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Ohio National Guard mortar men maintain proficiency during live fire exercise

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CAMP ATTERBURY JOINT MANEUVER TRAINING CENTER, Ind. — The mortar men of the Ohio National Guard's 2nd Squadron, 107th Cavalry Regiment, out of Hamilton, Ohio, fired more than 150 mortar rounds over a 12-hour span June 11 during a live-fire exercise here.

Among them were veteran Soldiers such as Staff Sgts. Brian Motsinger and Brian Carpenter — who have deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq — as well as newer troops such as Pfc. Alan Almaraz, who recently graduated from basic training. But even for highly-trained and -qualified Soldiers, firing mortar rounds isn't just another day at the office. These Soldiers spent months preparing and practicing in order to fire live explosives during this recent culmination training exercise.

Carpenter said the cavalry troops had the opportunity to fire all of the mortar cannons in their arsenal, which included the 60 mm, 81 mm, and 120 mm mortar tubes.

Firing requires dropping the live mortar round down into the tube onto an explosive charge. The distance the mortar can be fired is adjusted by adding or subtracting gunpowder, known as charges, which come in increments of one through four. With maximum charges, a mortar can be fired several miles; conversely, rounds can be dropped on targets as close as 600 meters without risking injury to friendly Soldiers.

“Firing mortars is what we call a ‘perishable skill,’ and if you don’t do it often enough, you’ll forget how to do it properly and safely—and safety is our top priority,” Motsinger said.

Aside from being able to maintain and increase proficiency, the Soldiers also were able to improve team cohesiveness during the exercise, because a mortar section or platoon operates as one “body” when everything is going as it should and being properly executed. Firing mortars requires three teams of Soldiers, commonly analogized as the “eyes, brains and muscle.”

The “eyes” are the forward observers, who are closest to the enemies on the battlefield and take sight readings on enemy activity, then determine grid coordinates where to fire the mortar rounds. They report these coordinates to the fire direction controllers, who are the “brains,” and run various mathematical equations — either manually or through computers — to translate them into firing coordinates, which are used to adjust the sights and move the mortar gun in the right direction to fire as accurately as possible. Finally, these firing coordinates are handed down to the “muscle,” the Soldiers who actually align and fire the mortar rounds.

If this process is performed correctly, and the “body” is in sync, the mortar will land in the vicinity of the targeted area. If it’s on target, the mortar round has a burst (kill radius) radius of 75 meters within the area targeted. Hitting a target with a mortar is

called indirect fire, which is basically shooting an object up into the air so that it will come back down onto the enemy. Properly aiming an indirect fire weapon takes more effort, skill and personnel than a direct fire weapon — such as a rifle or pistol, or something larger such as a tank — which may be directly pointed at an enemy.

Just out of basic training, Almarez said the knowledge he had recently gained was still fresh in his mind, so it was fortunate timing that he was able to participate in a live-fire exercise and continue honing his craft so soon after returning to his unit.

“I actually got out and did my job,” Alvarez said. “It was really cool that we got to fire some mortars.”

Alvarez said regardless of experience level, everyone took turns performing all the various tasks involved in firing a mortar round, including the gunner, who sights in the mortar tube; the assistant gunner, who drops the round down the tube; and the ammo bearer, who is the person that carries the 35-pound rounds from the secure ammo storage location to the weapons firing point.

Overall, the Soldiers said the training weekend was a success for two reasons — they accomplished the mission safely and they conducted some essential unit training to maintain a critical skill.

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Photo Caption:

110611-A-7271N-001—Soldiers from the Ohio Army National Guard's Headquarters and Headquarters Troop, 2nd Squadron, 107th Cavalry Regiment, out of Hamilton, Ohio, load a mortar round during a live-fire exercise June 11, 2011, at Camp Atterbury Joint Maneuver Training Center, Ind. *(Ohio National Guard photo) (Released)*

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT: The Ohio National Guard Public Affairs Office at 614-336-7000. Please visit the Ohio National Guard website at <http://ong.ohio.gov>.