

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE PAPER: THE FIRST WAVE

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The First Wave: OIF-1

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Abstract

In the initial invasion of Iraq, B CO 1/502 IN, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division conducted three major ground attacks in the cities of An Najaf, Karbala, and Baghdad. Bravo Company fought for 28 days in ground combat, traveling over 1200 kilometers and ultimately flown to Mosul where we stayed the remainder of our time in country. On 1 May 03, we transitioned to Stability and Support Operations (SASO) in the initial attempt to bring the city of Mosul out of chaos from looters, criminals, and any resistance leftover from Iraq's disbanded Army.

The First Wave

Assuming the Responsibility

As I sat in a room full of First Sergeants in early June 2002, Major General Richard Cody, Commander, 101st ABN DIV briefed us on his expectations of us as First Sergeants. As he continued with his speech, he said, “You will be taking your new companies into combat” and repeated those remarks several times throughout the rest of his briefing. Sitting there reflecting on what the general had said, I wondered when that date would be. Assuming the First Sergeant position of B CO 1/502nd INF REGT was an honor knowing that it was my responsibility to get my men ready for combat. Over the next nine months, the company trained, conducted live fires, and honed our skills as infantryman.

Pre-deployment

Second Brigade Combat Team (BCT) received orders in early December 2002 for deployment to Iraq. The next two months were spent packing mil-vans, con-exes, and rail-heading all of the unit’s vehicles. We also received a large amount of new equipment, things such as DCUs, body armor, new weapon magazines, 24 brand new M249 squad automatic weapons, ballistic goggles, and other miscellaneous equipment.

During those last couple of months, the commander and I worked diligently preparing the unit for combat. A big focus was the families, not knowing how long we were going to be gone or what laid ahead for us in Iraq put an enormous amount of strain on the families. We primed our Family Readiness Group (FRG) through many meetings making contact rosters, setting up check writing classes for the younger wives, daycare, and anything else that would add comfort to the families.

Updating and managing personal data for the unit and all the request for information by higher headquarters although necessary, was a big challenge. It seemed at the time that we were sending up the same information to the Battalion on a daily basis. Having all the new electronic technology that we have today, I suggested to the Battalion Command Sergeant Major (CSM) that all First Sergeants (1SG) along with S-1 get Personal Data Assistance (PDAs). The CSM took me up on the idea and with the new technology we were able to “hot sink” our PDA’s with each other thus eliminating hand written things being passed back and forth. I had the entire company’s information encrypted and set up on the PDA and I carried it under my body armor so it would not get destroyed. My Platoon Sergeants (PSG) knew exactly where I kept it at all times in case I was wounded or killed in action. If that should be the case, then my senior PSG could step into my position and have the entire company’s information at hand and we would never miss a beat. I will discuss PDAs later on were they really come in handy during the initial battles for Iraq.

On 3 Mar 03, the 2nd Brigade Combat Team (BCT) took off from Campbell Army Airfield enroute to Kuwait. Eighteen hours later my Soldiers found themselves in a part of the world they had only seen on television.

The Invasion

Staging out of Camp New York we flew by UH-60s crossing the border on 26 March to an area just outside of An Najaf, Iraq. On the afternoon of April 1, we loaded trucks for the initial move to the outskirts of the city, an area we called OP1. Getting off the trucks, we began receiving small arms fire from the outskirts of town; the young soldiers looked bewildered and confused. After issuing initial orders to the men, I watch my “boys” lose their innocence, and over the next few minutes, I watch them go from young men to fighting warriors, and ultimately

our next generation of hero's. I knew all the hard relentless training I had put them through was just beginning to pay off.

On 2 April, 2nd BCT with B CO selected as the main effort, we initiated the largest ground attack since Vietnam, almost 30 years, into the town of An Najaf. A two battalion frontal attack with a battalion in reserve we crossed the LD at 1300 in 98 degree heat wearing MOPP level 1. The intelligence we received from the Battalion S-2 was, "there is a 600 man stronghold in the town... anyone wearing black is the enemy". Crossing the 1000-meter open area just to get to the edge of the city is something that I will never forget. OH-58s and Apache helicopters flew overhead along with Bradley fighting vehicles (BFV) and M1 Abrams (M1) tanks in support. The artillery firing HE-VT and smoke covering our assault was an incredible site to see.

B CO lost five Soldiers crossing the open area not to hostile fire but to heat exhaustion. This is where the PDA came into play; without pulling out a big book that is notorious by most leaders, I simply turned on the PDA and all the information that the medics needed was readily available. Making our way through the initial sections of town, we encountered light resistance. What was surprising was many of the enemy forces were not fighting us, but rather going after the BFVs and M1 tanks. Clearing only half of our objectives by 1700, we received word to get to the southern edge of town by nightfall. Putting the company in hasty defensive positions the Commander picked the quickest route out of town. Linking the three platoons up again we conducted accountability and moved out on the route picked for our exfil. With two hours left of daylight we conducted a hasty road march out of town, moving three kilometers in under an hour. With the men tired and on the verge dehydration we set up a perimeter with BFVs and M1 tanks intermixed among us. As night fell on that first night An Najaf, the men stood steadfast,

ready for any attack that may come their way. After spending two days fighting in An Najaf the battalion loaded up on flat bed trailers and headed for Karbala.

Over the next twenty-two days, we fought our way north through Iraq, traveling by trucks, helicopters, buses, and C-130s. Receiving orders from division the 2nd BCT flew to Mosul on 26 April 2003. Upon landing in Mosul, we relieved a Marine detachment in place. Moving into the heart of the city, we could see the signs of heavy fighting that had taken place over the last few days and weeks. Over the next couple of weeks, the company saturated its newly assigned Area of Operation (AOR) bringing order out of chaos.

On 1 May 2003, President George Bush declared the end of major combat operations. Switching from a combat role to a Stability and Support Operations (SASO) role was a huge challenge. The biggest reason was the Rules of Engagement (ROE) had changed. Training our young Soldiers to accept this was a daunting task since in their eyes nothing had changed. The Platoon Sergeants and Squad Leaders understanding their Soldiers frustration with this new ROE did what every Non Commissioned Officer (NCO) does, they led by example. This dynamic show of leadership and poise gave the Soldiers the confidence to carry forth in their new roles.

From June to September we spent getting to know the local religious leaders in the area (known as Imams), shop owners, hotels, and putting together a small number of local informants to gather human intelligence (HUMINT). What we did though, was maintain a somewhat peaceful environment where people could live their lives peacefully. Although resistance was light during this time with only a few direct fire contacts occurring, I was “hit” during a riot by hand grenades along with my bedroom being targeted. My sleeping quarters at the time was on the corner of the building we were occupying. Two insurgents fired RPG-7s putting both rounds into the room, destroying practically everything and injuring four Soldiers in the attack.

In early September, we started experiencing an increase in Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) along our major routes through the city. With this new threat, we started shifting our focus from our stability operations to counter-terrorism operations. These operations continued throughout the remainder of our time in Iraq.

November 23rd will forever be a dark day for B CO and the remainder of 2nd BDE. I lost one of my Soldiers and the Brigade Command Sergeant Major (CSM) in an ambush. At 1400, I received a call that two American Soldiers were lying dead in the street in my AOR. Racing to the area, I could see my Soldier and the CSM laying beside their vehicle covered in blood, motionless. My soldiers although pulling security around the area kept looking at their friend and CSM. As I examined their bodies, I could see they were beat with rocks mutilating their bodies. Their weapons, body armor, and sensitive items were all missing. Picking up my Soldier and the CSM (my close friend and mentor) off the ground, I put them in body bags, knowing this would be the last time that I would every get to see them both again. Over the next three days, B CO swarmed the AOR searching for their killers. After receiving a tip from an informant, we mounted a company size raid and captured the men responsible for their deaths.

December through February, we were deeply focused on hunting down insurgents that were filtering into the area. B CO along with Department of Defense personnel vigorously hunted these people down. Along with our daily local patrols throughout the AOR, force protection and other duties, we were successfully conducting two to three raids a week. Our operational tempo during this time was unbelievable.

I contribute B CO's success to several things. First, the Squad Leaders and Platoon Sergeants led by example throughout our deployment; secondly, our vigilance and steadfast belief that we were making a difference in people's lives, and lastly being submerge in our AOR

rather than living out of a huge base camp that you see today in Iraq. Living among these people on a daily basis, we were capable of knowing the fine details of every road and back ally in our AOR. With this knowledge compiled with our local informants, we were able to maintain a stable environment for the citizens of Mosul. Starting in early January 2004, we conducted a battle hand over with 2nd Infantry Divisions new Stryker Brigade unit. On 4 February 2004, B CO redeployed back to Ft Campbell, KY. Taking those men into combat is one of the highlights of my life, bar none!