Press Release

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Navy Reservists practice tactical field care, medical skills during annual Operation Commanding Force at Fort Drum

FORT DRUM, N.Y. (July 26, 2022) -- A team of U.S. Navy Reserve corpsmen went chest deep into the water while maintaining control of a heavily-loaded litter over their heads. After slogging their way across the trench, they negotiated how to move the patient, themselves and their weapons over a seven-foot wall. All the while, senior leaders and cadre encouraged them to move purposefully to the next objective.

They endured one obstacle after another to bring their patients to safety, only to become casualties themselves at the end.

Welcome to Operation Commanding Force.

“Honestly, I thought it was going to be a walk in the park,” said Navy Reserve Hospital Corpsman Andrew Leach. “But it was probably one of the harder things, physically, that I’ve had to do in a while. You had to be fully engaged, tactically, the entire time, and it was taxing.”

The two-week Navy Reserve training exercise at Fort Drum ended July 21 with roughly 60 corpsmen practicing tactical field care and medical evacuation procedures outside the Bridgewater-Vaccaro Medical Simulation Training Center (MSTC).

Rear Admiral Eric L. Peterson, deputy commander of Naval Medical Forces Atlantic, observed the reservists as they circulated through the trauma lanes. He said that for many of the younger enlisted personnel this was their first annual training event.

“This was a great first experience for them to learn them what we are all about as a service and a warfighter, and how we support the warfighter and provide that care to preserve the fighting force if it should come to injuries,” Peterson said. “I can’t say enough about the great job they have done and the support from the leadership and staff here at Fort Drum to enable this training.”

The day began with an introduction to air medevac procedures from 10th Combat Aviation Brigade Soldiers, as Staff Sgt. Nate Carey rappelled from a helicopter to greet the reservists. Carey, a flight paramedic, showed the group how to bring a litter to the aircraft and then safely secure the patient and themselves inside.

This would become useful information later as they formed into quick reaction forces to extract casualties from the battlefield for both ground and air evacuations.

In addition to support from 10th CAB’s 3rd General Support Aviation Battalion and the MSTC cadre, medics from 1st Brigade Combat Team and 2nd Brigade Combat Team established field medical tents to process casualties. The Navy hospital corpsmen learned Role 1 operations – the level of care that includes triage, treatment and stabilization, as well as self-care and buddy care – at the aid station. At the Role 2 station, surgical teams are able to provide advanced medical support with x-ray and lab capabilities.

Leach said that after spending a few days in classroom instruction, this type of training was quite intense.

“It became a lot more hands-on, especially today,” he said. “It was the first time for a lot of us actually being in a Black Hawk. The training has been great, and it was interesting to see how Army medicine is actually very similar to what we do, as far as assessments go and how we treat our patients and triage.”

Navy Reserve Hospital Corpsman 3rd Class Syed Hoque said it was brutal going through the litter obstacle course, but afterward, he thought it was a fun experience.

“It was a serious training course, but I liked it,” he said. “I don’t fully know how to explain how it felt if you have never gone through it. They kind of threw the whole book at us. It’s going to take some time for me to process everything we’ve done, because it wasn’t just cut-and-dry training. It was the most realistic training I’ve ever been through.”

Before entering the obstacle course, Navy Reserve Hospital Corpsman 3rd Class Guadalupe Avila gathered her squad for a group photo. Afterward, when they emerged fatigued and drenched, she wished they took an “after” photo as well.

“At first you are excited and pumped up, because you think you are ready for this,” she said. “But after a few minutes of carrying the litter, it really brings you down. I think the mannequin weighs 135 pounds, and it took a toll on me.”

Navy Reserve Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Ryan Dunlap, from Batavia, said that most of the reservists work on ships or in naval hospitals, and they serve in many different capacities. Only those who work in field hospitals for the Marine Corps ever get to experience anything similar to this training exercise.

“This has been great,” he said. “I’ve been in for five years, and this was the first time I’ve actually gotten to qualify on a rifle.”

Dunlap said that he had worked with Army personnel while deployed, but having a joint training exercise was a unique opportunity.

“Ideally, when we are all downrange we are going to be working together, so it’s important to get a better sense of what that will look like,” he said.

Hoque was the only reservist from New Jersey, so he said it was a good experience meeting fellow hospital corpsmen from all parts of the country.

“My teammates and all the friends I made along the way definitely made this the most fun for me,” he said.

The reservists also practiced drown-proofing training in the pool at Magrath Sports Complex and marksmanship training at an indoor range. Navy Reserve Corpsman 3rd Class Karina Ruiz said that although convoy operations are not in their job description, she enjoyed experiencing it virtually inside a training simulator.

“I got to be the driver in the Humvee simulator, and it was really difficult,” she said. “I’ve never been in a convoy in real life – we’re never on land at all – so that was a good experience.”

Earlier, they conducted water rescue operations with members of the U.S. Coast Guard and New York Naval Militia on the St. Lawrence River.

“This training is all about readiness, and it has been outstanding,” Peterson said. “The interoperability they experience in this training environment is key to any future fight. The fact that we get to work and train with Army assets, in addition to the Coast Guard, was immensely helpful.”

Since 2012, Navy Reserve personnel from across the U.S. have conducted joint-service medical readiness training here through the Naval Medical Center Portsmouth (NMCP) in Virginia. Ken Walters, an instructor/operator at the MSTC and a 20-year Navy veteran, has been involved in the annual training exercise almost from its inception.

He said that it is difficult for reservists to complete all of the training and certifications required of them during drill weekends, and Operation Commanding Force gives them the opportunity to accomplish that and more.

“For them, going into the woods, holding rubber weapons and doing tactical movements is brand new,” he said. “So they are getting their two-week requirements in, but also exposure to training they might never get again unless they come back here.”

Walters has walked the litter obstacle course countless times in his career at Fort Drum, barking at Soldiers to maintain situational awareness, move expediently and – above all else – don’t let the patient die. Just because he was taking hospital corpsmen through the wringer, the former Navy chief didn’t mince words or cut them any slack. He said it’s because the training is that important.

“It’s long overdue in my opinion,” he said. “A lot of them are providers in the real world, and they are trained in their civilian job. But when it comes to this type of work in the field – no exposure to it, no training for it. But now, they’re working alongside Army medics and learning how they operate in the field.”

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Pictures to accompany this article can be found at:

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