

Running head: Changing to Meet the Mission

Personal Experience Paper

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Abstract

This paper describes personal experiences, key events and lessons learned during assignment to the 75th Ranger Regiment. It specifically discusses and debates established roles within Army SOF and highlights repercussions in Operation Desert Storm. It is not particular to operational lessons learned in a traditional manner but rather how forces could or should evolve to meet their requirements. I focused on preconceived roles, reluctance in adaptation and use of the Battle Focused Analysis to evolve to meet the mission.

Changing to Meet the Mission

The benefit of being a Senior NCO is that you get to look back over the course of your career and critique with hindsight. That is always easier than being in the stress of the moment, working with foresight achieving results. I had the benefit of spending over ten years in the 75th Ranger Regiment from 1990-2001 and I can speak to unit roles and responsibilities and how they frequently leave us in an ineffective position. Sometimes this is well within our control, other times I have been able to clearly see it, but to force a change feels like turning a battleship around in a river.

I entered the 1st Ranger Battalion complex at Hunter Army Airfield, Georgia in the dead of summer. Upon receiving assignment after completion of the Ranger Orientation Program (ROP), I remember thinking that Georgia was hot, but beach breezes would make this an ideal assignment. I was dead wrong. It felt more like a hair-dryer and the stress of showing up cold to a leadership position within this unit had my heart pounding.

Known as “imports”, outsiders that show up to the Ranger Battalions and take leadership roles from aspiring specialists and corporals are not heralded; they are resented. For this, my penance was cold shoulders and a continuous proving of physical prowess, ability to shoot and make decisions under extreme stress were essential to master. Luckily, I was a little faster than the next Ranger, shot a little tighter group than other NCO's and fell pretty naturally into my first night combined arms live fire at a deployment for training in Fort Campbell, Kentucky. The energy was intoxicating and competition between peers was the norm. We fired more ammunition in that single three-week deployment than I had fired in an entire year in previous units. We conducted more effective and practical training under the best leaders I'd ever seen, including then First Sergeant Michael T. Hall. Compared to my 82nd Airborne Division

experiences, I finally felt like I was doing what I came in for. I knew from the first time I led my rifle team of Rangers in a flanking maneuver against a bunker that I was in the right place.

.The thing about a Ranger Battalion is their perception of the world around them. We received fresh privates and indoctrinated them from arrival, forcing a fit or sending them packing. In some cases, this was abused, as were the privates themselves. Being an import and not ever experiencing a real “smoking” I didn’t feel right about doing it to others. Instead, I followed my mentors and did my best to emulate the NCO’s that demanded their squads master every skill associated with the job. The specialists were known as ‘the mafia’, and all I had to worry about was making sure my squad was hard, trained, accountable and ready.

What I didn’t know was where we really fit into the national equation. This level of knowledge is sometimes assumed wasted on young soldiers. In my case, I believe that it pumped us up and made us the ideal shock troops for the Nation. That was not the case, as I later learned of the Delta Force, and gained minor glimpses into their world of standards far more strict and mature than any I had seen in Battalion.

When I had been in my unit for approximately a year, we got an opportunity to experience what seemed like a lottery winning; we were going to combat. Saddam Hussein made a grave error in choosing to invade Kuwait, and it was already obvious by President Bush that we would react militarily. It felt like a rush to act before Saddam could change his mind and we were ready, but our deployment did not come quickly.

I can vividly remember the long hours of watching the news and the other units around me deploying for what felt like years. It certainly served to tighten our already well-prepared proficiency-level, but we were seeing the largest troop buildup since the Vietnam War, on television.

Finally, the day came when our Battalion Commander, then LTC Robert Wagner gathered us before COL Dave Grange, then the 75th Ranger Regimental Commander, or “RCO” as he was heralded for our ‘Ranger Standard’ command brief. COL Grange was hard, and his words echoed in our minds as he spoke them; “target-rich environment”; we eagerly listened to every word. I expected that this deployment would look like any I had experienced during Emergency Deployment Readiness Exercise’s (EDRE) in the 82nd, but that was not the case. We were late into December and our deployment date was still not settled. RUMINT of disagreements between GEN Swarzkopf and GEN Downing, then a significant Special Operations Commander, were rampant, and that added a dose of reality to our situation. We learned that our force structure would not be a full Ranger Battalion but rather a single company with two augmenting platoons, mine and a weapons platoon. At that time, weapons platoons consisted of light mortars and a 90mm antitank section; my platoon was a standard three rifle squad with three M60 machinegun teams. We measured this subconsciously against a reputedly experienced and significant foreign army on essentially their terrain, but we never spoke of it. We were ready. Finally the day came, and we deployed.

Arrival in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was surreal but grossly different than I expected. I was accustomed to the Intermediate Staging Base (ISB) concept, but this was not the norm. During training, it felt like the world revolved around our Ranger Battalion and tents, latrines and other facilities seemed to magically appear. Here, it was definitely different. We raised the tents, filled the sandbags and dug slit trenches until our medics oversaw our construction of “piss-tubes” and the same latrines I remembered from Vietnam War movies were being burned off and filled the air as it did 20 years earlier. But this wasn’t Vietnam and we were a Ranger Battalion. Something seemed terribly wrong. It was much like being on Division Ready Force (DRF) 9,

when we rigged other Battalion's vehicles for heavy drops, yet we walked when we were in the field. After thousands of sandbags were filled for Scud bunkers, hundreds of rolls of concertina emplaced to keep Saudi's from roaming our perimeter and our daily priorities of work were established, intensive training began.

We were in great shape from running at nearly 6000 feet. We did road marches, Indian runs, built expedient gyms and pushed ourselves for when the big operations came. We would be sharp and we were always ready.

Nearly a month later, we had done countless night maneuver live-fire exercises, but no missions came. We saw other SOF units around us conducting undisclosed operations allegedly 'deep in enemy territory'. We heard of Special Forces Teams making contact with Iraqi Forces and sustaining firefights until they could be exfiltrated. We even heard of a Brit soldier that experienced a break in contact following a vicious firefight between his small reconnaissance team and evaded from Iraqi territory all the way into Syria. Still, our warning orders came but revolved around a makeshift multi-purpose range wadi not far from our ISB.

Finally, deep into the air war, we were given an operation to plan. We planned concurrently with another platoon that would lead a series of infrastructure-destroying raids. We waited patiently, monitoring their operation and made minor corrections to our operation based on their after-action review. We drilled and prepared for the operation until it was absolutely perfect. We anxiously awaited infiltration the following night.

I still remember standing next to our designated UH-60 Blackhawk, the name 'Heavy Metal' painted on the exterior of the air intakes. I was finally going to conduct a raid as a Ranger into enemy territory. Better yet, my fire team was lead into a particularly important section of the target, and that meant I was on point out of the helo.

I still remember the disappointment and disbelief over the AN/PRC-126 radios. As if a loudspeaker, they all crackled the same command: "Stand Down! Cease-fire called minutes ago". My heart sank. I felt cheated. In disgust, we marched back to our tents with Ranger Standard discipline.

This made me think hard about perceptions and roles. Why were we not used at a critical time in our nation's history? Were we not the formidable shock troops I thought we were? Arguably, the fact remains that we were the largest quick-reaction force capable of rapid-response in support of National objectives because we were smaller, lighter and delivered more force per capita than any other unit in the Army. Having lived as a paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne Division, I knew we did similar missions but we executed them with far greater decentralization and our proficiency was unmatched because we didn't perform support cycles. We were always either preparing, deploying for training or recovering from deployment. We were also significantly better equipped than the 82nd Airborne at that time.

Having watched the Ranger Regiment evolve from just the years I spent there, it is apparent to me that Ranger Leaders are resilient and rapidly adjust their missions through a Battle-Focused Analysis that allows them to break from status-quo through their lessons learned. In fact, though the mission of the 75th Ranger Regiment still beckons back to their charter in that Rangers are the very best light infantry in the world (Abrams Charter, circa 1974), their proficiency-level, capability and mission requirements have turned a malleable Ranger Regiment into a self-contained Task Force. Their current construct enables them to organically support their missions (with exception to air mobility) in both current combat theaters.

In this text, I have discussed my personal experiences and the generalities of unit roles and evolutions. I would encourage any senior leader but implore senior NCO's to take a hard look in

their pre-deployment METL tasks in the form of a Battle-Focused Assessment. This will assist units in better training their forces to meet the challenges they face that in many cases directly conflict with the culture their roles and units bestow upon them. I know the 75th Ranger Regiment missed out on an important point in our nation's history because they were neither aware of what their role in a war such as Operation Desert Storm would entail nor did they impart to senior leaders what their roles and contributions could be. The Desert Storm experience caused many NCOs in my company to attend various assessment and selection opportunities outside of the Regiment to ensure their involvement in the next major fight or war.. Many more of them stayed, and led in significant roles that matured the Ranger Regiment and broke paradigms that short 5-10 year memories tend to embrace. CSM Michael T. Hall is one of those leaders who went on to lead the 75th Ranger Regiment, the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) and the US Army Special Operations Command (USASOC). He made an indelible mark on my career, my approach and our Army.

References

Hall, Michael T. (CSM Ret.), Command Biography, USASOC Archives;

<www.USASOC.Army.mil>

US Army Publication, Battle Focused Training, FM 7-1, Date 2007

Appendix

Each Appendix appears on its own page.

Footnotes

¹Complete APA style formatting information may be found in the Publication Manual.

Table 1

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Caption of figure

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