Insurgent Attack in Ramadi

Platoon Leader Recounts Urban Engagement

CPT EDWARD CLARK III

On 15 December 2006, a single shot rang out from the rubbled buildings in southwest Ramadi, and a young Soldier crumpled to the ground. This sniper attack was just one of the many attacks that took place in this area of operations, and in that sense, may seem insignificant. However, it had a tremendous impact on my platoon. The incident is illustrative of the type of engagements typical of guerilla, urban, or insurgency warfare and demonstrates some of the problems inherent in fighting in such an environment. It also illustrates some strengths and weaknesses of my platoon on that particular day.

I was the platoon leader of 1st Platoon, B Company, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, and we were detached from our parent company and assigned to Team Bulldog (B Company, 1st Battalion, 37th Armor), which was about 11 months into a 15-month tour when we arrived. We lived on a combat outpost (COP) that was a cluster of homes that had been seized and transformed into a base of operations three months before our arrival. Our days here were a haze of endless area clearances, movements to contact, and sit-and-wait ambushes highlighted by almost daily attacks on our COP.

At this point, we had not made any of the significant intelligence or public relations breakthroughs that would follow in only a few months with what would become known as the Awakening. (The Awakening was a movement in the Al Anbar province, led by local sheiks, that would transform Ramadi almost overnight from an intense war zone to a model of progress and cooperation.) We had found no strong allies in the community; we were operating in an informational vacuum. We knew that there was a city surrounding us and that there were people in that city who wanted to kill us. We did not know whether the majority of the people we talked with each day were our attackers, were protecting our attackers, or were just too scared or too ignorant to stand up to them. It was into this environment that my platoon walked out each day, hoping to find a cache or an informant or just someone who believed that we were trying to help.

Ramadi, which is almost entirely made up of Sunni Muslims, was said to be the most dangerous town in Iraq. As both the Iraqi Army and the residents themselves would tell us, those who lived in Ramadi did not suffer under Saddam Hussein. Many lived in

A Soldier with B Company, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, provides security during a mission in Selegh, Iraq.

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mansions with every modern convenience but now had no electricity, heat in the winter, or running water. Trying to convince them that we were there to help them was difficult. They associated the decline in their standard of living with the coalition invasion and, more recently, the development of COPs, which were usually homes that had been seized but then rented to the U.S. Army right in the middle of their neighborhoods. These outposts naturally drew fire from insurgents, who were perfectly happy to see our usually heavy-handed response, which by the time my platoon arrived, had reduced almost every building within 100 meters of the COP to rubble.

Most of our patrols were census missions. We entered houses, took photographs of the residents to add to our database, searched for evidence of insurgent activity, and usually found nothing. In December, our COP was being attacked regularly, and we were frequently finding or hitting IEDs as well. We were not, however, being decisively engaged as we walked the streets. We attributed this to the insurgents' reluctance to hit us when they knew we were in a position to maneuver against them. We varied our routes and patrol times as much as possible within our small area of operations. We moved quickly, and we used smoke and armored vehicles to cover our movements. In short, we remained aggressive.

We had been shot at on patrol several times, but it was never accurate or sustained fire. On 15 December, my platoon was engaged for the first time in a well-planned attack by a determined enemy. We were returning from a patrol conducted only a few blocks east of our COP. The day before an Iraqi Army soldier and a U.S. Soldier from another platoon had been shot while emplacing wire on our outer perimeter. We were attempting to track down any information on the shooter by visiting the homes around the point where we deduced the shot had come. As usual, the locals claimed ignorance, but my interpreter was able to get several children to tell us that the sniper had let the neighborhood know that he was going to attack and to stay off the streets. They also gave us a description of the sniper and his comrades. We had collected all the information I thought we were going to get and began the walk back home.

We walked back with 3rd Squad in the lead, 2nd Squad in the center and 1st Squad trailing. The Bradleys were one block to the south. Ideally, I would have had one of them to the north side and one to the south, or both on our street, but the rubble and potential for IEDs made it difficult and risky for vehicles to move to our north. The lead elements of my platoon had begun to cross a no-man's land of wire, concrete barriers and rubble that separated our COP from the neighbors. Our middle and trail elements were walking west to east along a residential street that, because of its proximity to the COP, was only about half inhabited. There was no one in the street, which given the information we had just received from the children made us a little nervous. Someone remarked over the radio that it seemed especially quiet. I answered back that I thought something was about to happen and said, "Keep your rifles up and make sure you throw plenty of smoke when you cross." It was less than 30 seconds later that *it* happened.

As adrenaline kicked in, time slowed down and for what seemed like minutes — but was probably a couple of seconds — I watched my platoon react in textbook fashion. It was as if we were back in Germany rehearsing our battle drills. If battle drills become a reflex, Soldiers will execute them in combat.

Our area was almost entirely residential, comprised mainly of one or two story concrete and stucco homes. Except for the excessive trash, bullet holes and six-foot concrete walls, it could have been any neighborhood in America. We came back using a different street than the one we used on the way out. Near the COP, there was a one-block-long area that had been completely demolished by air strikes. There was, in addition to the rubble, a smattering of large concrete barriers to prevent easy shots into the COP. I never liked that area, but in an attempt to switch up entrance points as much as possible, I would use it occasionally. We usually broke into a jog as we crossed and used plenty of smoke.

We were moving east in two columns on each side of the road. I had two Bradleys out that day, which were moving around our perimeter covering our movement. I gave the order for one of the Bradleys and our lead element to throw out some smoke. Just as our lead element began to pass through our wire, a Soldier was shot passing through the smoke screen. It was a single shot, and I, just a few feet ahead of him, initially thought he had tripped and accidentally discharged his M249. Then, we began to receive more gunfire and we realized we were under attack.

We were in a terrible position. We had begun to weave through the concertina wire, rubble and concrete barriers that surrounded our outpost. This cut us off from our Bradleys, making it impossible for them to come directly to us to load our casualty. Worse, we were between the enemy and our Bradleys, which rendered their 25mm cannons useless.

As adrenaline kicked in, time slowed down and for what seemed like minutes — but was probably a couple of seconds — I watched my platoon react in textbook fashion. It was as if we were back in Germany rehearsing our battle drills. If battle drills become a reflex, Soldiers will execute them in combat. Not only does this keep them alive during the first few seconds of contact, I believe it suppresses or replaces fear and timidity which may otherwise occur; this momentum then continues throughout the battle. I found that for most people, just as in athletics, nervousness or fear only lasts a second or two if they are actively participating. I have heard of studies that say only a small percentage of combatants attempt to engage the enemy when under fire. I can't speak to the entire history of armed conflict, but from what I saw on that day and on the subsequent days we fought in Ramadi, I have to disagree. My Soldiers returned fire in such deafening mass that, were it not for the rock fragments flying from the ground, I would have had no idea we were still under fire. As it was, I could not see the enemy and had to rely on the points and shots of the men around me to deduce their location. In an urban environment, when fighting a small guerrilla force, it is difficult to discern the direction of contact, and the attack usually does not last long enough for anyone to pinpoint it. One of the things I later came to realize is that every Soldier wants to be the one who saw and killed the enemy. I do not think it is conscious, but especially among younger Soldiers, there is a tendency to misinterpret the sights and sounds of the battlefield. This may

exaggerate their own perceived exposure to danger or their centrality in the conflict. This not only makes it difficult to discern reality when listening to a bunch of Soldiers tell war stories, it makes it difficult for the leader to filter this out and get a grasp of the true situation while he is on the ground (especially as he tries to suppress some of those same tendencies himself).

There were several acts of heroism that day, as Soldiers risked their lives to protect and move the wounded Soldier to relative safety. Almost as soon as he hit the ground, the Soldier behind him emptied his own magazine, ran to the wounded Soldier's side, picked up his SAW, and emptied all of its rounds in the direction of the contact. He then, without regard for his own safety, covered him with his own body and tried to move him to cover. He was soon assisted by our medic and a few more of his squad mates.

I screamed over the ICOM radio to give orders to my Bradley commanders. They could only make out bits and pieces but knew what was going on and what they had to do. They had to maneuver and come back around to get in front of us. They popped smoke canisters to help conceal us from the enemy and began their movement.

As the Bradleys arrived, one of the gunners said that he could identify an enemy position, and the gunners began peppering that position. Our COP's quick reaction force was on the scene within minutes and were also engaging targets. One of my Bradleys moved to the wounded Soldier's position, and his squad loaded him in back.

A tank from the quick reaction force (QRF) was blocking the Bradley's only exit, and because of the noise and other radio chatter, no one could get the message across to the tank's crew. Finally, I had to run over, wave him down, and signal to him to get out of the way.

As the lead elements of my platoon reacted to the contact, the rear of our line, which was still a block behind, was attacked by two men in a car with an assault rifle. The Soldiers reacted quickly though and killed the attackers.

As is typical of guerrillas in this type of environment, the enemy did not attempt to stand and fight once we gained fire superiority. The QRF vehicles, under the control of our company commander, were able to seal off their retreat and kill three as they tried to flee. Two more were killed as they tried to drop explosives off the back of a moped. The Iraqi Police brought in a few more that night who were being treated at the hospital for wounds sustained in this action. Since this was the only engagement in the area that day, we were able to confirm their involvement in the attack.

At the company commander's order, I moved my Soldiers into the safety of the COP once the enemy had been sufficiently suppressed and were being pursued by our armored vehicles. We wanted to stay out and tear through every house within small arms range, but it would have been the wrong move. In film and during training where there is no real danger, dismounts always maneuver on the enemy and kill him where he stands. We learned that most of the time, this is not a practical approach in an urban area. It is difficult to maneuver on an enemy that Soldiers can not pinpoint, and it serves no purpose to have Soldiers storm into the fray when a Bradley or tank can destroy the enemy. As our commander constantly, and correctly, reminded us, it was rarely worth risking the lives of dismounted Soldiers to chase after a fleeing enemy.

TSgt Jeremy T. Lock, USAF

Soldiers from the 1st Armored Division patrol Ramadi in August 2006.

Our medic had jumped in the back of the Bradley that was evacuating our wounded Soldier. He broke his hand and received an enormous gash on his head when the Bradley took a sharp turn but still continued working on the Soldier until the ramp dropped at the medical station. The wounded Soldier was given the best care possible by our medic, but his wound was too serious. We learned of his death within an hour, and our lives were changed forever.

When I spoke with the fallen Soldier's parents the next day, and later when they visited our unit in Germany, they wanted to know if their son had suffered and if had we killed

SGT Gary Witte

A team leader with B Company, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, studies a map during a mission in Ramadi 4 February 2007.

the men who killed him. They didn't ask if their son's death could have been avoided. I do not know what I would have told them. I ask myself that question every day.

In the days and months following the attack, I realized that we all had different memories of what happened on the battlefield. The "fog of war" was more intense than I had experienced before and was more than I had imagined it would be. I am not sure that any two of us agreed on the exact direction of the attack or number of attackers. This is not abnormal; there were very few engagements during our tour in which we had a clear idea of the distance, direction, or depth of our enemy. Several weeks after this attack, we found a sniper position on the rooftop of an abandoned building with perfect line of sight to the spot where the Soldier had been shot. There is no way to know for sure if it was the position used, but the angles match. To my knowledge, that particular house was never engaged. Whether or not we were shooting at all of the correct buildings, the violence with which we reacted to the contact surely caused the enemy to withdraw. The battle drills, which my Soldiers had rehearsed since they joined the Army and we had practiced together, saved lives when the bullets began to fly (on that day and in the days to come). The bravery, initiative, and quick thinking of individual Soldiers made it possible to fight in an ever-changing environment.

When bullets start flying, there is a tendency for everyone to try and jump on the radio at once. Add the noise of the gunfire, which can drown out the voice of the sender or overwhelm the ears of the receiver, and the normal problems that occur with electronic equipment, and it can be next to impossible to get a message across in battle. On top of a strictly enforced and rehearsed radio SOP, leaders at all levels have to consciously attempt to filter out the excitement and emotion and communicate clearly and concisely. This is something we did not do properly. Until that day, despite all of my live-fire training and previous experiences, I did not have any idea the extent to which communications can be degraded in that type of situation.

I often replay the scenes of that day in my mind. What could I have done differently? What will I do differently in the future? What was done right? I should have had my Bradleys in a different position ... I should have had systems in place to reduce radio traffic ... I should have had more smoke ...

The reality of combat is that a leader will never get it 100-percent right. He has to do the best he can with the skills that he has and hope that his mistakes do not cost the lives of those around him. Then, he must honestly evaluate the decisions he made, the weaknesses inherent in his unit, and the realities of combat and devise ways to mitigate the danger.

At the time this article was written, **CPT Edward Clark III** was a student in the Maneuver Captains Career Course at Fort Benning, Ga. He served as an infantry platoon leader in B Company, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division. He currently serves as the assistant S3 with the 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division at Fort Carson, Colo.