

**UNCLASSIFIED**

Personal Experience Paper

**"The Lwara mission"**

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Lwara mission preparation and execution, OEF IV

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Abstract

Ambush! Ambush! The commander yelled as he grabbed for the hand mike to tell higher that we were being hit and hit hard. I'm hit, I'm hit screamed our driver! God it hurts! We'll worry about that later, just drive fast. I was shooting from my side at the enemy while my top gunner was rapidly expending all his machine gun ammunition at muzzle flashes on the ridge. I could hear thuds as bullets passed through our vehicle miraculously missing my **commander's** head by inches. "Where the hell is **third platoon?**" I said, just as one RPG impacted just in front of my vehicle and another destroying the vehicle behind us.

"Cobra is going to Lwara in twenty four hours," the S-3 said as he briefed the audience. Thinking to my self **"that can't be, we are on force protection"** that is when he began to fill in the rest of the blanks. These are the facts he said with a nod of his head in my **commander's** direction. Alpha is going north to Sharona to establish a presence for the provincial Governors security. "Bravo is coming in from the south today and you will be relieved a day early," once again looking in our direction. **"I guess this is our warno then?" I said in the commander's ear. That's when the three looked at me and said "why, yes it is First Sergeant."** We found out that we would go long range to conduct a border meeting with the Pakis in Lwara. Long range means out side the max limits of **the 105's and at least forty five minutes** from CAS. Instantly I started going over in my mind how long this would be, from being there before I knew it would be a minimum of three days since it takes two just to get there and I knew we had never been out more than ten days so I had my parameters. Wasting no time I went to the tent where the rest of the leadership were still sleeping to get the Executive Officer in motion, then I would go set the world on fire. As usual I walked in and kicked **the XO's** cot and said **"good morning sir"**. He said "I HATE when you do that." **"Sorry, I said, after a split second**

he said "no your not you do it every day." **I said "yeah your right"** because both of us knew I would do it again tomorrow. **I said "got some poop" He sat up on one elbow and said "shoot"**. I told him of the encounter with Ops and him never being one to get excited said "its probably another limp dick", Which was a term we use loosely to describe a mission that we get completely prepared for and then it never materializes. **I then said "at any rate I would** like for you to get with the commander ASAP so we can get a jump on the prep." He **said "OK, is everybody awake? I said "yep everybody except you and the FSO."** I went to the chow hall, motor pool, and the AHA to get supplies laid on for the mission. I then came back to the HQ tent where the XO was just now putting on his boots and told him all the important parties had their heads up. I then went to the TOC where the commander was still scribbling in his green book. As I walked up he ripped out a scrap of what we affectionately call "booger paper" and handed it to me. On it was written prepare for eight days—Lwara, toss some houses, meet with Pakistanis. Three things immediately went through my mind, casualties, both vehicle and human, a mountain of trash, and Lwara its self, when we go out that far we have to think through all possibilities and then the contingencies. Lwara is in excess

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of thirty clicks, from Orgun-e although it is not as far as we had been Before, it is more complex due to the fact that we are guaranteed to encounter the enemy because we are going to one of the most highly used border crossing areas for insurgents. This particular crossing point is so popular to the insurgency because the only high speed avenue of approach is by air. Other than that all other avenues have to be traversed by vehicular convoy. In this part of Paktika province the highways are the river beds where every inch of your progress is over watched by strategically placed observers and every inch is a potential ambush site. Lwara its self is a convergence of two river beds with a gradual escarpment easing out of the river bend to the east **towards Pakistan which could be between 3 and 5 K's depending on** where they decided the border will be placed this month. Second, are the casualties, when we say leave no man behind this means him and the horse he rides in on. The vehicles suffer terrible abuse from the terrain they have to carry their occupants over. On long missions every contingency has to be thought of. Units have to depend on lessons learned by previous units so mistakes are not repeated every rotation by the new units to the area. Historical data is paramount. You are out of your element as an infantryman when you are told to

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put together a parts list for both HMMWV and LMTV and also include a minimum of two tow bars and three Twenty five thousand pound sling sets and not to mention the lucky mechanics who win the lottery and get to go each time we go long range, after all the **trucks can't** fix them selves.

Other than vehicular casualties are the human casualties. When one thinks of human casualties and caring for trauma the medical list gets extensive.

The one thing I never before considered was trash. It needs five times the room coming back as it does going out. Routinely an entire LMTV is full and over flowing by the time a ten day mission concludes. We never leave a single MRE bag down range that I am aware of. Other units will burn their trash we do not.

It was the twenty-fourth of January and we had at last count been on over thirty long range patrols this is the third time to Lwara the previous two times we were ambushed from the ridge lines during the day and our patrol bases rocketed during the night. The mission was to go into one branch of the Lwara valley and establish a definite presence doing a cordon and knock in one river bed while OGA and their Afghan soldiers would go into the other to meet the village elders and try to get intel on the insurgents that were coming in and out

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through the area. Our problem was (in my opinion of course) the enemy knew that with the OGA going in before us by a day we would be compromised. We were to follow with the more cumbersome and slow moving twenty vehicle convoy that included the Battalion Commanders vehicle, Civil Affairs, six up armored, the avenger, nine **of my own, the mechanics, and two LMTV's for meals, water, fuel,** tires and 120 Mortar ammunition among other things. Preparations went on as usual except for the fact that my Soldiers were coming off a long guard mount. We were determined to prepare for everything. Vehicles were packed, magazines were loaded and Weapons test fired. The Order was completed at fourteen hundred and the earliest time of move was at eighteen hundred local which was changed to zero four hundred so the Soldiers could rest.

During the preparation the men were like robots having done it so often, battle preparation became routine. The problem with routine is complacency. If leaders are not engaged with Soldiers shortcuts will be taken. Short cuts like the failure to do final inspection. It seems small but when a soldier fails to put water in his camel back because he has five boxes of water in his ride means to me that he will fail to load all of his mags because he has a few thousand rounds in ammo cans. My veteran Squad Leaders and Team Leaders most of whom

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were present and fighting during Anaconda were instrumental at ensuring everything happened like it was supposed to. The company was blessed with the full complement of SFC Platoon Sergeants that performed so well that I virtually had nothing to do. Most usually there is one that has to be watched, but not in this case. The ones we had to watch were the slice elements or attachments. They almost never showed on time nor were they prepared when they did show up. It was a night mare just getting battle roster numbers. Most of the time senior Specialists were in charge of a three person element and simply put they had to be inspected in depth. We would have to line up and stage in separate elements at least two hours early to prepare for movement. The key to this point is that all elements no matter how small should have responsible leadership. Once the last vehicle pulled out of the gate the flare we could always count on from the mountain tops went up. The insurgent word was out that we were coming. The insurgents had a very good communication network. It never failed, they always knew when we were going on a patrol. Since they could not see us coming there must have been an informant from the immediate area of the FOB that would use a cell phone to contact the person on the mountains.

The first day was long and uneventful except for the seven flat tires; we planned for five flats per day. The evening of the twenty-fifth found us in a patrol base on a mountain top that was about half way to our objective. The evening was uneventful other than insurgent traffic telling all in the area exactly where we were. At four A.M. on the twenty sixth we lined up and headed out. We moved steady with no issues performing the village searches in a methodical manor. While the platoons were searching the commander and I along with three empty vehicles and two armored vehicles pulled up ahead onto some high ground where there was a compound. When we arrived all the occupants had already came out front to watch the show and started to offer chai tea which we graciously accepted. As the platoons worked up to us the plan was to take our third platoon and go forward through a very restricted section of valley with sheer walls and switch back turns. Upon loading the third platoon we were preparing to exit the hill top when the commander looked over and said what is up with these two? There were two males standing over beside the road with shovels doing nothing which at this time of the morning was not suspicious but these two just **didn't** look right. Now, in retrospect they were probably early warning. With the third platoon loaded we rode about half a mile to the mouth of the canyon where we stopped and

unloaded the third platoon. The plan was to let the third platoon gain the high ground to provide over watch in a bounding maneuver. This was a good plan except when the third platoon leader gave us the go ahead we had no way of knowing that he and his men had gotten onto the wrong ridge and were actually fifteen hundred meters off their security position. Go Figure? We entered the canyon and when we were fully committed just like I had been taught, the ambush was initiated with most casualty producing weapon, **RPG's followed by light machine guns**. My driver was immediately hit in the leg and quickly let us know about it. **My commander just said "drive we can't stop here" and he did**. While we were driving out my gunner was quickly expending all his ammunition on the ridge line. The armored vehicles did as the battle drill goes and stopped in the kill zone to lay down suppressive fire while the light skins tried to move out of the kill zone. It was useless to fire out of the windows because we were looking at a rock wall that went straight up. After we made it out of the kill zone all vehicles began pulling up in various stages of destruction all had made it out except one but the driver had jump in another vehicle as it passed by. The driver was later decorated for heroism for saving his squad leader. My senior medic quickly administered first aid to the seriously wounded. The commander was on the radio calling for

medical evacuation support and sending situational reports via the tactical satellite radio. After casualties were evacuated we moved the destroyed vehicles to open areas so they could be lifted out. Once vehicles were lifted out we gathered our forces and made the move to the border checkpoint where the commander conferred with the Pakistani Colonel. **They talked about how the "miscreants" were not** using the order area in Lwara to cross. My commander was annoyed at the stone wall he was up against. We all knew full well the Lwara area was highly used by insurgents and their Al-Qaeda leaders. Later on the Battalion **Commander would say "I believe** that unless the Pakistanis get serious about the Waziristan area there would be no rest for south eastern Afghanistan." (Howard, February 2004 after action review).

Once we returned to the FOB we all attended the after mission AAR to break down our courses of action. My commander laid out how he used the more vulnerable target to lure out the insurgents then once the attack or ambush was underway the follow on element aggressively flanks using wadis or other lines of drift. We never used this TTP again.

there or at least not come back to that particular area. I think that it was mainly from fear of reprisals from the Taliban who would threaten them against having anything to do with us. In the past we had been attacked with rockets and mortars there some of which would impact in side their compounds. **"They have built the military base near our village to use the village as a firewall to protect themselves. We don't want them here,"** (Khan, 2004 Afghan locals wary over new US base on Pakistan border)

#### CONCLUSION

All Soldiers must have leadership with situational awareness at all times. When possible Senior leaders should accompany juniors to ensure the big picture is being taken into focus. Leaders have to take ownership in their part of the planning and mission in order to facilitate over all accomplishment. Leading is more than being the one out front or the one giving the orders. Leaders come from all levels. If the lowest ranking Soldier prevents the unit from going astray and says something about it then that Soldier has demonstrated leadership. Never discount contributions from any source even if our ego gets bruised. Plans are only as good as their contingencies, because once the enemy votes the plan changes.

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