OPERATION ASSURE, DETER, AND REINFORCE:
LESSONS LEARNED FROM A COMPANY COMMANDER'S PERSPECTIVE

By Captain James J. Duncan

From October 2022 to June 2023, while deployed in Eastern Europe to support Operation Assure, Deter, and Reinforce, the 59th Military Police Company, 759th Military Police Battalion, Fort Carson, Colorado, trained extensively on detention operations. During the culminating exercise, one platoon established a detainee collection point and conducted point-of-capture operations. During execution, the unit identified significant gaps in its organic logistical and sustainment capabilities. If left with inconsistent support in a large-scale combat operations environment, a combat support company would face considerable challenges in balancing detention operations with additional tasks in order to enable maneuver elements.

Over the course of 4 days and nights, I observed as my platoon faced adversity, tested its problem-solving capabilities, adapted to various complex obstacles, and bonded amidst the inherent difficulties of adverse weather conditions. I challenged my subordinate leaders' composure, resilience, tactical knowledge, decision-making ability, and ability to maintain command and control. Our Soldiers emerged from the mud and rain with a newfound respect for the daunting nature of the mission set and a sobering awareness that the exercise represented merely a glimpse of what we ought to expect. In truth, the exercise opened our eyes to an overlooked reality: Conducting detention operations in a large-scale combat operations environment will be an incredibly gargantuan endeavor from a tactical and logistical standpoint.

When we objectively examine the mission, we find the amount of resources consumed by a single detainee to be astounding. Time, space, manpower, food, water, fuel, and documentation are just a few of the commodities necessary to adequately care for an individual. When we multiply those needs by two, then five, we quickly understand how dynamic and adaptable our organic systems must be. The platoon was significantly challenged when faced with the prospective requirement to transport, in-process, screen, house, guard, sustain, and transfer a few detainees at a time. I inquired about what would happen if we were to find ourselves facing a battalion size element that was surrendering *en masse*. What then? Such a question is by no means outlandish. After all, we need only look across our borders to see that reality ever-increasingly unfolding.

If we draw from the harsh lessons of the current conflict in Ukraine, this is clear: The battlefield is marked by the absence of what we might have previously considered operational certainties. Would a military police company ordinarily expect to operate a detainee collection point without external support? No. But the fog of war to the east would indicate that it is within the realm of possibility.

Our lower-enlisted Soldiers and noncommissioned officers know how detention operations are supposed to be conducted, according to doctrine. Still, the sheer volume and chaotic conditions of what might await us could push our unit farther than we have been pushed in recent memory. If we genuinely wish to survive on the battlefield of tomorrow, we must be keenly aware of this possibility and continue to drive our organizations to the brink of a realistic training environment.

Three principal lessons can be learned from our experience:

- Exercise sustainment capabilities with the same level of intensity as tactical tasks are exercised.
- Push the company headquarters to its logistical threshold.
- Coordinate with adjacent enablers for additional resources; they will absolutely be needed. If the organizational transportation and supply systems can be enhanced, then the efficiencies gained through external support should be codified. This will allow far better preparation for handling the inherent challenges of the mission profile.

Captain Duncan is the commander of the 59th Military Police Company. He holds a bachelor's degree in Middle Eastern studies from the U.S. Military Academy—West Point, New York.