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Operation Enduring Freedom – Philippines

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### Abstract

This paper is an account of my experiences as a Special Forces Team Sergeant during Operation Enduring Freedom – Philippines. I will cover the permission training, forward staging, deployment, the obstacles we encountered as our missions drastically changed throughout the deployment, and how a trained experienced Special Forces Detachment handled all that was thrown at it.

In 2001, the First Special Forces Group (Airborne) received a deployment order to the Republic of the Philippines in support of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) as part of Operation Enduring Freedom – Philippines (OEF-P). We were to deploy to a small island in the southern Philippines in the Celebes Sea. Basilan is part of the Sulu Archipelago and is five miles south of the southern tip of the Zamboanga Peninsula of Mindanao. The island has a land area of 495 square miles. The people of Basilan generally live around the perimeter of the island, as the center is mountainous jungle. The island's population is predominately Muslim. Basilan had a notorious reputation because the terrorist group Abu Sayyaf (ASG) ran the island. The Abu Sayyaf Group is an Islamic terrorist group with links to Al Qaeda. This terror group had little or no respect for life and was infamous for kidnapping, torture, and murdering anyone who opposed them. The ASG's favorite targets were westerners and Christians who were unlucky enough to venture into their area. They would normally decapitate their captives and send their heads to their families in a plastic bag or leave them where they would be found, usually with a note attached saying "Death to infidels!" This should give you an idea of the type of people that we were to encounter.

My battalion, 3/1 Special Forces Group(SFG) was to be the second rotation to the island. We were to relieve our 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, which is forward deployed in Okinawa, Japan and was to be the first in the chute. This was to be the first of many six-month rotations into theater. As it typically happens, there were many problems with the first rotation getting into country. The biggest difficulty encountered was with the political aspect. This was not an invasion. We were going there to work through, by, and with the Armed Forces

of the Philippines (AFP). We were to train, advise, and assist the AFP on counter insurgency operations, and the Abu Sayyaf Group was our target. Although we were there at the request of the Philippine government, they were not sure to what extent they wanted us involved. The defining of the rules of engagement (ROE) between the Philippine and the United States governments delayed the initial deployment of 1/1 SFG. They finally got on the ground four months later and were just being aligned with their Philippine counterparts when two month later we were to replace them.

While all of the fine points were being worked out, my detachment was planning and preparing for our rotation. I had just returned to the 3d Battalion from my almost five years of being stationed in Okinawa with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion. When I got back I was tasked with “standing up” a new detachment; however, it wasn’t really a new detachment because a few years earlier each company was down sized by one team each. The war on terrorism increased the need for Special Forces (SF) again and so we were standing up these teams again. I had five guys and a Chief Warrant Officer (CW3) on this new team. Of these, one was a brand new guy and one had been out of the SOF for a while as a recruiter when the brilliant idea of sending SF guys out to be Recruiters and Drill Sergeants came to be. This was a bad idea because your typical SF guy that went through Selection and Assessment, the SF Qualification Course and Language School just to get on a team was now being pulled from the SF community and being sent to do something that they had no interest or desire in doing, especially after all they went through just to get here. It was a rough go getting this team up. The team had been “mothballed” for almost five years and there were serious equipment shortages that we had to sort out. One of the advantages that I had was that many of my teammates from Okinawa were rotating back and were coming back to the

3d Battalion. I had numerous meetings with both the Battalion CSM and the Company SGM and was finally able to convince them to get many of these experienced SF NCOs assigned to my team. I thought that I would have it made because I was getting four of my friends on my team again, and the only difference was now I was the Team Sergeant. This was my first mistake. Never take over a team when the majority is made up of peers and friends. The positive side was that they were very experienced and needed little to no supervision and were able to accomplish all challenges that confronted them.

My detachment was a direct action team and our focus was on urban combat and close quarters battle (CQB). Basilan Island is a jungle and has very rugged terrain. We would have to get back to basics and get down to some serious good old fashioned patrolling in the jungle. The pre-mission training went well with all of the team gelling into a closer unit as the training progressed. The team's spirits were high as it looked as if we were going to get into the fight. Until then, First Group seemed left out of the War on Terror and this was the source of a lot of frustration among the teams. There were a few teams that were deployed in CENCOM, but the majority of the teams were "chomping on the bit" waiting to do their part in the global fight.

The pre-deployment phase was proceeding as usual; there was a sense of excitement as we neared the deployment date. We received notice that the deployment was being slid left and we were to leave a month earlier than planned. This presented a completely different set of obstacles as we had men in schools that we needed to take with us, we had to reschedule the load out and still try to work in down time with the families prior to a long deployment. We were accustomed to having the deployments slide right

more often than not, and this kind of caught us flat footed, but in true SF fashion we were able to get all that we needed done and still allow for time off with the families.

The first step of the deployment phase was movement to, and then staging out of Okinawa and conduct of the final preparation and rehearsals prior to movement into country. One of the problems that we encountered there was the inability to move about on the island. The Japanese government does not allow us to move freely without an Okinawan driver's license. We were able to get enough people licensed to get the company moving and another problem was resolved. Training on Okinawa is unique unto itself, and we were able to get around all of this and finish the last bit of the permission training. The company started to deploy to EAAB Air Base in Zamboanga City, Mindanao, RP. From there, our movement consisted of a mixture of planes, trains, boats and buses to get us to our base camps. During this time one of the two guys that I sent forward as the advon was promoted to Master Sergeant and was moved to another team to take over as the Team Sergeant. That left me down one prior to getting started. I lost another guy to a family emergency a day later and this was not a good sign. The team went forward and my senior engineer and I moved the equipment via a convoy to the base. The team that we were to replace had left three days before we got there so there was no real hand off to speak of, just what my advon got for the two days that he was with them. We were starting from the ground up. We were paired up with a Philippine Marine Force Recon battalion during this operation. We met with their chain of command, toured the area, and that was it for the night. We were going to start fresh in the morning. A week or so earlier the ASG had captured an American missionary husband and wife team (the

Burnhams) and were holding them somewhere in the Mindanao area. At approximately 0300 my counterpart, the Philippine battalion CSM, woke me and was trying to inform me that they were to move out to link up with a task force to take part in the search for the Burnhams. I asked when and was told soon. What was lost in the translation was that soon meant now because I looked out the window and saw the last of them load the vehicle and depart the area. There was a company minus sized element remaining behind to continue the work with us. I contacted my higher and they were unaware that this was occurring. This would be a recurring theme during this deployment. The Philippines seemed to be operating on a very different sheet of music.

Part of the ROE was that we were only to go out with the battalion headquarters, specifically the battalion commander. The battalion commander for this unit was in Luzon, and as I was to find out later, would not be coming down here at all. This would make my job very difficult as the ROE constraints were effectively tying our hands. We continued with the evaluation of our host nation unit in anticipation of the future combat operations that we were told were two weeks away. As the mission progressed, we continued training with the remaining Force Recon element in all of the tasks that we had identified that they needed to work on. We were also concurrently conducting area assessments of our AOR. This allowed us to get out with the people and let them and the ASG know that we were aggressively out. I inquired daily as to the status of the return and was told it would be another week. The frustration level was high as we knew what needed to be done, but we weren't able to get there due to the ROE and the obstacles that the Philippine government was putting up. The Group Commander paid a visit to all of the AOBs and ODAs on the island to give us the road ahead from the source. The brief went well and it was at this

time that I explained to him that we were looking for work as our partner unit didn't look to be returning to Basilan at all. The commander did have another mission and I was to link up with him in a week for a briefing on the next task.

I linked up with the commander that following week and was briefed that they needed a school set up to train what amounted to a National Guard unit. It was at this point the commander asked if I wanted it. I really was unsure of what to do. We had been on the island for two and a half months and were not in combat yet, and if I took this, we were not going to get into combat at all. Then again, I didn't know if the Force Recon was going to be coming back and I was certain that the Battalion Commander would not. I was told that he hated the island and all of the Muslims that lived there. I was clued in by my commander that the combat operations that we were waiting on probably would not be approved during our rotation. This made the decision a lot easier, and a week later, my team was moved to Zamboanga to set up this school. The team performed flawlessly and was able to get the school up and running in two weeks with literally a shoestring budget. That is what we do best. We make things happen.

We were then tasked with running five MEDCAPs in the Zambaonga area. As we soon learned, there were a lot of ASG there as many had fled Basilan. I then set out looking for the "bad" parts of town, as my intention was to set up in the ASG's backyard and give the locals the medical attention that they desperately needed. I was also daring the ASG to try something that would show the locals that the ASG were the cowards, and that we knew they were, while at the same time winning the hearts and minds of the local populace. The set up of these MEDCAPS fell on the shoulders of my medic. He accomplished this task flawlessly. These were large scale with over 100 local doctors and

nurses both military and civilian. Non-government organizations (NGO) health care providers were providing not only basic medical care but also eyeglass screening and full dental treatment. There was also 75 plus US medical personnel from the Army, Navy and Air Force. My medic orchestrated a well-oiled machine. I managed the security for these operations. The security was set up in concentric rings. These rings consisted of elements from the Philippine conventional army (armor and infantry), the local police for each region that we were setting up in, and the Philippine Navy SEALs and my team formed the inner ring. Working with the SEALs was a pleasure. These guys were truly professional, they spoke English well, and had a similar mindset to my team. We integrated extremely well with these guys.

These missions continued and the team was busy with all of the planning and the preparation needed to continue with these operations. By this time, I had lost another three team members to family emergencies and was down to just four guys including myself. We were near the end of the rotation and were scheduled to leave the next week. It was at this time that I found out that we fell off the redeployment schedule and were being extended. I was contacted by the JSOTF J-3 and was briefed on the next new mission that we were assigned. We were to pick up as a Personal Security Detail (PSD) for the civilian and NGOs that were there to do the assessments for the civil affairs projects slated to begin on Basilan in a few months. I informed the J-3 that we were down to four guys, but that still didn't dissuade him. I was told that he needed experienced shooters that he could count on and that we were it. We finished these PSD details and were rotated out. The replacement force was down-sized and the three teams that were on Zamboanga were replaced by one ODA(+). These guys were to encounter a lot more problems because as

we were on the way out, the ASG had stepped up a bombing campaign and launched a few rockets at us as we were on the airfield awaiting the exfil bird. The Team Sergeant was killed a week later and the Detachment Commander severely injured when the restaurant that they were eating in was hit by a suicide bomber on a motorcycle.

The NCOs on my team performed just as they were trained to do. I couldn't have asked for a better team, and despite being hit with an unusually high number of family emergencies, we still accomplished all missions that we were given. We also received accolades for the execution of the MEDCAPS. I was told by the head of the NGOs that he had never felt so safe when doing these, and that he actually had to turn away offers from health care providers wanting to go on the MEDCAPS with the US Army Special Forces. As with all long deployments, there were times of frustration, especially when we felt our hands were tied by the restrictive ROE, but as is the nature of the Special Forces, these were taken in stride by the true quiet professionals that we are.