

**CRITIQUE OF THE ARMY EXECUTIVE SUMMARY, CONCERNING THE
ATTACK ON THE 507TH MAINTENANCE COMPANY, IN AN NASIRIYAH,
IRAQ, ON 23 MARCH, 2003**

Introduction

The **Army Executive Summary** of the incident was prepared by a team from the Department of the Army Headquarters, working under the Commanding General of the Army Training and Doctrine Command, and tasked by the Chief of Staff of the Army to conduct a fact finding mission and provide the above Executive Summary. I have to take issue with the document, not in order to criticize the troops involved, as they did the best that one could expect under such adverse conditions. However, the responsible Officer's apparently are not held accountable in the Executive Summary. I believe if they are not, then similar future incidents of this nature could occur, with the repeated and unnecessary loss of life and numerous injuries incurred in this incident.

As a retired Marine Officer, I make no claim to being an expert tactician or strategist, although my past tours of duty as a former Marine Rifle Platoon Cmdr., Rifle Company Cmdr., and Advisor, in combat, might provide some credibility to the statements below. Having written a critique of the Mogadishu affair in Somalia (Black Hawk Down), and the Ia Drang Valley battles in Vietnam, I believe this critique to be in line with others I have written. I might mention that I also have critiqued Air Force, Marine Corps and Naval errors as well, so I am not purposely selecting the US. Army, which I hold in high esteem, for any special criticism. However, lessons are never really learned, unless battles and incidents are critiqued and honestly expressed, regardless of who might get their feelings hurt, or if found warranted, receive disciplinary action.

Background

We Marines have always had difficulty understanding Army logic, in that Army Officers, seemed to have been mesmerized by the Fulda Gap in Europe, as the only possible avenue of a Russian advance against Europe. I have never met an Army Combat Arms Officer, who did not seem to have the Fulda Gap as his main priority and his main obsession. Personally, I thought that it would be the last avenue of attack the Russians might use, considering it was littered with atomic mines, and highly targeted by our forces from all directions. When we Marines would point out the importance of open sea lanes as priorities, since they are needed to provide supplies and munitions, Senior Army Officers viewed that situation as a minor Naval impediment, that could somehow be easily overcome. The fact that 98% of everything entering Vietnam, during that war, had arrived by ship did not seem to change their views or priorities. Similarly, the vast majority of men and equipment for the recent more Gulf Wars, arrived by ship. Thus, the need from the Marine/Naval viewpoint was that it was and is of paramount importance to protect the choke points and sea lanes such as the Suez Canal, The Straights of Hormuz, The Panama Canal, The Straights of Malacca, The Straights of Gibraltar, etc.,. But our arguments were for naught as the Army Officers would not budge, which is somewhat

similar to Air Force Officers believing all wars can be won from the air alone. With the Fulda Gap no longer viewed as a main enemy threat, it is difficult to determine where the next Army Commands fixation will surface, and it is doubtful that the Air Force leaders will ever concede that men on the ground win the wars, or that air units are required only as support forces to the ground elements, excluding the use of Nuclear weapons.

A second area of dispute between the Army and the Marine Corps is the need to have all troops trained as infantrymen. This training from the Marine Corps perspective requires the need to include proper patrolling techniques, setting up of ambushes, use of all infantry weapons, radio procedures, convoy protection, calling in of artillery and air support, etc. The Army provides for minimal training in these areas, for their non infantry troops. Thus, a disagreement remains between these two service branches, regarding the methods and philosophy in regards to the proper training of non infantry troops and Officers. In Vietnam, the first Marine to receive the Bronze Star, was a jet mechanic at Danang Air Base, whose nighttime duty was to protect the airfield. He personally killed 5 Sappers that night, and resumed his work the next morning fixing jet engines. In the Iraqi War Desert Storm One, a Marine Supply Officer and his supply chief serving with 1stBn, 7th Marines, knocked out several BMP troop carriers, with LAAWs and an AT-4 anti-tank weapon. This is not that unusual in the Marine Corps, as I have had to use truck drivers, cooks, bakers, and even bandsmen as replacements in my Rifle Company That was for ambushes, patrolling, perimeter watches, and defensive position assignments in Vietnam. We did not have time to train men in complicated infantry maneuvers and methods, while already engaged in combat The Marine Corps concept of every man a Rifleman, pays off when the losses run high , replacements are few, and infantry knowledgeable troops are required . With that background, I will attempt to critique an unusual incident with the 507th Maintenance Company in Iraq, on 23 March, 2003.

Critique on Attack on 507th Maintenance Company

The Army's Executive Summary of the subject incident is provided as an attachment to this critique, for comparison purposes. The Executive Summary provides excellent maps, along with excellent graphics of the vehicles involved in this incident, and is to be commended on that account. However, the responsibility for this debacle is not addressed, and while I cannot name names, the Senior Army Commanders can and should.

The 507th Maintenance Company originally consisted of 82 individuals commanded by an Army Captain, and consisted originally of 33 vehicles of various types and purpose, and appear, from the frequent breakdowns, to have been in various states of condition for lengthy trips into a combat zone. According to the Executive Summary (Hereafter referred to as the Summary) it stated that this small contingent was the last in a part of a 600 march column of vehicles. The primary mission of the 507th was to repair and maintain vehicles and equipment of the 5th Battalion of the 52nd Air Defense Artillery

(Patriot), but fell under the tactical control of the 3rd Forward Support Battalion for this controlled vehicle movement.

Prior to leaving their Kuwait base at Camp Virginia on 20 March, 2003 for the short 80 kilometer leg (2 hours driving time, 7PM- 9PM) to Attack Position Dawson, which was also in Kuwait, 18 soldiers (Contact Teams and Medics) were attached to and moved forward with other units for reasons left unexplained. Thus, this unit of 82 individuals was now down to 64, as they moved their 33 vehicles to Attack Position Dawson. There they received 10 hours of rest, while also refueling their vehicles and attending to minor maintenance needs at this location. Also, from this location at 7AM on 21 March, they moved and were shortly after linked up with the 3rd Forward Support Battalion, or hereafter know as the 3rd FSB.

The next part of the journey was a 35 kilometer leg from an area in between Attack Position Dawson and another Attack Position named Bull. This caused the convoy to depart Kuwaiti territory and enter Iraqi territory, and the convoy arrived at Attack Position Bull at noon on 21 March.

The next leg was to motor on to Attack Position Lizard some 80 kilometers northwest, and began at 6PM as darkness approached. Much of the travels were off- road, thus causing a number of trucks from many to be stuck or bogged down in the soft sand. During this part of the movement, many drivers became confused in the darkness and off-road unfamiliarity, causing some to separate from their march columns. The 507th was no exception to this condition, and due to mechanical failures and poor traffic ability fragmented into two groups. The first group led by their Captain consisted of those vehicles that did not break down or get stuck in the sand, and that were capable of keeping pace with the 3rd FSB convoy. The second group of the 507th consisted of vehicles that had mechanical problems, or were stuck in the sand, along with the vehicles used to tow or pull other vehicles free. The first group under the command of the Captain arrived at Attack Position Lizard at 0530 AM on 22 March after an all night drive, while the second group under the command of the 1st Sergeant arrived with all vehicles running or in tow at 4PM on 22 March, some 22 hours after departing Attack Position Bull.

While at Attack Position Lizard, the Captain decided to split his unit of the 507th into two groups. The first group was to be lead by the 1stLt. Executive Officer, and consisted of 17 vehicles and 32 soldiers and left with the main convoy at 2PM, while the Captain waited for his trace element lead by the 1st Sgt. to arrive. During this period, the Captain notified both the Artillery (Patriot) Battalion Commander the 507th was in support of, and the FSB staff of their situation and plans to split his unit into two sections. The 1st Sgt arrived at 4PM with his section and another convoy vehicle driven by tow soldiers from another unit, and who were towing a 5 ton truck. At 7:30PM the Captain reorganized the 1stSgts section into a new line of March unit. This newly reorganized unit consisted of 33 soldiers to include the Captain and 1stSgt. And 18 vehicles, two of which were being towed. The Captain was unable to contact the 3rdFSB operational staff by radio, although no mention is made if he tried to contact the Artillery Battalion staff, which should have been closer to their location. The Captain then set out by the most direct route (a straight

line over rough terrain), ultimately intending to join the convoy on HWY 8, listed by the Convoy Commander as Route Blue. However, this cross country second route named Route Jackson or HWY 1, was parallel to the Blue Route that the Captain had marked on his map, and Route Jackson intersected the Blue Route at different points on the map. However, the Captain failed, forgot, or was not notified to include Route Jackson or HWY 1 on his map. According to the Army Executive Summary map, prior to entering the city of An Nasiriyah the convoy was planned to leave Route Blue or HWY 8 and drive cross country on Route Jackson or HWY 1, thus skirting the city of An Nasiriyah. Unfortunately, the Blue Route which was the only one used by the Captain ran straight through the city of An Nasiriyah, and that is the route the Captain followed. There was supposed to be a Traffic Control Point (TOP) directing the Captain's section to Route Jackson or HWY 1, but these people were not in place. However, the Captain encountered other friendly forces, and was told the direction of continuing on to Route Blue or HWY 8 was straight ahead. By the Captain not being aware of Route Jackson HWY 1 was a planned or alternative route, headed right into An Nasiriyah.

In the ensuing battle, of the 33 members of this rear convoy section, 11 were killed or died of wounds or injuries sustained in combat, seven were captured by Iraqi forces, and the remaining 16 were able to rejoin friendly forces. Of the 22 that survived, nine were wounded in action. While the above information is extracted from the Army Executive Summary, I count 34 people in the above action, not 33. If you add 11 killed, 7 captured, and 16 able to rejoin friendly forces, that adds up to 34 people to me. Thus, either the Executive Summary has a typo or the soldiers were not properly accounted for with the numbers provided.

I do not intend to address the actual combat actions reported in the Summary, as I believe all the soldiers did the best they could under the circumstances. My critique is directed primarily at the Officers responsible for this debacle, not the troops who simply follow orders from their seniors.

Observations and Comments

The Army Executive Summary fails to address such issues as the actual training preparations undertaken in Kuwait, prior to the assembly and movement of the 600 vehicle convoy to Iraq. Considering the numbers of reported vehicle breakdowns during the convoy movement, coupled with the repeated failure of weapons to fire by the unit in question; the examination and analysis of the training, of spare parts and maintenance of vehicles, of weapons, and of unit equipment should have been addressed in detail, and not as a simple mass listing of training accomplished.

The questions regarding the type, amount, and method of training provided to the 507TH remains an area of concern, particularly weapons firing, cleaning, and protection from dust and dirt are not addressed in the Summary. Prophylactics such as used in Vietnam for barrel ends, and plastic or cloth casings for the receiver group, does not seem to have been used for weapons protection. This may have been the cause for weapons

malfunctions, and I personally have concerns regarding the entire training cycle for the basic requirements, as well as for other items and equipment.

Some of the Summary discussion of the Garmin Global Positioning System and the Route selections, along with the difficulties the 507th Maintenance Company encountered in the city of An Nasiriyah, are for internal Army concerns and should be addressed at the War Colleges and various Commands, rather than in my critique of the overall situation.

That said, it is the responsibility of all Commanders to insure their subordinates are properly trained and capable of using the issued equipment. Routes of march or movement should be explained over and over again at all levels of command, to insure that everyone understands the danger spots, the rally points, the alternative routes, and any deviation from the main route of march. Since the 507th was in Kuwait for almost a month prior to their movement within the convoy, the Captain should have been briefed properly. His understanding of his unit's participation, route, and avoidance areas should have been questioned, and he should have briefed his subordinates of all that he knew. It would appear that a foolish attempt at secrecy prevented much of the above, or else the Captain would not have been of the belief that his only route in Kuwait and Iraq was Route Blue or HWY 8. It is foolish to believe that formal briefings can be replaced with computer disks, GPS systems, and a minimal explanation of the tasks at hand. Senior Officers heads should roll on these issues alone.

What is bewildering to me is that apparently nobody from the 3rd FSB or the Artillery (Patriot) Battalion was assigned to accompany the rear element of the convoy. Considering that the rear element was assigned the task of supporting the Artillery Patriot Battalion, while protecting the rear end of the convoy, and also retrieving lost, inoperable, or stuck vehicles as well as providing transport for personnel, as required; it is almost incomprehensible to believe that they were not required to be in constant radio check, and when they split their unit at Attack Position Lizard were simply left on their own.

Perhaps, equally baffling is why this unit had no protection such as tanks, infantry, or air assets. Basic movement in a hostile environment requires and demands protection in the front (reconnaissance), flankers on the sides of the unit or convoy, and protection for the rear elements. This is Standing Operating Procedures, and it is difficult to image the convoy Commander failing to protect his rear element. Since the Summary does not address the rest of the convoy, I shudder to think of what else wasn't done correctly. Surely, a 600 vehicle convoy and perhaps 1200 individuals would rate protection from aircraft that could spot enemy forces from above and in all directions, and inform the convoy Commander of attacks on his units, bogged down or inoperable vehicles, or lost units heading in the wrong direction. Considering that friendly forces have and had Air superiority, surely air assets should and could have been made available to the convoy commander of this large a unit. Senior Officers heads should roll for this basic lack of planning. While it is granted that often the weather precluded aviation assets from being effectively utilized, this would not preclude the use of Infantry and Armor for the protection of this important and vulnerable convoy.

I find it difficult to comprehend how all the other vehicle drivers seemed to find their way, and apparently had few vehicles that were bogged down or became inoperable, while the 507th seemed to have had so many. From my reading of the Summary, the other elements did not seem to have communications problems, or locating their assigned objectives. I could go on with the critique, but it might appear to be nitpicking which was and is not my objective.

I think the Army Executive Summary should be rewritten to include more detailed information, and the responsible Commanders reprimanded or receive a courts-martial, where warranted, for this unnecessary debacle. It should begin with flag officers, not the junior officer's ala Lt. William Calley in Vietnam.

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