



Slowed by Snow; Forged by Fire

By Captain Saepyo Choe Warren

Monday morning, 28 November 2005, the Soldiers of the 23d Chemical “Lion” Battalion are plucked from the long Thanksgiving weekend to cross the snowy, rock-sliding Snoqualmie Pass to Yakima for a twelve-day, live-fire exercise (LFX). With the 180-mile stretch across Washington State before them, the convoy sets out into the snowy desert for cold-weather training. “You’ve got to be able to train in all kinds of terrain and weather,” said a private from the 585th Engineer “Roughneck” Company (Pipeline Construction).

This exercise offers leaders an additional training opportunity to prepare Soldiers—an opportunity that will not come around again for another 90 days. Stretching the limits of constraints—manpower, time, and training—is a natural consequence for a Soldier in a nation at war. Such commodities are consistently coveted and thoroughly tested. Over a span of two weeks, the battalion works, trains, and shivers for long hours to meet the commander’s intent and training objective: Safely conduct platoon level missions and evaluations, learn and improve systems and techniques, accurately battle track, and redeploy with 100 percent accountability.

No matter the mission—decontaminate an airstrip or a unit with M12s, conduct a resupply patrol with a tank and pump unit, or fire live rounds down range with a convoy of gun trucks—the process, from start to finish, is rigorous

and challenging. The observers/controllers (O/Cs) evaluate leader performance from the receipt of the mission, through the execution, to the discussion of lessons learned in the after-action review. Everyone involved carries a burden of responsibility. The platoon leadership (operating on a daily average of four hours of sleep) makes detailed decisions, the Soldiers dutifully carry out orders, the opposing force tests tactics, and the O/Cs assess and coach the team toward proficiency.

Harsh winter weather adds another dimension to training. With packed snow, black ice, changing altitudes, and a brutal windchill, units can spend several hours battling with snow chains. Icy roads slow dismount drills and result in occasional injuries (such as frostnip). Weather-related factors force Soldiers to improvise and adapt missions. The cold slows training, but impressively, has no effect on Soldier morale and momentum.

“I enjoyed the training,” shares a private from the 23d Chemical Battalion. “When the cold weather hits you in the morning and you can’t move your fingers and toes, it’s frustrating, but you’ve just got to suck it up—it’ll make you stronger. After this training, I know what my leaders expect of me. It’s about learning what we need to work on and getting better at what we’re already good at, so we’re strong and there are no weak links.”



In addition to running the main effort, a significant portion of the force runs simultaneous staff actions and mission support operations, spanning the gamut of battle tracking, maintenance, logistics, medical support, communications, human resources, dining facility operations, and chaplain services. All of the moving pieces—tactical and support—are pivotal to securing the overall mission success.



These demanding circumstances beg the question: How do Soldiers do it? When unfavorable conditions are unrelenting—in training or in battle—how do Soldiers maintain morale? The resounding answer across the board is “cohesion and balance in leadership.” According to the sergeant major of the 23d, “Adversity breeds cohesion.” “When you’re part of a team, you don’t want to let your team down—and that motivates you,” expresses a private in the 23d. “I’m only successful if the people on my left and right are successful,” echoes a sergeant from the 3d Platoon, 62d Chemical Company.

“Success goes above and beyond the mission,” continues the sergeant major. “The welfare of the Soldiers feeds into accomplishing the mission. There has to be that balance. You can’t tell Soldiers constantly what they need to do for you, then when it comes time for you to do something for them, say you don’t have the time. The key to success is making sure Soldiers understand that their leaders are doing everything they can to take care of them. Motivated Soldiers are responsive to their leadership. We have a tight company because we operate with this mentality.”



Amidst harsh conditions, a rigorous schedule, and challenging tasks, leaders are taking care of Soldiers, Soldiers are dedicated to accomplishing a tactical mission, and the service support staff is ensuring that every Soldier and fight are resourced. And through it all, Soldier morale is high due to the sense of accomplishment and cohesion. The week of exercises is recorded to help plan future training events, constructive comments on lessons learned are captured to improve the next iteration, and most importantly, the value of Soldier teamwork is stressed.

An LFX is about more than shooting live rounds. It is about great effort and teamwork making all things possible. It is about making it through the fire—the adversity and the fight—and forging a team. 🍷

Captain Warren is a native Korean from Pusan. She previously served as the adjutant for the 23d Chemical Battalion, Fort Lewis, Washington. She is a graduate of the University of Portland.