

Running Head: Challenges of OIF -

Challenges of OIF for an Infantry Heavy Weapons Company -

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Abstract

This paper will deal with the challenges I had in deploying a Delta Company of an Infantry Battalion of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). It will deal specifically with the pre-deployment, deployment, preparation and execution phases of the initial strike into Iraq. It is a story of men, trained in the art of combat, who in many instances had to take a step back and realize everything was not as we had trained so long and hard for. We realized when your call came, often it is the men who can adapt and overcome, who have the foresight to make changes when everything in our culture suggests otherwise

CHALLENGES OF OIF FOR AN INFANTRY HEAVY WEAPONS COMPANY

At the opening stages of these operations my experience as a First Sergeant consisted of approximately eight months in the position, I had an additional 19 years of experience in Infantry heavy weapons companies as a driver, gunner, company armorer, training NCO, squad leader, section leader and platoon sergeant. For this reason I felt I had a good grasp of all operations and functional areas within a Delta Company. The unit itself had a good mix of newly arrived NCOs and Soldiers and those who had been in the unit for approximately 24-36 months. All the platoons were at a high level of proficiency in terms of METL tasks and were well prepared for the coming operations, or so we thought at the time. At the time I arrived at the unit from Korea there was a lot of saber rattling between the United States and Iraq. Saddam Hussein continued to posture with the United States, always leaving the possibility that he had a chemical weapon capability which President Bush continued to claim to the nation could not be left unchecked. As well the situation with Al Qaeda and September 2001 had the nation wanting revenge. President Bush and his staff created a stir claiming Iraq itself was supporting Al Qaeda operations abroad. This has never been proven. But at any rate it gave our nation one more reason to want Saddam Hussein out of power.

So this was the situation leading up to our receipt of a Warning Order informing the Division to begin preparing for operations in the Middle East. Upon receipt of this order the division immediately went into a training cycle ensuring all Soldiers were qualified on their assigned weapons and crew served weapons to include the M2 .50 caliber

machine gun, MK19 automatic grenade launcher, and the TOW 2 anti-tank missile launcher. In addition, all Soldiers were trained on Common Tasks to include first aid, NBC training, crew drills and battle drills. It was required that every vehicle have at least one Combat Lifesaver assigned within a crew. We did a PMCS on all vehicles (Preventive Maintenance Checks and Services) to ensure they were mechanically sound for the coming fight. Every form of cool guy gadget began flowing in to our units based off RFI (Rapid Fielding Initiative). The problem was that we had no training on many of these items. The clothing bag items were easy, put it in your kit and move out, but the technical pieces of equipment such as the AIM 1 created a whole new set of challenges. I instructed my NCOs as best I could on the new pieces of equipment with often nothing more than a lesson plan put together based off of information found on the internet. The challenges at this time were many.

As we began unloading our vehicles on the trains that would carry them to the ports in Florida, our days began quickly winding down from intense training and preparation for the upcoming deployment to preparing our families for the whirlwind moves that were quickly coming. We strengthened our FRG (Family Readiness Group) through a series of briefings on everything from finance, to the internet, to a series of briefs by the chaplain on coping with the upcoming deployment. I instructed my training room to get up to speed on Microsoft Outlook. I felt mail and communication with the families would be difficult in the opening stages of the war and it was. But thanks to Outlook and our Brigades satellite link, we were able to have at least weekly internet access. All the families had my aiko address and would email their loved ones in this form with the

heading being the name of their Soldier. When my training room would go to Brigade and hookup the computer Outlook would then download all these emails into my laptop. The company would then have a mail call which proved to be an enormous boost to the troop's morale early on in the war. Finally our time had come to deploy and we flew into Germany and then Kuwait. While in Kuwait the Brigade continued to train as we had in Fort Campbell with an emphasis on zeroing all weapons and lasers for the coming fight. We were also married up with our civilian reporters who would be documenting our every move north to Baghdad.

Under constant SCUD alert throughout training, you could feel the young men in the company becoming nervous by the day. We played football and other sports to try to take their minds off the coming fight and the constant fear of SCUDs. Two days prior to our offensive kicking off a sergeant in the Brigade went crazy attacking the Brigade command group in their tents with M4 fire and grenades. He wounded several Soldiers including the Brigade Commander and killed an Air Force officer and the HHC Brigade commander. The morning prior to our operation kicking off we had a brief ceremony for the fallen and then began our final preparations for the move north into Baghdad.

At approximately 0300 on 26 March our Brigade crossed our Line of Departure with my company in the lead. We were approximately 20 miles to the west of the major MSR leading into Iraq from Kuwait. A decision was made by our Battalion Commander to leave all doors on the vehicles off to better facilitate shooting your weapons. Unfortunately, when this decision was made it was anticipated a heavy fight was ahead and not the driving sand storm and rain we encountered. Throughout our approximately 800 mile romp north to An Najaf, the only encounters we had with Iraqis were friendly Bedouins. -

Our initial order had us moving north from An Najaf to Karbala and possibly an air assault into Baghdad itself, but as often happens in war, no plan survives initial contact and this was no different. Our supply routes were being threatened by hit and run attacks out of An Najaf and our Brigade was ordered there to screen our supply routes and kill any enemy attempting to come out of An Najaf. After three days of constant attacks out of Najaf our Brigade Commander had enough with defense and the Brigade went on the offensive to seize the heights of An Najaf and the college overlooking our positions. This was carried out flawlessly with only minimal casualties and no wounds of a serious nature.

Once we were in An Najaf we began understanding the effect the Saddam Fedaiheen had on the city. Forcing young men to attack us at night with little more than their hands. If they refused their families would be slaughtered before their eyes. With this knowledge a new sense of urgency overcame the company to rid An Najaf of this incarnation of the Nazis of World War II.

Our battalion was soon moving into the heart of the city and encountering resistance as we went deeper into the city center. In the city square we encountered a statue of Saddam and destroyed it in place using C4 in a large package. Immediately following the destruction of the statue the people of An Najaf began coming out of their houses cheering which gave the men great pride, but at the same time this was very strange because we constantly felt like all of these people would shoot us in a heartbeat given the opportunity. Soon though all pockets of resistance within the city had ended and we began preparing for follow on operations into the north of Iraq. Now a battle hardened company, young men were not so young anymore, their innocence lost in the rush to An Najaf and the subsequent operations within the city which had now steeled their hearts.

In conclusion, our run to An Najaf was the most gratifying experience of their lives for many of my Soldiers. At the time, our presence was genuinely appreciated by the Shiite faith. We had delivered to this city freedom, something that was precious, something that had never been felt by many of the people in this city. Unfortunately though, as current times indicate, their love for us has dwindled and in many cases those long ago days when we liberated their city from tyranny have now escaped their minds with a fanaticism of its own. This hatred is based off of prejudices for their fellow man, particularly the Sunni faith and the tit for tat killings going on to these days. This is a sad testament to the outward lunacy of war and all it has stood for throughout history.