

OPERATION RIVER GATE

PARATROOPERS BATTLE INSURGENTS IN HAQLANIYAH

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As the executive officer for Alpha Company, 3rd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), I participated in the battle of Haqlaniyah which was part of Operation River Gate on October 4, 2005.

In 2005, the Al Anbar province was a hotbed for insurgency. Foreign fighters would use the “rat line” from Syria and work their way towards Baghdad. Terrorists would enter near Al Qaim, which bordered Syria, and travel from town to town down the Euphrates River Valley. There, they would stay with sympathizers; receive weapons and missions; and move down to Ramadi, Fallujah, Samarra, and eventually into Baghdad itself. Follow-on operations — Operation Steel Curtain and Operation Steel Curtain II — would continue to push west. Operation River Gate was a joint U.S. Army and Marine Corps offensive to sweep up the Euphrates River Valley, to include Haqlaniyah, Barwanah, and Haditha.

Alpha Company’s mission was to attack to clear multiple high value targets (HVTs). Once all HVTs were cleared, the platoons would set up combat outposts (COPs) and begin to dominate the area through aggressive patrolling. Our infiltration plan was to take 16 x 7-ton trucks that could hold about 15 Soldiers per load and get dropped off five kilometers to the south of Haqlaniyah. I was in one of the rear vehicles since I would travel with 3rd Platoon, Bravo Company, which was attached to our company for the mission. Upon disembarking the vehicle, I took up the rear of the company formation with 3/B. The plan was for both Alpha and Bravo companies to infil via trucks; Alpha Company would attack from the south, while Bravo Company would move in from the west. Charlie Company was still positioned at the airfields in Al Asad and would conduct an air assault infiltration

Photo courtesy of 2LT (now CPT) Richard Chudzik

into the town of Bani Dahir. Bani Dahir connected with Haqlaniyah from the north.

The plan was for three structures to be destroyed at the onset of the mission by fixed wing aircraft: a suspected IED factory, the Haqliniyah Hotel, and the bridge that connected Haqliniyah to the town across the Euphrates. The Haqliniyah Hotel was a threat because it was a three-story structure that had great observation and fields of fire not only along river street in the town, but also to the south. The bridge was to be bombed because it would be the only egress route for the enemy, and the IED factory was to be bombed to take out the insurgents’ most preferred weapon. On the command to move out, I began walking in the rear of the platoon formation with SFC David Stewart. Shortly after we

began moving, we saw an enormous explosion to the northwest. Contact had been made, but we were not sure by who. My night vision optics kept flaring out from the secondary explosions. "Man, we really nailed that factory; look at all that ammo go up," I thought. What I didn't know, and wouldn't find out until two days later, was that one of our anti-armor vehicles, with four paratroopers aboard, had hit an anti-tank mine while escorting Bravo Company into position. Three paratroopers were killed and the fourth suffered third degree burns over much of his body.

For the next two hours, we moved slowly and deliberately through the wadis of Haqlaniyah. None of us expected the wadi system to be as severe as it was to the south, and it slowed our movement incredibly. The company set in to an assault position at the last wadi system south of town. At 0200, the lead platoon picked up and began its infiltration in the town. Slowly, the other two platoons crossed Phase Line (PL) Japan, which was the southern road of the town that ran parallel to the city. "So far, so good," I thought, "we're at the southern part of the town and three platoons have already infilled without any problems." I looked at my watch, it was 0230; "my wife's picking up our son from school right now," I thought. I watched as the platoon ahead of us crossed PL Japan and entered the city. The 3rd Platoon had to go a different route than the rest of the company since our targets were down the hill to the east whereas the rest of the company had to move further north. We needed to go across PL Japan and proceed through an alley that paralleled the cemetery the rest of the company had used to our first target house.

First, 1st Squad went through the alleyway, then 2nd Squad, then 3rd Squad ... all going smoothly. As soon as I crossed the road and got into the alley, I heard a single M-4 begin blasting away. I immediately felt the concussion from two to three grenades going off. At that point, the whole alley way just lit up. The point man had turned the corner in the alley and saw four to six insurgents sleeping against a house with their AKs laying across their laps. He immediately raised his weapon and started engaging the enemy. When this happened, the insurgents on a parallel rooftop opened up with a PKM and a few AK-47s. Both the lead squad and insurgents took cover; the insurgents in a house, and the squad, along with the rest of the platoon, took cover behind six rock piles about four feet high that were stacked in the alleyway. The gunner on the rooftop continued to spray automatic weapons fire down the alley, as the troopers returned fire and threw grenades to push the enemy back inside the house. At this point, the entire platoon, minus the weapons squad, was on the northern side of PL Japan. The weapons squad leader ordered a gun section to begin suppressive fire on the house to our east from where we were receiving fire. The other section came behind us and set up south of the cemetery, slightly to our west, and began laying suppressive fire on the insurgents on the rooftop. To our northeast, another insurgent began to engage us with automatic weapons fire from another rooftop.

I was behind the rear rock pile with SFC Stewart and the platoon medic. I had our company NBC NCO as my RTO. I grabbed the radio from him and called my commander, CPT Nathan Molica, and gave him a situation report (SITREP) on our contact. The alley to our front contained all three line squads, so the rear element was not able to engage any of the insurgents due to fratricide concerns.

We pulled security to our west and east and listened to 2LT Richard Chudzik take control of his platoon and direct his squad leaders. To my right (east), there was a fence covered in palm leaves. While we were paying attention to the contact in front, we did not, at first, notice the rounds coming through the fence, but they quickly got our attention. An insurgent was coming out of a house on our east and would sporadically fire his AK-47 in vicinity of the fence where he thought we were. The problem with this was we did not know where he was and could not acquire a target; all we saw were the tracers from his weapon. However, the weapon squad section that was covering the east was able to fire at the insurgent and prevent him from firing on the fence line anymore.

All of this happened within a few minutes although it seemed like hours. During the initial contact and ensuing firefight, the forward observer (FO) for 3/B was attempting to call in a fire mission for mortars and immediate suppression. Our mortar section had received the mission and begun processing the data and waiting for clearance. We were denied mortar fire because the mortars were not registered, and we were in proximity to the target and in an urban area.

As the lead squad continued to fire at the enemy, the rear squad realized that there was a street light behind us on the phase line, illuminating our position. The squad took aim at the lamp and shot the light out. When the light was destroyed, the M240B machine guns increased their rate of fire to provide cover for the weapon squad leader, SSG Quentin Campbell, who was moving to my position. Once SSG Campbell reached my position, he fired an AT-4 rocket in the roof of the building where the automatic weapons fire was coming from. We were not sure if this worked, but for the next few minutes, there was no machine-gun fire coming at us from that section of the rooftop.



Author's photos

Soldiers with the mortar section clean the barrel of the company 60mm mortar in between fire missions.



Soldiers with the 3rd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, destroy an insurgent's vehicle during a mission in Haqlaniyah.

Around this time was when Charlie Company air assaulted into Bani Dahir. While we were engaged in the alleyway, the CH-46 and H-53s flew to the landing zones north of Haqlaniyah. The insurgent gunner to our northeast decided the aircraft were a more lucrative target and transitioned from firing at us to sweeping his automatic weapons fire to the north, without taking his finger off the trigger. I had not noticed much of the tracer fire from our firefight yet, but when I looked up and saw a huge line of tracers sweeping away from us and toward the helicopters, I was just shocked. How has no one been hit yet?

During the entire operation, an AC-130 Spectre gunship was on station, but during the initial engagements he was engaging other targets. After Charlie Company's air assault, the Spectre was allocated to our platoon. Our FO directed its fire on the house to the northeast, and once the Spectres' powerful IR flood light identified it, the rooftop absolutely erupted, and the enemy gunfire was silenced.

As soon as the machine gun to the northeast was silenced, the lead squad leader was hit by grenade shrapnel in his mouth. He was passed to the rear where his mouth was packed with gauze. At this time, 2LT Chudzik realized that his platoon was unable to maneuver forward on the enemy. Although his platoon had fire superiority, it did not command any terrain and would be assaulting into an intersection with two road directions and three alleyways. We began to peel the platoon back to the wadi across the road. The weapon section to the east pulled security as 3rd Squad, with the wounded squad leader and the other weapon section moved across the street. After we were in position, 2nd Squad moved over, and then 1st Squad moved out. Once we were on the

opposite side of the street, we called for a medical evacuation (MEDEVAC).

While we were pulling security waiting for the MEDEVAC, the insurgents went to a rooftop to our front and also tried to flank us from the east. Each time they attempted to flank, they were pushed back by the weapon section on the eastern side. There

was one gunman on the rooftop who was hiding behind the roof and just placing his AK-47 over the crest and firing. Around this time, I suspect the insurgents were policing their dead and wounded and pulling them out of the engagement area. While we were waiting for the MEDEVAC, we received an AH-1 Cobra gunship to support us with the gunman on the rooftop. The AH-1 had to do a few fly-by's before he could identify the target building. We fired a few 40mm M203 smoke rounds at the building in an effort to help the pilot identify the house. We also used the lasers from our PEQ-2s and PAQ-4 to help identify the house. Neither was too successful. Once the AH-1 could identify the target house due to the insurgent firing, he made two runs and fired one TOW missile each pass. The first TOW hit the left side of the building, and the second TOW missile hit the middle. After that, we received no more gunfire.

Almost immediately after the AH-1 cleared the house of gunfire, 3/B was on the offense again. 2LT Chudzik left me with a fire team for security as we waited for the MEDEVAC, and then 3/B went to clear the engagement area. Approximately 10 minutes after 3/B left, the MEDEVAC landed and took the wounded squad leader back to Al Asad CSH (Combat Support Hospital). After we loaded him on the helicopter, we rejoined the platoon.

As I walked in to the house that we had just engaged, I was amazed at how little damage the TOW missiles had done to the house. After firing 203 rounds at the front of the structure and putting two missiles in the house, there were two medium-sized holes and some rubble inside. While we were waiting for the helicopter, one squad cleared the house that we had been receiving much of the fire from. Inside the house lived

a woman, a few children, and two men. Only one of the men claimed that the two were brothers; when we separated them and questioned them, we found out who the liar was and who belonged in the house. We found the AK-47 that the insurgent had used to fire on us; it had only a few rounds left in the magazine and was freshly fired. We detained that individual and brought him outside where the remainder of the platoon was. We were pulling security and clearing the other houses in the alleyway from where we received contact. The main building where the automatic weapons fire came from had only one radio, brass on the roof, and a water cooler in side. There were blood trails and drag marks, but not a single body or weapon. There was another radio left in the alley, but it looked suspicious so we left it be. We cleared the houses that were in the engagement area and then continued on to our target house. The insurgents pulled out whatever casualties they had and hid their weapons back in the caches before sunrise. We never found any bodies from that night's firefight; all we got was signal intercepts detailing the action from their part that night. Once we got to our target house, we apprehended the HVT without incident. Inside his house were at least seven military-aged males, three of whom we were looking for. The rest of the house was filled with women and children.

Hindsight

After sitting here for hours writing the details of the engagement, a few things stick out now more than before. The rock piles that were in the alley were originally thought to be for a housing project in one of the houses nearby. After we AAR'd the engagement, we determined that we had hit an IED initiation/strike cell. They had overwatch of an intersection and were armed with radios and automatic weapons. They had used the rock piles as a blocking obstacle to prevent any vehicles from pushing through the alleyway and closing the distance with the insurgents. This also gave them their secured egress routes.

The ambush that we had been caught in was the "Inverted Closing U" ambush. This is an urban adaptation of the Vietnamese ambush Haichi Shiki, according to John H. Poole in his book *Militant Tricks: Battlefield Ruses of the Islamic Insurgent*. The insurgents would pin friendly forces down in an alleyway and flank them from

one side and attempt to attack their element from the side with automatic weapons fire. The only thing that prevented them from doing this was our weapons section to the east, preventing the individuals in the court yard from shooting through the fence; this technique was also used during the Battle of Fallujah

What I wish I would have done

I had just become the executive officer of Alpha Company two weeks before we deployed. I was not too sure what the role of an XO in combat would be. So I focused too much on the logistics of supporting the company while we were in garrison. Had my commander been unable to continue to lead during this operation, I would have been caught flat-footed. I should have been more focused on the plan, not necessarily in the planning process, but in the details, such as the route, fires supporting me, and the other platoons' missions. As far as I was concerned, I was just attached to a platoon so that I could go to the firm base and get it established to conduct steady state operations. I wanted to make sure that I would not step on the platoon leaders' toes at the first sign of a firefight. I very much wanted to get up and start maneuvering squads and making radio calls, but it was not my place. I sat and pulled security. This was a good thing since 2LT Chudzik was an extremely competent platoon leader, but I took it too far.

Prior to the deployment, I did no researching or training on Iraqi insurgent TTPs. I wasn't a platoon leader anymore; I was a the company logistics officer. That was the wrong mind-set to have. When I had my down time, instead of reading about Operation Anaconda, I should have been reading about the battles in Fallujah against a terrorist group in the Al Anbar province. Had I been more involved in the planning, I would have been able to ask for refinements during the planning process such as asking for a fires corridor which would have enabled us to fire the company 60mm mortars immediately. Again, hindsight is 20/20, but there were many things that I should have been on top of, and I might have been able to assist more in the battle.

The executive officer must always understand the plan, not just the platoons' or the company's but the battalion's. I was one bullet away from being a company commander, and I should have always been ready for that. As an XO, I wasn't just the manager of the company headquarters and logistics, I was the senior lieutenant in that company. Faced with this situation, you should always be ready to assist the younger lieutenants and help mentor them as well; the company commander is not always going to be around. Before moving out on the mission, I should have coordinated with 2LT Chudzik and talked it over with him, just let him know that I was there not to get in the way but would help in getting any assets that he might need so he doesn't have additional things to worry about. Previous communication with the platoon leader will help alleviate any confusion when the time comes to act.

Alpha Company and Task Force Blue Devil remained in Haqlaniyah from October 3-31, 2005. During that time, we lost five



Alpha Company and Task Force Blue Devil remained in the city of Haqlaniyah from October 3-31, 2005, and helped secure the town for the constitutional referendum.

paratroopers but dealt the enemy a solid defeat. We accomplished our task in securing the town of Al Haqliniyah for the constitutional referendum as well and denied insurgents the use of the town as a safe haven. We had more engagements with the enemy and accomplished our task. Task Force Blue Devil would continue to hunt insurgents through the Al Anbar province until the end of 2005.

I leave you with a quote given to us by our adversaries in the Euphrates River Valley. This transmission was picked up by an attached signal unit. It was a conversation between an insurgent leader in Al Haqlaniyah, we will call him (AH), to another cell leader across the river, we will call him (AR).

AH: "THEY HAVE US BY THE BALLS."

AR: THESE GUYS (BLUE DEVILS) ARE SPECIAL, THEY AREN'T MARINES. THESE ARE CRACK SOLDIERS; YOU CAN'T EVEN GET CLOSE TO THEM. THEY ARE EVERYWHERE....

AH: YES, THEY REALLY HAVE US BY OUR BALLS HERE. IS IT LIKE THIS ANYWHERE ELSE?

AR: NO, THAT IS WHAT WE CAN'T FIGURE OUT, MY GUYS (OTHER INSURGENTS) IN BARWANA AND HADITHA ARE MOVING FREELY. WE CAN'T FIGURE OUT WHY HAQLANIYAH IS SO DIFFERENT.

AH: IDON'T KNOW EITHER, BUT WE CAN'T DO ANYTHING. CAN YOU GET US OUT OF HERE?

At the time this article was written, **CPT Aaron B. Baty** was attending the Maneuver Captains Career Course at Fort Benning, Georgia. He is currently attending the Special Forces Qualification Course and will be assigned to 3rd Special Forces Group upon graduation in July. His previous assignments include serving as the executive officer and company commander for Alpha Company, 3rd Battalion, 504th PIR (now 1-508 PIR). CPT Baty graduated from Drexel University and was commissioned through Drexel's ROTC program in 2003.
