

# Lessons from the Past



## An Infantryman's Journey with a Medical Platoon

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One day many years ago, an infantry battalion was deep into its preparation to be validated for its new mission as part of a heavy force element being prepared for enhancing the XVIIIth Airborne Corps' contingency capabilities. The separate brigade the battalion was assigned to had been reorganizing as a mechanized brigade and was well along in that process. Its tank battalion, one of its mechanized infantry battalions, and its armored cavalry troop were already in place. Several units were still in progress of reorganizing — one of the infantry battalions, the artillery battalion, and the combat engineer company being the most critical.

Adding to the array of challenges confronting the battalion in the reorganization, the battalion was informed two months before the scheduled U.S. Army Forces Command two-week field validation exercise that the replacement for the medical platoon leader would not report to the battalion until several weeks after the exercise. The previous platoon leader had been reassigned about a month before. The battalion S1, the officer responsible for the battalion's medical platoon, was very concerned about the medical platoon's readiness for the coming evaluation.

Among his concerns was the condition of the 12 six-wheeled Gama Goat ambulances (M561—the ambulance version was the M792). This was a "somewhat" amphibious all aluminum magnesium construction vehicle whose cockpit/cab and truck bed and suspensions system were designed to make maximum contact with the ground under the vehicle — the bed could rotate separately from the cab and the suspension system could compress and extend well beyond other truck systems. The number of "u" joints made for a vehicle that did take some attention to maintain operationally.

With the amount of added ancillary equipment for a medical version of the vehicle, the S1's concerns were not unfounded. The platoon hadn't had a platoon leader for some time, had recently received a new platoon sergeant, and was only weeks away from a high profile evaluation. He needed a strategy to give the medical platoon its best chance to do well. The question was — how?

Two first lieutenants had recently been assigned to the battalion after having returned from overseas. One had commanded several platoons and had other battalion experiences but had not been a company executive officer (XO). The other lieutenant had commanded several platoons, been the XO of three companies, served on a division staff, and had completed the battalion personnel officer's extension course through the Adjutant General's School.

Both lieutenants were expected to be promoted to captain in five to six months. The S1 recommended to the commander that the lieutenant who had not had experience as a company XO be assigned as XO in one of the rifle companies. He recommended that the other lieutenant be assigned as the battalion's assistant adjutant focused on the battalion's pre-deployment personnel files, a huge personnel management



National Archives photo

Two Gama Goat ambulances sit near a detention compound during Operation Urgent Fury on 28 October 1983.

requirement for units prepared to deploy on short notice for contingencies. These files integrated all elements of personnel action administration for the deploying Soldiers' pay actions, family member administration, and survivor benefits among other items — a huge undertaking at the time in an organization of some 1,000 members.

The commander concurred with the S1's recommendations. The lieutenant selected as the assistant adjutant had led a provisional infantry platoon for riot control duty and a mechanized rifle platoon at a stateside post for almost a year. He had then been an XO of a mechanized infantry company, a mechanized battalion headquarters company, and a tank brigade headquarters company, also at a stateside post, for more than a year. The lieutenant was then an infantry platoon leader overseas and a division staff officer at an overseas deployed division.

The S1 decided he had a possible solution to the leadership dilemma confronting the battalion for the validation exercise. The experience of the assistant adjutant might be sufficient to allow him to do a "crash course" on medical platoon operations and then be able to pull off leading the medical platoon through the validation exercise.

The S1 informed the assistant adjutant that he would be the medical platoon's acting platoon leader over the next six weeks through the validation exercise. The assistant adjutant acknowledged the assignment with a number of misgivings he did not share with the S1, the 12 Gama Goats looming large on the list of concerns.

The newly assigned platoon leader lost no time. He met with the platoon sergeant and they mutually developed a plan to prepare the platoon for the exercise. The plan addressed the most essential individual and collective training needing emphasis. It focused on thorough maintenance of the vehicles with necessary inspections as well as full layout inspections of individual and platoon equipment.

The platoon leader then assembled the platoon and introduced himself as the new platoon leader. He stated the mission ahead and outlined the platoon's plan to meet and exceed the mission required. Then, he engaged the platoon — it was a mission the entire platoon was taking on, and each Soldier would be important to getting it done.

The medics responded with guarded enthusiasm. They barely knew the platoon sergeant, and the lieutenant was only known as the guy putting the alert folders together — and he was an Infantryman. But time was short, and it was made clear that the medics would be "on parade" — the upcoming exercise was a "big deal" in establishing that they were the professionals they thought they were.

Then preparation began — the lieutenant and the platoon sergeant were shoulder to shoulder with every medic in the platoon working through the training, the inspections, and the work-up of the Gama Goats. And Soldiers received feedback on what they were doing well on and what needed improvement, but the direction was always positive.

As weeks passed and the alert that would initiate the validation exercise became an ever-present possibility, a team formed that indicated it would be able to take on the exercise and excel. However, even though much had been done in a short time, the team had not tested itself on a sustained deployment — one that would evaluate every aspect of its operations.

The alert came and the battalion "deployed." Though at a southern post, it was winter and several nights dipped below freezing. Without heaters, the Gama Goats were especially unforgiving in such weather. However, the platoon demonstrated a level of teamwork and cohesion as well as tactical competence in its unique mission during a demanding exercise.

The platoon conducted evacuation operations from the companies to the battalion aid station, triage, battalion trains operations, engagement with brigade trains, and air evacuation operations with great skill and competence. On some days, the battalion trains displaced as many as three times. The aid station even conducted a real evacuation of an injured Soldier during the exercise.

Incredibly, the focus of Gama Goat maintenance both before and during the exercise produced 100-percent availability of the vehicles. This was remarkable in its own right given the cold snap encountered. The validation exercise came to a close, and the hotwash confirmed that the battalion passed its validation. The medical platoon unexpectedly drew exceptional comment and was rated as one of the top units evaluated in its category.

This result did not tend to be a normal occurrence for such units for a number of reasons. But it did verify that engaging Soldiers and making them skilled members of the team will release the best in them. The result was their rather spectacular performance during the exercise. The medics made their success story — they earned it by ability, determination, dedication, and teamwork. It was their achievement.

The platoon leader also gained a valuable insight — one he always believed was the case, but the medics proved. Infantry Soldiers when well led and cohesive in their unit can accomplish almost the impossible. The medics demonstrated that they were as capable of taking on the tough tasks and prevailing as their infantry brothers.

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