

Training and Certification for Convoy Escort Teams

BY CAPTAIN JEFFREY B. FREMBLING

After plans for a Quartermaster company to deploy to Afghanistan to provide convoy security changed, the unit continued preparations for a gunnery exercise to certify crews for convoy protection platforms.

“We are Soldiers first, logisticians second!” This quickly became my mantra as I prepared to assume command of the 53d Quartermaster Company, a bulk petroleum support company in the 553d Combat Sustainment Support Battalion at Fort Hood, Texas. The company had recently received orders to provide 42 guncrews for convoy security in Afghanistan—a mission that I had hardly expected when I graduated from the Petroleum Officer Course. But with forces being spread thin between two combat theaters, the logistics community was being asked to provide its own security. As reality set in and I realized that my “fuel command” would become a “gun truck command,” the company got to work, training long days and nights in order to be prepared to protect and defend ourselves and others.

A Change in Mission

We began training in early June 2011. We started with basic marksmanship practice, driver’s training, vehicle rollover drills, and familiarization with Training Circular (TC) 4–11.46, Convoy Protection Platform Gunnery. We worked closely with the 553d Combat Sustainment Support Battalion’s S–3 and the battalion master gunner to develop a road-to-war plan that would allow us to meet our deployment timeline. Included in that plan was a full-blown gunnery exercise to ensure that our crews were properly trained and qualified to provide convoy security.

Shortly after finalizing the plan, I was told that the company had been “off-ramped.” Despite the fact that we no longer had a gun truck mission, we were told to execute our gunnery program in order to verify the proof of principle of crew certification for convoy protection platforms.

Driver’s and Weapons Training

Beginning in early June, the company scheduled preliminary training events. We had to develop the 24

vehicle guncrews that would train together and complete the qualification course as a team. After setting the initial crews, we started the task of completing the basic requirements. We scheduled mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicle (MRAP) and MRAP all-terrain vehicle (M–ATV) driver’s training, basic weapons qualifications, crew-served weapons ranges, and the initial training for executing gunnery operations.

After completing the initial driver’s training, the company began the task of completing the necessary weapons qualifications. We executed basic rifle marksmanship ranges, followed by advanced rifle marksmanship ranges. The deployment order had also included the requirement for the company to become qualified on the M2 machinegun, MK19 grenade launcher, and M240B machinegun.

As a command, we decided to focus on the use of the M240B. The M240B is not an organic weapon to a petroleum, oils, and lubricants company, so we not only had to borrow the weapon systems from our sister companies but we also had to qualify crews on weapons that my Soldiers had not handled before. Once we were all qualified on our basic weapon systems, we moved on to the crew-served weapons.

The company spent a full week qualifying gunners and all members of the vehicle guncrews on the weapon systems. Each guncrew was required to attend the ranges as a crew and to work together to qualify. The crews worked on the required crew voice commands, and the vehicle commanders used the range time to evaluate each member of the crew on his capabilities on the range. In some cases, the vehicle commanders moved the designated driver to the gunner’s position after determining that the driver was a better gunner.

Learning to Work Together

Once training on the basic Soldier skills of driving and shooting was completed, we began developing the crews’ ability to operate and communicate together



A Soldier prepares a vehicle for the gunnery range.

effectively. This was accomplished at Fort Hood’s Warrior Skills Training Center (WSTC). The WSTC is a large complex of simulators and training aids that enabled our Soldiers to work on the vehicle commands, build the necessary confidence, and tie all of the required skills together. The WSTC provided a simulation of the environment that we would experience once we got to the range. It also gave the vehicle commanders an additional opportunity to evaluate the crews and make adjustments.

We were able to use the WSTC for a month leading up to the actual execution of the gunnery exercise. During this time, the vehicle guncrews bonded together and developed a real sense of “team.” I noticed that, within the company, the crews developed a platoon, section, and individual crew competition mentality. By the end of our time in the WSTC, the company was very motivated to get to the execution phase of gunnery.

The trainup for the range execution culminated with the vehicle guncrews completing a situational training exercise and an evaluation of their abilities to identify

vehicles and ammunition and break down and reassemble the M240B.

The Gunnery Tables

The execution of the gunnery exercise included nine gunnery tables and was spread over 6 weeks. I had three sections of eight vehicle guncrews each. The sections were broken down by platoon, each led by the platoon leader. Each section was to spend 1 week living in the field completing gunnery tables I through VI. While one section of vehicle guncrews was completing its week, the others were to spend their time in the WSTC honing their skills.

Table I consisted of a dry run through the range with the vehicle crew evaluators grading each crew on its ability to communicate and operate as a crew. This table also allowed each crew to get a feel for how the range was going to operate. Each crew proceeded down the range and identified targets, made the appropriate calls, and simulated engaging each target.

Tables III and IV were the vehicle guncrews’ first



The 53d Quartermaster Company built a sandtable of the range in order to conduct a rehearsal of concept (ROC) drill with the battalion commander, the battalion S-3, and the vehicle crew evaluators. The ROC drill prepared the convoy escort teams to execute the final phase of gunnery operations.

into the final phase of gunnery operations, the completion of the sectional phase. Tables VIII and IX are meant to test each convoy escort team's ability to shoot, move, and communicate as a part of a convoy element. In order to accomplish this, we established five sections of four gun trucks each and moved out

to the next range. We worked again with the battalion S-3 section and the master gunner to develop scenarios for accomplishing the remaining two tables.

As the company leaders were developing courses of action, each section completed additional training in battle drills and communication procedures in the WSTC's close combat tactical trainer (CCTT). Each section leader also was tasked with establishing standard operating procedures that would be followed during the execution of tables VIII and IX.

In order to complete tables VIII and IX, each section would be graded on its ability to plan, brief, rehearse, and execute the planned scenario. The company built a sand table of the range, set about the task of developing plans for the convoy from the company motor pool to the range, and rehearsed battle drills, such as react to contact, react to improvised explosive devices, and react to ambush.

Before the day of execution, the company came together and held a rehearsal of concept (ROC) drill with the battalion commander, the battalion S-3, and the vehicle crew evaluators to run through the execution of the range and brief the actual execution of tables VIII and IX. During the ROC drill, we ran through the concept of the operation, with the section leaders briefing the responsibilities of the next vehicle.

The scoring for the last two tables was less complicated than the scoring of the initial phase, but it was no less demanding. In order to get a "go," each section was required to not only accurately engage targets but also to effectively communicate and execute the briefed route and the standard operating procedures as a team of four gun trucks.

opportunity to actually engage targets with live ammunition. These tables proved to be quite a challenge for most of the crews; they were also the first opportunity for the vehicle commanders to fire. For many, the adjustment from shooting from the ground on a bipod or from a fixed position to engaging targets from an unstabilized position on top of an MRAP was hard to make.

While still in the trainup, we attempted to get MRAPs or up-armored vehicles from which to fire so the Soldiers could become accustomed to the sight picture. I believe that capability would have made a significant difference in the Soldiers' training. During the first week, a number of crews who went through the range ended up on the last two engagements with either not enough engagements to qualify or not enough ammunition to finish the range. After quite a few after-action reviews and discussions, we corrected the problems and the company moved on to table V.

Table V was designed to be a practice for the qualification in table VI. The targets were set up to really challenge the crews, specifically the gunners' ability to acquire and engage moving targets. Table VI was where each of the elements of the crew gunnery came together for the qualification.

During the 3 weeks that the company was in the field executing the operations, it performed very well. Of the required 24 crews, 6 crews qualified as Q1. Of those 6, 3 crews scored better than 800 points and received "Superior" scores; the "Top Gun" crew scored 864.

Executing a Scenario

With the completion of table VI, the company moved

On the day of execution, the section leaders were given an operation order and then required to develop a plan of action and a warning order and issue that warning order to the crews. At the appointed interval, each section leader used the sandtable to brief the crews and the vehicle crew evaluators on the threats, the standard operating procedures, and the plan of action for each phase of the operation. Then the vehicle commanders gathered their crews and began rehearsals and conducted precombat checks and inspections.

The execution of tables VIII and IX went exceptionally well. Every crew and section performed as rehearsed, and each section completed the tables the first time as a "go."

Finding Areas for Improvement

From the end of June through the end of October, the company remained focused and dedicated to completing the crew certification through sectional gunnery. From the after-action reviews we conducted, we discovered a few areas where we could have performed better and identified areas where we were operationally sound.

The flow of the training followed a very common-sense approach, as outlined by TC 4-11.46. Moving from basic marksmanship through crew-served weapons marksmanship was one of the areas that needed no improvement. The weapons training gave the Soldiers confidence in their ability with their primary weapons and allowed the unit to build the required crew skills for the gunnery operations.

We added the task of pairing the Soldiers serving as gunners with their vehicle commanders through the qualification process on the M240B machinegun. The gunners and vehicle commanders worked together making calls on targets, direction, and distance and completed the qualification process together.

Most notably, the CCTT was a very effective tool that we put to extensive use. The Soldiers in each crew spent approximately a month in the CCTT honing their communication skills and getting to work closely with each other. When the Soldiers were not on a mission or performing other garrison duties, they were in the CCTT. The decision to keep each section in the field during the qualification phase was an area of sustainment. This allowed each crew to focus on the task at hand and complete each table without distraction.

Of the areas that could have been improved, one was the difficulty in acquiring the required MRAPs and M-ATVs for the earlier training events. Since the company was "off ramped," it was not given the same priority as units that were deploying. During the weapons qualification phase, we were unable to get the one or two MRAPs that would have enabled the gunners and vehicle commanders to gain an appreciation for the difference between firing from the ground and the

firing from the vehicles' turrets.

This lack of vehicles was also a noticeable problem when the company was attempting to get drivers qualified. We were able to get my Soldiers through the driver's training academy. However, getting them licensed was difficult and had to be conducted with vehicles during the execution of gunnery operations.

Reflecting on the execution of the gunnery operations, the company performed exceptionally well during a very dynamic time. We began training for the gunnery exercise in June, executed a change of command, and went right into gunnery operations. The morale and confidence of the Soldiers and leaders in the company grew with each training event. I saw teamwork, determination, and a competitive drive from Soldiers in the unit when the challenge was issued by the 13th Expeditionary Sustainment Command (ESC) commander to take home the ESC's "Top Gun" award.

I witnessed a crew, after their platoon leader came in with a new "high score," turn around and state with all confidence that they would beat that score. Not only did they beat their platoon leader, they were the eventual trophy winners. I saw the crew's pride that not only had they exceeded the required score, but they had scored better than the previous trophy winners by more than a hundred points. This crew, led by Corporal Edmundo Salas with Specialist Ian Varner as gunner and Specialist Michael Weir as driver, demonstrated an impressive level of teamwork and skill as they scored 864 points with 9 engagements.

As a company, we learned what was required to work as a team and then applied those skills to complete our assigned mission. The company qualified 20 crews for convoy escort team and convoy protection platform operations, took home the "Top Gun" trophy, and eventually set the standard for other sustainment units to follow.

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