

Luck Favors the Prepared

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Abstract

During a day in October 2005 SGM Mark T. Finney was involved in Operation Iraqi Freedom, in Western Iraq. This story tells about a mission that strayed from initial plans, a firefight ensued and the professionalism of the soldiers on the ground dealt with a bad situation that ended up being successful.

Multiple units, once again, took part in a simple mission that was to last less than twenty-four hours. The mission was targeting an insurgent element that was disrupting the local farmers in the Al-Anbar Province of Iraq. The compound the insurgents were hiding in had been targeted several times before and they continued to use it. The leader of the insurgent force had been captured previously and released so they knew our tactics. The plan was to wait until night and assault from two different directions. If nothing was found on target the assault element would conduct a false ex-filtration and occupy some vacant houses near compound until the next period of darkness. The reason for staying was to catch the insurgents returning home during the day, which they had previously done after their compound was attacked.

The assault element would be two platoons of Infantry, a company of mechanized Infantry as the reaction force, various air assets and command elements to include a General Officer and his CSM. The reaction force would be ten to fifteen minutes away while we were on target. Aircraft would be on stand-by in case the ground force became overwhelmed.

As we approached the target movement was spotted from the air one kilometer away; it was three men crawling through a field. The ground force continued towards the compound. Once at the compound the assault element cleared several buildings in and around the compound. There was no one around and it appeared to have been vacant for quite some time despite the intelligence report that it was a bed down location.

After the initial assault one of the nearby neighbors exited his house; upon questioning he said there was a gas station up the road where insurgents were known to frequent. This gas

station was close to where the three men in the field were last seen; I was part of the element sent to check out the store. As we approached the store we set in a security element to watch over the field where the three men were. Finding the store empty we expanded our search and found trails at the back of the store leading into a reed bed in the direction of the men spotted earlier. A decision was made to search the field for any signs of a hideout where the insurgents have been known to cache weapons and supplies.

The search element had moved approximately two hundred meters when the three men started moving again. This time we were close enough to be seen; the men started firing their weapons. A gunship was called in to quell the threat because they were outside of effective firing range. After several runs the gunship reported the threat was eliminated. The search element moved in to assess and see if it was the men we were after. As we approached the first man he drew a pistol and was engaged. The second man never moved until he was grabbed and was detained unharmed by the air support. The third man was moving in a canal in a field three hundred meters away. At the end of the second field were two hideouts dug into the ground each containing weapons that were disposed of. Leading away from one of the hideouts was a trail that lead toward the main road where the gas station and main compound were located. All the elements moved back to the compound to discuss what we had found and formulate a plan.

The decision, although not unanimous, was to remain at the compound. The original plan was to stay if we did not find anything. Although we did not find anything at the compound, we had two dead enemy, one captured and a weapons cache destroyed. Some say

the decision was made to stay because of the command element on the ground at the time we were planning. The fact was that we were unsure of who was in the field and/or if they were part of the group we were after. The mission continued and during our false ex-filtration the higher command element flew back to base. The ground elements moved into a couple of vacant houses to hideout during the day. We did not expect what happened next.

As the sun rose the elevated road was higher than it appeared at night. It was elevated approximately twelve feet high on an embankment thirty meters from the house we occupied; even from the second floor we could not see the other side of the road. As the morning passed the vehicle traffic on the road picked up. From the second floor you could see cars stopping and talking to one another. At the other end of the road was another market area where people began to gather.

It was noted by several of us that the same car had passed many times within ninety minutes and the last pass looked directly at the house we were in. The other element was one hundred meters to our rear further off of the road. That same car was headed toward us again, only slower, when suddenly it turned into the driveway and two men with machine guns jumped out and moved toward the house we occupied. Our security element, located on the second floor, moved out onto the balcony preparing to engage the two men. As soon as we stepped out gun fire erupted from our nine o' clock to our two o' clock position into the first and second floor as close as twenty five meters out to two hundred meters. Using our rifles and grenades the enemy was held off as close air support was called in.

The first air support to arrive was helicopter gun-ships. After a few gun runs one of the helicopters was hit by small arms fire from the reed bed behind the store we searched the previous night. The helicopter made a safe landing on a nearby farm and was quickly rescued by an infantry unit conducting other operations in the area.

The next to arrive were A-10's ; they had been completely off target on their first run. Due to air restrictions imposed on the air crews the A-10's could not get low enough to spot our location. The A-10's conducted a show of force causing the remaining insurgents to retreat. We were able to get an element on the roof-top where the A-10's were finally able to spot our position.

After the fire-fight was over we re-cleared the surrounding houses and then moved to the vehicles left on the road by the insurgents. In those vehicles we found several machine guns, AK's, RPG's and grenades; all were destroyed.

As we reorganized it was quickly realized we were low on water and had several hours before we would be extracted. Due to the extra activity the night before and the firefight that morning we used more water than expected.

In hind sight luck was on our side. The only injuries, to include air crew, were minor cuts and bruises throughout the entire mission. The plan, in the beginning, was to stay if we did not find anything. After searching more than anticipated and waking up the entire area with our firefight in the field that night, we should have put more into our plan of staying behind.

You cannot hide a platoon size element in a rural community where everyone knows each other. The terrain was not as it appeared once the sun came up. The elevated road allowed insurgents to maneuver on us without our being able to see them. The house we picked to stay in was too close to the road, allowing little time to react to contact. The area itself provided good avenues to escape our attack unnoticed. Based on the fact that there was a security element keeping guard on the second floor, the first floor was a bit more relaxed. This allowed one insurgent from the vehicle in the driveway to close within fifteen meters of the house along a wall the second floor could not see. In the after-action review one of the helicopter pilots found out that aircraft have been shot several times in that area.

We received information from a few detainees we had captured that night that several of the insurgents in the area had family living in the surrounding houses. Having the US Military sitting in their neighborhood might have been a factor in the bold actions displayed by the insurgents that morning.

In the end it was a successful mission and the three men in the field were part of the insurgent group we were looking for. The man who drew the pistol was the insurgent leader for the Al-Anbar Province. The total number of insurgents that attacked us is unknown. From the air the pilots estimated thirty to forty insurgents. The assessment by the ground force was much lower.

Regardless of the fact that there was not unanimous agreement concerning all decisions made during that mission, it was supported from top to bottom. The success was due to the ground force controlling all the external assets and continuous communication within all the

elements. There were several mistakes to take away and lessons relearned. On a positive note, the professionalism of the soldiers involved quickly reacting to the situation at hand turned a possible catastrophe into a successful mission.