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WHAT I WOULD HAVE DONE BETTER AS A COMMANDER IN COMBAT

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The purpose of this article is to highlight four areas where I wish I could have done better as a commander in combat. These four areas are where my lack of focus hindered my company's ability to accomplish its mission in the most efficient and lethal manner. This article is in no way a reflection on the men of my company or my battalion. I had the distinct privilege of commanding and working with an incredible team of Soldiers, NCOs, and officers who proved their mettle time and time again in combat.

After leaving command, I had a unique opportunity to reexamine some of the problems that I faced in combat from a different point of view:

- 1) I stayed in touch with the unit that replaced us; and
- 2) I returned to Afghanistan twice where I was able to observe a different unit deal with the problems that I had faced.

Here is what I learned:

Commanders need to empower and train junior leaders to make quick, life-or-death decisions on their own.

How we trained at home station

My company had a great opportunity to train prior to our deployment to Afghanistan. We truly implemented the crawl-walk-run method in our training from simple marksmanship through platoon situational training exercises (STXs) and live-fire exercises (LFXs). However, all these events focused on reacting to the enemy's actions. All the live fires began with the pneumatic machine gun firing and the little green "Ivan" popping up. The squads were experts at reacting to contact. But, what about initiating contact? What about the myriad of different decisions that a junior leader has to make under stress in combat? I realized later that I had not developed scenarios that forced my junior leaders to make tough decisions on the spot, without calling higher for guidance.

Results in Combat

One of the squads, along with the platoon sergeant (PSG), was conducting a night ambush. On this particular night, four Afghans were walking in a single file on a trail, and two of them had AK-47s. The team leader (TL) spotted them and called the squad leader (SL) who called the PSG. Now, the PSG was forced to make a quick decision, and he wasn't the one with eyes on the target. The end result was that the four Afghans walked away without any action from the squad. Whether they were combatants or not is not the issue. The issue is that the SL had not been trained and empowered to make this type of quick decision.

Doing something would have been better than nothing. After the incident, the first sergeant and I preached this again and again



in the fire base, but it was too late. Some of our junior leaders were trained to react instead of initiate contact, and it was a hard habit to break.

To correct this, we set up a team LFX lane. The teams began the lane in a wadi where they could not see up the hill. The platoon leaders (PLs) briefed each team that two anti-coalition militants (ACMs) had been spotted up the hill wearing chest racks, carrying AK-47s and were planting a mine in the road. The PLs then set up two E-type silhouettes with chest racks and AK-47s. The teams then loaded into a cargo HMMWV and started up the hill. The difference in the teams was remarkable. One team crested the hill and immediately took action. The SAW gunner, with no prodding from his team leader, opened fire and cut down both targets. The team then cleared the enemy and secured the area.

Other teams crested the hill, looked at the obvious enemy, dismounted, formed a wedge, and moved toward the enemy waiting for the proverbial “pneumatic gun” to go off so they could launch into their battle drill. It was almost unbearable to watch.

How to fix the problem

Mind-set

Often, leaders try to mitigate this problem by adding layers of command and control. This is the wrong answer. No matter how many leaders were on a patrol, it was always the newest private or the youngest team leader that saw the enemy first. We must trust our team leaders and squad leaders and empower them to make decisions.

Training

Training should include the repetition and constant drilling that builds confidence and forms a team.

However, training scenarios must put junior leaders in stressful situations where they must make split-second, life-or-death decisions without calling higher. The key to making the right decision quickly is to know the **commander’s intent**. If junior leaders internalize the commander’s intent, they will make the right decision. Additionally, they must know that they have the trust and confidence of their commander to make these important decisions on their own. A big part of this is



Photo by Specialist Teddy Wade

knowing that the commander will underwrite their mistakes. Once our junior leaders have internalized the commander's intent and know they have the commander's confidence, they will make the right decision and respond expeditiously. Foster an environment in your company where junior leaders are empowered to make decisions and even to make mistakes. Don't build a zero-defect mentality.

Commanders personally need to be involved in the gathering and processing of intelligence to focus the company's efforts.

How we trained at home station

Every training mission prior to our deployment, we were given a specific target by battalion and told to conduct a raid, deliberate attack, ambush, etc. Battalion gathered and processed the intelligence and passed us a target packet to facilitate our planning.

Results in Combat

My company arrived at our firebase, and we looked at each other and said "Well, what do we do? Where is the enemy?" We rarely had a specific target to strike, and battalion was too far away to help gather intelligence. My response to this was to conduct extremely aggressive patrolling in hopes of finding the enemy. Day and night we launched squad-sized patrols to conduct ambushes and movements to contact. However, of the numerous firefights we were in, we never initiated contact. We were always reacting to the enemy. I believe our heavy patrolling did not help us find the enemy; instead it just attracted the enemy to us. They set the operational conditions and chose when and where to engage us.

How to fix the problem

Deliberate Targeting Process

I had the opportunity to read AARs from other units who fought in Afghanistan and Iraq, and many leaders shared my frustration over the inability to find the enemy. Additionally, I have spoken with many current company commanders and asked them about the targeting process in their companies. Unfortunately, many replied, "We just patrolled the streets and did vehicle checkpoints" or "Battalion didn't give us any targets, so we just drove around looking for action." So, how does a commander target an enemy that he cannot see? The answer is to identify an insurgent leader in the area, and target this enemy leader and his network.

This simple targeting method gives a specific purpose to your company's efforts. Now, instead of conducting a "presence patrol," you are looking for elements of the targeted network. All a company needs to begin targeting this network is one lead on a low-level facilitator in the network.

As the company conducts more raids, the company commander and intelligence representative can build a line-and-block chart and association matrix outlining the ACM network. They can compile intelligence on how Achmed's network conducts operations. With every raid and capture, they continue to build and fill in details on Achmed's network.

Coordinate with Local Government

As a commander, I wanted little to do with meetings. My men would escort the S2, Civil Affairs, and Special Forces Soldiers to the meetings, but I would wait outside. I missed a valuable opportunity to gain potential targets and better accomplish my mission.

Finding the right local leader to sponsor is a difficult task. It is hard to judge who is an honest supporter of the government of

Afghanistan. Much time and analysis must go into this choice. A commander does not want to end up supporting one tribal leader against another. After six months, my battalion found the right local leader. We developed a great relationship with him and his men. This resulted in added security for our Soldiers and better targeting of the enemy. These local leaders know who the ACMs are, and once you gain their trust, they will tell you. This process builds stability and sets the groundwork for good local leaders to govern the area and secure themselves.

Study Military Sources

Throughout history, commanders have dealt with the same issues that we are facing today. There are no original ideas on how to best find, fix, and finish the enemy in an insurgency. Books can give you good ideas or at least get you thinking in new ways. I read *The Bear Trap* with my lieutenants prior to the deployment. We discussed this chapter by chapter every morning before PT. However, we stopped doing this overseas. We got so busy that we did not make time to keep reading books that would help us generate fresh thinking. We had the time to do this while deployed, and I am confident that a rigorous reading program would help generate new ideas on how to target the enemy.

Crosstalk With Other Leaders

All the leaders in country (sister company commanders/SF team leaders/OGA employees) are facing the same problems you are facing. Crosstalking with these leaders will generate new and different ideas on how to find/fix/finish the enemy in your area. Many leaders (including me) do not want to drop our guard and ask others to share their ideas because it might sound like we need help. However, we owe it to our Soldiers to find the best way to defeat the enemy, even if it means swallowing our pride.

Commanders need to take time to think.

How we trained at home station

Throughout my career, I have endured images in books and movies of the officer hiding in the firebase while his men are fighting and dying outside the wire. Even prior to becoming a cadet, when I read the book *Platoon Leader*, I swore that I would not lead like this. "Lead by Example!" and "Lead from the Front!" are phrases that I absorbed throughout my time in the Army.

With these thoughts in my head, I made sure I was at every range and every training event. Although the CDR/ISG's presence at a range may raise the level of training that is occurring, it can also stifle the initiative and decision-making of junior leaders (refer to point #1).

Results in Combat

Throughout my time in Afghanistan, I was constantly on patrol with my squads and platoons. Often, I provided an unneeded level of C2. The times when I was not on patrol, my junior leaders did an incredible job. They were very aggressive and used all assets including indirect fire and close air support to destroy the enemy. I believe I had the respect of the men because I did not hide in the firebase, but I never built in time for me to reflect on how to better accomplish the mission or on how to win in our area. If I had not gone out so much, I might have solved some of these problems overseas instead of writing about them now.

How to fix the problem

I am not advocating commanding from behind a desk or hiding in the firebase. However, this is a thinking-man's war. The enemy

is constantly improving and changing. Commanders must build in time and institute mechanisms to allow themselves to think about what they can do to better find/fix/finish the enemy.

Some of these mechanisms are as follows:

Read!

Block time on your calendar to meet with a PSG/PL/SL to just talk and brainstorm about better ways to accomplish the mission.

Conduct PT with the 1SG where you focus on bettering your company.

Conduct a regular Ops/Intel Assessment. During this meeting, focus on what you are currently doing, what the enemy is doing, what should you be doing to win in 30 days, six months, five years. It is amazing when you lay this out how ideas on how to focus your company will jump out at you.

Leaders and units need to pursue the enemy relentlessly.

Every time the ACMs in Afghanistan tried to stand and fight against U.S. forces they suffered withering defeats. Because of this, ACMs usually use hit-and-run tactics. Throughout my time in Afghanistan, the enemy never engaged my company unless they fired from dominant terrain and had a planned exfil route. After a “mad minute,” the enemy broke contact with amazing speed and blended into the population or the countryside.

How we trained at home station

In most of our home station LFXs and simunitions training, we fought an enemy that stayed on a fixed target. This allowed us to quickly complete our battle drill. Although you need to be prepared for a hardened enemy, rarely does the enemy stay and fight to the death.

Results in Combat

During our firefights early in the deployment, we would quickly gain fire superiority over the enemy, but then lose contact as the enemy ran away. During one engagement, the squad in contact returned fire, the mortars fired in handheld mode, and I sent two mounted elements in opposite directions. One of the mounted elements captured the ACMs six kilometers from the engagement site. It was amazing how much ground the ACMs had covered in such a short time.

How to fix the problem

The obvious fix is to not get ambushed in the first place. A good terrain analysis will quickly uncover the best ambush spots. Stop and clear these potential ambush spots with as many assets as you can before you move through them. However, when you are ambushed, stay in pursuit of the enemy. Don't lose patience. One of the frustrating facts of fighting in Afghanistan is that the enemy rarely shows himself. Although it is not ideal, after an ambush you have a good lead on the enemy. Do not turn back to the firebase until you have exhausted every resource to regain contact. Leaders must know what indirect fire targets they

can call at all times, and they must know what routes they can send different elements on to prevent enemy exfil. Throughout the chase, leaders must maintain command and control of these elements who are often moving in many directions. Also, leaders must be patient. Give your units time to regain contact.

One of the great hindrances to staying after the fight occurs after sustaining friendly casualties. As leaders, we pay lip service to eliminating the threat prior to attending to our casualties. When we see the men we love injured, it is very hard to focus our attention on killing the enemy. Stay focused on the enemy, and don't let your mission turn into a casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) drill.

When I returned to Afghanistan as a staff officer, I got to listen to a battle on the radio that demonstrated how to stay after the fight. An ACM squad (+) ambushed a small patrol near the Pakistan border. The Soldiers fought back and killed four ACMs, but they sustained multiple casualties. I'll never forget the words of the patrol leader over the radio, “OK men, don't let this turn into a CASEVAC drill, continue to focus on killing the enemy.” The patrol then moved all the way to the Pakistan border and met with the Pakistan Army border guards. The patrol stayed all day and reengaged the enemy that night.

Conclusion

As I reflected on my time in command, I knew that I could have done better in the four areas/principles that I have outlined in this article. However, there were many times that the great leaders in my company accomplished one or more of these principles and destroyed the enemy.

For commanders heading to combat, you have great challenges ahead of you. You are facing a life-and-death chess match, and your company will be looking to you for the answers. I hope that these four principles will help you better find/fix/finish the enemy while continuing to build Iraq and/or Afghanistan into solid nations.

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Soldiers prepare to clear a hilltop in support of an operation in Afghanistan.