Execution of a Joint Task Force Raid:

An SBCT Platoon Takes on JRTC

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This article discusses a raid conducted during Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) Rotation 04-05 inside the Peason Ridge Maneuver Training Area as seen by a Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT) rifle platoon leader. The planning, execution, and lessons learned from this mission will all be discussed in depth in the following paragraphs. The JRTC rotation was conducted as a mission rehearsal exercise (MRX) prior to the deployment of the 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry Division (SBCT) in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) III. Throughout this article I will stress the importance of conducting solid, focused, and involved rehearsals, since this was paramount to my platoon's mission accomplishment.

This mission was conducted as a joint-task force raid involving a Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT) rifle company, an operational detachment alpha (ODA) team, an operational detachment bravo (ODB) team, and roughly a company-sized element of the Iraqi National Army (INA) mounted on 5-ton trucks. Although the initial mission was to conduct a raid, the further that the task force went into the orders process and the military decision-making process (MDMP), the more that the mission assumed the characteristics of a deliberate attack. During the mission, the platoon's task organization included two rifle squads, a weapons squad, four Stryker Infantry Carrier Vehicles (ICV), an engineer squad, a Stryker Engineer Squad Vehicle (ESV), and a headquarters section.

This task organization provided the platoon with tremendous combat power. The platoon totaled three .50 caliber and two MK-19 remote weapon station (RWS) platforms, three dismountable M240B teams, accessibility to demolitions, eight AT4s, three Javelin anti-tank missile systems, and 26 dismountable Soldiers. Also, each Stryker carried the Force XXI Battle Command Brigade and Below (FBCB2) system, which gives near-real time positional navigational assistance and a digital means of communication. The platoon was outfitted with state-of-the art thermal optics for individual and crew-served weapons and roughly 75 percent of the Soldiers carried night vision optics.

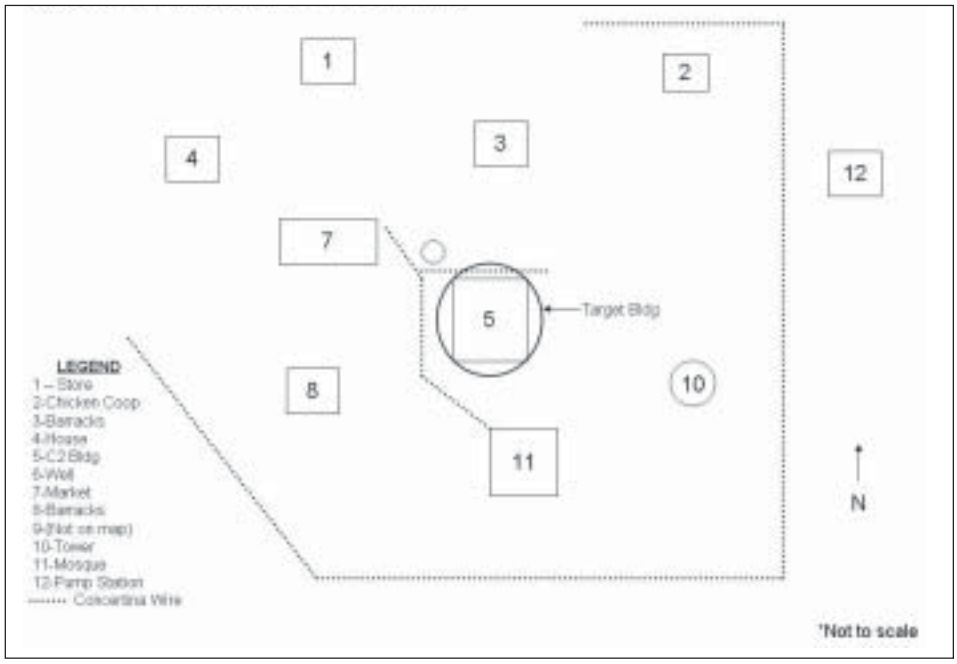
The platoon's original mission during the rotation was to provide forward operating base (FOB) security for the battalion FOB. The platoon was occupying various towers and guard positions throughout the FOB in a static manning rotation turning over every 12 to 18 hours. Upon receipt of the company warning order (WARNO) the platoon was relieved by elements of the headquarters and headquarters company (HHC). The relief facilitated the platoon and company leadership the necessary time to conduct the orders process and the MDMP.

PLANNING

The company was allotted ample amounts of time to conduct the initial planning and course of action development while still in the FOB. The timeline that was issued to the platoons was that there were up to 48 hours between the time the company left from the FOB to occupy the tactical assembly area (TAA) to the time of execution. This timeline was subject to change based off of the intelligence gathered by Special Operations Forces (SOF) surveillance and reconnaissance (SR) teams operating inside the objective (OBJ) area. The company commander conducted extensive parallel planning with both the SOF ground commander and his platoon leaders.

Estimated enemy disposition and composition on the objective, OBJ HOUND, was 20 enemy (OBJ was a suspected terrorist training camp that involved an estimated 8-10 cadre and 10-

Figure 1 - Objective HOUND (Merrill Village)



12 students) and 8-10 noncombatants. The noncombatants were believed to be located in the vicinity of the town mosque (Building 11). Enemy forces were armed with small arms, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), at least two technical vehicles, one 82mm mortar, and one SA-16. The objective building was a two-story, multi-room building with a front and rear courtyard protected by a wire obstacle and overwatched by fighting positions to the east. The enemy was projected to defend in place with possible counterattack from the east and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) along high-speed avenues of approach from the south.

The company concept called for a multi-phased execution with the intent to piecemeal the objective into smaller platoon objectives that would be seized sequentially. The company would proceed from the TAA, located approximately 10 kilometers to the north of the OBJ, to the dismount point/ objective rally point (ORP). From the ORP, the company would approach the OBJ from the west and establish platoon assault positions. Once in these assault positions, close air support (CAS) would drop a 2,000-pound inert (joint direct attack munition (JDAM) bomb on the target building and AH-64 Apaches would execute 30mm gun runs on the OBJ and the company mortars would fire isolation targets to the east of the objective area. Upon completion of the close air support (CAS) missions, the Supporting Effort 1 (SE1) platoon would clear buildings 4, 1, and 3. Once at Building 3, they would provide suppressive fires to facilitate the movement of the company SE2 platoon, which was to secure Building 8. When Building 8 was secured, the main effort (ME) platoon would move from its assault position to the southwest of the OBJ and clear Building 5. When the platoons had secured their buildings and oriented their fires eastward, the company commander was to call forward the vehicles from a lager point to the south of the OBJ and the ICVs were to augment the security perimeter inside the OBJ and place their fires to the east, too. Once the objective was secured, the company commander would call forward units of the INA to "rescue" the noncombatants from the mosque. Iraqi media crews were on hand to provide video coverage of the event. An aspect of the task force endstate was to encourage positive public support of coalition efforts and assist in the legitimization of Iraqi forces. Upon completion of the "rescue" of the noncombatants, the INA forces were to withdraw followed by the company, mounted in reverse order of movement onto the OBJ.

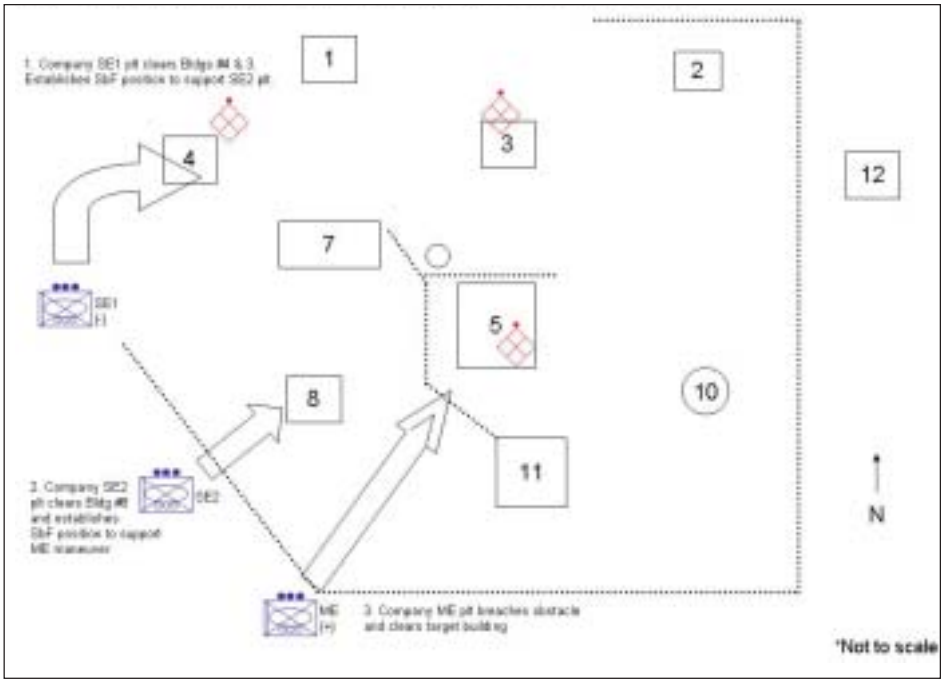


Figure 2 - Company Concept with Templated Enemy Positions

COMPANY CONCEPT WITH TEMPLATED ENEMY POSITIONS

The platoon concept was centered on a top-down approach to clearing the target building. From the dismount point, the platoon would proceed to its assault position, and the vehicles would move to a larger area to the south of the OBJ to provide mounted direct fire support if necessary and standby for a mounted extraction. From the assault position, the platoon would fire three AT4s into the target building: one into the main gate, one into the second story entrance way and one into the left corner of the front courtyard wall. This was the primary method of breach for the platoon. The AT4 shot at the gate was intended to destroy any obstacles blocking the entrance through the gate. The AT4 shots to the second floor entrance way and left corner of the front courtyard wall were projected to destroy or disrupt any enemy forces using them as an ambush position on any friendly forces entering the target building. The ME (3rd Rifle – CLEAR) squad was to be second in the order of approach to the target building. Once at the target building, the squad would stack to the right side of the building and allow the SE1 (2nd Rifle – BREACH) to establish a breach. This breach was focused on reducing any wire that was blocking the gate. Intelligence provided indicated that there was at least one strand of concertina wire surrounding the target building. Primary method of breach was to lay a collapsible stretcher across the wire or utilize wire cutters, if necessary. An explosive breach consisting of bangalores and flex-linear charges was considered, but the safety requirements would have caused too much risk to the Soldiers conducting the breach (Soldiers would have been exposed to fires from the east while they waited for the fuse to ignite the demolitions). Once the breach was established, the ME squad would proceed up to the second floor and secure the top floor. The SE1 squad would be the first squad to approach the target building. They were tasked with breaching the compound wall gate and clearing the ground floor. The SE2 (Engineers – CLEAR /DESTROY) squad was to follow the SE1 and clear the rear courtyard and be prepared to destroy all weapons found on the OBJ or conduct an explosive breach of the compound wall should the primary means of breach fail. The final squad to enter the target building was the SE3 squad (Weapons – SUPPRESS) and they were to proceed to the second floor and orient their fires to the northeast and southeast.

Due to the extensive amount of intelligence that was provided to the company, the platoon erected a "glass house" of the target building and began conducting rehearsals and war-gaming various contingencies. Rehearsals and contingency plans conducted were:

- ✔ React to contact (mounted and dismounted);
- ✔ React to IED;
- ✔ Enter building/clear room;
- ✔ React to ambush (mounted and dismounted);
- ✔ Conduct casualty evacuation (CASEVAC/mounted and dismounted),
- ✔ Breach a wire and mine obstacle,
- ✔ Rollover and fire drills,
- ✔ Fallout drills,
- ✔ Alternate task execution,
- ✔ Actions on OBJ and consolidation and reorganization,
- ✔ Withdrawal from OBJ, and
- ✔ Execute hasty attack.

These rehearsals were executed with the maximum number of personnel involved. Minimal dismounted perimeter security was established for three reasons:

1) The ICVs provided adequate perimeter security by scanning with the RWS,

2) Facilitate maximum Soldier involvement to ensure that each Soldier was aware of all tasks that needed to be accomplished, and

3) INA forces were also part of the security plan and they in conjunction with the ODA teams performed random mounted patrols in our sector.

By allowing maximum Soldier participation in the rehearsals, each Soldier knew not only his assigned task, but also the Soldier to his right, left, and other squads' missions. Each squad could perform any of the three doctrinal tasks assigned — breach, suppress, and clear — with equal proficiency. This single event was the greatest factor to the success of the platoon. Circumstances that evolved during the execution forced the platoon to execute the mission in a way that was not originally intended.

In conjunction with the platoon rehearsals, company-level rock drills, map rehearsals, walk-throughs, and leader synchronization huddles were also held. Many of these events included leadership from squad leaders, vehicle commanders, and up. These large-scale rehearsals allowed for each independent maneuver element to solidly understand the other's segment of the company plan. Also, task force rehearsals included hasty and deliberate attack, withdrawal plans, CASEVAC plans, and indirect fire plans.

Platoon timeline:

21 MAR 04
1300 – Begin tips & scales
1500 – Platoon OPORD issued
1600 – Company leader rehearsal
1800 – Squad rehearsals
2200 – NLT vehicles complete inspection
1900-2359 – Squad PCI / PCC

22 MAR 04
0500 – First call
0600 – Personal hygiene complete
0800 – C-17 loading begins
1100 – C-130 loading begins
2200 – NLT company staged in AA

23 MAR 04
0700-1100 – Squad rehearsals & PCC /PCI
1100-1500 – Platoon rehearsals
1500-1900 – Company rehearsals

24 MAR 04
(T) Leader's recon & insert sniper teams
2330 – LD from TAA for ORP

25 MAR 04
0200 – NLT set in ORP
0230 – Initiate movement to assault positions
0430 – NLT set in assault positions
0500 – NLT execution of raid

SEIZURE OF 2ND FLOOR & STRYKER POSITIONS

The digitized equipment available to the SBCT platoon can greatly assist the planning of the leadership. Digital route and fire support overlays, friendly maneuver graphics, and enemy templates can all be created on a single FBCB2 and distributed to any number of other systems selected. Also, an order can be written either in the preformatted programs organic to the system or typed out on a free-text message (very similar to a basic word processor) and be instantaneously transmitted to all elements. This outlines in black and white what each subordinate element is required to do. This capability also allows the platoon leader to place information that would consume large amounts of time to distribute to squad leaders very quickly and effectively (i.e., detain/search/protect lists, enemy/friendly situations, etc.). These capabilities greatly increase the situational awareness (SA) of the Soldiers in the platoon.

In order for the platoon to move into the area of operations (AO), an intra-theater air movement was replicated. The platoon had designated times to conduct all of the preparations that would be required for a real air movement. The planning for this move was conducted by the battalion staff, which freed the company from the constraints of planning such an intricate move. Upon arrival in the AO, the task force was notified that execution of the mission was moved forward 24 hours.

EXECUTION

Once all rehearsals and final PCCs and PCIs were conducted, the platoon formed up and occupied their position in the company march order (last in the order of march). As with all operations, the execution never goes down the way it was planned. There is a saying that goes "fight the fight and not the plan." Operations, enemy actions, and human error creates friction. This friction can cause well-planned operations to sometimes come unglued. To counter this, plans should be flexible enough to allow for change and fragmentary orders (FRAGO). Also, rehearsals and good communication (voice and dissemination of information) will help leaders get the mission focused again.

During the movement, there were breaks in contact. These breaks in contact were due to a variety of reasons, including lack of dissemination of the route (no strip maps were issued), lack of hard copy maps available to squad leaders, and FBCB2 navigational failures (Navigational assistance relies on GPS, and weather or overhead cover can skew accuracy. As with any other system, the FBCB2 needs a redundant back-up, in this case, hard copy maps would have been the best, but there was an extremely limited number of maps of the area for the company to use). These breaks resulted in the separation of vehicles within the main body, specifically two elements of the platoon (one M240B gun team and one

rifle squad). One of the initial phases of the raid was for the INA forces, along with their ODA teams, to occupy blocking positions to the south of the OBJ. These positions were compromised while the company was executing its movement, and the ground maneuver commander issued the codeword to initiate the hasty attack. This meant that the company would not proceed to the initial dismount point one kilometer to the southwest of the OBJ but would proceed to an alternate dismount point about 300m to the southeast of the OBJ.

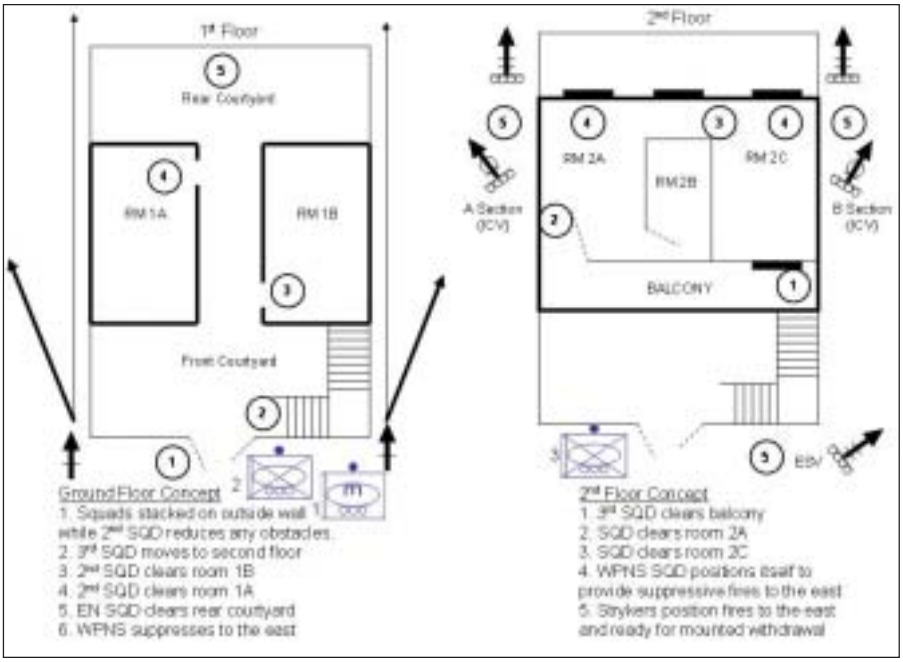


Figure 3 - ME Platoon's Concept for Clearing of Bldg 5

Once at the dismount point, the platoon dismounted and formed up into approach march formation minus the rifle squad and gun team, and the remaining vehicles withdrew to the vehicle lager area. At the company release point, the SE1 and SE2 platoons moved to secure their respective objectives, and the ME platoon moved to its hasty assault position. Due to the initiation of the hasty attack, the platoon was forced to approach the OBJ from the southeast rather than the southwest. As the platoon moved towards its assault position, it became apparent that the wire obstacle surrounding the target building was more elaborate (triple strand concertina rather than single strand) which was also pushed out 30m from the courtyard wall. At this point, the decision was made to conduct a mechanical breach. The explosive breach (bangalore torpedoes) was not selected due to the fact that platoons were heavily engaged and inside the minimum safe distance (600m). This was not a viable option because the platoons were exposed and could not withdraw outside the MSD.

By utilizing the FBCB2, one of the two separated ICVs linked up with the company at the dismount point and dismounted one M240B team. This gun team, along with other platoon elements, linked up with the platoon main body so the platoon was now short only one squad, the breach squad (SE1 – 2nd Rifle). The ME squad had the means to conduct a mechanical breach and had rehearsed the drill numerous times. Roughly 75m from the courtyard entry gate, the platoon halted and prepared two AT4s to fire, one at the gate itself and the other at the second floor entrance way. The ME squad sent forward its breach element and began the breach. The breach element began to encounter difficulties with the mechanical execution so a manual (body) breach was performed, for which the Soldier would later receive the JRTC Hero of the Battle Award. Once the breach was established, the ME squad flowed through and began clearing the second floor. The SE2 (Engineers) squad executed one of its alternate missions of clearing the entire ground floor and courtyards. The ME squad received two casualties (one KIA and one WIA) as they cleared the top floor of the target building. Weapons squad followed suit and set the M240B gun teams in windows oriented to the northeast and southeast to suppress any possible enemy counterattacks. Located within the target building were six enemy soldiers (five KIA and one WIA) and a substantial weapons cache consisting of SA-17s, RPGs, small arms ammunition, and demolition charges. There were no civilians located on the OBJ and all technical vehicles templated to be on the OBJ had already moved south and were harassing the INA blocking positions.

During the harassment (both direct fire and indirect fire) of the INA blocking positions, the second separated ICV linked up with the company first sergeant at the company/task force casualty collection point (CCP) and began to combat the enemy forces probing the CCP. That squad assisted in providing security and litter teams for the CASEVAC of the company casualties off of the objective. At this time, the company XO moved the company vehicles to the CCP to counter the enemy forces threatening the CCP. While the platoon's ICVs were engaging enemy dismounted forces in the woodline, an insurgent dismounted force closed with the Strykers and were able to destroy one of the platoon's five Strykers (an ICV) with a satchel charge. This is an inherent risk with mounted vehicle operations – they are extremely vulnerable to close dismounted enemy personnel.

CONSOLIDATION AND REORGANIZATION

Once inside the target building with a "cleared" status declared, establishment of the platoon CCP and detailed searches of the enemy on the OBJ commenced. Upon completion of the searches, all enemy weapons and ammunition (a substantial amount) were consolidated in the rear courtyard along with other weapons and ammunition found throughout the objective area (i.e. an 82mm mortar and accompanying rounds). With the commander seeing the amount of cached equipment that was originally decided to be removed from the objective, the decision was made to destroy the caches and equipment in place. This was also due to the fact that several mines/IEDs were placed along the high-speed avenues of approach leading into the objective area and vehicles could not move within 300m of the OBJ.

During the platoon's consolidation and reorganization, a fire team-sized element counterattacked from the east and the M240B

gun teams destroyed them before they could place accurate direct fires against any friendly forces. No INA forces approached the OBJ due to the fact that all INA forces were occupied with the insurgent mounted and dismounted threat located in the vicinity of their blocking positions in the south. Once consolidation of enemy arms and ammunition was complete and demolition charges prepared, the platoon began a dismounted withdrawal to the vehicles, located roughly 400m from the target building to the southeast. The platoon linked up with the vehicles and the remainder of the company and proceeded to the task force link-up rally point located three km to the southeast. The squad that was assisting with CASEVAC completed its mission at hand and rejoined the platoon. Once the company completed consolidation, it began mounted exfiltration of the AOR to the south. From this point, the platoon would posture itself to conduct follow-on operations and possibly return via ground or air movement to the battalion sector and FOB.

LESSONS LEARNED

△ **The route is important, too**. The route was the only aspect of the plan that was not well rehearsed or well disseminated. The route was discussed in depth and rehearsed at the company and task force level, but not at the platoon level. Because of this, breaks in contact and route confusion provided unnecessary friction to mission accomplishment. The route to the OBJ is just as important as the actions on rehearsal. If you cannot get to your objective, how can you accomplish your mission? The FBCB2 is a tremendous tool to assist in navigation and communication between SBCT units, but it is only a tool. Nothing can replace a map and compass. At a minimum, strip maps identifying key terrain features (an intersection, towers, turns, etc.) and checkpoints should have been distributed to each vehicle commander/squad leader in the absence of hard copy maps. Also, a route reconnaissance could have been conducted by a representative of each element to ensure that the route to the target area was known.

△ **Slow is smooth and smooth is fast.** Once on the OBJ, searches of the enemy personnel and weapon caches were executed haphazardly. These searches were conducted with speed and quickness, and Soldiers were neglecting to identify any possible booby traps and compromising the security of their buddies and themselves by trying to rush through their actions. Nothing should override the Soldier's need to secure themselves and their fellow Soldiers. Recent evidence has come to light that insurgents in Iraq have been booby-trapping weapons and equipment to cause injury to coalition Soldiers as they search or handle confiscated equipment.

Secondly, speed equals security in a MOUT fight, but not to the point that steps in a process are ignored or altered. Those steps are there to ensure that Soldiers execute fundamental actions with minimum amount of thought. In the attack, upon approaching the objective building, the platoon encountered a wire obstacle 30m from the point of entry. Upon reaching this obstacle, a breach that did not adhere to principles of breaching (suppress, obscure, secure, reduce) was conducted which resulted in the loss of one Soldier to enemy direct fire. Again, this is attributed to the emphasis placed on speed by the platoon leadership. The leadership should have set the conditions for a more successful breach by setting the conditions, throwing smoke to obscure the entire breach, and suppressing the target building with fires from both the platoon and overwatching elements (other platoons and the company / battalion sniper teams).

△ **Rehearse actions on the**

objective. As stated before, the amount of time dedicated to rehearsals and contingency plans was the largest factor that contributed to the success of the platoon on the objective. Soldiers were clear on what was expected and required of them during the mission. Whenever possible, rehearsals should be conducted at the platoon level and higher and involve as many personnel as possible to clarify any questions that any Soldier or leader may have.

△ **Set the conditions for the fight.** Prior to the execution of the raid, both Air Force and Army attack aviation were to prepare the objective with CAS. There was a 2,000-pound JDAM inert bomb that was to be dropped on the target building, and AH-64 Apache 30mm cannon gun runs were to be initiated to destroy enemy on and around the objective (technicals and reports of light armored vehicles operating around the periphery of the objective area prior to the compromise of the INA blocking positions. The armored threat ended up being false). When the hasty attack was initiated, the CAS had not yet come on station. Therefore, all CAS scheduled to hit the OBJ was canceled and shifted to an overwatch role to the southeast. In retrospect there was ample time to allow the CAS to accomplish their assigned tasks and not endanger any friendly forces during the execution of the hasty attack. Although the authority to abort any CAS missions was beyond the scope of a platoon leader, the cancellation of the JDAM mission was very relevant to the execution of the platoon's mission.

△ **Deliberate versus hasty attack.** The mission originally was designed as a raid which evolved into somewhat of a deliberate attack. During the movement from the TAA to the ORP, the task force supporting effort was compromised and the Task Force Commander launched the hasty attack contingency plan. Looking back, there was still ample time to maneuver the task force main effort (the SBCT Rifle Company, plus attachments) into position to execute its attack. The element of total surprise was lost, however, but the resources available for a deliberate attack were lost, these being the Strykers, their RWS (maximum effective range approximately 2,500m), and the CAS.

△ **Vehicle security.** As mentioned previously, the platoon lost a vehicle to dismounted insurgents and a satchel charge. As with all vehicles, there are blind spots around the vehicle that the crew members can not see from inside the vehicle. One technique to combat this shortfall is to ensure that all vehicles utilize the wingman concept, in which each vehicle is paired with another vehicle to provide mutually supporting roles. Another technique is to have dismounted security around the vehicles. When this technique is used, communication between the dismounted Soldiers and the mounted vehicle crew is essential to effective security. Vehicle security is always necessary, regardless of the mission, but the type of security will be based on METT-TC.

The biggest key to success for this mission at the platoon level was the rehearsals conducted. In my experience you can never do enough rehearsals. Someone once told me the saying, "I hear — I forget; I see — I remember; I do — I understand." Rehearsals at a minimum should be conducted as a brief back and should involve as many Soldiers as possible. I have found most of my success by maximizing the time for squad leaders to conduct their rehearsals. Also, the amount of time given to the platoon by the company commander is also important. Platoon leaders need to fight hard to give their Soldiers the time they need to properly prepare for an upcoming mission. Another contributor to mission success was the amount of detailed intelligence provided to the company. Floor plans and layout of the target building along with the objective area were very exact and facilitated accurate rehearsals.

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One aspect of the SBCT concept is situational awareness (SA). SA is accomplished through many systems within the Stryker brigades. The FBCB2 is probably the keynote system of the SBCTs. Overlays and orders can be developed on a single or multiple computer and disseminated to every squad-sized element in the unit. Also, spotted enemy forces and key activities (ambush or IED for example) can be populated on every FBCB2 in the brigade by a single element experiencing those activities first hand, allowing advance warning of danger areas. Also, frequency-hopping radios (AN/PRC-148 MBITR) are pushed to the squad level, which provides that squad leader with a readily accessible resource to both send and receive important information. SBCT assets such as UAVs, Prophet (a signals intercept radar), and company-level snipers all enhance a unit's SA by providing current intelligence to both the ground commander and the Soldier in the foxhole.

This mission demonstrated that today's military needs to be prepared to conduct a variety of missions and tasks. Everything from a combat patrol to distribution of humanitarian aid may be encountered on a mission. The mission was originally planned to incorporate stability and support operations (SASO) by "rescuing" the noncombatants from the mosque. Upon reaching the mosque, the noncombatants were not there and this mission became a purely direct action mission. The mission faced by this platoon is typical to what units do in their participation of a MRX in preparation for OIF. The bottom line is that Soldiers must be prepared to execute a variety of tasks and the best way to ensure that is to have solid rehearsals and easily applied SOPs. This reduces the amount of leader input required for unit actions. In today's Army, every Soldier is being faced with circumstances that their decision will not only affect them and their unit, but the entire scope of operations in their AOR. Today's Soldier is more agile and adaptive than ever and the SBCT is a place that will continue to develop those skills.

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