



Military Police Memorial

By Command Sergeant Major Jeffrey J. Mellinger

Each year, the Office of the Provost Marshal General conducts a remembrance ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery, Virginia, to honor fallen military police Soldiers. The guest speaker for the most recent ceremony, held 21 September 2007, was career infantryman Command Sergeant Major Jeffrey J. Mellinger. Although Command Sergeant Major Mellinger has no formal ties to military police, he has worked with them throughout his career. The following speech, which was submitted by Major Will McKannay of the Office of the Provost Marshal General, demonstrates Command Sergeant Major Mellinger's exemplary knowledge of military police history.

“Since their beginnings as a part of the Continental Army on 1 June 1778 at Valley Forge, military policemen have done their duty to assist, protect, and defend their fellow Soldiers, marines, sailors, and airmen.

In 1820, the Army saw the need for specialized troops to help enforce good order and discipline and issued Article 58 of the *General Regulations*¹ requiring troops to perform MP [military police] duties as needed. The regulation recommended selecting personnel of superior physical ability and intelligence to fulfill the duties.

It was not until World War I that a professional—though still wartime-only—Military Police Corps was established. In 1917, orders issued by Brigadier General Harry Bandholtz, the newly appointed American Expeditionary Force Provost Marshal General, fixed the duties and responsibilities of the new MP Corps—the first of which was battlefield circulation.

Sixty-six years ago this week, on 26 September 1941, the Secretary of War established a permanent Military Police Corps. The first MP School opened

the following year at Arlington Cantonment—very close to where we stand today.

Remember Melvin Purvis? Melvin joined the Military Police Corps as a captain on 31 January 1942 and took provost marshal training as a major at Arlington Cantonment later that year.

Who was Melvin Purvis? Ever hear of Baby Face Nelson? Pretty Boy Floyd? John Dillinger? Purvis was the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] agent who led the manhunts for each of them. He resigned from the FBI and became a military policeman and served a nation at war.

The bravery and tenacity of military police was demonstrated time and again during World War II, but hardly a better example exists than their defense of the Lunendorff Bridge at Remagen [Germany] in March 1945. General Eisenhower said the bridge—the last standing bridge across the Rhine—was ‘worth its weight in gold.’ The 9th MP Company not only held the bridge, but replaced drivers killed as they tried to move vehicles across. For nine days, the 9th MPs stood their ground, defending the bridge against attack after attack. Moments after the

company departed the bridge under orders to catch their division, the bridge finally collapsed. The unit was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for their actions.

Five years later, military police found themselves fighting alongside and in front of United Nations [UN] forces in Korea. They kept units moving at the front and landed at Inchon with the lead elements.

Government Order #31, dated 30 May 1918, placed responsibility upon the provost marshal and our military police for the care and custody of prisoners of war. Think of how many prisoners and detainees our MPs have captured, held, and processed over the years. Guarding prisoners has always been dangerous work, from the Revolutionary War through today.

Look a moment at the February and March 1952 riots in the Kojedo Island POW [prisoner of war] camp during the Korean War. And what of the numerous riots and disturbances at detention facilities in Iraq and Afghanistan? Nobody can argue [that] the face of imminent danger resides in the cells and compounds of Guantanamo [Bay detention camp, Cuba].

Terrorism is a far too common word today. But it can easily be argued that Private First Class Peter M. Feierabend of the 560th MP Company was among the first to face such a threat. Killed on 16 February 1964, while guarding the Kinh-Do Theater, Saigon, Private First Class Feierabend was one of the three Americans killed in the Vietcong terrorist bombing that targeted American military personnel attending a performance at the theater. While this action may sound ordinary, Private First Class Feierabend was posthumously awarded the Silver Star and Purple Heart for his actions.

On 31 January 1968, the North Vietnamese launched country-wide attacks during Tet. Who can forget the pictures of the 716th MP Battalion and the 90th Detachment MPs defending the U.S. Embassy compound in Saigon, repelling the attackers?

Not many know, but the MPs were the only combat troops stationed in the city and carried the battle for Saigon and the embassy alone for many hours until help arrived. Not one attacker survived to enter the embassy.

After the battle was done, Vietcong prisoners taken across the city were asked who they first made contact with during the fight and they replied, 'The MPs.'

In the first twelve hours of defending the city and embassy, the MPs lost twenty-seven killed and forty-four wounded. In addition to the Presidential

Unit Citation, the MPs earned a Distinguished Service Cross [DSC], a Silver Star, eighty-nine Bronze Stars, seventy-one Purple Hearts, and sixty-four Army Commendation Medals.

Our military police have been in the jaws of death many times, in many places, since. Let me name a few more MPs who gave their all while assisting, protecting, and defending the force.

Private First Class Scott L. Roth, killed in action, 20 December 1989, Operation Just Cause, Panama.

Specialist William F. Palmer, killed in action, 24 February 1991, on the first day of Operation Desert Storm's ground war.

Sergeant Christopher Hilgert, Specialist Mark Gutting, Specialist Keith E. Pearson, and Sergeant Ronald N. Richerson, all killed in action, 8 August 1993, after striking a land mine with their Humvee [high-mobility, multipurpose, wheeled vehicle] during the UN peacekeeping mission in Somalia.

Specialist Narson B. Sullivan, killed in action, 25 April 2003, Operation Iraqi Freedom.

In 1914, the *Field Service Regulations* of the U.S. Army assigned military police to a new role—convoy escort duties. MPs were 'assigned to preserve order, protect property, render assistance in case of accidents, and take part in the defense.' They were also to provide a strong guard in cases where the convoy employed locally hired or impressed transportation.

Think, then, of the actions of members of the 617th MP Company on 20 March 2005. On that day, Staff Sergeant Timothy Nein, Sergeant Leigh Ann Hester, and the remainder of the squad fought and killed twenty-seven AIF [anti-Iraqi forces], wounded six, and captured one—all while coming to the aid of a convoy under attack. Earned that day by these MPs were another DSC, a Silver Star (the first female since World War II to earn the award), and numerous Bronze Stars for Valor.

And most recently, Master Sergeant Wilberto Sabalu, Jr., was killed in action, 6 May 2007, during Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

We often think of the physical courage of our MPs, but perhaps take for granted their moral courage.

Think of the moral courage required by Specialist Joseph Darby of the 372d Military Police Company, the Soldier who first reported the abuses of Abu Ghraib. Knowing that he was alone against many fellow Soldiers as well as superiors, he did the hard, right thing and reported what he knew was wrong.

Many of us live or have lived on military bases, and it is during those times when we sleep best at night, secure in the knowledge that military policemen protect us.

But it is not always so safe for our MPs.

The main gate of Fort Gordon, a former MP School location, is named for Private First Class Robert J. McKenna, killed on 22 February 1966 as he stopped two armed robbers near Gate 1.

And Sergeant First Class Jeanne M. Balcombe was shot to death by a Soldier in her unit on 21 August 1999, at Camp Red Cloud, Korea.

Ever vigilant, our MPs stand ready all the time to do their duty.

We stand here today at the site of a plaque dedicated on 2 October 2002 in the memory and in honor of our MPs. The plaque reads, 'IN PROUD MEMORY OF THOSE SOLDIERS OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY MILITARY POLICE CORPS WHO MADE THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE IN THE DEFENSE OF FREEDOM.'

Some of you know that I spent a lot of time patrolling with our MPs as the Multinational Force–Iraq command sergeant major. I rode with them in the

cities and streets of Iraq and watched as they moved forward fearlessly time and again through enemy fire or improvised explosive device[s].

Of all the warriors I saw in action in Iraq, the military police continually earned my highest respect and admiration for their daily courage, selflessness, and dedication to duty. I am more honored to be here today than you can know, and I thank you for the opportunity to express my gratitude in such a public way.

May we never forget the value of those military police who gave their all, for they were truly of the troops and for the troops.

Assist. Protect. Defend.

Thank you.”

References:

- Government Order #31, 30 May 1918.
- Field Service Regulations*, U.S. Army, 1914.

Endnote:

- ¹*General Regulations for the United States Army*, Article 58, “General Police,” 1821.

Command Sergeant Major Mellinger is the command sergeant major of the U.S. Army Materiel Command.

