

# Artillerymen hone skills on Sicily Drop Zone

by Sgt. Mike Pryor

2nd BCT PAO

Staff Sgt. Rodel Yadao stood next to a 105 mm howitzer that was wrapped tightly in layers of cardboard cushioning and half-buried in the sand. Only minutes before, the 4,600-pound weapon had been dropped hundreds of feet from a moving airplane.

Yadao, a gunnery sergeant with Battery A, 2nd Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, felt for the stopwatch hanging from his neck. Then swiveled around to the tree line where another aircraft was approaching. Inside this plane were dozens of airborne artillerymen from Battery B, 2nd Bn., 319th AFAR, all standing up and ready to jump.

Yadao's eyes followed the plane as it passed over the drop zone, filling the sky behind it with parachutes. When the last jumper had exited the aircraft door, Yadao started his stopwatch. The clock was running. Battery B now had 15 minutes to put the howitzer into operation and send a round downrange. Speed and proper execution were the goals during Btry. B's heavy drop exercise at Sicily Drop Zone Oct. 4.

The 2nd Bn., 319th AFAR's standard for field exercises is to have an air dropped howitzer calibrated, positioned,

and ready to fire in 15 minutes during day and 25 minutes at night. It is a standard so difficult to achieve that it is rarely met, said Yadao.

"Everything has to be perfect," he said.

During this heavy drop, the first paratrooper to reach the gun after hitting the ground was Sgt. Billy Davison, a howitzer section chief. He immediately began checking for damages and working to unload it.

No matter who gets there first, that person has to be ready to spring into action, Davison said.

"The first man is in charge until a noncommissioned officer shows up. That's why we're all supposed to know one job up and every job below," Davison said.

As Davison went to work cutting away the retaining straps on the howitzer, he was quickly joined by other artillerymen, who tore apart the honeycomb cushioning on the weapon like kids on Christmas morning.

In no time they had the howitzer unwrapped. Next they had to move and place it on the firing platform. Shouting and grunting, they dug in their feet and pushed the two-ton gun into place.

The next step was to prepare the gun to be fired. This was mainly the job of the gunner. He had to go through a precise series of checks known as "laying procedures" to make sure the weapon was



photo by Sgt. Mike Pryor/2nd BCT PAO

**Soldiers** from Battery B, 2nd Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, prepare to fire a 105mm howitzer during a heavy drop exercise while an airborne artilleryman, in background, parachutes into battle at Sicily Drop Zone Oct. 4.

on the proper azimuth of fire. These steps were observed by the section chief.

"(The gunner) has certain steps that he's got to take to put that gun in order, and the chief has to verify that the gunner is straight," Yadao said.

Sweat poured from the artillerymen's brows as they raced to beat Yadao's clock, which was now a little past 10 minutes. Sgt. 1st Class John Duggins, the "Smoke," or platoon sergeant, urged the gun team to work fast.

As all this was going on, jumpers from another pass began falling from the sky.

At one point, as a falling paratrooper came close to crashing into the howitzer, Duggins hollered at him to

slip away.

"Get away from my gun, you idiot!" Duggins roared.

In another few minutes the gun team was able to call, "In order," meaning they were ready for a fire mission. Yadao glanced down at his stopwatch: 18 minutes, 18 seconds. They weren't going to meet the time standard, but they were still working fast.

About 25 meters behind the howitzer, the Fire Direction Center team was hard at work. The FDC team, led by 2nd Lt. Larry Pitts, was huddled together with papers, handheld computers, charts and slide rulers in front of them like a bunch of high school kids at a late night geometry study session.

Now that the howitzer was

ready for a fire mission, the FDC team had to get a target from the forward observers. Once the observers produced a grid, the FDC team calculated a range deflection from their computers and charts. Then they sent the information to the gun team.

Imagine trying to do complex math in the middle of a battle while being timed. Those were the conditions the FDC team was operating in. But the team couldn't let the pressure get to them, said Pitts.

"If we're not on top of our game, three things are going to happen: one, we kill friendly forces; two, we cause unnecessary collateral damage; and three, we don't

accomplish our mission," Pitts said.

At 10:29 p.m., the FDC sent the gun team its fire mission. Twenty seconds later, the howitzer reported, "Laid," meaning they were ready to fire rounds at a specified target. Yadao stopped the clock: 22:49.

The exercise was over.

Btry. B didn't meet its time standard, but the battery's performance was still something to be proud of, said Battalion Commander Lt. Col. Wilson Shoffner.

"I saw discipline, I saw hustle. Everything was just clicking," Shoffner said.

Then he threw down the challenge.

"Next time, 15 minutes," he said.

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