

# A Platoon Leader's Reflection on Readiness

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It was the night of 24 March 2017, though to my platoon it was simply "X5" as it was the fifth day of exercise Allied Spirit VI. The hillside where my platoon staged was dense with fog and brush. It was the dead of night, devoid of illumination. Under night-vision goggles, visibility was 20 meters at best. My platoon's six M113A3 vehicles were in secluded battle positions a kilometer behind our company's forward limit of advance. Faint gunfire rang in the far distance and the artillery barrages had finally ceased. For the first time in three days, my platoon was not the front line of the battalion. The eerily quiet night was shaping up to perhaps be a full night of rest.

A couple hours after settling into our positions, radio chatter radiated through the quiet cabin of my M113, "enemy movement towards Checkpoint (CP) 18." I knew CP18 was only a couple kilometers to my south. Before my company commander gave the order, I realized the imminent mission for my platoon: travel south and destroy the enemy's offensive in our area of operations. I began getting my crew together to prepare our vehicle for departure and soon heard my mission over the command net. My commander ordered my platoon to transition to the highest readiness condition (REDCON 1) in order to potentially join the fight at CP18. "Roger, sir. Moving to REDCON 1 at this time."

I made a net call on my platoon frequency and informed my squad leaders and platoon sergeant of the enemy movement to our south. Frustratingly, one squad leader was unresponsive on the radio despite several minutes of hailing. My other squads had established observation posts (OPs) using their dismounts, all of whom needed to be located and led back to the platoon for mobilization. The situation to our south escalated quickly, and my commander ordered an adjacent platoon to begin movement in support of friendly units already by CP18. I suspected that Blackfoot Company, the unit to our south, would need more reinforcements and tried to speed up our transition to REDCON 1. Ten minutes elapsed and I still had no contact with one of my squads and multiple

OPs were still dismounted. With rising aggravation, I sent a fire team to search for the unresponsive squad and set time hacks for being REDCON 1. "All 3rd platoon elements, we have one-five mikes to be REDCON 1."

The enemy successfully penetrated Blackfoot Company's defense to the south. Their mobility and tempo were sufficient to overwhelm initial defensive positions, and I felt my heartbeat intensify as I realized my platoon was nowhere near ready to join the fight. Forty minutes had elapsed since my first net call and finally all my squads were responsive and mounting up. My time hacks had passed, yet the dismounts were sluggishly strapping their gear to vehicles as a final preparation for movement. At last I received REDCON 1 reports from every vehicle, no less than an hour from our initial call to action. Embarrassed and agitated, I sent up our REDCON 1 status to my commander only to hear that the fight was over and Blackfoot Company had been severely attrited. I am still unsure if my platoon would have been mobilized to CP18, but I am confident that if we were ready to roll in 20 minutes we could have saved some lives in our sister company.

The failures here span from higher echelons, myself, and to Soldiers in my platoon. From a company command or



Photo by SGT Seth Plagenza

*Soldiers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade discuss possible routes during Exercise Allied Spirit VI at 7th Army Training Command's Hohenfels Training Area, Germany, on 20 March 2017.*

higher perspective, my platoon lacked a clear mission set. I knew to find battle positions on my hillside and to, of course, maintain some level of security, but my commander did not specify beyond that. However, the primary failure was mine as a platoon leader. Despite minimal guidance, I understood ongoing operations and locations of adjacent units, thus our implied role of being a reserve force should have been obvious. I was focused on our immediate surroundings — secluded, quiet, far from the front line, etc. These factors should influence the severity of my immediate security but should not dictate my overall task and purpose. Simply put, I became complacent, and war will never forgive complacency. I could have concluded that we were a reserve element and issued out potential REDCON 1 time hacks prior to ever hearing about CP18, thereby allowing subordinates to array their vehicles and dismounts to make it happen. At the Soldier level, everyone should be ready to mobilize in well under an hour no matter the situation. Thus, complacency, not just lack of guidance, was a factor in their sluggish response. Leaders set the conditions and environment for their subordinates, and I suspect that some level of complacency began above my level, which I perpetuated, and it came to fruition through my Soldiers.

If I had known what the enemy had in store at CP18, I

would have been at REDCON 1 all night, but the underlying lesson here is not that sometimes we lack all the information we want. The lesson is about the detrimental capacity of complacency. My platoon was extremely effective during our battles throughout Allied Spirit VI — except on the night of X5 when complacency led to our lethal fighting force not even joining the fight. Unfortunately, this same principle applies on a larger scale beyond platoons. Allied Spirit VI aimed to bolster readiness and interoperability across NATO allies. The rotational training units likely achieved this goal by developing tactical and operational skills on the battlefield. However, such a success also leaves a unit more susceptible to complacency. Leaving a training rotation feeling confident and having gained skills is a positive outcome, but this should set the tempo for continued high-level training rather than justify stagnation. The burden lays on the shoulders of leaders to remain proactive in training and readiness, which will set the conditions for our Soldiers to be ready to join any fight that comes.

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Photo by SGT Matthew Hulett

*Soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment serve as the opposing force during Exercise Allied Spirit VI on 18 March 2017.*