

Hard Lesson Learned

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Abstract

This paper describes some of the key events and lessons learned during my deployment to Baghdad, Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) III. I give significant discussion to: Checkpoint Operations, Right Seat Rides and the dissemination of information of procedures.

Our unit received the mobilization alert on 28FEB2004. We deployed to mobilization station Camp Shelby, MS on June 2004. After six months of pre-deployment training we deployed to Iraq in November 2004, with redeployment to the United States in October of 2005.

I was a platoon sergeant of 1st platoon Troop F 2/278th ACR. My job duties included manning an 1114 HMMV, conducting patrols, EOD Security, Perimeter OP operations, and ECP operations in central Baghdad, Iraq. While deployed with Troop F, I participated in all phases of combat operations, to include: civil operations and International (Green) zone security. One of the most significant assignments that stay in my mind is the operation of Checkpoint 12 and the events that transpired associated with it.

After several months of combat patrols in the Kindi area of Baghdad, 4-64 Armor tasked Troop F with Checkpoint 12 operations. Checkpoint 12 was a primary entrance into the International Zone (IZ) also known as the Green Zone. Checkpoint 12 was a highly trafficked area and came under attack by insurgent operations numerous times in the past. As a platoon sergeant, I instructed my platoon to pay close attention to all instructions and procedures in regards to operations of the checkpoint. The inherent danger of the situation necessitated a high degree of attention to detail and situational awareness by all involved.

On the 21st of July 2005, 4-64 armor met with the staff of Troop F to discuss the handover and operations of checkpoint 12. We did a walkthrough of the checkpoint with

all key leaders of Charlie Company 4-64 Armor. The following day, we started our right seat ride with Charlie Company. In my morning briefings, I instructed my soldiers to pay close attention and to ask as many questions as they could to make them comfortable with the mission and their assigned duties, and instructed my NCOs' to enforce this to the highest standards. In the coming months, the attention to detail, constant training, and supervision resulted in my platoon being able to easily exceed any expectations and standards that were set before them. On the 24th of July, we completed our Relief in Place and signed all documentation to assume the duties of Checkpoint 12.

On the 25th of July 2005, the troop officially took over all operations of Checkpoint 12. One of my personal missions was to ensure that each of my soldiers was manning their proper position and paying close attention to their surroundings and position duties. At 0826, a car bomb was detonated by an insurgent in front of the Checkpoint. All of 1st platoons' soldiers were in their proper positions and because of this, none were injured or in any danger of losing their life. Their attention to detail and professional attitude ensured that the insurgents did not get what they had come for, which was American blood. Charlie Company had informed our unit during the relief in place that every new unit had been attacked soon after manning Checkpoint 12. This was common knowledge that this occurred every time a fresh unit was placed on the checkpoint. Intelligence showed that the enemy was constantly watching and probing the defenses to find weaknesses within Checkpoint 12. Good information and intelligence is the key to success on the battlefield. The dissemination of that information to the lowest

rank has been proven time and again through the course of history to be paramount to this success. The NCO corps must force feed information and get good back briefs for this process to work. I wasn't really worried about how my platoon would perform, as I knew that they were highly motivated and well trained. I felt as though the RIP (Relief in Place) that we received from Charlie Company, combined with the questions asked by my platoon, helped prepare my soldiers to occupy the busiest checkpoint entering into the International Zone.

After a couple of weeks of observation and input from the soldiers and NCOs', the unit was into the workings of the checkpoint enough to make improvement to its operations. The C.O. took into consideration all information and ideas while vetting the ideas with the senior leadership. The new ideas were then implemented. If the procedure that was implemented worked, then it was turned into SOP. As NCOs', we must learn that "Joe" is keen on what really works and what does not. Good listening skills are important. All the changes that were done were put into place for a very good reason, "Force Protection" and "Mission Accomplishment". It was found that the screening of pedestrian traffic was slow and unsafe, with no pre-screening being done. We placed two ING (Iraqi National Guard) at the front of the pedestrian lane controlling the flow of personnel into the lane. This prevented a huge build-up of personnel in the lane at the final I.D check and made the personnel lane less of a target for a suicide bomber or insurgent attack. Required I.D checks were found to be lacking in the vehicle lanes entering the International Zone at checkpoint 12. Our soldiers found that many of the

vehicles that entered the IZ were skirting the rules by having too many vehicles or personnel and weapons coming into the checkpoint on one I.D. I informed my platoon to study the regulations and I.D requirements set forth by 4-64 Armor. Then my platoon started enforcing the rules and regulations by the letter. This caused a huge uproar, as the mentality of some was “I’m a minister and I’ll take as many people, weapons and vehicles as I want”. In the end, by doing the right thing, we as soldiers won that battle and the chain of command backed us 100 percent. Another problem that faced us constantly was uniform standards for the ING’s, as well as weapons control. In July of 2005, it was a constant problem. The NCO’s and soldiers enforced the rules constantly and it was almost a full time job (i.e. “Put your helmet on”, “Where is your weapon supposed to be?”). With the constant vigilance of our soldiers, this raised the readiness of the ING threefold.

After weeks of hard work getting everything to work smoothly, we were told that our unit was about to redeploy back to the United States and home. We were told that soon, we would be doing a right seat ride with the unit that was going to relive us. For discretionary purposes, I will not use the unit’s full designation or where they were from. The unit will be called “D” CO. On September 24, 2005, the “D” CO Commander toured checkpoint 12 with Captain Hammer, our troop commander. The tour went well, as I was told later by the CO. “D” Company’s CO seemed to be cooperative and willing to listen to our CO’s brief of the situation and the day to day operation of checkpoint 12. This train of thought would soon change.

For reasons unknown to me, we were told the right seat ride was postponed, which I thought was unusual because a right seat ride is several days in length. On October 2 2005, 1st Platoon started the RIP with “D” CO. It started out well, but soon, problems started to emerge after “D” company soldiers started standing post with my soldiers. Not long after the shift had started, some of my junior NCO’s started calling on the radio complaining that the “D” company soldiers were making comments about the setup of the checkpoint and basically being very disrespectful. This was not only happening to the junior NCO’s, but also to me. The “D” company NCOIC was not paying attention to me as I went over the procedures and workings of the checkpoint. At one point, the “D” company Sergeant First Class looked at me and said “We got it big Sarge, we’ve done this before”. In response, I said “This is not a traffic control point; this is a highly visible entry in to the International Zone”. By the end of the day, everyone in my platoon was frustrated. Several of my soldiers that afternoon came to me and complained about the other units’ attitude. I informed them to do their job and stay the right pat and to teach them even if they were unwilling to learn.

On October 3, 2005, 1st Platoon turned over the operations of checkpoint 12 to “D” company after only one day of a Right Seat Ride. I still feel that this was a huge mistake. Soon after the RIP, all the high standards we tried to enforce started to be lost. American soldiers milling the areas near the front of the checkpoint, the ING soldiers not following the rules, and the list goes on and on. I’m not trying to say we were the greatest platoon to ever run a checkpoint, but all we did was enforce the standards that were set

forth from our high echelon. I made a statement to one of my squad leaders the day of the RIP, "Mark my words, they will be hit in a few days". I wish I had never said or thought that.

Around 10:30 AM local time on October 10, 2005, a car bomb was driven right into the checkpoint and an American soldier was killed. My point in all of this is we as soldiers have standards and regulations we must enforce. There is a purpose for everything we do. We must push our soldiers to live by the standards and regulations. Why do we do precombat checks? Why do we listen and get back briefs? It is to accomplish the mission and to save lives. I think that the blood of that young American soldier that died at checkpoint 12 that day is on the hands of his leadership. It was a very hard lesson to learn. Don't let it happen to you.