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The sun has not yet even begun to rise as the Marines begin to gather on the benches in the motor pool. Some lay down their body armor and try to catch a few more minutes of sleep. Some smoke cigarettes. Some are already getting to work, checking their trucks’ communications equipment, loading water and meals ready-to-eat and any other gear they might need.

Everyone knows it is going to be a long day. And it’s supposed to be a hot one too.

These Marines have a job to do: ensure the security of a predetermined section of a major roadway in the Fallujah area to allow for the safe and uninterrupted passage of Coalition Forces and the Iraqi people and disrupt any insurgent activity on that roadway.

These men, the Marines of Military Police Detachment, Combat Logistics Battalion 8, 2nd Force Service Support Group (Forward), routinely provide security for CLB-8 assets during convoys and other operations throughout their Area of Operations in Western Iraq. They have also been assisting Regimental Combat Team 8, 2nd Marine Division, with security on the roadways.

Huddled around the front of a humvee, the headlights illuminating the patrol leader, Staff Sgt. Jamie M. Lybrand, the Marines listen as he briefs the mission at hand.

“The bottom line out there is our mission: to rid [the roadway] of insurgent activity and to ensure the safe passage of Coalition Forces,” said the Pace, Fla., native. “We have to stay alert and be wary because as we change our tactics, they change theirs. As we adjust, they adjust.”

After the briefing and a final communications check, the Marines mount their vehicles and stage in “marching order,” waiting to depart the camp.

The security of this particular route is the responsibility of 1st Bn., 6th Marine Regiment, RCT-8.

“We provide support which allows 1/6 to move their operations,” said Lybrand. “As they need to move to do their ops we are there to fill in and cover the [route]. If 1/6 moves they call on us to support.”

With weapons loaded and everyone’s eyes alert, the military policemen begin the potentially dangerous task of ensuring the route’s security. The six vehicles break into two teams and patrol back and forth along their section of the roadway, approximately five kilometers long with multiple overpasses and access roads.

“We drive the first time and inspect any debris, removing what we can,” Lybrand said. “This way we know to be extra alert if any new debris shows up while we are out there.”

Insurgents have established a steady habit of attacking Coalition Forces with Improvised Explosive Devices and mines, so this is one of the main concerns facing the MPs on their patrols.

Today the Marines brought a special tool in combating mines and IEDs: a combat engineer armed with an Army Navy Portable Search System 14, equipped with ground-penetrating radar, and the training of a sapper.

“Mines and IEDs are a tremendous threat,” said Lybrand. “We use every asset we have and do everything in our power to find mines and IEDs, anything that explodes, before they explode on someone.”

The military policemen have used engineers and military working dogs to help combat the IED threat in the past. They also use binoculars and rifle scopes to look for anything suspicious.

The Marines do more than just patrol while running these security missions; they also set up observation posts and run vehicle checkpoints.

There are two types of VCPs, deliberate and snap. Deliberate VCPs are when the patrol stops and sets up a checkpoint to search vehicles for an extended point of time. Snap VCPs are when the convoy abruptly stops and searches a few suspicious vehicles before remounting and continuing on their way.

During the checkpoints the MPs stop and search random and suspicious vehicles on the roadway.

“We run VCPs to screen what's on the road,” Lybrand said. “If we see a vehicle acting suspicious we block traffic and check the vehicle.”

Despite the temperatures exceeding 118 degrees Fahrenheit, the Marines remain diligent in accomplishing their mission.

“If a Marine’s mind is not on the mission because they are sweating out and it slows them down [leading to a potentially dangerous situation] well we prevent that by staying hydrated,” said Lybrand. “As long as they hydrate their minds are in the game.”

The military policemen of the detachment, call sign “warthogs,” do more than just patrol the roadways and assist 1/6; they provide security to CLB-8 for convoys, Explosive Ordnance and Disposal and vehicle recovery missions and conduct other security missions as the situation requires.

Of the 61 Marines in the detachment, 26 are provisional, meaning they are not military policemen by military occupational specialty. Twenty of the Marines are reserve communications Marines mobilized to augment the MPs.

“We train them and integrate them,” said Lybrand.

Sergeant Chris L. Epps, 4th squad leader and military policeman by trade, has deployed to Iraq three times. The Richmond, Va., native has seen Operation Iraqi Freedom develop since the beginning, and passes that knowledge on to his fellow MPs, provisional or not.

“The MPs are not different. They know their jobs. They sweat like us; they work like us; it's their necks on the line out there, just like us,” he said. “Marines are Marines; we all bleed green.”

While the provisional MPs work right alongside the other MPs, it took some training and experience to get them up to speed.

Sergeant Thomas M. Litton is a data communications Marine by MOS. He left his billet at the Mobilization Command Kansas City Technology Service Organization to deploy to Iraq earlier this year with the Marines of the Military Police Detachment.
"When I got out here all I knew was computers," the El Paso, Texas, native said. "Now I'm dealing with all the weapons systems and all types of humvees. It's pretty much a complete 180 from what I was doing."

It was a challenge learning all the weapons systems and how the MPs do business, he said, but the teachings of the staff noncommissioned officers and squad leaders in the detachment made overcoming that challenge possible.

"We learned from the experience of all the active duty regular MPs," he said. "We absorbed their knowledge and kept rolling with it."

The experience of many Marines within the detachment shows the progression of the conflict in Iraq and gives a broad spectrum of information to the less experienced Marines.

"The first time [OIF I] was more conventional; the enemy stood and fought us," said Epps. "The second time [OIF II] the enemy acted more like an insurgency, attacking with engage-and-withdraw tactics. Now [OIF III] the enemy uses mostly IEDs and terrorist-like tactics. Their tactics are evolving based on their defeats; we keep killing them so they try something different."

Corporal Andres U. Florentino, 1st fire team leader in 3rd squad and Newport News, Va., native, agrees with Epps. He also deployed to Iraq three times, but his second deployment was cut short when a rocket-propelled grenade struck his vehicle, littering his body with shrapnel.

Florentino volunteered for this third deployment to Iraq, citing his desire to pass his knowledge and experience to his fellow Marines as his motive.

"I'm trying to make it to where [something similar to what happened to me] doesn't happen to someone else," he said. "Maybe something I know can help someone else."

"When I'm driving and I see something - a defilade, highrise or overpass - I tell the Marines what the enemy used to do," he said. "It broadens their lookout; instead of just looking for mines and IEDs they are aware of what else could happen. Right now the war is mostly IEDs and mines, but who knows what's next?"

The Marines exude a knowledge that their efforts are directly impacting the future of Iraq.

"We're just trying to make a difference; get the insurgents off the road," said Cpl. Derrick R. Colclasure, 3rd fire team leader in 4th squad. "[The Coalition] is helping [the Iraqi people] establish a government so they can have more say in what happens within their own country."

"We're also teaching them how to enforce their government," said Florentino. "If we weren't here they'd have a leader who'd be overthrown and another dictator would fall into place."

"We can bring some semblance of peace and democracy to these people after their history, but there's a long road ahead of them," said Epps. "The simple fact that Saddam Hussein is not in power is not in power is the best thing anyone could have done for this country."

Drenched in sweat, the Marines pull back into the safety of Camp Fallujah as the sun starts to set in the sky. Another day's work finished; another step closer to a secure and stable Iraq.

"The efforts of the Marines here are what make this a success; the hard work, sweat and blood they put into everything they do," said Lybrand. "They're doing a damn fine job."


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