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'CHICKEN FARM' READIES V CORPS SOLDIERS FOR URBAN OPERATIONS

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CAMP SLAYER, Iraq – In an abandoned, makeshift town referred to as the "Chicken Farm," Soldiers from the 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry Regiment of V Corps' 1st Armored Division practiced battle drills and combat skills essential to their everyday missions here.

Some of those Soldiers have done this sort of mission nightly for most of the past year. Others were experiencing "the farm" for the first time. Either way, they need to come together quickly as a team to be successful during these drills.

"We are doing refresher training on the things we need to be very familiar with; that we do every day," said Capt. Jerry Patak, commander of the squadron's B Troop.

Three distinct but related training "lanes" were set up on the farm. The first presented the troops with a scenario that required them to react to an improvised explosive device. In the second area, Soldiers practiced gathering intelligence during a dismounted patrol. The last lane consisted of sets of Military Operations on Urban Terrain drills, such as crossing a danger zone or clearing a room.

"We need to maintain that razor's edge -- become experts at this," Patak said.

Throughout the farm, observer-controllers acted as graders and guides through the scenarios. Other Soldiers, dressed in authentic clothing, acted the parts of local government officials, religious leaders or police officers. Patak said the simulation of events makes the training more realistic and useful.

Milligan supervised the "React to an IED" lane. During the exercise, a small group of Soldiers drove the dirt roads of the Chicken Farm until their "convoy" came upon a tangled mass of garbage, wires and cloth.

"I think we have an IED up here," said a lookout in the turret of the lead Humvee.

The convoy stopped and the Soldiers ran through the steps in recognizing and reacting to an IED that they had rehearsed a few minutes earlier.

The lane training gives the students a chance to practice the drills again and again, and allows them to rotate through leadership positions and try different tactics.

"It not only hones our everyday skills, it allows the platoons to learn from each other," Patak said. "It is a good opportunity to 'cross-pollinate' our good ideas and skills that we have learned during our actual experience out there in 'the zone.'"

"It gives us more practice in a safer environment," said Staff Sgt. Walter Milligan of B Troop.

“(This training) helps our younger soldiers who are not in leadership positions to get into one and see what it is like. That way they will know what to do if their leader gets injured,” Milligan said. “We alter our training to reflect what new tactics the enemy is using.”

The troop trains here monthly for more than those reasons, however.

“This deployment has shown that people can be thrown into situations that they are not accustomed to or trained for.” said Sgt. 1st Class Pierre Thibodeaux, B Troop’s mortar platoon section sergeant.

“This deployment has changed a lot of people. Truck drivers are now MPs (and) tankers are doing dismounted patrols,” he said. “This (training) adds confidence and shows a different perspective from their normal duties.”

Thibodeaux immersed his students in a town populated with actors who dealt with the Soldiers much the same way Iraqis would. The Soldiers needed translators, patience and good boots to make it through the 2-mile foot patrol simulation.

Each site was developed to complement and build on lessons learned in the preceding lane. Since most of Baghdad is built-up terrain, the urban warfare tactics taught in the third lane can be used in numerous missions.

Assault teams practiced in a ‘glass house’ -- a training site with outlines in white

engineer tape representing walls and doorways. The openness of the structure allowed squads to practice “stacking” and silent communication techniques within view of the observer-controllers.

Common Soldier tasks such as first aid, communicating with radios and reacting to indirect fire are also added to round out the training and realism.

“We start with the skills they learned in basic training and add to those,” Thibodeaux said.

B Troop 1st Sgt. Roy Bartnick said the unit and the Soldiers seek out the training, because they know it's vital to their success here.

“These Soldiers are giving up sleep and maintenance time to get in this training,” said Bartnick. “It is that important, to us and to them.”

