

54th Engineer Battalion conducts quarterly commanders' conference at FOB Shank

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LOGAR PROVINCE, Afghanistan – Standing together in front of American, unit engineer and Afghan flags after a three-mile run, a group of outgoing and incoming company commanders, together with their battalion commander and staff, watched the sun rise over concrete Alaska barriers. This is how the 54th Engineer Battalion officially began their quarterly commander's conference, Feb. 18.

The engineer unit's company commanders flew to Forward Operating Base Shank from all across Regional Command East to attend the conference from Feb. 17 to Feb.20. They came to provide feedback and comments about how the battalion is operating and attend valuable battalion- and brigade-staff conducted training sessions.

The night before the run, company commanders shared dinner and then gathered to listen to Command Sgt. Maj. Richard Milford of the 176th Engineer Brigade give a speech about leadership. Then they settled in to watch "Restrepo" - a documentary about Soldiers of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team and their time in the Korengal Valley, Afghanistan. After the movie, the company commanders talked about how it applied to their current situations and areas of operation.

The next morning began with the commanders going on a three-mile run. Following breakfast, the commanders took part in a Comprehensive Soldier Fitness session. CSF is a program that focuses on five dimensions of strength - physical, emotional, social, family and spiritual. It is designed to improve Soldiers' mental and physical resiliency to the stresses associated with deployments.

Before they broke for lunch, the commanders attended the battalion maintenance control section's weekly maintenance meeting. Instead of just discussing the statuses of their equipment, the commanders heard from the various in-country field service representatives. An FSR is a contractor's customer service representative or team in Afghanistan that provides technical support to the war fighter and serves as a communication channel between Soldiers and their company.

These FSRs discussed their capabilities and explained how they can provide assistance with a variety of maintenance issues.

After the morning conferences and a short break for lunch, the commanders moved into the conference room and began briefing after action reviews

(AARs) of what they learned in the first 100 days of combat. The battalion commander tasked each company to provide three sustains and three improves.

"We want to sustain several things, continue training on the new equipment while on maintenance days and continue to field the most relevant Counter-Improvised Explosive Device (C-IED) equipment," said Capt. Brian Looney, company commander for 370th Sapper Company from Bowie, Md.

Once the AAR meeting finished, the commanders and staff attended a command and staff brief with the Battalion Commander (BC). They discussed conditions in their areas of operation and gathered feedback from the BC. After they completed the briefing, all the officers in the battalion gathered for Officers Call, or "O'call."

The battalion O'call is a chance for officers to get together, relax and present good-natured jives at the other officers in a type of "kangaroo court." The battalion commander presides over the event and gives arbitration and guidance on any dispute that arises during the course of the night. Each company is responsible for submitting a nomination. The best nomination receives the battalion's cherished "shovel" until the next month's O'call. Once the O'call was complete, most of the company commanders retired for the night to prepare for the next day of the conference.

In the morning, commanders attended a NIITEK corporation (Non-Intrusive Inspection Technology, Inc.) instructors briefing about their vehicle mounted mine detection system, known as the "Husky." After the classroom briefing, the commanders drove the vehicle on a training course to see if they could locate IEDs. The battalion commander's intent behind this session was to have the company commanders experience what their Soldiers experience when they operate this equipment.

"I found the training relevant, and it will help me select the right Soldiers to serve as operators for this piece of equipment," said Capt. Jessica Durbin, company commander for 535th Engineer Support Company from Shippensburg, Pa.

Following the Husky training, all of the commanders then attended several briefings the battalion and brigade staff delivered. The battalion chaplain facilitated a small-group session addressing ways to avoid stress and improve communication. Task Force Paladin and 160th Explosives Hazard Coordination Cell representatives discussed current and future C-IED equipment and enemy IED trends. Task Force Hammer's legal advisor provided the commanders with legal information and clarification concerning current orders and policies in Afghanistan.

"I liked having the Paladin folks here to learn about new equipment and being able to ask them questions," said Capt. Scott Sparrow, company commander from Layton, Utah for the 744th Mobility Augmentation Company, an Army Reserve company attached to the 54th Engineer Battalion. "I thought all of the

briefs were good. I was a little concerned that it would be a dry, boring two days but the briefs were relevant.”

The final part of the conference occurred when company commanders received their individual counselling from the battalion commander. This counselling provided in-depth feedback on the accomplishments the company commanders have made over the past few months and provided guidance and expectations to incoming company commanders.

“The feedback from the commanders about the conference went very well, they enjoyed the topics,” said Lt. Col. Timothy Holman, battalion commander for the 54th Engineer Battalion from Marks, Miss. “Some were a little skeptical at first, but after attending it and hearing the information they were introduced to, the general comment that I heard was that the conference exceeded expectations.”



110219-A-OT185-071

LOGAR PROVINCE, Afghanistan – Capt. Brian Looney, company commander of the 370th Sapper Company, 54th Engineer Battalion from Bowie, Md. gets some hands-on training inside the “Husky” vehicle during the quarterly commanders conference, Feb. 19. All of the company commanders from the 54th Engineer Battalion gained valuable insight during the conference, which took place Feb. 17-19. (Photo by 2nd Lt. Michael Chigbrow, Task Force Dolch)



110219-A-OT185-092

LOGAR PROVINCE, Afghanistan – Capt. William Robinson, chaplain with the 54th Engineer Battalion from Youngstown, Ohio, discusses ways to improve communication and reduce stress while deployed with company commanders, Feb. 18. All of the company commanders of the 54th Engineer Battalion gathered at Forward Operating Base Shank for the quarterly commanders conference, Feb. 17-19. (Photo by 2nd Lt. Michael Chigbrow, Task Force Dolch)



110218-A-OT185-208:

LOGAR PROVINCE, Afghanistan – Officers of the 54th Engineer Battalion raise their mugs and glasses in toast to the fallen heroes at the beginning of their monthly “O’call,” Feb 18. The O’call was part of the quarterly commanders’ conference, which took place Feb. 17-19. All of the company commanders for the battalion attended briefings and offered their lessons learned for the first 100 days of the deployment. (Photo by 2nd Lt. Michael Chigbrow, Task Force Dolch)