

Running head: REACTING TO AN IMPROVISED EXPLOSIVE DEVICE (IED)

Reacting to an Improvised Explosive Device (IED)

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Abstract

Another morning in eastern Afghanistan and we begin yet another patrol, but at least we are heading back to the firebase, our home away from home. Once we finally get started, things are going well; comms are working, weapons are running and our bellies are full. We're still early in the movement and ... BOOM! Everything is different now. This experience changes lifestyles and the way we look at life. We'll cover some of the changes between the lines of the following pages.

Reacting to an Improvised Explosive Device (IED)

Another cold morning in the Afghan countryside and we again embark on the long return journey to our firebase after a few days of intense mounted patrols. The firebase, which is located 14Km from the Pakistani border is the only home that we have known for several months. We actually looked forward to getting back home where we really only need to worry about the occasional rocket attack and not everything else that could go wrong while outside the wire. Our patrols didn't extend much beyond a few days, because after a few days of staying on the edge our senses would reach overload. We are currently in an overloaded state and are desperately in need of a recharge. Therefore, with our pre-checks and briefings complete, we head out of our patrol base and jump onto the primary route back (the only route). After about fifteen minutes of travel...BOOM! The first US vehicle in the convoy (incidentally, my vehicle) was hit with an Improvised Explosive Device (IED). Things at this point get blurred and confusing, but this writing experience will attempt to clear the fog for you and me. Bottom line, we experienced no serious injuries and recovered all equipment to the Firebase, but many things did change. We'll now experience the changes together.

Individual Background and Experience

I have been in the military for 19 years and spent most of the time working on a Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha (SFODA). The majority of my Special Forces experience is split between 3rd Special Forces Group and 1st Special Forces Group. I started my SF career as a SF Communicator with SFODA 325, 3rd Special Forces Group, Ft Bragg, NC from 1992 until 1996. I then served a three-year tour of duty as a Recruiter in Hattiesburg, Mississippi and was released (paroled) to return to Special Forces in 1999. At that time, I requested and was assigned to SFODA 155, 1st Special Forces Group in Ft Lewis, WA and served as a SF Intelligence

Sergeant. In 2001, I was promoted and moved to Okinawa, Japan and served as a Team Sergeant for SFODA 134, 1st Special Forces Group. During this time (post 9/11), we stayed actively engaged in OPERATION Enduring Freedom–Philippines. After three years of service in Okinawa, Japan I was ready to return to my Special Forces home, 3rd Special Forces Group. Luckily, the Team Sergeant position on SFODA 325 was open and I was slotted. I arrived October 2004, just after the team, and battalion, completed a successful rotation. My arrival was timed perfectly, because I was able to conduct many key training events with the SFODA. This training included a comprehensive rotation to the historic Ft William Henry Harrison in Helena, Montana. We were able to review all mounted and dismounted drills in an environment which closely replicated the Afghan terrain. Our detachment was ready to reenter the fight and we did in the summer of 2005.

Description of Area of Operation

Chamkani is located in the Paktya Province of Afghanistan approximately 14 kilometers from the Pakistani border. The Pashtun tribes of the Chamkani Kharouti and Mangal ethnically dominate the area. Chamkani lies in a valley within the Hindu Kush Mountain range, and is made up of several smaller villages of which the collective whole is known as Chamkani. Local Nationals of the area, when speaking of Chamkani, are usually referring to either the Chamkani tribe or the Chamkani Bazaar which is located approximately 200 meters outside the front gate of Chamkani Firebase.

The Firebase is located approximately 200 meters north of the Chamkani Bazaar with various hills surrounding the camp in a horseshoe pattern. There are three main lines of communication (LOCs) into the Chamkani valley, one coming from the east leading to Patan District and Pakistan, one from the west leading to Gardez and eventually turning north to Jaji

District, and one from the south leading to Jani Khel District and Khowst. There are several small mud dwellings and other two story buildings in the Chamkani Bazaar located outside of Chamkani Firebase. The whole of the valley consists of mainly the bazaar and small farms tended by the residents of the several small villages around Chamkani.

The local populace seems to be generally positive about the presence of U.S. and coalition forces and the positive economic conditions that have resulted since the buildup of coalition forces on Chamkani Firebase. The tribal elders assure US forces in the Chamkani area that there aren't any members of Al Qaida (AQ), Taliban (TB), or Hezb-E-Islami Gulbuddin (HIG) in their villages. However, we have received several reports that US personnel are under constant surveillance, observation and possible attack. The major threat to personnel in the Chamkani area continues to be AQ and HIG forces, including local tribal disputes. We expect rocket attacks originating from the southern valley, as well as, Improvised Explosive Devices (IED), booby-trapped weapons caches, and ambushes along patrol routes. The base is ever vigilant to attacks, harassment activities, and intelligence collection by enemy forces either at the firebase or while out on combat patrols.

Events Prior to IED

The months leading up to October (the month of the IED) were busy, both politically and operationally. During this time we have been working diligently on establishing rapport with the local leadership and population. This meant that we were on the streets nearly every day working our areas and speaking with the locals. Some of our areas, namely Ali Kheyl, were several hours away, which required us to plan patrols that lasted a few days in duration. With our surge into the area, we maintained a presence; which limited enemy activity to a few harassing rocket attacks or the occasional IED. Due to our established rapport and information

collection techniques, we usually received notification from the locals of an upcoming attack. This kept our detachment ahead of the enemy, which is always a better place to be. But things would soon change.

We planned and prepared to conduct a three-day patrol to the village of Ali Kheyl beginning on 30 September and ending on 2 October 2005. Little did we know at the time, but this patrol would change the lives of several people. We had several activities planned in conjunction with this patrol, but the main reason is to continue a US and Afghan Security Force (ASF) presence in the area. Patrol orders were published and approved and final preparations were conducted.

Patrol- Day One

The patrol started with no delays and we could now expect to be in our Ground Mobility Vehicles (GMV) for the next five to six hours with only a few breaks. During our planned breaks, we would conduct a short vehicle check point (VCP) and establish a security perimeter. At one VCP I remember confiscating a pistol from a local that was riding a moped (this incident will come into play again later). We had rules established in the area that prohibited anyone from carrying any type of weapon. This was for their protection as well as ours. Each household was permitted to have one AK-47 per adult male, but they still weren't allowed to carry them. It should be used for protection purposes only. We continued our patrol and arrived in the early evening in time to set up a security perimeter and conduct meetings with the local officials.

Patrol- Day Two

After an uneventful night, the day started the same as many. ASF soldiers scrambling to get chow out to the troops, team members taking care of their priorities of work, and the leadership dealing with the local officials. We departed our patrol base early, because we had

several activities which we needed to conduct during daylight hours. After the long day, we would egress to the same patrol base we used the night prior. We reused this patrol base several times while conducting patrols in this area, because the threat was low and the terrain worked to our advantage. We never had any engagement with hostile forces while occupying this patrol base.

Upon return to the patrol base, we were approached by the gentleman mentioned before that had his pistol confiscated. He claimed to be affiliated with the government and required the pistol for his protection. This was a common line that we would hear from locals in a similar situation. We informed him that the Government of Afghanistan required the confiscation of weapons (especially handguns) and he, working for the government, should know that. With a disappointed look, he departed our perimeter, but I had the feeling that we would see him again.

Patrol- Day Three

Another morning dawned and normal activities were taking place. We were planning to get out of the area early that morning, but a little vehicle trouble delayed our return to base. During our daily pre-combat inspections (PCI), truck one (first GMV in the order of movement) noticed that the serpentine belt was off the pulleys and wouldn't stay in place. Upon closer inspection, we noticed that a nut had vibrated off one of the mounting bolts and required replacement. We looked locally for a nut that could be used, but to no avail. Finally, we improvised and attached some wire to the end of the bolt and it looked as if it would hold. We may need to make more security halts to inspect the improvised bolt, but at least we would be mobile. The only alternative was towing and that was not an option, because we would lose too much mobility.

Meanwhile, the leadership was again speaking with the local officials and, as I expected, the man with the missing pistol was at our step again. But this time he was bringing some firepower. He was with Commander Dawood's son. Commander Dawood was a HIG commander during the Soviet occupation and still is held in high regard in this part of the country; his son attempts to carry as much respect. They teamed with the local officials and asked again for the pistol. We, team leadership, discussed the implications again, but came to the same result. We would not return the pistol, but informed him to get authorization from the provisional government for an exception to current policy. Some think that this decision triggered the attack...still questionable in my mind.

Back at the vehicles, systems were double checked and it looked as if we were ready to initiate our movement. However, due to the handicapped truck we decided to alter our normal traveling formation and put truck three, my truck, in the lead. With the changes made and the movement order briefed, we were ready to move.

Actions at Blast Site

Now that we were finally moving, things seemed to get back to a normal state. All communications were checked and double checked. We were using all of the available countermeasures as we always did on patrol and it looked as if it was going to be another routine patrol back to the firebase.

We moved downhill from our patrol base on a winding dirt road (all of the roads are dirt) and, after passing through a small bazaar, reached the rocky valley floor. This is a large valley area which holds a small river that was crossed as we continued through. The road now turned southward and followed the valley and river and would continue to do so until we had to cross the next mountain range. You may expect this area to be desolate, but this mountainous region

contained many coniferous trees and underbrush. Consequently, this made the valley floor an extremely vulnerable place and gave every advantage to the enemy. But we had no other route to travel. We continued on.

I was having a conversation with the driver covering our activities upon return. I was seated in the passenger seat and responsible for communications from vehicle. Our gunner was in his post manning an M-2 .50 cal machine gun. We also had one additional passenger in the rear cargo area manning an M-240G machine gun. This vehicle is not your standard M 1114 (hard-shell), but an open-ended M-1113. Luckily, we did receive the required upgrades which gave the vehicle some much needed protection (without these upgrades, this paper may not have been written). We were passing some snack food back and forth and then BOOM! We rocked around in the vehicle like some giant had picked the truck up and was using it to salt his food. Everyone was out of it for a minute or two and finally snapped out of it as we heard the guns from the rear trucks laying some rounds into the hillside. I called to each of the others to see if everyone was okay. Slowly (seemed as if it took forever), everyone answered and that confirmed that we all had made it through somehow. I announced to the rest of the team that we were shaken a bit, but seemed to be okay. Once recovered, we entered the fight, but it was a hopeless effort. We were wasting rounds into the hillside. We dismounted, covered and searched a few local dwellings and several bystanders, but no evidence to tie anyone to the attack.

After securing the area, many minutes traveled past as we went through the scene and tried to put things together, but we didn't want to spend too much more time in the area, so we prepped to move. After an aerial escort arrived and scanned the road ahead, we licked our wounds and headed out again. We were ready to reengage and expected to hit some trouble on

the road home, but the rest of the ride was thankfully uneventful. After several hours of rough mounted patrolling, we arrived at our pseudo safe haven, Chamkani Firebase.

Follow-up Activities

Within the hours after arrival

Everything was crazy. Everyone that was anyone was using every available communications link to talk with us and request several after action reports. Our medic was doing a fine job of conducting detailed medical assessments of the personnel involved in the blast. We told and retold the events of the day over and over again to our other curious firebase occupants. We were still on edge; adrenaline still flowing through the bloodstream like busy commuters through Grand Central Station. It would be several hours more, if not days, before we were back at some stable level.

Over the next few days

We took a few days to recover and evaluate the lessons learned, before heading back out on patrol. This gave the individuals involved opportunity to reflect and each handled the event differently. The driver, on the fence about his military career, decided that he would ETS and find new passions in life. The rear passenger didn't appear to have anything going on, but continued to operate as usual. The gunner suffered through several days of sleeplessness and started to show signs of PTSD. This was his fourth tour in Afghanistan and I think there was a build up of everything that he experienced in past rotations, but repressed until now. We gave him a few days down at the firebase to allow the team medic to evaluate the situation. He was eventually sent back to the states and clinically diagnosed with PTSD. I went through the motions as normal, but my personal thoughts dwelled around deep questions. What is the purpose of my life? Why didn't we get more seriously injured? How do I want to spend this

second opportunity? These questions still linger with me, but I can say that I have a healthy appreciation for life and look forward to every sunrise. I'm more in touch with family and want to live for the people that I love and take the time to show them that I'm here for them.

Lessons Learned

We altered many aspects of our mounted patrols, but the most significant was to sporadically plan the times of our patrol and to limit the amount of information that we divulged to the ASF. Sporadic reconnaissance was conducted as well (it looked sporadic to the watching eyes, but it had defined purpose). We alternated routes as much as possible, but the terrain restricted most alternate route planning. We dug deeper into our information collection techniques and this provided several early warnings and subsequent recovery of compromised IEDs. These methods kept us safe from further direct IED attacks for the duration of our mission.

Summary

I tried to lay out the events which led to our encounter with an IED and the repercussions through the aftermath. This is only one isolated incident that occurred while we were there, but it stands out as the most life altering. I think that it can be healing, on many levels, to work through a significant event similar to my experience. It will give you a chance to figure out what is important to you. You don't need to be in a combat zone to experience things of this sort and, hopefully, you'll never have to go through anything like this. However, everyone should take the time to reevaluate their position in life and name the things important to them. So, what's important to you?