Eyes On Fire

Omaha military policemen receive dose of pepper spray to prepare them for upcoming annual training

By Spc. Koan Nissen
Staff Writer

The 402nd Military Police Battalion will help guard some of the worst criminals in the military this summer during their annual training at Fort Leavenworth, Kan.

And because of their proximity to these folks, every one in the unit – every clerk, every cook, every officer – has to be prepared for what might go down at the United States Disciplinary Barracks.

So while preparing for AT during their March drill, the members of the Nebraska Army National Guard military police unit all got pepper sprayed – a full blast right in the face.

"I should have cooked today," said Sgt. Chelsea Self as she wiped her reddened face more than 20 minutes later. Self was among more than 70 Soldiers experiencing the spray's effects: Inflamed skin, intense pain, tears and a nose gushing snot.

Pepper spray is more properly known as Oleoresin Capsicum, or O.C. It is derived from hot peppers, but is several-hundred times more powerful than a jalapeno.

When correctly used by military police or other law enforcement officers, it is directed toward the eyes of an unruly suspect or prisoner in order to bring them under control without lethal force.

The reason the battalion's Soldiers were sprayed with the painfully-irritating chemical is a simple one: In the chaos of trying to subdue someone, they too could get sprayed, by accident. They must know what it feels like and understand they can continue to function even with the chemical in their face, making them feel as if their eyeballs were engulfed in scalding sand.

"It's good to know the effects of cross contamination," said Staff Sgt. Jason Allan, a one-year veteran of the unit and Grand Island police officer who sprayed everyone in headquarters company, one by one, from the lowest private to battalion commander.

Eye Wash: Sgt. Charles Garman decontaminates his face and eyes in an eyewash station at the North Omaha Readiness Center during pepper spray training, March 7. The training was designed to help prepare the unit Soldiers for an upcoming annual training at Fort Leavenworth, Kan.

The full day of training started off with an hour of classroom instruction followed by a one-hour practical exercise using inert canisters of spray. Those canisters delivered a harmless stream of liquid that helped prepare Soldiers for the real thing.

After the Soldiers had been properly instructed on the delivery of spray, they gathered in their physical fitness uniforms and were shown how the course would go.

Here's how it went:

One by one, each Soldier went to a designated spot on the driveway of a motorpool at the North Omaha Readiness Center, where the unit drills.

Photos by Capt. Andrew Nelson

Even the Battalion Commander Gets a Taste of Pepper Spray: Lt. Col. Byron Diamond, commander of the 402nd Military Police Battalion, is blasted with pepper spray during the battalion's pepper spray training, March 7, in Omaha. The training was designed to give the Nebraska Army Guard Soldiers confidence that they could continue to operate even though exposed to the painful spray.

Those awaiting their turn watched as the process unfolded. And there was ample time to contemplate how they too would feel when it was their turn.

"I've been thinking about it since Wednesday," said Pfc. Seth Larson, a paralegal on his second drill with the unit. The spraying would be, he said, a "good initiation."

First, Allan would spray the Soldiers from approximately six feet away with their eyes closed.

Once the spray had made contact with the eyeballs of the Soldier, they were directed to their first station for hand-to-hand combat. There, they delivered knee strikes to another Soldier holding a large protective pad (most times, the Soldier holding that pad was their battalion commander, Lt. Col. Byron Diamond.)

The sprayed Soldier would shout "get back" while delivering repeated blows. A prescribed amount of time would go by before a whistle was blown signaling it was time to change stations.

With the painful substance still burning, barely able to keep their eyes open and breathing hard, each Soldier was then sent to Station 2 for multiple assailant combat. Here the sprayed Soldiers would defend themselves against two simulated assailants attacking them with protective pads.

Hit after hit, they would have to protect themselves.

Once the second station was complete they weren't quite done. Off to the third stage for hand and elbow strikes.

Again the Soldiers found themselves dealing with a simulated uncooperative subject needing to be subdued.

The whistle finally blew and the fourth and final stage was now at hand. Walking toward another Soldier acting as an inmate or suspect, they would yell, "Get on the ground." The suspect would do just that; a pair of plastic handcuffs were given to the sprayed Soldier, who would tie the suspect's wrists.

Then it was off to a group of Omaha firefighters, who ran a stream of water into each sprayed Soldier's eyes. The Soldier was then led off to an industrial eyewash station just inside the readiness center for more water, before given a washcloth and led away to recover some more.

"I almost can't think straight," said acting 1st Sgt. Shawn Griffith after completing the course.

The affects for most would last for 20 to 40 more minutes.

"Any one of these Soldiers could get contaminated," said Capt. Jeffrey Boyden, Headquarters and Headquarters Company commander. "So I wanted to show them they could still operate."

And with that, each and every one of the Soldiers did.

Nebraska team growing local relationships in Afghanistan

By Capt. Michael Greenberger
5th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment

BAGRAM AIR FIELD, Afghanistan – As the noon sun crept toward the mountains west of Janquadam, Feb. 28, children ran from all corners of the village, greeting the group of Soldiers from the Forward 28th Agribusiness Development Team.

On this warm February day, the team was on a mission to help a blind farmer develop his fields and build a new vineyard to eventually grow grapes in.

The ADT, a National Guard unit deployed from Nebraska, has come to Afghanistan to assist, teach, train and educate the farmers on better farming techniques and introduce the farmers to grasses and alfalfa for better animal health.

After exchanging hellos with locals, the Guardsmen set to work measuring and marking the field for the new vineyard as well as taking soil samples.

While the Soldiers worked, children swarmed all around them offering homemade sling shots for a dollar each. Some troops paid the children for their wares, while others offered up whatever they could – candy, gum, pens, gloves. Soon, smiling children played in the field and some even assisted them in their tasks.

No strangers to this village, Soldiers from the 28th have visited several times before.

"On previous mission we assessed the farmer's fields," said Sgt. 1st Class Eldon R. Kuntzelman. "Then we got a letter of agreement from the land owner and later presented our plan to him."

"Marking and measuring the field was our primary mission," said 1st Lt. Eric Sattelberg, Agricultural team chief. "Our goal on every mission is to improve relations with the locals. In the long run, this type of mission will strengthen the bond between Afghanistan and the U.S. because they know that we are here to help grow this nation rather than destroy it."

Photos by Capt. Michael Greenberger

Security Mission: Spc. Aaron Closson, 28th Forward Agribusiness Development Team, keeps a watchful eye on the road while providing security on a mission to help a local Afghan farmer Feb. 28. The 28th Forward Agribusiness Development Team is made up of Nebraska Army National Guard Soldiers.

The 28th has more plans for Janquadam including installing grain storage bins, planting fruit and nut trees, working with animal health, water management, training and education in tractor maintenance, setting up green houses and underground storage for vegetables.

The future of ADT operations is simple explained Sattelberg – grow this nation into a thriving country of different fruits and vegetables.

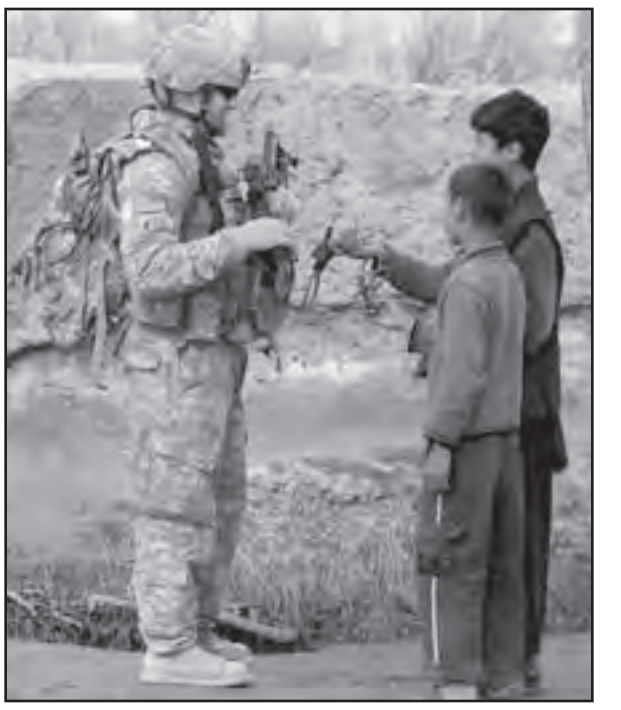
"The goal is a continuation of ADT rotations," said Sattelberg. "Several teams are either on the ground or being identified for a potential rotation. We are here doing one field at a time through demonstration farms as well as with other projects."

The demonstration crops afford the farmers an opportunity to learn a variety of methods for growing crops and then allow the local farmers to try different techniques for growing crops in their own fields.

About half the unit has been deployed before and all of the 52-member team volunteered for the deployment.

The 28th works in 4 provinces –Bamyan, Panjshir, Parwan and Kapisa. Four other ADTs operate across Afghanistan with more on the way.

After the work was done, the children shared more than sling shots and gum with the group of agricultural specialists – they shared themselves. They talked, they gave high-fives and they smiled and laughed…a precious commodity in a time of war.



New Friends: 1st Lt. Josh Kohout, 28th Forward Agribusiness Development Team, chats with local children while on a mission to help a local Afghan farmer, Feb. 28.

As the troops left, the children followed them out of the village with one collective question – when would they be back?

"The locals are becoming very familiar with the ADT and our mission since we have conducted numerous missions to the same locations," said Sattelberg. "We are respectful toward the locals and I think as long as we continue to respect them, they will continue to welcome us in their village."