

Training Day

It's just another training day! The radio's been crackling all morning. It's been raining for several days without a letup and vehicles are getting stuck as fast as they can be pulled out. My name is Corporal Hediger. I am assigned to Bravo Company, 1st of the Fourth Infantry Battalion, 3rd Infantry Division, Aschaffenburg, Germany. Our company is on a training mission in Grafenwohr [pronounced Graffen-veer], or "Graf" for short, near the East German border, that will last several days. My job description is an infantry soldier, but I work as a mechanic and driver. In the field, I usually fix broken vehicles, deliver troops and supplies where they are needed, and help with the mission wherever I can. My vehicle is a Gama Goat.

It is a unique vehicle. The military says it is an "M-561 11/4 ton 6x6 Cargo Truck." To me, it is my camper, my wheels, my home away from home. At seven feet wide, and 19 feet long, it is like a pickup, except different. It has six wheels, three inline on each side. The front and rear wheels turn together, but opposite directions, while the center wheels stay straight ahead. The aluminum body bends in the middle between the cab and box. The engine sits behind the driver and being there is only a cloth cab, it is very noisy. Earmuffs are a necessity to prevent deafness because the engine, a two-cycle 3-53 Detroit Diesel screams, making it difficult if not impossible to talk. The cab, which has no doors [you have to crawl in the window], along with the side-by-side cockpit seating, make for very close quarters.

Like I mentioned, it's been raining for several days. Here in "Graf" when it's dry you have four inches of white powder clay that clouds twenty feet in the air and when it rains it means wet gooey clay that sticks to the tires and balls up till the vehicle can't go anymore. It also means everyone's stuck except me. On this training exercise I've been spending all my time pulling out the wheeled vehicles, leaving the "VTR", our twenty-

seven ton tracked wrecker. to concentrate on pulling out the tracked armored personnel carriers and tanks.

The radio's been busy, this call is asking if we could come pull out the Captain's jeep. He's stuck in a creek. 1st Sgt. Gretsche is reading the map coordinates and telling me where to go. Up this greasy dirt road, turn right here onto a narrow field road that heads across a green grassy field. We are climbing just a little bit, the Detroit singing merrily along behind me. About a quarter mile in we can see the jeep on our right. It is down in the valley, sitting in a creek, just like they said. We have to go down a long, wet, grass covered incline and another 200 yards across a meadow to get there. I hang a right and as we go over the edge I slip the goat into six-wheel drive and start braking. The engine is revving up trying to hold us back, but with the brakes we make it to the bottom safely and pick our way across the meadow to where the jeep sits. Pulling up and scanning the situation, I turn around and back up as close as I can to the jeep. It's sitting in the creek, body deep in water, nose away from us, obviously stuck, the banks too deep to get out on either side. I climb out. "Hey Prince!" I inquire. He's my roommate back at base. "What are you doing in the water?" "Ah, the captain wanted to cross the creek and I thought I could get through here." I looked at the creek again, seen the sand bottom through the rain spattered water and thought to myself, "stupid", "there is a sand bottom and two foot high grass covered banks", "stupid, just stupid", "driver error." Grabbing the huge chain out of the back of the box, I hook it on the jeep and goat's pintle hitch and holler at Prince as I walk backwards to the front of the goat, "I'll tighten the chain and start pulling", "When you feel me pull, let the clutch out and try backing out." 1st Sgt Gretsche and Captain Cook are both standing by just watching. It's still raining. I am soaked to the skin. I thought to myself, "I'm glad to be back in the cab." After turning on the wipers, I put the transmission in first gear, release the parking brake, and gently ease out the clutch. The chain comes tight with a small jerk. I slip the clutch, raise the rpm's just a

little, and then let out the clutch fully. We're moving, a little more rpm, a little more. The Goat's 3-53 Detroit Diesel engine sounds loud even for a medium rpm. I can feel the engine vibrations in the steering wheel and sense with my body that we are pulling pretty good. I perceive some of the tires starting to spin a little. Checking the mirror I see the jeep is just coming up over the creek bank. I'm thinking as I'm watching, "A little more forward", "A few more feet", "whoa", "she's out." I back up and stop when I feel the chain go slack. Unhooking quickly, I stow the wet, muddy chain. Prince and I are bantering back and forth. Prince will take a ribbing many times back at the barracks over this mistake. "Ready to go 1st Sgt. Gretsch?" "Hey Prince!" I holler back. "Stay out of the creeks." He chuckles and hollers. I can tell it was a wise crack, but the sound of the Detroit drowns him out as I walk forward.

The radio is still crackling with chatter from the other units on maneuvers. We have not received a call in awhile. "Head home" 1st Sgt. Gretch tells me. Driving is so automatic I don't even think, shift into gear, release the brake, I just go through the motions. I am part of the Goat. She is part of me, I don't just drive her, I strap her on like a fighter pilot in a plane. She is alive. She becomes an extension of my abilities, and I become a part of her capabilities and limits. We are one!

Retracing our tracks across the meadow I notice that it is still raining, though not quite as hard. I'm mentally calculating as I'm driving how to get home, which roads to take. First, we need to get back up the huge, grass covered incline to the field road. As we hit the base of the hill I shift into six-wheel drive knowing we are going to need it. Everything is leaning back as we start the climb out of the valley. It's a long way to the top. I'm listening, sensing, concentrating, keenly aware of everything the goat is doing. I hear the sound of the engine pulling under the load, feel the steering in my hands and compare in my mind with what my eyes are telling me about vehicle direction, the tires and suspension speak to me through the small of my back and hips telling me spin/ no-spin,

I'm over a hump, I'm in a dip. Information, It's all about information. How do we perceive it? Are we listening? How do we react to it? Some days it's the difference between life or death. I sense the hill is getting slippery, the rpm's increase a little. I feel a tire slip, just one, more rpm's, more tires slipping. My focus narrows. Our forward speed slows as I increase the rpm's with the accelerator trying to compensate for the loss of traction. My mind is saying, "We are losing it!," "We are not going to make it!" We are starting to slide to the left, tires clawing, tearing up the grass, slinging it the into the air, trying to hold our position up the hill. The nose starts falling to the left turning us sideways. Not good! We continue to try and climb up as we skate, angled, across the face of the hill. My thoughts and being still intent on trying to reach the road at the top of the hill. This is not looking good and then, I spot the bomb crater. This area is an old abandoned artillery impact zone. I know instantly this thing is huge, big enough to hold a semi! Deep and steep! Our trajectory is going to take us over the edge, into the crater sideways. My mind is calculating, I want to go up! Can I achieve it? I know instinctively if we go in sideways we stand a good chance of rolling over. I don't have time to linger over options. We are failing! Options, choices! My mind is racing, speeding, making calculations and decisions in fractions of a second. Try to continue sideways? Turn down into the crater? Inside I give up willing us to the top. The decision is made. I commit to the bottom. As I turn into the crater 1st Sgt. Gretsche who has been oblivious to me screams over the engine, "What are you doing?" his voice questioning my decision. I hear the fear in his voice. I holler back as we turn and slide over the edge, "I'm trying to keep from rolling over." "If we go in sideways we'll roll, we'll never make it!", " We have to go to the bottom." There is no turning back. Everything is committed to my decision. As we start down I grab another gear and mash the accelerator. The Detroit Diesel responds instantly, like a dragster screaming on takeoff. Our speed increases, flying, the engine rpm's painfully over the max. I need more! We'll never make it out the

other side. I will the accelerator harder to the floor. We are falling, accelerating, near weightless. Everything is light. Time is surreal. It seems to slow down. I notice out on the corner of my eye that 1st Sgt. Gretsche has a two handed, white-knuckle grip on the windshield braces. I'm calculating so fast, input, input, action, reaction. Whoomph! We hit the bottom! I feel the hit, feel the goat hit and almost stop. The suspension compresses, I'm driven into the seat and forward. My body is heavy. I feel like I weigh a ton. I sense the carrier, the weight piling in behind us, pushing. Everything is reversing. The front springs, are starting to uncompress, lifting, pushing upward. We make the transition. We are headed up, momentum lifting and pushing. I am still willing the accelerator. Like a spring out of a hole, we shoot up, higher, higher! We are starting to fly again, near the top. The edge goes by swiftly. I feel us lifting, still climbing. We are clearing air, the tires leaving the ground as we launch up out of the hole. "Two tires, four tires," I count in the back of my head. Down we come. Everything is bounced as we land successfully. I again notice 1st Sgt. Gretsche's white-knuckle grip on the windshield braces as I turn for the road. "Sgt. Gretsche, "You can let go of my windshield braces." His only response was "Hediger!", "Your crazy, I'm never going to ride with you again." [He never did.] I thought to myself, "You're only the sixth 1st Sgt. to get out and walk

This is my job. Someone needs to travel or move supplies from point A to point B. I take them there, and back, me and my Goat. This is what I do. I am one of the best! To me, it's just another training day!