Passing the Torch

By First Lieutenant Megan Howell

To prepare future platoon leaders at the U.S. Military Academy (USMA) at West Point for what they might encounter in their profession, General Fred Franks (Retired) created the semester-long MX400 "Officership" Capstone Course for seniors. This course, which is now in its second year, begins with a battle command focus, including a series of guest speakers—battle commanders ranging from platoon leaders who just completed operations to senior leaders such as the USMA superintendent, Lieutenant General Buster Hagenbeck. The speakers are invited to relate stories about their experiences in leading Soldiers (especially those stories involving the more challenging problems faced by young leaders in Iraq and Afghanistan) and engage the cadets in conversations about those stories. This provides the cadets with the opportunity to think about the types of leadership situations and dilemmas that they may encounter.

I was one of five privileged platoon leaders invited to participate in a January 2010 iteration of this USMA event. My fellow participants and I spent our first day at USMA reflecting upon our own experiences—with each other and a team of officer mentors. Our conversation was followed by a dinner, during which General Franks thanked us for our service and shared some of his desires and expectations regarding topics to be covered during the event. For example, he asked us to share our feelings about our Soldiers, relay the importance of character, and provide the cadets with a sense of what is expected of a platoon leader who is handed a tough mission. General Franks listened to our stories and shared a couple of his own. It was inspiring to learn that, as a young major, General Franks had been severely wounded in Vietnam, yet continued to press forward.

As for my own background, I was commissioned from USMA in 2008 and assigned as the platoon leader, 3d Platoon, 218th Military Police Company, Fort Campbell, Kentucky. By April 2009, we were deployed to Kirkuk, Iraq. While most of the company remained at Forward Operating Base Warrior in Kirkuk, my platoon moved to the city of Hawijah. As the outlying platoon, we supported a cavalry battalion and an armor battalion and conducted a police transition team mission for police stations located in the Hawijah Iraqi Police District. Throughout the course of a year, 3d Platoon conducted more than 50 specialized police training classes and completed 575 combat patrols to Iraqi police stations. We also coordinated the acquisition of land, ammunition, and supplies; provided retraining for Iraqi police who needed additional instruction; and controlled the safety aspects of four Iraqi police ranges. Our success depended on our ability to operate in an incredibly decentralized fashion, with young, noncommissioned officers (NCOs) leading patrols and training Iraqi police every day. This was a new concept for an inexperienced platoon leader like me.

Most cadets do not know much about how military police units deploy and conduct operations, but the usual military police mission set of training and peacekeeping is becoming the norm for maneuver units. In addition, the need to "power down" leadership and operate in a decentralized fashion is becoming more and more prevalent across the force. I kept these trends in mind while attempting to connect with a broad range of cadets during the speaking engagement.

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An important skill for military police leaders is the ability to work directly with maneuver battalion and company commanders. This can be challenging, but our ability to work well with these leaders contributed to our success. Because the training mission is new to many maneuver units, my NCOs and I worked with the battlespace owners, providing them with standard military police training materials as well as guidance and advice from law enforcement professionals and international police advisors who have years of knowledge and experience. This ensured that all U.S. leaders were on the same “sheet of music” with regard to training and that they were all teaching the Iraqi police the same techniques and standards.

Another critical skill is the ability to work well with local security force leaders. Following the 30 June 2009 deadline established in Article 24 of the U.S.-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement,[1] Iraqi security forces took charge of area security, while U.S. forces played a supporting role. However, due to the strong relationship we had with Iraqi police leaders in our district, our partners continued to request training and support from coalition forces.

Finally, our success in Hawijah was largely due to the hard work and cooperation of our NCOs. Their experience and dedication caused the accomplishments of the platoon to stand out across Multinational Division–North, and I was able to showcase their exemplary military police service in my USMA presentation. In addition to encouraging the cadets to work hard and prepare to lead Soldiers, I wanted to inspire them to look forward to the honor of serving as a leader in our profession.

I think the cadets were able to gain some worthwhile insight from the USMA event. But more surprising, and personally worthwhile, was the positive impact that those two days at USMA had on me. I was reminded that, even though the current operational tempo makes it difficult to find the time, it is important that we reflect on our experiences. Reflection prompts new insight and brings new meaning to past events—which in turn, can improve our understanding of, and reaction to, future events. Sharing my knowledge and experiences with future leaders helped reaffirm my own sense of professional identity and pride in the Military Police Corps.

Endnote:

[1]The official name of the U.S.-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement is the “Agreement Between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq on the Withdrawal of United States Forces from Iraq and the Organization of Their Activities During Their Temporary Presence in Iraq.” The agreement established that U.S. combat forces would withdraw from Iraqi cities by 30 June 2009 and that all U.S. forces would completely withdraw from Iraq by 31 December 2011.

First Lieutenant Howell is a platoon leader with the 218th Military Police Company. She holds a bachelor’s degree from the USMA at West Point, New York.