

# Convoy Security Escort

## Down a Long and Perilous Road

by First Lieutenant David M. Foley

The noise from the engine and the air conditioner is deafening. I scan the horizon of the road in front of me, searching for anything that looks abnormal. I've been doing this everyday for the past month, and every time there are so many things that shouldn't be there, like trash scattered on the sides of the road. I take notice of places I would set a bomb if I were the enemy; there are so many, and as I pass I brace for the impact that does not come and then wonder why they haven't utilized these places. I drive by hoping they don't think like me; it would be devastating. My thoughts are momentarily interrupted by the crackle from the radio. It's just my platoon sergeant calling for a radio check. The up-armored Humvees respond in short order and in sequence to complete the radio check as quickly as possible.

The platoon has done well, remembering my instructions to minimize all radio traffic and to keep the line free. I continue to search and scan over the horizon, periodically breaking to check the distance we have remaining before our next turn. I know the route by heart now, and if I had to, I could tell you exactly how many minutes away we were just by noting specific piles of debris, a house, or other obscure landmarks along the way. This gives me the chance to give my eyes a break from the strain, but I do not rest long, in a moment I am looking again.

I tug at the collar on my IBA [Interceptor Body Armor]. The heat is unbearable and impossible not to notice. It is so unbelievably hot. I can feel the sweat cover my body. It is summer in Iraq, and it was 120 degrees today. I know that the air conditioning is on because it is so loud it is hard to talk to my driver. I like to put the sleeves of my DCUs [desert camouflage uniform] over the vent to capture all the air coming in. This is the only thing that seems to work; at least it helps a little. I twist my body so it creates a little nook where the air can flow through my DCU top, and I suck in my chest so I have an air pocket between me and my IBA. The cool air rushes in and it feels good. Then my driver says it looks like the vehicle is starting to overheat, so I order him to turn it off until the vehicle cools down. Instantly I feel the total loss of anything refreshing. It is just absurdly hot now and miserable. I ask the gunner to hand me another bottle of water from the cooler. It must be my fifth or sixth today. It is unbelievable how much we have to drink just to stay hydrated during the summer months.

I have to shift my body because I've been sitting in the same awkward position for hours. All I can feel is the heat from the engine rushing in by my left knee. It must be at least 140 degrees in the cab of the vehicle. The heat is constantly flowing in, but now with the air condition-

ing off, it just lingers around me with no relief.

I continue to search the side of the narrow road. It is barely wide enough for one Humvee. The road is elevated from the rest of the surroundings by a few feet in most places, but in a few spots it dips below into shallow valleys. For long stretches there are piles of dirt just dumped along side the road. Workers apparently left the dirt there while attempting to make the road wider. I wonder when they will resume work, because it seems like they haven't made any progress since I've been using this road.

We are in the middle of nowhere. The landscape is almost totally barren in this section of the road. It is just desert, dried up lakebeds and sand, lots and lots of sand. Occasionally, I see camels or a local national scraping salt out of the dried lakebeds to sell later at the markets. But for the most part there is nothing.

Sometimes, I chat with the driver or my gunner, but always we are watching the roads. I spend most of my time thinking of what I would do if I were the enemy, and I start to think about it again. There are so many places I could hit my own convoy along this route, if I were so inclined. It feels somewhat depressing knowing, at least initially, that we are relegated to being on the defense. But we know, in a firefight between us and any enemy, there would be no contest. We would crush anyone foolish enough to try to slug it out with us. The insurgents are no match for us, but that is not how they operate; not usually anyway. Now, I start to imagine what I should do if we did get hit. I break from this only to check on my convoy, ensuring they are all together, and to execute the random radio checks.

I look back through a bullet-resistant windshield into a small side mirror to see how the convoy looks. From what I can see it looks good, but I can see only a few vehicles. I will have to make sure the rest of the convoy is together by using the radio to call the rest of my teams. So I call the rest of my platoon and ask them, "How are we looking back there?" They all respond in sequence that we look "tight," and we press on. In some form or fashion this cycle continues for hours, mile after mile. The only real change comes when we have to slow down for intermittent dust storms, to block an intersection or perhaps to allow a herd of camels to cross the road.

Then out of the corner of my eye, I see it, what I hoped I never would. I see it in my small side mirror as clear as day. It looks like a mushroom cloud and reminds me of old World War II footage of atomic bombs being dropped. It's nowhere near that size, but that is exactly what it reminds me of—an atomic bomb. It looks huge to me, and it is black, maybe 100 meters high and spraying rocks and

debris in all directions. It will seem quite odd later, but even though I still haven't heard anything yet, I turn to my gunner and driver and ask, "Did you hear that?" Both of them give a negative reply. I say, "I think an IED [improvised explosive device] just went off!" Then I hear the explosion, and at the same time, I hear the crackle of the radio—"IED, IED, IED!" I quickly ask what the damage is, inquire if anyone is hurt, and follow that by asking, "Can you push through it?"

While waiting for the response, I begin to inform my own vehicle crew of the incident, while trying to search for additional attackers or IEDs and keeping an eye on the convoy to ensure the vehicles are sticking together behind me and are still following. They are, at least the few that I can see in the small side mirror. It seems like an eternity waiting for the response, but in reality, it probably isn't more than a few seconds. I use this time to take note of the time and grid coordinates of the attack, which I mark on my windshield with the grease pencil I had stashed for just such an occasion.

Finally I hear over the radio, "Everyone is okay; we can push through, and the convoy still looks tight." I make a quick check with the rest of my teams and with the KBR [Kellogg, Brown & Root] convoy commander, discovering that the convoy has slowed but pushed through and is still together.

So I give the order for my driver to continue on and order the gunner to search and scan, while trying to radio the closest "sheriff unit," as the convoy management teams located at forward operating bases are called. This particular area is relatively desolate and communications with anyone outside of the convoy, including any nearby units, is extremely poor, making it impossible for anyone from my convoy to reach any sheriff unit or friendly patrols.

I immediately try to contact the battery and the battalion over the MTS [Movement Tracking System], which in this area is my only effective means of communication back to the rear. As best and as quickly as I can, I send off the "Five Ws" (who, what, when, where, and why) of the attack. I can only send short messages, so I try to make the messages as concise as possible. I send them off in rapid succession, giving the time, date and location, action on contact, injuries and damage. I send them off and continue to reassess and gather more information from and about the damaged vehicle.

Then the damaged vehicle reports it has to slow down. It is having trouble keeping up. Also the turret is damaged and locked in the nine o'clock position. I order the convoy to slow, but continue movement, and direct the damaged vehicle to move up to my position where I can get eyes on their damage.

As they begin to make their way forward, the battery

responds to my initial messages and asks for more information. Apparently, not all of the messages I sent got through, and some had been received out of correct sequence. I attempt to resend the messages, this time pausing to ensure one is received before trying to send the next. This process is frustratingly slow because the messages that do go through take time, while often some don't go through at all. By now the damaged vehicle is at my position, and I can see that the damage is extensive. Most of the damage sustained is to the turret, tires and ballistic glass. It looks bad, but they can push on, even though they are running on a flat tire. I check to see how far it is to the closet friendly unit. We still have nearly 100 kilometers to go. The tire is quickly worsening, and I know we will have to change it eventually, because we are now moving at an unacceptably slow pace.



*The 2-44 ADA up-armored Humvee above was crumpled by an improvised explosive device during a convoy security escort mission similar to the one described in this article.*

I search for a good spot to stop the convoy, waiting for an area that is well away from the sand berms

and dunes normally found on our flanks. I pay close attention to keep from stopping where the enemy might likely be lying in wait to ambush us. I find a spot well away from the original attack site. It is relatively flat for a few kilometers, which is surprisingly hard to find on this route. I order the convoy to stop and direct the crew to change the tire and try fixing the gun turret.

The out-of-action turret gun is a major loss of our combat power, especially if there is going to be a fight. We need to get it fixed, if possible. However, my real priority is to get the convoy up and moving at full speed again. They do their best to make a speedy stop and rush to replace the damaged tire. While I continue trying to update my unit of the incident, and the crew is busy working on the vehicle, my driver and gunner keep a sharp eye out for anything out of the ordinary.

To my surprise, I see one of my teams race up beside the downed vehicle and begin helping with the repair efforts. Immediately I move to tell them to go back to their positions and take up security for the rest of the convoy. While their efforts are noble, understandable, and they have shown good instincts by rushing to the aid of their comrades, I find their response tactically unsound. When you hear a friend on the radio saying they are hit, your natural tendency is to want to go help. But there are too many vehicles bunched too close together, and my vehicle is already providing over-watch and security for the crew working on the damaged vehicle. I order the team to return to the center of the convoy and to provide security until we are ready to move out again.

The total time on ground is short, but to me it feels like we have been there forever. I alternate between sending messages on our progress, answering any questions from my unit and checking on the progress of the downed

vehicle. Quickly we get back underway and move the convoy toward our destination. Once all the questions from my unit are answered, I begin to alert other units. Once in range, I relay the message via radio. Upon arrival at our destination, we check in and give a full brief.

I conduct a quick but thorough AAR [after-action review] with my platoon. This is our first IED attack and emotions are high. I can see it on everyone's face. I know they need to talk about it, so I provide the opportunity. I give everyone a chance to "get it off their chest," and I am careful not to rush them, but I know that time is short, and I have to get my teams back on the road in only a few hours to make the return trip down the same road.

At the FOB [forward operating base] the repairs to our vehicle are finished quickly. It is there, at the motor pool, that I finally get a good look at the damage. The force of the IED was so great that it twisted the turret from roughly the two o'clock position and swung it around to the nine o'clock position. A large chunk of concrete, probably weighing 20 pounds, had been blown hundreds of feet into the air and had come crashing down on the shield of the .50-caliber machine gun, crushing it down below the level of the roof on the driver's side of the vehicle; thereby locking it in place. Miraculously, we got our repairs, and in only a few short hours, we began our return mission.

In actual time, the whole sequence of events happened in seconds and minutes, but it felt like it took hours. I am not sure I can adequately describe how members of our platoon felt that day. This was the first tough situation we faced; many more would follow.

Looking back, I can say, compared to subsequent experiences, this attack wasn't all that remarkable. My platoon would face a lot more difficult challenges, but there are a few things that I would take away from that first attack. Rely on your training and realize how important your training is. Nothing will ever prepare you for the first time someone shoots at you, but your training will at least give you a template to follow. It gives you a starting point to work from; each experience is different, so you have to use your training to fit you situation. You have to be flexible and adapt quickly to unexpected events. But your training will help you find your way through these tough times.

I've heard people say, "You don't so much think—you just react." While I don't totally agree with that, I understand it. Because you are always thinking and envisioning what to do, reacting just tends to come more naturally. In your mind, you have been there before, so the actions that you take come quickly.

You can train, but nothing will totally prepare you for the actual event; the important thing is to remain calm so you can think your way out of the situation rather than just reacting on emotions or fear. For example, the team that came to the aid of the damaged truck did the right thing by trying to help out, but they reacted emotionally to the situation instead of thinking it through. Once they saw that the individuals were okay and handling their situ-

ation, they should have returned to the more pressing duty of security for the rest of the convoy. It was an understandable reaction and was quickly resolved. Later, I made sure I discussed this issue with that crew and believe they understood my point.

The second thing I will remember is that people under stress seem to react very differently. During the AAR you could feel the tension in the air; that is why I thought it was so important to let them talk about the experience immediately and give them a chance to let it all out. I can say that was the toughest moment for me, trying to figure out how to deal with the emotions of the group at that point. I reminded them of our mission and our duty and that unfortunate and sometimes unavoidable hazards are associated with our job. Looking back, it seems kind of funny that I was more worried about how the team felt than about the actual bombs going off and people trying to kill us. All I could think of was how to get these guys back to a state of "normalcy" and back to the job.

I can't say enough about how proud I am of my platoon; each and everyone showed me, on multiple occasions, a seemingly endless amount of personal courage and intestinal fortitude. I feel privileged to serve my country with those I consider to be some of the bravest Soldiers I have ever met. It took great courage, after that incident, to turn around and go right back down that road, and even though I know some were shaken, they did return to their mission without complaint, simply because they are America's finest Soldiers.

I am sure some would question why, but we continued our mission that day down that same road, and I know that it was the best thing we could have done. It's not something that I will try to explain here, because either you understand it or you don't. I know that day changed my life and the way I look at things forever, and I am sure it did for a majority of the platoon as well. In some way I think it helped us come to terms with the reality of our situation, and for some, combat was no longer an abstract thought. These Soldiers realized they were at war with an enemy who was bound and determined to kill them. Nothing prepares you adequately for that moment. I know it is something difficult for others to understand, even through these simple words; however, there is no doubt in my mind that each member of our platoon understands what I am saying. All we have out there on the road is each other, and this experience made us bond closer together.

As I mentioned earlier, we would share many experiences like this over the course of our year in Iraq, and I could probably write a book on all of them, but somehow this one, even though it might not have been the worst, will always stick in my mind. Those moments will forever live in our hearts and minds. It was a moment when many of us changed the way we perceive our world.



*First Lieutenant David M. Foley is a platoon leader assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 44th Air Defense Artillery.*