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21 Aug 2018



Camouflage in Medical Operations IAW the Geneva Convention



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The Decisive Action Training Environment-Europe (DATE-E) at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) is a unique training scenario that replicates a near peer opponent, tactically and technologically advanced enough to operate in the rear area of friendly forces from the onset of conflict. This enemy has the capability to utilize information gathered via surveillance assets to direct air and artillery strikes to destroy friendly targets in depth. These capabilities have influenced North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces to adopt “old” techniques for hiding large formations. Face paint, camouflage nets, use of natural foliage, and roll on paint that can be removed at the wash rack have become standard tools in the quest to conceal forces. Not being found is the only way to guarantee survival on the modern battlefield. However, a general lack of awareness of applicable military regulations have enabled one distinctive emblem, the red cross, to betray the most ardent of concealment efforts throughout numerous DATE-E rotations at the JMRC.

Brigade level commanders have the authority to order the full removal of the red cross. Yet, NATO commanders routinely order camouflaging of medical facilities, equipment, and vehicles while simultaneously requiring the same forces to display a large red cross upon a white background. Commanders fear depriving medical personnel of the protections granted by the 1949 Geneva Conventions for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed



Forces in the Field (GWS). A cursory glance at ATP 4-02.2 “Medical Evacuation” paragraph A-4 tells us that “Camouflage of medical facilities (medical units, medical vehicles, and medical aircraft on the ground) is authorized when the lack of camouflage might compromise tactical operations. The marking of facilities and the use of camouflage are incompatible and should not be undertaken concurrently.” Furthermore, paragraph 6-39 states “Under tactical conditions, when requirements for concealment outweigh those for recognition, all distinctive emblems may be obscured or removed from medical equipment if ordered by a brigade or higher commander and authorized by Army regulations. Display of the distinctive emblem is not required to afford the right against intentional attack. Attack of medical units, equipment, and personnel not

displaying the distinctive emblem are prohibited if opposing forces realize that the forces about to be attacked are medical units performing humanitarian duties.”

NATO Standard ATP-79 dated January 2018, promulgated in NATO STANAG 2931 dated 19 January 2018 paragraph 1.3 Camouflage of the Protective Medical Emblems states, “Although the Conventions require medical emblems be highly visible and prominently displayed, in so far as military considerations permit, circumstances may occur where, the normal color scheme of these emblems could be detrimental to tactical operations, and/or medical personnel or facilities displaying these emblems could be subject to direct targeting.” Paragraph 1.3. 2. States, “When the use of highly visible and prominently displayed medical emblems could compromise military operations, camouflage of medical personnel and/or facilities may be ordered by a commander at a relevant level with the necessary insight to balance operational concerns with the protection of medical facilities and personnel. In such circumstances, the camouflage of medical units will follow that of the supported units.”

Many Commanders remain unaware of the fact that medical personnel, facilities, equipment and vehicles are protected by the GWS regardless of the presence of any distinctive symbol. The recent surge in camouflage tactics has led medical units to unwittingly adopt tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) which are in direct opposition to Army regulation. A note in ATP 4-02.2 on page A-2 says “There is no such thing as a camouflaged red cross. When camouflaging a medical unit or ambulance, either cover up the red cross or take it down.”

References:

- a. Geneva Convention For The Amelioration Of The Condition Of The Wounded And Sick In Armed Forces In The Field Of 12 August 1949
- b. ATP 4-02.2, Medical Evacuation, August 2014
- c. NATO STANAG 2931, Orders For The Camouflage Of Protective Medical Emblems On Land In Tactical Operations, 19 January 2018
- d. NATO ATP-79 Orders For The Camouflage Of Protective Medical Emblems On Land In Tactical Operations (STANAG 2931) Ed B, Ver 1, January 2018