

The Race

by LTC Walter F. Ulmer III

It was either November or December 1987 — I can't recall exactly when — that 2LT Eric Hartsell, United States Army Chemical Corps, reported to the battalion S3 shop. I had been the S3 for about ten months and, like most S3s, was on the threshold of learning the job a few months before I was scheduled to depart.

Hartsell was not unlike any other brand-new chemical lieutenant reporting to his first unit: he would have been just as comfortable reporting to a battalion stationed on the planet Mars. And, as a chemical officer, he was in a particularly alien world. Instead of being surrounded by talk about radiac meters and lethal doses, he was about to be inundated with discussions on boresighting, maintenance, and tank gunnery at fabled Grafenwohr. To make things worse, the battalion chemical NCO billet in the shop was vacant. Hartsell was a brand new special staff officer in a tank battalion with no NCO to keep an eye on him. At least the other 2LTs reporting to the battalion that month had platoon sergeants and fellow platoon leaders to help them sort things out.

I recall my inbrief with LT Hartsell. (I liked to talk with all incoming officers about their job, the unit, and expectations.) We spoke about the battalion, the duties he would assume as the battalion chemical officer, the training calendar, and the challenges associated with being an unmarried lieutenant stationed in Germany. I told him, as I did all my new officers, that I was certain he'd do fine if he followed three rules:

-Always tell the truth, no matter how hard it might be, or how much heat you might end up taking for it (honesty).

-Mistakes are authorized, as long as you are trying to do your best and are being a team player. Just don't make the same mistake too many times.

-Try to have some fun. Despite his jet lag, LT Hartsell seemed to be absorbing most of the message.



— James Shane

We spent some time discussing the nature of his duties as chemical officer. As the primary advisor to the battalion commander on chemical matters, he would be responsible for tracking the status of chemical equipment and training in the battalion, as well as assisting the battalion commander in ensuring the commander's chemical-related intent was understood by the company commanders. His would be a tough job for a new officer. While the company commanders were ultimately responsible for all chemical-related training within their units, he was to assist them in any way he could, whenever they asked.

Also, as the most junior officer in the shop, he had automatically "volunteered" to perform various "special duties." For example, he would have the pleasure of collecting money for dinings-in, taking roll of S3 shop officers at battalion training events, and other sundry (and mostly unwanted) tasks. The shop had a tradition that the junior officer carried out these duties. One day, if the Soviets didn't attack soon, Hartsell would pass on these duties to another newly assigned junior officer.

Hartsell didn't know it that day, but his first special duty would be a doozy. Division 10K runs were a big deal those days in Germany. About every six months, a battalion would be chosen to host a race. These 10Ks were not to be taken lightly; the corps commander was a marathoner and enjoyed being "invited" to these semi-annual events. A few months back, at a weekly brigade S3 meeting, a battalion S3, figuring it was his battalion's turn to host the event, had experienced a moment

of unconsciousness and volunteered his battalion to host the next 10K run. Unfortunately, the battalion commander didn't see it that way, but it was too late. Due to the battalion S3's lack of judgment in signing up for the 10K, the battalion commander designated him to be the project officer. The assistant project officer, the S3 was now happy to announce to the new lieutenant, would be the chemical officer.

The enthusiasm with which LT Hartsell had initially reported, filled with visions of NBC stakes, MOPP gear runs, and decontamination exercises, had just been dealt a blow. Of course, these important training events would go on as scheduled, but so would the division 10K. Hartsell, early in his tenure, faced the reality of "doing all that other stuff," a challenge which occurs in every unit. I'm sure there was no course of instruction on planning a division 10K at the Chemical Officer Basic Course.

I gave him my initial planning guidance. I instructed him to contact the battalion that had hosted the last 10K and get its After Action Report (AAR). I instructed him to give me an update on his progress the following week. Off he went, probably to get some sleep.

A week passed and there was no sign of Hartsell. I dropped a few hints with the other officers in the shop. Finally, three days later, he knocked on my door.

"Sir, LT Hartsell reporting for division 10K update."

"Eric, sit down. You don't have to be so formal."

He sat down.

“How’s your inprocessing going?”

“Great, sir. I ordered my first schnitzel last night at a local Gasthaus.”

“Great, Eric. Now, how about that 10K?”

“Sir, I have nothing to report, sir.”

“What?”

“Sir, I could not find the last battalion that hosted the 10K.”

I had a mental picture of Eric driving around the German countryside in search of the 1-36 Infantry “Spartans.”

“Why not?”

“Sir, I really don’t know where to begin.”

The division 10K was still two months away. When I had given Eric the mission, I had purposely programmed some flexibility in the planning timeline, anticipating a few bumps in the road with the new lieutenant.

“OK, Eric. The first place you start is...,” and we proceeded to talk about how one obtains information in a tank battalion. He took notes. Then, I went down a laundry list of items that he would likely need for the event, including those folks with whom he would have to coordinate. The list included everything from course markings to trophies for the winners. Contacts included everyone from the division action officer to the local Polizei. I instructed him to brief me the following week.

A week passed. This time he was prompt.

“Sir, LT Hartsell reporting for division 10K update.”

“Eric, again, no need to report. Just knock, make sure I’m not on the phone or talking to someone, come in, and sit down.”

“OK, sir.”

“OK. What have you got laid on?”

“Well, sir, I have the engineer tape for the finish line.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“OK. Who have you coordinated with?”

“I know where the Polizei station is in Friedburg.”

“Eric, on April 15, the entire division, along with its commander and maybe even the corps commander, is going to

show up at the old Friedburg airport and expect to run a ten kilometer road race. The last thing they want to see is one-each 2LT standing there with a roll of engineer tape and directions to the police station.”

Eric gave me that blank look that many new lieutenants give their bosses, signaling cluelessness.

“OK, Eric, what we need is an MOI.”

“A what, sir.”

The next class was about how to write a Memorandum of Instruction (MOI). We talked about what should be in it, how it should be staffed with all the key players, who should review it, and how soon prior to the event it should be published.

Then Eric looked at me.

“Sir, I don’t think I can do this.”

“Why not?”

“Sir, there’s just too much to do.”

“Come on, Eric. You were selected for assignment to a forward-deployed tank battalion in Europe. As such, you were judged to be one of the chemical corps’ most promising young officers. Are you telling me you can’t accomplish the mission?”

“Sir, I don’t know, sir.”

Bingo. Eric was learning. He had reached his saturation point and had the guts to say so. While I wanted Eric to develop a “can do” attitude, I didn’t want him to develop it at the expense of his integrity.

“OK, Eric.”

And we continued our discussion, which now involved delegation of responsibility by the S3 shop. I explained to Eric that even if he and I spent the next two months doing nothing but 10K stuff, we could never do what was required to get the event off the ground. Therefore, we “tasked” subordinate units in the battalion to execute our plans. We were only planners, I told him, and wore no green tabs which signified command. We planned and commanders executed. Then, we proceeded to designate units for various tasks associated with the 10K. One company would be responsible for the course. Another would be responsible for the finish line and the awards. Another would be responsible for refreshments. And on it went. Eric left with enough guidance to plan the New York Marathon.

The weeks passed. Gradually, the 10K seemed to be taking shape. Now and then I’d see Eric walking down the hall with various items that one would associate with a road race: runners’ numbers, bottles of Gatorade, more engineer tape, etc. He even came up with one of those wheel things that marks off course distance, pushing it around the shop with obvious pride. Eric also began to learn to balance his 10K duties with those required in his primary role as chemical officer. And, as a new lieutenant in the battalion, he went through those changes which occurred with most new lieutenants. He became friends with the other single lieutenants in the units and they “hung out” together when off duty. Letters from his girlfriend at home became less frequent. He showed up with a local German fraulein at a battalion hail and farewell. He was invited to married officers’ quarters for dinner. He was even assigned a chemical NCO. He was beginning to fit in to his new home.

The weekly updates continued. But now, instead of reporting, it was a knock on the door and a plunk down on the sofa to wait until I was done doing whatever I was doing. We were now two weeks away. The division commander RSVP’d that he’d attend and would bring the corps commander with him as his “guest.” The battalion commander was now requiring daily 10K progress reports from the S3. Word amongst soldiers in the battalion was that the commander was running twice daily.

“Sir, we’ve got a problem.”

“What is it?”

Eric was learning to bring information to me by default, only those things he could not fix himself. He was learning my nuances, one of which was that everything was going OK unless brought to my attention. The other was that bad news gets worse with time.

“The flatbed scheduled to be positioned for the awards ceremony is non-operational. It won’t be fixed in time for the race.”

“Great, Eric. Just great. What’s the matter with it?”

“Flat tires, sir.”

“Flat tires!?”

I had just been informed by the brigade S3 that our ammo allocation for the upcoming tank gunnery rotation at Graf had been cut; I was in no cordial mood.

“Yes, sir.”

“Eric, this is not good. I know you don’t own that flatbed, and there’s not much you can do about it. Go ahead and execute your back-up plan.”

“Sir?”

“Your contingency plan. Whatever you did to ensure there would be an awards platform on site, in case the flatbed is unavailable. Go ahead and execute.”

Pause.

“Sir, I don’t have one.”

Another lesson.

“OK Eric. I get the picture. Sergeant Major!”

The battalion operations sergeant major sauntered in.

“Sir?”

“Sergeant Major, we have a problem. Flatbed for awards platform for 10K is broke. The lieutenant doesn’t have a back-up. See what you can do.”

“No problem, sir. C’mon, lieutenant.”

The sergeant major eased out of the office, allowing only me to see the grin on his face. His S3 wasn’t having a good day in the first place and the new lieutenant wasn’t helping any.

“Eric.”

He stopped on his way out the door.

“Yes, sir.”

“First, always have a back-up plan. Second, it’s wise to check with the operations sergeant major during a crisis before coming to me. He might be able to pull something out of his hat.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And Eric...”

“Sir?”

“If this 10K doesn’t go as scheduled, you and I will be driving a “honey-wagon” in some small town in Germany for the rest of our lives. You’ll be driver, I’ll be vehicle commander.”

“Yes, sir.”

He got the picture.

As the 10K approached, Eric’s anxiety increased. While I was confident everything was OK, the young lieutenant was in the shop early in the morning and was going home after everyone else had left. Still too new to appreciate what was about to be the culmination of a fairly complicated staff action, I’m sure he tossed and turned on more than one night during the weeks prior to the big day.

The morning of the 10K was bona fide German. Drizzle the night before, ending in the morning with light fog and a chill in the air. Start time for the race was scheduled for 10 a.m. The division commander had approved a division training holiday immediately following the awards ceremony. A great way to end the week.

At 0630, I showed up and had my driver park my jeep at the end of the runway, out of the way of the impending action. I hopped out, zipped up my Graf jacket, poured a cup of coffee... and watched.

In a few minutes, things began to happen. The company in charge of traffic control arrived and began marking off designated parking areas. The company in charge of the course showed

up and started mixing Gatorade for the water stops. The medical platoon set up a tent for the aid station. Wives began showing up and started placing their pies, cookies, juices and other items they’d sell in booths which had been positioned the night before. The portapottie guy dropped off his wares. And, almost miraculously, a flatbed truck appeared and positioned itself precisely where it was supposed to go, as depicted by the diagram in the MOI.

In the middle of all this stood a lieutenant. He had been there for over an hour. He had a clipboard in his hand. As items for the race appeared on the scene, the respective person in charge would approach the lieutenant for final instructions. With a wave of his hand or a reference to his clipboard, the lieutenant would point out a location or provide clarification. Between instructions, he would survey the scene, seemingly astonished that his plan was coming together. As more items showed up, he began to smile. As things were placed in position, his smile grew. His astonishment turned into pride.

I hopped in my jeep and drove over to the lieutenant. By this time, 2LT Eric Hartsell, Chemical Officer, 4th Battalion, 67th Armor, was beaming. He saluted. I returned it. He said nothing. I smiled and said nothing. I didn’t have to. He knew he’d done good.

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