

Remember

What the loss of LCpl Rother 35 years ago continues to teach us about training in the desert today

by LtCol Chris Proudfoot (Ret)

Thirty-five years ago, on 30 August 1988, LCpl Jason Rother was left in the northern training areas at the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in Twentynine Palms, CA, as part of the Combined Arms Exercise Program (CAX 9-88). Rother was later found dead from the heat. The Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in Twentynine Palms at that time was 800 square miles of harsh desert landscape used primarily for live fire training. LCpl Rother's post as a convoy road guard was 35 miles north of the main base, with absolutely nothing in between. LCpl Rother had seen his unit and many others pass him by in the dead of night. He likely saw other road guards picked up by the faint chemlite glows, and sometime after midnight, he re-

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alized he had not been picked up and was alone. His unit, Kilo Company 3/2 Mar, had already trained in the harsh Mojave Desert heat for over a week. LCpl Rother was starting his second

year as a Marine and had only been with the 3rd Battalion for a little more than a month.

Alone, LCpl Rother determined to leave his position sometime in the morning of 31 August and initially followed the trail to the East that he believed his unit had taken. He carefully placed an arrow made of rocks to the point where he intended to travel. The terrain was steep and compartmentalized, with no artificial light. This area of the Combat Center is one of the most confusing areas for navigation near the Blacktop Strongpoint. As he walked east, the terrain eventually opened up so he could see miles in almost every direction. Visible was a train track, Route 66, the town of Amboy, and, to some degree, Interstate 40. He moved toward a visual landmark on Route 66, a large tree and bridge.

The all-consuming August heat hit 107 degrees and would have made him confused and uncoordinated. He was likely frustrated and, as any good Marine would be, pissed off; however, he kept going. Ultimately, Rother traversed over seventeen miles of harsh desert, much of it at the absolute hottest time of the day. Likely delirious, he sought shelter where there was none by setting up his poncho as shade. Exhausted and alone, the sun turned his poncho shade into a hot oven. He eventually succumbed to the heat, less than one mile from Route 66 and possible rescue. Most experts believe he expired on the afternoon or evening of 31 August, less



Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in Twentynine Palms is the Corps' premier live-fire and maneuver training capability but also one of the most unforgiving environments to train in. (Photo by Cpl Matthew Allen.)



Unexploded ordnance is another safety concern in the high desert training areas and ranges. The Corps takes action to minimize these risks. EOD Marines are trained to locate, access, neutralize, and dispose of these hazards. (Photo by LCpl Luis Aguilar.)

than 24 hours after being posted on his road guard detail.

His unit, meanwhile, had just realized he was missing the night of 1 September when his rifle was unaccounted for back at Camp Wilson. Since LCpl Rother had been detached from his platoon for road guard duty, this was the

On 4 December 1988, as part of a search and rescue training exercise, LCpl Rother's remains were found. Most of his gear was in the same area. Today, a simple cross with associated mementos from well-wishers marks the spot where LCpl Rother passed.

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first time his unit realized he was not back at Camp Wilson and accounted for. The exercise force conducted searches immediately. Every effort to find LCpl Rother was initiated. However, the calculus had not considered that he could walk 17 miles, was just off the installation, and possibly already deceased before they began the search.

lesson learned, and this event remains a constant reminder for every Marine training at the Combat Center. Nothing replaces the fire team, squad, and platoon oversight of our Marines.

BEARMAT, the Combat Center range control agency, monitors everything in the training areas 24/7/365. Their goal is 100 percent accountability

of everyone entering the training areas. Combat Center Search and Rescue training is a constant. A formal program has been in place because of this event. Coordination with local law enforcement and search groups is routine. Exercises and rehearsals are conducted to ensure the collective responses are prepared. Today, if someone is unaccounted for more than two hours, a formal search and rescue is initiated, and training stops. Every Marine that enters the Combat Center range complex must receive a desert survival brief that includes what to do if lost in this environment. Every Marine also gets a specific brief on dealing with the desert tortoise, an endangered species, and with unexploded ordinance.

Before any training, this tragic event is discussed to highlight the dangers that exist in training at the Combat Center. The Combat Center staff has learned and continues to learn from this experience. Rother's tragic loss is not forgotten and is used daily at the Combat Center.

Overall, the sheer courage of LCpl Rother to endure what he ultimately did has changed the Marine Corps' approach to training in the desert. Of the millions of personnel trained at the Combat Center over the last 35 years, it is impossible to say how many lives were saved. Today's Marine Corps remains cognizant of LCpl Rother's loss and endeavors daily to not repeat it. Marking the 35th anniversary of his loss, we collectively employ this lesson learned daily to prevent the senseless loss of life as we train Marines to go in harm's way in the most challenging training environment.

