

# A Taste of Life at Outpost SAPPER

## Supporting Peace on a Volatile Border

by First Lieutenant Michael Scott

The main effort of Task Force Falcon in KFOR is a small outpost that sits on a saddle 300 meters from the provincial boundary separating Kosovo from the rest of Serbia. Outpost Sapper, named by the engineer company that first manned it, overlooks the tiny ethnic Albanian town of Dobrosin, located in the Ground Safety Zone established by UN Resolution 1034. Dobrosin is the headquarters for the UCPMB, a small guerrilla force determined to achieve independence for Kosovo. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, four M1A1 tanks, four M2A2 Bradley Fighting Vehicles, two Avengers, a FIST-V, and approximately 45 U.S. soldiers overwatch this town. The unit's activities here give some good examples of the complex challenges today's junior leaders face during peace support operations.

OP Sapper is now in the sector controlled by A/2-6 IN, commanded by CPT Mark Jackson. The company is augmented by a tank platoon from B/1-35 AR. However, the task organization for this mission does not end at the company level; two of the platoons are tank organized to the platoon level. Each of these platoons contains one tank section, one Bradley section, two dismount squads, two Avenger teams, a FIST team, and up to three medics. The two platoons rotate between OP Sapper and Camp Monteith, spending five days at each location. I am the tank platoon leader assigned to OP Sapper with my platoon sergeant, SFC Frank French. Our infantry counterparts are 1LT Steve Gutierrez and SFC John Bennett.

OP Sapper serves two purposes: to observe activity in the town, particularly regarding the UCPMB, and to control movement through the town. The operators of the vehicles work in two-man teams and rotate shifts throughout the day. One tank, one Bradley, one Avenger, and the FIST-V are always scanning into the Ground Safety Zone at any given time. When not operating the vehicles in the battle positions, the soldiers will conduct maintenance on the vehicles not scanning, improve their living conditions at



Overwatching Dobrosin, on the Serbia-Kosovo border, is this M1A1 from Task Force Falcon's B 1-35 Armor.

the outpost, conduct physical training, and take some down time to relax, playing cards or watching a movie.

OP Sapper controls the only access road to Dobrosin from Kosovo. The dismounts operate a traffic control point for all traffic passing through. Since November 28, the boundary has been closed to all traffic except for those providing humanitarian aid. That would include anyone requiring immediate medical attention or families going to buy food. Those passing through must explain their reasons for leaving or returning to Dobrosin. OP Sapper has three medics on site, one belonging to the platoon and two from the support battalion for MEDEVAC. One of the medics screens anyone claiming to require medical attention from a doctor in one of the bigger towns in Kosovo. The medic makes an assessment and gives a recommendation to the leader on site. If the leader decides to let the individual pass, we notify them that they must have a diagnosis in writing signed by a doctor in order to return to Dobrosin. Likewise, families going to purchase food must have food when they return, but only enough for the family. If they have an extraordinary amount of food, we turn them back or confiscate suspicious items.

The road bisecting OP Sapper also provides access to Stublina, a village that lies in the province of Kosovo.

People traveling to and from Stublina are permitted free access through the checkpoint. All residents in Kosovo have an identification card that shows their hometown, and this is our verification for their destination.

The soldiers operating the checkpoint conduct a thorough search of every person and vehicle passing through, regardless of origin or destination. We look for contraband items such as weapons, grenades, mines, explosives, military equipment and clothing, and other supplies. If they discover any contraband, the soldiers seize it and detain the personnel involved. We have two options for dealing with people we detain. One is to send them directly to Camp Bondsteel for confinement. The other option is to dispatch a Mobile Interrogation Team to question these individuals. We also attempt to improve our understanding of the situation in Dobrosin by running an information-gathering campaign. The soldiers at the checkpoint have talking points and questions prepared for residents in the village that help us learn about the disposition of the UCPMB in addition to conditions of the civilians in the area. The information we gather helps the chain of command decide policy for the area.

The platoon leader and platoon sergeant on site are responsible for the operations at OP Sapper. The platoon

leader is responsible for everything that happens or fails to happen at the site. I have established several areas of emphasis to ensure that the outpost operates to standard. The first area is the command post. The CP is the heart and brain of OP Sapper. The primary functions of the CP are communications and information-gathering. All SALUTE reports and reports of both boundary crossings and Stublina traffic are collected here and passed on to higher. This information goes into a database so it can be analyzed for consistencies, trends, or other observations to help intelligence personnel make interpretations and recommendations.

The next area of emphasis is supervising the traffic control point. The responsibility for permitting people to cross the boundary lies with the platoon leader. After training the dismount NCOs who operate the checkpoint on the basic rules for allowing people to cross, they make all routine decisions. However, anything out of the ordinary requires platoon leader involvement.

Another important role of the platoon leader is that he is the KFOR representative to the people of Dobrosin. Often, the elected leadership of the town, one of whom is the village defense leader and a member of the UCPMB, will come to the checkpoint to complain about the boundary closure. They want us to allow all civilian villagers to cross, regardless of reason. The platoon leader at Sapper must meet with these people and explain our situation while maintaining as friendly relations as possible to avoid unnecessary confrontation. The platoon leader also gives the platoon sergeant his guidance and standards to be met in accomplishing his duties.

Another of the platoon leader's areas of emphasis is hosting and briefing VIPs that visit the site in the absence of the commander. Since December, visitors have included the Chief of Staff of the Army, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, The Fifth Corps commander, the deputy commandant of the Marine Corps, and various senators and congressmen. The company commander gives them a tour of the site and briefs them on the situation from a hill overlooking Dobrosin. When the commander is not available to conduct the brief, the platoon leader must execute this operation, often with little notice.

The platoon sergeant essentially runs day-to-day operations at OP Sapper. His primary responsibility is security of



**At the traffic control point, NCOs make most of the routine decisions.**

the site to ensure force protection. He inspects the concertina wire and early warning devices that surround the site, establishes a 24-hour security plan, both within the wire and the surrounding area, and inspects soldiers, vehicles, equipment, weapons, and fighting positions. The platoon sergeant also establishes and supervises a maintenance plan for all vehicles.

Another important concern for the senior NCO at OP Sapper is the health and welfare of the soldiers. He establishes the detail schedule which ensures the cleanliness of all common areas, to include the mess tent, latrine, living area, and the grounds. The platoon sergeant also implements, through his junior NCOs, a solid physical fitness plan run at the section/squad level to maintain the ability to accomplish war-fighting missions. SFC French has also created a cross-training plan so all the soldiers can learn from each other. The tank crews give classes on their equipment to the Bradley crewmen, dismounts, artillerymen, and air defense soldiers. Then each other section does the same. This fosters teamwork within the platoon and prepares young soldiers to be a part of a combined arms team later in their careers.

The five days the platoon spends back at Camp Montieth are far from rest days. The day we return from OP Sapper is a maintenance and recovery day for the two HMMWVs the tank section uses, along with the infantry company's 5-ton. The section leaders and squad leaders use this time to have their soldiers clean weapons and inventory ammunition.

For the next three days, the platoon conducts five patrols per day, two mounted and three dismounted, within the company sector. The company is

responsible for approximately 70 square kilometers is eastern Kosovo, to include 16 kilometers of the provincial boundary. The task of the majority of the patrols is border interdiction. The mounted soldiers patrol routes in sector and the dismounts walk through terrain that can't be covered with a vehicle. The purpose is to apprehend individuals bypassing our checkpoints and possibly smuggling arms and supplies into the GSZ. The day prior to return to OP Sapper is another day reserved for maintenance and vehicle dispatching. The section sergeants also conduct troop-leading procedures to prepare for the five days at Sapper.

The patrols from Camp Monteith and operations at OP Sapper are interdependent. The patrols detain anyone crossing the boundary at any location other than Sapper, with the threat of sending them to Camp Bondsteel. The intent is to influence people to either go through Sapper or not cross the boundary at all. OP Sapper acts as a detainee collection point for the patrols, so they can drop off any suspects and then continue their mission.

Another duty of the platoon leader is that he is responsible for three small villages in the company sector, Lovce, Slubica, and Inatovce. They all lie within a few kilometers of the provincial boundary. During the war, most of the people who lived there fled to Albania and Macedonia, and returned only after stabilization by KFOR. The platoon leader attends town meetings and finds out what KFOR can do to help provide a more safe and secure environment for the residents of these towns. Mostly, they want assistance in improving infrastructure, such as elec-

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tricity, sewage, and water systems, sanitation, and road repair. In most of these situations, the lieutenant passes the information to higher. Then the battalion refers the problems to a non-governmental agency that can help the residents improve their quality of life. As the KFOR representative for these towns, the lieutenant must reinforce the fact that KFOR is here to provide a safe and secure environment, not rebuild the country.

The meetings also provide a platform for information sharing. The lieutenant passes along information from KFOR to help the people understand KFOR's needs, and then attempts to obtain information critical to the company mission, primarily concerning people bypassing the checkpoints and transporting weapons and supplies. This helps the company to focus its efforts on certain areas or people that may be of concern.

In addition to conducting peace support operations, soldiers in Kosovo cannot forget that American soldiers fight

and win our nation's wars. In order to maintain their proficiency for high intensity conflict, we executed a training program to maintain their necessary skills. During their time back at Monteith, the tank commanders and gunners will spend time in the MCOFT to maintain gunnery skills. We also established a plan to train and test all soldiers on the TCGST skills required for all 19Ks, and the Bradley section sergeant executes similar training for Bradley crews. Dismount squad leaders conduct common skills and EIB training.

Peace Support Operations at Outpost Sapper reflect the versatility and flexibility of today's Army. Leaders must have the ability to expand their focus to ensure that all required tasks are trained and soldiers are capable of executing both peace support operations and high intensity conflict to standard. Sergeants and corporals routinely execute tasks that exceed the normal responsibilities given to junior leaders, which allows them to gain experience and develop the leadership skills they will use as senior NCOs.

Soldiers are also expected to conduct a difficult and complex mission that requires a great deal of intellect and compassion on a daily basis. They are required to conduct this mission in an unfamiliar environment, separated from family and loved ones for long periods of time, during holidays, working seven days a week. Each one of the soldiers at OP Sapper is doing an outstanding job representing themselves, their unit, KFOR and the United States. The performance of these soldiers makes the leader's job that much easier, and it truly displays the amazing depth of the U.S. soldier.

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1LT Michael Scott graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 1999 with a degree in German and Spanish. After graduation, he completed AOBC and was assigned to 1-35 Armor Regiment in Baumholder, Germany. He has served as a platoon leader in Bravo Company since March 2000 and has been deployed to Kosovo since December 2000.