

# A Few Harmless Holes in a Humvee's Canvas...

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**...That** could have been deadly holes in a couple of Marines and a Sailor.

A hot October day found a company of combat engineers from Camp Pendleton, Calif., conducting work-ups before the final event of a combined-arms exercise (CAX). Everything seemed to be going OK as the company gunny delivered the demolitions each platoon had requested.

The hour-and-a-half drive to Quackenbush Lake as well as the offload of demolitions for the 2nd platoon had been uneventful. The platoon's mission was to practice ambushing techniques and to conduct demolitions training, with emphasis on priming and disarming anti-tank land mines. The training was to end when the platoon ambushed a column of vehicles and used a land mine to blow up the first vehicle.

When the instruction period was over, the Marines broke down into squads and started practicing what they had learned. One small-arms explosion was followed by another, then another, and, before long, it sounded like a small war had erupted in Twentynine Palms. The explosions continued throughout the day.

Meanwhile, the hot sun beat down on the Marines, who were in all their combat gear, and the day's events started taking their toll. The only thing on most Marines' minds was getting back to Camp Wilson. Soon, the Marines began making mistakes.

Finally, it was time for the last event: arming and placing a land mine under the ambushed vehicle. With the sun setting, the Marines were eager to finish their

training, get back to the Warrior's Club, and talk about who had the day's best demo shot.

They prepared themselves for a blast that would shake the night. However, there was no fireball, no flying debris from the vehicle—nothing but a dull pop. The Marines followed the misfire procedure and waited a half-hour. Then, the platoon sergeant and platoon commander investigated. What they found wasn't good.

The mine's pressure plate had been blown off, and the fuse was exposed. They backed to a safe area to figure out what they were going to do next because no extra demolitions were available for misfire. They decided to leave the mine and to return the next morning. After all, Quackenbush Lake was at least a half-hour from any civilization. "No one would come out here," they assured themselves.

When the Marines had returned to Camp Wilson, the platoon sergeant checked into the company's command center but



didn't mention the unexploded anti-tank mine. The next morning, he filled out a rapid request for one firing system and a vehicle so he could go back to the training area. Puzzled by this request, the company gunny asked, "Why?"

When the platoon sergeant explained, the gunny grabbed the company clerk and a corpsman and headed to the magazine to pick up C-4 and electric blasting caps. The three then drove to the training area.

The company gunny cautiously approached the vehicle for a look at the unexploded mine. He had never seen anything like it. Besides the mine's missing pressure plate and exposed fuse, parts of .50-caliber and 7.62 linked rounds were around and under it. The rounds looked bad; they were bent and corroded from what looked like years of being buried in the desert. "Now what?" thought the company gunny. "I could call EOD, but they might take forever to arrive, and I don't intend to spend the day here."

That line of thought caused the gunny to slide under the back of the vehicle and gently brush away the sand that was partly covering the mine. Because of the mine's condition, he decided he should place the C-4 just to the side of it, then push sand around the whole charge. Once he had primed the firing wire, he ran it back as far as it would go—only 250 meters—which wasn't far enough to avoid falling debris. The gunny had the company clerk and the corpsman move the HMMWV just behind a hill, then he connected the firing wire to the blasting machine and squeezed it. Nothing happened. The blasting machine was no good.

The gunny decided to use the HMMWV's battery for an electrical source. When he touched the leads to the posts, though, there still was no explosion. Frustrated, he repeatedly rubbed the lead wires across the terminals until "Kaboom!" The mine unexpectedly detonated. Everyone dove for cover under the HMMWV until debris stopped falling.

The only damage from this incident was a few holes in the HMMWV's canvas, but families could have been burying two Marines and a Sailor. Here is what led to this near-mishap:

- The platoon sergeant had been working out of his MOS for eight years and had forgotten arming procedures for the anti-tank mine. He was more concerned with not embarrassing himself than getting reacquainted with the procedures before the training started.
- The platoon sergeant allowed more ordnance to be placed with the unexploded mine. There's a time and place for this practice—but during a mission isn't the time.
- The platoon sergeant didn't check the shot. Again, he wasn't sure but didn't want to be embarrassed.
- Although it's a common practice to set aside demolition and firing systems for misfires, no one did in this case.
- These Marines should have contacted range control and EOD for guidance. Never leave unexploded ordnance behind after a training exercise. 🧨

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Explosion photo by LCpl. Zachary A. Crawford  
Photo-composite by Patricia Eaton