

Firefighting Unit Leadership: An Opportunity for Change

By Captain Max Hanna

United States Army firefighting detachments are sorely needed for airfield and base camp operations throughout the current operating environment. These units fulfill a very important function for the Army—that of force protection through reduction or elimination of fire hazards. While deployed, these detachments also provide vital mission support in the form of vehicle crash rescue, confined space rescue, high angle rescue, and immediate hazardous materials (HAZMAT) response. Nearly all of the military occupational specialty (MOS) 21M (firefighter) Soldiers are either professional or volunteer firefighters in their civilian careers and practice these skills on a regular basis. All but one of the military firefighting detachments are either United States Army Reserve or Army National Guard units.

The unit commander is usually a first lieutenant or a junior captain. According to the modified table of equipment (MTOE), they are the fire marshal—with responsibilities ranging from morale, safety, training, maintenance, preparation for deployments, and development and implementation of fire protection plans. If this fire marshal is the only engineer officer attached to an aviation brigade, he is likely assigned the additional duty of brigade staff engineer liaison officer and a myriad of other duties.

With only rare exceptions, these officers have no firefighting experience, which puts them at a distinct disadvantage. Firefighting is not taught in any engineer officer courses, to include the Engineer Basic Officer Leader Course (BOLC), Engineer Captain's Career Course (ECCC), Combined Arms Exercise (CAX) Course, and Combined Arms and Services Staff School (CAS3). In fact, some engineer officers are not aware that firefighting detachments exist, much less that they fall under the giant umbrella of the Engineer Regiment.

The senior noncommissioned officer (NCO), or fire chief, is—according to the current MTOE—an E6 21M who has advanced through the ranks of the unit. Most fire chiefs have been 21Ms their entire career and have stayed in the same unit because it was the only firefighting detachment within the



regional readiness command or the state. Without a doubt, they know their job. The fire inspector is an E5 or E6 and is typically only slightly junior to the fire chief. These two senior NCOs have a tremendous responsibility, especially on the fire scene. However, in a brigade or division setting, they carry little weight, even as an E7.

In order to be promoted to E7, most 21Ms have to move to another unit and accept another MOS. Only after that assignment can they move back to the firefighting detachment as the senior NCO. This prevents many NCOs, who have acquired very

specialized skills, from staying in the detachments. Or, on the flip side, this situation develops a culture of homesteading—the tendency of personnel to find a unit and position and stay there until they are forced to retire. Given the Army Reserve/National Guard policy of promoting into slots, homesteading in these small units prevents junior enlisted personnel from being promoted to E5 without being reclassified. From my experience, the most often cited reason for 21M Soldiers leaving the Army after their initial contract ended is the inability to be promoted.

Based on my experience as fire marshal of the 369th Engineer Detachment (Firefighting) during Operation Iraqi Freedom Phase I, my recommendation is that the firefighting detachment MTOE be modified to replace the first lieutenant with a warrant officer 1 or warrant officer 2. Then provide the senior NCO in the unit an opportunity to advance by allowing him to attend the Warrant Officer Basic Course. As a warrant officer, the fire marshal would be recognized as the expert he is in his technical field and would have rank, stature, and respect during the brigade and division staff meetings that he attended.

At a minimum, the Warrant Officer Course should include the following plan of instruction:

- Senior-level firefighter courses (coordinated with the local Fire Academy)
- HAZMAT and confined spaces trainer courses (to train his Soldiers in these skills when he returns to the unit)
- Administrative duties (such as awards and NCO Evaluation Reports [NCOERs])

- Supply (accountability, supply discipline, and the forms required to maintain a multimillion dollar property book)
- Maintenance (specifically, maintenance procedures required for the specialized firefighting equipment)
- Risk assessment
- Practice in public speaking (to prepare for briefing division or brigade commanders)

With this change to the MTOE, these vital firefighting detachments would be similar in leadership structure to many geospatial mapping teams that are currently led by warrant

officers. They could establish a professional detachment with capable and knowledgeable leaders and create better opportunities for advancement of junior Soldiers. This would also enable some engineer first lieutenants to fill other positions—such as platoon leader or company executive officer—which would better benefit the Army.



Captain Hanna served as Commander of the 369th Engineer Detachment (Firefighting) during its one-year deployment to Baghdad in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom Phase I.