

Trust in Action

By Col. Charles D. Allen

U.S. Army retired

It was early June 1979 in Schweinfurt, Germany, at the height of the Cold War. The Army was transitioning from the Vietnam War and building an all-volunteer force with severely limited funding for training and operations. B Battery, 2nd Battalion, 39th Field Artillery, had just come off a successful certification during a battalion-level Army Training and Evaluation Program, and new officers were filling important positions. I was the battery executive officer (XO), after having spent six months as the fire direction officer (FDO).

B Battery had been alerted for a short-notice test of deployment from garrison and firing battery operations. The deployment from garrison required checking wheeled and tracked vehicles to validate that they were operationally ready and could be dispatched for the 74-kilometer road march to the Wildflecken Training Area.

Upon arriving at Wildflecken, the battery set up and received fire missions. It had been a long and hectic morning, but the battery had done well with the alert, the

road march and the first set of missions—a time of high adventure and anxiety until the first round was reported as “Observed safe!”

One of my responsibilities as the XO was to monitor the gun line and supporting elements. As we were settling into the routine, I got word from the fire direction center (FDC) that the base piece howitzer was refusing to fire the data. I immediately went to Gun 3 and asked the gun chief about the problem. Staff Sgt. George Seifert responded, “XO, the data is out of safe,” as he pointed to the Safety T (a card that showed the limits on the range of firing data).

I then headed straight to the FDC. As I entered the track extension, I saw my old FDC crew led by Sgt. George Davis with their new FDO, 2nd Lt. Jack Malloy. Malloy had spent his first year in the battalion as a fire support team chief. Now, he finally had his chance to serve in a firing battery. He was noticeably upset that the gun line refused to fire his data. When questioned about the Safety T, Malloy replied that the FDC had just received meteorological (MET) data and based its calculations on that new information, but they did not have

time to provide a new Safety T to the gun chiefs.

Timely delivery of safe and accurate fires is a core task of an artillery battery—the first principle. I asked Davis for the MET and the subsequent calculations in order to confirm both the manual and computer data. Davis nodded and quickly reviewed the data with me. Satisfied that all was in order, I directed him to relay the firing commands to base piece. Over the gun-line communication, Seifert questioned, “XO?”

I responded, “Fire!”

After the loud report of a 155 mm howitzer, Seifert replied, “Shot on 3!” After some long seconds, the forward observer called the FDC with an adjustment to the round that had landed safely within the impact area. The fire mission continued without incident.

I have thought about that morning many times over the years. The battalion and battery commanders trusted me with the duties of a battery XO when we were the first unit selected to conduct the no-notice exercise. I

trusted the training and expertise of my old FDC, but I exercised then-President Reagan’s qualification: “Trust but verify.” Seifert properly followed procedure, which required verifying firing data in accord with the Safety T. I had the overall responsibility to protect both those perhaps exposed to an errant exploding projectile as well as members of the battery involved with firing the artillery round. Seifert trusted me to do so.

In exercising collective trust, we all shared a teachable moment. There was no anger or reprimand. We simply observed professional standards based on our training and expertise. Needless to say, I was comforted by the trust extended to me from my commanders and subordinates, and in turn, I gained greater trust in the competence of B Battery, 2nd Battalion, 39th Field Artillery. ★

Col. Charles D. Allen, USA Ret., is the professor of leadership and cultural studies at the U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pa. His 30 years of service in the U.S. Army included various overseas assignments as well as leadership and staff positions in Army and joint commands.

