enemy fire from the right side of the road. The other drivers climbed out of their trucks for cover and Cross knew he also had to get out. As he was rolling down the window to get out, he heard the back of his trailer get hit four times and then heard a boom. The next thing he knew, he was flying through the window not knowing whether he had been blown through it or jumped out through it, but he worried about his face hitting the asphalt. So he put his hand out and rolled coming to a stop near the rear tandems. He planned to remain there, but heard rounds hitting the trailer and decided to hide behind his tractor. He saw a white truck and a military truck with a container ahead of it, so he took cover behind the rear tandems of the white truck. Another American driver pulled up behind him and Cross held up his fist to signal him to stay put. A Third Country National jumped out of his vehicle cried, "Allah," and knelt down to pray. Cross knew things had gone from bad to worse.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, Hart had thrown the air brakes on and likewise climbed out of his truck to get down behind the cover of the duals of the green truck, but ran into Delancey just as he was climbing out of his truck. The young soldier's face was covered with blood and he still had the SAW in his hand. When Hart saw Delancey, he lost his fear and forgot he was a civilian. It kicked in his head that he was a platoon sergeant again and Delancey was one of his soldiers. The old retired infantry sergeant first class got angry and told Delancey to get his ass down. "Give me that SAW." Delancey told him his partner was still in the truck. Hart told the young soldier there was nothing he could do for Ricketts right then, but "we need to kill these bastards before they kill us." Hart then picked up the SAW and took up a firing position behind the first set of rear duals on the tractor below the trailer. It gave him the best amount of protection and good field of fire. He fired at all the windows of the two-story house where he thought the sniper was. He then fired at the water tower. He then fired at anything he suspected

looked like a sniper position.⁴⁵

After firing off the first 200 rounds, Hart asked Delancey if he had any more ammunition. Delancey said, "Up in the cab." Hart went up to the cab and grabbed one can of ammunition and hoped it was not M16. He heard Ricketts moaning and told him "Just hang on. We will get you out as soon as we can. Don't move around." Hart then returned to his position and loaded the belt directly into the SAW. Delancey wanted to show him how to load the plastic drum on the side of the SAW. Hart said, "Don't worry about that I already know how to do it. We don't need to be pretty right now."⁴⁶

Six Iraqis popped up along the berm that paralleled the left side of the road and were running away toward where they could shoot at the rear of the convoy. They were wearing the Iraqi Police uniforms: blue shirt, black Kevlar vest and black helmet. It puzzled Hart but he thought, "They are in the wrong location," so he decided the fire them up. He fired off another 100 round belt. He did not know if he hit anyone, but when he stopped firing, "they weren't running anymore." He heard something going on to his right side and saw a soldier climbing into the cab of the truck. Hart continued to provide covering fire with the SAW. It was SPC Jenny Beck, the driver of the next M915 in line behind Ricketts'. The drivers were beginning to take decisive action.⁴⁷

SSG Uhl and SPC Bos had waited at the rally point and hoped the remainder of the trucks would start coming out of the kill zone, but for the longest time, none followed. Uhl finally turned to Bos and said, "We have to go back." This violated their doctrine but he had to do something. So Bos skillfully turned his rig around and Uhl radioed the others he was driving back into the kill zone. Suddenly, Beck called back and asked, "Can we come out to you?" For the first time, SGT Bloebaum, the assistant convoy commander, finally realized the convoy commander was no longer with the convoy. There had been no battle handoff to let him know he was in charge.⁴⁸

Beck had gone through a roller coaster ride of emotions. First she had mistaken Ricketts' voice as that of her fiancé, SPC Bos. She was panicky until she realized who it really was. She then saw the mortar round hit Ricketts' truck and she called them on the radio. She heard nothing. She had a sinking feeling in her stomach fearing the worst had happened. Tears

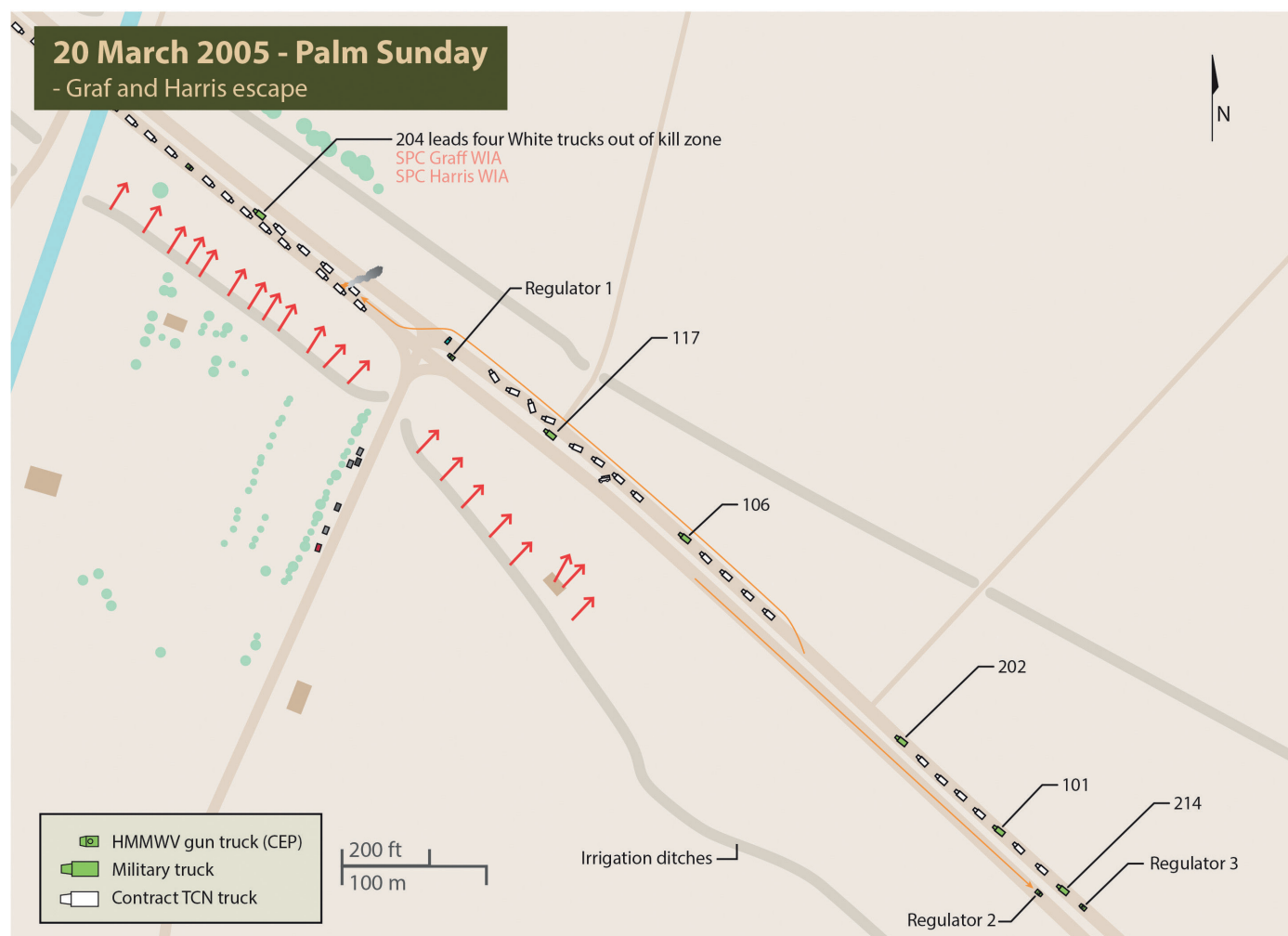
welled up in her eyes and Bloebaum comforted her saying, “It’s okay. They’ll be fine.” He added, “Don’t worry about it. Let’s get out of here.” With that he began typing a request for medevac on his MTS and sent their grid coordinates. Both of them let the air out of their seats to let them sit lower behind the door armor. Bloebaum then came up with a plan.⁴⁹

He knew that to get convoy vehicles moving, a military truck would have to lead them out. He told Beck, “We’ve got to get these white trucks out of our way. We’ve got to get the ones behind us to back up. That way, we can back up and go around the rest of the whites to Ricketts and Delancey.” About that time, Graff called over the radio asking if there was a way to drive around the traffic jam. That was a relief for Beck.⁵⁰

Five vehicles behind them, Graff and Harris decided to clear the kill zone on their own. Their truck crawled forward looking for an opening on the right but that escape route was blocked. As they moved, enemy fire increased. Just as they were about to turn to the left, a

burst of machinegun fire hit their cab. Graff looked over at Harris and he was holding his neck. One round had penetrated the windshield, hit the lip of Harris’ helmet, shattering and sending fragments of the helmet and bullet down his face and neck, knocking him against the passenger door. Harris lay there trying to clear the cob webs out of his mind when he felt something cold and wet splash against his hand. He knew it was blood. This brought him a little back to his senses and he reached up and pinched off his carotid artery. He then saw Graff looking at him. Unable to speak, Harris motioned to the front. Graff knew what it meant. He had to get his battle buddy quickly out of the kill zone to safety where he could be medevaced or he would die.⁵¹

Graff pushed down on the accelerator and maneuvered around the right side of the convoy. Upon coming abreast of Ricketts’ vehicle he pushed the smoldering bus out of the way and drove into the southbound lane, drawing a hail of small arms fire that hit the truck sounding like popcorn. Graff was driving



through the center and most intense part of the kill zone. Chunks of fiberglass from the hood of his truck were flying everywhere as rounds tore it apart. A round passed through the side window striking him in the shoulder. Graff only felt a tug and reached up underneath his deltoid armor and drew back a bloody hand. He also heard the hiss of an air leak and feared rounds had punctured an air line and his trailer brakes might lock up. Unknown to him the hiss came from his tires. He pushed his truck on as hard as he could and cleared the kill zone.⁵²

Once Graff's vehicle left, the white trucks behind Beck and Bloebaum had room to back up. Beck hung out the door and motioned the DoD drivers behind her to back up. They understood and were still in their cabs. The first DoD speaking driver put his rig in reverse, backed up and then drove around the convoy. Others followed. After four more vehicles passed by, Van Reokel in the lead gun truck, Regulator 1, ordered Higgins to follow them to the rally point, "Let's get moving, let's get moving!" At 1157 hours, they cleared the kill zone. They had spent around 15 minutes near the center of the kill zone and had fired off a total of 30 magazines of M16, two drums of M249 SAW ammunition and 200 rounds of .50 caliber.⁵³

As soon as room opened up behind Beck and Bloebaum, Uhl came over the radio saying he was coming back. Bloebaum told Beck to tell Uhl to stop, turn around and set up a casualty collection point. He knew if Uhl reentered the kill zone, there would be no one to stop the other trucks coming out. They would just keep driving down the road. Beck radioed Uhl, "Don't come back. Can we come out where you are at?" Relieved, Uhl found her question funny. That was what he had wanted them to do. He said, "Yes, yes. Get out here." Uhl then ordered Bos to turn his truck around and return to the spot where he originally stopped.⁵⁴

About that time Graff pulled up next to Uhl with fluid spraying out of his tractor. Graff jumped out and yelled that Harris was hurt. Uhl jumped from his truck, ran to Harris' door and opened it to see the young soldier with blood covering his face. Harris looked at his squad leader as if to ask how he was. He then gritted his teeth and rolled his eyes. He tossed his combat life saver bag to Bos who helped Graff pull Harris from the cab and set him down against the wheel of his truck. Bos then began treating his wounds while Uhl radioed for a medevac.⁵⁵

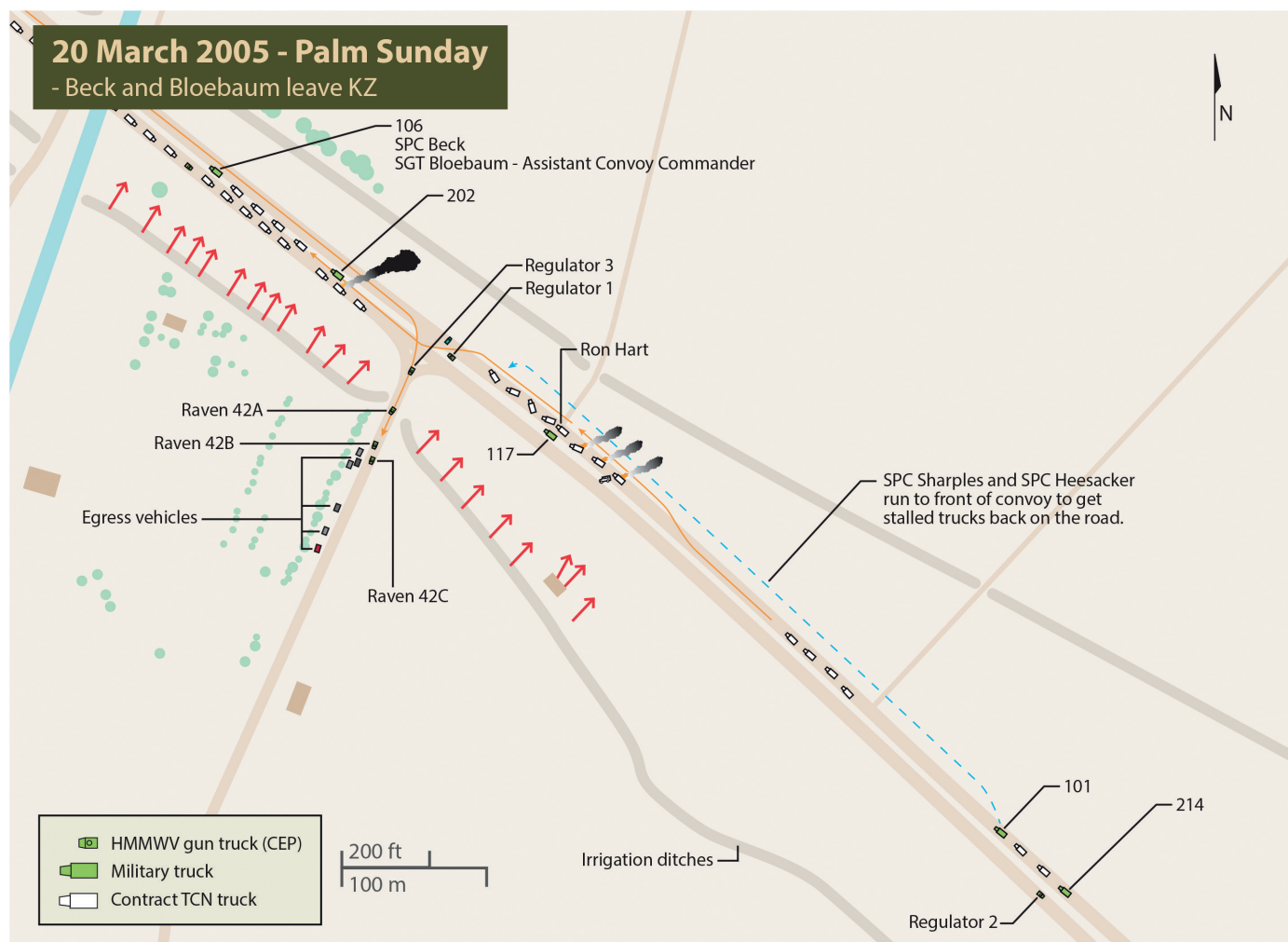
Back in the kill zone, Bloebaum told Beck to pull

her rig up to the right of Hart's. They crept forward about 15 mph when a Third Country National jumped up the running board next to her door to show her the wound in his arm. She opened the door and he crawled in behind her next to the MTS. Reaching Hart's vehicle, she then jumped out of the cab and walked around to Ricketts' truck still under fire. Typical of a truck driver, she did not carry her weapon. Upon seeing her, Delancey struggled to his feet. He told her to get them out of there and that Ricketts was still in the truck. She told him to get in her truck. Bloebaum had just opened the door to get out when Delancey climbed up and jumped in. Sandwiched between the Third Country National and Delancey, the assistant convoy commander then treated Delancey's wounds and sent more MTS text messages.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, Beck opened the passenger door and looked in the cab at Ricketts lying helplessly on the floor board pinned under the wreckage of the console. He raised his head off the seat and looked surprised to see her. He told her, "I'm stuck." She told him, "I don't care. You're getting out of there." She reached in and began pulling. Trapped under the console, he could not budge. She cursed at him and he explained, "I can't move." It seemed the harder she pulled the tighter he became lodged under the console. She yelled at him, "We're not leaving you here. If you're not doing it for yourself, you're doing it for me. You're not staying here." He said, "Okay, but my legs are stuck...my right leg is stuck and I'm shot in the left leg." She told him to push with his good leg no matter how much it hurt. She counted to three and she strained with all her strength. Ricketts finally started moving. She now had a problem in that she could not hold Ricketts up.⁵⁷

When Hart looked over again, he saw Beck pulling Ricketts out. She appeared excited and out of breath, but in control. Afraid she would drop Ricketts, Beck asked Hart if he could help pull Ricketts out of the cab and drag him around to the other side of his truck. So Hart laid the SAW down near the rear duals and the two lowered Ricketts to the ground. Then they dragged him by the collar of his body armor. Still under fire, Ricketts then rolled over on his stomach and started to crawl so Hart could pull him a little faster. About that time, Stallion 33A drove by heading north to the access road.⁵⁸

Beck then climbed half way in her cab when she saw that her truck was crowded with three people in the cab.



She turned around, looked down and told Hart she had no more room in her truck. She felt bad about having to leave him. Ricketts was trying to climb into the cab when she told him there was not room. He understood, climbed down and crawled under Hart's trailer. She said someone else would come and pick Ricketts up. She then asked Hart if he had picked up Ricketts' M16. She did not want to leave any weapons around. He said no and she then asked if he could go get it. He responded, "Right, no problem." She then climbed back in her cab and radioed the trucks behind her to pick up Ricketts. She stepped down again to tell Hart to hold that position until one of the drivers behind her recovered Ricketts. For some reason her focus on a military driver picking up Ricketts overlooked the fact that Hart's truck still worked and he could have driven him out. Beck then signaled the civilian drivers behind her to get ready to go, mounted, and drove her M915 into the median and out of the kill zone with several other drivers following.⁵⁹

Cross remembered Beck came back screaming,

"We've gotta move." A truck driven by an English man had stopped immediately behind Hart's, the next was driven by Peterson from Australia,⁶⁰ and then Cross with another American driver behind him. Cross replied, "I can't move unless they move. Listen I'm back here. If you can get these guys to move, I'm with you a hundred percent." So the other drivers climbed back into their trucks and followed her out. The Brit led the group, followed by the Aussie, Cross and then the other American. As they pulled out there was an explosion behind the Aussie's truck and the right side of Cross' truck. Cross drove with his eyeballs peering just over the steering wheel.⁶¹

Beck led the four contract trucks across the median just past the burning bus. When the truck directly in front of Cross' reached the median, its drive wheels began spinning in the mud. Meanwhile Cross was building up momentum to power through the mud, but feared he was going to run into the back of the trailer ahead of him. Flames were shooting out of the bus just a few feet

away and Cross felt the intense heat coming through his window. He held off hitting brakes until the last moment, and luckily the truck ahead caught traction and took off. So Cross kept his foot on the accelerator and his truck fishtailed through the muddy median.⁶²

Cross saw Iraqis fire and duck. Most were wearing street clothes, but a couple wore blue shirts and one even wore a dark blue Iraqi Police armband. He saw no more than two at a time. He then spotted the head and shoulders of an Iraqi with an RPG to his left. Cross hit the brakes and his truck wiggled as it slowed down just as the RPG flew past the front of his truck, glanced off the asphalt and landed in the field. He did not know if it exploded. He remembered it then took 45 seconds to clear the kill zone.⁶³

Meanwhile, Beck radioed back to SPC Kelly Kinzer and SPC Paul Rullo that she had Delancey, was heading north and for them to pick Ricketts up. They misunderstood that she had Ricketts. Uhl also misunderstood her. Kinzer and Rullo followed her out of the kill zone as Ricketts watched the column of trucks pass. A strange sense of ease came over him. He did not want to stop any of them because they were not supposed to stop in the kill zone. He would have felt terrible if someone was killed on his account. A good portion of the 1075th convoy had finally cleared the kill zone and no one picked up Ricketts.⁶⁴

After the first four trucks had driven forward behind Graff, Regulator 1 raced ahead of the vehicles past the AAFES convoy on their left and after a minute slowed down, unable to see any vehicles behind it. An RPG streaked at it and the crew returned fire. They accelerated again and, after less than a minute of driving, Van Roekel asked, "Is the driver behind us?"

Higgins answered, "No."

"Why are you driving then?"

Higgins responded, "You told me to get out of the fucking kill zone."

"So where is the convoy?"⁶⁵

By their doctrine they were supposed to establish the rally point three to six miles down the road out of the range of enemy weapons, but they had no idea Uhl had set it up just one mile from the kill zone.

Higgins then slowed her HMMWV to a stop and realized no one was behind them. They had not even seen Uhl's M915 when they passed it. They then

checked their status of ammunition and SFC Ramero stepped out to look for the convoy. Two minutes later they turned around and drove back toward the kill zone. They found Graff and Uhl's M915s parked side-by-side. The crew dismounted and then Torres and Higgins went over to treat Harris's wound. A few minutes later the white trucks pulled up. Refusing treatment, Graf walked to the southbound lane and waved at an approaching HET convoy to stop.⁶⁶

About 20 minutes after the ambush began, SSG Shirley Jacobs' southbound convoy of the 4th Platoon, 96th HET heading from Anaconda to Scania neared the kill zone from the north. Her call sign was "Dragon 47." This was SSG Jacobs' first time as convoy commander. Her convoy included seven green HETs, 14 white HETs, three gun trucks, a contact truck with spare parts and a wrecker, for a total of 25 vehicles. Off in the distance, Jacobs saw smoke which was a common sight in Iraq. Locals burned everything. She then heard on the Sheriff net about an ambush, but when she plotted the ambush grid on her route map, it was not in the direction she headed. She had the wrong grid coordinates so she did not think there was any trouble up ahead.⁶⁷

She then called "Yellow Jacket," her escort from A Battery, 1st Battalion, 178th FA on the SINCGARS, "I can hear them on the SINCGARS. We're close." As her convoy neared the smoke, Jacobs saw three parked M915s about 300 meters ahead. Smoke was coming from the right hand side of the road further ahead. She planned to stop and help, and as soon as she passed the first M915, she saw a soldier bleeding from a head wound, a sergeant and a female soldier standing next to him. Jacobs then pulled up next to the second M915 and stopped.⁶⁸

Jacobs then instructed her convoy to go into a box formation. Her green HETs alternated pulling in left and right behind her vehicle. The white HETs followed the green HETs in front of them and the gun trucks took up security around the box. She had been a drill instructor at Fort Jackson and taught basic training soldiers the box formation. She called her soldiers on the SINCGARS, "Get out of the trucks and pull security. Do not go to the right side." From the sound of gun fire, she could tell that her right side was exposed to fire. The ambush sounded like the gun fire she had heard on firing ranges when she was a drill instructor. As soon as the Third Country

Nationals climbed out of their vehicles, the NCOs knew to herd them into the center of the box.⁶⁹

Graff yelled over that his convoy needed medics and combat life savers. SSG Jacobs, PFC Christy Kirkland, the combat life saver, and SGT Eddie Munos, the driver, climbed out of her lead HET and went over to the wounded soldier in front of the lead vehicle. About that time the gunfire stopped. Jacobs saw an Apache helicopter overhead. It circled in wide loops and the enemy fire always stopped when the Apache appeared overhead. Kirkland automatically started triaging the wounded.

Jacobs asked Uhl, "How many are hit, how many vehicles in your convoy? Have you called for a medevac?"

Visibly shaken, Uhl answered, "There are three or four people that I know of." He also told her how many vehicles he had and he had already called for a medevac.⁷⁰

Up until then, Stallion 33C was under fire in the rear of the AAFES convoy when SGT Ricky D. Burke, the vehicle commander, heard Stallion 33B was receiving heavier fire up front. Burke and his .50 gunner, SPC Kirby Gregory, suppressed much of the enemy fire. That was the time Raven 42 radioed they were taking fire from both sides of the road and needed help. By that time, Jacobs' HET convoy had pulled up so Burke knew she covered his rear and he instructed SGT Mathew T. Simpson to drive their M1114 to the front of the convoy. They drove down the northbound lane behind the vehicles, passed the burning Reefer trailer, crossed over into the southbound lane again. Upon seeing Raven 42's M1114s on the access road, Stallion 33C drove to help them.⁷¹

Much earlier, Regulator 3, in the rear of the 1075th convoy, heard gunfire to their left front but could not see where it was coming from. They could hear the sound of gun fire getting closer and, about two or three seconds later, rounds started ping-pong off their HMMWV. A heavy



Looking north from the kill zone with Apache flying overhead. Photo courtesy of the 106th Transportation Battalion

volume of fire flattened three of its tires and hit its ballistic windshield. The crew still could not see any enemy to engage. They then heard Ricketts scream on the radio, "I've been hit, I've been hit!" SSG Aaron Castro on the .50 returned fire in the direction he heard enemy fire but his .50 also jammed after firing a few rounds. His turret also

locked up and would not rotate. SGT Rondell Brown, the vehicle commander, thought they were sitting ducks and SGT Anthony Hernandez, the driver, yelled they had to get out of there. Although their place was protecting the rear of the convoy, they were unable to see anything to fire at so Brown told Hernandez to drive around the right side of the convoy using the trucks as a shield just as Raven 42 and Stallion 33 had. They saw the drivers on the right side of the road hiding behind their trucks. As they drove down the right side of the convoy they received small arms fire from the field in that direction. They returned fire and quieted that side of the road. Through the gaps they saw Regulator 2 falling back. Brown asked Hernandez, "Where are they going?" Regulator 3 returned fire and kept going until they found a gap in the convoy large enough to drive through. They nosed their HMMWV through and saw enemy fire from the direction of the warehouse and grove of trees by the access road. They felt if they could drive to the cover of the berm, they could suppress the enemy fire and protect the convoy. While they drove to it they saw three Iraqis come out of the two-story house with RPGs. They arrived right behind Stallion 33C.⁷²

Upon reaching the access road, the crew of Regulator 3 only saw two HMMWVs parked with their crews in a fight of their own. They saw one wounded MP on the ground, Haynes firing the .50 from the turret and Mike firing his M4 from the berm. They saw Haynes get hit in the hand and then he dismounted. They thought the .50 was inoperable. This was the final act in the heroic fight by the MPs of the Raven 42.⁷³

While engaging the enemy, Haynes, on top of Raven

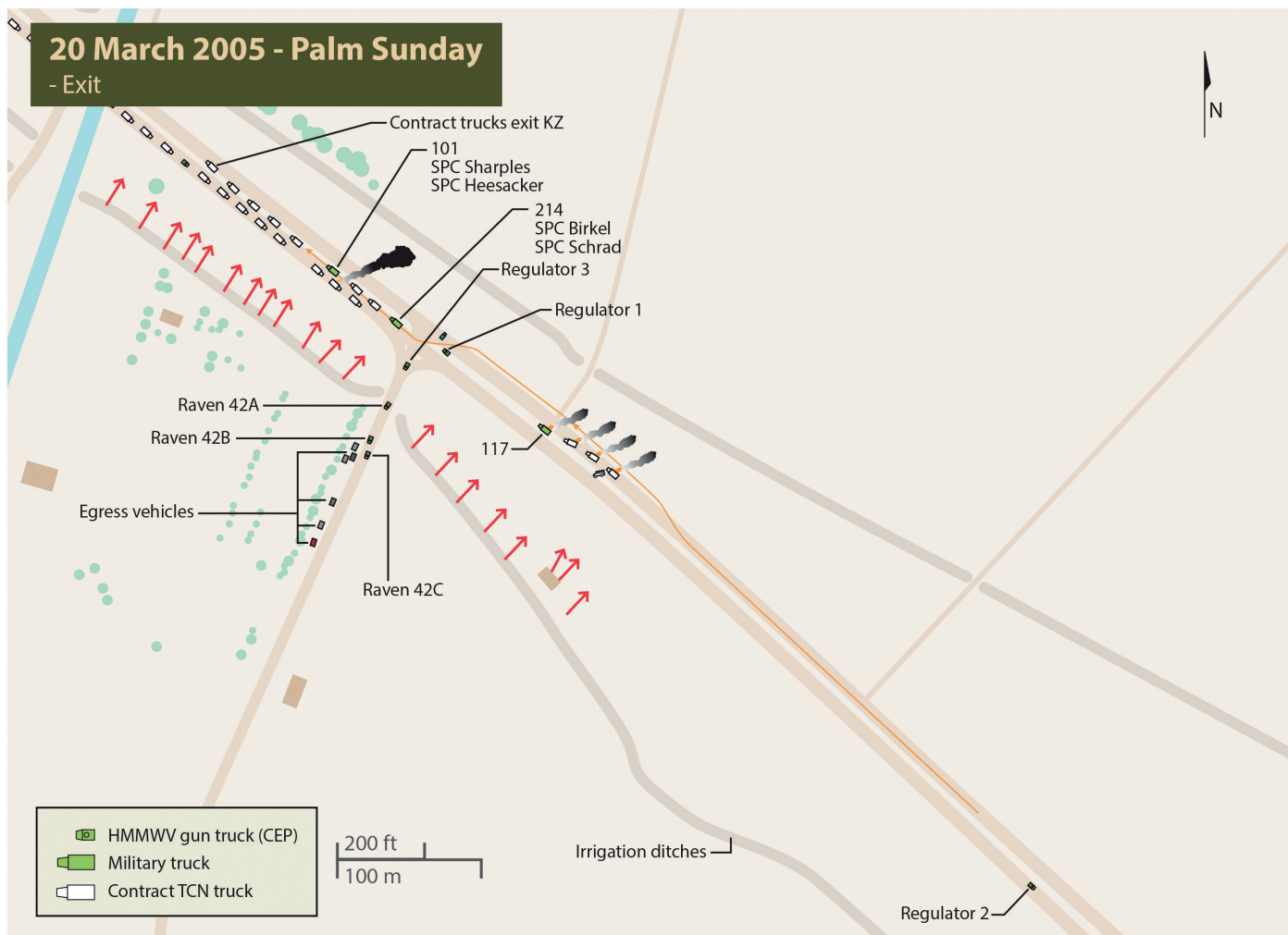
42C, saw SSG Nein and SGT Hester approaching along the irrigation ditch. He stopped firing his .50 and called a cease fire. About that time, Nein, Hester and Morris came over to assess the situation. SGT Hester calmly walked over while the enemy fire continued and asked Pullen what she needed. Pullen was holding down a compress bandage on Rivera's stomach and said she needed another bandage. She was not trained as a combat life saver (CLS) and did the best she could, but did not know what she was looking for in the CLS bag. For some reason, she did not think to use the bandage on Rivera's vest. Rivera was screaming for her to get off of him because it was hurting. She fought back the tears as she tried to calm the sergeant down. She told him to think about his little son, his mother, his home and Kentucky. Hester then calmly walked over to Brown and Hernandez who had dismounted from Regulator 3 and asked if they had a combat life saver on board. All were combat lifesaver qualified, so Hester told Brown, "We need a Medevac, we need a Medevac!" Brown walked back to his vehicle and called for a Medevac on his radio. While Hernandez headed toward the wounded, Brown learned a medevac was already on the way so he took up a firing position along the berm with Castro who had already dismounted with his SAW. Pullen looked up at the nearest gun truck, Stallion 33A, and saw the driver sitting there. She yelled over at Mike, "Get him out of there and make him do something!" Mike physically hauled him out of the vehicle. SGT Burke and SGT Simpson, wearing tan body armor, dismounted and ran over to Pullen to render medical assistance to Rivera and provide covering fire. She did not hear them. She just saw them staring at her causing her to remark, "If you're not going to help me, go shoot somebody or something; but just don't stand there and stare at me!" They were still under fire and ran over to help Mack.⁷⁴

Simpson then dragged Mack behind the cover of the driver's side of his vehicle to treat his wounds. They then came under fire from the two-story building to the south. That was when they saw Mike fire the AT4 into the building. After the explosion, the crew of Regulator 3 saw six or seven Iraqis running from the house. Shortly after this, Stallion 33B arrived and provided additional .50 caliber fire into the irrigation ditch. SFC Hammons and his driver, SPC Kevin R. Vogal, climbed out to load SPC Mack into their vehicle for evacuation. As Stallion

33B prepared to leave, Stallion 33A pulled up. Hammons then instructed SGT Baker in Stallion 33A to call for a medevac and establish a landing zone. As both Stallion 33A and 33B drove back to the main road, they received heavy fire from both sides of the access road. Stallion 33A fired to the north side of the road while Stallion 33A returned fire to the south side. They drove south to the check point taking fire the whole way. There they established a casualty collection point and landing zone 600 to 1,000 meters south on the road. Stallion 33A and 33B then found the lone Third Country National where they had left him. Baker called in the nine-line medevac report. The tail end of the 1075th convoy was still ahead of them.⁷⁵

While they were working on Mack, SPC Hernandez of Regulator 3 walked up wearing green body armor and asked Pullen, "What can I do to help you!" She said, "We need to move him, get him out of the mud and get him to a truck." Hernandez pulled out his Gerber knife and cut off Rivera's gear and then he helped bandage SGT Rivera's wounds while Pullen calmed him. They called SPC Mike over who then grabbed Rivera's feet, Hernandez his arms and lifted him while Pullen held the bandages. They carried him to the nearest vehicle, Stallion 33C, and started to slide him across the back seat, but there was a cooler and other trash in the way. Pullen yelled, "Get this crap out of here. He's not going to be in any more pain than necessary." Someone came and tossed the junk out of the vehicle which took a while. Ordunez finally came over while Pullen was trying to insert an IV into Rivera. Since she was not combat life saver trained she did not know how, which was good. She later learned that she was not supposed to administer an IV to someone with a stomach wound. Ordunez handed Rivera the guardian angel his fiancé had mailed him for protection then looked at Pullen and, with tears in his eyes, asked if Rivera would be okay. Pullen told him she would not let anything happen to him. After 20 minutes the fight had died down on the access road but it still raged over on the south half of the kill zone.⁷⁶

After Beck drove off, Hart went back to Ricketts' truck, picked up the SAW and took up another firing position. Lying under Hart's trailer, Ricketts had watched the trucks roll by with none stopping. Hart remained in the firing position for five more minutes until he knew Beck



was safely down the road. He picked up the M16 and threw it inside his truck. He then went over to check on Ricketts and give him water. A Third Country National had shown up and was also sitting next to him. They waited for someone to drive by and pick Ricketts up. However, it finally occurred to Ricketts the others had forgotten him.⁷⁷

Beck and Bloebaum reached the casualty collection point established by Uhl. There she climbed out of her cab and felt a sense of relief seeing her fiancé, Bos. The two helped Delancey out of his body armor so the combat life savers could treat his wounds. She sat by comforting him while worrying about Ricketts. Someone yelled out that Ricketts was inbound with Rullo and Kinzer. Beck and several other drivers grabbed a litter to meet the truck. To her shock, Ricketts was not in the truck. She realized they had left him behind. She was furious and communication with the rear of the convoy was bad.⁷⁸

Back in the kill zone, Hart and Ricketts, however, remained along with seven white trucks, two green and

the bobtail. Many of the contract drivers were hiding in the ditch. SPC Michael Sharples, the driver of the second - to - last M915, had understood the call to pick Ricketts up and had seen Rullo and Kinzer's truck slow down as it passed Hart's truck. He was glad to see the convoy finally moving again. Just to make sure that someone picked up Ricketts, he asked on the radio, "Did anybody get Sergeant Ricketts?" Someone said, "Yeah, he's here." They may have confused Ricketts with Rickey Delancey.⁷⁹

About that time, an F16 jet arrived and circled overhead as a show of force. Sharples told his driver, SPC Thomas Heesacker, "Stay here. I'll be right back." Sharples climbed out of his cab and ran along the line of trucks opening the doors to check for civilian drivers. The windshields and cabs were shot up but all the drivers were taking cover in the ditches. Upon reaching the last vehicle, there was a long gap between it and other trucks. As he stepped out, gun fire opened up on his left with the rounds hitting the ground in front of him.

The small arms fire made the distance between the trucks immense. He told himself he was not going to run it alone, turned and then ran back to his truck hearing a couple more rounds pop over his head.⁸⁰

About the same time, Birkel sitting in the last bobtail reached for the radio and asked the crew of Regulator 2, "What's wrong with your vehicle?" They told SPC Josh Birkel their transmission had been damaged. It had made a lot of noise when it backed up so SGT Kennedy wanted to tow it out. For this reason, they pulled up behind the bobtail. While the bobtail lined up with the tow bar on the front of the HMMWV, Kennedy ran up to ask the mechanic to come out and help. Once the tow bar was hooked up, the bobtail lurched forward. A few minutes after the F16 had arrived, a pair of Apaches flew overhead and the enemy fire momentarily died down. Dettman, in the turret of the HMMWV, was still firing when he felt the tow bar jerk. Kennedy called that he needed a medevac and whined why they were not leaving. They did not have a combat life saver bag in the vehicle so Kennedy used his and Dettman's field dressing to bandage Hubbard's wound. After they pulled up about 50 feet, Kennedy heard Regulator 3 was on its way to pick up Hubbard. While waiting, Birkel decided to climb out of the cab, go back and check the shot-up HMMWV for himself. It turned out the transmission was not damaged but he learned when Hubbard slumped forward, his body put the vehicle in low gear. So they disconnected the tow bar and Birkel returned to his cab where he ran into Sharples.⁸¹

Pointing to the civilians, Sharples told him, "You need to help me get these guys out of here. There's a big gap up there and I don't want to do it alone. Maybe we can cover each other or something." Wide-eyed at the suggestion, Birkel snapped back, "I'm not going to do that." Sharples pleaded again, "C'mon man, we're never going to get out of here if we don't get them back in their trucks." Birkels realized he was right and agreed. He then told his co-driver, SPC Jay Schrad, he was going forward with Sharples. Schrad provided covering fire out the window of his truck and Dettman, in Regulator 2, laid down suppressive fire on insurgent positions in a dune and a house to their left and watched two to five insurgents drop and not get up again. The other two ran between the gaps in the trucks. Each time they drew enemy fire and Birkels was sure he was going to get hit.

Soon Birkels became focused on what he was doing and blocked out the danger. He quit hearing gunfire. They reached the large gap and Sharples leaned around the nose of the truck and fired off a burst, then both sprinted across the gap. To their surprise, they drew no enemy fire this time probably because two Apache helicopters had arrived and circled overhead.⁸²

Sharples and Birkel ran the 300 to 400 meter length of the convoy trying to get the drivers back in their trucks. Scared and unable to speak English, most of them did not initially respond to the orders and remained hidden in the ditch. Some climbed out of the ditch to hear what they had to say. It took a lot of prompting to get them back into their vehicles and drive out. Sharples discovered one Third Country National who had been shot in the butt hiding behind the tire and helped him into one of his friend's truck. After getting all the drivers in their trucks, the two Americans were about to run back.⁸³

Hart thought it was taking way too long for anyone to come and pick up Ricketts, so he went over to Ricketts' cab and found his Motorola. He called on the radio, "I've got a wounded soldier. I need someone to come up here and get him." It seemed like forever as nothing happened. Then he got on the radio again and said the same thing. Someone asked who he was. Hart said, "I'm one of the Western drivers up here at the front of the convoy with a wounded soldier." Finally they said someone was coming up there.⁸⁴

As Birkel was about run back to his bobtail, a civilian driver grabbed his shoulder and pointed to Hart's truck. There Birkel astonishingly saw Ricketts lying on the ground. Birkel ran yelling and waving to get Sharples' attention. After Sharples saw Ricketts, he picked up the radio and angrily said, "I thought you guys had said you had Ricketts. Why is he still here?" Someone answered, "I don't know. Get him up here because the choppers are here." They sprinted across that open road and when they reached Ricketts he was nearly faint from the pain. Birkel inspected Ricketts' leg wound and was surprised at how little it bled. The hot round had evidently cauterized the wound. Birkel and Sharples then carried their friend to Hart's cab and loaded him. Hart jumped up in his truck while they assisted Ricketts into the sleeper behind him and then one said, "Once you get him loaded, go on down to a casualty collection



Enemy weapons collected by the MP quick reaction force. Photo courtesy of the Army Women's Museum

point." A Third Country National opened the door and asked if he could ride with Hart. Hart recognized him as one of the IAP Third Country Nationals and let him ride. So Hart drove off. His truck only had a few flat tires.⁸⁵

As Birkel and Sharples ran back to their trucks, they forced the rest of the civilian drivers back into their trucks. Along the way, they saw one tractor had its air lines damaged so it could not pull its trailer, so they unhooked the trailer and had their bobtail come up and hook up to it. Birkel and Schrad then remained in the kill zone until the last of the civilian vehicles had cleared it. As the convoy drove forward, Hubbard came to and Kennedy told him to drive Regulator 2 forward. Finally the last drivers of the 1075th Medium Truck cleared the kill zone.⁸⁶

Over on the access road, Pullen told Hernandez they needed to medevac SGT Rivera soon. Hernandez replied, "Okay, let's go." So he crawled in the driver's seat of Stallion 33C to drive to the southern casualty collection point. SGT Brown and SSG Castro mounted Regulator 3 and Brown told Hernandez to follow him there. Mike drove Raven 42A with Haynes in the turret behind them. Pullen sat in the back where the gunner normally stood and talked to Rivera. Meanwhile SPC Gregory, the gunner, rode up front in the vehicle commander's seat. Pullen looked out the window and saw blown up trucks and SUVs - what looked like total

destruction. She got on the radio and asked where SPC Mike was. Someone said he was behind her vehicle. She then asked where the landing zone was. He answered, "It's straight ahead. Just keep moving."⁸⁷

Along the way they saw Regulator 2 still sitting in the kill zone behind the maintenance bobtail. Brown pulled Regulator 3 up to Regulator 2, where Kennedy informed him Hubbard was seriously wounded. Brown then called for a gun truck from the southern casualty collection point to come and pick up Hubbard. Stallion 33B happen to be returning to the kill zone when they flagged it down. Brown and Castro jumped out then pulled Hubbard from his vehicle and put him in Stallion 33B's vehicle. Kennedy grabbed Burke's hand and placed it on Hubbard's bandages to keep the pressure on. Stallion 33C then drove him back to the southern casualty collection point.⁸⁸

The medevac helicopter arrived at 1216 hours. SGT Baker and SPC Young were treating Mack's arm wound when Regulator 3, Stallion 33B and 33C arrived at the casualty collection point with Hubbard and Rivera. A Regulator 3 combat life saver then relieved Young and took care of the wounded so Young could return to his .50 and provide security. Pullen told Rivera she was going to check on his boys, referring to Mike and Haynes. The wounded sergeant gave her a look like he wanted her to make sure they were okay. She told him



SSG Nein and SPC Cooper standing near enemy weapons.

Photo courtesy of the Army Women's Museum

she would be right back and climbed out of Stallion 33C. She ran into SPC Mike who handed Haynes off to her. She walked him over to the helicopter and asked how he was. He had a glazed look and was shot in the hand. He said, "I'm okay. How are you?" She thought shock was setting in as he was a little off. She handed him to the guys in the helicopter and told him she was going back to get Mack. She walked over and looked down at Mack on the stretcher. She and Mack had fought with each other since she arrived in the company but bonded like brother and sister. She knelt down by his head because they were strapping him in and asked how he was. He looked up at her and asked, "Who are you?" Pullen responded, "What? It's me Ammons (her maiden name). How can you forget me? You hate me?" He asked her to tell them to loosen his straps because they hurt his wounded arm. They later found out that he had a collapsed lung. Someone loosened the straps and Mike grabbed one side of the stretcher, Pullen the other and another soldier the other end. They loaded him into the helicopter. Pullen then went back to Rivera on the stretcher in Stallion 33C and the helicopter started to take off. She started yelling, "Where the hell are you going? I have another injured man down here!" The helicopter returned to the ground.⁸⁹

Pullen held Rivera's hand while they carried him to the helicopter. She told him she would not leave him. She had only been in the company for a month and a half and had formed a bond with SGT Rivera. He had a death grip on her hand. When they reached the helicopter the

medics asked what was wrong. She told him that Rivera had an entry and exit wound in his stomach. She was getting ready to crawl up in the helicopter but the crew would not let her. She felt bad because she could not keep her promise to her sergeant. After the helicopter left with the three wounded, Pullen looked at Hernandez and SPC Gregory in Stallion 33C and then said, "If you're coming with me, I'm going because my guys are still under fire so you better get your asses in." They climbed in the vehicle and Pullen signaled Mike she was going back. The three HMMWVs, Raven 42A, Stallion 33B and 33C, returned to the access road where they found a large number of MPs sweeping the field north of the access road. Pullen dismounted and asked, "Where the hell did all these people come from? Where were they 20 minutes ago when I needed them? She manned the radio the rest of the day. At the same time, Hernandez linked up with Brown in Regulator 3 and then drove north to Jacob and Uhl's casualty collection point.⁹⁰

After Raven 42A had left, Nein ordered his remaining Raven and Stallion soldiers to sweep the field and the two-story house while he and SGT Burke cleared the irrigation ditch that paralleled the main road. SPC Simpson provided cover from the turret of Raven 42B. During the sweep, some of the wounded Iraqis reached for their weapons and the soldiers had to kill them. Those that did not resist were taken prisoner. They recovered 26 Iraqi insurgents killed and six wounded and collected 22 AKMs, 13 RPKs, six RPG launchers, 39 hand grenades and 16 RPG rockets, 123 full AKM magazines, and 52 empty magazines. Questioning of the detainees revealed there had been 40 to 50 insurgents in the area with ten cars. Some of the insurgents had zip ties and handcuffs - a clear indication they planned to take captives. CPT Lindner arrived with the rest of the MP company and took over control of the sweep. This relieved Stallion 33 so they could rejoin their convoy.⁹¹

The MP quick reaction force had picked up four lost contract trucks on their way to the kill zone. As the four contract trucks followed Beck down the road, Cross saw a blue truck with a bucket on the right hand side and a red truck was on the left hand side. The Iraqis in bucket were working on poles. Someone came up from the berm as the bucket descended and then they drove off. The contract trucks then received a couple of rounds from right hand side. They continued down the road but



The contract truck burnt to the ground on ASR Detroit. Photo courtesy of the Army Women's Museum

did not see any other trucks follow them or see any of the convoy rallied up along the road. Somehow they had missed Beck pulling into the rally point. When they drove by a burning red truck, they received gunfire from a car. They then rallied up, dismounted and the Brit said he knew where he was. Cross did not know because he had never been on that route before. The Brit said they were just a couple of miles from the back gate to Anaconda. Cross did not want to move, because he felt safe and believed the cavalry would come to the rescue. He wanted to wait, but was out voted.⁹²

As they drove further down the road, mobs came out and threw rocks at their trucks. Some appeared to have guns and women made cutting motions across their throats. One child ran out in the middle of the road to try and stop them. So Cross stood up and acted like he had a pistol. The kid withdrew and then threw a rock through the Aussie's windshield.⁹³

When the four trucks came to the T-intersection, they parked beside each other. The Brit admitted he did not know where he was. He wanted to turn right and drive down that road. Cross saw street lights to the right and none to his left. Cross told him, "That's going downtown. We'll be better off staying in the country than driving in the city." The Aussie then admitted he knew where he was, "We were supposed to turn to the right a couple of miles back. I know where we had to turn." Cross however did not want to drive back through the mob.⁹⁴

In spite of his protest, they drove back down the road a couple miles and turned left. They continued down that road for about a mile and saw four or five M1114 gun trucks approaching. The four commercial trucks flashed their headlights at them to stop, but the MP quick reaction force did not realize they were part of the convoy that had been ambushed and had no intention to stop. So the four trucks blocked the road to prevent the HMMWVs from passing. When the MPs stopped, Cross explained they had come from the kill zone and the MPs told them, "Form up with us." The contract drivers then followed them back toward the kill zone, but by then the ambush was over. They drove up to the convoy of HETs parked behind the southbound convoy that was ambushed and stopped. The IAP convoy commander had not even known the four trucks were missing. The MPs had not believed what had happened but the Iraqis were still coming out throwing rocks.⁹⁵

At the north casualty collection point, a medevac helicopter landed behind Jacob's HET convoy. Munos and another sergeant from her convoy were about to head into the kill zone to pick up another wounded soldier when the last of the 1075th convoy arrived. Munos carried Ricketts, using the fireman's carry, over to their casualty collection point. Jacobs then went to work on the leg wound. Finishing dressing Harris' head wound, Torres came over and gave Jacobs and Munos bandages. After dressing their wounds, Munos,

Kirkland, Torres and Uhl carried Harris and Ricketts on litters over to the helicopter. SSG Uhl received a call that another wounded soldier was coming to the casualty collection point. After they loaded the third wounded on the medevac helicopter, Jacobs jumped in Sheppard's gun truck and drove into the kill zone, which was about 200 to 300 meters ahead.⁹⁶

Driving through the kill zone, Jacobs saw a northbound white truck with an RPG hole through the van. She also saw the bus tipped over in the middle of the median. On the other side of the bus from Jacobs was a burning vehicle and an SUV beside it. Next she saw Ricketts' abandoned M915. She continued through the kill zone checking for wounded and sensitive items. The rest of the convoy was still in a straight line on the side of the road.⁹⁷

Jacobs met and talked with the crew of a gun truck. They were shaken up. She asked if they were with the 1075th. They said, "No." They were Stallion 33 escorting Third Country Nationals and AAFES trucks to Scania. She then asked where the convoy commander was. One guy said the convoy commander was back counting trucks. Jacobs, Sheppard, the driver and gunner walked down looking for the convoy commander. She found SFC Hammons and asked if he had accounted for all his trucks. He said, "No." She then asked how many military vehicles he had. He said, "Three, one is down and another needs to be towed. The other one has two flat tires." All the Stallion 33 vehicles were badly shot up. 33A had a damaged transmission, oil cooler, lost brakes and a flat tire. 33B had two flat tires. She told him they were hauling battle damaged HMMWVs and his crews could take the tires or whatever else they needed. He then told his mechanic to get some tires and Jacobs told Hammons to have his mechanic meet up with her mechanic to take what he needed. Jacobs then asked how many killed and wounded he had. He told her he had two killed, one Third Country National and another who worked for AAFES.⁹⁸

Hammons then left and Jacobs walked back to her bobtail to send a MTS message to convoy operations. By the time she reached the bobtail, approximately eight MPs were there and two Apaches flew overhead again. After finishing an MTS dialog, she went over to Hammons to get a count and tell him to have his convoy fall in with hers because the MPs were pressuring her to move out. Jacobs told the convoy commander she wanted two white trucks to fall in behind each of her whites. "Get all your people

together and I'll be right back." She then climbed back in her vehicle at the head of the convoy where she waited about 10 to 20 minutes until everyone had changed tires and someone hooked up Stallion 33A to a tow bar. Then Jacobs called out, "Mount up, we're rolling." The other convoy fell in with hers as planned and they left.⁹⁹

Lesson

The purpose of studying battles is to learn lessons. As students of the art of war, we are armed with hindsight and a much better knowledge of what each element was doing. In actual battles, the fog of war shrouds the participants from seeing and knowing everything. To learn from any battle, the student must learn what was done well and what mistakes were made. Then the student should place themselves in the various positions in the battle knowing only what the participant knew and decide what decisions they would have made or what they could have done to improve their comprehension of the battle. The advantage of studying this ambush was the number of moving parts providing a student of the art of war plenty of roles to choose from. Pointing out the mistakes of any particular person or unit is not meant as criticism as all war is chaos and mistakes are made on both sides. Victory is often determined by who makes the least mistakes or capitalizes on their enemy's mistakes. Pointing out these mistakes makes for a more realistic portrayal of what happens in a battle. The most important thing is the outcome and for this battle, the coalition participants can take pride.

Timing was significant. The Anti-Iraqi Freedom (AIF) Insurgents evidently liked to attack on significant dates. This ambush was launched on the anniversary of the beginning of the ground war in 2003 and also Palm Sunday. While this was not quite the anniversary of the Easter Weekend ambushes, it was close. They clearly wanted to take hostages as they had done on Good Friday 2004 and the anniversary of the fall of Baghdad. Unfortunately, the situation on 20 March 2005 turned bad for the Iraqi insurgents.

This ambush also hinted that they wanted to take advantage of the one-year rotation policy of the US Army. The last big ambushes began in April 2004 when all the units were new to the theater. By March 2005, no veteran OIF 2 transportation units were left on the road. The 518th Gun Truck Company had been reformed

from new volunteers in November 2004, but the new leadership had not reinforced the turn, fix and fight tactic or placed the same emphasis on weapons training. Similarly, B Battery, 1-623rd FA (Stallion 33) was also new in country and interestingly, both units responded the same way, the way they were taught by MPRI. Palm Sunday became both units' first complex ambush. This rotation policy resulted in a spike in attacks soon after arrival. As the Army would send brand new units to Iraq each spring, the Iraqis would gain another year of experience. The individual rotation policy during the Vietnam War ensured a better transfer of knowledge and experience, but it resulted in poor cohesion. The unit rotation provided better cohesion but left the units vulnerable during the first few months of their arrival.

Consequently, this was the first complex ambush for the 1-623rd FA and the new members of the 518th Gun Truck Company. The new units had to learn how to fight the war for the first time while the enemy already had two years of experience. The crews did not perform like the original company and did not follow their "turn, fix and fire" doctrine. Part of it resulted from the short hand-off between the old and new crews and change in tactics due to weakness in armor. Keep in mind that the original 518th developed their tactics with hillbilly armor.

Tactics change and this ambush presented a change in enemy tactics. Prior to this ambush, the insurgents usually shot at the white contract trucks but during this ambush the small arms fire was directed at the green military trucks and the fire targeted mostly the cab area. The insurgents also had handcuffs and zip ties on them and the MPs remembered seeing the trucks of their escape vehicles open. So the insurgents clearly wanted American casualties and captives.

The turn of events was not due to the lack of planning and preparation by the insurgents. Generally, the enemy operated at either the squad-size or company-size when conducting ambushes. Based upon their cellular structure of four to seven insurgents per cell, a company-sized ambush was usually included 40 to 50 insurgents. In this case, about 50 insurgents established about a 1,000 meter kill zone. The access road divided the kill zone in two parts with approximately 35 insurgents north of it and 15 south. They tended to follow standard ambush doctrine with their force divided into security, support and assault elements. Supposed

to initiate with the most casualty producing device followed up by rockets and small arms fire, this ambush began with small arms and RPGs. The fire increased gradually with not everyone firing at one time. Even with stationary targets, the insurgents were not very accurate with RPGs as only a small fraction hit their targets. They did have snipers or designated marksmen spread throughout the kill zone and at least one was armed with armored piercing rounds. Two such rounds penetrated Ricketts' door and one hit him in the leg.

This was a well planned and executed L-shaped ambush that caught two convoys in the kill zone. It was oriented to catch a southbound convoy. Coincidentally, a northbound convoy had entered the kill zone at the same time. Either by accident or design, the insurgents initiated the ambush with both in the kill zone. The problem with attacking two convoys at the same time was it doubled the number of gun trucks in the kill zone. What their spotters of the security element failed to identify was that an MP route security patrol was shadowing the southbound convoy. This tripled the number of gun trucks giving the convoys an advantage. Expecting a truly soft target, the insurgents unexpectedly had nine HMMWV gun trucks coming at them from opposite directions. A Stallion 33 gun truck cleared the kill zone and established a casualty collection point south of it where it repeatedly drove back into the kill zone to pick up wounded. The access road divided the kill zone into two separate fights. A couple of the Stallion 33 M1114s later joined the fight in the access road with the two of Raven 42 that had been shadowing the southbound convoy. The 1075th and 518th also engaged the southern part of the kill zone. Allowing this many gun trucks in the kill zone was a big mistake of the enemy.

Although it was policy for convoys not to stop in the kill zone, in the confusion of the battle, the civilian drivers did. Third Country Nationals were the unpredictable factor in ambushes. RPG and IEDs brought the southbound convoy to a halt. Regulator 1 in the northbound convoy inadvertently hit the brakes and caused the convoy behind to stop. Both the north and southbound convoys came to a halt with only three vehicles escaping the kill zone. The insurgents had not done so well in any of their recent ambushes. At first it looked like things were going in favor of the insurgents.

Unfortunately, the language barrier did not allow the convoy escorts to properly instill in the Third Country Nationals the importance of remaining in their vehicles. When they dismounted, this kept the rest of the convoy from driving down the road. After this convoy, the 7th Transportation Group came up with cartoon illustrations to brief Third Country Nationals on what to do during contact. These later fell by the wayside and the convoy commanders just gave the convoy brief to the Third Country National drivers regardless of whether they understood it or not. The important lesson was to engage the civilian contract drivers in order to make them feel like members of the team. Usually there would be at least one Third Country National who spoke a little English and could translate for the majority who spoke his language. As the years progressed, many of the Third Country National would remain and accumulate more experience on the same roads than the US Army drivers. As unpredictable as their behavior was in contact, many would surprise the Americans with their cool headedness and bravery under fire.

The position of the convoy commander was key to this fight. By riding at the head of the convoy, however, the convoy commander of the 1075th was able to escape the kill zone, but was the only one. Because of the breakdown in communication between him and his assistant convoy commander, Uhl was unable to influence the action behind him. In the event an ambush split a convoy, most of the important decisions were almost always made in the middle or rear of the convoy. The lead element would most likely always escape the kill zone. By the end of the Vietnam War, convoy commanders likewise learned to ride in the middle or rear of the convoys for this very reason.

CSM Dwayne Perry, the 7th Transportation Group command sergeant major, identified there was no battle handoff between the convoy commander and assistant convoy commander. For this reason, the convoy sat in the kill zone for up to 20 minutes. Bloebaum had no idea why the convoy was halted ahead of him. The assistant convoy commander, a junior E5, took action about 10 to 15 minutes into the ambush. Because of the ratio of green to white trucks, squads escorted convoys. NCOs led many of the convoys in Iraq yet none of their military education trained them for this. Only officers received school training in convoy operations and most NCOs

picked it up through on-the-job experience. The units that historically performed the best during ambushes were those that war-gamed every possible scenario daily. There cannot be enough emphasis placed on this type of training. Not only that but rank should not be the criteria for responsibility. By 1969, the 8th Transportation Group in Vietnam appointed convoy and assistant convoy commanders based upon their experience rather than rank. It was not unusual for a sergeant to be a convoy commander with a lieutenant riding along to gain experience.

CSM Perry also recognized that the escorts focused too much on engaging the enemy rather than getting the convoy through. In the Torres video shot from inside Regulator 1, the crew can be heard asking why the convoy was not moving. That was an inherent problem with external escorts. They usually had little rapport with the convoys they escorted and in this case did not talk with the convoy. They should not have been asking each other why the convoy was not moving but should have talked with the convoy commander and assistant convoy commander. The HMMWV gun trucks had the advantage of maneuverability which would have allowed them to act like sheep dogs getting their herd moving again. The problem here was the culture of the new 518th. The 7th Transportation Group did not allow for the old 518th leadership, under 1LT James McCormick and SFC Jody Cuthbertson, to train up their replacements. McCormick had stressed the importance of the escorts to help the convoys at their destinations, but the culture allowed by the new leadership allowed the replacements to act like fighter escorts peeling off to go take care of their business when the convoy rolled into its destination. They had learned this from the 1-178th FA. To create a bond between the escorts and the escorted in Vietnam, 8th Transportation Group kept the gun trucks internal to the truck companies. At the end of the day, the gun truck crews faced the drivers they had to escort and defend. The result of this ambush would have been much different had the gun truck crews come from the 1075th Transportation Company. However, the trend during the war in Iraq would be to not only consolidate the gun trucks into an external company, but external battalions and by the end of the war, an external escort brigade. It would take command emphasis to ensure cohesion between the convoys and external escorts.



LTG John Vines, MNC-I Commander with members of Raven 42 after award ceremony. Photo courtesy of the Army Women's Museum

The policy the gun trucks followed was for the lead gun truck to lead the convoy to the rally point. Stallion 33A did this, but only one vehicle followed. Since only one vehicle of their convoy escaped, Regulator 1 remained in the kill zone and thus bore the brunt of the fighting. It only left the kill zone after the lead part of the convoy departed. The remaining two gun trucks in each convoy held their ground and defended their part of the convoy. However, Regulator 2 put up a short fight and cleared the kill zone after their driver was wounded and thought it had an engine fire. Regulator 3 had a dilemma. It had to protect the rear of the convoy but the fight was up front. It left the rear of the convoy and drove behind the convoy till it found a gap in the convoy then raced to the access road, just as Stallion 33B and 33C did when they received the call for help. Regulator 3 also drove behind the convoy similar to Raven 42 then looked for an opening. With the exception of Regulator 2, the gun trucks of Regulator and Stallion 33 performed identically. This was the product of MPRI training.

The decisive action of the battle was that taken by Raven 42. The MPs of Raven 42 used a more aggressive posture and tried to flank the enemy. Similar to the original 518th, they conducted daily after action reviews and war gamed constantly. They had been blooded so each member knew how he or she would perform as well as knew how the others would perform. They had confidence in their leaders and followed without hesitation. While Regulator and Stallion 33 performed

as MPRI doctrine trained them, the main lesson was that the units which conduct daily after action reviews, rehearse and war game perform the best. They knew the area and had rehearsed their tactics for such a situation. One possible miscalculation Raven 42 made was they underestimated the size of the enemy and kill zone. SSG Nein expecting a force of no more than 12 insurgents as he had faced before planned to cut off their retreat and kill or capture all of them. Knowing the access road was ahead of them, he raced his squad to it with the intention of flanking the enemy. To his surprise, Nein cut the insurgents off from their egress vehicles but he ended up facing around 50 insurgents spread out over a kilometer and the access road was in the middle of the kill zone not the flank. This miscalculation put Raven 42A in the cross fire of two enemy positions. This was the product of the fog of war. However, realizing the dire circumstances, the MPs countered again. SPC Mike and SSG Nein quieted the fire from their rear (south) and then Nein led an assault on the enemy north of the road. Raven 42A's .50 had accounted well for itself in killing insurgents in the main canal.

Historically, the units that performed the best in ambushes conducted extensive after action reviews, talked over their tactics and revised them constantly. This eliminated confusion and caused the participants to act in unison and instinctively. Over the previous three years of the war, MPs operated with less aggressive tactics. Raven 42, however, demonstrated

how MPs should perform. Caught in a bad situation, they responded quickly and violently turning the fight back on the enemy. The 617th MP Company had strong leadership involvement from the company commander down. The loss of the aggressive leaders and lack of proper company grade officer involvement in the training and after action reviews of the new 518th resulted in a passive posture and hesitation. The Regulators did perform heroically but what was needed in the northbound convoy was someone taking charge and getting them moving as soon as the convoy bunched up and halted. This happened more at the individual level rather than the result of a single leader and then only ten to 15 minutes into the fight. Good rehearsals and war-gaming of the different scenarios might have taught this. Raven 42 acted without hesitation but then they also put themselves between the cross fire of the enemy rather than on the flank. Raven 42B had more wounded because of this. Still, quick decisive leadership turned a bad situation into a good one. The fight on the access road was the turning point in the battle. The key to the American success was their ability to adapt to the changing situation faster than the enemy and fire power. Had the insurgents trapped one convoy with only three gun trucks, the situation would have most definitely turned out different. For this many vehicles, it took nine gun trucks to turn the fight back on the enemy. The established 1:10 ratio for each convoy only allowed for a passive defense. The additional three gun trucks allowed them to take the offense and turn the battle around.

The worse indictment of 518th was the failure of



SSG Nein and SGT Hester after receiving their Silver Star Medals. Photo courtesy of the Army Women's Museum

the M2 .50 caliber machineguns. None of their .50s could fire more than seven rounds before the weapons misfired. Clearly the timing was off on all three and had they been able to test fire their weapons, they would have realized this early on. No investigation was conducted as to who set the timing. This once again reinforced why it was important to test fire weapons before each operation. The purpose of higher headquarters was to provide the soldiers the best means to accomplish their mission, not impede it.

War is chaos and mistakes were made on both sides. The side that wins is the side that recovers from its mistakes and takes advantage of the enemy's mistakes the quickest. This ambush turned out to be the most complicated ambush of the war. No other convoy ambush had as many different units involved. It is an excellent study of what happens when convoys get trapped in the kill zone and the difference between aggressive and defensive tactics. The sweep of the northern half recovered 26 dead Iraqis and six prisoners and enough weapons for 41 insurgents. There was no sweep of the kill zone south of the access road to determine how many Iraqis were killed by the 518th and 1075th but by eye witness accounts the enemy took a beating there too. Coalition casualties were three Third Country Nationals killed and seven wounded, the 617th MP had only three soldiers wounded and one of its HMMWVs severely damaged. The 1075th and 518th suffered five soldiers wounded, three civilian wounded, two destroyed M915s, and four destroyed civilian tractor-trailer systems. All three 518th gun trucks were shot up but from SSG Van Roekel's inspection, Regulator 3 had the most battle damage. There were no Americans killed or captured. That was a pretty good day in anybody's book. The ambush on Palm Sunday turned out to be a one-sided victory in favor of the coalition forces. The 518th and 1075th believed this ambush occurred on ASR Bismarck and consequently referred to it as the Battle of Bismarck. The MPs referred to it as the Battle of Salman Pak from the nearby village. Since it did occur on ASR Detroit, Dr. Tom Bruscino of Combat Studies Institute gave it the name the Palm Sunday Ambush.

In consequence of their actions, SPC Jason Mike, SGT Leigh Ann Hester and SSG Timothy Nein received Silver Star Medals for their actions during the battle. Nein's award was later upgraded to the Distinguished

Service Cross in 2007. SPC Jenny Beck received the Bronze Star Medal in 2006. The 1075th Transportation Company also received the Meritorious Unit Commendation in 2011.

¹ SFC David Van Roekel email to Richard Killblane, November 20, 2006.

² SFC David Van Roekel email to Richard Killblane, November 20, 2006.

³ 2LT Charles Gilkey, "Convoy 678N Engagement Narrative;" CPT Kevin Hynes, "Under Fire, Nebraska drivers played critical role during Battle of Bismarck," *Prairie Soldier*, February 2006.

⁴ Hynes, "Under Fire."

⁵ CPT Eric S. Minor, Memorandum for Record, Subject: Historical summary on 20MAR05 Ambush on ASR Detroit, 503rd Military Police Battalion (Airborne), 27 March 2005.

⁶ SSG Timothy F. Nein interview by Tom Brusino at Ft Leavenworth, KS, 28 June 2006; and SGT Dustin Morris interview by Tom Brusino at Ft Leavenworth, KS, 19 July 2006.

⁷ Nein interview and Morris interview.

⁸ Nein interview.

⁹ Nein interview.

¹⁰ Nein interview and Minor, "Historical summary."

¹¹ SGT James Reed Baker, SPC William P. Young, SPC Patrick T. Malone, SGT Rickie D. Hammons, SGT Kevin R. Vogel, SPC Richard S. Saylor, SGT Ricky A. Burke, SGT Matthew T. Simpson, and SPC Kirby Gregory sworn statements, 20 March 2005.

¹² Baker, Young and Malone sworn statement. The time is based upon the videos shot by the two civilian contract drivers in the 1075th convoy and the video shot in Regulator 1 gun truck. Stallion 33A passed the convoy as SPC Beck was pulling Ricketts from his truck. She was not able to move forward until the truck behind her cleared the kill zone, which allowed Regulator 1 to leave the kill zone, which they did at 1157 hours.

¹³ Hynes, "Under Fire."

¹⁴ Ron Hart telephone interview with Richard Killblane, 12 May 2006; William Cross telephone interview by Richard Killblane, 15 April 2014; and Hynes, "Under Fire."

¹⁵ Jairo Torres video and Hynes, "Under Fire."

¹⁶ SFC David Van Roekel email to Richard Killblane, October 24, and November 20, 2006; Van Roekel sworn statement, 20 March 2006; Interview with SSG David Van Roekel, SPC Barbara Higgins, PFC Jairo Torres, SGT Jonathan Kennedy by 2LT Charles Gilkey and Richard Killblane, 28 March 2005; and Hynes, "Under Fire." There was considerable discrepancy over the exact time of the ambush. The MNC-I SIGACTS listed the ambush as having started at 1155 hours. All the 623 FA sworn statements listed the time of the ambush at 1145 hours and the 503rd Military Police Battalion, Memorandum for Record, Subject: Historical summary on 20MAR05 Ambush on ASR Detroit, dated 27 March 2005, listed the time of the ambush "at approximately 1140hrs (local)." The 7th Transportation Group AAR, "Convoy 678N Engagement Narrative," only mentioned the time the convoy passed through the check point as 1120 hours, but did not estimate the time the ambush began. The video shot by Jairo Torres in Regulator 1 had them at the check point at 1120 hours and the video began filming again at 1152 hours after the ambush had started. Since

the kill zone was only a couple miles up the road, it would not have taken but a few minutes to reach it, but it would have taken the convoy a good five to ten minutes just to clear the check point. The crews claimed to have been under fire for approximately 20 minutes. It is more likely that the 617th MPs and 623rd FA had better communications with their headquarters so the 1140 to 1145 time is probably more accurate.

¹⁷ Gilkey, "Narrative;" and Hynes, "Under Fire."

¹⁸ Torres interview and video; Gilkey, "Narrative;" Van Roekel email, October 24, November 18 and 19, 2006; and Van Roekel, Higgins, and Torres interview, 28 March 2006.

¹⁹ Torres video; Van Roekel email, October 24, November 18 and 19, 2006.

²⁰ Gilkey, "Narrative;" and Hynes, "Under Fire."

²¹ Gilkey, "Narrative;" and Hynes, "Under Fire."

²² Hart interview, and Cross interview.

²³ Hynes, "Under Fire."

²⁴ SGT Jonathan Kennedy and SPC Brandon Dettman interview by 2LT Gilkey and Killblane, 20 March 2005, and Gilkey, "Narrative."

²⁵ Kennedy and Dettman interview, and Gilkey, "Narrative."

²⁶ Hart interview ; Kennedy and Dettman interview; Gilkey, "Narrative;" and Hynes, "Under Fire."

²⁷ Gilkey, "Narrative;" Hynes, "Under Fire;" and CPT Kevin Hynes, "Nebraskans kept cool during heat of ambush," *Prairie Soldier*, April 2006.

²⁸ Gilkey, "Narrative;" and Hynes, "Nebraskans."

²⁹ Henry J. Dordes, "Nebraska Guard unit recalls ambush in Iraq," *World-Herald*, May 29, 2005; Gilkey, "Narrative;" and captured Iraqi video.

³⁰ Nein interview, Morris interview and SPC Jesse Ordunez interview by Tom Brusino at Ft Leavenworth, KS, 18 July 2004. The timer on the captured Iraqi video showed all three Raven 42 M1114s driving past ten trucks in front of the camera man at about two minutes into the fight. The video had started right after the ambush began.

³¹ Nein interview, Morris interview and SPC Ashley Pullen interview by Tom Brusino, at Ft Leavenworth, KS, 16 August 2006.

³² Nein interview, Morris interview and Pullen interview.

³³ Nein interview, Morris interview and Pullen interview.

³⁴ Nein interview.

³⁵ Nein interview and Pullen interview.

³⁶ Minor, "Historical summary."

³⁷ Nein interview and Morris interview.

³⁸ Nein interview, Morris interview and Ordunez interview.

³⁹ Nein interview and Morris interview.

⁴⁰ Pullen interview and Ordunez interview.

⁴¹ Pullen interview.

⁴² "Battle of Bismarck Green Tab AAR," 106th Trans Bn. The numbers of enemy and their locations south of the access road were based upon three days of interview of the 518th and 1075th soldiers by 2LT Charles Gilkey and Richard Killblane immediately after their return from the convoy.

⁴³ Hart interview; Cross interview; and Hynes, "Nebraskans."

⁴⁴ Cross interview.

⁴⁵ Hart interview.

⁴⁶ Hart interview.

⁴⁷ Hart interview.

⁴⁸ Gilkey, "Narrative;" and Hynes, "Nebraskans."

⁴⁹ Hynes, "Nebraskans."

⁵⁰ Hynes, "Nebraskans."

⁵¹ Gilkey, "Narrative;" and Hynes, "Under Fire."

⁵² Gilkey, "Narrative;" and Hynes, "Under Fire."

⁵³ Van Roekel, Higgins and Torres interview; Gilkey, "Narrative;" Hynes, "Nebraskans;" and Torres video.

⁵⁴ Gilkey, "Narrative;" and Hynes, "Nebraskans."

⁵⁵ Hynes, "Nebraskans."

⁵⁶ Hynes, "Nebraskans."

⁵⁷ Gilkey, "Narrative;" and Hynes, "Nebraskans."

⁵⁸ Hart interview; Hynes, "Nebraskans;" and videos PHOT0021 and 1075BOB shot from digital cameras by two different DoD drivers.

⁵⁹ Hart interview; Hynes, "Nebraskans;" and DOD video.

⁶⁰ Peterson filmed the event from his cab.

⁶¹ Cross interview.

⁶² Cross interview.

⁶³ Cross interview.

⁶⁴ Cross interview.

⁶⁵ Conversation was recorded in the Torres video.

⁶⁶ Torres video and Hynes, "Nebraskans."

⁶⁷ SG Shirley Jacobs interview by Richard Killblane at Arifjan, Kuwait, 9025 March 2005; and Hammons, sworn statement.

⁶⁸ Jacobs interview.

⁶⁹ Jacobs interview.

⁷⁰ Jacobs interview and Hynes, "Nebraskans."

⁷¹ Gregory, Burke and Simpson sworn statements.

⁷² Gilkey, "Narrative;" and SSG Aaron Castro, SGT Rondell Brown and SPC Alexander Hernandez interview by 2LT Charles Gilkey and Richard Killblane, at Cp NAVISTAR, Kuwait, 28 March 2005.

⁷³ Gilkey, "Narrative;" and Castro, Brown and Hernandez interview.

⁷⁴ Hynes, "Soldiers;" Burke sworn statement and Pullen interview.

⁷⁵ Minor, "Historical summary;" Hammons, Vogel, Saylor, Simpson and Burke sworn statements; Kennedy interview; Dettman interview; and Castro, Brown, and Hernandez interview.

⁷⁶ Minor, "Historical summary;" Castro, Brown, and Hernandez interview; and Pullen interview.

⁷⁷ Hart interview and Hynes, "Soldiers sprint through enemy fire to rescue comrade," *Prairie Soldier*, April 2006.

⁷⁸ Hynes, "Soldiers."

⁷⁹ Hynes, "Soldiers."

⁸⁰ Hynes, "Soldiers."

⁸¹ Hart interview; Kennedy and Dettman interview; Castro, Brown and Hernandez interview; Gilkey, "Narrative;" and Hynes, "Soldiers."

⁸² Gilkey, "Narrative."

⁸³ Gilkey, "Narrative;" and Hynes, "Soldiers."

⁸⁴ Hart interview.

⁸⁵ Gilkey, "Narrative;" and Hynes, "Soldiers."

⁸⁶ Gilkey, "Narrative;" and Hynes, "Soldiers."

⁸⁷ Gilkey, "Narrative;" Minor, "Historical summary;" Castro, Brown and Hernandez interview; and Pullen interview.

⁸⁸ Gilkey, "Narrative;" Minor, "Historical summary;" and Castro, Brown and Hernandez interview.

⁸⁹ Minor, "Historical summary;" and Pullen interview.

⁹⁰ Minor, "Historical summary;" Hammons, Vogel, Saylor, Baker and Young sworn statements; and Pullen interview.

⁹¹ Minor, "Historical summary;" Hammons, Burke and Simpson, sworn statements.

⁹² Cross interview.

⁹³ Cross interview.

⁹⁴ Cross interview.

⁹⁵ Cross interview.

⁹⁶ Jacobs interview.

⁹⁷ Jacobs interview.

⁹⁸ Jacobs interview, and Hammons, sworn statement.

⁹⁹ Jacobs interview and Hamons, sworn statement.

Ambush at Ad Duluiyah, 20 September 2005

1173rd Transportation Company, 457th Transportation Battalion

L SA Anaconda occupied the Army's side of Balad Air Base, a former Iraqi base just north of Baghdad. This was the hub of the hub and spoke sustainment operation centered in the heart of the infamous Sunni Triangle. Consequently, every convoy out of the base was a combat operation, so the Corps Support Command (COSCOM) began referring to them as combat logistical patrols. These convoys pushed vital cargo to all the forward operating bases (FOB) surrounding the area. In September 2005, the 181st Transportation Battalion had just replaced the 457th Transportation Battalion and assumed control over its predecessor's truck companies. Five of the ten were convoy escort companies. These veteran companies had been navigating the hostile roads of Iraq since the beginning of the year.

Before the 457th Transportation Battalion had handed over responsibility for the convoy operations to the 181st Battalion, they still kept convoys less than 30 vehicles and ran with a gun truck ratio of one-to-five, a policy started by the 181st Transportation Battalion during the first rotation. To do this, LTC David Gaffney's 457th Battalion would assign four gun trucks to escort



457th and 181st Transportation Battalion T-barriers.

Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

no more than 20 prime movers. After he had inherited the convoy mission from 7th Battalion, he also had the convoy commander and assistant convoy commander ride in HMMWV gun trucks. This increased the number of gun trucks to six per convoy reducing the gun truck ratio to less than one-to-four. By the third OIF rotation, the 457th had replaced all its add-on-armor and "hillbilly" armor HMMWVs with up-armored M1114s.

At first LTC Gaffney did not like the 5-ton gun trucks and even less after one with the New Livermore gun box rolled over. This was the result of an inexperienced driver who accidentally drove the 5-ton up over an Iraqi car that had swerved in front of him and then the truck rolled over on its side. Because of this, Gaffney



M1114 with dual weapon systems. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

considered the 5-tons unsafe and wanted to take them off the road. Unfortunately, Multi-National Corps-Iraq (MNC-I) began taking some of his M1114s away and giving them to other units. To keep the same gun truck ratio, Gaffney had quite a number of 5-ton gun trucks with a variety of gun boxes. Consequently, Gaffney began substituting the 5-ton gun trucks for the M1114s he was losing. Because of his safety concerns, he would not allow anyone to ride in the gun boxes. Instead the machine gunner manned the M2 .50 caliber machinegun on the ring mount over the cab. Not putting a crew in the box also reduced the number of crews from a minimum of three to just two. To his surprise, the crews liked the 5-tons. The greater height advantage over the HMMWVs improved observation and survivability against IEDs. The convoys pushed the 5-ton through obstacles better than HMMWVs and could intimidate civilian traffic better. After trial and error, Gaffney settled on a three-and-two ratio of three M1114s and two 5-ton gun trucks for each convoy. In Iraq, the HMMWV gun trucks were called convoy Protection Platforms (CPP) and the 5-ton gun trucks were called Heavy Armored Trucks (HAT). The 457th Transportation Battalion tended to place the 5-tons up front and in the rear of the convoy paired up with an M1114. The third M1114 rode in the middle as the floater.

This improved armor caused a change in tactical doctrine. With all around protection, crews remained buttoned up and adopted passive tactics of suppressing enemy fire and clearing the kill zone. Only the semi-exposed gunners in the turrets returned fire. Ironically, early in the war when gun trucks had less armor, some of the crews adopted more aggressive tactics of stopping in the kill zone and exiting the vehicles to return fire until all vehicles had cleared the kill zone.

Communications had improved. By that time almost all the military trucks had SINCGARS radios so they could communicate internally. So the convoy commander had double-stacked SINCGARS to communicate internally with the convoy and another to communicate with the Sheriff network, battle space owner and call in medical evacuations. They usually had the same type of civilian radios the KBR drivers had plus Mobile Tracking System (MTS) with the lap top display and text messaging capability. In addition, the crew members had headsets

with internal communication. So a convoy commander had to manage four different radio networks at the same time. To complicate matters worse, the truck drivers lacked radio discipline and a language unique to their operations, which would simplify communication. When the infantry or armor made contact with the enemy, in a few short phrases everyone understood what they needed to do. The convoys had not yet developed that. While the convoys finally had the ability to communicate like any other combat maneuver unit, this complicated the duties of the convoy commander and assistant.

The 457th and its replacement, the 181st Battalion, also had the responsibility to escort Kellogg, Brown and Root (KBR) convoys. KBR was an American contract company that hired primarily English speaking truck drivers. Because the contract drivers were considered non-combatants, the Army lawyers would not allow civilians to carry any weapons for their protection if captured. This would violate their non-combatant status and the Geneva Convention could not protect them. The enemy had demonstrated their disregard for the Geneva convention in regards to contractors. They were an integral part of the planning and preparation of convoy operations. The KBR convoy commander and assistant convoy commander attended the planning briefs with the transportation battalion. Another thing that Gaffney had instituted in the battalion was that each company would build a sand table for the crews to rehearse battle drills or "what if" scenarios in case of ambushes. Prior to each convoy, each convoy to include the KBR drivers, had to rehearse one reaction to contact drill.

In September 2006, ABC News aired a broadcast of a video shot by KBR contract driver, Preston Wheeler of Mena, Arkansas, about an ambush that occurred 20 September the previous year. The video showed the M1114 gun truck in front of his truck leaving his and two other disabled contract trucks in the kill zone. Two contract drivers in front of him were killed while Wheeler was heard in the video screaming on the radio for help. At one point the Iraqis fired up his truck wounding him but were not able to come over and pull him out of the truck because to his belief, the attack helicopters arrived. He accused his escorts of cowardice. ABC News jumped all over the story claiming that the video spoke

for itself. What neither Wheeler nor ABC News knew or saw was that a gun truck was standing guard right behind his. The gun trucks were doing exactly what they were trained to do.

On 20 September 2005, the convoy of 12 KBR trucks was escorted by the standard three and two mix of gun trucks of the 1173rd Transportation Company, a National Guard unit from Rocky Mount, North Carolina and Martinsville, Virginia. An M1114 and 5-ton gun truck led the convoy with SSG Marty Herron, the convoy commander, in the middle M1114 gun truck that was right in front of Wheeler's. A 5-ton and M1114 gun truck closed up the rear. Herron was a veteran of Desert Storm, Somalia and Bosnia.¹

The gun trucks were leading the KBR convoy to FOB Mackenzie, a camp about 45 minutes from Anaconda that they normally did not travel to. Misled by faulty maps, the convoy mistakenly made a wrong turn down into the village of Ad Duluiyah in the dangerous part of the Sunni Triangle. They drove down a narrow two lane road flanked closely with houses and brush. Kids came out and threw rocks at the contract trucks. After traveling several miles, the road dead ended to everyone's surprise and the convoy had to turn around. Evidently the insurgents knew the convoy would have to turn around and an estimated 100 to 200 insurgents prepared a hasty ambush for them. While the convoy turned around, one old man pounded one hand into the other like a knife cutting a chopping block. The drivers knew what it meant. Bad things



Convoy line up at Taji with M1114 in front and M923 with LLNL gun box behind it in March 2005. By September, the convoys began putting the 5-tons up front.

Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

waited for them down that road.²

The street that had been crowded with people a few minutes before was disturbingly empty. Within minutes IEDs exploded accompanied by small arms fire, rockets and hand grenades thrown and fired at the passing convoy from roof tops, garages, bushes and culverts along the quarter-mile kill zone. The drivers came over the radio reminding everyone to keep driving and clear the kill zone.³

Christopher Lem was driving the lead white truck with the KBR convoy commander, Marc Kenyon. An AK round hit Lem in the neck killing him and causing his truck to flip over in the two-lane road. Terry Steward in the next KBR truck steered around the flipped truck but was shot four times with another six rounds bouncing



KBR Mercedes tractor with external armor.

Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane



Interior of M1114 with double stacked SINCGARS and MTS. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane



Example of sand table at Arifjan in 2006.

Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

off his body armor. His truck came to a halt. Kenyon climbed out of his overturned rig, climbed up into Steward's cab and drove the truck out of the kill zone. Keven Dagit in the third white truck also tried to steer around the overturned rig but his was disabled by fire. This evidently was the worst part of the kill zone. Sascha Grenner-Case in the next truck stopped to rescue Dagit.⁴

SPC Andrew Thompson drove Herren's M1114 gun truck and SPC Ryan Totten, the gunner, was shot in the arm but kept firing. Wheeler was in the next white contract truck behind the HMMWV gun truck. As Wheeler's truck approached the overturned rig, a rocket brought his truck to a stop in the middle of the road. To his horror, he watched Herren's HMMWV keep going. Wheeler later commented on television, "I do not know who the driver was of that HMMWV, but he abandoned us."⁵

Herren's HMMWV cleared the kill zone as the policy dictated and raced ahead to the rally point where he called in a request for air support and medevac. From there he sent the other M1114 gun truck, driven by SPC Caroline Kibogy, back into the kill zone to rescue the trapped drivers. Back in the kill zone, the next two contract trucks behind Wheeler's drove around his and continued to the rally point as policy. Robert Cunningham driving the next truck was shot five times through the torso and arms causing his truck to halt behind Wheeler's. It blocked the road.⁶

Wheeler took cover under the console then behind his seat and began to scream into the radio for help, "I'm fixing to get killed, God damn it! I cannot move! Truck five cannot move! Copy? I am getting shot! Someone

get their ass back here now!" Understandably he was scared since he was trapped unarmed in the worst part of the kill zone. In the truck behind Cunningham's was Robert Woolvine, the assistant convoy commander. He tried to calm Wheeler down who kept shouting that he was going to die and for them to tell his family he loved them. Finally Woolvine just told Wheeler to shut up that he had his hands full and help was on its way. Several minutes later, Wheeler witnessed the insurgents pull Dagit and Grenner-Case from their vehicles and shoot them. Wheeler became hysterical and screamed into the radio, "They just killed him! Oh, Jesus! Oh, my God!" Rick "Poncho" Wynne, a contract driver at the rear of the convoy, tried to calm him, "I know you're under fire, but you have to keep your head on your shoulders."⁷

What Wheeler and his camera failed to record were the two gun trucks from the rear of the convoy fighting their way forward. Wynne witnessed the gun trucks going forward and reach Wheeler's disabled truck within minutes. Unable to drive around the contract trucks stopped in the road, some of the crew dismounted the safety of their gun truck and took up firing positions beside Wheeler's truck while he continued to scream for help. The insurgent fire, however, kept the drivers from reaching his cab. About that time, 15 minutes after the attack began; the attack helicopters arrived overhead forcing the insurgents to take cover while they kept fighting. The last four contract trucks and two gun trucks finally drove forward. Wynne and Woolvine pulled Wheeler from his cab under fire and loaded him in one of the HMMWVs then took him to the rally point where he was evacuated. Two other wounded drivers were evacuated while the gun truck laid down suppressive fire. The ground reinforcements arrived 30 minutes after the beginning of the ambush and drove off the remaining insurgents.⁸

Typical of shoddy television journalism, they aired a video and interview showing only one small part of a large ambush that made the Army gun truck crews look like cowards. ABC News claimed to have asked the Army for a report for several days but did not receive any response so they ran with the story without fully researching it on their own. The newspapers such as Roanoke Times and Richmond Times-Dispatch evidently had no difficulty in tracking down the Army veterans of that battle and getting their side of the story. While

the Army and KBR may not have responded in a timely manner to provide both sides of the story, ABC News failed to do the responsible thing and air a follow-up story to tell of the heroism of the Army gun truck crews. ABC News had insulted the reputation of the 1173rd and simply posted the Army and National Guard responses on its web site. From Wheeler's perspective, he was left alone but his perspective was that of an unarmed civilian driver hiding inside a disabled truck in the middle of a kill zone. What he did not realize was that the insurgents did not kill him because of the gun trucks behind him. The whole idea of objective reporting was that thorough research could provide more than just a very narrow perspective of a battle and come closer to finding the truth, something ABC News was unable to do. SSG Herren had a very simple counter to Wheeler's accusation that the gun trucks abandoned him, "If we abandoned him, why is he back in the US telling his



MTS laptop display and CVC helmet with internal communications. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

story?" Needless to say, the Guardsmen were bitter with Wheeler and ABC News.⁹

Three of the 13 KBR contract drivers were killed and three others were wounded. Wheeler and Dagit's brother would blame the HMMWV gun truck in front of them for continuing through the kill zone and leaving him. The Army would conduct an investigation of the attack and agreed that the Soldiers had followed their SOP to clear the kill zone. They had performed as they were taught and trained. The problem with the passive tactics is when vehicles are stopped in the kill zone. Ideally, one of the rear two gun trucks would have come up to defend the disabled vehicles in the kill zone while the other protected the rear of the convoy. The problem was that there were four disabled trucks in the kill zone and the rear gun trucks could only reach the last one and the lead HMMWV gun truck did not reach Dagit in time to prevent his death. In hindsight, the middle HMMWV gun truck was the only vehicle that could have defended the first two disabled trucks in the worst part of the kill zone. This is where the more aggressive "turn, fix and fire" tactics would have worked best. Yet again, there is no guarantee that this tactic would have saved anyone's life. It would have been just one HMMWV defending three disabled trucks. If there was any fault, it was not with the Soldiers but their doctrine and training. They performed bravely under the conditions and saved all but three of the contract drivers. The Army awarded ten medals for valor and one Purple Heart to the Virginia Guardsmen.¹⁰

Lesson

While according to the battalion convoy procedures the convoy was not guilty of the accusations, that did not mean the procedures were correct for the situation. Getting lost and making a wrong turn down a narrow road closely flanked by houses and walled yards did not allow for any maneuver room in the event a truck was stopped in the kill zone. The locals demonstrated their hostility toward the convoy so the threat level was elevating. Preemptive measures could have been taken.

Most convoy ambushes ended when the combat unit that owned the battle space responded with a maneuver force. It would have been advantageous if, when the convoy commander suspected the convoy was in danger, to go ahead and alert the battle space owner in order to have them prepared to respond. As learned in

Vietnam and later in Iraq, overhead cover also deterred enemy activity. So when the threat increased, as a minimum, the convoy commander should have called for air support. An Apache could have scouted the route looking for signs of ambushes. As learned in two wars, the presence of helicopter gunships was a deterrent against ambushes. Had an Apache helicopter gunship flown overhead, this would very likely have prevented the ambush or at least kept any Iraqis from approaching the disabled KBR trucks.

Although the policy of the 181st Transportation Battalion and its predecessor, the 457th, was for the gun trucks to clear the kill zone, this was not the best option for that situation. Even though their standard operating procedures called for the gun trucks to fight from the flanks of the kill zone, the Vietnam gun truck veterans understood their job was to go into the kill zone and defend all disabled vehicles until the drivers had been recovered and accounted for. Had the convoy commander's gun truck remained in the kill zone, it would have more likely deterred the enemy from approaching the disabled trucks and executing the civilian drivers.

The Army Judge Advocate General's policy of not allowing civilians to carry side arms in combat only put them at greater risk since the enemy did not respect the non-combatant status protected by the Geneva Convention. Had these drivers had side arms, they at least would have had a chance to defend themselves.

¹ John Cramer, "1173rd Transportation Company convoy leader denies ABC News report," *The Roanoke Times*, <http://www.roanoke.com/news/Roanoke/wb/85517>; John Cramer, "Attack reverberates for Guard, truckers," *The Roanoke Times*, <http://www.roanoke.com/news/roanoke/wb/86192>.

² Peter Bacque, "Virginia Guard leader disputes ABC report on convoy in Iraq," *TimesDispatch.com*, Sep 29, 2006; Cramer, "Attack;" and Wheeler video.

³ Bacque, "Virginia Guard;" and Wheeler video.

⁴ Cramer, "Attack."

⁵ Cramer, "Attack."

⁶ Cramer, "Attack."

⁷ Cramer, "Attack;" and "1173rd Transportation Company."

⁸ Bacque, "Virginia Guard;" and Cramer, "1173rd Transportation Company."

⁹ Cramer, "1173rd Transportation Company."

¹⁰ Bacque, "Virginia Guard" and "Convoy leader details Iraq ambush," *TimesDispatch.com*, September 30, 2006.



Kevin Dagit's tractor and trailer overturned in kill zone. Photo courtesy of Preston Wheeler, DVIDS



M923 with Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) gun box prior to the policy excluding gunners in the back.
 Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane



FMTV with Stewart and Stevenson gun box and cab armor kit. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane



Letterkenny gun box on FMTV. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane



FMTV with Letterkenny gun box and Stewart and Stevenson cab armor kit. Photo courtesy of the 1544 Transportation Company

Suse Ambush on ASR Cheyenne, 26 October 2005

**729th and 1173rd Transportation Companies,
181st Transportation Battalion**

Not even a month after a 1173rd convoy was ambushed at Ad Duluiyah, another 1173rd convoy was ambushed. The convoy on the day of the ambush started out normally. At 0730 hours on the morning of 26 October 2005, fourteen M915A2 tractors and trailers with factory-built add-on cab armor, one M915 bobtail, and one HEMTT wrecker from the 729th Medium Truck Company, an Army Reserve unit from Fresno, California, linked up with their escort in the company motor pool. Since every convoy was a combat operation, they required an escort of gun trucks. The 1173rd Medium Truck Company provided the escort and convoy commanders, which consisted of three up-armored M1114 HMMWVs and two M923A2 5-ton Heavy Armored Trucks (HAT). The 5-tons had the “Frankenstein” add-on cab armor.

The crew of each gun truck consisted of three soldiers - the driver, the assistant driver and the gunner. The assistant driver operated a myriad of electronics: SINCGARS radio, internal communications (ICOM), Precision Lightweight GPS Receiver (PLGR) and Mobile Tracking System (MTS), as well as searching the surrounding area for the warning signs of an ambush. The battalion deemed it unsafe for the gunner to ride in the box, so the M2 .50 caliber machine gun moved from the pedestal in the gun box to a ring mount over

the cab. The battalion’s policy was to place one 5-ton HAT in the lead with a second in the rear to keep civilian traffic from intruding on the convoy. The M1114, known in Iraq as Convoy Protection Platforms (CPP), could accelerate faster and race forward to block traffic at intersections and turns. Collectively, soldiers referred to both systems as gun trucks. The call sign for each CPP or HAT was “Gun Truck” or “Gun” for short and the number of its sequence in the convoy – 1 through 5. Convoy commanders used their company call signs and the 1173rd used “Hawkeye.” SSG Michael Mulcahy, the convoy commander, was Hawkeye 34. This was an all green (military) convoy. Official Corps Support Command policy called for a 1:5 ratio of gun truck to task vehicle, but experience had proven that the 1:4 ratio worked better. Because all the vehicles had improved armor, no one fired out the windows anymore. Only the gunners in the turrets returned fire.¹

The night before, the drivers had war-gamed the different threat scenarios along their route on company sand tables. Prior to the convoy brief, the drivers conducted their rehearsals. That morning they practiced a roll-over drill, snatch and grab, nine-line medevac, and how to set up a landing zone. Because the drivers were on the road so much, this was the only way they could sustain training. This convoy was every bit a combat operation.

Prior to 26 October, the 1173rd had only run north to Suse once. It was a detention camp under construction for the Iraqis and not a normal run for the Anaconda-based convoys. After their first trip, they had



M915 with cab armor kit. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane



1173rd Transportation Company convoy returning from FOB Spartan. Photo courtesy of the 1173rd Transportation Company

learned to travel the route only during day light hours. SSG Mulcahy considered the new mission was “a cluster” from the start. His battalion tactical operations center (TOC) had received the mission at the last minute and with no intelligence on the route. The main problem was communication with different maneuver units between areas of operations on the Sheriff net. The northern maneuver units used different punch keys on their SINCGARS and the convoys could not talk to them until they pulled into a forward operating base (FOB) and found an authorized person to key their radios. The problem was supposed to be resolved the month prior but had not. If the convoy ran into trouble, it could not talk directly to the maneuver units in the area which were supposed to come to their rescue. Mulcahy, SGT Rebecca Baumgarner, his assistant convoy commander, and the company truck master tried to get in touch with local maneuver elements, but received the usual “run around.” Without adequate communication with the maneuver units, they would communicate with battalion via satellite email through the mobile tracking system (MTS). They finally received fairly decent maps and intelligence that the route was a clear run with little to no enemy threat. Mulcahy requested a later starting point (SP) time because of advice he received from some of the local units.²

The convoy rolled out of the gate on time at 0920 hours with Gun 1, a 5-ton HAT in the lead, followed by the bobtail, then four M915 tractors and trailers. SGT Baumgarner rode in Gun Truck 2 followed by four more M923s. The rest of the gun trucks were interspersed about every fifth vehicle with a 5-ton HAT in the rear.

SSG Mulcahy rode in Gun Truck 3, which was an M1114 in the middle of the convoy. SGT James Witkowski manned the M2 .50 caliber machine gun on Gun Truck 3. SGT Gary Smith drove Gun Truck 4 with SPC Monica Beltran as his gunner. Another 5-ton HAT picked up the rear position. Although SSG Mulcahy was the convoy commander, CPT Nate Peterson, 1SG David Heuer, and MSG John Phillip Souza accompanied



IED crater on ASR Cheyenne shook loads loose on trailers. Photos courtesy of the 1173rd Transportation Company



Vehicle accident with Iraqi Police just prior to the village. The convoy went “Hadji” by driving around it in the opposite lane. Photo courtesy of the 1173rd Transportation Company

the convoy. CPT Peterson, Executive Officer of HHC, 1/504th PIR, and his clerk were riding along to rejoin their unit at FOB Suse. 1SG Heuer and MSG Souza were both assigned to the 729th. MSG Souza was also the battalion master driver with the responsibility to ride in convoys to inspect convoy discipline and operations.

The convoy was delivering Class VII medical supplies, Class IX repair parts and Class VIII construction materials for construction of a detention facility at FOB Suse. They turned onto ASR Cheyenne from ASR Dover and headed north. The gun trucks radioed in all their marks. As they reached FOB Spartan, near Ashraf, they passed a small outbound convoy of four vehicles. Around 1040 hours, just past Ashraf, the convoy halted for about ten minutes where the area was considered safe so the drivers could check their loads and tighten any straps that came loose. The previous roads were riddled with IED craters, which had bounced the loads around. The drivers wanted to tighten straps, so they would not



First IED detonation. Photo courtesy of the 1173rd Transportation Company

have to stop again until they linked up with their escort at FOB Warrior. They again headed north and, along the way, they encountered a vehicle accident leading into a small Iraqi village. One truck was overturned in the northbound lane blocking the road, and the other was overturned on the side of the road. The contents of both were spilled around them. It looked as if they had been there awhile and Iraqi Police were standing around so it did not arouse any suspicion. The convoy went “Hadji,” swerving over into the southbound lane to drive around the obstacle. The trucks then closed up their interval driving through the town, but opened up again as they cleared it on the other side.³

A couple miles after clearing the town, an IED detonated to the right of Gun Truck 1. Traveling at 50 to 55 mph with a 75 to 100 meter interval, fortunately, the IED exploded behind the 5-ton. The trucks immediately sped up throwing off the enemy’s timing of the IEDs. A second IED exploded to the left, between the bobtail



Second IED detonation. The concrete barriers on the right were most likely the reference point for the trigger man to detonate the IEDs. Photo courtesy of the 1173rd Transportation Company



The berm that flanked the kill zone after the IEDs. Photo courtesy of the 1173rd Transportation Company



and the M915, quickly followed by the explosion of a third IED to the right of the M915. The blasts covered the road with smoke and debris so the drivers could not see what was ahead of them. Immediately after the IEDs exploded, the rear of the convoy came under heavy RPG and mortar attack then the entire convoy started

receiving RPGs and small arms fire from the left side. An RPG hit a load of lumber on a trailer a couple of vehicles behind Gun Truck 2 setting the lumber on fire. The crews radioed to the other drivers the results of each explosion.⁴

The insurgents had a well-laid kill zone. A burnt-out

truck and an overturned concrete HESCO barrier marked the boundaries of the half-mile kill zone. The three IEDs were intended to disable the lead trucks thus blocking the road. There were small concrete barriers nearby that the enemy possibly used to time the detonation of their IEDs based upon the speed of the convoy.

Anywhere from a squad to a platoon of insurgents armed with small arms and RPGs hid behind a berm which paralleled the road about 30 meters to the west, on the driver's side of a northbound convoy where only the gun trucks could return fire. In all the ambushes Mulcahy had seen or heard of, the insurgents used tracer rounds. They did not use them in this fight which made it harder for the gunners to determine where the fire was coming from. Some drivers claimed there were some insurgents on the right side of the road, but others believed it was just dust kicking up from the impact of stray rounds. This was a linear ambush. Some saw a white pickup truck on the left side of the road with a crew-served weapon and another truck parked alongside the road facing north at the southern end of the kill zone. The gunner on the rear 5-ton thought the vehicle



There was a gap between the end of the berm and the road. The convoy continued to receive small arms fire here. Photo courtesy of the 1173rd Transportation Company

looked suspicious and opened fire. Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) later confirmed the truck was a Vehicle-borne IED (VBIED). The plan looked as if the enemy wanted to stop the lead vehicles with IEDs and then maneuver a VBIED up to the last vehicle to trap the convoy in the

kill zone. Had the convoy been boxed in, the enemy would have picked off the trucks with ease.⁵

The Iraqi insurgents planned their ambushes out in detail. They studied the reaction of the convoys and changed their tactics accordingly. The improvements in the level of armor protection of the vehicles subsequently reduced the number of catastrophic kills. The survivability of the convoys allowed them to clear the kill zone. This time the insurgents directed a light amount of small arms fire at the tires of the line haul trucks, in order to disable them in the kill zone, but concentrated their armored piercing rounds at the doors and windows of the gun trucks. Concealed in the cloud of dust from the explosions was an enemy grenadier who tried to lobbed grenades into the turrets of the passing gun trucks. Just as the guerrillas had during the Vietnam War, they had realized that to destroy



Gun Truck 5 changing a flat tire and Gun Truck 3 hooked up to a HEMTT Wrecker. Photo courtesy of the 1173rd Transportation Company



Discarded lumber set afire by the RPG. Photo courtesy of the 1173rd Transportation Company

the convoy, they had to disable the gun trucks first.⁶

Right after the first explosion, Mulcahy was on the radio checking for casualties and telling everyone to push through and return fire. Since none of the trucks were disabled by the IEDs, the drivers drove through the black cloud of smoke and a hail of small arms fire and out of the kill zone. The enemy initially had the element of surprise, but the gun trucks returned with heavy suppressive fire turning the fight back on the insurgents. SGT Gerald Clemmens in Gun Truck 1 briefly returned fire before his vehicle cleared the kill zone. SPC Jennifer Suchowski in Gun Truck 2 also returned fire expending almost 200 rounds of .50 caliber ammunition. SGT Witkowski had fired off about 60 rounds before the insurgent tossed a hand grenade into his turret. He stopped firing to get rid of it, and then SSG Mulcahy



OH58D Kiowa scouting the area for enemy. Photo courtesy of the 1173rd Transportation Company

heard the explosion and his vehicle filled with blood and smoke. The driver, SGT Jeffery Gantt, started screaming, "Oh my God! They got Ski! They got Ski!" Mulcahy looked back and saw Ski slumped over. He yelled at the passenger behind him to get the medic bag while Mulcahy started feeling SGT Witkowski for injuries since he could not see. He then checked for a pulse. The blast had killed Ski, but he had shielded his crew from most of the shrapnel.⁷

Mulcahy then asked if everyone else in his gun truck was alright. The bonding of a crew is strong. So SGT Gantt was in tears and kept repeating what he said earlier. The passenger was in a state of shock, but acknowledged he was alright. Everyone had received some shrapnel wounds. Mulcahy yelled over the radio for the other vehicles to keep going and get out of



Gun Truck 3 hooked up to the HEMTT Wrecker with OH58D searching the area. Photo courtesy of the 1173rd Transportation Company



Convoy heading south on ASR Cheyenne with OH58D escorts. Photo courtesy of the 1173rd Transportation Company

the kill zone. He then encouraged Gantt to drive and just look straight ahead. Mulcahy kept repeating this while checking on the status of the rest of the convoy. After he was sure the convoy was safely out of the kill zone, he told Gantt to stop. Mulcahy could tell from the emotional stress of losing his friend, Gantt needed to stop. The lead half of the convoy, however, did not hear his instruction over the radio to stop, so by the time it stopped in a linear formation about three to four miles down the road from the kill zone, it was about half a mile ahead.⁸

The drivers of the lead half climbed out to pull security and checked the damage to their vehicles. All vehicles sustained small arms fire and grenade or RPG damage, attesting to the accuracy of the enemy's fire. A load of lumber was on fire behind Gun Truck 2 and another tractor had two left rear tires shot out. The crew put out the fire with a fire extinguisher and chained up the axle expecting to pull out soon.⁹

The lead half communicated with SSG Mulcahy they had no one injured. The latter half of the convoy was not so lucky. It had received the full brunt of the enemy's fire. Since his vehicle could not drive, SSG Mulcahy called for SGT Baumgarner in Gun Truck 2 to bring up a body bag and close the front door on his box formation. Mulcahy then climbed out of his vehicle and instructed the lead person from the 729th, SSG Christine Froncak, to check

her personnel and equipment for damage. Mulcahy then bandaged SGT Gantt's wounds. Mulcahy could not get any of the local maneuver elements on any channel, including on plain text, which the maneuver element should have been monitoring. SGT Baumgarner arrived and walked over to see what was going on. Mulcahy told her to get a couple of people together to help with SGT Witkoski's body. While she was doing this, Mulcahy texted his company and battalion tactical operations center via MTS to start coordinating medevac. He had a total of five wounded: Gantt, the passenger, SGT Gary Smith, SPC Monica Beltran and himself. SGT Smith and SPC Beltran were in Gun Truck 4, which was hit by what appeared to be three large caliber explosive rounds. One penetrated the driver's window and shrapnel hit SGT Smith in his back. SPC Beltran had part of her thumb shot off by small arms fire, but she had kept on firing.¹⁰

Realizing they were going to wait for a while, MSG Souza and 1SG Heuer decided to have the lead half form a box. The lead 5-ton HAT closed the front door and SPC Fernando Magdelano from the fourth M915 and SSG Edwin G. Stracke from the seventh or eighth M915 ran to the rear of the formation with their SAWs to close the rear door. The lumber was still smoldering, so CPT Peterson made the decision to dump the load for fear it might catch fire again. Meanwhile six soldiers

worked at changing the two blown tires while the rest of the drivers took up prone positions around the convoy and pulled security. The rear half of the convoy did likewise and the medevac arrived about 30 minutes after they boxed up.¹¹

Upon receipt of Mulcahy's message, the 181st Transportation Battalion immediately called for the quick reaction force (QRF), which was deployed from FOB Spartan, but detected a daisy chain of IEDs in the vicinity of the original ambush. The combination of Marine and Army forces waited for two hours until EOD personnel cleared the IEDs. An hour had elapsed by the time the 181st learned about the delay so they called for two OH-58s, which did not arrive for another two hours. By luck, an F15 circled high overhead and provided cover. Due to his injuries, SSG Mulcahy turned command over to his assistant, SGT Baumgarner, who sent Gun Truck 4 up to the lead half of the convoy. Shortly after that, the QRF reached the rear half of the convoy. After the QRF arrived, they asked why the convoy was running without air cover and ground support. They explained there had been a lot of enemy activity along that route. MAJ Mathews, from the 793rd MP, decided the best course of action was to turn the convoy around and roll fast, since it was getting dusk and the nearby village was unfriendly to Americans. The lead half of the convoy turned around and joined up with the latter half, while they finished the repairs and recovered their damaged vehicles. Civilian traffic had backed up the entire time. The convoy passed the burning VBIED and returned to FOB Spartan for the night.¹²

Lesson

For a variety of reasons there was a breakdown in coordination with the owner of the battle space for this mission. This was the responsibility of the chain of command up through the Corps Support Command to the Multi-national Corps-Iraq. The intelligence analysts up to that time had no template for how to interpret enemy activity to predict future attacks on convoys, so they usually just provided a history of recent attacks and let the convoy commanders interpret them. What the intelligence reports usually missed was current activity, but the battle space owner usually understood the current threat in their area of responsibility better than anyone. Had the convoy managed to get in contact with

the battle space owner, they would have been warned of the increased threat level and probably advised to have air cover.

The enemy planned this kill zone very well. The insurgents in this ambush had evidently planned to destroy the lead and rear vehicles of the convoy with both IEDs and a VBIED. The initial IED was intended to disable the lead gun truck and the other two IEDs on opposite sides of the road were intended to disable any vehicle that tried to go around the first thus blocking the road. The VBIED would maneuver to disable the last vehicle thus trapping the convoy in the kill zone. Small arms fire was directed at the tires of the M915s to immobilize them and shooters with armored piercing rounds targeted the gun trucks. Since the insurgents never planned anything by accident, the grenadier was clearly placed in a position where he would be concealed by smoke to throw grenades in the turrets of the gun trucks if they tried to pass. The open turret was the only significant target for a grenade. The advantage of a linear ambush was that it could ambush a convoy heading in either direction, but the way the IEDs and VBIED were planned they were clearly waiting for a northbound convoy. In concept, the insurgents' objective was to halt the convoy trapping it in the kill zone and then destroying it in detail.

Fortunately, the convoy foiled the enemy's plans and the lead vehicles cleared the kill zone. The speed of the convoy threw off the timing of the command detonated IEDs and the alertness of one gunner prevented the VBIED from moving up to a vehicle and detonating. The improved level of armor on all vehicles protected the crews from most of the small arms fire and RPGs. The gun trucks quickly turned the fight back on the enemy, allowing the rest of the convoy to escape with minimum damage. Unfortunately, the enemy grenadier did kill one gunner and wounded the rest of the crew. Evidently, the convoy procedures and improved armor worked.

There was reluctance from senior field grade officers to employ 5-ton gun trucks with their open gun box design reminiscent of the Vietnam gun truck for many reasons, but fear of a grenade tossed in the box was one. Because of one roll-over in 2005, no one was allowed in the gun box of 5-tons in Iraq. Up to that time the author has found no case of a grenade thrown in the back of a 5-ton gun box, but has found at least two

cases of grenades landing in the turrets of HMMWVs.

Another lesson lost from the Vietnam War was the need for air cover to prevent ambushes. Up to that time of the war in Iraq, air cover was called in after the ambush, and most participants noticed when the air cover arrived overhead, the enemy gun fire usually stopped. The battle space owner clearly understood the convoy should have had air cover when it drove through.

Everyone can learn from a battle, but the losers have the most to learn from failure. The insurgents would then start using infrared (IR) motion detectors to set off their IEDs, thus eliminating the timing problem. They would use their cell phones to arm the device when they saw the target convoy approaching. They also shifted from IEDs made from unexploded ordinance to the energy formed projectiles (EFP) a platter charge designed to penetrate the improved armor of the vehicles and and, in particular, destroy the gun trucks first.

¹ MSG John P. Souza's e-mails to Richard Killblane, March 23-29, 2006; MSG Souza's sworn statement 20051028; 1SG David J. Heuer's sworn statement, 20051028.

² SSG Michael Mulcahy email to Richard Killblane, April 6, 2006 and Mulcahy telephone interview.

³ MAJ Christopher Hart's e-mail to Richard Killblane, March 30, 2006; MSG Souza's and 1SG Heuer's sworn statements.

⁴ MAJ Hart's e-mail; MSG Souza's and 1SG Heuer's sworn statements; MSG Souza's e-mail, 1 April 2006, Mulcahy email, April 6, 2006, and Mulcahy telephone interview.

⁵ MAJ Hart's e-mail; telephone conversation with MSG Souza, 30 March 2006; Mulcahy email, April 6, 2006; and Mulcahy telephone interview.

⁶ Mulcahy telephone interview.

⁷ SGT James Witkowski, Silver Star Citation, Mulcahy email, April 6, 2006.

⁸ Mulcahy email, April 6, 2006.

⁹ 1SG Heuer's and MSG Souza's sworn statements.

¹⁰ Mulcahy email, April 6, 2006.

¹¹ 1SG Heuer's and MSG Souza's sworn statements, and MSG Souza's e-mail, 1 April 2006.

¹² 1SG Heuer's and MSG Souza's sworn statements, MAJ Christopher Hart email to Richard Killblane, April 4, 2006.



Top: M1114 with added ceramic plates and factory built bumper.

Middle: M1114 with BAE Objective Frag 5 Doors, Marine Turret and Gun Shield, and Rhino 2.

Bottom: M1114 with Interim Fragmentary 5 Kit, Dukes Electronic Jammer and Rhino 2.

Photos courtesy of Richard Killblane



Top: M1151A1 with Rhino 2, Dukes jammer, AM General Gunner Protection Kit, Marine Corps gun shield, and extra ballistic glass on turret and door.

Middle Left: M1114 with Interim Frag 6 Kit, extended Rhino, Objective Gunner Protection Kit, sniper screen and Duke jammer.

Middle Right: M1117 Armored Support Vehicle (ASV). **Bottom Left:** M1114 with BAE Objective Frag 5 Doors, another type of Objective Gunner Protection Kit.

Bottom: M1114 with BAE Objective Frag 5 Doors, another type of Objective Gunner Protection Kit.

Photos courtesy of Richard Killblane

ASR Sword Hasty Ambush, 25 October 2006
217th Transportation Company (HET) & A Battery,
121st Field Artillery

Due to the improvements in vehicle armor and tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) by 2006, the enemy had pretty much abandoned deliberate complex ambushes in favor of Iranian imported energy formed projectiles (EFP), which could penetrate any kind of armor. However, the Iraqis tested the convoys now and then to check for weaknesses in their TTPs or to see if a sense of complacency about complex ambushes had set in after each new rotation of units. All convoys north of Convoy Support Center (CSC) Scania were conducted at night, which eliminated any problem of civilian intruders since there was a curfew in effect with Iraqi civilians. So the convoys had the roads to themselves. That allowed them to change lanes and go “Hadji” – driving in the opposite lane. The intent was to confuse the IED triggerman as to where the convoy drove.

In addition, Sheriff net, which had been established

early in the war, was the coordinating network for any convoys passing through a battle space to call for medevac or quick reaction force, kind of like a 911 operator in a war zone. The manager of the Sheriff network would then coordinate with the appropriate units for any assistance needed by the convoy. Each network was managed by a different Sheriff designated numerically. Sheriff 15 operated out of Baghdad International Airport (BIAP) and Sheriff 16 operated out of Logistic Support Area (LSA) Anaconda.

In 2006, the 24th Transportation Battalion owned all the HETs and had learned to lead convoys with the larger HETs because they survived EFPs better than M1114 up-90 armored HMMWVs, which were lower to the ground. By this time the HETs had a factory - 9090 built cab armor kit that protected them against most IEDs,

and the height of the HET required such an angle on the EFP that it usually passed under or over the passengers. Each company in the 24th Battalion backed up the lead HET with a gun truck of its own. Because the object of the lead HET was to find or trigger IEDs, it usually had additional armor on the doors. By that time all military



Energy formed projectile (EFP) was a platter charge that combined kinetic energy and heat to penetrate any kind of armor. They were often camouflaged as concrete, rocks or trash alongside the road. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane



The new cab armor kit for the M1070 HET tractor. The white antenna is the Dukes electronic jamming device used to jam radio signals for arming or detonating IEDs. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane



Realizing the HET was the most survivable vehicle against an IED or EFP, convoys started leading with a HET tractor with additional door armor to protect against an EFP. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

vehicles had Dukes jamming device mounted on their trucks along with radios. Although the Ambush of Ad Diwaniyah had clearly shown that having the tank crews ride with their tanks turned each HET into a gun platform, Multi-national Corps-Iraq (MNC-I) changed the policy that crews could no longer ride with the HETs hauling their tanks.

By the 2006 rotation, the Transportation battalions at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait had consolidated their gun truck escorts into escort companies, and the 37th Transportation Group had the 1st Battalion, 121st Field Artillery at Camp Navistar as its attached escort battalion. The 1st Battalion, 121st Field Artillery was a National Guard unit from Wisconsin that had arrived in July and completed its transfer of authority on 15 August. The battalion lost its first casualty, SPC Stephen Castner hours after crossing the border on his first right-seat ride on 24 July. The subsequent investigation and repercussions from this made the chain of command up to the 336th Transportation Group almost paranoid about casualties from then on. The death of SGT Stephen W. Jopeak by an IED on 24 July 2006 caused Combined Land Force Component Command (CFLCC) headquartered in Kuwait to also require gunners to ride “eyeball” defilade, in other words, only the gunners eyes were allowed to be above the gunner’s hatch. Jopeak had

been sitting at “nametag” defilade when shrapnel from an IED came over the turret armor and killed him.

The Intelligence section (S-2) also studied the history of enemy attacks searching for patterns and discovered windows of time the enemy preferred to attack. So the 336th scheduled convoys to avoid those windows making the missions twice as long as normal. To make up for this, the 336th increased the number of task vehicles per convoy from 30 to 45. With an escort ratio of 1:10, this increased the number of gun trucks per convoy to four. This allowed two middle gun trucks to “float” by driving up and down the convoy rather than just one. The tactics was to return fire and clear the kill zone, or defend any disabled vehicles in the kill zone, but not to go after the enemy. The 121st had learned from its predecessors to stagger their gun trucks left and right along the convoy so they could see up and down the convoy, instead of following right behind the task vehicles. The escort commander was subordinate to the convoy commander.

The 1-121st FA restructured for the mission using a Military Police organization with the platoons organized into four escort teams. Convoys were escorted by teams that had trained and remained together. They drove M1114 up-armored HMMWVs with the interim fragmentary kits for additional protection against the



1-121st FA at Camp Navistar restructured their organization similar to MPs with permanent escort teams and the teams had their assigned areas in the motor pool. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane



M1114 with Frag 5 door armor and Rhino 2 in the up position. Rhinos provided a heat signature ahead of the vehicle to detonate the IEDs triggered by motion detectors. The 1-121st FA had their 157th FA Brigade patch as the logo on their gun shields. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane



Rear view of M1114s of the 1-121st FA. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

EFP. The lead escort vehicles had the Rhinos attached to the front bumper. The enemy would arm the EFP with cell phones after civilian traffic had passed and the convoy approached, then an IR motion detector would set off the EFP. So an innovative soldier wired a glow plug in an ammunition can filled with oil on a pole six feet in front of the truck to detonate the EFP ahead of the vehicle.

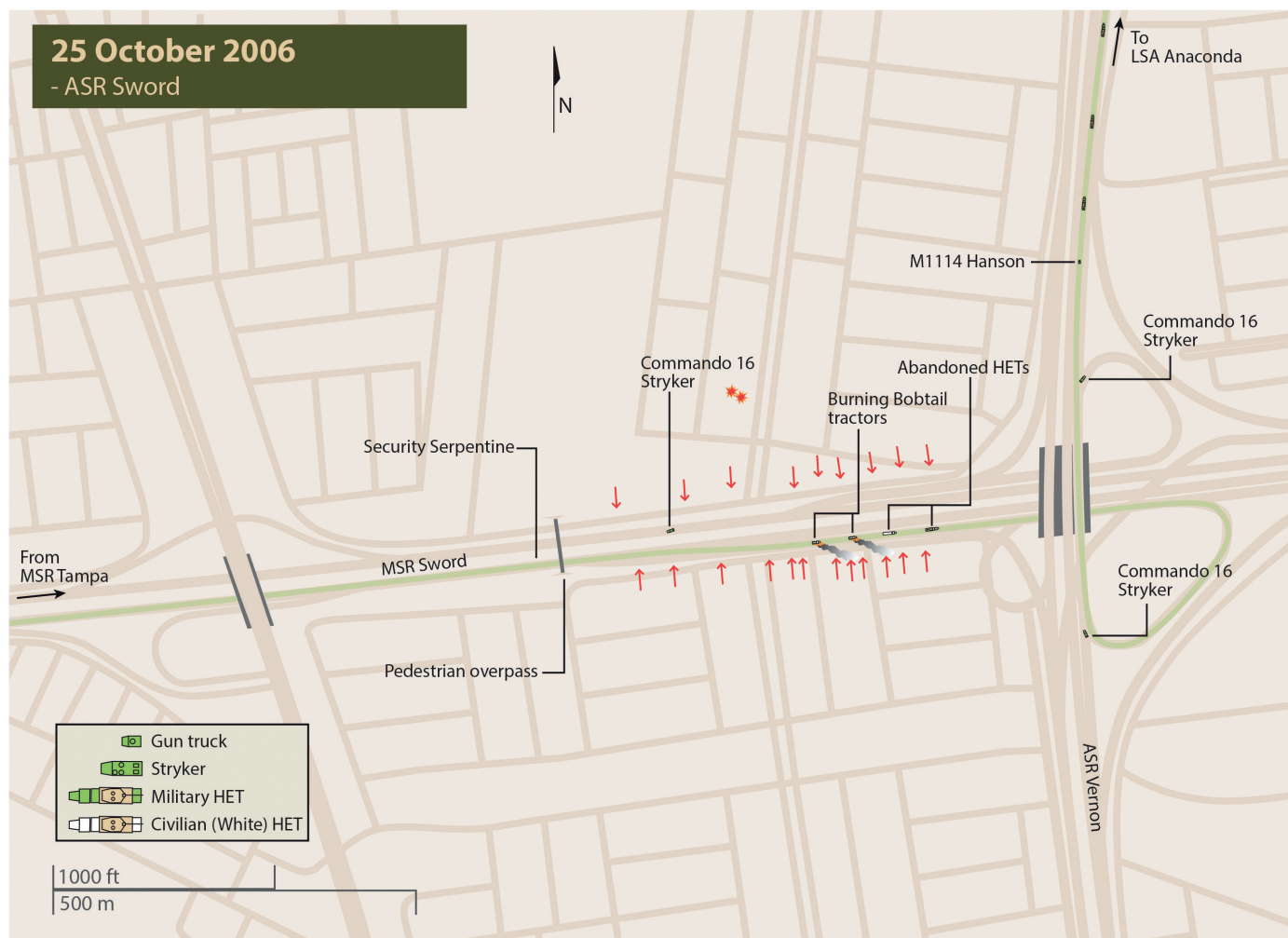
This design was standardized and issued as the Rhino. Every truck also had Blue Force Tracker (BFT) instead of Mobile Tracking System (MTS) because the former provided situational awareness of other coalition forces in the area.

The 217th Transportation Company (HET), US Army Reserve from San Antonio, Texas, based in Camp Arifjan had only been in theater three months when it received the mission to haul M1 Abrams tanks to LSA Anaconda. SGT Tucker led the convoy of the 217th with an M1070 HET and M1000 trailer hauling an M1 Abrams tank. SSG Joe Gutierrez's M1114 gun truck armed with an Mk19 automatic grenade launcher followed behind as part of the 217th HET scout team. The next HET was the pace setter for the convoy, which was followed by nine white (contract) HETs driven by Third Country Nationals (TCN). SSG Vernon Drake followed behind in his HET as the convoy commander. The external escorts for this mission came from Headquarters Platoon, A Battery, 1st Battalion, 121st Field Artillery with SSG Gary Jandreau, the escort commander. Half of A Battery came from Maine and the other half came from Arizona and Nevada. Jandreau rode in the middle M1114 and SSG Kirkland behind him in a HET also followed by nine more white HETs. SFC Bernard Wilson followed them also with nine white HETs in tow. SSG Raz, the assistant convoy commander, brought up the trail party with his HET, a green (military) maintenance HET, and CPL Leonard Hanson's 121st FA M1114 gun truck.¹

On 25 October 2006, the northbound HET convoy left Scania at 0100 hours and passed the turn off to BIAP around 0400 hours. It had spent three days at Scania due to IED damage to a HET. Its destination for the day was LSA Anaconda, so it made the turn off MSR Tampa onto ASR Sword heading for the turn onto

25 October 2006

- ASR Sword



ASR Vernon, which would lead them back onto MSR Tampa toward Anaconda. The convoy had numerous breakdowns along the way and SGT Tucker's M1000 semi-trailer in the front of the convoy had two bad bogies, which caused the convoy to halt on ASR Sword. The Multi-National Corps-Iraq (MNC-I) and CFLCC policy was not to abandon any vehicles on the road, but secure and recover them; and Wilson's policy was to never to leave a vehicle behind and maintain convoy integrity. Sword, which ran through the suburbs of Baghdad, was still the most heavily ambushed road in Iraq. After a 30 to 45-minute delay on Sword, the lead element of the convoy drew small arms fire from the left around 0700 hours. The lead gun truck radioed back taking small arms fire on the left and SSG Jandreau heard the report on the radio. He then reported the small arms fire and grid coordinates to Sheriff 15.²

Meanwhile, Jandreau's gunner saw an Iraqi reach over the wall with his AK and fire at the convoy. As soon as the gunner returned fire, the Iraqi ducked. The gun

truck pulled off the road to the left side and stopped to let the convoy pass. When the Iraqi stood up to fire again, the gunner fired his M2 .50 caliber machinegun at him. The Iraqi never fired back again. A few minutes after the small arms fire started, Jandreau heard explosions and felt the concussion, but did not see where the explosions came from.³

Two mortar rounds exploded about 200 meters to the left and right of Tucker's truck at the head of the convoy. 15 to 20 seconds later, three more rounds exploded a little closer to the left and right of his truck, and he realized the enemy was bracketing his truck and walking rounds closer. SSG Drake then gave the call for the convoy to continue mission and drive out of the kill zone. As the lead elements of the convoy negotiated the serpentine check point manned by the Iraqi Police (IP) under the overpass, small arms fire broke out on both sides of the road. A TCN driver heading for the check point was shot in the abdomen and the convoy came to a halt with six trucks in the serpentine and four white



The 1-121st FA was recently issued the M1117 Armored Support Vehicle (ASV). Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

HETs ahead of it. Jandreau pulled his M1114 to the left at an angle in what he called a “spiked L” in order to see up the convoy. CPL Hanson likewise pulled his M1114 to the rear, but the gun trucks identified no targets to engage. The enemy fired had ended.⁴

Right after the halt, SFC Wilson drove his HET up past a TCN who was out of his vehicle trying to get his attention. Wilson stopped his truck and while still under fire, dismounted and walked over to the TCN who was then calmly standing by his driver’s door. Wilson noticed the white HET had been damaged by small arms fire, and about that time, another TCN pulled his HET up alongside the damaged HET, so Wilson put the other TCN driver in that truck. The driver then signaled with his hands to Wilson that the TCN in his truck was wounded, so Wilson ran back to his HET to get the combat life saver bag. Upon returning to the white HET, he realized the contract vehicle was unarmored so he assisted the wounded TCN up to his armored HET. Although the TCN was wounded in the left leg, he could still walk. Once safe in the armored cab, Wilson bandaged the contract driver’s leg.⁵



LT Olson, Platoon leader in the 1-121st FA. The new body armor had side SAPI plates and shoulder guards.
Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

Jandreau then called Sheriff reporting the convoy had wounded and to standby for a nine-line medevac report. He also requested the quick reaction force, and then called SSG Gutierrez to reposition his 217th gun truck from the front to the rear and for CPL Hanson to come up from the rear and provide medical aid to the

wounded TCN, since Hanson was also an emergency medical service (EMS) civilian. Hanson pulled up about a 100 meters from the Iraqi check point, grabbed his combat life saver bag and ran to the TCN with the abdominal wound where he assessed the extent of injury and rendered medical aid. Hanson then told his gunner, SGT Michael Albert, the nine-line, who then radioed it to Jandreau. Jandreau likewise relayed the nine-line medevac report to Sheriff and reported possible enemy troops in the area. After about 15 minutes of quiet, the convoy began receiving more small arms fire from the right side and a TCN came back and in broken English told Hanson another TCN was wounded up front. Hanson asked if the TCN could bring the wounded back. Two TCNs and two Iraqi Policemen went up and brought the wounded driver back. The driver had

been shot through both legs. Hanson then treated both and a minute and a half after Jandreau had called in the nine-line, a medevac helicopter and Apache gunship arrived. The appearance of the gunship overhead ended the enemy fire.⁶

Coincidentally, Commando 16, a patrol of four Strykers, eight-wheeled armored combat vehicle, out of Taji, heard the call and asked Jandreau if they could provide security. Jandreau was extremely grateful for the additional fire support. Five to ten minutes later, four Strykers arrived and asked where they could be best placed. Jandreau told them to position two up front, one in the middle and one in the rear. The two up front guarded the far side onramps leading up the overpass.⁷

SFC Wilson, however, had lost radio communications earlier that day and needed to inform his assistant convoy commander about the wounded TCNs. His truck commander, Niky Eakins, ran back past 18 white HETs to Raz's HET to inform him about the wounded TCN. Eakin reported the situation to Raz. When the Strykers arrived, one Stryker pulled up next to Wilson's truck where they quickly loaded the wounded contract driver in it and drove him back to the rear of the convoy where the medevac helicopter landed. Jandreau asked Hanson what color smoke he was going to throw. Hanson tossed purple smoke, and the medevac identified the correct color. The helicopter landed, loaded the two wounded

contract drivers, and was not on the ground for three minutes before it took off.⁸

Jandreau then radioed for Hanson to move his gun truck back to the rear and for Gutierrez to return to his position up front. On Hanson's way back, small arms fire opened up from both sides of the road in front of Jandreau. His gunner saw Iraqis on the roof tops and in the windows on the right side of the road. The crews of the Strykers saw them also and both laid down suppressive fire. The .50 caliber rounds, however, seemed to have no effect on the thick adobe walls of the houses along the road but the Mk19 automatic grenade launchers on the Strykers silenced the enemy fire. However, a couple more white HETs were disabled by enemy fire. Jandreau then called the convoy commander to go back and recover the HET and tank. He then called Sheriff asking where the quick reaction force was, but Sheriff did not know and said it should have been there by then. Sheriff admitted they in the middle of a shift change so the message may not have been passed down. Jandreau's adrenaline was pumping with anger and said they had better give him air support or something.⁹

Meanwhile, Wilson waited for Eakins to return, so he ran back to the middle of the convoy and saw two to three white HETs damaged by small arms fire that could not drive. One was shot through the engine and



M1114 and M1117 ASV of the 1-121st FA returning from an escort mission. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

another had a flat tire. Wilson then met up with Raz, and sent someone back to bring up the two white bobtails. When Jandreau saw Wilson, he exited his gun truck and ran with his M203 grenade launcher to the convoy commander. Wilson reported the battle damage, situation on the ground, and who he was talking with on the radio. They then walked back to the first contract truck discussing how to recover the disabled vehicles when small arms fire opened up on them from their right front on the other side of the berm that flanked the onramp. Jandreau dropped to the prone position as rounds stitched the ground just inches to his left. Wilson had leaned against the truck and the two looked at each other then ran back down the line of trucks to get away from the enemy fire. Rounds were hitting in front and behind them as they ran. Jandreau thought for sure he was going to get hit and ran holding his Kevlar helmet so it covered the back of his neck. Everything seemed to move in slow motion. They had passed three or four HETs when they finally stopped to rest against a contract HET. As the rounds hit closer to them, they started running further to the rear of the convoy. Jandreau then heard someone yell. Another TCN was hit. Jandreau stopped three or four trucks away and yelled out if the TCN was ready. The TCN gave the thumbs up sign, so Jandreau and Wilson ran the rest of the way back to the rear of the convoy. It was then Jandreau saw Hanson and Raz on top of a tank trying to cut the lock.¹⁰

Previously, Hanson met up with Raz at the rear of the convoy and decided to recover the equipment. The recovery team switched out the HET that had a flat tire and then decided to drive the tank off the trailer of the disabled HET. They asked who knew how to drive a tank and Raz said he had driven a tank before but not an M1, but was willing to try. So Raz and Hanson climbed up on top of it only to discover the hatch was locked. Hanson then brought up a pair of bolt cutters from his gun truck but could not cut the lock. They then started receiving small arms fire from the right side of the road since the Strykers were on the left side. Hanson and Raz immediately jumped to the ground. Hanson dropped his M4 and returned fire with his M9 Berretta pistol then the small arms fire increased. Wilson nearby could see one Iraqi to his right and fired four to five rounds from behind the rear wheels of trailer with the tank, and the enemy fire stopped. Raz had landed on the right side and

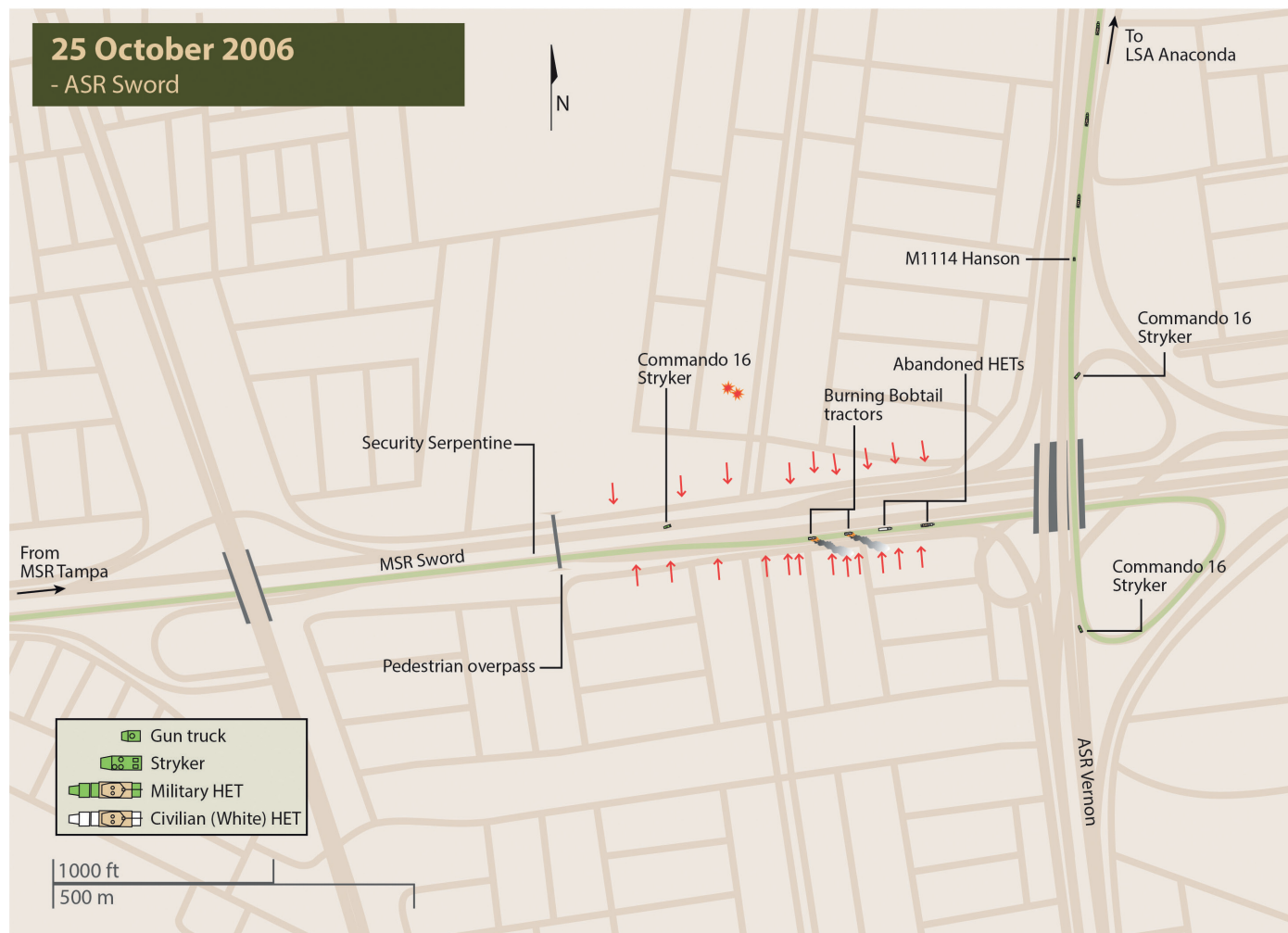
crawled under the trailer to the front of the cab where he was yelling in pain. Wilson asked if he was hit, and Raz said he had twisted his knee on the landing.¹¹

Raz, Wilson and Hanson then climbed into Jandreau's gun truck to discuss what to do next. It was pretty evident the longer they remained in the kill zone recovering vehicles, the more vehicles were damaged and more drivers wounded. They agreed Raz would drive the white HET and Wilson would go to the front of the convoy. After Wilson received the "green light" that everyone was ready, he would lead them out of the kill zone. Wilson parked his HET on the other road. There were two white HETs and a bobtail that had not yet entered the serpentine. Jandreau drove SSG Drake over to his bobtail, which was parked behind Wilson's HET. They received the word that all green (military) trucks were ready to go.¹²

It was then that Wilson saw SSG Drake. Wilson walked at a stoop over to Drake standing next to a white HET where Wilson then explained what had happened so far. About that time the small arms fire increased and someone yelled that another TCN was wounded. Wilson and Drake saw a wounded TCN by the tire of the same vehicle they had just left. Wilson handed Drake his weapon and ran over to the wounded driver, grabbed him by the collar of the IBA and dragged him behind the second white HET. The TCN had been wounded in the left hand and right leg. The Stryker was also there to take the wounded TCN. The situation was deteriorating the longer they remained in the kill zone.¹³

At that point, Drake made the decision to leave the disabled HET before they had any more drivers wounded. Wilson asked the Stryker to cover him while he ran to his truck, and the Stryker drove between him and the enemy while he ran. Upon reaching his HET, he discovered three gun shots to the windshield and one to the radiator, which was leaking fluid on the ground. Unable to drive his truck, Wilson decided to secure the sensitive items. As soon as he jumped out of his truck, Drake came up with the maintenance vehicle. Wilson tossed the sensitive items in the maintenance vehicles and climbed in. Once he reported to Drake he was in the vehicle, the convoy drove off. The quick reaction force arrived much later.¹⁴

After dropping off Drake, Jandreau turned his gun truck around to drop Hanson off with the TCN. Jandreau



then dropped Raz off with the white HET while Hanson drove up the convoy blowing his siren, an understood signal to mount up. Raz climbed in the white HET. The main body of the convoy was already at Taji and what was left of the convoy was still drawing small arms fire and the gunners on the gun trucks and Strykers were still engaging the enemy. Mk19 rounds sounded like mortar rounds exploding on their targets. The convoy finally pulled out with Jandreau's gun truck in the front, Hanson's in the rear and Raz three vehicles behind Jandreau. They made the turn onto ASR Vernon, but Raz was having trouble getting the commercial HET into higher gear so it moved at a crawl. Military trucks had automatic transmissions. He stopped on the onramp to Vernon and after five minutes a TCN in the HET ahead of him came back to show him how to shift gears. With that the convoy started moving again. About three miles down Vernon, they saw one of their green HETs parked on the side of the road. They stopped for a moment

and reported the grid coordinates to Sheriff 16 saying they needed quick reaction force and KBR recovery. Sheriff 16 called Sheriff 15 to send the recovery team. Meanwhile, Jandreau was trying to get the convoy commander on the radio. They had abandoned two bobtails, an empty white HET and one green HET with an Abrams tank behind. Commando 16 (Strykers) asked what they wanted done with vehicles left behind. At Taji, Jandreau learned two white HETs had been recovered but two HET bobtails were burning.¹⁵

Lesson

Only gun trucks should halt or remain in a kill zone. Everything else needs to clear the kill zone and rally at a safer area as quickly as possible.

This case study illustrates how rapidly a situation can deteriorate in the effort to recover a disabled vehicle. The delay in the enemy opening fire on the halted convoy and the sporadic nature of the fire

indicated this was a hasty ambush. ASR Sword was historically notorious for convoy ambushes and any halt on that short stretch of road incurred high risk. The prolonged delay of the convoy in recovering the initial disabled vehicle provided a target of opportunity for the insurgents; and once the shooting started, the longer the convoy remained in the kill zone, the more vehicles were damaged and drivers wounded.

During 2004 and 2005, units could abandon vehicles if they could not recover them within ten minutes, but that policy later changed. MNC-I policy no longer allowed convoys to abandon any vehicles. This, however, did not require the entire convoy to remain in the high threat area during the recovery. To minimize risk to others, they could have pushed all the other vehicles out except a few gun trucks and bobtail HET for security and recovery, or set a time limit on how long the convoy could stay in the area before having to move to a rally point in a safer area.

Another option was to call up the battle space owner as soon as the HET trailer broke down to have the quick reaction force secure the convoy as rapidly as possible. These decisions were made after the enemy fire began. Rarely has anyone thought of calling the quick reaction force before contact, but if done earlier it could have reduced the risk of other vehicles and drivers in the kill zone. They were fortunate that two Strykers happen to be passing by because the quick reaction force arrived

long after the convoy had abandoned the vehicles.

Once in a kill zone, the counter measure is to suppress the enemy fire with overwhelming and accurate fire. In this ambush, the M2 .50 caliber machineguns failed to suppress the enemy fire coming from the buildings, but the Mk19 automatic grenade launchers were the only weapons that stopped enemy fire. The next case study has a convoy halt in the same area but showed the advantage of overwhelming and accurate fire.

After three years of the war, the third country nationals (TCN) had plenty of experience working with Americans and performed very well that day.

¹ SFC Bernard Wilson and SSG Vernon Drake interview by Richard Killblane at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait on 4 March 2007; and SSG Gary Jandreau interview by Richard Killblane at Camp Navistar, Kuwait, 6 March 2007.

² Wilson and Drake interview, and Jandreau interview.

³ Jandreau interview.

⁴ Wilson and Drake interview, Jandreau interview, and CPL Leonard Hanson interview by Richard Killblane at Camp Navistar, 6 March 2007.

⁵ Wilson and Drake interview.

⁶ Jandreau interview, and Hanson interview.

⁷ Jandreau interview.

⁸ Wilson and Drake interview, Hanson interview, and Jandreau interview

⁹ Jandreau interview.

¹⁰ Jandreau interview.

¹¹ Wilson and Drake interview, Hanson interview, and Jandreau interview.

¹² Jandreau interview.

¹³ Wilson and Drake interview.

¹⁴ Wilson and Drake interview.

¹⁵ Wilson and Drake interview.



M1114 of the 1-121st FA. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane



Top: Cab armor kit FMTV.
Two Left: Cab armor kits for M915s.
Right Bottom: Cab armor kit for M923
aka "Frankenstein Box"

Photos courtesy of Richard Killblane

**Don't Mess With Texas;
Ambush on ASR Sword, 23 February 2008**
A Company, 3-144th Infantry (TX NG)
106th Transportation Battalion

Since SSG Shane Lindsey and SFC Efrain Garcia were interviewed within three weeks after the incident, the language used during the ambush was still fresh in their memory. This story captures the language used in a kill zone. For people who are offended by profanity, they should do their best to stay out of kill zones.

The 106th Transportation Battalion, then commanded by LTC Christopher Croft, returned to the war a third time in 2007 to conduct convoy escort out of Logistic Support Area (LSA) Anaconda, or Balad as the US Air Force called it. The 106th Transportation Battalion assumed the convoy escort mission for short haul convoys to the different logistic bases in each Multi-National Division area. These missions usually took a day or two to complete. Its escort companies ranged from combat arms companies such as infantry or cavalry to logistics units. The 106th had changed its nickname from "Spearhead" to "Spartans" because they assumed the 7th Sustainment Brigade would arrive in Iraq ahead of them and had adopted the name Spearhead (although their motto was Resolute). The popular movie "300" also embraced the same warrior's mindset that Croft wanted in his convoy escort companies.

LTC Croft had an offensive mindset about convoys and encouraged his companies to come up with innovative solutions. He admitted his infantry and cavalry companies performed the best, but the 106th was held back on some of its ideas by COL Brian K. Leonhard, Commander of the 213th Area Support Group, who believed convoys should just get from point A to point B. This rotation also occurred during the surge of combat troops in the Baghdad area. Many subordinates felt the colonel was risk adverse because he did not want any unnecessary casualties. The innovations by the escort companies and the combination of walling the routes with concrete barriers reduced the number of IED attacks on the convoys throughout the Baghdad area.¹

A Company, 3-144th Infantry was the infantry escort company under the 106th Transportation Battalion. This was an East Texas National Guard company of the 36th Infantry Division with an aggressive gunslinger mentality. They claimed the wide open ranges of West Texas allowed cowboys to shoot long distances from horseback, but in East Texas the area was more urban and cowboys had to be quicker on the draw. Consequently, 1LT Michael Geraci joked about his gun trucks crews, "If you shoot at them, you just make them mad and they shoot back." Geraci claimed his 1st Platoon had the most enemy kills of the company. The company had only returned from Afghanistan six months before it was alerted for this deployment to Iraq.



M1151 and M1117 ASV with tow bars up front at LSA Anaconda. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane



New armored cab of KBR tractors. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

All volunteered to deploy so they could stay together as a company. So 80 percent of the company had been deployed to Afghanistan and maintained the same aggressive attitude of taking the fight back to the enemy. CPT Chris Miller had served in Iraq before as contractor with KBR and assumed command of A Company in April 2007. The company mobilized in May 2007 and went to Camp Shelby. It then arrived in Iraq during the second week of August where it replaced the D Battery, 1-5th FA, which the Texans claimed did not have a combat mentality. They did not take personal weapons with them on the road. They were not prepared to be hit when they crossed the wire. Their mentality was, "If we get hit, we get hit."²

A Company was the first replacement company in the 106th Battalion to complete its transfer of authority (TOA) and it quickly established a more aggressive mentality for the next companies to arrive. LTC Croft put out his intent to maintain an aggressive and disciplined mentality. After a couple weeks in country, a convoy from A Company was hit by an IED on the way to Camp Speicher, outside Tikrit. It drove off the road and raided a building looking for the trigger man. While LTC Croft had to encourage some of his other companies to be more aggressive, he had to tell the Texans to slow down, fearing they might stumble into an ambush. When he advised them to take an offensive posture, he did not mean to dismount and kick in doors. He said, "Look at it;

do you really want to do it." LTC Croft then added tactical patience to his guidance. "Let the EOF [escalation of force] system work; don't go straight to shoot to kill. Does that threat have to be eliminated or blocked?"³

The infantry knew if they could see the trigger man through their thermal night vision goggles then they could take him out. If they were hit by an IED, then they would scan for the trigger man and take him out. The Texan attitude was "If you get hit and you can eliminate the threat, he will not be around to hit someone else."⁴

The infantry ran with tow bars on the front part of their vehicles, which served a practical purpose and happened to also identify them to the enemy. CPT Miller claimed his company also came up with the idea of employing snipers. He wanted to infiltrate snipers along the main supply route in habitual hot spots where they were often hit by IEDs, but the battle space owner did not want them to do it. B Company, 297th Infantry also asked to do it. The snipers then asked what they could do. So they rode in armored LMTVs and could shoot from the top.⁵

The recent surge in combat units in the Baghdad region had reduced the IED threat to convoys because of the increased number of patrols in the area. This did not allow the enemy time to properly conceal their IEDs. In addition, the coalition forces began erecting concrete T-wall barriers along the main routes through Baghdad used by coalition forces, which eliminated much of the



KBR fuel tankers. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

trash that littered the roads, in which the enemy hid the IEDs. The barrier program was still underway and Alternate Supply Route (ASR) Sword had not yet been walled up. It was still an unfriendly road and houses along it had thick concrete or adobe walls that some thought were reinforced because .50 caliber rounds failed to penetrate them.⁶

By then convoys only drove at night, which meant they could see the muzzle flash of enemy fire, which gave them positive identification, so vital to returning fire. The procedure for reaction to contact had not changed much: clear the kill zone and defend any disabled vehicles, but the organization of the gun trucks had. Because the enemy had targeted the lead and rear gun trucks, the convoys placed three gun trucks up front and two in the rear. That way if one was disabled, another could defend it, and in the case of a gun truck hit up front, the third gun truck could escort the convoy to the rally point.

To minimize casualties, current Multi-National Corps-Iraq (MNC-I) policy did not permit the crews to dismount their vehicles and engage the enemy as the gun truck crews had done during early deployments. Since the vehicles were fully armored with ballistic glass, senior commanders felt the crews were safely cocooned inside the armored vehicle. Senior commanders were so paranoid about the casualty numbers reported on the news that they micro-managed the war through power point.

After SGT Stephen W. Jopeck, of the 1st Battalion, 121st FA (WI NG), was killed by IED shrapnel sitting high in the gunner's turret on 24 July 2006, the 336th

Transportation Group required all gunners to sit at eyeball defilade in the turret. MNC-I likewise studied charts of casualty statistics and realized that gunners were often wounded by shrapnel that slipped through the gap between the gun shield and turret shield, so they also established the policy that gunners had to sit at "eyeball defilade." In other words, only the top of the gunner's head was allowed above the roof of the gun truck. This would not allow the gunner the benefit of his greatest advantage against an IED – vision, but instead had to rely on the driver and truck commander to spot IEDs.⁷ Evidence would later show that 80 percent of IEDs were found visually versus by any technology.

On 23 February 2008, A Company, 3-144th Infantry escorted a KBR fuel convoy returning from Convoy Support Center Scania with SSG Efrain Garcia as the escort commander. The convoy had two M1117 Armored Support Vehicles (ASV), a four-wheeled armored car (upgrade of the old V-100 from the Vietnam War), up front because they considered them more survivable, next followed eight KBR trucks. The convoy commander's M1114 armored HMMWV mounted with an M240B was next, followed by eight more KBR fuel tankers, and then the assistant convoy commander's M1114 armed with an M2 .50 caliber machinegun and 240B. Garcia placed his assistant convoy commander, SSG Shane D. Lindsey, in the middle of the convoy because he had the most experience in responding to ambushes. Garcia essentially placed his best tactical leader in the right place. Lindsey was followed by eight more KBR fuel tankers, then an ASV, wrecker, eight more KBR tankers, and finally two M1114s armed with

.50s and 240Bs. The convoy had no fire truck, which was common with some fuel convoys. Seven gun trucks escorted 24 fuel tankers with a ratio of one - to - four.⁸

SSG Garcia's convoy rolled down ASR Sword near Abu Ghraib just past the dip in the road adjacent an apartment complex with thick adobe walls. As the rear M1114 gun truck was just moving up front to block the turn onto ASR Vernon, SSG Garcia heard a loud explosion at 2245 hours. He asked on radio if anyone heard or saw it. Someone in the ASV gun truck that had moved up front said he heard it was behind Gun Truck Number 2. A KBR driver went crazy saying he was taking small arms fire. Then all the trucks from the lead gun truck to convoy commander's gun truck, 11th vehicle back, took small arms fire from a group of buildings on the right hand (south) side of road. SSG Garcia called on radio, "Contact right." Their tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) called for a gun truck to pull to the contact side and return fire, so the gun truck in contact pulled the right side. The lead three gun trucks had cleared the kill zone, so SSG Garcia's gun truck pulled over and the assistant convoy commander came up to join the fight. The gunner saw three Iraqis on top of the building to his right. SSG Lindsey saw two on the roof top, more in the second story windows, and possibly five on the ground running from house to house.⁹

Lindsey then saw a KBR truck stopped in the kill zone with its brakes locked up. So Lindsey's M1114 gun truck pulled up to the right rear between the truck and the enemy. His M1114 started receiving small arms fire from south side (his right), then he saw two more enemy insurgents with AKs on the north side. SSG Garcia's gun truck also received automatic fire from an RPK machinegun.¹⁰

As the ASVs were leading the rest of the convoy out of kill zone, the crew of the lead ASV called that they saw

an IED wrapped in a bag in the median 300 meters from the convoy commander. SSG Garcia instructed them not to stop. He knew if they stopped they would be trapped in the kill zone. They replied, "Roger, we are not stopping; we are pushing left." As the rear ASV with the wrecker drove past the convoy commander's gun truck, the IED detonated behind it causing no damage to wrecker.

Only the two gun trucks and disabled KBR truck remained in the kill zone and the rear M1151 gun truck was coming up. As soon as Lindsey's gun truck received fire from both sides of the road, he called to say he needed "Six" to come up. While waiting, Lindsey pulled further forward to the right side of the KBR tanker. The small arms fire sounded like hail hitting his passenger door and gunner's turret. Lindsey told his gunner, SPC Anthony D. Cooke, to find where the most concentration of fire came from and suppressive it, "Find the fuckers!" Lindsey was so mad at that point; he yelled, "Find me a

fucking target." Lindsey was highly pissed off because that was the 12th IED that went off on this convoy and the enemy was trying to hit his gunner. When the enemy saw Lindsey's door crack open, they concentrated even more fire on his door, which pissed him off even more because they did not want to let him out.¹¹

Meanwhile, Gun Truck 6 pulled up next to Lindsey's M1114 and

the gunner, CPL Tanerrius D. Robinson, fired to the left (north) killing two insurgents with his .50 and the truck commander, SGT Leonard Giramita, opened his window and engaged with his M4 carbine to the right. They were drawing fire from both sides of the road at that location. The KBR bobtail with "Medicine Man" stopped behind the disabled vehicle. Garcia's driver talked to "Medicine Man," who said, "I'm not getting out of this truck till the shooting stops."¹²

An IED then detonated behind Garcia's truck while he was trying to figure out what the rest of the convoy



Convoy escorts staging for a night convoy.

Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

was doing. Garcia told the lead truck to stop and assess the damage. He saw fuel was leaking everywhere. “Lost Boy’s” gun truck (the middle floater) was up front; SGT Tony Robbins called Garcia and said he still saw heavy enemy fire. He heard Garcia say they were getting ready to move and he saw trucks receiving small arms fire. “Lost Boy” made the decision to turn back into the kill zone leaving the three ASVs up front for security. Garcia told Hernandez in Gun Truck 1, an ASV, to stop and then roll at 10 to 15 mph to allow time for the recovery operation. Meanwhile PFC Jesse “Woody” Henderson drove “Lost Boy” zigzag through the convoy with a police light on his front grill to get the Third Country National (TCN) and KBR drivers out of the way. The tankers that had bullet holes pulled to the right so the fuel would spill into the median, not the road. The ones not shot pulled to the left. SGT Robbins yelled,

“Don’t stop shooting!” His gunner, CPL Clinton Williams, was firing his M240B at the house that was engaging Garcia but his weapon jammed. He then switched to fire the SAW but it could not work either. Robbins then yelled up, “Shoot something.” Disgusted, Williams threw the SAW down into the truck yelling, “If you want to shoot the mother fucker, you shoot it!” Robbins then picked up the SAW, got out of the truck and laid down suppressive fire. About that time Williams got his M240B working.¹³

Enraged and with no regard for his own safety, Lindsey exited his vehicle and fired his M203 grenade launcher using the armored door for cover and a steady aim. He fired three or four rounds, the first one in a window with two enemy insurgents then the others in the windows next to it. That quieted the fire coming from the house. He then shut the door and walked around behind his gun truck to check on the KBR driver while Cooke



Vice President Dick Cheney presenting Bronze Star Medals to SSG Shane Lindsey and PFC Veronica Alfaro of the 106th Transportation Battalion. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

provided covering fire. His driver, SPC Miguel Velazquez, yelled out, "Hey, the damn KBR guy is out of his truck." He had dismounted to hook up a tow pin. Seeing another gun truck, Lindsey yelled, "Who's fuck'n truck is that?" It belonged to SGT Robbins, who was out of his M1114 using it as cover while walking and firing his SAW. Lindsey asked, "What the fuck you doing bringing your truck so close to mine?" Robbins said, "There's a guy out working on his truck out here." Lindsey asked, "What fucking guy?" It turned out "Medicine Man" was under the truck trying to hook up a "D" ring so he could tow the disabled truck. "Medicine Man" was cool under fire. Lindsey then walked back the rear of his truck and fired more HE rounds in the building and behind the wall. He spotted an Iraqi wearing the blue sweatshirt behind the mud wall that surrounded the house about 75 meters from the road and the .50 cal chewed him up. The .50s from Lindsey's and Garcia's gun trucks worked the wall and also fired at the enemy running toward the four cars down the alley.¹⁴

Up front, "H" Hernandez had stopped the lead part of the convoy up the road and boxed it up with an ASV front and rear, trucks in two rows, and the third ASV was in middle. Garcia then told "H," "You got the front until we get out of here." "H" then dismounted and coordinated with the KBR convoy commander to conduct a battle damage assessment (BDA) on their trucks. "H" told the drivers and truck commanders to get on the ground and for the gunners to keep scanning. Discovering seven tankers with bullet holes leaking fuel, CPL Nichols and the KBR convoy commander then started patching bullet holes with plugs to stop the fuel from leaking. To plug the higher holes, Nichols had a KBR driver climb up on his shoulders. After the KBR driver was drenched in fuel, they switched, until Nichols was also covered with fuel. Meanwhile, "H" checked drivers and found a driver who was shot in the head. He then sent a text message to the battalion tactical operations center.¹⁵

After receiving the MTS message, "KBR was shot in the head," Doc, who was in Lindsey's gun truck, said, "We got to go; somebody's shot in the head." Lindsey got on MBITR (hand held squad radio) and asked, "What ta hell is going on up there? Is somebody shot in the head or not." Doc was panicky. Lindsey then told "Junior" Velazquez to find out what was going on, and then Lindsey returned to shooting bad guys while

"Medicine Man" finished hooking up to tow the disabled KBR tanker.¹⁶

It turned out a round had busted out the dome light, the ricochet hit the KBR driver's helmet and split it just grazing his head. "H" pulled him out of the truck and took him to his ASV gunner, SPC Jesse Vanegas, who asked the guy if he is alright. Vanegas, who never said much, told him, "Drink some water," not knowing what else to do for him.¹⁷

By that time the small arms fire was dying down, so Gun Truck 6 concentrated its fire at the enemy on the roof while Lindsey's gun truck fired at guys on the ground, with Lindsey firing his M203 into the second floor windows. Garcia's gunner, Armstrong, was shooting star clusters and parachutes flares at the building, yelling, "Hey, mother fuckers shoot at me over here!" Lindsey could not see where the enemy was firing from, but Garcia could. Looking at the building the flare went into, Garcia said, "Look at that mother fucker; I caught it on fire." This was the result of a change in their tactics, technique and procedures.

After getting hit by their first IED, they sped up and cleared the kill zone. That first IED had scared them; but by their second IED, they reacted the same way but it pissed them off. So they discussed it and Garcia said they did not need to speed through the kill zone after an IED attack because it had already detonated. They needed to slow down and let everyone catch up. After the third IED, they wanted to do something to discourage further attacks, and decided to fire back at anything suspicious. They knew the trigger man had to be hiding out in the desert and they shot up the desert to scare him from further attacks. That was when they also decided to shoot flares at the enemy to catch them on fire. The next day it worked out. Lindsey said, "Gotta make a point. Recon by fire. The truck that gets hit marks the site, pulls over and finds something to shoot at to draw fire." So during this ambush on ASR Sword, "Phalanx," Garcia's call sign, fired flares everywhere.¹⁸

By that time, the bobtail was backing the chain out, Lindsey was also shooting flares on top of the building, then a Stryker unit came up and the enemy small arms fire stopped. When the convoy had made the turn onto ASR Sword, they passed the slower moving Strykers heading in the same direction. The convoy had switched lanes after entering Sword, then pushed the third gun

truck up to block the turn onto ASR Vernon. For some reason it took the Strykers 20 minutes to catch up. When they arrived, the Stryker crews asked if the convoy needed help. With the KBR truck hooked up for tow, Garcia's convoy continued its mission.

Lesson

The enemy laid out a common pattern kill zone. They placed a couple IEDs up front to disable the lead vehicle and any vehicle that tried to drive around it. They also planned to disable a vehicle in the rear to trap the convoy and finish it off with small arms fire. The first IED missed and everyone sped up, throwing off the timing of the trigger man. The gun trucks did as they were trained and led the convoy out of the kill zone. Two gun trucks defended the one tanker system that was disabled. The enemy had selected an ideal location for the kill zone as the concrete walls of the neighboring buildings protected them from .50 caliber fire, but they did not count on the accuracy of SSG Lindsey with his M203 grenade launcher. He dropped 40mm grenade rounds in any window he saw fire come from and quickly silenced the enemy.

His act of getting out of the vehicle was actually against MNC-I policy. Restricting only the gunners to the fight reduced the advantage of firepower when the gun trucks stopped. Not only that, but MNC-I had restricted the gun trucks from mounting the Mk19 automatic grenade launcher to minimize the collateral damage. They felt the Mk19 was too much fire power for a convoy and would instead be a greater danger to local civilians. As Lindsey demonstrated, the grenade launcher was the ideal weapon for ASR Sword.

Like James McCormick, this crew adopted the aggressive policy to deter further enemy attacks and also learned the advantage of firing flares at the enemy. A flare coming at the enemy did not look much different

from an RPG. A flare fired at the ground behind the enemy at night could also illuminate them from behind making them easier to see. It could also burn down the building they are hiding in.

Hidden so low, the gunner would be unable to see above the gun shield. Later statistics would show that 80 percent of IEDs were spotted visually, not by technology. In reality, most gunners ignored the policy and sat high in the turret so they could see out.

Lindsey's selective disobedience won the day, but almost got him in trouble. Fortunately, LTC Croft defended his actions and even recommended him for the Silver Star Medal. On 18 March 2008, Vice President Dick Cheney presented SSG Lindsey with the Bronze Star Medal for his valor. Robbins also received the Bronze Star Medal. Cooke, Armstrong, and Robinson received ARCOMs with V devices.

¹ LTC Chris Croft interview by Richard Killblane at LSA Balad, Iraq, 12 March 2008.

² CPT Chris Miller interview by Richard Killblane at LSA Balad, Iraq, 13 March 2008; and 1LT Michael Geraci interview by Richard Killblane at LSA Balad, Iraq, 17 March 2008.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ SSG Shane Lindsey and SSG Efrain Garcia interview by Richard Killblane, at LSA Balad, Iraq, 13 March 2008. Since this interview was conducted within a couple weeks after the ambush, the vocabulary was still fresh in Lindsey's memory.

⁷ Richard Killblane, OIF 2007 Journal.

⁸ Garcia and Lindsey interview.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.



Top Left: MAXXPRO with anti-RPG Q-net.
Photo courtesy of SPC Edward Bates DVIDS

Middle Left: MAXXPRO.
Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

Bottom Left: MRAP All Terrain Vehicle (M-ATV) with anti-RPG Q-net.
Photo courtesy of SPC Vang Seng Thao DVIDS

Top Right: RG31.
Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

Bottom Right: Caiman.
Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane



13-14 June 2006

- Regay, Afghanistan



Operation Enduring Freedom, Afghanistan

Regay Ambush, 13 June 2006

First ambush of a US military convoy in Afghanistan Team Cadillac, 710th BSB

The 10th Mountain Division planned a large offensive against the Taliban which would not only expand the operational area of the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, but would also require military convoys to sustain the force. Up until that summer, American units in the field had been sustained primarily by air or Afghan contract “Jingle” trucks. For this reason, Americans had not encountered logistics convoy ambushes in Afghanistan, but that was about to change. Beginning in the summer of 2006, the US Army would run ground convoys in Afghanistan and the first convoy ambush would soon follow. Although American soldiers had plenty of experience with convoy ambushes in Iraq, the nature of the enemy and terrain in Afghanistan only allowed some of the lessons to carry over into this war.

The 2nd Battalion, 87th Infantry formed the nucleus of Task Force 2-87 for this offensive into Regional Command-South. Its forward support company (F Company), however, was tied down providing logistical support and force protection to Forward Operating Base (FOB) Orgun-E. The 10th Sustainment Brigade Commander, COL John Nicholson, instead tasked LTC Vernon Beatty to support this operation with his 710th Brigade Support Battalion (BSB), which was conducting split-based operations between Bagram and Salerno. LTC Beatty decided to create a forward support company (FSC), which would move forward with the infantry. The forward support company borrowed 65 Soldiers of A Company, 20 Soldiers from B Company (Maintenance), two medics from C Company



Jingle trucks at Little Round Top. Photo courtesy of CPT Michael Dolge

(Medical), and some cooks from F Company. CPT Carolyn Trias-DeRyder, the Headquarters and Headquarters Company Commander, assumed command of the newly organized Forward Support Company, H Company, which most called "Team Hotel." This ad hoc unit would form the convoy that was ambushed.¹



M1114 with SAW, Dukes electronic jammer and TACSAT. radio.

Photo courtesy of CPT Michael Dolge

Signal Company Commander, and the Logistics Task Force Deputy Support Operations Officer (SPO) to develop a plan. CPT Dolge (Transportation Corps) was the commander of the 699th Maintenance Company (Direct Support) (Light), from Fort Irwin, California. During the remainder of April and beginning

In planning for the summer offensive, Operation Mountain Thrust, the Joint Logistics Command was losing a lot of equipment due to pilferage and ambushes on the Jingle trucks traveling west from Kandahar across Highway 1 in Regional Command (RC)-South. Joint Logistics Command needed to provide a military convoy capability. The original intent was 50 percent military and 50 percent host nation contracted Jingle trucks. Military trucks had rarely escorted Jingle trucks before and no one else in the Joint Logistics Command had extra soldiers to provide drivers. So mid-April 2006, Joint Logistics Command directed the Logistics Task Force to provide a convoy capability. Logistics Task Force directed CPT Michael Dolge and CPT Devin Callahan,

of May, the two captains found, stole or borrowed four M1114 up-armored HMMWVs and five Palletized Loading Systems (PLS) with trailers, and a HEMTT wrecker from other units around Bagram to meet the mission requirements. Essentially, they were building an ad hoc convoy from men and resources thrown together for this mission.²

The PLS had no armor kit at that time, so Dolge visited the Army Materiel Command (AMC) shop on Bagram and had them fabricate an armor kit with a ring mount on each PLS and his HEMTT wrecker. He only had four M2 .50 caliber machineguns and two Mk19 automatic grenade launchers for his four M1114 up-armored HMMWVs; but in case they had to establish



PLS trucks in the desert of RC-South. Photo courtesy of CPT Michael Dolge



HEMTT wrecker of Team Caddy. This one replaced the one destroyed in the ambush. Photo courtesy of CPT Michael Dolge



Team Caddy after training. Photo courtesy of CPT Michael Dolge

a fire base in the desert, they could arm both the M1114s and PLSs. Otherwise, the opening in the ring mount allowed the truck commander to stand up and fire out of the cab.

CPT Dolge, two other captains, and SFC Michael Leipheimer, the Headquarters' Platoon Sergeant of the 699th, then sat down to discuss how to organize the team. They drew a diagram with each of the ten vehicles and decided what crew each vehicle needed. Mechanics could drive trucks as well as fix them so they needed mechanics (MOS 63B and 63H) as drivers. SFC Leipheimer happened to be a track vehicle mechanic. They also discussed what they needed to be self-sufficient. They needed radio mechanics, so Dolge took SSG Debutts and SPC Brown from his Communications and Electronics (C&E) Shop. He wanted a small arms mechanic but did not have one. Needing two medics, A Company provided SPC Roger Pena, Jr., and SPC Smith. Dolge found SFC Hall from the 699th who he could leave in their rear headquarters at Kandahar and depend upon to get the team whatever it needed. Fuel handlers knew the supply system, so SGT Trujillo joined the team from the 699th. This was an unlikely combination of soldiers for convoy operations but they rose to the challenge.

The team would operate out of Kandahar and Camp Bastion (owned by the British). At Bastion, the team would set up a forward supply point. 699th's NBC NCO, SSG Greg Gardner, would work in the Jump TOC with Trujillo and Brown. The team of 28 drivers voted on the name Team Cadillac. The 710th Brigade Support Battalion provided direct support to the 3rd Brigade Combat Team so Team Cadillac (Caddy for short) would deliver supplies to the 3rd Brigade Combat Team.

As the senior captain, both the brigade and battalion commanders picked CPT Dolge as the commander of the team. The other captains had other missions. Dolge, however, had an executive officer, 1LT Audry Ahlvers, and platoon leader, 1LT Lucas Overstreet. His plan was to get the mission running and then turn it over to his platoon leader, but this did not work out because they did not conduct that many convoys.

During the second week in May, Team Caddy drove from Bagram to Jalalabad to pick up an organic HEMTT wrecker. They took four HMMWVs and two PLS trucks as recovery vehicles. This was a test run to determine what problems they would encounter on the road. As a convoy it was a successful mission, but there were serious communication issues. The Joint Logistical

Command and Logistics Task Force could not see them on Blue Force Tracker (BFT) or talk to them on either PRC117s radios or the Iridium and Thuraya cell phones. Designed to jam enemy remote electronic detonation devices, the Dukes interfered severely with the FM communications and the lead vehicle could even not talk with the rear vehicle. Without communication with higher headquarters, the convoy would have been in serious trouble had it been ambushed. It could not have called for help.

After their return to Bagram, the crews placed a filter on their Dukes so it would not block certain FM frequencies. The 699th was the first unit in Afghanistan to be “clean fielded,” which meant they had only one type of jammer. To mitigate the communication issues, they added an Acorn jamming device to the lead and rear vehicles, which did not jam as many frequencies. To talk long distances, the convoy had to halt requiring the gunners to search five meters out and then ten meters out, “five and ten checks;” then they would turn off their Dukes and then turn on tactical satellite radio and Blue Force Tracker. This did not work if there were mountains to the south because the satellite was low in the southern horizon. With Acorn, the lead or trail truck would pull away from the convoy outside the range of the Dukes, turn off the Dukes and then turn on Acorns. This electronic jamming technology was new and one

system interfered with the other.

The next task was to relocate the entire team from Bagram to Kandahar in preparation for the offensive. The standby soldiers flew to Kandahar to replace any casualties or soldiers who went on leave. All ten vehicles convoyed first to Camp Phoenix in Kabul, then Ghazni, FOB Laghman, and onto Kandahar. The convoy became lost in Kabul and stopped at Phoenix to find an escort through Kabul. Then a Vehicle-borne IED (VBIED) exploded 600 meters outside the gate. This was the first VBIED directed against American soldiers since 2001. The VBIED drove across the depressed median and detonated in the depression and could not drive up the other side. The convoy suffered no injuries, but one tire thrown from the VBIED hit a PLS four vehicles back. SPC Garcia, the driver of the HMMWV had just opened his window to because the gunner had farted, which happened to allow the concussion to escape without blowing the gunner out. The convoy took two full days to complete the trip from Bagram to Kandahar.

As soon as the convoy arrived at Kandahar, all the vehicles had maintenance problems and it took about seven days to service them. Dolge wanted to get every vehicle as close to TM 10-20 maintenance standards as possible before kicking out again. Two days after their arrival, they received an escort for the run to Bastion, but they cancelled it because of too much enemy activity



Buffalo was designed to dig up mines. Photo courtesy of CPT Michael Dolge

at Gereshk. They did reconnoiter the route through Kandahar with five HMMWVs, and around 3 June, four or five days later, they ran the first full convoy to Bastion. The unit move included one or two containers of Class I provisions, Class V ammunition, tents, personal gear, a Gator, and a contact truck - a HMMWV with a tool shelter on back. They had one 20-foot container for personal provisions, sundry packs, carpentry tools, toilet paper, and spare parts.

The Task Force 2-87 column departed Kandahar early to mid-evening and, as the task force moved out, it stretched out into a number of serials and Dolge's serial left sometime between midnight and 0200 hours. His four M1114 gun trucks escorted the five PLS trucks and one HEMTT wrecker. They traveled across Highway 1 towards FOB Price with the intent to turn north at Price and head up into Helmand Valley. An Engineer route clearance patrol (RCP) was embedded in an infantry column ahead of the column searching for IEDs in the road. The plan was once the convoy turned right off of Highway 1 at Price, the route clearance patrol would then take the lead and clear the route. Halfway to Price, an insurgent fired an RPG from a building on the left side of the road that hit the Buffalo Mine Resistant Ambush

Protected Vehicle (MRAP) right below the driver's compartment. It penetrated the engine compartment and started a fire. Other than a small hole and smoke, there was very little visible damage to the vehicle. Fortunately no one was hurt. The infantry consequently captured three or four insurgents and Dolge's mechanics and HEMTT wrecker were called up to recover the damaged vehicle, then tow it the rest of the way. That Buffalo was unfortunately their only capability in the convoy to dig up mines, so the column turned around and headed back to Kandahar where it took a couple of days to repair the damage.

This delay caused the task force to revise its plan and abandon FOB Bastion as a logistics base but run directly to Musa Qala instead. When they reached to the town of Musa Qala, they would head north around a hill mass. Between that and the next mountain ridge, they would establish the forward operating base.

During the middle of the night on 11 June, Task Force 2-87 again departed Kandahar. The large convoy did not reach Musa Qala before nightfall and, because it was not advisable to navigate through the town at night, they stopped. The lead element halted on a small hill mass, which they named Little Round Top, just north of



Scouts of 277th ASG pulling overwatch while the rest of the convoy catches up. Photo courtesy of CPT Michael Dolge

the mountain near Musa Qala. The main body of the convoy halted in the desert.

Musa Qala became the forward operating base for the infantry operations in the Helmand Valley and most supplies were delivered by air.

The Forward Support Company provided support, conducted container deliver system air drops, ran the fuel point, water point, shower point and pulled base security. The trucks of A Company were occasionally tasked out piecemeal to support the infantry during the 42 days of operation.³

Upon their arrival, one of Dolge's PLS trucks was too broken down to return. Bastion was supposed to be the staging area, so Dolge had not planned to leave them behind. So Dolge had to leave three mechanics and drivers there to build a mini-forward operating base. The mechanics figured out the part they needed and Dolge left Gardner, Brown, and Trujillo.

The next day on 13 June, Dolge led his ten-vehicle convoy back to FOB Bastion to pick up supplies and return to the task force camp at Little Round Top. Dolge's convoy headed south through Musa Qala and the Helmand River Valley with Gereshk and FOB Price at the end of the valley where it narrowed between the mountains in the central part of Afghanistan. South of Musa Qala, the valley opened up into a delta with canyons and hill masses. Musa Qala was in the Sanagin District, which was commonly referred to as "Taliban Central" because of the level of enemy activity. Dolge's convoy was rolling south in the vicinity of Regay. The road narrowed and the convoy ran into some overhead wires and Dolge wanted to find an access route to get onto the western desert where he had more freedom of maneuver. A trickle of the river meandered through the wadi covered with shrubs and rocks, flanked by 15 to 20-foot embankments. So Dolge had his and another M1114 lead the convoy as scouts using a traveling overwatch technique. His two gun trucks scouted the route ahead and provided security at a rise of ground while waiting for the rest of convoy to catch up. Each



Regay. Photo courtesy of LCPL Joshua Rudy DVIDS

scout vehicle leapfrogged ahead of the other in a bounding overwatch fashion.

After traveling south paralleling the river for a couple of hours, Dolge found a path leading out of the wadi to the entrance of a small Afghan town of Regay. Adobe houses and buildings were on the left

(east) and the right side (west) opened up into a farm field with some rugged terrain and trees. He saw a hill mass to the west and wanted to drive on top of it to see if there was a route out of the valley.

Dolge's vehicle was about 600 to 800 meters ahead of the other HMMWV when it climbed up the path. At that time, an RPG hit it from the left side. It detonated in the gap between the left rear door and the frame, hit SPC Pena in the passenger seat and came to rest in a box of Mk19 ammunition. The blast blew the door open and ejected the medic from the vehicle. SPC Garcia and SSG Debutts continued driving not knowing they had lost their passenger. Immediately after the RPG, they began receiving small arms fire. Dolge heard somebody on the radio report, "We were taking fire from the right." Yet, most of the fire was coming from the left. The next vehicle in line was 200 to 300 meters behind. All the vehicles reacted by pushing the gas pedal to the metal and racing through the kill zone. The first PLS through the kill zone, driven by SGT Eric Trueblood, was hit with shrapnel to the driver's side fuel tank. It was leaking fuel but had not caught fire so the vehicle continued to roll forward. Dolge told everyone to push far enough ahead of the kill zone to create some maneuver space for the others and then wait for the rest of the convoy to catch up. As the wrecker, third vehicle from the rear, came upon the same spot where Pena's HMMWV was initially hit, it was also hit by an RPG in the fuel tank setting it on fire.

Meanwhile, Dolge looked at his map and identified an unpopulated open area just south of the town. He wanted to get to there so they could consolidate and reorganize, then move to the next terrain feature. Just then the second HMMWV pulled up and stopped. It

could not move forward anymore and blocked the road. SGT Eric Trueblood's PLS came to a rest almost 50 feet behind it right between two buildings and an alley. It began taking fire through that alley and from a hill mass off to the right. The truck commander and team executive officer, 1LT Luke Overstreet, jumped out of the cab of his PLS and started putting out the HEMTT fire with his fire extinguisher. He then saw Pena lying back in the kill zone. Meanwhile, Trueblood and his truck commander dismounted, ran up to the M1114 and climbed inside to escape the small arms fire. About that time, their PLS was hit by another RPG, which set the leaking fuel on fire. The gunner on the disabled gun truck kept on engaging the targets to the right front with his Mk19 and that enemy fire stopped.

So the first HMMWV was disabled, with the PLS disabled and burning right behind it. SSG Alan Peterson's HEMTT was also on fire in the rear of the convoy trapping the convoy on the road. The trail HMMWV driven by SGT Blankenship with SFC Leipheimer as the vehicle commander recovered Pena, quickly loaded him on their hood and then cleared the kill zone. With three disabled vehicles, Dolge had nine passengers needing seats in his six remaining vehicles. He did not have that many seats because every HEMTT and PLS had the Dukes and radio mount installed on the doghouse inside the truck. So the captain tried to get his battalion at Kandahar on the tactical satellite radio but it was not working. He finally reached them on the Iridium cell phone and told them he had one killed and no wounded. They in turn called the British at Bastion to scramble Apache gunships.

The battalion tactical operations center started coordinating fixed wing support as well. Eventually the convoy received the two British Apaches, a US Blackhawk an A10, two British GR8s, a B1 bomber and a French Mirage. Dolge called the medevac for Pena and at the same time planned to load those other nine guys into the helicopter. The British sent a medevac helicopter from Bastion but it could not find a landing zone free of enemy fire, so it left. The tactical operations center decided to send the British Quick Reaction Force, a large company team stationed at Bastion with two Chinooks. The company had to go through the entire NATO channels to scramble, which took about six hours. In the meantime, Dolge and his driver, SPC Ben Bese, controlled all the aircraft on station.

The French Mirage arrived first, but the convoy could only talk to the pilot on FM radio, which meant the plane had to fly very close to the ground. Its inability to stay low and slow limited its ability to stay within range of Dolge's radio, so the plane just ended up leaving. As soon as the Apaches arrived, the enemy's rate of fire decreased significantly. The enemy ceased firing when the Apaches came in for strafing runs, but when they circled around, the convoy received fire from about 200 meters away. As gunships came for another strafing run, the enemy fire stopped again. The pilots told Dolge to mark the targets, so he had his M203 gunner fire smoke rounds and a couple of his SAW gunners fire tracers at the area where the enemy fire came from as the Apaches approached. The Apaches then fired its mini guns and the drivers saw a puff of pink mist (blood splatter) and the enemy fire ceased from that direction, but the convoy then took fire from 100 meters to the left and repeated the technique. The fire in that direction ended but started up again from the initial position. About that time the A10 Warthogs arrived overhead.

The drivers received most of their enemy small arms fire from the buildings, then a tree line and another compound to their left (east). At one point, a donkey would walk out from around the corner of that compound and each time that donkey came out they would receive fire from that general area. After two or three times Dolge's gunner, SPC Nathan Toews, finally realized, "Every time that donkey comes out, we get shot at. Let's kill that fucker." So Dolge lined up as many people as he could and when the donkey came out everybody unloaded on it, turning it into small chunks of meat. To no surprise they stopped taking fire from that corner.

By that time, Dolge was talking to the A10 pilots with his Iridium cell phone while his driver, SPC Bese, talked to the Apache pilots on the radio. About the time they had killed the donkey, Bese asked the Apache pilot if he could see anything in the compound where the donkey had come from. The Apache pilot saw a bunch of people running around there, so he fired 20 to 30 rounds into that little compound. Consequently, the convoy stopped taking fire from that direction. They then received fire from the tree line and Bese instructed the Apache to lay some fire into the tree line. It swooped down from far away and fired 40 to 50 rounds from its cannon and two or three rockets into that tree line in one pass. The

Apache cleared out a good 150-meter wide section of that tree line. The convoy only received random fire from there after that.

Again, Toews realized they were taking fire from a door of a building. So Dolge pulled out his last magazine, which he had loaded with tracers, and fired three-round bursts into the building. It then began to smoke and they no longer received fire from there either.

During the fight, the remaining medic, Smith, ran to the HMMWV while still taking fire, opened up the back, dove inside, searched around and then came running back around with a white box. Dolge thought he might be bringing IVs or something important, but the medic ran up to Dolge and handed him a pack of cigarettes, "Here sir, you want some?" To which the captain replied, "Okay, great." Smith then went to every person in the convoy and handed them a pack of cigarettes. That day everyone was smoking.

About 1700 hours the British quick reaction force landed 300 to 400 meters to the north in two CH47 Chinooks. Two platoons circled around to the west to secure that area while one platoon headed directly to the convoy. Dolge talked with the company commander and they agreed the hill mass just to the west was a good location to move everyone to for cover. They set up their four or five 60mm mortars in the low ground and their 7.62mm general purpose machineguns around the perimeter with two of the M1114s on the corners with the heavy machineguns pointed towards Regay and the third one on the backside oriented towards a more sparsely populated portion of the line. But before they left, they had to recover as much of the equipment from the disabled vehicles as they could.

The HEMTT wrecker had burnt to the ground along with all the sensitive items, Dukes and radios. The British ignited a thermite in the wrecker to ensure there was nothing the enemy could salvage. An Apache also fired 15 to 20 rounds into the wrecker and the PLS to complete the destruction. Consequently they lost the Dukes in both trucks, three of four radios, and a couple pair of night vision goggles. The burning PLS also had their QUADCON, the Mk19, the .50 cal, two basic loads of ammunition for all the weapons, a couple of spare radios, extra laptops, and everyone's personal gear in it. At the end of the day, 14 of the 28 crew members owned nothing more than what they were wearing. Fortunately,

some had their assault packs in another vehicle.

The British called in a medevac and a Chinook but neither could land. The Chinook however brought in some water, tossed it out and then flew away. Every truck had three days of supply of water; but through the course of the day, the soldiers had drunk about two days' worth of it. Dolge's uniform was soaked from head to toe with sweat. Water was dripping from his body armor and he had drunk 12 bottles of water in six hours. Once in the perimeter, the soldiers requested spare parts, tires, fluids, and more ammunition. Most of the vehicles leaked oil and the PLS leaked hydraulic fluid. They patched the hoses with duct tape. Two US Blackhawks flew in with tires and other supplies, but they were not willing to take the casualty at that point. They mistakenly brought HEMTT tires and not PLS tires, which were useless; so the drivers just slashed them and threw them into the desert.

Because they did a light insertion, the Brits called in two more Chinooks with food and water. The quick reaction force did not know how long they would stay, but decided they would remain long enough to need some more food, water and ammunition. Once Dolge's trucks pulled up, they threw their ammunition on the trucks, and radioed back for more ammunition. They decided to remain there until the sun came up then move further west.

About midnight, Dolge was sitting in his HMMWV typing up an email message on the Blue Force Tracker. Toews was leaning on the hood and the assistant gunner, SPC Daniel Colon, was sitting at the back left tire of the vehicle bathing himself with baby wipes. Suddenly an RPG exploded on the front left headlight tossing Dolge into the back seat and knocking Toews down. Toews right eye was hanging out on his cheek and small shrapnel had peppered his face, but he had a big gash to his head. Colon received a big gash in his neck all the way to his Adam's apple, which was bleeding severely but easily dressed. He also received a deep gash in his right thigh and a little piece of shrapnel in his stomach because his body armor was open. Toews was unresponsive and had very labored breathing. The bone in his right wrist looked as if it was severed, but not bleeding very much, as if a piece of shrapnel swiped him. He also had a big gash in his leg, so they called over a British medic since the convoy medic was on the other



Blackhawk scouting route for convoy of PLS trucks. Photo courtesy of CPT Michael Dolge

side of the perimeter. They took him by litter to the middle of the perimeter and had to pry his grip finger by finger to let go of the M16. They patched up his injuries and then cut off his body armor to check for other injuries but found none.

They called in another British Chinook, which arrived with more supplies and then left because two US Blackhawks were coming in behind them. They put the wounded driver and assistant gunner on the medevac helicopters with six other drivers which flew off. One of the Blackhawks flew back to FOB Price with its passengers, set it down long enough to pick up some gas and returned. The British Apaches then swapped out with American Apaches for the rest of the night.

When the sun came up, Dolge only had three M1114s and his was less than mission capable with one flat tire and the driver's side of the windshield blacked from the blast. All four of his PLS trucks had some form of damage and could not travel far on their own. They departed at a walking pace while the Blackhawk scouted a route ahead of them and the British light infantry walked beside the seven trucks across the

desert. Because his new driver could not see out the windshield, Dolge and his new gunner, SGT Trueblood, had to tell him where to drive. They stopped on a rise of ground and another British Chinook delivered more food and water, which they shared with the Americans, because their Meals Ready to Eat (MRE) had burned up with the PLS and the cans of water and fuel had exploded from the impact of rounds.

Dolge tried to coordinate with Kandahar or Musa Qala for an aerial escort from there to Price or a ground-based escort either from Price to take them back to Price or from Musa Qala to escort them south. The captain felt with all his vehicles disabled, his gun trucks had lost their ability to maneuver and if they received another attack, he would need additional support. The task force finally said it would send an infantry company with a route clearance patrol to lead them to Price. The infantry would secure a landing zone for the Brits to leave and then they would escort the convoy back to Musa Qala. After 36 hours, the infantry company arrived in HMMWVs with the route clearance patrol but they said they were not going to escort the

convoy because it was not part of their mission set. They were instead heading back into Regay with the route clearance patrol, consolidate the damaged vehicles in one spot and call in close air support to complete the destruction of the vehicles. So Dolge requested some Blackhawks as his escorts. The next morning, 15 June, they received a couple of Blackhawks and completed their journey to Price without any further problems.

They remained at Price for two days refitting and left for Kandahar on 17 June. After nine hours on Highway 1, they arrived at Kandahar and immediately started to perform maintenance on the vehicles. They held a memorial service for SPC Pena while at Kandahar.

Lesson

This early in the Afghan war, military convoys rolled with a one-to-one gun truck ratio, and were still ambushed. Because of civilians killed by mistaken identity or collateral damage, US and allied air cover could not shoot into villages unless they had positive identification of enemy. So the Taliban used the village for cover and the road through the village channeled the convoy into the intended kill zone. Traveling through wadis, convoys were not confined to a strict path except when crossing

fords or going through villages. These choke points became places to expect ambushes, but knowing which one was the kill zone was often unpredictable. Dolge's convoy had no prior intelligence indicating any threat in Regay. The Taliban would continue to attack from villages throughout the war.

The soldiers wanted to blame someone for their misfortune and most of their blame was directed at CPT Dolge since he was their convoy commander. The battalion S3 at Kandahar held an after action review and learned when the convoy left Musa Qala instead of going straight, it turned left. Had it turned at the right location, it probably would have avoided the contact; but in combat the difference between life and death can be as simple as turning left, right or going straight ahead with no hint as to what the right answer is.

If any mistake was made, it was having the vehicles not in the kill zone drive through the kill zone, but that was the policy and would remain the policy during the TK Ambush three years later. As early as 1968, the 8th Transportation Group's Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) stated in the event of an ambush: a. (1) When a convoy encounters sniper fire, an ambush or mines it should KEEP MOVING if at all possible. (2) The security



M1151 of the 277th ASB with Helmand Valley in the background. Photo courtesy of CPT Michael Dolge

forces will be contacted by radio immediately. (3) All vehicles which are beyond the “kill zone” will continue moving toward their destination. (4) If unavoidably stopped in the “kill zone,” personnel must dismount, take up covered and concealed positions, and lay down a heavy volume of fire only on active enemy targets, staying in close proximity of their vehicles. In no case will convoy personnel close with or attempt to pursue the enemy as this will interfere with the tactical reaction plan. Convoy personnel will cease fire upon arrival of tactical security elements to allow tactical vehicles and personnel freedom of movement against enemy forces. Convoy control personnel will insure that traffic begins to move as soon as the tactical situation permits. (5) Those vehicles which have not yet entered the “kill zone” will halt at 100 meter intervals, dismount and defend as described in para 8 (a) (4) above, firing only if the enemy targets are visible. This last point was a lesson the convoys in Afghanistan had yet to relearn.

The battalion determined that once in contact, the soldiers’ actions were good. The crews did everything they could to clear the kill zone, disrupt or destroy the enemy, called in close air support and controlled it well. The high gun truck ratio was still not enough to deter attack. The battalion at Kandahar did not have an accurate manifest of the vehicles in the convoy, so when the convoy asked for PLS tires the battalion thought they had HEMTT LHSs because that was what the battalion had. So the battalion went to KBR and sent out HEMTT LHS instead of PLS tires. They similarly sent ammunition based on the weapons they had and not what the convoy had. They did not have any Mk19s and the convoy did not have any M240s. So when ammunition arrived, the drivers just gave the M240 ammunition to the Brits. They only had phone numbers on their cell phones for Task Force 290-87, but not the British or Special Forces that occupied the nearest FOBs. Unlike Iraq, there was no Sheriff network to coordinate with everyone in the same battle space.

The terrain in Afghanistan was vast and the coalition forces were spread out at great distances. The wide open desert and narrow mountain passes required the convoys to send scout vehicles out ahead to the next terrain feature (usually a rise in elevation) in search of IEDs or possible kill zones. They would provide overwatch for the convoy until it caught up and then

would scout to the next key terrain. Unlike Iraq, the convoys in Afghanistan did not drive through some brigade’s battle space and could expect a quick reaction force in a matter of minutes. Consequently, the convoy commanders had to know how to call in artillery, attack helicopters and direct close air support.

¹1LT Maria Flores and 1LT Leah Mock interview by Richard Killblane at Fort Eustis, VA on 30 January 2008; and CPT Carolyn Trias-DeRyder, Operation Mountain Thrust, *Army Logistician*, Jan-Feb 2008.

²The following narrative is taken from a series of interviews with CPT Michael D. Dolge by Richard Killblane at Fort Eustis, VA on 17 July 2008 and 10 April 2009.

³Flores and Mock interview.

14 April 2007
782nd BSB

With the introduction of a second brigade combat team to the northern part of Regional Command-East, Jalalabad and Salerno became the two logistical hubs run by one brigade support battalion. Inclement weather such as rain, snow or dust storms routinely prevented air operations, which had been the major mode of distribution to many combat outposts. Salerno was in a bowl surrounded by mountains on all sides and a low ceiling prevented aviators from flying out of the bowl although it could distribute to remote combat outposts along the Pakistan border.

With the new requirement for ground convoys, LTC Michael P. Peterson, Commander of the 782nd Brigade Support Battalion, decided to move the hub from Salerno west across the mountain range to FOB Sharana since a paved road connected it with Highway 1 at Ganzi. Highway 1 was the major paved highway through the area from Bagram and would make a good main supply route (MSR). Moving the hub from Salerno to Sharana would also make their hub accessible to Bagram by both land and air.

1LT Marco Oledan (Quartermaster) had responsibility for the long haul convoy out of Sharana, consisting of three gun trucks, either M1114 or the newer and more powerful M1151s, escorting ten to 15 task vehicles.

Every military vehicle except the load handling system (LHS) had a ring-mounted crew-served weapon.¹ Each military vehicle also had a Dukes electronic jammer. Host Nation contract trucks, known as Jingle trucks, would also tuck in with the convoy for protection.

Engagements in Afghanistan were officially called troops in contact (TIC). There were two types of engagements, direct fire (DF) and indirect fire (IDF). The long haul and local haul convoys had run into two direct fire ambushes and the local haul convoy was able to just drive through the kill zone. The ambush that hit the long haul convoy damaged and stopped several vehicles. Because of electronic intercept capability, the enemy had a hard time maneuvering undetected in large numbers, so most ambushes by the summer of 2007 were small in nature. Because of the rarity and simplicity of convoy ambushes in Afghanistan, tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) were still in their infancy.

Probably because the ground convoy operations were fairly new in Afghanistan, the sustainment convoys out of Sharana had not run into any IEDs or been ambushed in the mountains. The few attacks had been initiated with RPGs followed up with small arms fire in the open valley. The enemy usually fired on the convoy from positions 100 to 150 meters up the slope. The current TTP for reaction to contact was to stop in the kill zone, engage and kill the enemy. Convoys also called for close combat aircraft (helicopters) and close



M1114s with Frag 5 doors and Dukes belonging to the 782nd BSB at FOB Salerno. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

air support (fix wing). This aggressive tactic was obviously a product of the airborne attitude of the 82nd Airborne Division. The 782nd convoys did not get hit much but the security patrols were attacked more often. The mission was coming to an end since the 82nd Airborne Division was pulling its people out of the two outposts as they redeployed.

At 2230Z 14 April 2007, Oledan's first convoy from Bagram was ambushed. The destination was an Afghan National Army (ANA) outpost on a route that the convoy had not driven before. The battalion staff had studied the route and the terrain and the S2 had conducted a pattern analysis of the enemy activity in the area. Oledan's ten-vehicle convoy consisted of a HMMWV gun truck up front followed by a task vehicle then a Jingle truck. Oledan decided to let the Afghan contract Jingle truck fall in the convoy for security. One or two tractors and trailers followed the Jingle Truck and the second HMMWV gun truck with the convoy commander followed behind them. A fourth tractor and trailer system followed behind that gun truck and Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers rode in a Ford Ranger behind it. A wrecker and third HMMWV gun truck brought up the tail of the convoy. Every military truck had Dukes electronic jamming device with a radius far enough to cover the host nation truck and ANA vehicle between them.

Direct fire ambushes were not common on military convoys, but route clearance patrols (RCP) came under direct enemy usually initiated to inflict damage to one vehicle and then exfiltrated the area. The Taliban habitually ambushed individual Jingle trucks driving down the road with the intent to scare the drivers away so they can pilfer the cargo.

It was night as Oledan's convoy entered a mountain pass and rising slope on both sides restricted any maneuver off the road. The enemy fired an RPG at the Jingle Truck disabling it then followed up with small arms fire. The Jingle truck came to a halt and the driver ran away thus blocking the road. The two lead trucks did not hear the attack and kept driving as if the convoy was behind them. 1LT Oledan, not hearing the attack wondered why the convoy had stopped. He radioed ahead asking, "Why are we stopped?" The lead vehicle replied they had not stopped. Oledan decided to drive around the truck ahead of him to determine the source of the problem. The road offered little space so they

drove very slowly. It was then he saw tracers fired across the road and muzzle flashes a hundred meters up the slope. He realized it was an ambush.

The tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) was to return fire and clear the kill zone, drop off the task vehicles at a security rally point then have the gun trucks return to the kill zone and engage the enemy until the quick reaction force (QRF) arrived. As the convoy commander's gun truck negotiated its way into the kill zone, the enemy fired flares. Oledan then called asking about injuries. The ANA soldiers jumped out of their Ford Ranger and ran away, blocking the path of the last two vehicles. Oledan radioed the others to drive around. The vehicles followed his out of the kill zone to the rally point a mile and a half up the road. Once he had a hundred percent accountability of his military personnel, he consolidated the convoy and drove away. As they drove on, the last gun truck saw head lights approaching from behind. Oledan feared it was a Vehicle-borne IED (VBIED) and ordered his convoy to speed up while the rear gun truck did an escalation of force with the laser. The vehicle did not stop. It turned out the driver of the Jingle truck had been wounded and hopped a ride with a passing civilian truck. Battalion called and told Oledan to turn around, return to the kill zone and secure the Jingle truck that was hauling ammunition. The quick reaction force and air support was on its way.

Oledan halted his convoy, turned his three gun trucks around and returned to the kill zone just as the close air arrived. The enemy feared close air support and had already exfiltrated the area. Oledan stopped his gun trucks short of the kill zone and saw the burning Jingle truck but saw no enemy fire, so he called the rest of the convoy to join him. They established 360 degrees of security while waiting for the quick reaction force. QRF4 arrived and Oledan joined them in the kill zone with one of his gun trucks but leaving the other with the convoy. He assisted them in a sweep of the area and, judging from the spent brass, discovered approximately 12 enemy fighting positions. Battalion then directed Oledan to destroy the Jingle truck with incendiary grenades. The close air also wanted to help and made strafing runs on the truck. The ANA soldiers finally returned to their Ford Escort, the quick reaction force turned back to where they came and Oledan led the convoy on to its destination.



Jingle Trucks. Photo courtesy of SSG Darian D. George DVIDS

Lesson

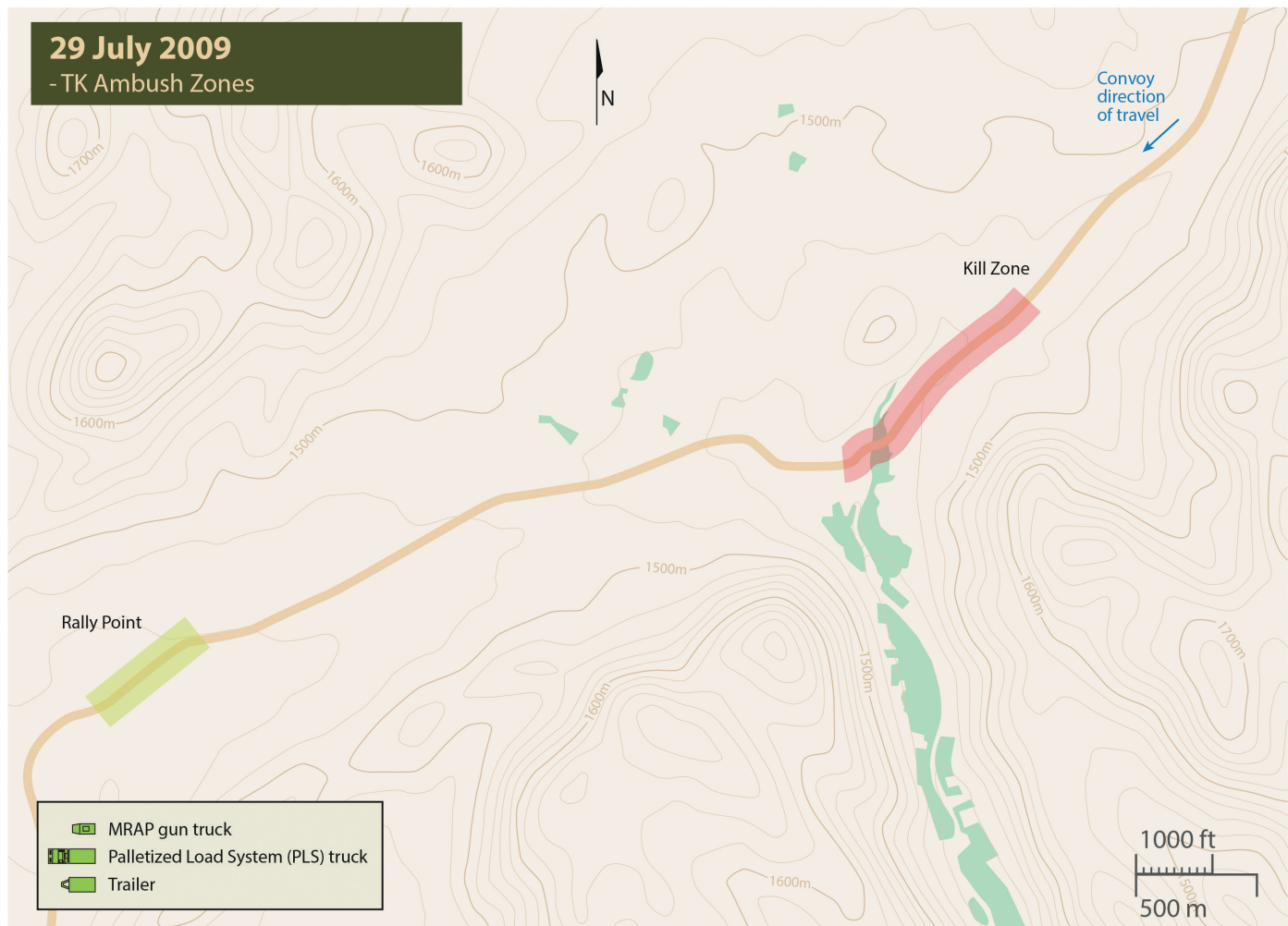
This ambush was very typical of most ambushes in the mountain passes of Afghanistan. The enemy initiated the ambush with an RPG hoping to block the pass with a disabled vehicle and then finish off the rest of the convoy with small arms fire. The enemy kept their distance at about 100 to 150 meters up the slope so as to be able to break contact if their mission failed. They tended to select mountain slopes with a 30 to 45 degree slope.

The policy then was to not to escort host nation trucks because the locals usually knew where the kill zones or IEDs were. If they did fall in with the convoys, it was at the rear and it was also their responsibility to keep up. The convoy usually had Afghan interpreters assigned to them to communicate with locals and any host nation truck drivers.

The lessons Oledan drew from this ambush was that he violated his TTP by traveling a different route. However, this mission was directed from higher so he did not have much of a choice. He felt the driver of the Jingle truck or the ANA soldiers may have tipped off the enemy. He thought it may have been better not to let the

Jingle truck into his convoy. With the need for gun trucks to escort host nation vehicles, this might not have been an option so he would collect the host nation drivers' cell phones. He also had interpreters in the convoy explain the TTPs to the host nation drivers of not stopping in the kill zone but to keep driving. Nonetheless, the other trucks managed to clear the kill zone.

¹This account comes from 1LT Marco Oledan interview by Richard Killblane, FOB Salerno, Afghanistan, 1 March 2008.



TK Ambush, 29 July 2009

286th Combat Support Sustainment Battalion

On 29 July 2009, Taliban guerrillas ambushed a convoy of 286th Combat Support Sustainment Battalion (CSSB) (MN NG) (Task Force Dirigo) in the largest complex attack on an American convoy during the entire Afghan war. The 286th CSSB operated at Kandahar Air Field (KAF) in Regional Command (RC) – South, the southern region of Afghanistan next to the Pakistan border. 1LT Tamara Da Silva’s 1st Platoon, 53rd Quartermaster Company, call sign Outcast, had been detached from its parent company in Bagram and operating out of Kandahar since January 2009. During the cold winter months, the Taliban usually waited across the border in the camps until the weather began to warm. During this lull in attacks, Silva’s platoon became familiar with the terrain and acquired experience escorting convoys. Unlike Iraq, US ground convoys were new to Afghanistan.

Until the summer of 2006, the Coalition Forces had relied on air and host nation “jingle” trucks to deliver cargo throughout Afghanistan. That summer the United States doubled the number of Brigade Combat Teams in country without a reciprocal increase in the number of lift assets. This required the Americans to run ground convoys for the first time during the war. When the Russians had expanded their footprint in Afghanistan, this made them more vulnerable to convoy ambushes. The Russians, however, chose to defend their convoys with tanks and armored personnel carriers. By the time the 53rd Quartermaster escorted a convoy of the 154th Transportation Company into harm’s way, they drove the latest RG31 MRAPs and had tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) battle tested during the last six years of war in Iraq and modified to adapt to the unique terrain of Afghanistan.

The Taliban were not necessarily from the local area although they might rely on local sympathy and support.



Outcast Platoon of the 53rd Quartermaster Company provided security for the convoys of the 154th Transportation Company. Photo courtesy of the 53rd QM Company

During previous ambushes, they tended to attack coalition convoys from the slopes of mountains or from inside villages to negate the effectiveness of coalition air support, which required positive identification to prevent collateral damage to innocent Afghans. During the TK ambush these guerrillas would use both to their advantage in a very well-planned kill zone. While the Taliban made preparations for their spring and summer offensives, this allowed the new American units time to acclimate to the Afghan environment.

In keeping with President Barack Obama's campaign promise to provide greater focus on the war in Afghanistan, he deployed US Marines into Regional Command-South during the spring of 2009. This increase in US forces in the British area of responsibility required the 45th Sustainment Brigade to extend its reach into Regional Command-South with the 286th CSSB.

The 154th Transportation Company (PLS) had originally deployed to Iraq in 1 January 2009 where it performed convoy escort for three months. In keeping with his campaign promise, President Obama shifted units from Iraq to Afghanistan. The 154th was alerted

to deploy to Afghanistan in March and arrived on 15 April. It provided the line haul capability for the 286th CSSB while Silva's platoon of the 53rd Quartermaster Company provided its escorts. The 154th PLS had ironically trained to escort convoys in the deserts of Iraq, but was not prepared for the mountainous terrain and deep wadis of Afghanistan. In the desert of Iraq, high ground was any overpass or two-story house; but in Afghanistan, the rugged terrain provided the ideal kill zones.

Mission to TK

The mission to Tarin Kowt was far from routine. The 286th CSSB tasked the 154th Transportation Company to provide a convoy of 15 PLS trucks escorted by seven RG31 MRAP gun trucks from the 53rd Quartermaster Company to deliver construction materials to FOB Tarin Kowt (TK), between the Oruzgan and Kandahar Provinces on 27 July. 1LT Da Silva would be the escort commander and SSG Anthony Williams, 154th Transportation Company, the mission commander, and 1LT Latonya Polk rode along because there was a shortage of co-drivers. She was originally a platoon

leader in the 154th Transportation Company but was filling in as the acting commander and added her name to the manifest as a truck commander the day before the mission.¹ The 90th Maintenance Company provided the extra wrecker and the 149th Transportation Company provided the two drivers for a PLS.

The escorts did not even have a day between their last mission and this new one. On 26 July, the escort platoon had completed a split mission. Da Silva and a staff sergeant took one mission to Wabak while her Platoon Sergeant, SFC Bryon Mills, and another sergeant took a convoy to Ramrod and then returned around 2100 hours. The entire platoon had been on the road until 2100 hours the night of 26 July. SFC Mills felt because of their level of experience in country, they had enough time to prepare for the mission to TK the next day. Because of the recent surge in troops, they were used to the high operational tempo anyway. They had enough time to get eight hours of sleep, draw equipment and vehicles.² SGT Brandon Lee Burks, however, felt that for a mission of that magnitude (an unfamiliar and dangerous route), they needed more time to prepare.³

Similarly, some PLS drivers were caught by surprise. A PLS platoon of the 154th Transportation Company had previously been sent to FOB Leatherneck where it was attached to the 100th Brigade Support Battalion for an anticipated two-week mission that lasted a full month. Some of the soldiers like SGT Young Kim had returned to Kandahar on 26 July just to pick up more

uniforms and were asked if they would go out on the TK mission. They accepted.⁴

In planning for the convoy, SSG Williams was briefed that the major threat was an area going into FOB Frontenac known as IED Alley. Beyond Frontenac, Route Bear turned into an unimproved road that was supposed to be safe all the way to TK, but it was an uphill drive and the PLS trucks were also pulling trailers.⁵ 1LT Polk, however, had heard that any convoy heading to TK was always hit by the enemy.⁶ Special Forces, British, and other coalition partners had been the only ones to complete a mission to TK. Red Horse had tried it twice but was hit both times, turned around and returned. Silva's Platoon Sergeant, SFC Mills, also knew the route was "historically hot" and every unit that had driven it was hit and had soldiers medevaced out of there. SGT Mario E. Saenz was the NCOIC of the lead gun truck and had spent a week studying the route because they had not driven it before. He learned from Special Forces at Kandahar that the evening was the best time to travel the route, because they had never experienced enemy contact during those hours. However, the 53rd preferred to travel during the daytime so they could assess the local women and children activity as an indicator of an ambush. Special Forces warned of the choke points and not to go in with a large convoy. They also warned there was no Afghan National Police or Army along the route, but only a private Provincial Security Force manning checkpoints.⁷



PLS trucks of the 154th Transportation Company pulling trailers with RG31 MRAPs of the 53rd Quartermaster Company as escorts on the return trip from Tarin Kowt. Photo courtesy of the 53rd QM Company

The primary threat to convoys had been IEDs buried in the road followed up with small arms fire. The Afghans, fortunately, did not have the energy formed projectiles (EFP) that penetrated armor. The enemy tended not to stand and fight but just seemed to feel out the convoys and tried to inflict casualties. Probably because of the high gun truck to task vehicle ratio (1:1 a year before and recently 1:2) the enemy rarely ambushed on US convoys. Most convoy ambushes resembled the attacks on Route Clearance Patrols, where the enemy would detonate an IED then fire small arms and RPGs at the vehicles from concealed positions 100 to 150 meters up the slope of a low mountainside or from a nearby village.

The Taliban had not attacked Afghan convoys until they ambushed a 17-vehicle Jingle truck convoy on its way to Wazi Qua in May 2008 probably because the Provincial Governor rode on it. The Taliban destroyed the fuel trucks and two trucks carrying MRAPs. Afghan convoys were soft targets simply because they did not have gun truck escorts, thus making them easy targets. In June 2008, the Taliban massacred an entire 60-plus Jingle truck fuel convoy heading from Kabul to Warduk. It took several days to clean up the mess on the road and scared the host nation drivers from driving until they hired escorts. The Taliban had demonstrated they were capable of complex convoy ambushes but only against soft targets.

Route clearance patrols (RCP) swept the roads for IEDs, but they followed a schedule that did not always match with the convoy's schedule and route. Regardless, each vehicle in the US convoy had Dukes electronic jammers to jam the radio frequencies detonating IEDs. The convoy speed was 15-25 kph, but reduced to 5 kph during contact and their battle drills still required the convoy to push through the kill zone.⁸ Because of the distances between camps, quick reaction forces (QRF) were not as available as they were in Iraq, so convoys had to rely on close air support, helicopter gunships and indirect fire in case of attack. The lead gun truck acted as a scout vehicle searching for signs of IEDs and kill zones out ahead of the convoy. The next gun truck set the pace for the convoy and provided security for the lead or scout gun truck. With nearly a 1:2 gun truck ratio, a gun truck was placed between every two or three task vehicles.

This convoy would haul A2 rubber flooring matting, each weighing over 2,700 pounds each, six on a trailer and six on a PLS; but if the drivers kept up their momentum, they could climb the grade with no problems.⁹ Because of his concern about pulling the heavy loads uphill, SFC Mills discussed the route with Special Forces. They said that due to the incline in some areas, they had to stop their vehicles and chain a gun truck to the local national truck to pull it up the hill.



Afghanistan offered a variety of terrain. Photos courtesy of the 53rd QM Company



The PLS trucks fortunately could switch to low transfer and pull their loads up the inclines, but Da Silva and Mills feared the Taliban would ambush the convoy at one of those inclines where they would have to slow down. They also had a concern with the shortage of backing pins, without which the driver could not back up the PLS without jackknifing the truck and trailer. Even if they could back up, the convoy had no alternate route.¹⁰

Departure from Kandahar

The soldiers arrived at the motor pool around 0600 hours on 27 July. Since the gun trucks were running every other day, the crews did a clean sweep of their weapons the night before and also that morning along with a systems check, radio check and weapons check. The leaders inspected the soldiers' personal equipment to make sure they had everything. At 0800 hours, they held the convoy brief, manifest and roll call.¹¹

There were multiple indicators of a possible attack.

Prior to departure, the convoy received a report from the 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB) that an aerial surveillance team observing an area had noticed four perfect squares cut out of the road. There was another report that 11 Afghan men were walking along the route placing rocks, but they were not sure if they were marking the road for upcoming construction or an ambush. Da Silva contacted the 286th CSSB at Kandahar and informed them of the intelligence reports. The battalion acknowledged and the convoy would still continue the mission. Probably the best indicator was when the local Afghan drivers learned of the destination, all of them took off.¹²

Start point time was set for 1000 hours. The mission to TK included 15 PLS trucks, seven gun trucks, and two wreckers with over 60 personnel. They were supposed to escort local national trucks that day but the Afghans had refused to go. The order of march had Gun Truck 1 as the scout gun truck followed by Gun Truck 2 (lead gun



truck), then PLS 1-3, Gun Truck 3, PLS 4-6, Gun Truck 4, HEMT Wrecker, PLS 7-9, Gun Truck 5, PLS 10-12, Gun Truck 6, PLS 13-15, HEMT Wrecker, and Gun Truck 7. As soon as the convoy was about to depart, indirect fire hit the FOB about 400 meters from the convoy, and then the convoy continued the mission.¹³

Along the route, the PLS trucks had difficulty negotiating the dry river beds.¹⁴ The loads kept shifting with every bump or turn even though they traveled at a slow 5 mph. When they came to a hill, the mechanics told the drivers to downshift into low gear to climb up it; but some tried to climb in high gear, which bogged them down. After the convoy passed FOB Frontenac, Route Bear narrowed to the width of one and a half vehicles so on-coming traffic would have to stop to allow the other to pass in the opposite direction. At the wadi, they had trouble negotiating the turn up the bank and had to back up, then go forward, and back up again to climb the hill.¹⁵ One of the PLS drivers had to stop his vehicle, dismount and ground guide the other PLS around to make sure the trailers did not break while making the turn. The wreckers also had to pull a couple of PLS trucks up the hill. This process took about an hour.¹⁶

During the trip, the gunner in Gun Truck 5 spotted an Afghan beside the road, filming the convoy with his cell phone. SGT Brandon Lee Burks, truck commander, asked Da Silva for permission to dismount. SGT Burks and his assistant gunner dismounted and then confiscated the cell phone. He initially had trouble figuring out what buttons on the cell phone to push because they were written in Arabic, and then he watched the video. The first video revealed two men

talking in a pasture. The second video filmed the convoy showed the spacing of vehicles, bumper numbers, vehicle tires, and fuel tanks. The third video contained footage of insurgents planting a pressure-plate IED. So Burks texted Da Silva on his Blue Force Tracker (BFT) they had picked up some good intelligence. Other than that, the journey seemed relatively safe.¹⁷

It took 14 hours to reach TK, so the convoy did not arrive until around 0200 hours on 28 July, becoming the first US sustainment convoy to reach TK.¹⁸ SSG Ronnie Biggers remembered the trucks were nearly out of gas by the time they reached their destination.¹⁹ The 286th CSSB planners had estimated the Outcast convoy traveling at a steady 30 mph would reach TK at 1600 hours, download and depart the following morning at 0900 hours but did not take into consideration the elevation and terrain. However, due to late arrival and that the receiving unit was not prepared to download the trucks, the battle space owner insisted Da Silva contact MAJ Tikem and ask to stay one more day until they downloaded the 15 PLS trucks.²⁰

While she did this, SGT Burks turned the cell phone over to 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade but they did not have time to properly interpret the video before the convoy rolled back out. The video did heighten their concerns about an impending attack on the return trip. The S-2 of the 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade provided some additional information that a Dutch convoy had been ambushed along the route three days earlier and had to turn back. It had taken them two and a half days to reach Kandahar, and Da Silva's convoy had seen their burnt out HET trailers on the way up. The S-2 of the



Return trip from Tarin Kowt with empty trailers. Photo courtesy of the 53rd QM Company

286th CSSB had failed to inform their convoy of this.²¹ The only thing SSG Williams remembered from the threat briefing was a British truck had been blown up during the last 24 hours. The route to TK had been considered safe because most units traveled at night, so the intelligence community did not know what the threat was like during the day.²² Because they anticipated increasing danger on the return trip, 1LT Da Silva and SFC Mills preferred to push out on schedule with little to no sleep, so as not to allow the enemy another day to prepare kill zones. They discussed this with their soldiers but, nonetheless, their start point time was pushed back to 0700 hours on 29 July. So they spent 28 July downloading their trucks.²³

While waiting, the drivers conducted an after action review with the brigade commander and that was when they finally saw the video on the cell phone. Prior to departure on 29 July, SFC Mills met with Special Operations Forces to gather more intelligence about the route, which identified one Known Area of Interest (NAI) - a canal zone north of Kandahar City just prior to Frontenac. Special Forces stated they traveled Route Bear at night and told Mills that there had been no significant activities from Frontenac to FOB Tarin Kowt. Special Forces acknowledged the provincial security in the hills were friendly. Mills said he had a “warm and fuzzy” feeling regarding the route from the Special Forces.²⁴

They would have preferred to schedule a route clearance patrol to sweep the route of IEDs before they drove down it; but the Engineers planned route clearance patrols two weeks out, and a route clearance patrol had not operated north of Frontenac during the last two

weeks. Regional Command-South dictated additional moves, so they would need a Level 1 Contingency Operation (CONOP) to schedule another route clearance patrol. Convoys, however, had a greater need for route clearance patrols than air weapons teams. A route clearance patrol traveled at 5 kph through known areas of interest; and even though they had the Husky vehicle-mounted mine detectors, Task Force Thor admitted that 80 percent of all IED discoveries by a route clearance patrol were visual. So the Outcast convoy would have to rely on their own eyes to spot IEDs.²⁵

Regional Command-South did not have a common operating picture of the threat. The Kandahar Intelligence Fusion Center (KIFC) was disconnected between IED/air weapons team/route clearance patrol and all other intelligence assets. Besides CPT Savoie was a newly assigned 45th Sustainment Brigade liaison to Regional Command-South for route clearance patrols and air weapons teams.²⁶

Departure from TK

The delay at TK actually gave the enemy plenty of time to select and prepare their kill zone and, unfortunately, the convoy had no alternate route. It would have to travel back along the same route, keeping in mind the enemy had observed which areas the trucks had difficulty negotiating and where the gun trucks pulled over to provide overwatch. The enemy planned accordingly and then waited.

The Outcast soldiers arrived at the motor pool two hours prior to departure, as usual, to inspect and prepare their trucks for the mission. Then at 0800 hours,



Wrecker hooking up to PLS. Photo courtesy of the 53rd QM Company



Outcast convoy showing the dispersion of the first four gun trucks. Photos courtesy of the 53rd QM Company

the trucks closed up to move to the front gate where it encountered maintenance issues. PLS 433's starter did not work, so SGT Todd Wilkens hooked it up to SGT Kee's wrecker from the 98th to tow it back. The crew, SPC Roper and SPC Williams, rode in other vehicles. PLS 14 remained at TK so the two soldiers from 149th Transportation Company flew back to Kandahar.²⁷ The air brakes on PLS 433's trailer locked up so SGT Wilkens managed to get them unlocked causing the convoy not to depart until 0910 hours – ten minutes late.²⁸

On 29 July, the Outcast convoy of 22 vehicles returned from FOB Tarin Kowt along the same exact route, MSR Bear, to FOB Frontenac.²⁹ Order of march when ambushed:

- Gun Truck 1 (scout gun truck)
(SGT Saenz, Osborne, Weidel)
- Gun Truck 2 (lead gun truck/pace setter)
(Palacios, Garcia)
- PLS 301 (SSG Williams)
- PLS 312
- PLS 313
- Gun Truck 3 (convoy commander)
(1LT Da Silva, Lewis, interpreter)
- PLS 425 (SGT Kim)
- PLS 438
- PLS 316
- PLS 308 (Biggers)
- Gun Truck 4 (SGT Hattock)
- PLS 119

- PLS 436
- Gun Truck 5 (Burks)
- PLS 305 (1LT Polk)
- PLS 434
- Gun Truck 6
- PLS 118
- PLS 120
- HEMT Wrecker 130 (SGT Wilkens)
- HEMT Wrecker 502 (Kee)
- Gun Truck 7 (asst convoy commander) (SFC Mills)

SGT Saenz was the NCOIC of Gun Truck 1 that led out as the scout vehicle. SSG Williams followed in the lead PLS 301. 1LT Da Silva rode in Gun Truck 3 and 1LT Polk was in PLS 305, right behind a Gun Truck 5. SFC Mills rode in Gun Truck 7, the last vehicle in the convoy. SGT Kee's wrecker started out in the middle of the convoy but it did not have the power to haul the PLS,



Afghan National Army check point.

so SGT Wilkens hooked the PLS up to his wrecker and Kee's wrecker fell behind Wilkens' in the rear of the convoy.³⁰

The convoy passed through two towns without incident and then came upon an Afghan National Army (ANA)³¹ check point. The ANA soldiers had strung a rope across the road to stop traffic. Gun 1 then called 1LT Da Silva in Gun 3 forward. The guards reported the ANA had been in contact with the Taliban all morning up on the ridgeline. Da Silva then informed everyone in the convoy of the situation and also notified Dirigo tactical operations center. The tactical operations center informed them that a route clearance patrol could not make it out there for two weeks; and since the convoy could not turn the PLS trucks and trailers around in that narrow road, their only choice was to continue the mission or camp on that road for two weeks. Everyone pretty much agreed to "Charlie Mike" (continue the mission). Because the 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade had wanted their rubber floor matting; in return, they provided air cover from Kandahar to TK and back. However, since the helicopters had consumed fuel circling around in search of the enemy, the convoy had to wait for the helicopters to refuel and return before it could continue.³²

The convoy then departed Tarental and turned onto Route Bear, a route not normally traveled by US personnel. Route Bear was unimproved the entire length to Kandahar dotted with small villages with not a lot of civilian traffic. Along the way, Da Silva noticed some very clean looking civilian farmers with long beards in white who just seemed out of place watching the convoy. The convoy had one breakdown prior to reaching the ANA check point. One flat rack came off of the PLS, which they had to recover and also had one flat tire, which took about an hour. The convoy was in the vicinity where they confiscated the cell phone and they did not see any civilian population on the road or playing - an indication of impending danger.³³

ANA Check Point – Decision Point

At 1201 hours, an unconfirmed intelligence report from MIRC Chat claimed insurgents waited ahead along with multiple mines and IEDs. Task Force Kandahar, Task Force Thor and Task Force 72 were contacted to request route clearance assets after being informed by



The convoy drew fire from this wadi and village to their left.

ANA of IEDs ahead of them in the road. Task Force 72 was the only source that might be able to help so they began initial coordination. Outcast was trying to get positive identification of the threat so an OH-58 Kiowa conducted a reconnaissance of the threat area.³⁴

Around 1300 hours, approximately 30 miles from Frontenac, SGT Saenz saw an ANA soldier waving for the convoy to stop so he had Gun 1 stop on the road.³⁵ SGT Saenz and his driver, SPC Dana S. Osborne, saw the ANA soldier pointing ahead of him making a hand motion of shooting. Saenz then called his convoy commander to come up with the interpreter to find out what was going on.³⁶ Da Silva's Gun Truck 3 stopped 75 feet behind Gun 1, and then CPL Robert W. Lewis, assistant gunner, and the interpreter dismounted to talk with the Afghan soldier.³⁷ The Afghan translated that all ANA check points along the route had been attacked and overrun by the Taliban all morning so the road was closed to civilian traffic, and the ANA had been in contact with an estimated a battalion-sized Taliban element for several hours. Da Silva could see the Taliban on the mountain east of her position, the ANA on a low ridge and hear gun fire behind the convoy indicating a large engagement area.³⁸

Da Silva relayed this information back to the rest of the convoy and both Saenz and Da Silva radioed for the Kiowa to fly around to pinpoint the Taliban location, but the air cover could not positively identify any Taliban on the ground. The fire fight between the Taliban and the ANA appeared to have halted when the Kiowa flew over. Not only that but the air support was for the convoy and it did not want to fire a few hellfire missiles in case the convoy might run into an ambush later. The pilot

recommended the convoy continue the mission because the contact appeared to be taking place between the Taliban and the ANA, not a threat to the convoy.³⁹ The Kiowa then flew back to refuel while the convoy waited for its return.⁴⁰

SGT Burks in Gun 5 believed this was a deliberate delaying tactic and the Kiowa also believed that enemy contact on the hilltop was intended to delay the convoy to provide the Taliban up ahead more time to prepare the kill zone.⁴¹ This, and because the area where they had confiscated the cell phone was completely empty of people, they knew they were going to get hit.⁴²

The ANA soldier stressed the enemy was out there and also warned there was a possibility of IEDs on the road ahead. Da Silva contacted the 286th Battalion to inform them about the contact and possibility of IEDs. The 286th Battalion tactical operations center confirmed the threat and asked for a route clearance patrol, but it was denied unless the threat could be identified. The next sweep along that route was not scheduled for two weeks.⁴³ The narrow road was about the width of the PLS trucks, so without the backing pins there was no alternate route, and there was no way to turn around, so they were committed to going through. The drivers heard small arms fire coming from the rear of the convoy so, as the convoy pushed forward, they thought they left the fight behind them. 1LT Da Silva consulted with her platoon sergeant, SFC Mills, as to what they should do. Mills told her it was her call if she wanted to push forward. He reminded her they had air cover and all their battle systems (electronic counter measures) were a go. She then asked the crew of the scout gun truck and SGT Saenz recommended they continue the mission, "Let's get home." So Da Silva decided to push forward until they had some kind of positive identification on the IED threat.⁴⁴

After about half an hour to an hour wait, Da Silva informed the drivers of the situation, that she had been in contact with Dirigo Base (286th CSSB) and they were going to roll. The other soldiers broke radio discipline exclaiming excitedly, "Hell yeah, let's do this!" She did not poll her drivers as to how they felt but they agreed to push forward. "We all agreed to continue the mission, because that was our mission," confirmed PFC Jose L. Garcia, the Gun Truck 2 gunner.⁴⁵ She warned the convoy to prepare for contact and then the convoy pushed forward.⁴⁶

At 1354 hours, Da Silva reported to the 286th tactical operations center that the enemy contact appeared to have ended and the Kiowa could not positively identify the Taliban position, so she decided to continue the mission until they could positively identify a threat.⁴⁷

Contact

North of Frontenac, Route Bear narrowed into a choke point where the trailers became a liability. The road through the kill zone curved around a hill to the right, then turned left and dropped down into the wadi, where it snaked back up to the right and over another hill and then curved back to the left. The excessive weight of the trucks and trailers made it nearly impossible to turn around, so the convoy proceeded cautiously.⁴⁸

PFC Jeffrey Weidel, the Gun Truck 1 gunner, observed several holes dug in the ground up ahead.⁴⁹ Before they left TK, intelligence had warned of possible IEDs at certain grid coordinates and Saenz plotted them on his Blue Force Tracker. As Gun 1 approached the first one, Saenz sent air support forward to scout the area. The pilot radioed back he had spotted a one-by-one hole dug in the ground and hovered over the area, but did not see anything else. Saenz' scout vehicle then approached the area and stopped about 200 to 250 meters away from the hole. Saenz handed binoculars to Weidel up in the gun turret and had him examine the hole. Saenz then called Da Silva, who asked what he wanted to do. Saenz said he wanted to approach it for a better view. So they drove a little closer where Weidel identified loose gravel around the hole but did not see any wires. Saenz' vehicle then drove around to the left of hole and then approached the location of the next reported IED.

Just two or three miles past the ANA check point, Gun 1 stopped and Weidel spotted a green cell phone on loose gravel in the bottom of another square hole about four to five inches deep on the west side of the road.⁵⁰ The enemy sometimes left cell phones as decoys but the yellow light indicated their Dukes was jamming a radio signal trying to activate the cell phone. Gun 1 reported, "My Dukes is jamming, my dukes is jamming." Gun 1 told Gun 2 to check the hole it as it passed. Gun 2 drove up and saw the same green cell phone in the hole.⁵¹ When Gun 2 passed the cell phone, its Dukes

also jammed the signal.⁵² The next three PLS trucks reported over the radio their Dukes were jamming the signal. As Da Silva's gun truck drove past, she looked down at her Dukes and saw a solid yellow light indicating her Dukes was also jamming the signal.⁵³ Someone was clearly trying to detonate an IED as the trucks passed.

The convoy passed a tree then into the open and there was a green fuel truck that 1LT Polk thought would make a big explosion.⁵⁴ Every vehicle's Dukes jammed the original signal until the last wrecker approached. SFC Mills in the last gun truck was just about to let Da Silva know the convoy had cleared the narrow village when the IED detonated.⁵⁵ SFC Mills came on the radio stating the wrecker had been hit, but SGT Wilkens quickly interrupted, "Break, break, break, this is the wrecker. Yes, we were hit, but are fine to go. Push through!" The wrecker had its Dukes on but the PLS truck it was towing did not, so the IED detonated on the towed vehicle. Right after that Wilkens' radio blacked out because of the explosion. PFC Stewart checked the systems and everything seemed to be working.⁵⁶ After the initial explosion, the convoy picked up speed and heard more explosions in rapid succession as if a daisy chain of IEDs.⁵⁷

Up front Gun Truck 1 rounded a bend and drove down into the valley to a wadi flanked by mountains to



Gun Truck 1 was destroyed by a mine.

Photo courtesy of the 53rd QM Company

their right and left front. On the left, enemy small arms fire hit them from woods in a dry creek bed. PFC Weidel, in the gunners hatch, pointed at something up the mountain and turned his turret forward. As Saenz looked in the mirror he heard an explosion that tossed his MRAP about 15 feet to the side of the trail, blew the M240B out of the gun turret and completely disabled the

vehicle and all communication systems onboard.⁵⁸

The concussion inside the vehicle was so intense it knocked the wind out of Saenz. It felt as if his driver had slammed on brakes. After a few minutes, Saenz caught his breath and then checked his arms and legs for injuries only to discover he had hit his head on the screen and split his chin. He then told his crew to check each other. He knew the vehicle was disabled, but the dirt on windows did not allow him to clearly see out. So he told his gunner to climb back up in the turret, but Weidel had fractured his ribs. Since the M240B was also blown 10 to 15 meters away, Weidel could not pull security, so Saenz had him close the gunner's hatch, and then began pulling out sensitive items in preparation to evacuate vehicle. Saenz destroyed the hard drive on the Blue Force Tracker since they could not cross level it. As soon as Weidel closed the hatch, Saenz saw Gun 2 pull up.⁵⁹

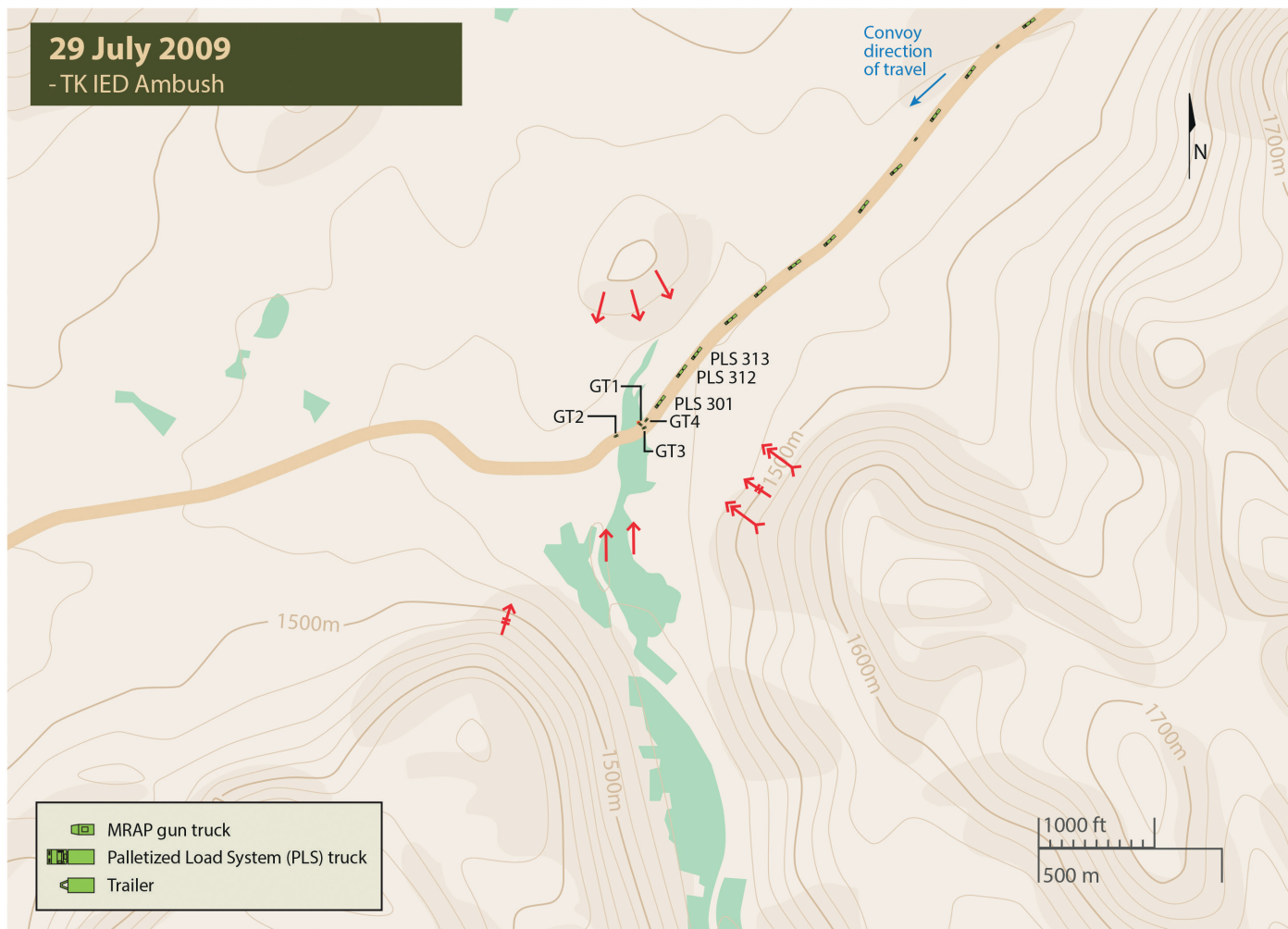
When the crew of Gun 2 saw the explosion and resulting cloud of dust engulf Gun 1 ahead of them, they quickly reported on the radio that Gun 1 was hit. As soon as the dust cleared enough to see, Palacios raced Gun 2 up as a gun wall between the disabled Gun 1 and the enemy (left side).⁶⁰ Da Silva's Gun 3 also pulled up to the contact side behind Gun 2, and Gun 4 stopped right behind Gun 3, boxing in the destroyed MRAP. SSG Williams also had his driver pull up leaving almost no gap between his PLS and Gun 4.⁶¹

After the initial IED detonated, the enemy began pummeling the rear of the convoy with RPGs. One



IED or mortar explosion on the rear of the convoy.

Photo courtesy of the 143rd Transportation Company



exploded in front of SFC Mills, in the last gun truck, kicking up dust and smoke causing his driver to jerk the steering wheel to the left and ram into a big tree. He backed up and tried to push through in time to hear Gun 1 get hit by an IED and become a mobility kill.

The next IED detonated on PLS 434 in the middle of the convoy driven by SPC Kuhn with SSG Ronnie Biggers as the truck commander.⁶² Biggers heard the explosion behind him but did not know what it hit. The driver in the truck behind his said Biggers' trailer had been hit but with not much damage.

When Wilkens' radio in the wrecker finally came back on, he heard Da Silva say Gun 1 had been hit, the front end had been blown off and it was resting on its nose.⁶³ Da Silva instructed everyone in the convoy to push through, but Gun 1 was disabled right at the choke point and the other three gun trucks blocked the road. As the rest of the convoy closed up to the bottleneck, the convoy came to a stop in the kill zone. While the convoy waited, RPGs, mortars and small arms fire

rained down on the trucks.⁶⁴ At 1419 hours, Da Silva reported to Dirigo base the convoy was taking small arms fire and multiple IEDs in the Tanji Valley.⁶⁵

Gun 2, 3 and 4 had formed a box around the disabled Gun 1 and laid down suppressive fire. They had rehearsed this technique so often it was instinctive. Da Silva and her assistant gunner jumped out of Gun 3 to retrieve the soldiers in Gun 1. The entire front end of the RG31 MRAP had been blown away as it was designed to deflect the majority of the blast away from the crew compartment, so the front of the vehicle was resting on its frame. CPL Lewis dismounted from his vehicle and banged on the door of Gun 1. Da Silva opened the driver's door and looked inside to see the crew was stunned by the blast and had moved to the rear of their vehicle. She reverted to her old drill sergeant voice and commanded the soldiers to exit the vehicle. They began to climb out through the driver's door, the only operable door. Da Silva then passed them to her assistant gunner who quickly hurried them into his gun truck through



H58 Kiowa. Photo courtesy of the 143rd Transportation Company

the passenger side door since the enemy fire from the high ground above them prevented them from entering through the rear door. Because of the confined space, the crew of Gun 1 had to take off their body armor. Lewis borrowed Da Silva's M4 carbine and began to return fire but could not see any muzzle flash to aim at. As the others climbed in the vehicle someone accidentally kicked the Blue Force Tracker, disabling it.⁶⁶

Once in Gun 3, Saenz put on a headset to listen to the radio. Air support called asking if they needed a medevac and Saenz replied, "Yes." Saenz did not know he had injured his back until the gunner said he needed more ammunition and when Saenz grabbed ammo can to hand him he could not hold it up.⁶⁷

Da Silva's crew assessed the injuries. SPC Osborne had been thrown to the back of the vehicle by the concussion. PFC Wiedel had broken his ribs. SGT Saenz had injured his back when thrown against the door. SPC Rodriguez, the assistant gunner, had a dislocated shoulder, but the crew put it back into place. Since her Blue Force Tracker did not work, Da Silva could not contact the 286th CSSB, so she requested the Kiowa to call for a medevac for three casualties; SPC Osborne, PFC Wiedel and SGT Saenz.⁶⁸ Although in pain, SPC Rodriguez, the assistant gunner, wanted to remain with the convoy to fight the enemy.⁶⁹

Having successfully recovered the crew of Gun 1, the only disabled vehicle in the kill zone; the subsequent events would disable more vehicles and delay the convoy



The kill zone as it looked from the rear of the convoy.

Photo courtesy of the 143rd Transportation Company



The road headed down into the wadi and back up to the right. Photo courtesy of the 143rd Transportation Company

about six hours in the kill zone while mortar rounds and RPGs exploded around them. The important thing was that Da Silva sounded calm and in control and was making decisions. The danger was that the enemy had set up a very well-planned kill zone. The front part of the



Outcast convoy showing the dispersion of the first four gun trucks. Photo courtesy of the 53rd QM Company

kill zone was in a valley flanked by two mountains. The enemy fire initially came from the mountain slope to the 9 o'clock position in relation to the convoy and there was an abandoned village at the 10 o'clock position in a tree covered valley, so the Kiowa could not engage that area without positive identification of the enemy. The enemy in the mountain, however, was dug in under cover so they could not be seen from the ground or air.

The one-lane road through the wadi was flanked by steep embankments. It was an ideal choke point to trap the convoy and the enemy had seen the difficulty the trucks had negotiating it a couple days before. Fortunately, the trucks behind the bottleneck were not damaged. The enemy had detonated IEDs on the rear PLS and wreckers hoping to block the egress route, but the trucks could not turn around and their tactic, technique and procedure called for them to push forward anyway. The participants divided the fight into three parts: the forward green zone, the "circle of death" in the wadi, and the rear safe haven or green zone.

At first the enemy fire came from up the mountain slope to the convoy's 9 o'clock position and then, as Gun 2 returned suppressive fire it, began receiving fire from its 3 o'clock position. Gun 2's dismounted crew then fired in that direction while the gunner in turret fired at the 9 o'clock threat. The gunners then alternated their fire from one direction to the other.⁷⁰ The radio traffic was congested and the Kiowa could not understand how the fire could be coming from two different directions. So it placed suppressive fire on the ridge line.⁷¹ A ridge line linked the two mountains around the road leading

out of the wadi, allowing the enemy to fire down on the convoy from two sides thus forming a U-shaped kill zone.

After Da Silva cross-leveled the crew of Gun 1 into her vehicle and recovered the sensitive items, she ordered Gun 2 to push through. The IED explosion that destroyed Gun 1 had also damaged Gun 2's antennas so its Blue Force Tracker and Dukes did not work. SGT Armando Palacios did not have the route so Da Silva told him to follow the road.⁷²

Gun 2 drove directly up the hill but, because the disabled Gun 1 blocked the road in the wadi, Gun 3 and 4 made a detour around a tree. SSG Williams' PLS 301 tried to drive around the tree but did not complete the full turn and had to back up, then make a second attempt before climbing the hill. As his PLS was driving through, it triggered a pressure plate IED that detonated under PLS 312. The explosion ejected SPC Ineda Carr, the co-driver of PLS 312, from the truck.⁷³ SGT Young Kim, truck commander in PLS 425, saw PLS 312 get hit by the IED as PLS 313 passed.⁷⁴ At the same time, an RPG hit the back of PLS 312 and that damaged truck blocked the route. Williams saw an RPG explode in front of his truck and another hit the truck behind his. After his PLS 301 cleared the kill zone, mortar rounds started coming in.⁷⁵

Only Gun 2, 3, 4 and PLS 301 reached a flat open stretch of road 500 meters on the other side of the hill, which became the safe haven or green zone; and then someone said, "We're not leaving anyone behind. Get the PLSs out."⁷⁶ Da Silva called for Gun 2 to come back and Palacios replied, "Roger." Palacios turned his gun truck around and the three gun trucks left SSG Williams'



Gun Truck 2 was destroyed after it returned to the kill zone. Photos courtesy of the 53rd QM Company

PLS alone in the green zone for about an hour to an hour and a half. His truck received some “chip shots” but the small arms fire was not as intense as in the kill zone.⁷⁷ Gun 2, 3, and 4 left the safety of the green zone to go back and escort the rest of the convoy out of the kill zone.

Gun 2 followed Gun 3 up over the hill and met three or four PLSs driving up the other side. Gun 2 pulled off to the right to let them pass - the same place it had set up an overwatch position on the drive to TK. Evidently the enemy had anticipated this and Gun 2 detonated a pressure plate IED disabling that gun truck. Da Silva believed insurgents had closely studied the convoy negotiating the wadi two days previously.⁷⁸

Right before Gun 2 blew up, Palacios pulled his throttle down and then radioed his truck was hit.⁷⁹ PLS 313 was heading up the road next to Gun 2 when the concussion of the IED blew SGT Baronsay White's door open and his M16 flew out, so Gun 4 drove up and

recovered it.⁸⁰ Wilkens, in the wrecker, also saw an RPG round explode in front of Gun 4, blowing out its tires, but it could still escort two or three more PLS's out of the wadi.⁸¹ When SGT White's PLS 313 arrived in the green zone, the convoy commander and assistant convoy commander called for him to take charge of the trucks in the green zone, because they were still stranded back in the kill zone.⁸²

Down in the wadi, both air lines of Gun 5 were shot through so the brakes locked up. Burks later admitted had he known his vehicle better, he could have put it in four-wheel drive and driven it even with all the brakes engaged.⁸³ Burks dismounted Gun 5 and provided suppressive fire from behind his armored door all day and his gun truck took a beating. He picked up a .556 mm armored piercing slug that had penetrated his door so he assumed the enemy had M16s. Burks felt the majority of the enemy fire was coming from the buildings



Rally point at the Green Zone. Photo courtesy of the 53rd QM Company



Gun Truck 5. Photo courtesy of the 53rd QM Company

and trees directly to his 9 o'clock position and requested the Kiowa spray the buildings and tree line, but the helicopter would not fire for fear of collateral damage. If he had an Mk19, Burks could have blown the trees down and possibly destroyed the buildings as well.⁸⁴

Meanwhile, Da Silva's Gun 3 drove down into the kill zone to get the rest of the convoy moving again but took a round through the engine and was disabled. Da Silva radioed back for someone to drive up and bump Gun 5 out of the way so they could pull the immobilized PLS 312, and then the other PLS trucks could continue out of



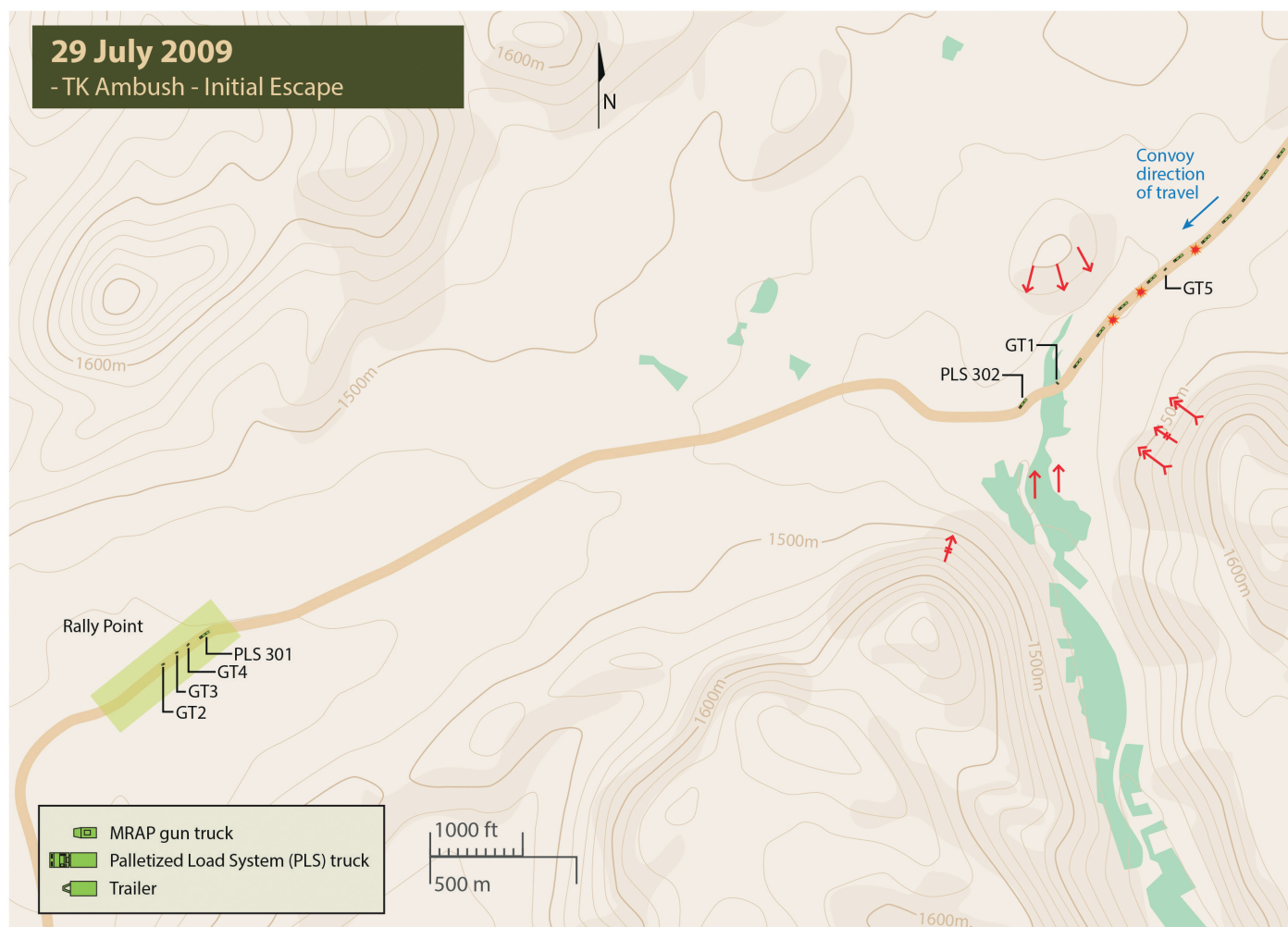
Rear gun truck driving forward around PLS and another gun truck can be seen returning into the kill zone above the wadi.

Photo courtesy of the 143rd Transportation Company

the kill zone.⁸⁵ Her gun truck came to a halt facing Gun 2 just 30 meters away.

Kim's PLS 425 had been stranded behind the disabled PLS 312, as Gun 4 had already escorted PLS 313 over the hill to the rally point. Kim's PLS tried to make a ten point turn to drive around PLS 312; and as soon as Kim's truck passed PLS 312

and reached the top of the hill, he saw the damage to Gun 2. Kim radioed the convoy commander that Gun 2 was damaged. As Kim's PLS 425 was passing around the bend behind Gun 2, an RPG aimed at Gun 2, hit his trailer but it was still able to drive to green zone.⁸⁶



After PLS 312 was destroyed, Gun 4 drove back and picked up its crew. The tires on Gun 4 were shot out but not enough to stop it; but it could turn neither left nor right. Nonetheless, it led the next three PLS's out of the kill zone, but could not return to the kill zone. So the MRAP pulled security with SGT Hattock as the truck commander. For about another hour, Gun 4, PLS 301, 303, and 304 remained in the green zone.⁸⁷

Within the first hour of the ambush, the Taliban had disabled three of the four lead gun trucks and two of the first five PLS trucks and blocked the choke point in the wadi halting the rest of the convoy in or behind the kill zone. This was a very well planned and executed ambush, but the Americans were not finished yet.

Breaking The Bottle Neck

Unable to backup, the convoy had to clear the kill zone to survive. The other trucks still in the kill zone reported taking fire from their 9 o'clock position. Wilkens had advanced his wrecker to within 150 meters of the wadi

where he could see the damaged Gun 1. He also heard Gun 2 and 3 had escorted a PLS out of the wadi and were on their way back, then Gun 2 was disabled and another PLS was also hit by an IED. Three or four PLS trucks had reached the far side but the disabled PLS 312 blocked the road in the wadi. Gun 2, 3 and 5 remained disabled in the kill zone and then time began to drag on.⁸⁸

Up around the bend in the road, disabled Gun 2 was cut off from the rest of the convoy. The enemy fired armored piercing rounds and one penetrated their gun truck and another cracked the driver's windshield. Suffering only a mobility kill, Gun 2 could fight but remained isolated in its position for about two hours laying down suppressive fire switching between firing to the 9 and 3 o'clock directions. Some of the enemy actually advanced toward the trucks in the kill zone and the Kiowa periodically flew over Gun 2, firing hellfire missiles at any insurgents that approached the stranded vehicle.⁸⁹ Because of duration of the fight, the crew of



Kill zone as it looked when the recovery team entered it. PLS 312 blocked the wadi, another PLS was stranded behind it, and the mark where they were dropped. Gun Truck 1 is behind the second abandoned trailer. Photo courtesy of the 53rd QM Company



Rear gun truck passing Gun Truck 1. Photos courtesy of the 143rd Transportation Company

Gun 2 ran out of gun lubricant and improvised by using shampoo and lotion out of a hygiene kit to lubricate their .50-caliber machine gun.⁹⁰

About an hour into the fight, the wreckers began to receive incoming mortar rounds to their 3 o'clock position on the hill. The enemy walked the rounds in. The first one hit on the side of the hill, the second one exploded 40 meters closer and then the third landed 40 meters from the wrecker. After that, additional rounds exploded sporadically around the convoy. From Wilkens' vantage point he could see Gun 5 and two PLS trucks hit by RPGs. Wilkens' wrecker also began receiving small arms fire.⁹¹

1LT Polk's truck was hit on her passenger side and an RPG hit the back side of the truck in front of hers. To the left and right was a ditch or drop off making it impossible to turn around. So Da Silva gave the order to drop trailers and drive out of the kill zone. This required the co-drivers to get out and unhook the trailers, but they were still taking small arms fire so Polk froze and refused to get out of her vehicle.⁹² As an officer, her refusal disappointed Da Silva to say the least.

Behind her, SGT Biggers tired of waiting in the kill zone and knew it would be an uphill battle to climb that hill again hauling the trailer. He knew they needed to get out of the kill zone and there were still vehicles behind him. So SGT Biggers called Polk on the radio, "LT, I'm going to drop this trailer and you and your driver can hook up to this truck and drive the PLS out." They called for the gun trucks to support them. Biggers and his driver then dismounted and disconnected the trailer on Polk's truck, so her truck could hook up and pull one of the two disabled vehicles blocking their path. It was about that time, Gun 7 came up from the rear and pushed Gun 5 out of the way. Polk's PLS could not pull up to the PLS in front of hers. Someone else hooked up to the disabled PLS and pulled it out. Polk's PLS pushed another PLS out of the kill zone. The RG31 had both rear tires blown out and was not going anywhere so Biggers instructed the crew to pull the PLS out because it had all its wheels and could roll a lot better. It was one hour before sunset.⁹³

The two remaining gun trucks in the rear of the convoy had not yet been engaged, so Da Silva called for Gun 6 to come up, but it could not make it past the disabled vehicles. Da Silva then told Gun 7 that

someone had to come and push a couple of vehicles out of the way. After about 90 minutes into the ambush, SFC Mills' Gun 7 drove around the wreckers and reached the wadi where it pushed SGT Burks' Gun 5 out of the way. Driving into the kill zone, Mills could not see who was shooting at them. His gun truck laid down suppressive fire in the direction of where the gunner thought the fire came from, and the Kiowa could not get positive identification either, so it fired into areas the truck drivers pointed out. Once Gun 7 pushed the disabled PLS 312 out of the way, it broke the bottleneck and then escorted the remainder of the convoy out of the kill zone. On the way out, Gun 7 stopped 100 meters short of the disabled Gun 2 after the crew spotted a secondary IED near the disabled gun truck. SGT Palacios' crew collected their sensitive items and ran to Gun Truck 7 who then hauled them to the green zone for medical evacuation. This cleared the path for the rest of the convoy to escape.⁹⁴

After Gun 7 had escorted the lead elements of the convoy to the green zone, Gun 6 continued to escort PLS trucks out of the kill zone. Eventually, the cargo trucks with their long trailers could not fit through the narrow curved road because too many disabled vehicles blocked the way. One by one, Gun 6 pulled up to the contact side of each PLS, so each driver could dismount and unhitch the trailer.⁹⁵

First Medevac

Da Silva wanted to evacuate as many drivers out on helicopters as she could to minimize the risk of them getting hit again riding in other gun trucks. The US Air Force at Kandahar Airfield launched the HH-60 Pavé Hawk medevac helicopters to their rescue. The first medevac was airborne at 1446 hours and could only evacuate two patients. A second medevac flight followed at 1450 hours. At 1451 hours, Da Silva also requested a route clearance patrol (RCP) via MIRC Chat⁹⁶ because the quick reaction force (QRF) could not launch from Frontenac since the route was mined. Due to the current enemy contact, an RCP, which had not been available for two weeks, was then released to clear the route.⁹⁷

The first medevac landed about 75 meters uphill from Da Silva's position because it did not see the enemy fire when it arrived. Gun Trucks 2 and 3 were still taking small arms fire, so when the two Air Force para-



Blackhawk helicopter landing to medevac wounded. Photo courtesy of the 53rd QM Company

rescue men (PJs) exited the helicopter, it then flew off. The two PJs ran up to the disabled Gun 3 and asked if the crew was alright. The PJs then established security and laid down suppressive fire for the helicopter to return. Both the convoy and air weapons team overhead had difficulty locating the well-concealed enemy. The pilots, however, detected fire coming from three sides on the convoy, but had difficulty making positive identification of the source of fire during daylight.⁹⁸

On the ground, Osborne and Wiedel had both removed their body armor because of possible injuries. Da Silva along with Gun 3's driver, PFC Devin Chapman, shielded Osborne and Wiedel with their bodies as they ran to the first helicopter. Da Silva, Lewis, Chapman and Rodriguez carried Saenz on a litter to the helicopter and then strapped him in.⁹⁹

As the helicopter lifted off, the passengers smelled fuel. Evidently enemy small arms fire had caused a leak that forced the helicopter to land on the other side of the mountain to check the extent of the damage. Da Silva did not see the helicopter go down.¹⁰⁰ As soon as the helicopter went down, a Fallen Angel call went out and all available aircraft at Kandahar Airfield deployed to aid the immobile helicopter. Wiedel said, "You could look up into the sky and see Kiowa pilots in their [physical training uniforms] and their helmet."¹⁰¹ An F-18 Hornet was on station conducting a show of force, and AH64

Apache gunships launched from Qalat were also circling overhead.¹⁰² As air support stacked up, Da Silva focused on coordinating with them and her battalion for external support while SFC Mills took charge of the recovery.

Once on the ground, the helicopter crew climbed out to check for damage. Saenz worried about security as his crew had left their weapons with Gun 3, so Saenz asked the helicopter crew for weapons. A PJ pulled a 9mm pistol out of his bag and Saenz asked Wiedel if he could fire, then the PJ handed it to Wiedel. None of injured soldiers exited the helicopter. The area was still hot, so the pilots decided to take off. It flew the wounded to Kandahar where the battalion commander was waiting for them. Saenz told the commander the convoy needed ammunition. Saenz and Da Silva both knew before the ambush the basic load was not enough ammunition if they ever got into a complex ambush, but they were not allowed to take more.¹⁰³

Second Medevac

At 1517 hours, Dust Off 67 (the second medevac) was low on fuel and could not land because of enemy contact. The first medevac, however, had wheels up and was on its way back to Kandahar Airfield. A third medevac was also inbound at 1636 hours.¹⁰⁴ When the second helicopter did land, SGT Williams ran the casualty evacuation. They loaded the first two

injured soldiers and were supposed to load a third, SGT Sanchez, but he was helping load the litters so others mistakenly thought he was part of the aid and litter team. He turned around after loading the injured, walked back with the others and did not get on the bird when it lifted off. He repeatedly told everyone he would be alright.¹⁰⁵ At 1648 hours, SPC Carr and PFC Bryne, were successfully evacuated.¹⁰⁶

Recovery

Meanwhile another convoy (Ghost Rider 7) of the 154th Transportation Company with two wreckers from the 90th Maintenance Company happened to be on a “turn-and-burn” mission¹⁰⁷ from Kandahar to Frontenac to drop off a load of 155mm ammunition. They were about an hour into their download when they read a message on their Blue Force Trackers that the Outcast convoy was ambushed and had suffered casualties.¹⁰⁸

CPT Jennifer Ernest, Commander of the 149th Transportation Company (Port Operations), had ridden along on battlefield circulation to check on her soldiers stationed at Frontenac. While the convoy commander was at the command post talking with battalion, she saw several helicopters circle and land to conduct a hot refuel. Ernest saw a female Canadian pilot climb out

of a helicopter with a shrapnel wound in her leg and went over to ask her what was going on. She told Ernest about the ambush and then proceeded to get medical treatment.¹⁰⁹ SGT Dill Tabota, 154th Transportation Company and lead gun truck commander, also talked with the pilots who said the convoy was receiving heavy small arms fire, RPGs and mortars and they needed someone on the ground to help get that convoy out of the kill zone as soon as possible.¹¹⁰

At 1615 hours, battalion tasked Ghost Rider 7 to assist with recovery operations and the route clearance patrol (Task Force Thor) was expected to arrive within five hours. At that time the second medevac was still on the ground due to contact and one US Air Force para-rescue man was on the ground at the helicopter crash site.¹¹¹

The convoy commander then called everyone together to inform them Da Silva's convoy was ambushed on its way back from TK and there were casualties. They were going out to recover the vehicles, but some were still in the kill zone. The PLS drivers in the Outcast convoy were from the same company as the Ghost Rider convoy, and the wrecker crews were also from the same 90th Maintenance Company. CPT Ernest was getting ready to go with them when the convoy commander told her she did not have to go. Ernest



Recovery Team in the Green Zone. Photo courtesy of the 53rd QM Company

replied that soldiers in that convoy belonged to those of her battle buddy and she wanted to help them. She then called her battalion from the Canadian command post to make sure she could go. She was not alone. All the members of Ghost Rider 7 had friends in that ambushed convoy and were eager to go help them.¹¹²

At 1700 hours, the second medevac had returned to Kandahar Airfield and at 1702 hours, SFC Mills in the green zone sent up a LACE¹¹³ report that his convoy was out of water, but had plenty of ammunition for the M2 and 700 M249 rounds. They still had two possible IEDs in front of the green zone, so the rest of the soldiers hunkered down and waited for the route clearance patrol to arrive and clear the route. Battalion submitted a request to Task Force Pegasus to resupply Outcast with water and ammunition and would extract up to eight combat ineffective personnel.¹¹⁴

Over at Frontenac, the recovery convoy wanted to depart as soon as possible, but had to wait for the route clearance patrol to arrive from Kandahar. While waiting, the convoy commander studied the route with the Canadian explosive ordnance demolition (EOD) team and planned how they were going to recover the convoy. Meanwhile, the drivers loaded their vehicles with extra MREs, water and ammunition for their friends in the kill zone because they knew they would be out.¹¹⁵

With the arrival of the route clearance patrol, the recovery convoy consisting of five MRAPS, six PLS, and one wrecker. The route clearance patrol with a Canadian EOD team finally departed Frontenac at 1809 hours.¹¹⁶ Even though the kill zone was only 20 to 30 kilometers away, the recovery convoy crept along at 5 to 10 mph while the route clearance patrol swept the road ahead of them for IEDs.¹¹⁷

Back in the kill zone, PFC Gacia was added to the medevac list at 1854 hours and two more US Air Force HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopters were dispatched on medevac mission to the kill zone. On lift off from the kill zone, one HH-60G received small arms fire and made a hard landing. The over watch HH-60G landed and evacuated crew and injured drivers.¹¹⁸ SGT Kim remembered the HH-60G was shot down around 1830 hours, just before it turned dark, and then watched it burn all night on the right side of the hill. The sun began to set at 1910 hours and then the enemy firing slacked off. The enemy knew the Americans could see their

muzzle flash in the dark with their night vision devices, so they quit firing after it became dark.¹¹⁹ SGT Kim had not left his vehicle while in the green zone because he still heard small arms fire; but when the firing quieted down, he climbed out with his driver to check on the damage to their truck. He noticed that the two rear tires on his truck were shot out and everything on the bottom of his vehicle was leaking hydraulic and transmission fluids, and fuel. He reported the damage to the convoy commander and she said his vehicle was not going to be able to move. So Kim and his driver collected all the sensitive items and zeroed out the night vision goggle.¹²⁰

SGT Biggers had helped the wrecker recover vehicles and brought up a tire from the kill zone by the time the firing quieted down. Because of the congestion of damaged vehicles in the kill zone, they had to roll a spare tire to the green zone to get an RG31 moving on its own.¹²¹ The wrecker drove up to recover Gun 3 but became mired in the mud. So the PLS, wrecker and Gun 3 blocked the route to the green zone. By that time, they had radio contact with the Ghost Rider 7.¹²² After six hours in the kill zone, SGT Biggers finally reached the green zone where he contacted 1LT Da Silva and gave her his battle assessment of the equipment on his truck. He then waited in the green zone for another three hours before the recovery convoy arrived.¹²³

Even though it had turned dark, the fight was not over. At 1956 hours, MIRC Chat reported that enemy radio chatter indicated insurgents were planning to exploit the downed helicopter and engage any first responders.¹²⁴ At 2044 hours, two additional medics were inbound on a UH-60 Blackhawk to the kill zone and the recovery assets from FOB Frontenac with route clearance patrol and one company of Canadian forces were three kilometers south of ambush site.¹²⁵ Within two kilometers of the kill zone, the Canadians found two pressure plate IEDs and had to clear them. This delayed the recovery convoy even longer.¹²⁶

At 2051 hours, however, the aerial re-supply was five minutes out and SFC Mills coordinated with a PLS in the back of the formation to set up a landing zone for resupply of food, ammo and water.¹²⁷ Prior to their deployment, the company had rehearsed medevacs with actual helicopters. SGT White said his training kicked in and he brought in the medevac and resupply helicopters. He sent a landing zone team out to set up 360 degrees

of security. When the pilots called him to ask where he wanted it to land, he identified where they were and the helicopters landed, dropped the food, water and ammo and then left.¹²⁸ The survivors of the ambush then settled in for a long night and at 2300 hours, RC-South and Task Force Pegasus informed the 286th CSSB it had until dark the next day to decide whether to blow the equipment in place.¹²⁹

When Ghost Rider 7 recovery convoy finally reached the green zone at 2300 hours, it was dark and they saw the burning helicopter about 500 meters to the left of the road. They saw civilian traffic had also backed up behind the convoy. The crews of Ghost Rider realized half the MRAPs and the wrecker of Outcast had recovered as many vehicles as possible and the other half of the convoy was still in the kill zone. All the Outcast vehicles had battle damage and some of the drivers could not exit their vehicles because the doors were jammed. SGT Tabota remembered an RPG had bent the armor on a fellow NCO's PLS, so they had to strap the door and pull it open to get him out. Ghost Rider 7 loaded up what they could from the first half but was told to stand fast and wait for EOD to clear the route into the kill zone.¹³⁰ SPC Aaron Ward, 90th Maintenance Company, did not recover any that night, but gave out two tow bars and changed some tires that were punctured by shrapnel.¹³¹ They could not drive down into the kill zone and recover the rest of the vehicles because the route had not been cleared.¹³²

Realizing they did not have enough assets to recover all the damaged vehicles, Da Silva and the convoy commander of Ghost Rider 7 called back to Kandahar for more. 1LT Joshua Kolleda, executive officer of the 149th Transportation Company, sent out M915s with lowboy trailers with a second recovery convoy (Ghost Rider 5) from the 154th Transportation Company.¹³³ At 0410 hours, the route clearance patrol found a secondary IED and they received an aerial resupply of water and ammunition. By 0525 hours, Ghost Rider 5 departed Kandahar with seven MRAP gun trucks from the 154th Transportation Company, two wreckers from the 90th Maintenance Company and two M915 lowboys. The convoy was beginning its second day in the kill zone.¹³⁴

At 0651 hours, Outcast discovered another pressure plate IED on the passenger side of PLS 312 and a

disabled gun truck was also in the immediate vicinity of the pressure plate. Gun 12 was then forced to evacuate. Around 0800 hours, Ghost Rider 5 finally arrived and the combined recovery teams entered the kill zone to complete the recovery.¹³⁵ The M915s pulled up to the first damaged MRAP and CPT Ernest assisted her soldiers in recovering it. There was still some enemy small arms fire so anyone not involved in the recovery had to climb back into their vehicles and pull security.¹³⁶

While the recovery was taking place, the air cover spotted a Taliban mortar team coming around the mountain to fire on the trucks. While her M915 drivers were chaining down the second disabled vehicles, CPT Ernest remembered hearing on the radio some aircraft were going to fire some Hellfire missiles. When the enemy started to flank the green zone, an F-18 Hornet dropped two 500-pound bombs on the ridgeline and that ended any further enemy attacks.¹³⁷

Around 1030 hours, SGT Kim and his driver were evacuated out on a Blackhawk flying back to refuel. He reached Kandahar 30 minutes later.¹³⁸ By 1645 hours, the recovery mission was complete and everyone returned to Frontenac at 2045 hours, where the battalion commander and command sergeant major were waiting for them with chemical lights to wave them to the refuel point. There, other soldiers of the forward logistics element took over the vehicles so the drivers could get a hot meal. The chain of command then debriefed them and the chaplain was also there for counseling.¹³⁹ The recovery teams waited two days at Frontenac for air support and then pushed to Kandahar with all damaged vehicles divided into two march serials. That ended the mission.¹⁴⁰

Lesson

The 286th CSSB S-2 had estimated the convoy was ambushed by an 80-man enemy force.¹⁴¹ Burks estimated the enemy had about 40 men and two mortar teams. The enemy set up a U-shaped kill zone taking advantage of the high ground surrounding a choke point in the wadi below. The enemy made an excellent selection of the kill zone having seen the trouble the convoy had negotiating it on the way to TK. Everyone agreed the ambush was very well planned. Because of the remote distances between forward operating bases, any convoy in Afghanistan had to be



Gun Truck 2. Photo courtesy of the 53rd QM Company

able to defend itself for several hours on its own with only the aid of air support or artillery.

During the nine - hour battle, insurgents fired approximately 14 RPGs along with detonating multiple roadside bombs and pummeling the convoy with small-arms fire. Some insurgents used armor-piercing rounds. The Taliban fired machine guns and assault rifles from nearby homes, the tree line or from dug-in positions on the mountain ridges. Although the militants were well-covered, many soldiers recalled the enemy had been close enough to see faces. After the battle, several soldiers reported seeing doors in the hillside and speculated hollowed areas in the ground may have held weapon and ammunition caches.

Five MRAPs were disabled, and ten PLS trucks had been hit by mortar rounds. One RPG hit a PLS, and two RPGs hit at the rear of Gun Truck 4, taking out its rear tires with shrapnel. Fortunately for the convoy, several IEDs never detonated. Five soldiers were evacuated that

day and one soldier was evacuated the following day. The MRAPs performed the way they were designed and deflected the blast away from the crews, blowing the front ends away, but saving the crews.

Da Silva, to her credit, asked for support from the maneuver force at TK and also asked for a route clearance patrol, but none were available to support the run back. The convoy had no alternate routes to choose from and even knowing the enemy was waiting, they chose to return. This was a typical truck driver attitude, regardless of the threat; the convoy had to get to its next destination as soon as possible. The next critical decision point came when they were stopped at the ANA check point. Again, the decision was unanimous to push through. The crews felt very confident in their equipment, tactics, techniques and procedures.

Later Da Silva admitted once in the kill zone, she should not have pushed the rest of the convoy through the choke point; but at the time, their tactics, techniques

and procedures were to push through. They did not have the hindsight of Vietnam War standard operating procedures that warned that any trucks that had not entered kill zones should not do so. If they had changed their tactics, techniques and procedures to stop and pull security, then the enemy would just adjust their tactics to maneuver on the halted convoy. Only the lead trucks that had escaped the kill zone had a choice in where they set up the rally point, and then the enemy still tried to maneuver on it. Only the arrival of air cover prevented the enemy from assaulting the vehicles in both the kill zone and the green zone. Enough emphasis cannot be stressed on the importance of air cover for the survival of convoys.

Even though the enemy selected an ideal site for an ambush and made good use of the terrain, no driver was killed. The tactics, techniques and procedures worked. The escort crews knew and had rehearsed them to the point they executed them instinctively and rapidly recovered the crews of the disabled vehicles. The gun truck ratio was adequate for this threat. With the exception of one person, the drivers and wrecker crews reacted heroically, which got most of the vehicles out of the kill zone.

Not having anticipated such a high amount of battle damage, the convoy admitted it did not have enough self-sufficient recovery assets or spare parts, especially tires. Complex ambushes are rare events so there may not be enough self-recovery assets and spare parts for every convoy. For such worst case scenarios, there needs to be recovery assets on call, and fortunately, the Ghost Rider 7 convoy happened to be nearby at Frontenac. Everyone admitted the Canadians and Americans worked exceptionally well together and NCOs took charge of the medevacs, resupply and recovery missions. Even with Ghost Rider 7 nearby, the self-recovery was begun by Outcast before Ghost Rider had arrived, but no one could return to the kill zone to complete the recovery until the next morning after Ghost Rider 5 arrived from Kandahar. An ambush is chaos and aside from all the problems, nearly everyone did as they were trained; so at the end of the day, not one American died during the battle.

After this ambush, the tactics, techniques and procedures changed that vehicles would no longer immediately push through the kill zone. The lead gun trucks would stop, assess the situation, conduct their 5 and 25 meter scans for IEDs, then try to identify the



Gun Truck 5 with crew: SPC Gerber Sierra, SPC Jared Hawkins, SPC Mabel Fields, and SGT Brandon Burks.

Photo courtesy of the 53rd QM Company

enemy and look for secondary IEDs. After that ambush, the gun trucks also started carrying Mk19s automatic grenade launchers.¹⁴²

Eight soldiers received Purple Heart Medals for this ambush and no one, including 1LT Da Silva or SFC Mills received any award higher than an Army Army Commendation Medal with Valor device for having fought in a nine-hour ambush.

¹1LT Latonya Polk interview by LCDR Jason Roberson at Kandahar, Afghanistan, 2009; and SSG Anthony Williams interview by LCDR Jason Roberson at Kandahar, Afghanistan, 2009.

²SFC Byron Mills interview by LCDR Jason Roberson at Kandahar, Afghanistan, 2009

³SGT Brandon Lee Burks interview by LCDR Jason Roberson at Kandahar, Afghanistan, 2009.

⁴SGT Young Kim interview by LCDR Jason Roberson at Kandahar, Afghanistan, 2009

⁵Williams interview.

⁶Polk interview.

⁷Mills interview, and SGT Mario Saenz telephone interview by Richard Killblane, 22 June 2012.

⁸AAR - Outcast TIC.

⁹Williams interview.

¹⁰1LT Tamara Da Silva interview by LCDR Jason Roberson at Kandahar, Afghanistan, 2009.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Da Silva interview, and Mills interview.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵SGT Ronnie Biggers interview by LCDR Jason Roberson at Kandahar, Afghanistan, 2009.

¹⁶Polk interview, and SGT Todd Wilken interview by LCDR Jason Roberson at Kandahar, Afghanistan, 2009.

¹⁷Burks interview.

¹⁸Da Silva interview, and Mills interview.

¹⁹Biggers interview.

²⁰Da Silva interview.

²¹Burks interview.

²²Williams interview

²³Da Silva interview, and Mills interview

²⁴AAR - Outcast TIC.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Da Silva interview; and Wilkens interview.

²⁸Williams interview.

²⁹Spc. Elisebet Freeburg, "US Convoy Ambushed, Battles Insurgents for 9 Hours," Joint Sustainment Command - Afghanistan September 1, 2009.

³⁰Da Silva interview, and Wilkens interview.

³¹In the interviews soldiers used reference to ANA and ANP interchangeably, but for consistency, they will be referred to as army not police.

³²Williams interview

³³Da Silva interview.

³⁴AAR - Outcast TIC.

³⁵Da Silva interview, and Saenz interview.

³⁶Freeburg, "US Convoy Ambushed;" and Saenz interview.

³⁷Mills interview.

³⁸Da Silva interview, and DA Form 2823, Sworn Statement by Tamara Da Silva, 1 August 2009.

³⁹Da Silva interview, Saenz interview, and Da Silva Sworn Statement.

⁴⁰SGT Armando Palacios interview by LCDR Jason Roberson at Kandahar, 2009.

⁴¹AAR - Outcast TIC.

⁴²SGT Burks interview.

⁴³AAR - Outcast TIC.

⁴⁴Da Silva interview, and Saenz interview.

⁴⁵Freeburg, "US Convoy Ambushed."

⁴⁶Da Silva interview.

⁴⁷AAR - Outcast TIC.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Freeburg, "US Convoy Ambushed."

⁵⁰Saenz interview, Freeburg, "US Convoy Ambushed."

⁵¹Williams interview.

⁵²Palacios interview.

⁵³Sworn Statement by Tamara Da Silva, 1 August 2009.

⁵⁴Polk interview.

⁵⁵Mills interview.

⁵⁶Wilkens interview.

⁵⁷Freeburg, "US Convoy Ambushed."

⁵⁸Freeburg, "US Convoy Ambushed," and Saenz interview.

⁵⁹Saenz interview.

⁶⁰Palacios interview, and Williams interview.

⁶¹Williams interview.

⁶²Da Silva interview.

⁶³Wilkens interview.

⁶⁴Da Silva interview and video shot during the ambush by a TC in the rear of the convoy.

⁶⁵AAR - Outcast TIC.

⁶⁶Da Silva interview, and Saenz interview.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸AAR - Outcast TIC.

⁶⁹Freeburg, "US Convoy Ambushed."

⁷⁰Palacios interview.

⁷¹Williams interview.

⁷²Palacios interview.

⁷³Freeburg, "US Convoy Ambushed."

⁷⁴Kim interview.

⁷⁵Freeburg, "US Convoy Ambushed."

⁷⁶Williams interview.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Palacios interview; SFC Mills interview; Freeburg, "US Convoy Ambushed."

⁷⁹Palacios interview.

⁸⁰SGT Baronsay White interview by LCDR Jason Robison, Kandahar, 2009.

⁸¹Wilkens interview.

⁸²White interview.

⁸³Burks interview.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Mills interview.

⁸⁶Freeburg, "US Convoy Ambushed."

⁸⁷Williams interview and Kim interview.

⁸⁸Wilkens interview.

⁸⁹Palacios interview.

⁹⁰Freeburg, "US Convoy Ambushed."

⁹¹Wilkens interview.

⁹² Biggers interview; and SFC Mills interview

⁹³ Biggers interview and Polk interview.

⁹⁴ Mills interview; Wilkens interview; and Freeburg, "US Convoy Ambushed."

⁹⁵ Freeburg, "US Convoy Ambushed."

⁹⁶ MIRC Chat was a new form of instantaneous text messaging.

⁹⁷ AAR - Outcast TIC.

⁹⁸ AAR - Outcast TIC, and Da Silva interview by Richard Killblane, 21 November 2011.

⁹⁹ Freeburg, "US Convoy Ambushed;" Da Silva, 21 November 2011.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² AAR - Outcast TIC.

¹⁰³ Saenz interview.

¹⁰⁴ AAR - Outcast TIC.

¹⁰⁵ Williams interview.

¹⁰⁶ AAR - Outcast TIC.

¹⁰⁷ Turn and burn was slang for a convoy that was scheduled to return from its destination the same day instead of remaining overnight.

¹⁰⁸ SGT Dill Tabota interview by LCDR Jason Roberson at Kandahar, Afghanistan, 2009; SPC Daniel J. Marler interview by LCDR Jason Roberson at Kandahar, Afghanistan, 2009; and SGT Jeremy Dowling-Wise interview by LCDR Jason Roberson at Kandahar, Afghanistan, 2009.

¹⁰⁹ CPT Jennifer Ernest interview by Richard Killblane at Ft Lee, VA, 20 January 2012.

¹¹⁰ Tabota interview.

¹¹¹ AAR - Outcast TIC.

¹¹² Marler interview, and Ernest interview.

¹¹³ Liquid, ammunition, casualties and equipment (LACE).

¹¹⁴ Mills interview, and AAR - Outcast TIC.

¹¹⁵ Tabota interview, and SFC Mills interview.

¹¹⁶ AAR - Outcast TIC.

¹¹⁷ Tabota interview, and Marler interview.

¹¹⁸ AAR - Outcast TIC.

¹¹⁹ Mills interview, Polk interview, and Kim interview.

¹²⁰ Kim interview.

¹²¹ Biggers interview.

¹²² Mills interview.

¹²³ Biggers interview.

¹²⁴ AAR - Outcast TIC.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ The AAR - Outcast TIC stated it took the convoy two and a half hours to reach the site and two hours to clear the IED, and the members of the convoy agreed they linked up with the ambushed convoy around 2300 hours. Marler interview, and Tabota interview.

¹²⁷ AAR - Outcast TIC, and Mills interview.

¹²⁸ White interview.

¹²⁹ AAR - Outcast TIC, and Mills interview.

¹³⁰ Tabota interview.

¹³¹ Ward interview, and Tabota interview.

¹³² SPC Aaron Ward interview by LCDR Jason Roberson at Kandahar, Afghanistan, 2009; Tabota interview; Dowling-Wise interview, and AAR - Outcast TIC.

¹³³ Ernest interview.

¹³⁴ AAR - Outcast TIC, Dowling-Wise interview, and Ernest interview.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ernest interview.

¹³⁷ Mills interview, Ernest interview, Biggers interview, Freeburg, and "US Convoy Ambushed."

¹³⁹ Kim interview

¹³⁹ Ernest interview.

¹⁴⁰ Dowling-Wise interview.

¹⁴¹ Mills interview.

¹⁴² Kim interview.

Observations

The previous case studies have examined the conduct of ambushes and what takes place inside kill zones. An ambush is the worst case scenario when things have gone terribly wrong. The trick is to avoid an ambush if at all possible.

The study of convoy ambushes and convoy security operations reveals certain patterns. Some of these never seem to change and violation of them renders convoys vulnerable to attack. The challenge has been to articulate them. Throughout history, philosophers of war have tried to define those permanent tenets or principles that define the conduct of combat. The US Army has defined its doctrine in the Field Service Regulations beginning in 1914, that evolved into FM 100-5 in 1941 and, more recently FM 3-0, to fit a period of time, but this doctrine never fully addressed partisan, irregular or guerrilla warfare. Instead, soldiers and leaders have developed their own doctrine for how to conduct operations for each conflict. Tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) on the other hand, vary constantly based upon the mission, enemy, friendly troops, weather and terrain. Understanding the enemy and either anticipating his action or recognizing his strengths and weaknesses during the action, the convoy or security commander uses the advantage of terrain and weather to employ his strength at the enemy's weakness while protecting his own vulnerabilities. The US Army has participated in three wars with different terrain - Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan - that have provided ample material to understand convoy security.

To help identify the solutions, one must first understand the characteristics of an ambush. An ambush is an attack with the element of surprise. The element of surprise allows the enemy the liberty to select which targets to destroy first, which is why an ambusher initiates with a casualty producing device. The amount of damage depends upon how well coordinated and accurate the fire is. A convoy ambush differs from other ambushes in that the targets are vehicles and the ambush is generally restricted to the road. In most cases, convoy ambushes are linear but, depending upon the path of the road or surrounding terrain, may vary.

Vehicles can provide the advantage of armor, fire power, speed and maneuverability. The security vehicles, more commonly known as gun trucks, can provide a platform to mount armor and weapons systems that provide an offensive capability. While a good road can allow them to drive fast, other road conditions can significantly reduce their speed or even stop the convoy. The size of trucks, however, makes them easy targets when halted or driving slowly. Being road bound, the enemy knows the path the convoy has to follow, which makes it easy to obstacle with road blocks or explosives. Roads through jungle and urban areas also limit maneuverability and offer cover and concealment to the enemy.

The need for security vehicles should have become doctrine after the Vietnam War, but most doctrine developers saw the Vietnam War with no safe rear as an anomaly of the 20th century; where, more accurately, the broad front concept of war that dominated the 20th century was the anomaly that ended with Desert Storm. So the Vietnam War laid the ground work for convoy security, but there were three unresolved issues from the Vietnam War related to convoy escort doctrine. What was the best type of escort platform? Should convoy escort be internal or external to the truck company, and what branch can best perform convoy security? Should convoy tactics be passive or aggressive? The following observations are derived from what has and has not worked during three wars.

Doctrine

Doctrine involves more permanent concepts that define how to conduct military operations. Because of the separate branches of the US Army, convoy security is divided into three areas of responsibility. The maneuver forces have responsibility for rear area security and the supply routes which pass through their battle space. Historically, whatever security measures the battle space owners have taken, the enemy has found other ways and locations to ambush convoys. As a minimum, the battle space owner can provide the quick reaction force, medevac, recovery, and synchronize the battle. The Military Police likewise has responsibility for route security and can also serve as a quick reaction force. Also, the enemy studies their operations for gaps in their security. Since neither can completely protect the routes and convoys, convoys therefore need their own means of immediate self-defense. So the convoys have to defend themselves until the nearest reaction force can arrive and conduct a battle handoff so the convoy can continue its mission.

There are several options for internal convoy security. One is to arm most or all of the task vehicles. The minimum security consists of armed right seat passengers, referred to as “shotguns” during the Indian and Vietnam Wars and “shooters” during Operation Iraqi Freedom. While this allows the truck to return fire, task vehicles do not have the flexibility or maneuverability to flank the enemy or defend disabled vehicles in the kill zone. A dedicated escort vehicle with crew-served weapons provides the most flexibility and maneuverability. The best defense consists of armored vehicles dedicated as weapons platforms. The term “gun truck” refers to any cargo truck used as a weapon’s platform. Different terms were used to avoid confusion between the larger platforms that could carry more than one crew-served weapon system and smaller platforms that could only carry one. The Vietnam War added a new dimension to gun truck concept and terminology with “hardened truck” referring to any truck that had armored plating. A gun truck became not only an armed platform but an armored one as well. An armed ¼-ton M151s were called gun jeeps and armed ¾-tons were called gun beeps. By 2004 during Operation Iraqi Freedom, armored HMMWVs with crew-served weapons were officially called Convoy Protection Platforms (CPP) by units based in Iraq and Convoy Escort Platforms (CEP)

in Kuwait. Unofficially, the crews referred to them as gun trucks as had the veterans of the Vietnam War. For the purpose of this study they will be referred to as either gun trucks or escort platforms.

Type of Escort Platforms, Arms and Armament

By doctrine, convoys traveling through enemy territory should have dedicated escort platforms, referred to in this book as gun trucks. The question is type, armament, and identification.

When convoys began getting ambushed during Operation Iraqi Freedom in June 2003, a gun truck by definition was any vehicle, whether armored or not, armed with a crew-served weapon. It could have been a gunner sitting in the back with an M249 5.56mm Squad Automatic Weapon (SAW) or a M2.50 caliber machinegun. The type of vehicle did not matter. During the Vietnam War, truck drivers converted any wheeled vehicle into an armored gun truck and practical experience settled on three basic designs: the gun jeep, 5-ton gun truck, and V-100 four-wheeled armored car.

Each type of escort vehicle had its advantages and disadvantages. Although the M151 jeep could not carry much armor and only mount one light machinegun (M60), it had the room for extra radios and was very maneuverable, making it a preferred platform for a convoy commander and assistant convoy commander vehicle. Some convoy commanders upgraded their M151 ¼-ton gun jeeps for the M37 ¾-ton gun beep. Its cargo capacity only allowed it to mount single-plate armor, but it could mount two light machineguns. In a 1969 study in Vietnam, nearly every colonel and above believed the 5-ton gun truck was a temporary substitute until enough factory-built V-100s could be fielded in the Transportation Corps truck companies, since the MPs had priority on issue in the field. The gun truck crews, however, knew the V-100 was a death trap if anything penetrated the armor such as rounds, shrapnel or blast as there was no place for it to escape. Infantrymen knew this and rode on top of armored personnel carriers rather than inside as the vehicle was designed, and even layered sandbags on top for extra protection against mines. There were several cases during the Vietnam War where RPGs hit the gun boxes of 5-ton gun trucks and only killed the gunner directly in the line of the blast, but the rest of the crew would survive. Although wounded,

the crews could still continue to fight. The V-100 only had one crew-served weapon mounted in a cupola, while the 5-ton gun trucks mounted at least three. This offered 360 degrees of observation and fire. By the 1971 study, senior officers admitted what the crews had known all along - that the 5-ton gun truck was superior to the V90 90-100. The armor on the gun truck was the same as a V-100 but the open box design allowed the blast or shrapnel to escape. The open gun box design also allowed for a minimum of three machineguns and the lesson of convoy ambushes in Vietnam was the fight usually ended with superior and accurate firepower, and accuracy could be compensated for with sheer volume of fire power.

The V-100 had the advantage of its off-road capability. CPT Walter Anderson, Commander of the 563rd Transportation Company at Pleiku then Phu Bai had six 5-ton gun trucks and two V-100s when he assumed command in February 1970. He liked the V-100s because they could accelerate faster and drive off-road. On the coastal plain they could go after the enemy in the rice paddies. Other than the MPs, Anderson was one of the few who liked the V-100. Because the gun trucks preferred to enter the kill zone and fight it out with the enemy, they preferred the 5-ton gun truck with the open box and three to four machineguns. The convoy escort solution during the Vietnam War was a mixture of different escort platforms with different capabilities.

During the later Iraq War, as they did in Vietnam, the drivers turned any wheeled vehicle into a gun truck platform to include the biggest truck, the HET, but settled on three escort platforms: the HMMWV, 5-ton gun truck and M1117 Armored Security Vehicle (ASV). Again, each had its advantages and disadvantages, which were similar to their Vietnam predecessors.

The M1114/1151 HMMWV, like the M151 jeep, remained the preferred command and control platform because it had the space for the additional electronics. During the Iraq War, the convoy commander and assistant convoy commander had double-stacked SINGCARS radios to talk not only to the convoy but to the Sheriff net, plus Mobile Tracking System (MTS) or Blue Force Tracker (BFT) to track their real-time movement on a laptop map image, provide satellite email capability, and with BFT situational awareness of other forces in the area. In addition, electronic jamming devices were added

to the vehicles. Consequently the HMMWV remained the preferred command and control vehicle until the fielding of the Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles. All these extra electronics, plus the weapons, ammunition and equipment maxed out the load capacity of the HMMWVs, let alone the additional armor. The HMMWV still had the advantage of rapid acceleration for blocking intersections or getting the commander to the scene of an attack, if the convoy ran at a speed five miles an hour slower than the maximum acceleration speed of the HMMWV. The HMMWV was not designed to be an armored vehicle so the additional weight left little flexibility in the suspension system, so any quick correction of the steering would cause the HMMWV to roll over. For this reason the up-armored HMMWV had the highest roll-over rate of any vehicle.¹

As the enemy weapons improved, so did the armor. The kinetic energy and heat of the Explosive Formed Projectile (EFP) (platter charge) could penetrate nearly any armor fielded by the Tank Automotive Command (TACOM), so the thickness of the door armor was increased with the Objective Fragmentation 5 Kits (OF5K), and even heavier Frag 6 kits for the M1114s. The additional weight of the 400 and 600 pound doors severely stressed the power train and suspension of the M1114, which led to the fielding of the M1151 with improved suspension and power train. But even with the Frag 5 and Frag 6 kits, the M1114s and M1151s were still vulnerable to EFPs. There were several cases where the EFP had not penetrated ballistic glass, but only melted it inward, which inspired units in Taji and Tallil to reinforce the outside of their doors with ballistic glass. Essentially the HMMWVs were becoming tanks.²

Unlike the HMMWV, the 5-ton cargo truck was designed to handle the weight of the armor and still maintain speed (if one tweaked the governor). During the first year of gun truck construction, the truck companies that had 5-ton cargo trucks built gun box designs similar to those used in Vietnam, except for the size. Because of the limited amount of hardened steel, the units initially constructed gun boxes large enough to only fit one pedestal-mounted machinegun. As steel arrived in greater quantity, the "Skunk Werks" welding shop at LSA Anaconda, Iraq began constructing larger gun boxes, but still the units mounted only one machinegun, probably because of the initial shortage of M2 .50 caliber

machineguns. There were a few rare exceptions where units mounted more.

The 5-ton cargo trucks, either the M900 series or the M1083, had a much better height advantage for spotting IEDs. Its size also made it more intimidating to civilian traffic than the ASV. Many units in Iraq, especially the northern area, preferred to lead with the 5-ton, because the threat was mostly victim-detonated IEDs and the crews felt the 5-ton offered greater survivability. Some liked the M900 series, because the front axle was forward and the cab was very high off the ground, so the IED detonated forward of and under the cab. Others felt the M1083 was better, because the front axle was under the cab and the mine would actually detonate behind the cab. On one convoy that the author rode on, an IED did destroy the front left wheel of an M923 with no injury to the crew. It was clear that the 5-ton was no more survivable, but its passengers were. The problem with the M1083 was the frame could not hold the additional weight of the armor. The frames were showing the strain of the cab armor kit and cracked. The same units that liked the 5-ton up front similarly liked to place one in the rear. Its size was more likely to intimidate approaching traffic into stopping, and the height allowed better escalation of force. A .50 caliber on the cab could depress low enough to shoot in front of any oncoming vehicle. The 5-ton had the slowest acceleration speed, so it was not good for racing ahead to block traffic. Many 5-ton gun trucks used the bed or “hillbilly” armor gun box on the back to store extra tires and spare parts, very much like maintenance gun trucks of Vietnam.³

Stewart & Stevenson, Letterkenny and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) designed gun boxes for the 5-ton cargo trucks. LLNL

started with a solution from the past and improved upon it. John Hunter studied the Eve of Destruction in the Transportation Museum and recognized the double-walled armor box was more survivable than most armor. He assembled a group of technical experts and two Vietnam veterans to examine how they could improve upon the original design with the latest improvements in armor and ballistic glass. The result was far superior to the Vietnam solution and anything in the field at the time. At least one LLNL gun truck, named Iron Horse, in the 1073rd Maintenance Company at Camp Ridgeway was hit by a double-stacked IED in 2005 and the entire crew was unharmed. The 7th Transportation Battalion at Anaconda received the first LLNL kit on 14 July 2004 and realized that it was superior to anything else they had on the road at the time. Factory-built M1114s up-armored HMMWVs had not yet been issued to transportation units. Consequently, the 7th Battalion asked for more and received 26 more kits, which arrived in December 2004. By then the 457th Transportation Battalion had replaced the 7th Battalion, and the new commander, LTC David Gaffney, did not like 5-ton gun trucks. In 2005, one rolled over when an Iraqi car quickly pulled in front of it causing the truck to drive up over the car and roll over. Consequently, Gaffney considered the gun box a risk and would no longer allow crews to ride in the gun box. At the time of the rollover there

had been over 300 HMMWV rollovers resulting in over 80 deaths. After the Palm Sunday Ambush in March 2005, complex ambushes became rare so there was rarely a need for suppressive firepower of the crew-served weapons.

However, in 2006 and 2007, the 1-325th Infantry and 2nd Brigade Combat Team, from the 10th Mountain Division, liked to use the LLNL



Crew of Iron Horse of the 1073rd Maintenance Company that survived a double-stacked IED in 2005. Photo courtesy of the US Army Transportation Museum



Skunk Werks patching and adding additional armor to underside of M1117 ASV. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

gun trucks to insert scouts, observation posts, and sniper teams; and also evacuate casualties and detainees. This was the only gun truck platform that was used as troop carrier. The 1-325th liked the LLNL better than the Stryker or Bradley, because they could fit more combat-ready soldiers in the gun box.⁴

LTC Gaffney was far from alone in his opinion. There was considerable bias against the 5-ton gun truck from the majority of senior Army officers. Most battalion commanders and above came to the war with two goals, accomplish the mission and bring all their soldiers home with all their moving parts. In their defense, the senior officers wanted to provide their soldiers with the best possible protection and saw the best way to protect a gun truck crew was cocoon them inside 360 degrees of armor. Consequently, they did not like the open box design of the 5-ton gun truck. The 5-ton gun box left the crews exposed, so many commanders saw this as too much risk. Added to this was a dislike of anything that resembled a solution from the Vietnam War. The senior officers had fallen victim to the media hype the US Army had lost the Vietnam War, when in fact it had defeated the insurgency by 1968 and negotiated a peace treaty with North Vietnam by 1973. Since the misconception was the US Army had lost the war in Vietnam, therefore, nothing could be learned from that war, or any solutions of that war would not apply to this one. In fact the 5-ton

gun truck successfully kept the roads open in Vietnam. COL Jeff Miser, Commander of 7th Transportation Group during its 2004-2005 rotation, had even visited with Vietnam gun truck veterans on replicas of their gun trucks and still did not like the Vietnam solution. He recognized it was a good solution for its time, but he did not like the “cowboy” attitude of the crews or individualism represented in their artwork. He believed in standardization of gun truck design and definitely did not like the elitism. Consequently, he made the 518th Gun Truck Company dismantle its 5-ton gun trucks and definitely did not let them field the Livermore gun box. Ignoring the casualties brought about by the additional armor of the HMMWVs, the senior officers looked for any excuse to validate their beliefs about the problems of the 5-ton gun truck.

When combat units began taking away his M1114s in 2005, Gaffney relented and let his escort companies take the 5-ton gun trucks out but not allow any crew members to ride in the gun box. Once the crews had the battalion commander’s consent to use the 5-tons, they admitted they liked them and the battalion adopted a three and two mix of M1114s and 5-tons. After a LLNL gun truck drove off a bridge due to driver error, Multi-National Command-Iraq (MNC-I) forbid any LLNL gun trucks from going outside the wire of a forward operating base. If the same rules had applied to all platforms

as was applied to the LLNL gun box, then no ASV or M1114/1151 would have been allowed to go out on the road. What few LLNL gun boxes the author saw in transportation units in March 2007 were used for troop transportation and litter carriers.⁵

Similar to the V-100 in Vietnam, the Transportation units were the last to receive the M1117 Armored Security Vehicles (ASV); but by 2006, most Transportation units had enough ASVs to field at least one or two per convoy. The M1117 ASV, contrary to Tetron's claim that it was a new design, was an upgrade of the V-100/150. Not only that, but Tetron was a subsidiary of Cadillac Gage that had built the original V-100/150. The main difference between the V-100/150 and the M1117 was an improved power train and upgraded armor. Otherwise, it had the same four-wheeled armored car design. It had all the same problems as the V-100 in Vietnam and some.

ASVs and 5-ton trucks were initially considered the most survivable and both were used as lead and rear vehicles in convoys. However, when the author met with the welders of the Skunk Werks at LSA Anaconda, he learned they had patched holes in 30 ASVs since their arrival six months before. The ASV was not as

survivable as some thought. They had taken IED and mine blasts and kept rolling, but did not stand up to an EFP. They had cramped compartments and were difficult to egress while wearing body armor. For this reason, some crews preferred to not wear body armor at all. Neither was there much room for MTS and Blue Force Tracker up front which were instead placed near the VIP seat in the back, requiring a fourth crew member. Although the turret had limited peripheral observation, the optics was an advantage. Once the gunners became used to looking through the scope, they liked the increased magnification capable for searching the road farther ahead. The gunner could usually see details much sooner than the drivers. However, he had to rely on the drivers for identifying suspicious objects much closer alongside the road because of a narrow peripheral vision. The weapons system on the ASV offered the gunner two very good options: the .50 caliber machinegun or the Mk19 automatic grenade launcher. The design of the ASV, however, did not allow the gunner to depress the gun to the rear in order to conduct an escalation of force in the event a car approached the rear of the convoy. For the gunner to fire a pen flare or shine the laser at the approaching vehicle, he had



Airmen of the 70th Motor Transportation Detachment "Scorpions" in Kuwait in 2008. Two are wearing the black LVC patch for Lead Vehicle Commander. Photo courtesy of the 70th MTD



Lead HET had the Rhino attached to the front bumper. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

to climb out of the turret and expose himself. The ASV accelerated faster than the 5-ton gun trucks; and for these reasons, some units preferred to use the ASVs up front and rear. Other units that liked the 5-tons as lead and rear vehicles placed the ASVs behind the lead gun truck and ahead of the rear gun truck, so they could race up and block traffic. Crews praised the ASV for the smoothness of its ride. Its suspension system was not maxed out, but it did have a high center of gravity and a high tendency to roll over on the slightest incline and the turret would pop off, so it could not go off road. When initially fielded, the ASV was very well liked by most units; but by 2008 after a year of use, many units quit using ASVs because of the restricted compartment, limited observation, tendency to roll over, and the inability to get to an injured crew if the doors were combat locked from the inside. Once again, if given the choice, the majority of truck units preferred the 5-ton gun truck.⁶

The Heavy Equipment Transporter (HET) proved to be the most survivable wheeled vehicle on the road due to its height. Even after EFPs became the primary threat in 2006, the high angle needed to hit the passenger or driver had to be exact or it would pass over or under the person, where a more horizontal shot on a HMMWV almost guaranteed hitting the passengers. Consequently, the 24th Transportation Battalion in 2006 made the HET the lead vehicle in all its convoys. By 2009, all truck battalions in Kuwait placed a HET up front until they

finally received MRAPs.

By 2007, the M1114/1151s armored HMMWVs, M1117 ASVs, and 5-tons, either the M900 series or M1083s were the platforms in use. After questioning drivers and crew members throughout Kuwait and Iraq, the author found no consensus of opinion on what was best. Interestingly, many of the opinions contradicted one another. Some crews in one battalion considered one type of platform, such as the ASV or 5-ton truck, the best while crews in another battalion at another camp considered it the worst. 1SG James Shreve, 1041st Engineer Company (AFB) (WY NG) at FOB Speicher, summed it up best. "They prefer what they are the most familiar with." This fact was important because for the most part, the chain of command dictated what platforms the convoys would use.⁷

By 2008, convoy escort units began receiving Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles. TACOM reluctantly adopted the MRAP from South Africa until it could develop its own similar or better design. The seven MRAP designs with their signature V-shaped hulls to deflect mine blasts had been the innovation of the Rhodesian Army during their civil war in the 1960s. They were top heavy and could not take a turn faster than 25 mph. They were good on level paved roads but some troops complained about them on uneven roads possibly rolling over and the suspension system made them ride like stage coaches and a bump in the road would

bounce the passengers off the ceiling of the vehicle. Its high profile provided great observation for the gunners and had the compartment space for all the electronics. It combined the best features of the 5-ton gun truck and HMMWV.⁸ The most important feature was that the design deflected any mine blast away from the crew compartment. Units in Afghanistan liked the RG31 because of the room to carry several soldiers although there was no need for such capacity in their mission. These were later replaced by the International MaxxPro.⁹

By 2008, the escort and truck companies had employed all the platforms, except the MRAP, long enough to thoroughly know what they liked. The main lesson was all escort units preferred a mix of capabilities, usually two types of gun truck platforms. The MRAP replaced all other escort vehicles. The key features looked for in an escort vehicle depended upon its function and place in the convoy. Lead and rear vehicles needed the advantage of height for observation and survivability against directional mines like the platter charge. The V-shaped hull was clearly a preferred feature for all trucks.

In conclusion, there was no one platform, except possibly the MRAP, that possessed all the advantages needed in a convoy escort platform. Each had capabilities that were needed in the convoy. Survivability was probably the paramount concern of the crews for all vehicles. The key features looked for in an escort vehicle depended upon its function and place in the convoy. For lead and rear gun trucks, observation and fire power were next. The 5-ton gun trucks, HETs and MRAPs provided the height advantage, but the ASV has the best long range optics at the cost of peripheral vision. The rear vehicle needed the capability to conduct escalation of force that included shining a laser or spotlight at the approaching vehicle, firing a warning shot in front of the approaching vehicle and, lastly, shoot through the vehicle. The 5-ton and MRAP were probably the best vehicles for trail vehicle and the V-shaped hull was clearly a preferred feature for all trucks. There was a need for a few vehicles in the middle of the convoy with speed to race ahead to block traffic. The MRAP, ASV or HMMWV performed this role better. All vehicles needed the internal space to house the myriad of electronics that made up convoy operations and yet still allow soldiers in full body armor to move around and egress

with ease. The open box design of Vietnam did not get a fair chance to prove its merit in Iraq, and neither did most gun trucks have more than one crew-served weapon. Many gun truck crews did not have a choice in what platform they received, and were not in the selection process. Clearly the senior leaders' concerns were far different than those of the crew members, so future fielding of gun truck platforms should involve the crews, if possible, in their operational environment. Simply provide the gun truck crews with what is available and let them pick what works best.¹⁰

Weapons and Ammunition

The key feature to turn any vehicle into a gun truck was the crew-served weapon. What was missing from Iraq and Afghanistan were gun trucks with multiple crew-served weapons. Instead, the convoys fielded more platforms with single crew-served weapons. What these wars had in common was one weapon. From the Korean War to Iraq and Afghanistan, the preferred weapon of choice was the M2 .50 caliber machinegun over either the .30 caliber or later 7.62mm machineguns. Originally designed to target enemy vehicles and aircraft, the .50 caliber intimidated the enemy more because it did not wound but literally blew a man apart if hit by it. Some gun trucks during the Vietnam War liked the 7.62mm mini-gun, which was a small caliber Gatling gun with an electric motor that had an incredibly high cyclic rate of fire of 2,000 to 6,000 rounds per minute. It was also very intimidating, but had a higher chance of misfire. In Vietnam, the gun truck crews preferred the most lethal weapons systems available, as well as the gun truck crews in Iraq, but senior commanders wanting to limit collateral damage in urban areas knew accidental killing of civilians can result in unintended consequences and sometimes preferred less lethal weapon systems.

Escort units in 2005 often had a smaller caliber M249 SAW as a backup weapon when in urban areas since the .50 caliber could travel further and cause more collateral damage. The dual weapons systems were removed by the next year though. The next favorite weapon was the Mk19 automatic grenade launcher, which provided the escorts with an indirect fire weapon. The Vietnam War introduced the M79 and M203 grenade launcher, basically a handheld indirect fire weapon for the gun truck, which lobbed a 40mm

grenade out to about 150 meters. This was the preferred weapon of the gun truck drivers, but the gunners would have loved the rapid fire and longer range of the Mk19 automatic grenade launcher. It had a cyclic rate of fire of 325 to 375 rounds per minute and could throw rounds out to 2,023 meters with an effective range of 1,400 meters. It could hit targets hidden behind protective walls the M2 .50 caliber could not penetrate. As effective as it was in Iraq, MNC - I took it away from the escort companies in 2008 because of its potential collateral damage with civilians, especially in built-up areas. The A Company, 3 - 144th Infantry Texas National Guard ambush on ASR Sword and the TK Ambush in Afghanistan reinforced the need for the Mk19 grenade launcher. In an effort to restrict collateral damage, commanders placed their convoys at risk in the event they ran into complex ambushes.

The Common Remote Operated Weapons Station (CROWS) was a remote controlled .50 caliber weapon system on top of the HMMWV fielded in limited quantities by 2005. Even though most gunners had plenty of video game experience, the CROWS was universally disliked because when the fighting was for real, the gunners preferred the wide peripheral vision and feel of the weapon in their hands rather than a joy stick. The one good feature liked about the CROWS was its thermal optics, but the crews preferred the short range thermal imagers (SRTI) that were becoming available in 2008.¹¹

Artwork and Elan

The Army of the Potomac was at a low state of morale when MG Joseph Hooker assumed command in January 1863. He improved the diet, sanitation and supply of the Army and also authorized each corps to wear a distinctive insignia. All had an immediate effect on improving the sagging morale of the Army. During World War I, the US Army authorized divisional insignia and regimental crests in 1924. For a century and a half, the US Army has recognized that distinctive identification is a source of pride for soldiers.

During the Vietnam War, the question of art work on gun trucks was an issue. Just as they have done with boats and planes, men have had a love affair with trucks and consequently have named them. After the 2 September 1967 complex ambush in Vietnam, LTC John



The eagle on the nose of the M915s belonged to the 729th Transportation Company at Anaconda in 2005.

Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

Burke, the acting commander of 8th Transportation Group until COL Joe Bellino arrived, directed each company to build gun trucks. Not all but many named them and stenciled the names in white letters on the sides of their truck. One of the first gun trucks named was Burke's Law, which was a TV show at the time. When LTC Burke saw it, he decided to let the crews continue to stencil the names of their gun trucks on the side. In fact, Burke's Law was named by SP4 Larry Hicks, in the 563rd Medium Truck Company, after his platoon sergeant also named Burke. Over the next year, the gun trucks remained olive green like the other trucks.

When COL Garland Ludy replaced Bellino as the 8th Group Commander in September 1968, the élan of the gun truck crews was increasing and consequently, they wanted their gun trucks to reflect it. However, Ludy forbid the crews to paint their gun trucks anything other than olive green and only stencil the names on the sides. Ludy wanted the gun trucks to look just like any other truck, so the enemy would not know which one was the gun truck or task vehicle. The difference, however, was blatantly obvious. In violation of Ludy's policy, SGT Steve Calibro, of the 523rd Transportation Company, built a 5-ton gun truck and had its name, Eve of Destruction, painted in Old English style white letters with the red shadow, and put it on the road on 4 July 1968. It is not certain whether the Eve was the first gun truck with elaborate artwork, but the day after Ludy gave up command, the paint brushes came out. Some crews even hired Vietnamese artists to paint the art work on the sides of their gun trucks. The artwork was reminiscent of the

nose art on WWII bombers. The trucks remained olive green but crews began to add varnish to the green to give it a darker hue so the truck would stand out more. Over time, the green became darker and darker until the crews just painted their gun trucks black and added bright color trim. The gun truck crews wanted the enemy to know they were coming and generally the enemy took out the gun truck first inspiring the belief the enemy had bounties on gun trucks. Because the Brutus, in the 359th POL Truck Company, was hit twice in a short span, November 1970 and February 1971, this led to the belief the Brutus had the highest bounty. This belief did not encourage the crews to hide their colors, but only added to the élan even more and helped recruit new crew members. Only the best and courageous drivers served on gun trucks in the 8th Group. The permanent gun truck crew members in the 500th Group had the same élan, but the two additional gunners were tasked from other units on Cam Ranh Bay. While the crews rotated through them, the gun trucks of Vietnam grew into legend enhanced by their names and artwork.

No surprise, the crews in Iraq had likewise named their gun trucks. At first units like the 459th Medium Truck scratched the names of their gun trucks on the side with chalk during the first year of the war, but this eventually gave way to paint. Because some units drew offensive slogans on the sides of their trucks, the official policy in Kuwait and Iraq was no artwork of any kind on

vehicles, but National Guard and Army Reserve units cut stencils to paint unit logos on the doors of their trucks to show the pride of their state and unit. Senior commanders cast a blind eye to this at first since it made it easy for them to identify convoys while driving 55 to 60 mph down the road.

As a pattern, most crews did not name their HMMWVs, but tended to name their larger gun trucks and paint the names on the side. One exception was the Zebra. After his first ambush, 2LT James McCormick, of the 1487th Medium Truck Company in Kuwait during OIF II, wanted to paint his HMMWV in alternating black and tan tiger stripes so the enemy would know it was coming down the road. He wanted to instill fear in the enemy to cause them to leave his convoys alone. He had originally wanted to name his gun truck, the Raptor or Striped avenger, but his crew jokingly said it looked like a zebra and outvoted him. The Zebra was definitely recognizable and earned the reputation McCormick wanted it to. When he helped form the 518th Combat Gun Truck Company, they adopted the marshal's star as their logo with the same idea.

A story circulated during the OIF III rotation about one unit that painted the Punisher's death head on their trucks to intimidate the enemy, but the unit had poor discipline and their convoys were hit so often as if the enemy waited for them to roll down the road. The unit took the art work off their trucks. In fact MNC - I made all units take art work off their trucks so the enemy could not tell the difference between tough alert convoys and weak ones, but the enemy could still tell. Nearly every unit arriving in theater was hit hard during its first month after arrival.

COL Jeff Miser, Commander of the 7th Transportation Group during its deployment to Kuwait from September 2004 to September 2005, disliked elitism and individuality. He did recognize the advantage of the unit logos but forbid any other artwork on the trucks. He also liked standardization and ordered all the 5-ton gun trucks disassembled in his unit. His Command Sergeant Major, CSM Dwayne Perry, learned from the Iraqis they watched for identifying objects in trucks as reference points. For example, if a driver had fuzzy dice hanging from the mirror, the spotters could warn the ambushers where an ideal target was in relation to the truck with the fuzzy dice. So they forbid



Centurion logo on M915s of the 424 Motor Truck Detachment (USAF) with artist, Sr Airman Jason Marquez, in 2006. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane



Some soldier humor at LSA Anaconda in 2005.

Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

anything that made the trucks look different.

After a while, MNC-I and later Coalition Force Land Component Command (CFLCC) policy did not allow units could to even paint unit logos on the doors, because the enemy watched for weak units and the unit logos made their work easier. Eventually, the trucks even went so far as to removing the bumper numbers, and still the enemy knew which convoys were new. One thing for certain, the enemy watched and studied convoys like a predator searching for the weak prey. Convoys would pass through kill zones unmolested until the right one came through and then the enemy would spring the ambush. There were clearly visible things a convoy could do to avoid getting hit.

During the Vietnam War, LTC Orvil Metheny, Commander of the 6th Transportation Battalion from 1968 to 1969, knew the enemy looked for the weakest convoy so he had his drivers wash their trucks every day and leave early to present an image of a disciplined unit. He understood the enemy would attack the weakest convoy. While the worst ambush during his tour involved the 7th Battalion, his convoys were ambushed four times during his tour.

A National Guard officer, during one of the early rotations into Iraq, had his drivers deliberately leave their trucks dirty so to give the enemy the impression his was a seasoned truck company rather than a brand new one. With the one-year unit rotation in Kuwait and Iraq, the enemy looked for new units and hammered them hard their first month in theater, until they learned to fight back.

From MG Hooker to the present day, distinctive

uniform insignia has contributed to the pride of units which contributes to the fighting spirit. Similarly, distinctive art work on gun trucks clearly added to the élan of the crew, which historically has had a significant contribution to performance on the battlefield. The problem is that convoys become easily recognizable and the enemy will go after the weak ones; but as Iraq demonstrated, the enemy will identify the weak convoys regardless of taking away any identifiable markings.

Size and Organization

Another doctrinal issue is convoy size and ratio of gun trucks to task vehicles. The organization and structure of the convoy depends upon the mission, enemy, troops, and terrain issues. History of convoy operations during the 19th century, Vietnam and Iraq, however, reinforces that a certain convoy organization works best. Nineteenth century doctrine interestingly divided large convoys into divisions of 100 vehicles further divided into sections (later termed march serials) of 20 to 30 wagons separated by 30 to 40 yards. The 1914 Field Service Regulation that codified Army doctrine assigned an NCO as the wagon master (later convoy commander) for 20 to 30 wagons with 25 yards between these march serials. From wagons to trucks, convoys and march serials of 20 to 30 vehicles seemed the right size for security, command and control. In the absence of attacks, however, convoys during the early part of the Vietnam War and Iraq War grew to 100 vehicles lined up at 100 meter intervals. Ambushes, maintenance and load problems, and control issues would reduce the size of convoy serials during those wars and integrate gun trucks. The size of convoys and ratio of gun trucks should, therefore, become standardized into doctrine.

After the 2 September 1967 convoy ambush in Vietnam, the battalion commanders agreed to require each truck company to build gun trucks for self-defense, but left the design to the crews. The acting 8th Group Commander, LTC John Burke, established the doctrine of convoy organization and gun truck ratio, which started out with convoys divided into serials of ten task vehicles with a gun truck ratio of one-to-ten. After a year of experience, COL Ludy settled on convoy serials not to exceed 30 vehicles with a gun truck ratio still at one-to-ten with 20-minute interval between serials. This seemed the most manageable size of convoy and had as



Two columns of M1151s awaiting their convoys at Tallil in 2007. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

many as three gun trucks. This would allow for one gun truck to escort the lead element of the convoy out of the kill zone to the safety of a security check point while the remaining two gun trucks and convoy commander's gun jeep provided suppressive firepower in the kill zone.

History did not record whether the 8th Group commanders came up with the ideas themselves or acted on suggestions from subordinates. During the first two years of the Iraq War, the development of gun truck technology and doctrine was a bottom-up approach, whereby the soldiers who rode in the convoys originated most of the good ideas and the battalion and group commanders implemented them. During this war, the author made a point to identify the authorship of the majority of good ideas and during the first couple years, the best ideas came from the ranks of staff sergeant to sergeant first class and warrant officers.

During the first year of the war, it was not unusual to have convoys of 80 to 100 vehicles that stretched for miles. Consequently, convoy commanders in the lead of the convoy could not talk to the assistant convoy commander in the rear with the radios issued at the time. During the first year of the war, the 181st Transportation Battalion admitted it was the NCOs who came up with the recommendation convoy size not to exceed 30 vehicles with a gun truck ratio of one-to-five. SSG Walter "Tony" Floyd, of the 1-178th FA during 2004-2005, explained that a convoy of 20 normally had one maintenance or load problem that required a halt. Increasing the number of trucks increased the number of maintenance halts and consequently increased risk. Smaller convoys improved the chances of the convoy commander and his assistant at opposite ends of the convoy to talk on the radio and limited the time the local

nationals had to wait for a convoy to pass through an intersection. With a 100 meter interval, a 30-vehicle convoy would still stretch three kilometers (approximately two miles).

After the April Uprising of 2004, BG James Chambers, the 13th COSCOM Commander, mandated this convoy size and gun truck ratio policy for any convoys north of Scania, essentially driving into the Sunni Triangle, and one-to-ten for convoys south of Scania. The reason for the difference was the 375th Transportation Group had to scrounge to even find enough gun trucks to meet the one-to-ten ratio, let alone the one-to-five, and all routine sustainment convoys handed off to Iraq-based escorts at Cedar, which was south of Scania. The threat south of Scania was mostly theft and Kuwait was always a lower priority to fielding of new gun truck technology. However, Common User Land Transportation (CULT) missions out of Kuwait delivered anything anywhere in Iraq and Kuwait-based convoys rarely had enough gun trucks add more than a one-to-ten ratio when traveling north of Scania. The shortage of escort platforms and personnel to man them was always an issue to fielding more gun trucks with the Transportation Group based in Kuwait.

The gun truck to task vehicle ratio was based upon escort vehicles and by 2005, the escorts usually came from a different company than the line haul trucks. Some commanders like LTC David Gaffney, Commander of the 457th Transportation Battalion at LSA Anaconda from 2004 to 2005, required the convoy commander and assistant convoy commander bring HMMWV gun trucks, which improved the ratio to closer to one-to-four. Clearly, the drivers wanted more gun trucks if they could field them, but the availability of gun trucks was always

the limiting factor on how many convoys the Kuwait-based Transportation Group (and later Sustainment Brigade) could put on the road at any one time.

During the “Surge” of 2007, MNC-I increased the convoys from 20 to 30 vehicles and the number of gun trucks increased from four to six, because six gun trucks provided greater flexibility to organize the convoy. The Kuwait-based convoys also saw the use for an extra gun truck, but increased the number of prime haulers to 40 in order to add the fourth gun truck. So those convoys still ran with the gun truck ratio of one-to-ten.¹²

The convoy ratio was significantly different in Afghanistan. By the summer of 2006, the US Army doubled the size of its brigades in Afghanistan without increasing the number of aviation brigades. Consequently, the Army began conducting ground convoy operations. Because of the threat and lack of a quick reaction force, the gun truck ratio started out at one-to-one but by 2009 decreased to one-to-two. This still did not deter the enemy from ambushing convoys as illustrated by the TK Ambush on 29 July 2009. Ground convoys were not the primary means of distribution in Afghanistan so the convoys remained small allowing for a better gun truck ratio.

Studies of both the Vietnam and Iraq Wars concurred that no convoy or march serial should exceed 30 vehicles. This did not stop replacement Transportation Group in Kuwait from trying to field 80 to 100-vehicle convoys, but they relearned the same lessons as their predecessors. The convoy interval reduces vulnerability by preventing vehicles from bunching up. Throughout the 20th century, combat and logistics units agreed that a 100-meter interval on the open terrain and 50 meters in urban areas are ideal to reduce the number of vehicles in the kill zone and still maintain control. This was consistent with the convoy interval during the Vietnam War.

The main difference between the lessons of the Vietnam, Iraq and Afghan Wars was the gun truck ratio, and the question was whether the ratio applied to vehicle or number of crew-served weapons. A Vietnam gun truck had three-to-four crew-served weapons while an Iraq or Afghan War gun truck only had one. So the weapon ratio in a Vietnam convoy was more like one-to-three, as compared to the one-to-five with an Iraq War convoy or one-to-two in Afghanistan. This matched

with the one-to-three weapon ratio of ring mounted machineguns during the Korean War. Because convoy serials in Vietnam traveled about five minutes apart, the gun trucks from one serial could quickly reinforce the other, combining five gun trucks in a kill zone with as many as 15 to 20 crew-served weapons. As far as how many machineguns a gun truck needs, one should ask if caught in a kill zone how many machineguns would one want? The answer should be as many as possible. Most ambushes in Vietnam ended when either the tanks or APCs arrived from the security check point or five gun trucks gathered into the kill zone. The lesson of the Vietnam ambushes was that overwhelming fire power ended the fight. As a minimum, a convoy should have one-to-ten ratio of gun trucks to task vehicles, one-to-three is more ideal, and one-to-one is best. Since the purpose of the gun trucks is to provide immediate security until the nearest combat force can take over the fight, the ratio depends a lot on the threat and availability of a quick reaction force.

Organization of the convoy and placement of the gun trucks varied depending upon the enemy tactics so this was more of a technique, but generally their placement should be front, center and rear, but more than three gun trucks offers variety. The author found two examples of “super convoys” in Iraq. Super convoys consisted of several convoys combined as march serials into one large convoy, which provided a much greater combat capability.

During the Indian Wars when convoys rolled across the vast open prairie or desert, they had an advance guard usually consisting of a small cavalry company to search for any possible ambush, the main body escorted by either infantry or cavalry to defend the convoy, and a rear guard to react to any threat from the flank or rear. Often, Indian scouts screened the front and flanks for enemy scouts, and followed behind to police up the rear. This convoy had to be self-contained because of the absence of any other support as the convoy advanced from outpost to outpost. In a modern operating environment, the different branches of the Army provided the three organizations of a convoy. The MPs provided route security, which operated similar to the advance guard while the Engineer sweep teams searched for mines and explosives along the route. The gun trucks provided the internal security to the main

body. The combat arms provided the quick reaction force similar to the rear guard depending upon how fast they could respond to an attack. The war in Iraq provided some refinements to this convoy structure.

LTC William H. Adams, Commander of the 143rd Combat Sustainment Support Battalion (CSSB) at Camp Speicher, Iraq, realized that convoy operations were combat operations, and second, he knew that the role of his staff was to provide the convoys everything the convoy needed, but not control them. LTC Adams instructed his S3, CPT Cory Olmstead, "Cory, what can we bring to the fight to help the soldiers?" Right after the battalion completed its transfer of authority (TOA) on 14 September 2006 and before the old companies departed, LTC Adams and CPT Olmstead held a meeting with all the convoy commanders and asked what they needed. They wanted aviation support, to move during the day, get the roads cleared of IEDs, and an offensive mindset from the top down.¹³

CPT Olmstead then did a lot of leg work to find air support. First he walked over to the 82nd Aviation Brigade and asked for support. They informed him they were direct support (DS) aviation to the ground combat troops and recommended he find the general support (GS) aviation. He located the 25th Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB) which had OH58Ds and could provide general support to the convoys. In fact they did not have very many missions and were waiting for work. So Cory talked captain-to-captain and picked up nearly daily aviation support for his convoys. They only flew a window of five hours so they could not cover every mission.

CPT Todd Minarich arrived in Balad, Iraq with the 1034th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion in 2006 and similarly asked for Apache escorts for his convoys. It just seemed logical and worked. It was not always available due to other missions, but when it was, no convoy was hit by anything other than a victim detonated IED.

This was important because the author had proposed to the 457th Transportation Battalion back in March 2005 because the lesson from Vietnam was that any convoy that ran with air cover of any kind did not get hit, but LTC Gaffney turned it down. Probably because there was a shortage of aviation assets in Iraq, no unit asked for routine air cover until late 2006. To everyone's pleasant surprise, convoys with air cover did not even

get hit by IEDs. Evidently the trigger men had watched all the infrared videos of helicopters killing enemy in the night and feared ending up as "thermal splatter" on some Youtube video. This success created a demand for air cover by other units.¹⁴

CPT Olmstead also tried to coordinate support with the battle space owner, but the battle captains of the 82nd Airborne Division said their units were too busy. Cory still wanted to provide some kind of overwatch and offensive capability. So instead he considered using his D Troop, 4th Cavalry in this role. Because of the shortage of assets, the cavalry escorted convoys continuously with little down time. CPT Olmstead and LTC Adams realized a convoy was a combat maneuver element.¹⁵

CPT Olmstead then talked to the 1st Engineers that provided the time and place where they conducted their IED sweeps. He then scheduled the convoys to depart right behind the EID sweeps. This would reduce the opportunity of any Iraqi setting up an IED between the time the Engineer sweep team passed and convoy arrived. It did require the convoys to travel at a slower pace. CPT Olmstead also started attending the Target Areas of Interest (TAI) meetings to predict most likely areas the convoys would get hit.¹⁶

CPT Olmstead then combined the convoys for the night into what he called "super convoys" or "mutually supported convoys." It consisted of three or more regular 30-vehicle convoys with their separate convoy commanders under the overall supervision of a platoon leader. Each march serial was separated by a 5 to 15 minute interval following about 15 minutes behind the Engineer sweep team. In the event any element was ambushed, the gun trucks from another could converge in the kill zone and maximize fire power as gun trucks had done during the Vietnam War.¹⁷

Because Coalition Force Land Component Command, 13th Sustainment Command (Expeditionary) (the term for the former Corps Support Command) and civilian contract convoys required a specific ratio of gun trucks to task vehicle, most convoys rolled with the bare minimum. This left them little flexibility to drop gun trucks off to respond to problems and still permit the convoy to continue on to its destination. If a convoy halted to detain a couple of kids digging alongside the road or wait for the medevac and vehicle recovery teams to relieve them of their casualties or damaged vehicles

(which happened on a convoy the author rode on), it had a long wait. Any time a convoy halted on a road in Iraq it became vulnerable to attack. Most of the ambushes the author studied during his 2007 trip to Iraq were hasty ambushes that took place after a convoy had delayed for about 20 minutes. So had the 143rd CSSB added extra gun trucks in the convoy, they could have waited for the relief of detainees or wounded while the convoy rolled on to its destination behind the Engineer sweep team. Another battalion out west, however, did come up with a concept for a completely self-sustained super convoy.¹⁸

After the April Uprising of 2004, BG James Chambers, 13th COSCOM Commander, had opened up the western route by the end of the year to bring in supplies from Jordan so as not to depend upon a single supply line out of Kuwait. He established an escort battalion at Al Asaad in the Anbar Province of Western Iraq. Since there were no forward operating bases (FOB) to provide infantry or MP support along the western route, the convoy had to take its own route reconnaissance, recovery and quick reaction force (QRF).

The 1-133rd Infantry (IA NG) arrived in March 2006 and organized the escort mission to the Jordanian border into three elements. The Forward Security Element (FSE) consisted of six gun trucks and sometimes an LMTV 5-ton cargo truck. The main body escort had up to 200 contract trucks divided into two serials of 100 vehicles per serial each with the mandatory one-to-ten gun truck ratio. The 133rd Infantry averaged about 133 commodity trucks and the 2-504th, which replaced it on 11 July 2007, averaged about 169 but had escorted as many as 226 commodity trucks. Each convoy required two separate companies to escort the serials. Since there was no battle space owner, the convoy had to provide its own quick reaction force (QRF), a maneuver force that consisted of three recovery vehicles escorted by six gun trucks. The 2-504th changed it to six gun trucks under one platoon leader, and the recovery team consisted of the command and control element, a recovery section of three gun trucks, one PLS truck and one recovery vehicle. The 2-504th preferred to load any disabled vehicle on a PLS truck since the distances they traveled were too long to tow a vehicle. Consequently, the entire convoy could stretch 30 to 50 kilometers.¹⁹

The first leg of the four-day cycle drove 225 miles and took 10 to 14 hours to reach Camp Korean Village

(CKV). CKV was a forward camp with six soldiers from the battalion: intelligence analysts and operations analysts to provide the latest intelligence under the direction of an officer. The 1-133rd Infantry placed a major in charge of the team because their battalion had an excess of majors, but the 2-504th put a captain in charge. The battalion also added a five-man maintenance team to fix any mechanical problems on the convoy. On Day 2, the convoy drove along ASR Mobile to Trebil on the border to pick up loaded trucks, drop off empties and then return to CKV. The 118-mile round trip took three hours and 45 minutes. The border inspections, however, caused delays. There was a nine-soldier quality assurance team to inspect the contract trucks to make sure the vehicles were mechanically sound enough to complete the entire trip. On Day 3, the convoy returned but at the "TQ Split" one half the convoy headed back to Al Asaad, completing a three-day mission, and the other half with half the escorts and the recovery team headed down ASR Long Island to al Taqaddum (TQ), a 236-mile journey that took an average driving time of three hours and 45 minutes to complete. On Day 4, the last convoy returned to Al Asaad completing the journey in four hours and 53 minutes. The reason the return trip took so long is that they drove down ASR Uranium, an unimproved road. The convoys took this route because ASR Bronze passed through towns.²⁰

Essentially, the 133rd Infantry had reinvented the 19th century convoy organization with the advance guard (route security), main body and rear guard (QRF). The air cover of the 143rd CSSB filled the role of the Indian scouts screening out around the convoy. So even though the MPs have doctrinal responsibility for route security and the combat arms has reasonability for rear area security which includes the quick reaction force and recovery, if neither is available then the convoy should provide its own. The advance guard should consist of vehicles that can accelerate rapidly to screen the road ahead to identify potential problems in order to give the convoy commander time to properly react. In the event the convoy is hit, the route security can either provide security for the rally point or provide a reaction force to the front part of the convoy. Doctrinally, a gun truck should never be sent out alone. So gun trucks should, as a minimum, work in pairs so that if one is disabled, the other can secure it. The Raven 42 route security element

during the Palm Sunday Ambush effectively operated in a team of three HMMWV gun trucks. The same with the two gun trucks of the 178 Route Security Element (RSE) during the ASR Heart Firefight. While the organization of the main body of a convoy seemed simple enough with march serials not exceeding 30 vehicles with a minimum gun truck ratio of one-to-ten, the scout element and rear guard needed more explanation.

Scouting

In 2003, the 181st Transportation Battalion at Anaconda, Iraq initially adopted the Rat Patrol/Tiger Team concept developed by MAJ Dean Dominique in that two gun trucks would scout out ahead of a convoy looking for ambushes and blocking traffic, the inspiration for future convoy scout teams. By April 2004, the 7th Transportation Battalion had improved on the 181st Transportation Battalion's convoy doctrine by reducing the size of convoys to less than 30 vehicles and increasing the number of gun trucks to five for a one-to-five gun truck to task vehicle ratio and, ideally, one-to-four. This moved the gun trucks to the main body of the convoy where they were evenly spaced out very similar to the Vietnam doctrine.²¹

By 2006, battalions across Iraq began pushing out the lead gun truck, often called the "rat," as a scout vehicle. Kuwait-based battalions, with fewer gun trucks, realized that bigger trucks were more survivable, especially the HET, and pushed them out ahead as the lead vehicle looking to initiate or discover the IED or ambush. The second vehicle was the "pace" vehicle which set the pace for the rest of the convoy. After the start of the "Surge" in 2006, MNC-I increased the size of the convoys to add six gun trucks, they initially spaced them evenly throughout the convoy. The primary threat became energy formed projectile (EFP) so the enemy then began targeting the lead gun trucks. In response, convoys placed two gun trucks up front so the second could provide security for the first in the event it was hit. In March 2007, the enemy hit the "pace" gun truck to see what the scout gun truck would do. Realizing it would drive down the road alone to provide security for the rally point, the enemy then set up a secondary kill zone for the lead gun truck. So the convoys added a third gun truck to the front: two scouts and one pace. This way, two gun trucks could run forward as a team to establish

the rally point. The enemy then shifted their attacks to the last gun truck and the Iraq-based convoys, because of their higher gun truck ratio, moved a second gun truck to the rear of the convoy. Essentially, the convoys were creating an advance and rear guard but at the expense of security for the main body.²²

LTC Chris Croft's 106th Transportation Battalion, which assumed the convoy escort mission at Anaconda in 2007, also sent out a small overwatch element a short distance ahead of the convoy with great success in disrupting up the enemy's ambush, but his brigade commander later disapproved of sending it out as a separate overwatch element. LTC Croft instilled an offensive mindset resulting in the innovation of a number of concepts. A Company, 3-144th Infantry (TX NG) developed a unique concept for convoy security - snipers. Knowing the battle space owner did not have the resources to defend every inch of the supply routes, the infantry company proposed sending out a sniper team ahead to overwatch the most likely areas they would be hit. Unfortunately, the brigade commander did not permit the 106th Battalion to send out any gun trucks ahead of the convoys, so the infantry integrated snipers into their convoys. They were still successfully able to spot and kill an IED trigger man. Snipers, when appropriately employed, provided a tremendous combat multiplier. The use of air support increased and convoys that had some form of air support flying overhead usually did not get hit. Just as during the Vietnam War, the enemy seemed to fear being seen and hit from the air.²³

By 2008, after the success of the "Surge," nearly all convoys north of the Iraqi-border returned to only two gun trucks up front. With the route between Anaconda and Tikrit a the major hotspot, convoys running north reverted back to the Tiger Team concept where the two lead gun trucks acted as scouts, one providing overwatch while the lead gun truck scouted most likely ambush areas. This was very similar to the point-man team in the infantry in Vietnam. The point man searched for trip wires and signs of ambushes from eye level down, while his "slack" searched eyelevel and above as well as kept the pace count and direction. Kuwait-based convoys put a HET followed by a HMMWV gun truck up front. The lead HET was similar to the point man out front searching for the enemy. The gun truck behind it with the MTS was similar to the slack man or compass

man. It also protected the lead vehicle in case it was hit. The lead task vehicle in the convoy was the pace setter, which was the same as the pace man in a patrol. The rest of the convoy was organized just like a patrol also with the patrol leader, aid and litter team, landing zone party and assistant patrol leader. Convoys were combat operations.

Military convoys in Afghanistan employed a slightly different method with the two lead gun trucks. The lead scout vehicle would patrol ahead of the slower moving convoy and scout to the next terrain feature where it would wait in an overwatch position until the lead gun truck of the main body came within sight and then it would bound to the next terrain feature, using what the mechanized infantry referred to as the traveling overwatch movement technique. Essentially, the same methods that have worked for the dismounted infantry or cavalry heading down a trail in column formation work for convoys. Generally the crews of the scout vehicles were the best of the units.

The most successful scouts were those that were the best at spotting IEDs or ambushes before their convoys entered the kill zone. The author discovered two such units throughout the war; the 1032nd Transportation Company (VA NG) during OIF 1 and the 799th Maintenance Company during OIF 3. The common factor in each scout element was their degree of situational awareness. SFC Kelvin B. Davenport, 1032nd, was in law enforcement by profession. When tasked to form a scout element, he selected men with law enforcement backgrounds or proven good judgment under fire. The trait he was looking for was situational awareness; men who could identify trouble merely by body language of the pedestrians.²⁴

Similarly, SFC John A. Wolitski, 799th Maintenance Company 2005 to 2006, also served in law enforcement by profession. Surprisingly, he did not select his scouts from soldiers with law enforcement experience, but from soldiers with good situational awareness during the IED lane training and soldiers who had demonstrated good decision making abilities. Wolitski's scouts roamed 1,500 to 2,000 meters ahead of the convoy, which would give the convoy time to stop and still maintain its proper interval. He bragged that his convoys were never hit while others in MND - West were. The lesson is that the scout elements should not come from any particular

branch, but individuals who go through selection and training by civilian law enforcement, with added training in identification of IEDs and ambushes.²⁵

Conversely the mission of the lead HET was to set off IEDs and was a position of great responsibility, risk and pride since only a few drivers wanted the job. SPC Wesley Rhoads boasted he earned the position of lead HET driver because he was the best HET driver in the 24th Transportation Company during 2007 and 2008. He took great pride in driving the lead HET. SGT Dan Snyder had been his truck commander and was on his third tour driving in Iraq. Everyone has their limit of combat, IEDs or fights. It is a magical number that no one knows until they reach it and then they are done. SGT Snyder reached his limit of IEDs on the night of 19 September 2007 when his HET was hit by an IED driving into Tikrit and another driving out. Two IEDs in one night was enough for him so he returned to driving a truck in the main body of the convoy. Rhoads kept driving until he shot his mouth off to his convoy commander and was busted back to driving for the convoy commander. Driving for the convoy commander was usually reward for being a good driver, but in this case it was Rhoads' punishment. For many drivers being assigned to the lead HET would have been punishment, but for Rhoads it would have been his reward. One driver's reward could be another's punishment.²⁶

Rear Guard

During the Vietnam War, the minimum trail party consisted of a maintenance or recovery vehicle, gun truck and command and control vehicle. Recovery vehicles could have been either a wrecker or bobtail. After a while, the maintenance vehicle was replaced by a maintenance gun truck that carried spare tires, batteries and belts to make quick repairs on the spot. Recovery, security, and command and control were also the three main elements the 133rd had identified it needed in its rear guard. Most convoys in Iraq, similar to Vietnam, just had the minimum, a gun truck, some bobtails for recovery and maybe a command and control vehicle.

At best, the rear guard should consist of a reaction force that can reinforce the main body and possibly flank the enemy. That is why it travels a safe distance behind the convoy. There were a couple of times during the Vietnam War where the security force had responded to

a decoy ambush but were in a position to more rapidly respond to the main ambush. The rear guard can either be gun trucks or tactical wheeled vehicles. Gun trucks are restricted to the roads and have limited avenues with which to flank the ambush while dismounted infantry or tactical wheeled vehicles can do this over a greater variety of terrain. There is an inherent danger of the rear guard consisting of infantry riding in unarmored cargo trucks if the enemy is looking for an increased body count. The infantry passengers would provide the enemy a better target than the cargo or fuel trucks. The infantry, however, provide an ability to dismount and flank the enemy using terrain. They do not need to stay with the convoy once they had dismounted. The US Marine Corps preferred to have tanks and infantry mounted in cargo trucks escort their convoys during the Vietnam War. Historically, the truck companies in the Army have had to resort to internal gun trucks because there has never been enough infantry to go around and most infantry commanders prefer to hunt for the enemy rather than defend convoys.

Part of what has held up the official establishment of any doctrine on convoy security was the inability of everyone to agree on a doctrine. The answer to the two key issues of internal versus external escorts, or passive and aggressive tactics were actually related. While some claimed the purpose of the gun truck was to just get the convoy out of the kill zone and defend any disabled vehicles in the kill zone; others believed that unless the gun truck made the enemy pay a price for ambushing the convoy, they would have no incentive to stop. The answer was actually both tactics work. The problem has been looking at the escort as just one element instead of three: scout, main body, and a follow-on maneuver element. The main body should employ passive tactics while the maneuver elements employ aggressive tactics.²⁷

To understand the need for three elements within a convoy, one must understand the frustration convoys had with the battle space owners. The maneuver unit that has had responsibility for the battle space the convoys passed through has also had responsibility to defend the routes. Because there were just not enough maneuver assets for the battle space owner to cover everything, the enemy tended to attack in areas not covered. Convoy commanders also admitted they tended

to get hit by IEDs in the same locations with great regularity. Some commanders, of groups and battalions responsible for convoy operations, also expressed the lack of support by the battle space owner to defend the main and alternate supply routes. Those that expressed success in getting the battle space owner to move his forces to the areas of attacks have done it by showing clear patterns of attacks on convoys in those areas.

That meant the convoys had to be attacked several times in the same area before the combat arms repositioned their limited resources to defend the area. The enemy then just picked another unguarded section of the route to attack. Consequently, it would be more economical to provide the convoys a maneuver element of their own, allowing them the offensive capability to fight or fix the enemy until the nearest quick reaction force arrives.²⁸

One officer came up with various option for mixing these elements. After the 734th Transportation Battalion assumed responsibility for convoy escort out of LSA Anaconda in September 2006, CPT Nicholas M. Breen, the 734th Transportation Battalion support plans officer, met with CPT Sandor, commander of outgoing C Battery, 1-17th Field Artillery; CPT Matt Snell, Commander of B Company, 1-16th Infantry; and CPT Carta, 1-34th Brigade Combat Team that the 1-133rd Infantry fell under, to discuss the idea of a maneuver element shadowing the main body of convoys. CPT Breen (TC), a former cavalry officer, called the concept, "Roving Shadows," because each follow-on maneuver element would follow a convoy like its shadow. Their idea would beef-up the lead element of three to four vehicles serving as scouts with another force serving as the rear guard. By then, most units just pushed one gun truck out forward as a scout. The idea was that each forward and trail element could act as a separate maneuver force able to attack and flank any ambushers while the gun trucks defending the main body could focus on clearing the kill zone. These officers believed that just returning fire and clearing the kill zone was not discouraging the enemy from attacking convoys. CPT Breen refined the idea into three courses of action based upon availability of resources.²⁹

- COA 1 was to attach a shadow element to all convoys. This, of course, was the ideal situation providing

each convoy a maneuver capability. However, it required additional personnel and gun trucks. This was actually the way convoys were conducted during the Indian Wars. The troopers of Troop D, 4th Cavalry had also pressed this idea of a maneuver element with their higher, the 143rd CSSB.³⁰

- COA 2 was to attach shadow elements to random convoys. This was an economy of force option, if there were not enough shadow forces to follow each convoy. Raven 42 of the 617th MP Company employed this concept during the Palm Sunday Ambush on 20 March 2005. The MPs, who normally patrolled this sector of road, were shadowing a southbound convoy down ASR Detroit when about 50 Iraqi insurgents ambushed the southbound convoy and a northbound convoy. The worst case scenario occurred and both convoys stopped in the kill zone. Although both of the convoys had their own escorts of three gun trucks each, they were committed to defending the halted convoys. The enemy had every intention of capturing drivers as they had a year before during the Good Friday Ambush of the 724th POL on 9 April 2004. The turning point in the battle came when the three MP HMMWV gun trucks raced into the kill zone and flanked the enemy by turning down an access road. The combination of passive and aggressive tactics resulted in 26 enemy killed and six wounded.³¹

- COA 3 proposed to establish roving patrols in known areas of interest. This was another economy of force option in which there were only a few shadow elements. This was very similar to the route security element (RSE) started by the 106th Transportation Battalion on 1 January 2005, as a result of increased enemy activity just across the Iraq - Kuwait border. While this area belonged to the British sector, they did not have the resources to patrol the area closest to the border. Consequently, the 106th Battalion Commander, LTC James Sagen, formed the RSE out of veterans of the 518th Gun Truck Company and had it patrol the route his convoys traveled. The RSE uncovered several planned ambushes and disrupted a number of attempted hijackings. On 30 January 2005, a northbound HET convoy halted, due to a number of flat tires caused by road spikes, near the overpass where the RSE set up on overwatch. The convoy then came under attack, and the

RSE raced to render additional fire power. The convoy returned fire, and once it had all its personnel accounted for it departed. The RSE returned to the overwatch position on the bridge. A short while later, the RSE came under attack by Iraqis approaching up the on-ramp. The RSE then overwhelmed the attacking force and captured nine Iraqis. A platoon - sized British quick reaction force from the 2nd Prince of Wales Regiment arrived just before more Iraqis attacked. As the combined force of eight tactical vehicles defended the on-ramp, some Iraqis maneuvered to the high ground. At that time the RSE's quick reaction force arrived on the high ground thus flanking the enemy. The forces increased piecemeal until the British reinforced with a company. The combined RSE and British quick reaction force provided the base of fire, while the British Armored Company assaulted the flank. This severe punishment of enemy aggression ended the threat of complex ambushes near the Kuwaiti border for a long time, and the replacing battalions continued the route security element. Neither course of action was accepted.³²

Nearly every branch of the US Army, including the US Air Force, provided companies as "in lieu of" truck companies, and every branch had a different culture making some better for different missions. CPT Olmstead wanted to use Troop D, 4th Cavalry as the maneuver force. In March 2007, the author observed cavalry units serving as escort companies for the first time. The combat arms units that served as escorts complained the most about not being allowed to go after the enemy. They had to be reminded that their mission was to get the convoy to its destination and not close with and destroy the enemy. The cavalry, unlike the infantry, were primarily a mounted force. While they may dismount to fight, they would always come back to their vehicles. Route clearance was part of the Cavalry's mission.³³

Troop D, 4th Cavalry served as convoy escorts, but chomped at the bit to take the offensive. After an IED detonated, 1LT Ed Pluciennik took his gun trucks and cordoned off a building that he was convinced the spotter/trigger man was hiding in. He turned the area over to the quick reaction force who then captured the trigger man. Pluciennik admitted the best gun truck escort for the main body should be truck drivers, since they know what trucks can do. Likewise he claimed

the cavalry was probably the best unit to serve as the maneuver element because this was more in line with their mission. The cavalry was definitely the better maneuver element for the open desert, but an augmentation of infantry would be better for urban environments. In this case, either Strykers or LLNL gun boxes would make good insertion platforms for the infantry accompanying convoys.³⁴

A conclusion was that convoy escorts for the main body should employ passive tactics and clear the kill zone while the rear guard, which shadows the convoy, employs aggressive tactics to punish the enemy. Since school trained drivers (88M) better understand the capabilities of the trucks in the convoy and have a loyalty to the other drivers, convoy commanders prefer internal escorts, who belong to their companies, for the main body. The advance and rear guard should come from the infantry and cavalry.

Any progress toward this convoy organization seemed limited by the availability of gun truck assets and the reluctance of senior commanders with a defensive mindset. After the Palm Sunday Ambush of March 2005, the battlefield threat did not require an offensive mindset; and with increased armor, the defensive tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) seemed to suffice against the increasing IED threat. However, the defensive mindset would not be sufficient to counter ambushes like those convoys faced on Good Friday, 2004.³⁵

Command, control and communication unity of command is paramount, but throughout history there has been a separate convoy commander and escort commander. So who does history say has authority over both? During the 19th century, the escort commander had overall responsibility. There was no separate Quartermaster branch so Quartermaster officers were merely line officers detailed to the position and most tactical commanders had experience with wagon transportation. With the exception of the 48th Transportation Group in Long Binh during the Vietnam War, there was no separate escort commander since the gun trucks fell under the control of the convoy commander. Since the 48th Transportation Group initially did not allow gun trucks, their convoys depended upon the combat maneuver units in the area for convoy security. A 1971 report had the provost marshal flying

overhead responsible for convoy security until the maneuver unit arrived and then it took control of the convoy in case of an ambush. The problem arose during the war in Iraq where the convoy commander and escorts came from different units. Generally the convoy commander had control of the convoy until it made contact with the enemy and then the escort commander took over. The Palm Sunday Ambush is a good example of no battle handoff and consequently the convoy sat in the kill zone for 20 minutes before trucks started moving. The best person take command of the convoy is the one who understands the mission better depending upon the situation, but this has to be agreed upon either by policy or not before the convoy takes the road.

Because most combat maneuver commanders do not understand the capabilities and limitations of most of the vehicles in the convoy and think in terms of closing with and destroying the enemy, the transportation officer or NCO should have authority over both the convoy and its escort. This has been a tough pill for field grade officers of the combat arms units to swallow, but too many problems have arisen with combat arms escorts during OIF. For various reasons, they tended to leave the convoys unprotected when contact was made with the enemy. The combat maneuver vehicles tend to drive slowly when they should drive faster. When the two commands worked together for the common goal of protecting the convoy all the way to its destination, they were usually successful. For example the convoy commanders praised the support of the US Marines during the April Uprising of 2004. The key to maneuver commanders taking command of the convoy is knowing the capabilities and limitations of the vehicles in the convoy and never forgetting their mission is to deliver the cargo, not fight the enemy.

To successfully maneuver in a kill zone, elements need to be able to communicate. During the Vietnam War, it took about a year to get radios for every gun truck. Lucky convoy commanders had two radios, one to talk with the security force defending the road and another to talk with the gun trucks. The lesson of every contingency or war after Vietnam was that every truck needed some form of communications.

By the April Uprising in 2004, this came close to a reality. There was an unintended consequence of this though. Without truck drivers trained in radio

discipline or combat terminology, the different networks became cluttered with noise and the commanders became overwhelmed with processing the high volume of information. During the Palm Sunday Ambush on 20 March 2005, the convoy commander was not able to talk with his subordinates because of the excited drivers talking on the radio. By 2005, most convoy commanders had double stacked SINCGARS radios, one to talk with the military drivers and escort and the Sheriff net to talk with the units responsible for support in the area of operation. They also had either a Citizen Band (CB) or Motorola radios to talk with the contract drivers and an internal head set to talk with the crew of their gun trucks. Over the next few years, the Army issued all trucks radios. During an ambush, this could easily result in information overload. During the ambush of 20 April 1971, 2LT Jim Baird kept his radio transmissions brief telling the gun trucks only what they needed to know. He had total confidence that they would do the right thing. He only spoke one more time upon the arrival of the gun truck, King Kong to inform the crew that the enemy had infiltrated the ditch near him. Since convoys have become combat operations, every truck needs radios to synchronize activity during an ambush. Convoy personnel also need the same training in radio discipline as their maneuver counterparts.

Internal or External Gun Trucks

During the Vietnam War, most truck companies kept their gun trucks internal to the company. They operated on the premise that no one would defend a truck driver better than another truck driver, especially when the gun truck crews had to return to the same barracks as the men they escorted. In some cases, the Vietnam truck companies might consolidate the gun trucks into a single platoon, but they still remained in the company. The 8th Transportation Group once consolidated gun trucks into a single company but quickly went back to internal gun trucks. The 48th Transportation Group at Long Binh was the last motor transport group to adopt gun trucks and consolidated theirs into a single gun truck company during the last two years of the war.

During the second Gulf War, gun trucks were often consolidated into escort companies for standardization of platforms, standard operating procedures (SOP), tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP), and

simplification of training and maintenance. This way the maintenance was reduced to one type of task vehicle and command and control vehicles. In the effort to reduce the simplicity of command responsibility by consolidating gun trucks into escort companies, there was an unforeseen risk.

Whether by design or by accident, convoy security was taken from Transportation Corps units and given to the Infantry, Armor, Cavalry or Field Artillery battalions. In Kuwait, successive Transportation Battalions consolidated their gun truck assets into convoy escort companies for simplification in training and maintenance, and standardization of tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP). In 2004, the 1-178th Field Artillery assumed the consolidated escort mission for the transportation group operating in Kuwait. Still truck companies in the two other battalions created their own internal escorts. These were later consolidated into single escort companies in the battalions. For the 2008 rotation, the National Guard sent battalions with the warning that if the companies were broken up and piecemealed to other battalions, the states would not send any more units to Iraq. The Ohio National Guard deployed the 1-126th Cavalry and the 1-148th Infantry to Kuwait. The 1-126th Cavalry replaced the 1-160th Infantry at Camp Virginia, which had been a consolidated escort battalion since 2004; however, three companies of 1-148th Infantry replaced the convoy escort companies of the 10th and 1144th Transportation Battalions at Arifjan, Kuwait thus taking the escort mission from the line-haul battalions. The 10th had one remaining escort company as it had consolidated its gun truck platoons under its HHC for training and maintenance, but the platoons only escorted their companies.

In December 2008, the 29th Brigade Combat Team (BCT) deployed from Hawaii to Arifjan with all three battalions. The 299th Cavalry replaced the 148th Infantry at Camp Arifjan; the 100-442nd Infantry replaced the 126th Cavalry at Camp Virginia; and the 487th Field Artillery assumed the security force mission at Camp Buerhing, Kuwait. Since the battalions deployed with their brigade headquarters, the escort battalions were pulled from the 4th Sustainment Brigade (SB) and placed under the control of the 29th Brigade Combat Team. So for the first time, the logistics brigade

headquarters responsible for convoy operations no longer provided command and control of the escort battalions. The 4th Sustainment Brigade had to task the 29th Brigade Combat Team for assets. Consequently, the 4th Sustainment Brigade required each of the two truck battalions to build internal escort assets and the battalions tapped into external escorts only after they had exhausted their internal assets.

By 2009, nearly all the convoy escort battalions in Iraq were maneuver units. Only the 10th Sustainment Brigade at Taji, Iraq did not have a maneuver escort battalion. The 1-185th Armor escorted 16th Sustainment Brigade convoys in MND-North. The 2-142nd Infantry and 1-303rd Cavalry escorted 371st Sustainment Brigade convoys in MND-West. The 3-133rd Field Artillery escorted 287th Sustainment Brigade convoys in MND-Southeast, and the 1-161st Infantry escorted 304th Sustainment Brigade convoys out of Balad, Iraq. The 1-161st Infantry replaced the 293rd Infantry in November 2008, which had replaced the 106th Transportation Battalion in March 2008. That was the first time the mission of convoy escort at Balad/Anaconda was taken from a transportation battalion. The mission of convoy escort in MND-West was tasked to maneuver units since the 1-34th Brigade Combat Team had arrived in 2006.

Most company commanders, if given a choice, preferred internal escorts to external escorts. There were several cases in which the escorts and convoy commanders did not even talk to each other during attacks. In one case where a tractor and trailer had been damaged by an IED on ASR Sword, the convoy commander was in a dead space and could not reach the battle space owner, so he relayed messaged through Mobile Tracking System (MTS) back to his battalion tactical operations center in Kuwait, completely unaware that his escorts had radio contact with the battle space owner. Some convoy commanders also complained that when they rolled into the gate of their destination for the day, the escorts peeled off like fighter aircraft during a bombing raid not to be seen until they were ready to roll out the gate the next day. Yet there was still a lot of coordination needed by the convoy before the drivers could bed down and the more maneuverable escorts could have been very helpful. The bond of commitment between the convoy and their escorts is critical to

teamwork and success. This can be best facilitated by keeping the gun trucks in the companies they escort.

Standard Operation Procedures

The key to success as a fighting unit is cohesion and team work. Standard Operation Procedures (SOP) or Tactical Standard Operation Procedures (TACSOP) provide rules by which units adhere to minimize risk and ensure everyone performs the same way in combat thus reducing as much chaos as possible. The SOPs and TACSOPs included battle drills, and many of the battle drills in Iraq, such as how to block an intersection or box up at the rally point, were developed by Military Professionals Recourses, Inc. (MPRI) at Udari Range. MPRI borrowed these from units in the field and changed them accordingly. For example by 2005, the convoys abandoned the box formation at the rally point but just pulled off to the side of the road so they could rapidly depart once personnel and equipment were accounted for, recovered and medevaced if necessary. Another policy that changed over time in Iraq was abandoning disabled vehicles. Initially, when the threat was greater, if a disabled vehicle could not be recovered within a given amount of time, it was set afire and abandoned; but as the threat of complex ambush diminished, Multi-National Corps - Iraq (MNC-I) would no longer allow convoys to abandon vehicles on the road. So during both the Vietnam and Iraq Wars, SOPs evolved over time because of new experience or changes in the enemy threat.

Ambush after ambush during the Vietnam War taught that superior and accurate firepower determined the victor. After the element of surprise was lost, the safety of the remaining vehicles and crews depended upon whether the convoy could mass superior firepower against the enemy. The question of how many weapons a gun truck must have or how many gun trucks should escort a convoy depends upon the worst case ambush scenario that the enemy can present. During a Good Friday Ambush of 2004 in Baghdad, Iraq, the 724th POL convoy ran through two kill zones, one deliberate and one hasty, that stretched for several miles. Five gun trucks with one crew - served weapon each was clearly not enough since the convoy lost seven out of 19 fuel tankers, lost seven contract drivers killed, two military and one civilian driver captured. While this

study examined the actions and results during convoy ambushes, there were claims during both Vietnam and Iraq that a well-armed and well-disciplined convoy deterred the enemy from attacking it. More gun trucks and weapons pointing out of the vehicles possibly intimidated the enemy and forced them to select weaker targets. During OIF 1 and 2, this was called the “porcupine effect.” On certain occasions during the Vietnam War when the probability of attack was high, the 8th Transportation Group sent out convoys of entirely gun trucks. The enemy avoided contact with these “death convoys.” History shows that the deciding factor in any gun fight is always superior and accurate fire power. One can never have enough machineguns in a convoy.

So the next question is what should the trucks and gun trucks do in case of an ambush? The answer depends upon where they are in relation to the kill zone since even a small convoy can stretch for several miles. An ambush will most likely occur in the front, middle or rear of the convoy either stopping the convoy or dividing it. Reaction to an ambush should consist of three possible scenarios, vehicles that have driven past the kill zone, vehicles in the kill zone and vehicles about to drive in the kill zone. Those vehicles that can clear the kill zone should continue to safety, whether it is a “floating rally point,” security check point or military camp. Those that are not in the kill zone should not drive into it and those caught in the kill zone have to fight their way out. There were different ways to do this.

US Marines believed that the best reaction to an ambush was for the drivers to stop, dismount and attack through the kill zone. For any military organization where the primary training was based upon the philosophy that everyone was a rifle man, this reaction would work. In fact LTC Christopher Croft discovered this same attitude with A Company, 3-144th Infantry (TX NG). Croft led the 106th Transportation Battalion to LSA Anaconda, Iraq from 2007 to 2008 and had several branches represented under his battalion and admitted the infantry and cavalry were his best for convoy escort. He embraced an offensive mindset and encouraged his subordinates to explore new ideas. He also admitted he had to reign in those Texas infantrymen because they wanted to leave the convoy and go after the enemy. They were more concerned about fighting the enemy than delivering the cargo.

There are some inherent dangers with this concept. By doctrine, dismounted infantry march with an interval of five to ten meters between them. If caught in an ambush, they are close enough to support each other in an attack on the enemy, but vehicles ideally travel with an interval of 100 meters between them - too far apart for a coordinated infantry assault. Even if the vehicles are bunched up, the length of the vehicles still does not bring the drivers close enough to mount a counter-ambush. As seen in ambushes on Route 19 on 2 September 1967 and at Ap Nhi, Vietnam, on 25 August 1968, the drivers had to fight as infantry; but because of the spacing of the vehicles, they fought isolated battles and defended their trucks. The similar situation happened to the 1075th Medium Truck convoy during the Palm Sunday Ambush on 20 March 2005. The 8th Transportation Group established its SOP that drivers should only dismount and fight if trucks were unable to clear the kill zone. The main advantage that trucks have over dismounted infantry is they can maneuver more rapidly; but as LTC Croft pointed out, their mission was to get the trucks to their destination and not hold it up fixing, fighting and finishing off the enemy threat.

LTC Croft admitted his E Troop, 105th Cavalry had a much better concept for how to fight the enemy as was also seen with the Troop D, 4th Cavalry at Speicher. The cavalry traditionally rides into battle, dismounts to engage the enemy, but not too far from their mounts. As a screening force, they usually fix and fight the enemy until they can hand off the battle to the follow-on infantry and then the cavalry can remount to continue the mission. This is the ideal offensive role for convoy escort; take the fight to the enemy, but do not stray too far from the road or convoy, fix the enemy and then turn the fight over to the battle space owner. In one IED attack, Croft’s cavalry company surrounded the trigger man in a building and kept him pinned down until the battle space owner arrived. The main difference between the infantry and cavalry was the infantry always wanted to finish the fight while the cavalry was just as content to hand off the fight and return to the road.

It is a different case for vehicles disabled in the kill zone since they have their choices narrowed. Drivers of task vehicles can dismount and take up fighting positions behind their trucks or in the cabs if armored. The lesson of Vietnam is that drivers should remain

with their trucks until rescued by passing trucks or gun trucks. Accountability is the problem. If a driver has been rescued by a passing truck escaping the kill zone then they should notify the convoy commander and gun trucks. This will prevent weapons platforms needlessly waiting in the kill zone looking for the driver.

The vehicles that have not entered the kill zone have more options. They can continue to drive through as the 172nd and 1486th Medium Truck convoy did during their ambushes on 9 April 2004. The leaders based their decision on the fact that previous kill zones were only a few hundred meters long and they had the speed to race through it. Under that assumption it would have been more difficult to turn a convoy of tractors and trailers around and head back. This kill zone, however, stretched for over a mile. The decision of the 2123rd HET to take a detour around a disabled vehicle in ad Diwaniyah on 17 April 2004 actually sent them into the kill zone. 1LT DaSilva realized driving through the kill zone was a bad idea during the TK Ambush in Afghanistan on 29 July 2009 and they lost five out of seven MRAP gun trucks damaged or destroyed. Without the ability to turn around, waiting in both cases might just as easily invited attack. While driving through a kill zone is not a good option, sometimes the only other option is to wait to get attacked.

The second choice is to halt and wait for other forces to clear the kill zone. When a convoy escorted by the 518th Gun Truck Company was halted on ASR Sword in Iraq on 18 October 2004, this placed them across from Iraqi insurgents lying in wait. Fortunately for them, the enemy was waiting for the Explosive Ordnance Demolition (EOD) HMMWVs to drive up to disarm the improvised explosive device. Sticking to the plan, the insurgents missed the opportunity to disable a greater number of soft skinned vehicles. After they opened fire on the HMMWV arriving on the overpass, five gun trucks in blocking positions opened fire on the enemy and the one-sided fight ended in a few minutes. The problem with halting is that it makes the convoy a more vulnerable target. Speed is security. It is harder to hit a moving target than a stationary one. The ambush of the 96th HET in Baghdad on Good Friday 2004 illustrates that. The MPs halted a convoy right next to an IED after it had turned around because that was their policy. The delay allowed the insurgents to conduct what

appeared to be a hasty ambush. A similar hasty ambush happened to the recovery convoy blocked by the Koreans at a bridge along Route 19 in Vietnam on the night of 16 December 1970. In most ambushes during the Vietnam War, however, the enemy initiated with the highest casualty producing weapon on a particular vehicle or vehicles in a certain location that would block traffic for the purpose of destroying the remaining vehicles with subsequent fire.

The third option is to turn around and return to the safety of a rally point or compound where the convoy can wait. This may not always be an option if the blocked road is too narrow to allow tractors and trailers to turn around. If halted, the convoy must take up position ready for a hasty ambush. There are any number of defensive formations; however, vehicles bunched up make easy targets for mortars as witnessed during the Iskandariyah ambush of the 172nd and 1486th convoy on Good Friday 2004. The enemy anticipated the vehicles that had escaped the kill zone would drive ahead about a mile to form a box. So the insurgents were waiting for them with a mortar in a dump truck. No one solution works in every situation so the convoy commander has to analyze the best course of action depending upon the enemy capability, safe places to go, and available friendly assets. Be aware that the enemy looks for patterns to predict the reaction of the convoy. Changing the reaction to contact policy can keep the enemy off guard but more often the convoys were reacting to the enemy changes instead of anticipating them.

Regardless of the course of action followed, one rule should always be followed: if the convoy divides, never leave an element of the convoy unprotected. If the lead element of the convoy flees the kill zone, at least one gun truck should accompany that element. As seen in ambushes along Route 19 on 25 January 1968, 8 March 1968, and 9 June 1969, the enemy employed a decoy ambush to draw off the gun trucks in hope of having the convoy drive unprotected into the main kill zone up ahead. There has to be some balance between how long some gun trucks can remain in the kill zone waiting for the infantry and its ability to respond should the convoy encounter another ambush up the road.

During the Iraq War, the major threat changed after the Palm Sunday Ambush of 20 March 2005 from complex ambushes to energy formed projectiles (EFP).

Consequently, tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) changed accordingly. By 2007 senior military leaders became paranoid about casualties, so TTP decisions were being made at the highest levels, based upon the analysis of data, to mitigate loss of life where during the first couple years of the war it was a bottom's up approach to tactical and technical solutions. The top-down directives included the number and type of gun trucks used in each convoy, the uniform, or even how high the gunner could sit in his turret. The emphasis became one of reducing the risk to soldiers.³⁶

Data indicated that shrapnel from IEDs had killed gunners by coming in over the top and through the gap between the gun and turret shield, so both CFLCC in Kuwait and MNC-I in Iraq directed that gunners ride at eyeball defilade, rather than nametag defilade as before. "Eyeball defilade" meant sitting so that only the top of the head extended above the gunner's hatch. While this may have reduced the gunner's desire and ability to watch for ambushes, the reality was that they seldom received small arms fire and were rarely able to return fire. This was because the insurgents lost the majority of their attacking force during the Palm Sunday Ambush on 20 March 2005 and had little success on the few complex ambushes after that. Thus they changed their tactics primarily to IEDs and hasty attacks when a convoy halted for over 20 minutes in a danger area, usually waiting for the engineers to blow an IED up ahead. The gunners, however, liked gunning and trusted their eyes better than any technology for spotting IEDs or kill zones, so they rarely followed this directive. In fact, 80 percent of IEDs were spotted visually.³⁷

While many of these top-down driven directives saved lives, some veterans of the previous deployments, on the other hand, felt their initiative stifled. The one area still left to the imagination of the companies was modification to vehicles. From Kuwait to Iraq, the companies had taken the basic gun truck and added lights, laser designators, thermal sights and moved the electronics around to improve the capability of the platform.³⁸

The units that listened to their subordinates such as the LTC Chuck Maskell's 181st Transportation Battalion at Anaconda in 2003, LTC William H. Adams' 143rd CSSB at Speicher in 2007-2008, or LTC Chris Croft's 106th Transportation Battalion at Anaconda in 2007-2008 led

in innovation. LTC Adams' philosophy, "What can we bring to the fight to help the soldiers?" caused his staff to listen to the suggestions of their companies so much so that the troopers of Troop D, 4th Cavalry claimed to be the inspiration of nearly every good change in convoy doctrine the battalion adopted. LTC Adams admitted the other three companies also helped develop the battalion tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP). These ideas included leaving right behind the engineer sweep teams, combining several small convoys into super convoys and having aviation escort the convoys. Convoy operations in Iraq revealed that the best ideas usually came from the ranks and primarily from the ranks of staff sergeant to sergeant first class – the most experienced leaders doing the work. Staff can come up with good ideas but need the advice of good NCOs with hands-on experience to determine if they are sound.³⁹

Reaction to Enemy Contact

During the Vietnam War, the 8th Transportation Group was the first to develop gun trucks and how to react to contact. Route 19 through the Central Highlands was the most heavily ambushed road in Vietnam, so the convoys of the 8th Group faced the greatest threat. Their policy was for any vehicles in or ahead of the kill zone to drive to the nearest security check point, but vehicles behind the kill zone should halt and establish security. Their policy for how to react if caught in a kill zone was very simple.

If unavoidably stopped in the kill zone, personnel must dismount, take up covered and concealed positions, and lay down a heavy volume of return fire on active enemy targets, staying in close proximity of their vehicles. In no case will convoy personnel close with or attempt to pursue the enemy as this will interfere with the tactical reaction plan. Convoy personnel will cease fire upon arrival of tactical security elements to allow tactical vehicles and personnel freedom of movement against enemy forces. Convoy control personnel will insure that traffic begins to move as soon as the tactical situation permits.

As the gun trucks turned the fight back on the ambushers, the enemy reduced the size of the kill zones to about 100 meters in length. This would allow about two or three vehicles to enter the kill zone and the enemy learned to attack the gun trucks first then any task vehicle in the kill zone, so there were almost always

one or two disabled vehicles beside a gun truck in the kill zone. A mobility kill on a gun truck could still keep laying down suppressive fire while waiting for the arrival of other gun trucks. This led to the new policy of, "Provide flanking support fire into kill zone. Security vehicles apply maximum base of fire; fight as a team; deploy upon command." Basically this translated into all gun trucks racing into the kill zone to provide suppressive fire. The firing method preferred by the gunners of the 8th Group gun trucks was spraying fire where the gunners depressed the butterfly triggers on the M2 .50 caliber machineguns until the 100 - round belt of ammunition was expended. They would then replace the belt and repeat this until they had exhausted four cans of ammunition, then change out barrels to allow the first to cool down. Although the school taught gunners to fire three - to - six round bursts so as not to quickly overheat the barrel, the gunners of the 8th Group could not see the enemy muzzle flashes when they rolled into a kill zone, so not identifying the exact location of the enemy, they just fired in every direction. Three to four .50 caliber machineguns blazing away in every direction seemed to have an intimidating effect on the enemy.

Although the same policy called for the gun trucks to stand off on the flanks of the kill zone and provide suppressive fire, the 8th Group gun trucks usually just raced into the kill zone next to any disabled vehicle and laid down suppressive fire until the air cover arrived or the security force assumed control of the fight. Because of the small kill zones along Route 19 and later Route 9 during Lam Son 719, there were no more than two disabled vehicles so the gun trucks focused on protecting them from inside the kill zone.

The gun trucks of the 500th Group in Cam Ranh Bay, on the other hand, developed its gun trucks and techniques a year after the 8th Group. These gunners used the three - to - six round bursts as taught in the schools, but because of the large size of their convoys, preferred to have the gun trucks in the kill zone lay down suppressive fire until the next gun truck came up to replace them, and then continue with the rest of the convoy. Surprisingly, many escort units in Kuwait and Iraq would develop the same method for reaction to contact and call it "bumping," because the gun truck in the kill zone would wait for the next gun truck to come up and "bump" it, so it could follow the rest of the convoy

out of the kill zone. This was the method used by the 518th Gun Truck Company during the Palm Sunday Ambush. CPT Eric Lendewig, of A Battery, 1-143rd FA (CA NG) at Taji in 2008 liked bumping because it did not allow his gunners to expend all their ammunition.⁴⁰

2LT James McCormick developed the concept for his "turn, fix, and fire" technique during the second convoy to the Green Zone in Iraq on Easter Sunday, 11 April 2004. On his first ambush driving into BIAP the previous Thursday night, he had his gun truck drive right into the apex of the kill zone and set up a gun shield between the enemy and his convoy. With a smaller convoy to escort to the Green Zone, he had his gun trucks drive between the enemy and the convoy as a gun shield, but decided to have the gun trucks turn into the enemy, stop and then have everyone get out and fire at the enemy while the convoy passed. He found this worked and taught this method of "turn, fix, and fire" to the gun truck crews of the 518th when it was formed in May 2004. This technique quickly suppressed any small ambush the convoys ran through.

Once the escort units in Kuwait and Iraq had factory-built M1114s, M1117s, and M1151s, the crews had 360 degrees of armor and ballistic glass, therefore, MNC-I would not allow anyone to exit the vehicles, so only the gunners could return fire. This limited the number of weapons the crews could bring to bear on the enemy. The Texans of the A Company, 3-144th Infantry violated that policy during the ambush on ASR Sword in 23 February 2008 and the gunnery of SSG Shane Lindsey armed with the M203 turned the fight back on the enemy. This ambush illustrated the need for soldiers to employ all their weapons. The open gun box design of the Vietnam gun truck allowed this, but the cocoon of armor the soldiers rode in during the latter part of the recent war forced them to exit their gun trucks in order to engage all weapons. The design of the gun trucks had to weigh the risk and benefit of protection and offensive capability.

Convoy Times

During the Vietnam War, the truck units believed the enemy owned the night and made it policy to roll only during daylight. Crews wanted 360 degrees of unobstructed vision to spot any signs of ambushes or mines, but they could not see the muzzle flash of the



Lead M1114 with extra lights to illuminate the road ahead and the Rhino in the down position. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

enemy weapons during the day time. During Lam Son 719 in 1970, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) had priority of movement on Route 9 that paralleled the Demilitarized Zone, so the American convoys of the 515th and 523rd Truck Companies had to drive at night. While they could not see any signs of a kill zone, once the ambush was initiated, they could see the muzzle flash of the enemy and knew exactly where to aim their weapons. There were many advantages and disadvantages to driving during day and night.

In 2005, MNC - I required the convoys to roll at night to eliminate the threat of civilian intruders in the convoys and possible Vehicle - borne IEDs (VBIED), because the curfew prevented civilian traffic after the hours of darkness. This eliminated the problem of civilian traffic and VBIEDs, but darkness reduced the chances of convoys spotting IEDs hidden alongside the road. So soldiers came up with novel solutions.

SFC John A. Wolitski, of the 799th Maintenance Company (GS), Iraq was the NCOIC of the Logistical Security Team during 2005 and 2006, which escorted convoys out of Ar Ramadi. Wolitski, his lieutenant and squad leaders studied the intelligence reports on IED attacks, type of attacks, location, time of day, day of week of attacks and realized that 90 percent of the attacks took place an hour before dusk to half an hour

to an hour after dark. Since convoys were required to run at night, Wolitski scavenged extra flood lights off of destroyed wreckers and wired them onto the scout HMMWV so it could illuminate the path and identify the signs of IEDs at night. It had two on each end pointing down to the side of the road, two more looking out a little bit further, plus the regular head lights. Every one of his gunners had spot lights so they could scan the sides of the roads. He borrowed that idea from his police work.⁴¹

After showing the evidence, SFC Wolitski told his superiors if they ran daylight convoys, their scouts could spot the IEDs better, and if something did happen they would have better observation on them. Out in the western part of Iraq they did not have a lot of civilian traffic and the area was open desert so it did not have the same need to run at night. They began running right after daybreak and were off the road before dark. The only time they were restricted to driving at night was when they had to drive through Fallujah or Baghdad. When running to Al Asaad, Al Taqaddum, Habadia, Corregidor, they ran during the day and were never hit by IEDs.⁴²

The Marines in the area were hit because they believed speed was security. By driving fast, they could not spot the IEDs. The enemy ran detonation wires through plastic tubing across the road and air brushed

it to look just like asphalt. After the gun trucks began looking for things in the road, the enemy then laid the tubes parallel to the asphalt, so if a tire veered off the asphalt, it detonated the IED. Wolitski restricted his convoys to 45 mph on open road, so they could better identify IEDs.⁴³

After a while, this became MNC-I policy. Convoys traveled at 45 mph to identify IEDs, and in the elevated threat zones (ETZ)⁴⁴ had to slow down to 25 mph. Like Wolitski's scout vehicle, other units also began to add extra lights to their gun trucks. By December 2006, LTC Edward McGinley had standardized the light configuration in his 24th Transportation Battalion with four 5-ton lights on the bumper and two rotating search lights, called "Go Lights" mounted on the top right and left of the cabs.⁴⁵

The next evolution in convoy times came in the terms of movement windows. During OIF 3, the XVIII Airborne Corps had a fusion net which empowered soldiers with information rather than data. The 82nd Sustainment Brigade, at Tallil from 2006 to 2007, conducted a 90-day pattern analysis of route segments to determine tier-one hot spots based on times and locations of IED attacks. The 90-day pattern of analysis provided the best windows for travel and seemed to work.⁴⁶

Soon after the 336th Transportation Group replaced the 37th Transportation Group in Kuwait, its first soldier, SPC Stephen Castner of the 121st FA, was killed just a few hours after crossing the Iraq border in his first convoy on 1 August 2006. Previously, Castner had written his father complaining about the inadequate training at the mobilization station for the mission his unit would perform in Iraq. Consequently, his father, an influential lawyer, started a letter writing campaign all the way to the Pentagon. COL Don Cornett had three-star generals asking lots of questions, so he had his executive officer, COL James A. Haun, conduct an AR15-6 investigation into the matter. From then on, the 336th Group became very cautious and averse to taking risks.⁴⁷

In the 82nd Sustainment Brigade, the 336th Group had their intelligence analysts study the times and places of attacks and predicted the period time during each day for IED attacks along certain routes. Its subordinate, 57th Transportation Battalion, claimed to

have had the best intelligence section for predicting time of attacks. They provided these patterns to the convoy commanders so they could schedule their departure times during low incident periods with the movement control teams to avoid the likelihood of attacks. They had reduced the windows for driving time to a couple of hours each night. These short movement windows, however, reduced the time on the road to the point it took theater-based convoys twice as long to reach their destinations as before. The convoys ran to Camp Navistar, Kuwait during the day, waited until night to cross the Iraqi border and head to LSA Cedar. They waited at Cedar until the next night to run to Scania where they received another movement window the next night for their convoy to BIAP. From BIAP they left the next night to LSA Anaconda or their destination. A trip that used to take two days increased to four, if there are no problems. The movement windows provided by the Intelligence office significantly reduced the Serious Incident Reports (SIR) but also the volume of supplies moving forward.⁴⁸

The 1st Theater Sustainment Command (TSC), commanded by MG Kevin A. Leonard, replaced the 377th TSC in May 2006 and brought with it senior officers with battalion and brigade level command experience from previous tours in theater, such as BG Luis Visot who commanded the 32nd Transportation Group in 2003. For this reason they reversed a trend toward casualty aversion. Knowing the current convoys had far more armor and resources than during the previous years they were there, the 1st TSC ended the practice of avoiding certain high-threat windows and thus reduced the turaround time for convoys, surprisingly with no significant increase in loss of life due to enemy activity until the "Surge." The surge in troop strength caused an initial spike in enemy attacks in September and October 2006, but declined with the increased patrolling in the Baghdad area and the barrier detail which began in May 2007. The concrete T-wall barriers lining all the roads throughout Baghdad reduced the trash that hid IEDs, and the active patrolling reduced the time the enemy could properly hide them. So the enemy initially responded by firing small arms at the convoys in Iraq, which had the same effect as throwing rocks at the armored trucks. Over time they used the walls as fortifications and attacked through loop holes in them.

Nonetheless, the new leadership knew risk aversion should not impede the mission.⁴⁹

Just as terrain provides tactical advantages, so does the time of day determine the risk to convoys. Daylight makes it easier to detect signs of mines, IEDs, and kill zones, but hides the enemy's muzzle flash. The night reveals the muzzle flash of enemy positions, but makes it harder to detect mines, IEDs or kill zones. Lighting the front of the truck like a sports stadium helps gun truck crews see in the dark though. Reducing the time of travel to certain windows may be beneficial to those convoys that do not have that far to travel, but for long haul convoys, this increased the time of turn around making it counterproductive to the mission.

Tactics

Battle drills and standard operating procedures (SOP) standardize the way units operate and react to different situations and provide the tools for a commander to maneuver units or, in this case, gun trucks, utilizing the advantage of terrain to counter the enemy tactics. The Vietnam gun truck veterans had SOPs but do not like to talk about tactics. They claimed officers liked to talk in terms of tactics, but the gun trucks of 8th Transportation Group only had one tactic – drive into the kill zone with machineguns blazing in every direction. The gun trucks out of 500th Group did something different and used the bumping method of having the gun trucks in the kill zone lay down suppressive fire until the next gun truck came up to replace it. The gun truck would then continue with the rest of the convoy. LTC Ed McGinley, Commander of the 24th Transportation Battalion in Kuwait during 2005-2006, explained that the gun truck crews in Vietnam had to face every kind of threat, whether mines, small ambushes or large complex ambushes. Having to face every kind of threat, they could not study or develop tactics for everything, but the convoys driving in Iraq after 2005 faced primarily one type of attack – mines then better known as improvised explosive devices (IED), and the enemy established patterns based upon perceived weakness in the convoys. To react properly to an ambush one must understand tactics.

Tactics is dependent upon the mission, enemy, friendly troops, weather and terrain. The mission of the convoy is simple – deliver the goods to the customer. A question has arisen about how aggressive the convoy

security should be. 2LT McCormick believed that gun trucks should shove the fight back down the enemy's throats. This idea had many supporters during the Vietnam War. Some gun truck crews felt that the gun trucks needed to turn the fight back against the enemy as quickly as possible. The mission of the Transportation Corps, however, is to deliver the men and material to their appointed destination on time. A purely defensive philosophy would only have the gun trucks remain in the kill zone long enough for all the vehicles to clear the kill zone. A defensive tactic does not discourage the enemy from further attacks but might encourage them to continue their quest to improve their ambush tactics. Turning the fight back on the enemy and making them pay a higher price in casualties would more likely discourage them from attacking again until they have learned from their mistake. Most ambushes during the Vietnam War ended with the gun trucks fixing the enemy until the combat arms units arrived and flanked the enemy.

The purpose of the ambush is to destroy as much of the convoy as possible in as short a time as possible using the advantage of terrain combined with the element of surprise. Surprise allows the enemy to hit their first target, which is why an ambush should always be initiated with a casualty producing weapon. This guarantees one kill if the aim is good. A common trait between the guerrilla war in Vietnam and Iraq was the fact that the enemy operated in small guerrilla cells. So they had to conduct detailed planning and rehearsal in isolation, and only came together for the ambush. That meant they were inflexible in their execution. The lesson from the Vietnam War was to disrupt the enemy's plan as quickly as possible.

Tactics resemble the shield and the sword. The shield protects the warrior's weakness while the sword strikes at the opponent's weakness. Wheeled vehicles provide the advantage of speed of maneuver, armor, and firepower. Assuming that a gun truck is an armored vehicle and dedicated weapons platform, its primary purpose is to protect the convoy. To do this in an ambush, they have to turn the fight back on the enemy as rapidly as possible through either accurate or superior fire power. In the 8 April 2004 ambush, 2LT McCormick and CPL Noble took out the key enemy weapons through accurate fire. During the 23 February 2008 ambush,

SSG Lindsey likewise took out the enemy's weapons by his accuracy with the M203. (Both these ambushes occurred at night). The A Company, 3-144th Infantry also found nothing more accurate than a sniper. Because they could not see the enemy muzzle flash, they used spraying fire and trusted to luck. SFC Gabriel Bueno, of the 250th Transportation Company at Tallil, Iraq during 2006 - 2007, admitted they were hit by IEDs 13 times on their first 11 missions escorting KBR convoys, but when they finally started tearing up the open desert with machinegun fire after any IED detonation, the attacks dropped off. While they did not have the required positive identification of the enemy trigger man, they assumed the trigger man feared the odds of getting hit. Other units confirmed this trick to stopping IED attacks. The lesson is that as a minimum, gun trucks have to lay down accurate or suppressive fire until all the vehicles have cleared the kill zone and, if vehicles are trapped or disabled in the kill zone, the gun trucks have to rescue the driver and defend the vehicles until the convoy commander determines to abandon the vehicles.⁵⁰

One enduring question has been whether to suppress enemy fire from inside the kill zone or the flank. The answer has to depend upon the nature of the kill zone, enemy position and friendly situation. If friendly vehicles are trapped in the kill zone, then the gun trucks

need to protect them. By entering the kill zone and firing on the enemy, they draw fire away from the other trucks. By sitting off on the flank, the gun trucks get to use the advantage of the long range of weapons such as the .50 caliber machinegun or Mk19 automatic grenade launcher.

The purpose of maneuver is to rapidly find that decisive point on the battlefield that allows one side to employ its weapons systems against the enemy's weakness. This decisive point is often considered key terrain on the enemy's flank. The 4 January 1970 ambush along Route 19 in Vietnam provides an excellent example of where the Koreans cut off the retreat of the insurgents when the accurate fire of the gun trucks drove the enemy from their positions in the rice paddy. In the Iraqi desert, key terrain was an overpass or two-story building but in Afghanistan, key terrain was a mountain that flanked the road. Flanking either concentrates superior fire against a weakly defended or undefended area if done with speed, or forces the enemy shift some of its fire power away from the kill zone. By finding the flank along a linear kill zone where maneuver is restricted such as in the jungle, mountains or city, the flank is the edge of the kill zone along the road. In cases where there is room to maneuver or other maneuver elements, the flank can be off the road.

Most ambushes during the Vietnam War ended when



Soldiers of the B Co., 3-144th Infantry rehearsing medevac procedures in 2008. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

the reaction force arrived. During the Palms Sunday Ambush in Iraq on 20 March 2005, three HMMWV gun trucks of the MPs drove down the access road and flanked the insurgents and were later joined by three more, resulting in as many as 27 enemy killed. This flanking action clearly caught the enemy by surprise and was the decisive action of the battle. It worked because the enemy did not expect it. During the 22 March 2004 ambush, 2LT McCormick had his gun truck mount the overpass where it had excellent observation of the enemy, but during the 8 April 2004 ambush, turned his gun truck into the apex of the kill zone so he could dismount his crew and employ all his weapon systems against the enemy. He also turned into the enemy during his ambushes to the Green Zone on 11 April 2004. The decisive point is different in each battle. The problem of flanking with road bound vehicles is that the enemy can predict which roads they might try to flank on. When behavior becomes predictable, then the enemy can plan for it. Beware that the enemy can set traps for the flanking element.

Tactics require swift judgment for the best use of friendly weapon systems and the advantage of terrain against enemy action. There is no one answer to all situations, so every solution is situational dependent. To understand tactics requires training the mind, and each ambush provides examples to study.

After Action Reviews, Training and Rehearsals

The study of convoy ambushes from Vietnam to Iraq revealed that these battles were won by superior and accurate fire power. Enough emphasis could not be placed on the perfection of marksmanship rather than just routine firing on the range. In January 2003, Military Professionals Recourses, Inc. (MPRI) at Udari Training Range, Kuwait recognized the need for a live fire exercise for support units before they invaded Iraq. This evolved into their convoy live fire exercise, which by the second year of the war, CFLCC required every arriving support unit to undergo before crossing the border into Iraq.

By 2004, similar live fire ranges had sprung up throughout the United States, so MPRI could focus on situational lane training. They questioned units in Iraq for what did and did not work, then by 2006 had developed a situational lane training. They constructed a mockup

town and overpass, hired Kuwaitis to play pedestrians and present the arriving convoy personnel with realistic scenarios from IEDs to intruders and VBIEDs they might encounter in Iraq.

After he received the task to create the Logistical Security Team in August 2005, SFC Wolitski went to the US Marines at Ar Ramadi and asked them to explain what kind of IEDs they expected to get hit by. He asked them if they could set up something to show them, so they set up an IED alley for training and SFC Wolitski would send his teams through the lanes. Everyone went through the training, and Wolitski paid attention to the most observant soldiers and picked them as his scouts. Other units set up IED lane training.⁵¹

The gunners needed to fire the same way they would engage the enemy in battle, both stationary and on the move. In 2006, LTC Ed McGinley's 24th Transportation Battalion conducted Table 8 mounted gunnery training for its gun truck crews, but LTC Robert C. Ling's 10th Transportation Battalion replaced the 24th Battalion and improved upon this, making Table 6 and 8 gunnery a quarterly requirement and calling them motorized platoon live fire exercise (MPLFS). Another important skill was aggressive driving. Rollovers were probably the next biggest killer of truck drivers to IEDs. Drivers needed to train at pushing their vehicles to the limit in a safe environment in order to understand the capabilities and limitations of those vehicles. Again, the 10th Transportation Battalion developed such a routine training program. LTC Ling also consolidated all his gun trucks into his HHD and tasked its commander, CPT Patrick Knight, to develop the initial and sustainment training.⁵²

By 2008, most units had developed some form of initial training or a certification program for convoy commanders. Sustainment training was the area where there was great variation because there were certain skills that either declined or needed perfection.

From the author's observations, the units that performed the best in combat conducted daily after action reviews (AAR) and war-gamed combat scenarios. SSG Timothy Nein of the 617th MP Company (KY NG) religiously conducted AARs after every patrol and war-gamed how his Raven 42 patrol would react to the same situation or could improve upon their operations. It was the study of a recent ambush that inspired him to want

to flank the enemy on the next ambush, which turned out to be the turning point of the Palm Sunday Ambush. Likewise, the 518th Combat Gun Truck Company during 2004 also conducted similar AARs after each contact. SFC Wolitski, of the 799th Maintenance Company at Ar Ramadi in 2005 - 2006, designated one primary scout vehicle and trained an alternate. The crew studied anything related to scouts, information about enemy tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP), current hit lists, current suspected VBIED vehicles. They had no personal life; they just studied every bit of useful information, so they would know what to look for. His convoys were never hit.

Most units either rehearsed or more often recited their tactics, techniques and procedures prior to each convoy. The problem was complacency. The units that

performed the best in ambushes were those that had war-gamed scenarios. LTC Lee Ellis, Commander of the 1103rd CSSB 2007 - 2008, directed his Intelligence section during the rehearsals prior to each convoy to interject different scenarios and ask each gun truck what it would do. CPT Patrick Knight, a veteran of three tours, also studied the routes for the most likely ambush locations, such as intersections, overpasses and choke points, and then developed tactics, techniques and procedures for each location based upon the configuration of the convoy.⁵³ SFC Wolitski's Logistics Security Team likewise knew where the hot spots were and developed tactics accordingly. They had specific battle drills for each hot spot. A convoy brief usually lasted 30 minutes. They did not have a sand table but used rocks on the ground for their



SSG Villareal of the 2nd Platoon, 1498th HET (CA NG) going over the route in briefing tent in Kuwait in 2009.

Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

“ROC drills.” Most units the author observed during his five visits to Iraq and Kuwait had built sand tables with roads, overpasses and intersections with wooden vehicles so they could war game scenarios, but he never saw any unit use them.

The enemy was constantly changing the way they emplaced and hid IED/EFPs. This information was either disseminated verbally or through photos. Most were found, but identifying IED/EFPs was an art that needed perfection. In 2007, the 7th Sustainment Brigade at Tallil during 2007-2008 included in its Combat Logistical Patrol (CLP) Academy lane training in IED identification as sustainment training. Clearly the best training was hands-on training with lanes replicating the latest IED camouflage methods.⁵⁴

By 2008, escalation of force (EOF) had become a serious issue with many units in Iraq as the Iraqis received more freedom on the roads. Most escalation of force incidents resulted from the fear of Vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIED). There were indicators that identified a suicide bomber versus a typical aggressive Iraqi driver and his family. These were taught verbally, but 18 and 19-year old gunners had to make life and death decisions in a matter of seconds. The wrong decision more often resulted in the death of innocent Iraqis, which had unintended consequences, such as increased attacks. Since the gunners had to visualize the situations, visual training aids or, again, situational training exercises were needed. Interestingly, one of the better units with a low escalation of force incident rate was CPT Eric Lendewig’s A Battery, 1-143rd FA (CA NG). Those California National Guard soldiers drove on the most congested roads in America and had learned to anticipate another driver’s moves by what the car did. Consequently, they were used to aggressive driving and had only fired one warning shot during their first seven months in Iraq.⁵⁵

In Summary

Four wars requiring convoy security operations provide ample material to study. There are some obvious patterns that should be codified into doctrine and lessons to form the foundation for standard operating procedures and tactics, techniques and procedures for the next conflict. Anyone who assumes the responsibility for the safe delivery of cargo inherits

the great responsibility to accomplish the mission while protecting the crews, cargo and drivers assigned. The preceding ambush case studies will allow any students of war to mentally take the place of any of the participants and train their minds to find solutions, but in a non-threatening environment. Hindsight is usually 20/20, but it is the decision process one must focus on, not so much what was the right answer, for in combat life and death decisions will be made in seconds or less.

In summary, Sun Tsu said “Know the enemy and know yourself and you can fight a hundred battles and win every one.” One can never know enough about the enemy. Find his patterns then plan and exploit his weaknesses. Conduct after action reviews after every mission to learn what one can do better. Know the ground one travels down to the littlest detail and know what ground provides a tactical advantage. Look disciplined, always look formidable and dangerous rolling down the road, and look alert especially in high threat areas. One can never have enough machineguns or ammunition in a kill zone. Whenever available, ask for air escort; both the Vietnam and Iraq wars taught that any convoy rolling with air cover did not get hit.

¹ Richard E. Killblane, OIF Trip Report 2007, 13 April 2007.

² Killblane, OIF/OEF Trip Report 2008.

³ Killblane, OIF Trip Report 2007.

⁴ Killblane, OIF/OEF Trip Report 2008.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Killblane, OIF Trip Report 2007.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Killblane, OIF/OEF Trip Report 2008.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Killblane, OIF Trip Report 2007.

¹¹ Killblane, OIF/OEF Trip Report 2008.

¹² Killblane, OIF Trip Report 2007, and OIF 2007 Journal.

¹³ Killblane, OIF 2007 Journal.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Killblane, OIF Trip Report 2007.

¹⁹ Killblane, OIF trip Journal 2008.

²⁰ Killblane, OIF Trip Journal 2008.

²¹ Killblane, OIF/OEF Trip Report 2008.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.



Convoy staging out of FOB Sharana, Afghanistan. Photo courtesy of Richard Killblane

²⁴ Killblane, OIF Trip Report 2007.

²⁵ SFC John A. Wolitski interview by Richard Killblane, at Fort Eustis, VA, 19 July 2006.

²⁶ Killblane, OIF Trip Report 2008.

²⁷ Killblane, OIF Trip Report 2007.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Killblane, OIF Trip Report 2007.

³⁵ Killblane, OIF/OEF Trip Report 2008

³⁶ Killblane, OIF Trip Report 2007.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Killblane, OIF 2008 Journal.

⁴² Wolitski interview.

⁴³ Wolitski interview.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Killblane, OIF 2007 Journal.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Killblane, OIF Trip Reports 2007 and 2008.

⁵⁰ Killblane, OIF 2007 Journal.

⁵¹ Wolitski interview.

⁵² Killblane, OIF/OEF Trip Report 2008.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

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Videos PHOT0021 and 1075BOB shot from digital cameras by two different DoD drivers.
Captured Iraqi video of the Palm Sunday Ambush.

A

Adams, SPC Darrell, 38,
Adams, LTC William H., 262, 263, 273
Addison, SPC Jamaal R., 11
Adkins, SPC Bill, 67
Ahlers, 1LT Audry, 211
Akin, LTC George, 34, 35, 37, 57, 58
Albert, SGT Michael, 194
Alfaro, PFC Veronica, 204
Allen, CPT, 56
Anderson, CPT Walter, 251
Anguiano, PFC Edward, 11
Armstrong, 205, 206
Armstrong, SSG Thomas, 50, 55, 56

B

Bach, SPC Jacob, 22, 89
Bachman, SPC Michael J., 39, 45, 46, 49, 68
Bailey, SGT, 21
Baird, SPC Dan, 30
Baird, 2LT Jim, 269
Baker, SGT James R., 138-140, 159, 162
Bartlett, SFC Richard, 74-77, 79
Baumgarner, SGT Rebecca, 181, 186, 187
Baxter, SSG Brett A., 75, 77, 78
Beatty, LTC Vernon, 209
Bedford, MAJ (UK), 129
Beck, SPC Jennifer, 140, 141, 144-146,
153-157, 159, 160, 163, 164, 169
Bell, Timothy, 47, 58
Bellino, COL Joe, 5, 257
Beltran, SPC Monica, 181, 186
Bennet, SPC Michael L., 121, 122
Biggers, SSG Ronnie, 228, 230, 234, 240, 243
Bese, SPC Ben, 215
Birkel, SPC Josh, 161, 162
Blackwater Security Consulting, 21, 105
Blackwood, James, 52
Blanchette, SGT Casey J., 51
Blankenship, SGT, 215
Blankenship, SGT Terry, 38, 42, 50, 51, 54
Blanton, SGT Heather M., 76
Bloebaum, SGT Anthony J., 135, 141, 144, 153-
155, 160, 167
Blue, SPC Ralph, 24, 26, 29-31, 88
Bohm, SPC Matthew W., 39, 48, 49, 54
Bolland, CPT David, 117
Bos, SPC Tim, 141, 142, 153, 155, 160
Brady, MAJ James, 116, 117, 126, 128, 131
Bradley, William, 44-46, 54
Breen, CPT Nicholas M., 266
Brezovay, Michael, 48, 49, 51, 54
Bristow, CPT Isaac, 19
Brooks, SGT Andrea, 77
Brown, SPC, 211, 214
Brown, SSG Aaron B., 74-77
Brown, SPC Jacob P., 38
Brown, SGT Kirk W., 76
Brown, 1LT Matthew R., 35-39, 41-46,
50, 51, 57

Brown, SGT Rondell, 158, 159, 162, 163
Bruscino, Dr. Tom, 169
Bryne, PFC, 242
Bueno, Gabriel, 278
Buggs, SGT George, 10-12, 14
Burke, LTC John, 257, 259
Burke, SGT Ricky D., 158, 159, 162, 163
Burks, SGT Brandon Lee, 225, 228, 230, 232,
237, 238, 240, 244, 246
Butler, SGT Thomas, 83, 85, 88
Byers, SGT, 86

C

Calibro, SGT Steve, 257
Carta, CPT, 266
Callahan, CPT Devin, 210
Campbell, SGT Curtis, 11, 13
Carista, CPL Francis, 11, 13
Carlson, SGT, 102
Carr, SPC Ineda, 236, 242
Carter, SSG Robert, 75, 76
Cass, SFC Louis, 134, 136
Castner, SPC Stephen, 191, 276
Castro, SSG Aaron, 158, 159, 162
Cheney, Dick, 204
Chambers, BG James, 107, 260, 263
Chapman, PFC Devin, 241
Church, PFC Jeremy L., 35-37, 41-44, 49-51,
54-56, 61
Clemmens, SGT Gerald, 185

Coalition Forces
Coalition Force Land Component
Command (CFLCC), 11, 19, 126,
131, 134, 135, 191, 193, 259, 262,
273, 279
Multinational Corps-Iraq, 107, 130, 134,
168, 173, 191, 202, 206, 253, 264,
274, 275, 276
Combined Joint Task Force 7, 21, 35,
36, 107
2nd Prince of Wales Royal Regiment, 126,
129, 130, 267

Coe, SPC Brian, 25-29
Coleman, Elaine F., 28
Coleman, SSG Ronny, 101
Colon, SPC Daniel, 216
Cooke, SPC Anthony D., 203, 204, 206
Cooper, SPC Casey, 147-149, 163
Cornett, COL Don, 276
Costa, SSG Anthony, 101, 106
Cremin, 1LT Colin, 90, 97
Croft, LTC Christopher, 264, 270, 272
Cross, SSG, 103-107
Cross, William, 141, 144, 146, 152, 153, 156,
157, 163, 164, 168
Croley, SSG, 112
Cunningham, Robert, 175
Cuthbertson, SFC Jody, 114, 117, 118, 126-
128, 130, 131, 167

D

Dagit, Keven, 175-177
Danforth, 2LT Wade, 82-84, 88
Da Silva, 1LT Tamara, 223-225, 227-238,
240-245, 247, 272
Davenport, SFC Kelvin B., 265
Debutts, SSG, 211, 214
Delancy, SPC Ricky, 114, 146, 153-155,
157, 160
Delaney, SPC John D., 76, 79
Delaney, SPC Robert A., 28
Dempsey, MG Martin, 107
Dettman, SPC Brandon, 145, 146, 161
Dolge, CPT Michael, 210-218
Dominique, CPT Dean, 20, 264
Dominguez, SGT James, 77
Donelson, SGT Nancy, 75
Dowdy, 1SG Robert J., 9-12, 14
Drake, SSG Vernon, 192, 193, 196
Drushel, SSG Jeffrey A., 77
Dubois, PFC Marcus, 11, 13
Dyer, SGT Tracy, 25-29

E

Eakins, Niky, 196
Ernest, CPT Jennifer, 242, 244
Eby, SGT Matthew D., 83, 85, 88
Ellertson, SGT Shaun, 99, 101, 102, 106
Elliot, PFC Adam, 11, 13
Ellis, LTC Lee, 280
Estrella-Soto, PV2 Ruben, 11, 14

F

Farenden, SGT, 128
Fields, SPC Mabel, 246
Fischetti, LTC Joseph, 10
Fisher, Steven, 40-42, 47-49, 54, 58
Floyd, SSG Walter "Tony," 260
Ford, SPC, 117
Franklin, SFC, 56
Froncak, SSG Christine, 186

G

Gaffney, LTC David, 172, 173, 252, 253,
260, 262
Gallet, PVT Ronald, 64-68
Gantt, SGT Jeffrey, 185, 186
Garcia, SPC, 212, 214
Garcia, SFC Efrain, 200, 202-206
Garcia, PFC Jose L., 230, 232
Gardner, SSG Greg, 211, 214
Gatewood, CPT Amanda R., 74, 75, 79, 80
Gearheart, SPC Ryan, 75
Geraci, 1LT Michael, 200

Glass, CPT Peter, 64, 65, 68
 Goodrich, PFC Gregory R., 45, 54, 55, 57, 58
 Graff, SPC Jacob, 145, 154, 155, 157, 158
 Grage, SSG Donald C., 38, 39, 41, 45, 48, 51
 Greene, MAJ Mark, 70, 72
 Gregory, SPC David, 111, 112
 Gregory, SPC Kirby, 158, 162, 163
 Grenner-Case, Sascha, 175
 Grimes, SSG, 98, 100, 101, 104
 Groff, SFC Robert D., 35, 39, 42, 47, 49, 51, 53-57, 60, 61
 Grubb, SPC James, 11, 13
 Gruver, SSG Rick, 24-28
 Gutierrez, SSG Joe, 192, 194, 195

Gun Trucks

Battleship, 17
 Big O, 111-113
 Brutus, 258
 Burke's Law, 257
 Eve of Destruction, 252, 257
 Eve of Destruction II, 17
 Heavy Metal, 111
 Iron Horse, 252
 King Kong, 269
 Street Sweeper, 83, 85, 86
 Zebra, 23-26, 28-31, 61, 80, 83-88, 258

H

Haggard, SFC Tim, 24, 82-84, 86, 88
 Hamill, Thomas E., 34, 36, 38-42, 44, 47, 52, 53, 58
 Hammons, SFC Rickie D., 136, 159, 165
 Handy, SPC, 104
 Hanson, CPL Leonard, 192, 194-197
 Harris, SPC John, 141, 145, 154, 155, 157, 164, 165
 Harshbarger, SGT Dale, 111-113
 Hart, Ron, 141, 144-146, 152, 153, 155, 156, 159-162
 Hartman, SGT Jonathan, 98, 102
 Haun, COL James A., 276
 Hawk, SGT Brian, 78
 Hawley, SFC Mark A., 35, 37, 38, 41, 50, 51
 Hawkins, SPC Jared, 246
 Haynes, PFC Donzie, 70
 Haynes, SPC William, 149, 150, 158, 159, 162, 163
 Heard, SGT Donald, 65
 Heesacker, SPC Thomas, 160
 Heggie, SSG, 120, 124
 Henderson, SGT Jesse, 204
 Henderson, LT Robert L. II, 92-94, 98, 100, 102, 103
 Henley, SGT Jon, 111
 Henry, CPT Terrence, 21
 Henson, PFC Clayton W., 102
 Hernandez, SGT Alexander, 158, 159, 162, 163
 Hernandez, SGT Anthony, 76, 79
 Hernandez, SPC Edgar, 11, 14
 Hernandez, "H", 204, 205

Herron, SSG Marty, 174
 Hester, SGT Leigh Ann, 138, 148-151, 159, 169
 Heuer, 1SG David J., 181, 182, 186
 Hicks, SP4 Larry, 257
 Hicks, SGT Ronald C. Jr., 76, 77
 Higgins, SPC Barbara, 141-143, 155, 157
 Hinton, CPT James, 22, 24
 Hollingsworth, SSG Arthur, 44, 51
 Holloway, SPC K'ray, 25, 26, 28, 29, 119
 Hooker, MG Joseph, 257, 259
 Howard, 1LT Gregory, 38
 Howell, Nelson, 38, 44, 47, 52-54
 Hubbard, SPC Ryan, 145, 146, 161, 162
 Hudson, SPC Joseph, 11, 13-15
 Hulett, Steven, 45, 47, 58
 Hunter, John, 252
 Hupp, SGT Robert, 77, 78
 Hurd, SSG, 65, 66

I

Ingham, SPC Aaron J., 121, 122, 124

J

Jackson, SSG Tarik, 11, 13
 Jacobs, SSG Shirley, 157, 158, 164, 165
 Jandreau, SSG Gary, 192-197
 Johnson, PFC Howard, 11, 13
 Johnson, SPC Shoshana, 11, 14
 Johnson, SPC Timothy, 12, 13
 Johnson, Tony, 45, 46, 58
 Jopeck, SGT Stephen W., 191, 202

K

Kapture, PFC Ronald J., 51
 Kellogg, Brown and Root (KBR), 19, 21, 34-40, 44-52, 54-58, 60, 65-68, 108, 173, 174, 176, 177, 197, 200, 202-206, 219, 278
 Kennedy, SGT Jonathan, 145, 146, 161, 162
 Kenyon, Marc, 174, 175
 Kibogy, SPC Caroline, 175
 Kiehl, SPC James M., 11, 14
 Kim, SPC Joanna, 77, 78
 Kim, SGT Young, 225, 230, 236, 238, 243, 244
 Kimmitt, BG Mark, 21
 King, CPT Troy K., 8-14
 Kinzer, SPC Kelly, 157, 160
 Kirkland, PFC Christy, 158, 165
 Kirkland, SSG, 192
 Kirkpatrick, SPC Shawn E., 39, 48, 49, 54, 55
 Kleiman, 1LT Kim, 120-124, 130
 Klein, SFC Michael A., 50, 51, 54, 55
 Knight, CPT Patrick, 279, 280
 Kolleda, 1LT Joshua, 244
 Kowalewski, SFC Christopher H., 54-56
 Krause, SGT Elmer, 51, 56-58
 Kuhn, SPC, 234
 Kuta, Timothy J., 5

L

Lamar, SPC Karon G., 39, 42, 49, 53, 55
 Landry, CPT Robert, 108, 110, 111, 116
 Lane, SPC Joseph, 117, 119
 Lavite, 1LT Bradley, 17
 Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL), 172, 174, 178, 252-254, 268
 Lawson, SPC Brandon, 24, 28-308, 85, 88, 89
 LeClair, SSG Steve, 74-77, 79
 Lee, SSG, 98
 Lehman, SGT Christopher M., 83-86, 88
 Leipheimer, SFC Michael, 211, 215
 Lem, Christopher, 83-86, 88
 Lendewig, CPT Eric, 274, 281
 Leonard, SPC Colby, 77, 192
 Leonard, MG Kevin A., 276
 Leonhard, COL Brian K., 200
 Lester, Jackie D., 40-43, 47-49, 52, 54, 55, 58
 Letterkenny, 252
 Lewis, CPL Robert W., 230, 231, 234, 235, 241
 Lindner, CPT Todd, 137, 138, 163
 Lindsey, SSG Shane, 200, 202-206, 274, 278
 Ling, LTC Robert C., 279
 Lourigan, SPC Steven, 111, 112, 118, 119, 121, 125-128, 131
 Love, SFC Polee, 70-72
 Loyd, SPC, 76
 Ludwick, CPT Michael E., 57
 Ludy, COL Garland, 257, 259
 Lyles, James, 5
 Lynch, PFC Jessica, 11, 12, 14, 16
 Luten, CPL Damien, 11, 13

M

Mack, SPC Brian, 150, 159, 162, 163, 174
 Magdelano, SPC Fernando, 186
 Mahamd, Signd, 76
 Mahdi Militia, 21, 22, 33, 34, 36, 40, 82, 90, 91, 107
 Malone, SPC Patrick T., 139
 Marquez, Jason, 258
 Martin, SSG James D., 28, 29
 Martin, SSG Joshua D., 97, 101
 Maskell, LTC Charles, 19, 273
 Mata, CW2 Johnny V., 11, 13, 14, 23
 Mata, SSG Robert, 111, 112
 Maupin, PFC Keith M., 37, 45, 46, 56-58
 McCormick, 1LT James, II, 22-25, 28-31, 61, 80, 82-86, 88, 89, 108, 110-112, 116-122, 124-131, 134, 167, 206, 258, 274, 277, 279
 McDermott, SPC Craig V., 37, 38, 44, 45, 50, 51, 60
 McEndree, SPC Sean, 64, 66, 67, 69
 McGinley, LTC Edward, 276, 277, 279
 McLean-Burrell, CPT Thelonious, 116, 117, 134
 McPhee, SPC Shareese, 70-72
 Mealer, PFC, 25, 30

Meaney, PVT James M., 51
 Medicine Man, 203, 205
 Mehall, SGT Eric J., 54
 Metheny, LTC Orvil, 259
 Mike, SPC Jason, 149-152, 158, 159, 162, 163, 168, 169
 Mikes, SFC Stephen, 111, 112, 114
 Military Professional Resources, Inc. (MPRI), 21, 110, 134, 166, 168, 269, 270, 279
 Miller, CPT Chris, 200
 Miller, SPC Justin, 25-29
 Miller, SPC Keith, 29
 Miller, PFC Patrick, 11, 12, 14
 Miller, 2LT Renina, 64-67, 69
 Mills, CPL, 128
 Mills, SFC Bryon, 225-227, 229, 230, 232-234, 240, 241, 243, 247
 Minarich, CPT Todd, 262
 Miser, COL Jeffrey, 117, 134, 253, 258
 Montague, Jack, 45, 58
 Moore, CPT Thomas J. II, 92-107
 Morabito, SSG Carl, 122, 124
 Morris, SGT Dustin, 137, 138, 147, 148, 151, 159
 Motley, SPC Andrea, 76, 77
 Mulcahy, SSG Michael, 180, 181, 184-187
 Mullen, SGT Mike, 77
 Mullins, PFC Eric, 98
 Multauopele, SSG Americana, 100
 Munos, SGT Eddie, 158, 164
 Munz, CPT Aaron J., 22, 55-57

N

Nace, PFC Dale, 11, 13
 Nash, CW3 Mark, 11, 13
 Nein, SSG Timothy F., 31, 136-139, 147-152, 159, 163, 168, 169, 279
 Nichols, CPL, 205
 Nicholson, COL John, 209
 Noble, CPL Bryan, 23-25, 28-31, 83-86, 88, 89, 118, 119, 277

O

Oledan, 1LT Marco, 220-222
 Olivas, SGT Michael A., 120, 122, 124
 Olmstead, CPT Cory, 262, 267
 Olson, LT, 194
 Onwordi, SPC Justin B., 51
 Ordunez, SPC Jesse, 147, 148, 150, 151, 159
 Osborne, SPC Dana S., 230, 231, 235, 241
 Overstreet, 1LT Lucas, 211, 215

P

Pagent, MAJ Mark, 37
 Palacios, SGT Armando, 230, 233, 236, 237, 240

Parker, Jeffrey, 45, 58
 Parsons, PFC Timothy, 119, 125, 127
 Peacock, SGT, 25
 Pelz, SPC Patrick L., 39, 42, 49, 54-56
 Pena, SPC Roger Jr., 211, 214, 215, 218
 Perry, CSM Dwayne, 167, 258
 Persinger, SGT, 56
 Peterson, (AU), 156
 Peterson, Bill, 37, 45, 50
 Peterson, SSG Alan, 215
 Peterson, CPT Erik, 91-96, 107
 Peterson, LTC Michael P., 220
 Peterson, CPT Nate, 181, 182, 186
 Peterson, SPC Nicholas, 11, 13
 Petrik, SGT Joel, 11, 13
 Petropoulos, CPT George, 74, 80, 89
 Pierce, SFC Anthony, 11-13
 Piestewa, PFC Lori, 11, 12, 14
 Pluciennik, 1LT Ed, 267
 Polk, 1LT Latonya, 224, 225, 230, 233, 240
 Powell, SFC Samuel, Jr., 64-68
 Power, 2LT (UK), 126-128
 Pullen, SPC Ashley, 147-152, 159, 162, 163

R

Ramiro, SFC, 143
 Rat Patrol, 19-21, 262
 Raz, SSG, 192, 195-197
 Rhoads, SPC Wesley, 265
 Rhyne, 1LT Joe, 100
 Richardson, SGT Anthony, 84-86, 88, 89
 Ricketts, SGT Terrance, 143-145, 153-156, 158-161, 164-166
 Riley, SGT James, 11, 12, 14
 Rivera, SGT, 64, 68
 Rivera, SGT Joe, 138, 148-152, 159, 162, 163
 Robbins, SGT Tony, 204-206
 Robinson, SPC Michael, 111, 113
 Robinson, CPL Tanerrius D., 203, 206
 Rodriguez, SPC Alfredo, 235, 241
 Rose, SGT Matthew, 11-13
 Ross, Randy, 34, 39, 40, 41, 44-46, 49, 60
 Row, SPC Dustin L., 37, 38, 44, 45, 50, 51, 54, 58
 Rullo, SPC Paul, 157, 160
 Russell, SPC, 21

S

Sadr, Muqtada al, 21, 24, 33, 34, 39, 43, 58, 82, 91, 96, 106, 107
 Saenz, SGT Mario E., 225, 230-233, 235, 241
 Sagen, LTC James, 5, 116-118, 126, 131, 267
 Salemme, SPC Thomas, 23, 86
 Sanchez, SGT, 242
 Sanchez, Edward, 51, 54
 Sandor, CPT Wesley, 266

Sauer, SPC Tara, 75
 Schrad, SPC Jay, 161, 162
 Sharples, SPC Michael, 160-162
 Shaw, SPC Thomas F., 78
 Shearin, 1LT Jeff, 10
 Schrack, SSG Charles M., 77
 Shreve, 1SG James, 255
 Shugrue, SPC Michael P., 75-78
 Sierra, SPC Gerber, 246
 Simpson, SSG Donovan D., 50, 51, 54
 Simpson, SGT Mathew T., 158, 159, 163
 Skunk Werks, 18, 19, 34, 69, 251, 253, 254
 Slaughter, PFC Jeffrey, 37, 44, 45, 50
 Sloan, PV2 Brandon, 11, 12, 14
 Smith, SPC, 211, 216
 Smith, CPT Jeffrey F., 34, 35, 37, 57, 58
 Smith, SGT Gary, 181, 186
 Snell, CPT Matt, 266
 Snyder, SGT Dan, 265
 Souza, MSG John Philip, 181, 182, 186
 Stanley, Keith, 50-52
 Stannard, Raymond T., 46-49, 51, 52, 54
 Stantz, SPC Travis, 119, 125, 127-129
 Steward, Terry, 174, 175
 Stewart, PFC, 233
 Stewart, SSG Thomas G., Jr., 27-30, 83-85, 88
 Stewart & Stevenson, 178, 179, 252
 Stracke, SSG Edwin G., 186
 Studer, SSG Dan, 21
 Suchowski, SPC Jennifer, 184
 Suter, PV2 Hillary, 27, 29
 Swenson, CPL Richard III, 111

T

Tabota, SGT Dill, 242, 244
 Taylor, 1SG Charles Q.,
 Tavai, MSG Ani, 89
 Thompson, SPC Andrew, 175
 Tiger Team, 19, 20, 264
 Tikem, MAJ, 228
 Toews, SPC Nathan, 215, 216
 Tollison, Rick, 49-51
 Torres, PFC Jairo, 143, 157, 164, 165, 167
 Totten, SPC Ryan, 175
 Trias-DeRyder, CPT Carolyn, 210
 Trueblood, SGT Eric, 214, 215, 217
 Trujillo, SGT, 211, 214
 Tucker, SGT, 192, 193

U

Uhl, SSG Jeffrey, M., 135, 136, 140-142, 144, 153, 155, 157, 158, 160, 163, 165, 167

US Army units:	201st Field Artillery, 25	336th Transportation Group, 191,
	487th Field Artillery, 269	202, 276
Corps	623rd Field Artillery, 18, 133, 136,	372nd Transportation Group, 108, 110
V Corps, 7, 8	137, 166	375th Transportation Group, 132, 260
		500th Transportation Group, 258, 274, 277
Division	Air Defense Artillery	6th Transportation Battalion, 6, 259
1st Cavalry Division, 21, 31, 34, 36, 91,	52nd Air Defense Artillery, 7, 10	7th Transportation Battalion, 33-35, 57,
107, 112		108, 252, 259, 264
1st Armored Division, 90, 93, 107	Aviation	10th Transportation Battalion, 269, 279
3rd Infantry Division, 6, 9	25th Combat Aviation Brigade, 261	24th Transportation Battalion, 190, 255,
10th Mountain Division, 209, 252	82nd Combat Aviation Brigade, 227,	276, 277, 279
24th Infantry Division, 22	228, 231	49th Movement Control Battalion, 36
36th Infantry Division, 200		57th Transportation Battalion, 276
82nd Airborne Division, 221, 262	Engineer	106th Transportation Battalion, 5, 116,
	1st Engineer, 262	130, 131, 199, 204, 264, 267, 270,
Infantry	20th Engineer Battalion, 56	271, 273
5th Infantry, 90	1041st Engineer Company, 255	181st Transportation Battalion, 19, 172,
16th Infantry, 266		177, 180, 187, 260, 264, 273
87th Infantry, 209	Military Police	457th Transportation Battalion, 172, 173,
133rd Infantry, 263, 265, 266	125th MP Battalion, 108	252, 260, 262
135th Infantry, 253	617th MP Company, 136, 137, 169,	734th Transportation Battalion, 266
142nd Infantry, 270	267, 279	766th Transportation Battalion, 64, 65,
144th Infantry, 200, 202, 257, 264, 271,		66, 90-92, 94
274, 278	Support	812th Transportation Battalion, 88
148th Infantry, 269	1st Theater Sustainment Command, 276	1144th Transportation Battalion, 269
160th Infantry, 269	377th Theater Sustainment	25th Transportation Company, 68, 71
161st Infantry, 270	Command, 276	96th Transportation Company, 64, 68,
293rd Infantry, 270	13th Corps Support Command, 34, 107,	157, 272
297th Infantry, 200	110, 135, 260, 262, 263	149th Transportation Company, 225, 230,
325th Infantry, 252, 253	172nd General Support Group, 36, 57	242, 244
442nd Infantry, 269	213th Area Support Group, 200	154th Transportation Company, 223- 225,
504th Airborne Infantry, 263	4th Sustainment Brigade, 270	242, 244
	7th Sustainment Brigade, 200, 281	172nd Transportation Company, 74,
Cavalry	10th Sustainment Brigade, 209, 270	270, 272
2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment, 90, 91,	16th Sustainment Brigade, 270	178th Route Security Element, 116-118,
93, 94, 106	45th Sustainment Brigade, 224, 229	120, 264, 267
4th Cavalry, 262, 267, 271, 273	82nd Sustainment Brigade, 276	217th Transportation Company, 190, 191
5th Cavalry, 54	287th Sustainment Brigade, 270	227th Transportation Company, 70, 117
8th Cavalry, 64	304th Sustainment Brigade, 270	233rd Transportation Company, 109
11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 120, 121	371st Sustainment Brigade, 270	250th Transportation Company, 278
12th Cavalry, 22, 41, 50	3rd Forward Support Battalion, 6, 8	359th Transportation Company, 258
105th Cavalry, 271	100th Brigade Support Battalion, 225	459th Transportation Company, 258
126th Cavalry, 269	143rd Combat Sustainment Support	515th Transportation Company, 275
299th Cavalry, 269	Battalion, 262, 263, 267, 273	518th Combat Gun Truck Company, 80,
303rd Cavalry, 270	286th Combat Sustainment Support	88, 89, 108, 110-117, 119, 131,
	Battalion. 223, 224, 227-229, 232,	133-136, 149, 165-169, 253, 258,
Armor	235, 244	267, 272, 274, 280
37th Armor, 90, 93, 100, 106	710th Brigade Support Battalion, 209, 211	523rd Transportation Company, 257, 275
185th Armor, 270	782nd Brigade Support Battalion, 220	563rd Transportation Company, 251, 257
	1034th Combat Sustainment Support	567th Transportation Company, 136
Field Artillery	Battalion, 262	660th Transportation Company, 34, 50, 54
5th Field Artillery, 200	1103rd Combat Sustainment Support	644th Transportation Company, 35, 38
17th Field Artillery, 266	Battalion, 280	724th Transportation Company, 21, 33-38,
121st Field Artillery, 190, 191, 194, 195,		57-61, 68, 267, 270
198, 202, 276	Transportation	729th Transportation Company, 180,
133rd Field Artillery, 270	7th Transportation Group, 18, 117, 118,	182, 186, 257
143rd Field Artillery, 274, 281	120, 131, 132, 167, 253, 258	740th Transportation Company, 22
178th Field Artillery, 118, 120, 121, 133,	8th Transportation Group, 5, 58, 60,	1032nd Transportation Company, 265
138, 167, 260, 269	167, 218, 257, 271, 273, 274, 277	1075th Transportation Company, 133,
	32nd Transportation Group, 276	135, 140, 149, 152, 157-159, 162,
	37th Transportation Group, 191, 276	164-167, 169, 271
	48th Transportation Group, 268, 269	

1158th Transportation Company, 32,
120, 121
1173rd Transportation Company, 172, 174,
176, 180, 181
1175th Transportation Company, 90-94,
97, 100, 101, 105, 107, 167, 169
1452nd Transportation Company, 90, 94,
99, 104, 105
1484th Transportation Company, 257
1486th Transportation Company, 21, 22,
24, 74-76, 81, 82, 83, 85, 86, 111,
119, 272
1487th Transportation Company, 22, 23,
31, 82, 110, 111, 112, 258
1498th Transportation Company, 280
1544th Transportation Company, 70, 71
1836th Transportation Company, 18, 32
1864th Transportation Company, 20,
134, 143
2123rd Transportation Company, 90-94,
97-101, 104, 105, 272
2632nd Transportation Company, 19, 35
424 Motor Truck Detachment, 258

Quartermaster
53rd Quartermaster Company, 223-225

Ordnance
90th Maintenance Company, 225,
242, 244
507th Maintenance Company, 6-13, 15, 16
699th Maintenance Company, 210-212
799th Maintenance Company, 265,
275, 280
1073rd Maintenance Company, 252

US Air Force
70th Motor Transportation Detachment,
254
2632nd Air Expeditionary Force, 37, 38

US Marine Corps
1st Marine Expeditionary Force, 7

V

Vancleeve, SSG, 93
Van Roekel, SSG David, 142, 143, 157, 169
Vanegas, SPC Jesse, 205
Velazquez, SPC Miguel, 204, 205
Villareal, SSG, 280
Vines, LTG John, 168
Visot, BG Luis, 275

W

Wallace, SPC David, 111, 112
Walsh, PFC Jarob, 46-48, 52-55
Walsh, SPC, 64, 67
Walters, SGT Donald, 11, 12, 16
Ward, SPC Aaron, 244
Wardale, SGT, 64, 66, 67
Watson, SGT, 21
Watson, SGT Bryan C., 39, 45, 49
Weidel, PFC Jeffrey, 230, 232, 233
Wells, SSG Steven G., 75, 76, 78
Wheeler, Preston, 173-176
Whisenant, SPC Brandon, 119, 120, 124,
125, 127
White, SPC, 83
White, SGT Baronsay, 237, 243
Whitehead, BG Ennis, 17
Wickham, LTG John A., 131
Wilhelm, CPT Doug, 119
Wilkens, SGT Todd, 230, 231, 233, 234, 237,
239, 240
Williams, SSG Anthony, 224, 225, 229, 230,
233, 236, 241
Williams, CPL Clinton, 204
Williams, SFC John O., 111, 113, 115
Wilson, SPC Bernard, 192-196
Witkowski, SGT James, 181, 185
Wolitski, SFC John A., 265, 275, 276, 279, 280
Woolvine, Robert, 175
Wood, Danny, 49-51
Wynne, Rick, 175

Y

Yager, SSG Jeff, 101
Young, SPC William P., 139, 140, 162

Z

Zaremba, SSG Michelle, 77
Zhang, SPC Jun, 11, 13
Zimmerman, Tommy K., 40, 41, 48, 52, 54, 55

