

Change of Mission: A Military Police Platoon in 2040

By Lieutenant Colonel Megan R. Williams

“Any questions?”

That curt inquiry jolted the lieutenant back to reality. She hastily scanned her notes. A drop of sweat escaped her helmet, plopped onto her notebook, and threatened to smudge the ink. Her mind was spinning, processing the weight of the mission change that was being thrust upon her shoulders. *An unexpected change of mission? Any questions?* she thought, *Yes—all of them!*

For the past few months, the lieutenant’s platoon had supported convoy operations, providing security for the constant sustainment support moving toward forward outposts. Somewhat ironically (since the autopilot tactical vehicles still required heavy supervision from military police forces), this sustainment was called “unmanned sustainment.” However, the battalion commander was now directing the lieutenant to assume a new mission; her platoon was to quickly transition to detainee operations, with only 24 hours to prepare to receive captured enemies.

The echoing mantra that “Sustainment is projected, predictable, and protected” was the factor directing the military police platoons to travel with and protect the convoys. While sustainment vehicles were now able to use sensor technology and sophisticated algorithms to navigate and continue to move without human drivers, they were still vulnerable to innovative and improvised enemy interference. Sometimes enemy innovation and improvisation involved armed forces stopping the movements; but more often, they involved dislocated populations seeking to rob the convoys for supplies. Outside the protected enclaves of the international mission, desperate groups could not easily access the resources that moved in relative abundance between military camps. Therefore, despite the use of advanced technology, the mission continued to require a human “in the loop.” For the past few months, sustainment convoy protection had been the mission of the lieutenant’s platoon and that of every other military police platoon in the division.

The lieutenant now reviewed her hasty scrawls, which were awkward due to a lack of practiced handwriting on paper; however, her tablet had chosen this time for a reboot to install updates. Her company commander, who was standing beside her, fidgeted. The battalion commander was expecting a reply.

Technically, detainee operations were still covered in doctrine but they had not been emphasized in years. During recent conflicts—and during the training in preparation for them—requirements for the U.S. Army to hold enemy prisoners were brushed off, as it was regularly presumed that coalition partners would deal with them.

“What do we know about the enemy population?” the lieutenant asked, hoping that her voice projected more confidence than question. She noticed the battalion operations officer exchange a glance with the intelligence officer. “Not much. They weren’t supposed to be our problem,” replied the battalion commander. His mere presence at this mission briefing lent enough weight to the requirement that the company commander and collection of battalion staff took notice.

As the battalion commander explained the context, the lieutenant nodded, soaking it in. She was unfazed by the mission redirection, as she knew that she could rapidly upload the detainee operations doctrine on her technology-enhanced glasses (commonly referred to simply as “tech glasses”). The technology-enabled screen would exhibit real-time notifications, track movement on maps, and display files. In addition, artificial-intelligence programming was already evaluating the higher headquarters mission to develop the platoon plan and preparing to produce proposed courses of action for her review and approval. She looked sideways at her platoon sergeant, whose glassy gaze suggested that he was already viewing platoon-supporting sustainment plans displayed on the lenses of his tech glasses and preparing to transmit data to the tablet in his hands. The tech glasses were capable of processing vast quantities of data and transmitting it to the wearer, with the speed hampered only by the process of collating and merging the information with intelligence reports. Although the U.S. Army had already been making use of this technology for a few years, the fielding of user terminals incorporating synchronized tech glasses and accompanying tablets was far from ubiquitous. However, the lieutenant knew that, with the accelerated mission change, her platoon would need to heavily rely on this technology. Fortunately, the maneuver brigade commander supported by her battalion ensured that military police had access to the same equipment as

maneuver units. From talking to her peers, the lieutenant was aware that—with the dissolution of military police brigades several years ago—not all maneuver commanders had those same priorities. “We’ve got this, Sir,” she said. She was ready to go, and there was much to be done.

Two hours later, after much concurrent planning and amidst many hasty preparations, the lieutenant was ready to brief her platoon. Her Soldiers, most of whom had been born during the first Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, were now more comfortable with virtual communication than with face-to-face interaction. Even within their squads—and even when in the same room—the Soldiers preferred to engage in group chat, which included the timeless banter and teasing of youthful camaraderie and competition. The lieutenant understood this preference but was also grateful that her company commander continued to reinforce the need for personal interactions. She believed that conversations were meant to be had in person; this allowed her to interpret the body language and emotions of others and to convey expression and meaning in return.

As her noncommissioned officers quickly moved to implement her initial directions, the lieutenant continued to refine the plan. Although the leveraging of tech glasses allowed technical instructions to rapidly flow from the squad leaders, the technology could not supersede the platoon leader’s mission briefing. In developing the plan, the lieutenant knew that her role was to lend context to the doctrinal mission, marrying the intelligence reports with the battalion commander’s intent and imparting meaning and depth to the operation.

The lieutenant was concerned with the intelligence reporting—or lack thereof—regarding the detained population. Based on her assessment, she determined that the enemy prisoners might be hosting unanticipated embedded threats; after all, there must be some reason that they were so willing to be captured. She knew that she would need to instruct her platoon to limit their technological advantage in handling the prisoners in order to reduce the vulnerabilities of the platoon and to emphasize the need for ethical, humane treatment. Delivering her mission briefing to her platoon, the lieutenant emphasized the commander’s intent. She saw value in her platoon members understanding the background of the mission because she believed that would allow them to better implement the directions and develop new and innovative ideas.

As the lieutenant gave the instructions to drop the tech glasses, she sensed the hesitation of the platoon; however, only one Soldier voiced concerns. The platoon organic communications specialist respectfully objected—but with anxiety in his voice. He was hesitant to relinquish the safety of the technology. “Let me write the code for a firewall,” he implored, “I can protect the tech. We can upload it right away.” The lieutenant trusted the communications specialist’s competency, and she appreciated his initiative; however, she knew that they needed more time to write the code. “No, we don’t know what they have,” she heard her calm but authoritative voice say, “We must secure this population and

not make ourselves vulnerable to them.” Radio frequency identification was now archaic technology; still, she knew that the detainees could have ingested radio frequency identification tags (or something similar) to transmit their locations and digitally burrow into her Soldiers’ technology. Before they knew it, enemy artificial intelligence could begin to decipher and corrupt their systems and transmit their vulnerabilities. Although this threat was not new to their battlefield, this was the first time that the platoon might come face-to-face with an enemy that was providing it.

The lieutenant redirected the platoon and focused on characterizing the way in which the prisoners were to be treated. She explained that ethical treatment would be a force multiplier. Enemy forces, who had been raised on propaganda and had experienced development of their home countries, would be expecting the worst. But the lieutenant knew that once captured, they would be disoriented, malnourished conscripts who did not have the autonomy of independence and trust that her Soldiers did. They would live through this experience and communicate about it back at home.

Scanning her audience, the lieutenant saw the noncommissioned officers start to nod. They understood. The unknown threats of the enemy population could be countered not by increasing technology, but by setting it aside.

“The lieutenant gave us our mission and the intent. Now, we move out,” the platoon sergeant interjected as the lieutenant completed her briefing. He had reached his limit of tolerance for discussion about the mission. Galvanized by his firm instructions and leaving no room for interpretation, the assembled platoon members moved to make initial preparations.

The lieutenant knew that more planning and refinement of intelligence would be necessary. The hours before the platoon would depart to make contact with the first prisoners (possibly the first enemy prisoners of war held by the U.S. Army in years) would fly by. She would need to refine the details about how her platoon would execute without the full empowerment of technology. She made eye contact with several Soldiers as they turned to get ready; they nodded their understanding.

In the brief seconds before the lieutenant turned back to her planning tasks, a couple of thoughts crystalized in her mind: Missions were enabled by technology but could also be prevented by it. Leadership and communication were the mainstays.



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