

# Commercial Vendor Services and Disbursing Situational Training Exercise

BY CAPTAIN JOHN R. BORMAN

To prepare for its deployment to Afghanistan, a finance detachment of the 13th Expeditionary Sustainment Command developed a training event that simulated the daily business it could expect to conduct in the theater.

An audit of finance operations in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom conducted by the Army Audit Agency (AAA) highlighted the importance of quality control when finance units process contracts for payments. The AAA report identified shortcomings throughout the contracting process, from generating the contract through payment and certification.

To address these deficiencies, the leaders of the 13th Financial Management Center (FMC) and the 15th Financial Management Company (FMCO) presented the need to ensure proper training of finance units before their deployment to Brigadier General Terence J. Hildner, the commander of the 13th Expeditionary Sustainment Command from August 2010 until his death in Afghanistan in February 2012. The general understood the Finance Corps leaders' vision for the way ahead and challenged his units to create an effective training plan to meet the demands in theater.

General Hildner thus became the driving force behind the first commercial vendor services (CVS) and disbursing situational training exercise (STX) at Fort Hood, Texas. The exercise was designed to meet the need of finance units for predeployment training.

My unit, B Detachment, 15th FMCO, completed the first CVS/disbursing STX at Fort Hood in December 2011. The purpose of the exercise was to provide realistic training that would mirror the conditions that the detachment would encounter in its upcoming OEF deployment. With the B Detachment "Honey Badgers" preparing for this mission, the STX provided beneficial collective training before the unit's culminating training exercise in March 2012.

## Developing a Training Plan

A finance detachment trains and deploys as a unit capable of supporting a battalion-sized element in a theater of operations. The detachment seldom deploys with its parent support unit. Finance units that are preparing to deploy usually attend a multifaceted finance training program, the

Diamond Saber exercise in Fort Dix, New Jersey. However, because of adjustments to the deployment cycle, some finance units are unable to attend Diamond Saber.

As the Army places increased emphasis on resource management, the need for individual units to train and certify themselves becomes a priority. Without Diamond Saber, a finance detachment needs an effective training plan to ensure that its personnel are sufficiently trained before its culminating training exercise. The original intent of the CVS/disbursing STX was to develop a plan in which a financial management company, working with support from a financial management center (FMC), would be able to train its own units and certify them before deployment.

The STX would provide the commander with an initial assessment of the unit's technical proficiency before the culminating training exercise. The exercise would do this by providing realistic training that mirrored the conditions the finance detachment would encounter in a deployed environment.

## Preparing for the STX

Before the trainup for the CVS/disbursing STX, B Detachment endured an extensive manning overhaul. We wanted to ensure that the personnel receiving the training would be the personnel deploying with the unit. When the dust settled, 18 of the 26 authorized personnel were new to the detachment, and many of them had little practical finance experience. With such a high turnover, we had to ensure that all Soldiers were collectively up to speed on finance operations and operating on the same training plan. In doing so, we faced many challenges. With the holiday season quickly approaching, our training calendar offered little training time.

With assistance from the 13th FMC, our training plan was greatly enhanced. In less than 3 weeks, the 13th FMC established and provided pre-STX consolidated baseline training for all of the individual tasks associated with the exercise; these included training for disbursing agents and managers, certifiers, cashiers, the CVS cell, and information management officers. The support unit automations

*At Forward Operating Base Shank in Afghanistan, a certifier shows his cashiers how to find and correct an error in the daily business.*

cell also played a vital role in the preparations by imaging finance computer systems and creating an internal network needed for the exercise.

The focus of the CVS/disbursing STX was to simulate daily business for split operations based on the policies and procedures currently used in the theater. Theater finance operations are continuously changing, so we coordinated with the finance unit we were scheduled to replace for guidance on current operations and procedures in order to provide realistic training.

Site selection for the training exercise was a key aspect of the planning process. As a finance detachment, it would be extremely difficult and unpractical to roll out to a field environment and establish two separate locations. So we coordinated for the use of a large convertible classroom wing of the education center. This area allowed the unit to design two locations with finance offices set up similarly to those in theater.

## Executing the Training

During the STX setup phase, the team was divided into two locations and Soldiers fell into their separate roles to set up needed systems and create an environment conducive to daily finance business operations. The Soldiers developed a CVS cell to verify and process commercial contracts.

Each location established a disbursing cell with a vault and the ability to disburse U.S. and foreign currency. The disbursing cells used computer-based software to conduct financial transactions, such as the Deployable Disbursing System, EagleCash card, and the Paper Check Conversion Over-the-Counter system. Each site processed its business on Financial Management Tactical Platform laptops. The laptops operated on an internal network using the Combat Service Support Automated Information Systems Interface processor system and routers.

During the execution phase of the training, each site funded its cashiers daily, ran a full day's worth of business, and balanced its corresponding vault each day at the close of business. Other units in our battalion assisted the training by providing role players who simulated the business of finance customers. The 13th FMC provided observer-controllers who assisted each section and controlled the imbedded missions throughout the exercise. At the end of each day, we submitted our daily reports and conducted our unit after-action reviews.

The overall training event was a success. We were able to gather some valuable lessons learned—lessons we hope other units can apply to their upcoming training exercises. If you take the time and effort to properly plan a training



event, you will reap the benefits at execution. Site selection is vital; the focus of our training event was technical experience, so training at a hard site allowed the unit to focus on the technical tasks. Using role players without a finance background and having independent evaluators and trainers added to the benefits of the training. It is important to remain flexible because you never know when you are going to have to adjust your plan. We had an unexpected high turnover of personnel before the event, but we were able to adjust our plan to accomplish the mission.

With the CVS/disbursing STX completed, our next challenge was to maintain our training while preparing for our culminating training exercise in March. We managed to create a training plan that finance detachments can use in the future. Going forward, the focus will remain on creating realistic and challenging training events that follow the most current policies and procedures for conducting financial management support in a deployed environment.

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