

SETTING THE CONDITIONS FOR DECISIVE ENGAGEMENTS IN BUHRIZ

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Doctrine requires human judgment when applied to a specific situation. In choosing a solution to a tactical problem, applicable laws and regulations, the mission, the laws of physics, human behavior, and logistic realities constrain the tactician, not standardized techniques and procedures. The true test of the tactician's solution is not whether it uses the specific techniques or procedures contained in this manual, but whether the techniques and procedures used were appropriate to the situation.

— FM 3-90, *Tactics*

In January 2006 my company assumed responsibility for the southern half of Baqubah, the largest city in Iraq's Diyala Province (Figure 1). Our battalion was charged with preparing an Iraqi Army brigade to assume the security lead and for setting the conditions for provincial government control in Diyala. My company's mission was to disrupt a Sunni-based insurgency to give the Iraqi Police and Army space and time to develop capabilities and assume the security lead. As I deployed my company, my biggest challenge was in focusing our combat power into tactical operations against an asymmetric opponent in a decentralized fight.

The conventional Army is manned, equipped, and trained to rapidly find, fix, and destroy other conventional forces. When we find ourselves facing an enemy who can readily blend in to an opaque society, we are challenged to affect a decisive outcome. Because we cannot readily discriminate friend from foe in this environment, we look towards indigenous security forces to overcome this limitation. However, until those forces are adequately manned, trained, and equipped to do the job, we must intervene to provide them space and time to mature. It is in this period that discrete application of combat power against the enemy's vulnerabilities is critical.

We have been fighting a number of opposition groups in Iraq. While each has unique agendas and goals, they all appear to have at least one common operational goal, namely the premature exit



Figure 1

of U.S. forces from Iraq. This translates into a common set of tactics against coalition forces and leads to difficulty in modeling and predicting enemy activity in Iraq. However, an accurate accounting and analysis of both enemy and friendly patterns can lead to useful assumptions that allow us to shape operations that decisively attack the enemy's vulnerabilities.

My company consisted of two organic mechanized infantry platoons, the battalion mortar platoon, and one armor platoon with an engineer squad. We had M2 Bradley fighting vehicles and M1A1 Abrams main battle tanks. All platoons were also motorized with M1114 armored trucks and 25 to 30 Soldiers. We supplied two platoons a day to protect the force, and we fielded two platoons a day for offensive operations.

Our area of operation included the boroughs of Tahrir and Katoon and the village of Buhriz. Unlike Tahrir and Katoon, Buhriz is an independent municipality with its own mayor, city council, and police department. It also serves as the administrative seat for the Buhriz Nahia which extends many kilometers south. (The Nahia is an administrative district similar to the county in the U.S.) Buhriz, which is a largely conservative Sunni agriculture community, is generally poor. The people earn their living through the palm groves which produce dates, oranges, and other fruit and from grain raised on irrigated farmlands. There is no industry or service economy aside from small shops in the central market area. Major infrastructure such as roads, power, water, and sewer are poorer than in neighboring Baqubah.

The village is isolated geographically by a dense palm grove

and the Diyala River on the west, and by irrigated farmland on the east (Figure 2). A wide irrigation canal runs north-south and splits the village. East-west traffic is constricted to three bridges large enough to support vehicles and to a handful of pedestrian bridges. Within the village traffic is constricted to narrow, paved and gravel roads. A paved road runs the length of the village on the west side of the canal. Because of profuse irrigation canals, the village is accessible by only a few roads: the primary road in the north and the south, and by three improved gravel roads running to the east. Traffic is controlled by permanent checkpoints at the extreme north and south of the village, but internally is unregulated. Historically, the village had been a zone of support for various Sunni insurgent groups and the site of numerous firefights, engagements, and uprisings. Most notably was the downing of an American helicopter in 2004.

The Buhriz police were understrength and poorly trained. Barely capable of defending their station, they rarely patrolled the village. The checkpoints at the north and south of town were manned by officers from Baqubah traffic department and their guard mount constituted the only regular non-coalition patrols through town. The original police station had been attacked and completely destroyed in 2004, and the southernmost checkpoint was frequently attacked and on several occasions completely destroyed.

We were challenged to paint a coherent picture of the enemy in Buhriz. Solid intelligence on enemy activity there proved difficult to obtain. External reporting was at best vague and often wildly inaccurate and unverifiable. We inherited a robust human intelligence program from the previous unit; however, their vetting system was largely intuitive. While they were extremely proactive and detained many low-level terrorists and criminals, they had not accurately tied activity in Buhriz with a larger insurgency. Recurring reports from sources and contacts indicated that large groups of armed men massed after curfew to attack the Iraqi Police positions. Finally,

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the enemy routinely employed roadside bombs in Buhriz, but they were not as effective as in other areas in the province.

Several assumptions drove my tactical analysis. First, the enemy can afford a stalemate because time is on his side. He is here for the rest of his life, but we can't stay indefinitely. Our operational reach in Iraq is virtually equivalent to the amount of time our Nation will keep us there. No other factor limits us to the extent of this great unknown. History, however, guarantees that two things will shorten this reach: unacceptable U.S. casualties and abuse of U.S. firepower. Because of this, effective attacks are more valuable for the enemy than us and ineffective or inaccurate attacks are more prejudicial to us than the enemy. The details of every American casualty and every botched operation are published in every major American newspaper, whereas most enemy die anonymously and enemy attacks with no effects are underreported even by us. The result significantly limits the amount of risk

we are willing to take, and it limits the available kinetic options at our disposal while the enemy is relatively unfettered.

Marginalizing him from the society he hides amongst is the surest route to victory. This entails building and protecting a number of complementary effects within that society. In this sense fighting the enemy is only necessary when he threatens our effects. We do not necessarily have to destroy him when it will suffice to merely disrupt him. This is a much easier tactical task.

My METT-TC (mission, enemy, terrain, troops, time, civilians) analysis resulted in four effects objectives that served as the framework for all company operations:

- Ø Fix and destroy the enemy when and where he exposes himself;
- Ø Develop Iraqi security forces (ISF) to assume basic security and law enforcement operations;
- Ø Foster local popular confidence in the ISF; and
- Ø Capture or kill enemy leadership and resources with combined operations.

I wanted to relate all company operations back to one or more of these objectives. Because of its independent nature and because of its reputation as a Sunni stronghold, I chose to focus my company's effort in Buhriz. While we continued to comprehend the enemy structure and target his leadership and support element, we nonetheless had to

confront the real danger posed by the reports of forces massing in Buhriz. To confirm or deny these reports we reconnoitered at night. The restrictive terrain favored our truck mobile platoons. During the day we trained the IPs and canvassed the neighborhoods to acquire solid intelligence.

Our first two direct fire engagements were in Buhriz (Figure 2). The first was from elevated positions near the central market area. There the enemy attacked with machine guns as the platoon crossed a bridge. The platoon immediately returned fire, and the platoon leader pushed across the bridge and south to escape. From there he was unable to flank the enemy with his trucks,

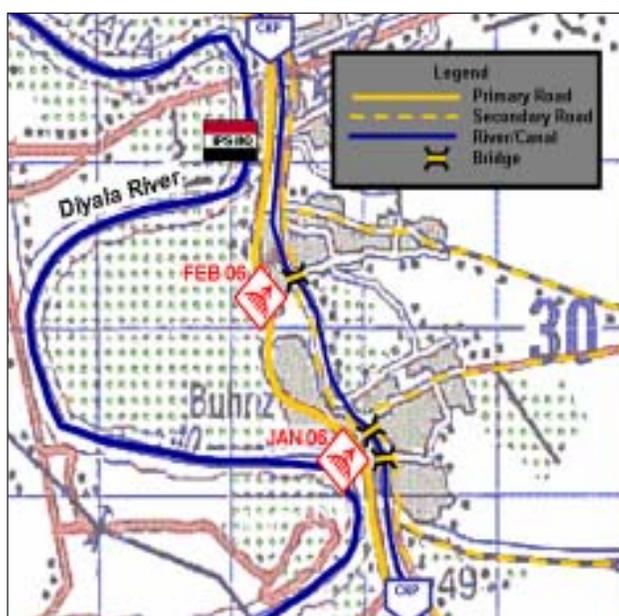


Figure 2

and by the time he led his squad afoot to maneuver on the enemy they broke contact and evaded capture.

Less than a month later, another platoon was moving north through the village when the enemy engaged it with a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) and machine-gun fire. The platoon attempted to maneuver on the enemy, but could not precisely locate the foe. Then the enemy detonated a roadside bomb near one of the trucks and engaged the platoon with a machine gun. The platoon leader attempted to fix the enemy and maneuver on it with his squads, but again the enemy was able to break contact.

Neither engagement proved decisive for us because the enemy combined an early warning system, with a disciplined engagement criteria and a calculated withdrawal plan that set the conditions in his favor. In both instances the enemy attacked four armored gun trucks at night. The enemy surprised the patrol with a direct fire attack, the platoon reacted aggressively and attempted to maneuver on the foe, but they evaded the platoon in the restrictive terrain and suffered no apparent damage.

To change the dynamics, the company before us had experimented with infiltrating snipers into key terrain, but they were unable to do so clandestinely. Because they couldn't gain surprise, the enemy refused to commit while the snipers were in place. While this suppressed enemy activity, the company could not sustain them for more than a few days and so achieved no long term effects. They also tried committing more firepower by

employing Bradley fighting vehicle sections. The Bradley's firepower advantage was offset by its lack of mobility in the narrow streets and along the irrigation canal. This neither decreased attacks nor netted decisive engagements because the enemy retained the initiative and decided when and how to engage.

I intended to decisively and consistently defeat the enemy at night on his own turf. This would neutralize the Sunni resistance threat, provide operating room for the beleaguered Iraqi police, and provide us with a positive IO message which we could leverage during the day. The challenge then was: how to circumvent his early warning and engagement criteria to get him to commit when we could decisively maneuver on and destroy him.

We began to model and track the enemy's intent and engagement criteria. Our assumptions from his patterns indicated:

Ø His intent was to set the conditions for attacks that he could leverage in a prolonged IO campaign. Complete success for him was a catastrophic kill that destroyed a coalition vehicle, killed Soldiers, or elicited a gross overreaction on our part. Direct participation with small arms was critical to his ethos and his IO campaign. Partial success was to periodically engage us without sustaining any losses. Failure for him was no attacks.

Ø The enemy concealed sentries in houses near all mounted approaches to Buhriz, and these sentries used cell phones to communicate with the ambush position.

Ø Because of its symbolic importance the enemy was more



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Soldiers react to a situation while on foot patrol in Buhriz in February 2007.

likely to attack Thursday or Friday night. (I never determined if the so called "Fight Nights" on Thursday and Friday were factual or anecdotal. A previous S2 suggested that over the course of a year no night or nights incur more attacks than others.)

Ø The enemy was more likely to attempt to attack us after a successful non-kinetic operation.

Ø He would use the same engagement areas consistently.

Ø The enemy would not engage patrols larger than a certain number of trucks.

As a result we implemented the following control measures:

Ø Our platoon's mission in Buhriz after curfew was: Destroy enemy forces massing in Buhriz to neutralize their influence and provide ISF freedom of maneuver.

Ø Frequent daytime reconnaissance of likely enemy engagement areas both mounted and on foot to familiarize the platoons with the area.

Ø From Sunday to Wednesday night we deployed another platoon to a nearby neighborhood, either to the north or to the south. While both patrols had separate missions, they stood ready to maneuver to and reinforce each other.

Ø Platoons deployed their rifle squads to clear through likely engagement areas on foot.

Ø Patrols would only engage confirmed enemy locations and observe suspected and likely locations. (The intent was to minimize collateral damage and avoid gross overreactions.)

Ø No platoon operations on Thursday and Friday nights or after non-kinetic operations. On these nights we coordinated one or two platoons and the company headquarters.

My concept for the company operations was to leverage our organic Raven small unmanned aerial vehicle (SUAV) in conjunction with two platoons maneuvering in Buhriz. The company headquarters with three trucks usually set in position first and we launched the Raven from the edge of town. Another platoon with four trucks would move to a blocking position. Then, as the third platoon of four trucks entered town, we would attempt to locate enemy ambush positions and maneuver our forces on them. After several

iterations we became proficient with our Raven SUAV, but we were unable to make contact with the enemy.

We concluded that either the enemy had relocated to another area or that the enemy's early warning was sophisticated enough to detect our intent. Occasional night attacks against the southernmost police checkpoint convinced us that he was still there, but the police could never convey where they came from or where they went after the attack. To defeat the early warning, we scaled down the operation to a single platoon with four trucks, and the headquarters with three trucks ready to maneuver and support. With each operation we pushed our Raven launch site further from town, and still we netted no significant contact. On the last night we ran this operation, our platoon in town found a roadside bomb, but no fighters. In retrospect I believe that it was virtually impossible to hide our signature from his sentries. Shortly after this patrol, we handed Buhriz over to another company, and the IA took the security lead in Baqubah. The battalion assumed operational overwatch and we focused on QRF support to the IA, select combined raids, and daytime non-kinetic operations.

While we never achieved my intent of decisively beating the enemy on his own turf at night, we nonetheless forced the enemy to failure through a careful analysis of his patterns and by leveraging his triggers against him. Never once did the enemy engage us when we were implementing this plan.

This allowed us to do several things. First and foremost it gave us immeasurable clout with the Buhriz police. As the weeks progressed, we worked closely together first teaching them marksmanship and then more complex tactical skills. As we proved the enemy was unwilling to challenge us, the police grew bolder. Soon they accompanied us on daytime patrols and a few select raids. At the same time, we promoted them with the people of Buhriz. By linking our success to them it increased the number of citizen contacts coming to the police with intelligence. This provided both a positive measure of popular confidence in the institution and a source of intelligence to drive future operations.

The other benefit was directly with the

people of Buhriz. Immediately they noticed our subtle approach and appreciated both our controlled operations and the general decrease in violence. This lent us credibility with the civil authorities, and allowed us to restart some sidetracked projects. Finally, our success gave the battalion commander leverage with the local Sheiks. In this sense he was able to negotiate several deals between the tribes to further our cause. In the end we managed to effectively transition the gap between coalition and Iraqi security lead in Buhriz through our discrete application of combat power and by carefully setting the conditions for decisive engagements.

Focusing your available combat power and setting the conditions for successful tactical operations takes a great deal of analysis and consideration. Remember to define the effects you want to generate in your area. Get all your assets into the fight, and fight for the esoteric ones. Some assets that I could have used included: signal detection equipment to confirm or deny the capability of his early warning capability, tactical UAVs to reinforce my limited reconnaissance stealth UAV, and an Iraqi army close target reconnaissance team to report clandestinely from inside town.

Your METT-TC analysis has to consider the enemy's intent and scheme of maneuver. Don't just look at what he might or can do. Consider what he needs to win, and look at how he loses. Assess his tactical triggers, and update your model with every engagement. Then you are ready to develop a scheme of maneuver to defeat him. As FM 3-90 reminds us:

Success in tactical problem solving results from the aggressive, intelligent, and decisive use of combat power in an environment of uncertainty, disorder, violence, and danger. A commander wins by being on the offense, initiating combat on his own terms — at a time and place of his choosing.

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