

“Combat Leadership”

Personal Experience Paper

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Abstract

September 11th 2001 I was overseas on a Joint Readiness Exercise. Not being in country I was a spectator to the events. As the news broke I was keenly aware of the NCOs around me who “got it” and the ones that did not. There were a few NCOs that thought that the day was business as usual, but most of us realized that the world forever changed. As the unit slowly redeployed the focus was of eminent combat. We knew that this war would be a war of Special Operations and being in the preeminent Special Operations Unit we also knew that whatever the U.S. response that we would be involved.

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Background

My army experience began as a USAR enlistee. I actually joined the Army Reserves in order to make myself more competitive for a job as a Deputy Sheriff. Once I made the decision to join the Army I did not care that the amount of training required for my MOS, 18E, would preclude me from getting that job. I began my training and after a year-and-a-half of active duty training I returned to my unit and began my career as a reserve Special Forces NCO.

The move to the reserve component was a positive experience but after watching Operation Desert Storm on television and not being allowed to participate I knew that enlisting into the active components of the Army would be the only way to ensure that I would be allowed to participate during the next conflict. I joined the active components. My first assignment was to 1st Special Forces Group. I spent 4 years in 1st SFG (A) and held positions in the Group Signal Company and on two operational detachments. After four years with 1st Special Forces group I had the opportunity to PCS to Ft Bragg, the home of Special Operations. I jumped at the chance as I joined the Army to be at the tip of the spear, and engaged when the Army goes to war.

My assignment to Ft. Bragg has been a continual process of growth, maturity and marked by various challenges that can not be met by standard doctrine. They cannot be met by doctrine because in many cases these challenges are completely new. A common mantra at the unit is “we hired you to think”, and this mantra is instrumental in the development of the unit as well as the NCOs who serve.

The hiring process for the unit seeks a certain type of individual. The unit does not hire the best man always, but it always hires the right man. There is a significant difference between the two. The unit finds individuals who can operate well on their own or in groups; individuals who can take charge but are also comfortable taking direction from others; individuals who have shown the propensity to make good decisions the most of the time and individuals who actively seek complex problems with

innovative solutions. Once those individuals are trained and assigned they are given the opportunity to hone their most important skill...decision making. This developmental process is paramount in the success of the unit. When a young NCO is assigned he will, by nature of the assignment, be thrown into situations that require him to make decisions well above his pay grade. Decisions that impact not only the MACOM above the unit but in many cases National Policy. In the unit rank does not matter, what matters is that NCO's ability to break with convention and excel when asked to perform completely outside any scope of training. The NCOs that are successful in the unit have shown the ability to operate across the operational continuum and serve in equally well in varyingly challenging jobs.

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Combat Experience

The first deployment to Afghanistan came just two days after Thanksgiving, 2001. Six weeks after the attack of 9-11 seemed too much of a wait before action, but in hindsight it was not a long delay. One can look back and say that the initial responses to the al Qaida attacks fell short of any strategic goals, but the initial and most achievable goal of the GWOT was to “regionalize” terrorism. This goal was certainly met in the initial weeks of the GWOT simply because the safe-haven of Afghanistan was taken away from al Qaida. The only way into Afghanistan was ensuring that any action within the borders of this Muslim caliphate had an Afghan face. This meant that the U.S. forces in the initial phases of the Afghanistan campaign would be small in numbers and only be enough to ensure that the Afghans could do it themselves. The most effective use of force, with the numbers of U.S. soldiers that were allowed into theater, was imbedding small numbers of U.S. Special Operations soldiers with Afghan units. This strategy allowed for very effective air support that gave a “simple” indigenous army 21st century air power.

My role was the “Second-in-Charge” of a five man team that was attached to an Afghan unit assaulting a Taliban stronghold. Our primary job was providing close fire support and being able to react to any HVT sightings. The initial instructions were to pack for 36 hours, but once we infiltrated the area of operations we were in the field for nearly two weeks. The terrain was very mountainous, steep and reached altitudes over 10,000 feet. The tactical decisions had to not only consider the enemy disposition but also the nature of the terrain. A 1500m movement could easily take five hours to complete. The team had one Air Force CCT who was primarily responsible for fires, but with 24hr operations it became necessary for all members of the team to be able to safely control and direct the delivery of munitions in the area of operations.

The second trip to Afghanistan was manning an austere outstation in early 2002. This particular

outstation consisted of a Special Forces Company, a Ranger Platoon, my three-man element and elements of various civilian government agencies. My role as a team leader was to be the unit representative at this outstation, manage the outstation and to develop any intelligence that could be used by an assault force. This was the first experience with routinely dealing with members of other units and government agencies. The trip came and went without any significant action but served as a great learning experience for the inter agency process. This trip was still close enough to 9-11 that much of the “Cold War” bureaucracy of the civilian agencies still existed. This bureaucracy had an adverse effect on the ability to quickly prosecute timely targets.

In November of 2002 the third deployment to Afghanistan occurred. This deployment was once again in an outstation, but this was a troop deployment. A troop deployment allows the unit to actually deploy and operate as an operational element. This deployment walked the line between unilateral troop operations and what is now known as Advance Force Operations. The focus of this deployment was hunting particular HVTs in a mountainous region of Afghanistan. The difficulty of this deployment was getting from the valley floor to the 10,000ft ridge lines without detection and with enough supplies to sustain a mission longer than 36 hours. What developed was climbing with just enough food and water for two days while searching for suitable mountainous helicopter landing zones from which the force would be resupplied. This was not optimal as it relied on the unknown and required rotary wing aircraft support at high altitudes, but it was found to be the only way to conduct the reconnaissance in the mountainous terrain.

The next two deployments were outstations, but were far different than any previous deployments. At this outstation we were guests of other government agencies. By this time in the GWOT it became necessary for civilian government agency employees, who otherwise would not be assigned to austere outstations, to participate in order to remain competitive for promotions. This was not a huge issue, as output and efficiency still mattered, but it was a minor challenge as work needed would only have to be framed under the premise of “how helping me helps you”. All were committed

to the effort, but it must be understood that some sent by other government agencies had no idea what they were getting into. The path to success in this new Inter-Agency environment was to totally break with convention, forget about the way things “used” to be done and figure how to make it all work. The issue was that within the Army doctrine was relatively unchanged since Viet Nam, but also because the civilian government agencies' standard operating procedures worked in the Cold War, out of embassies, but were not effective much anywhere else. What must be understood by all parties is that each entity at an outstation has something to offer the “team” as well as multitudes to be learned by the other entities that would make up an outstation. When in charge of one of these outstations, leaders work to the strengths of the individuals. The individuals must understand the strengths of the other members. This Inter Agency (IA) partnership was a work in progress continues to evolve and is the future of GWOT outside of Iraq.

Though we all want to operate as a unit, we found that our best and most effective and efficient use of force was to facilitate the action of our target set by providing target data to conventional units. Close relationships with the Battle space Owners (BSOs) is something that continues to be important in today's fight in Iraq. We would digest intelligence; verify the data, conduct reconnaissance, then build a packet and show up to a Battalion S3. We would help them plan, and then be there with them through every phase of the operation. The culmination of this type of operation was when the small outstation provided the intelligence and target packets that enabled the BSO to conduct 32 simultaneous assaults throughout the city.

Another development in the targeting was the understanding by all members of the task force to be involved in the target cycle. This has now become doctrine (Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze—F3EA). This targeting methodology was introduced to conventional units at the lowest levels. Their commanders saw the benefits and enabled their subordinate commanders to manage their own battle space. When F3EA is executed at all levels what usually results is a rapid destruction of a given target set.

The next two deployments to Iraq were as a Squadron Operations SGM. The two most significant learning experiences understood the importance of receiving and giving guidance and intent, and understanding the importance of the partnership between the senior enlisted and their officers. As the Operations SGM, I was given the authority to make decisions in the absence of the Squadron CSM. I knew that was huge responsibility, and ensured that I made no decisions that the Squadron CSM would not make. Maturity and sound judgment were important, but the most important thing I could do was to ensure that any decision I made in the stead of the CSM were what was best for the Task Force and devoid of personal preference.

The latest deployment to Iraq was as a Troop SGM with the responsibility of leading an assault troop in the prosecution of Task Force targets. The trip was tiring but fruitful. The trip was a huge success not because of the volume of targets prosecuted, but because the entire troop worked throughout the entire targeting process. The same men who would be going on target would be the same men sitting down with analysts in the various Intelligence sections working the development of each targeted individual. The men going on target would be the ones who knew the most about the target. This has continually proved valuable, especially so in the exploitation phase. The exploitation phase is the most important, as it is the phase that bears the fruit of the prosecution of the target and often times leads to more and more targets. When the targeting becomes exponential the rapid degradation and destruction of the target set is the result.

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Insight

As I look at each one of these deployments individually I understand that they have been marked by change. Some of these deployments were only months apart from each other yet the changes from one rotation to another were great. Flexibility is key in the adaptation to each and every deployment. The changes will continue as the political situations in the areas of interest and within the U.S. continue. This is an adaptive process. As a Sergeant Major who has had the opportunity to serve in combat at leadership positions at the E7, E8 and E9 level I consider myself fortunate. It is my responsibility, now, to ensure that I give my subordinates the freedom to discover and make the right decisions, the guidance to fully understand their left and right limits and the intent to know what must be done. It is my responsibility to allow my subordinates to succeed, grow and learn so that they can fight the next phase of this war.

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Lessons Learned

The lessons learned are important. It may be semantics, but the “lessons UNDERSTOOD” better conveys my thoughts on the useful cataloging of combat experiences. The most significant lesson learned is in the F3EA. The only way to defeat our current enemy is to get inside their decision cycle and attack when they do not have the ability to react. At the start of the GWOT it was considered below many assault forces to go after what was called “low hanging fruit”. What has become apparent in several years of “man hunting” terrorists is that we cannot wait for the “big fish to jump in the boat”. You attack the network where you can and move laterally and vertically when possible. This requires an intelligence section that spends more time analyzing than “building product”. This requires the leverage of strategic assets to be employed tactically. This requires NCOs to figure ways of getting to the enemy as opposed to focusing on why things cannot be done. This requires commanders to have competent and empowered staffs, and it requires that the staffs think and act independently while staying within the guidance and intent.

Though we focus on Iraq and Afghanistan the future fight will not only be that of an occupying army. The F3EA and the lessons learned in the outstations can be applied to any future fight. The IA

partnerships will grow in importance and soldiers will be in smaller groups working with country teams, foreign and surrogate forces. Those who excel will have to operate throughout the operational continuum.

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