

# This NCO's in Charge

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Soldier Magazine

Published in the NCO Journal's 1991 fall issue

Feb. 14, 2018



Sgt. Randy Trombley, a squad leader in 3rd Platoon, Company B, 19th Engineer Battalion, shows members of his squad the correct way to prepare a fuse. (U.S. Army Photo by Staff Sgt. William H. McMichael)

"Men, what we're going to do here is blow this T-72. I want to use two shaped charges, and a crate of TNT."

The statement had the ring of authority, of a leader who calls all the shots. But after he spoke, Sgt. Randy Trombley, a squad leader in 3rd Platoon, Company B, 19th Engineer Battalion, stood back and watched. His men went to work, measuring and setting the fuses.

The mission - enemy vehicle demolition in the Iraqi desert - was an urgent one. The corps commander wanted the remaining vehicles in the next war theater disabled, and no one knew

commander wanted the remaining vehicles in the post-war theater disabled, and no one knew when American forces would have to withdraw. Speed was of the essence - but so was safety.

At the T-72 site, he watched one of his men prepare a fuse. When the Soldier had finished, Trombley stepped over. "Let me show you something," he said. "If you tie that knot like that, this charge won't blow like it should." A quick demonstration remedied the problem.

The fuses were set so that all the explosives would detonate simultaneously in nine minutes. As they did at every demolition, the entire squad - now a safe distance away - waited to view the explosion. The most interested parties were Trombley and the Soldier chosen to calculate, measure and cut the proper amount of "det cord" so that the explosion would take place in exactly nine minutes. If the explosives went off more than two seconds before or after the mark, the Soldier owed Trombley 50 push-ups. If it was within that four-second window, Trombley would drop to the sand to knock out 50.

"Five, four, three, two, one, zero," Trombley counted. Right on time a plume of fire and smoke shot into the sky as the sound of the blast rolled across the desert. The squad cheered. Trombley shook his head in mock disgust. Wearing a helmet and flak jacket, he lowered himself to the ground and paid off his debt.

At the next site, the explosion took place 40 seconds early. But instead of chewing out the private who had set the charge, he used the incident to offer encouragement.

"Listen," he said in a calm voice, "You're a private. You're not supposed to have it down pat yet like an NCO. But you're doing a great job out here.

"I know what you did," he continued. "The det cord you used came from two different spools, and they burned differently. You have to work from the same spool. Why? If your charges don't go off on time, you could kill a fellow Soldier on the battlefield. Remember that the next time. But you're doing a great job."

It was a leadership style that seemed to hit the right buttons. To keep the mission moving, Trombley chose to make the initial decision on the charges needed. But he also had faith in the ability of his men. If he saw a problem, a quick teaching point solved it. He managed to combine hands-on training with a real-world mission.

As a result, morale was higher than one would expect in a small unit that relentlessly crisscrossed the desert gypsy-like in a monotonous search for inert targets. Trombley was giving the men a lot of rope, and they were enjoying it.

"When I was a private, I didn't like to be micromanaged," he said. "So I like to let my Soldiers do what they learned in basic training and Advanced Infantry Training. Being a noncommissioned officer, I like to just check their work, rather than micromanage them. I want to see what they actually know. and challenge their minds."

...and challenge their limits.

"When I came out here, I wasn't that confident," said Spc. Ramon Saint-Hilaire. "I didn't know what I was doing. It took me a while." He called the mission "fun, and a chance to experiment." As the squad moved from site to site, Trombley left no doubt who was running the show. But his Soldiers were also being given the opportunity to perform. As a result, they gained invaluable experience and became better Soldiers.