

Running head: TF 2-7 BATTLE INTO BAGHDAD AIRPORT

TF 2-7 Battle into Baghdad Airport

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Abstract

In modern day combat, it is sometimes easy to see how everyday Soldiers doing their jobs are mistaken for heroes. I encountered one of these situations on 3 April 2003. What appeared in the eyes of many to be a heroic act was just a time in my life when I knew what right was and I executed. On this day, I found myself in a position that required me to lead an element of approximately eighty wheeled vehicles through four consecutive ambushes. When the day was over, approximately sixty enemy soldiers became martyrs for their country and I left carrying a badge of honor.

On 3 April 2003, Task Force (TF) 2-7 halted to refuel at Objective Peach, just south of Baghdad. My company commander, CPT Szymanski (Black 6), went forward to the Battalion TOC to receive a FRAGO to our current operations while the XO and I controlled the refueling of our company, B 2-7. Upon returning to the company with only half of the vehicles refueled, CPT Szymanski disseminated the order that we were going to be moving rapidly into the Baghdad International Airport (BIAP) and our company would be the spearhead. I recall the elation of becoming the lead element for the main assault into Baghdad.

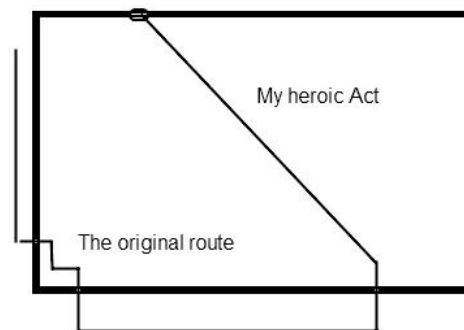
The Battalion lined up in a standard column formation and the Battalion Commander, LTC Scott E. Rutter (Able 6), chose to move the S3, Major Coffee (Able 3), to the front to assist B Co with the assault into the Airport. We began our movement under the cover of darkness with the entire TF in tow but we ran into a major movement problem around 2200. Without any warning, the TF encountered a canal crossing situation. MAJ Coffee informed us that this would not be a difficult crossing for the TF as long as everyone followed the leader. The route that he wanted us to take was to go over the canal and then hang a left and then an immediate right followed by an immediate left and back over the canal and a final right. Upon hearing this on the company net, CPT Szymanski and I were completely confused. I attempted to draw on a piece of paper what MAJ Coffee transmitted but I could not logically determine the route. CPT Szymanski came back on the net and asked ABLE 3 to clarify the route one more time. MAJ Coffee came back on the net with the exact same instructions a second time.

*At times leaders may feel that their communication skills are adequate but combat breeds confusion.*¹ CPT Szymanski and I were completely confused over the previous order. I believe that I was more upset with the situation than he was because I felt that our company was beginning to delay the entire assault on the airport. After what seemed like an hour, but was

¹ Italic remarks used throughout this paper are lessons learned or mental insights.

probably closer to 10 minutes, we had finally achieved getting our first vehicle through the passage. At this rate, there was no way we could make the airport under the cover of darkness so I chose to try to find an alternate route for the Task Force.

When I look back, I contemplate what in the world could have possibly gone through my mind. I quickly called Bushmaster 6 and let him know that Band-Aid (my medic M113) and I were going to find an easier route to move the convoy. I moved parallel to the canal for about 300 meters before I found another crossing. I turned left over the crossing and began to head at an angle towards the lead Bradley in the convoy. I called the first vehicle in the convoy to ensure that he would not attempt to engage me as I made the movement towards the front of the column. He could not positively identify my vehicles, so I thought quickly of what to do and told my driver and my Band-Aid to turn on their white lights. This would give CPT Szymanski an idea of what route to lead the rest of the company through and it would allow the lead vehicle to identify me just a little better. Because we were traveling through high grass, my driver and I were not aware that we were heading straight towards the other side of the canal system.



My M113 went from 20 MPH to a dead stop as we flipped over sideways into a 15-foot ditch. The .50 cal swung around connecting with my face and threw my Combat Vehicle Crewman (CVC) helmet onto the side of the M113; the silence of the engine was deafening. My Band-aid called the company commander and quickly dismounted to provide aid to my crewmembers and me. I felt that I had just placed myself into a position that I could no longer

be an effective leader for my unit. I had turned myself into just another Soldier. I realized that as quickly as my vehicle went from 20 MPH to zero I had also gone from a leader to a hindrance. The medic was running towards me and I could not allow him to see me like this. I jumped up onto the side of my vehicle and hollered at the medic to take his vehicle back and link up with the company. My medic protested and said that he would stay with me while the company made the movement north. I began to pull myself together now and realized that the company could not go on without the medic. I finally threatened him to get back in his vehicle and link up with the company. When the medic began to leave, the TF realized that the road was impassable and Able 6 ordered a new lead to the column turning the entire formation around. CPT Szymanski and a small element that made it across the canal continued to push forward north into BIAP.

Silence was the only thing that my crew and I could hear now. I told my driver to pull out all of his grenades and his M203 and establish a small hasty position at the front of the vehicle. Meanwhile I did the same thing at the back of the vehicle. My driver and I pledged that no matter what happened from that point on, neither of us would go down without firing everything that we had on board and destroying the M113. Again, the silence of the combat environment was deafening. About an hour went by before we began to hear the gunfire from the Airport. I reflected upon my military experience and myself at that moment and realized that my men were up there in a firefight without my medic or me. *The sense of helplessness in a leader is one of those feelings that a person will never forget.* Several hours went by before I began to hear what sounded like two Bradley Fighting Vehicles (BFVs). My head was hazy from the hit by the .50 cal and battle fatigue was setting in, but I could hear the distinctive whine of two BFVs. I jumped onto the RTO's radio and began to call on my company net. I could only hope that two of my vehicles were possibly stuck on the initial route attempting to get

around the canal.

After several attempts on the radio, I heard one of the best sounds that I could imagine. It was SFC Miller (Green 4), who was pulling out SSG Maccabee (Green 3). I told Green 4 that as soon as he gets the vehicles freed up then I would need them both to come forward to pull security around my vehicle. Green 4 arrived at my location in about 20 minutes and established a perimeter around my vehicle with his dismounts; we began to assess the situation, and hope that daylight would come soon so we could see the damage to the vehicle. At daybreak, we could now see the situation we were in and it did not look good. I contemplated several times calling for a loss of the vehicle but I knew that destroying the M113 this far into the combat zone could result in more harm for the Battalion than it needed. I told Green 3 and Green 4 that we had to get it out. After several attempts, Green 4 came up with the idea to create a tandem pull. This is a situation where two vehicles connect themselves together with tow cables in an attempt to increase the pulling power of the lead vehicle. *Always remember that many good ideas will come from your experiences in training.* Within 20 minutes, we had freed the vehicle and started its engine.

I knew at that point there was only one thing left to do and that was to link back up with the company. The problem that now faced us was that I did not have the new route into the airport and it was just two BFVs and me. We drove back on the route that we originally came up and picked up a stranded M1 tank and crew that had somehow become detached from the main effort. We continued back down this route and ran into CPT Knight (Able 4). CPT Knight was trying to gather all of the soft skin vehicles back into the main convoy in order to push to the airport with the Task Force support element. I did not want to stop and help Able 4 at this time because the only thought in my mind was to try to get back up with my company; after all, they needed me. However, the professional side of me said that I had a CPT on the

ground and I had to do what was right and assist him any way that I could. I decided that I would help him as long as it did not take too long and I could link back up with my company. Within an hour we had recovered several wheeled vehicles and my Band-aid vehicle, who had not linked up with my company before they hit the airport. I told Able 4 that I would lead the convoy with my two BFVs up front, followed by my M113 and Band-aid. The trail vehicle of the column would be the M1 tank that I just recovered. Any sane man might say that the tank should go up front but I had to get back to my company and I could not allow a tank to slow me down. CPT Knight agreed with my plan and we began to roll the convoy into four of the bloodiest moments that I experienced in Iraq.

We started to move up Highway 8 and it seemed as though I would link back up with my company within the next hour. *When everything seems fine in combat, begin to plan for something to happen.* Within minutes, an RPG exploded on the front slope of the lead vehicle. We were now inside a hasty ambush composed of about 30+ Iraqi soldiers. My two BFVs and I quickly conducted a basic ambush battle drill to obliterate everything within the area. I steadily controlled the situation because it felt more like an event from the National Training Center than a real ambush. Able 4 kept calling on the Administrative + Logistic (A+L) net to continue to push through the area, but I knew that if we left too many enemy soldiers in fighting condition then the soft skin vehicles behind us would not make it through unscathed. I had wounded or killed over half of the enemy in this ambush because they continued to concentrate their fire on the two Bradleys and did not even notice that my vehicle was the one creating most of the havoc.

As we continued to travel down the road, I called for a SITREP from Able 4, who was located about half way back in the formation. Able 4 informed me that all of the vehicles made it through, but reminded me that when dealing with soft skin vehicles in an ambush, the key to survival is usually speeding through it. I acknowledged this and informed my BFVs that we

needed to modify our normal procedures for ambushes. *Doctrine works great until the enemy begins to fire.* We drove on further down the road when I started to get the feeling that something was not right with the highway ahead. Green 4 acknowledged the same feeling but neither of us could pinpoint what it was. I told Green 3 to begin to scan heavily on the left side of the road while Green 4 scanned the right. The next overpass was coming up and I had to assume that on the other side of that overpass there would be another ambush waiting for us. These feelings quickly came to reality as the Iraqi soldiers had fortified another ambush. This one was better prepared than the last; an Anti-Aircraft gun that was in a direct fire mode position fired the initial round. Within seconds, my lead track was already disabling that gun with a few precision shots of armor piercing rounds. Green 4 was having some difficulties with the right side of the road because the ambush was too close for the BFV to completely depress and effectively suppress the enemy. This was a prime target for me to assist the BFVs more. I called to Green 4 and told him to begin to suppress the engagement area as he moved through. The sounds of the firing kept the concentration of the Iraqi personnel on Green 4; meanwhile I began to fire from the right side of the column to the left and again wiped out anything that chose to pick up its head. About half way up the column, I saw what appeared to be a large black football coming towards my head. Within a millisecond, I pushed myself back and dodged the round from hitting me. Quickly I swung the .50 cal around to engage the combatant who tried to kill me with an RPG. There was nothing but fury in those next three bursts as I took this individual down. We continued to push through the ambush but Able 4 informed me that we left a couple alive and one of them had engaged and hit one of our truck commanders. The SGT was wrapping up his leg on the move and the convoy was just a little closer to our final destination into the airport. I could begin to hear my commander on the radio and I was eager to step up the pace, but I had an entire wheeled convoy behind me and we all needed to make it

there together.

Green 3 called back to me on the radio and informed me that he did not have the graphics for the route into the airport. I told him that it would not be a problem and that I would lead him with the copy I had. *There is always a reason to make more than one copy of your graphics.* I was unaware at the time that the battalion had modified the route the night before and we were about to go down a route that was not cleared by the main TF. We proceeded around the east side of the airport between two 12-foot high walls. I thought to myself, if the enemy was smart, they could hit the front and the back of the column at one time and completely decimate our convoy. I began to try and figure out what our actions would be if they hit us with another ambush but the time was limited, the lead track reported a civilian with a white flag to our front. My mind could not make the two things add up until I could see the person up the road and realized that attached to the white flag was an RPG. We were now into the third ambush and we had to do something quickly. I ordered Green 3 to fire and we initiated their ambush before they had a chance to. Green 4 identified the main line of the ambush and he and I began to take the line down. Green 3 had stopped firing for the moment but I realized that every time he fired the ambush line shook with fear. I called for Green 3 to continue to fire into the concrete wall. The sound was unbearable. *Creativity on the battlefield is combat multiplier.* Two BFVs firing 25mm and my .50 cal caused the enemy to just fire blindly. Within a minute Green 4 and myself had eliminated over half of the ambush line and the rest of the Republican Guard Force (RGF) were running for their lives as our soft skins pulled into their sectors.

I could now hear Bushmaster 6 clearly and I knew my company was on the other side of the wall. I told Bushmaster 6 our current situation as my RTO reloaded my .50 cal. Bushmaster 6 tried to give me directions to enter the airport but nothing looked the way he was telling me. We realized later that he had entered the airport from a different location than where

I was leading the convoy through. Minutes after my RTO had finished loading the .50 cal, we hit the final ambush of the run. The RGF had a barracks located on the airport and people were running out of the buildings and directly towards our column. There was no way that we could take them all out. The RGF did not assume a military formation; they were just running and jumping out of windows. I told my lead track to push as fast as he could through this and just fire on the run. I came up on the net with Able 4 and told him that we had to go as fast as we could through this one because stopping was not an option for the column. I then jumped back on the radio with CPT Szymanski and told him that the sounds of our guns were where we needed an opening to get through this wall. Black 6 informed me that he was sending out a linkup element and we needed to continue to push up the road to link up with the TF. Within minutes, we were through the final ambush and the wheeled convoy composed of over 80 soft skin vehicles was in position to begin their support effort for TF 2-7.

I remember when CPT Szymanski conferred with SFC Miller, SSG Maccabee and CPT Knight and decided that my actions were worthy of a silver star. All I could think was how moments in time when a Soldier tries to be a hero, he becomes a failure; but when a Soldier simply does his job, he is sometimes referred to as a hero. I did not do anything that any other leader would not have done in my circumstance. I feel that the award I accepted should have been awarded to any one of my fellow Soldiers that day, but I carry it with me to remind me of the heroes that I served with on one of the luckiest days of my life.

Bibliography

Coffey, Rob, Major, USA, S3, 2-7th IN BN

Macabee, John, Staff Sergeant, USA, Section Sergeant, 2-7th IN BN

Miller, Franklin, Sergeant First Class, USA, Platoon Sergeant, 2-7th IN BN

Rutter, Scott, Lieutenant Colonel, USA, Commander, 2-7th IN BN

Szymanski, Stephen, Captain, USA, Commander, B/2-7th IN BN

Outline

Objective Peach

- Refueling operations
- Order to march into BIAP

Canal

- Initial order to cross
- Alternate route
- Linkup with partial element

Next Day

- Excavation of M113
- Linkup with Able4

Ambushes

- Ambush 1
- Ambush 2
- Ambush 3
- Ambush 4

Link up with company