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Mass Grave Removal Near Karbala

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Abstract

During the late months of 2004, 1438th MRBC prepared to deploy the company to Iraq as part of OIF 2.5. The mission to Iraq was the second time in a year the unit mobilized to deploy. The first deployment was cancelled when Turkey decided not to support coalition forces. Initially during the second mobilization we were to take the northern part of Iraq. Two weeks before departure we were notified that we would be covering the southern part. This story tells of one mission that a National Guard Bridge Company was tasked with which none of us saw coming as a bridge company. We were to remove the bodies of Kuwaiti civilians kidnapped and murdered 13 years earlier during Desert Storm by Iraq to be used as human shields as coalition forces moved north.

It was almost one year since we had de-mobbed as the first Missouri Guard unit mobilized for Iraq. We knew there was a strong possibility we would go again since we were well trained from the first mobilization. I had been the Company First Sergeant for three years and I knew my Soldiers were ready to finally go. It was a great disappointment to have mobilized the first time and not go. Our mission was to arrive in Turkey and bridge south to Baghdad down the Tigris. When Turkey finally decided not to support troops passing through their country, our ship was re-routed to Kuwait. By the time it arrived in Kuwait, the military had already moved swiftly north to Baghdad. After months of training, we stood down and went home. The second mobilization took us through Ft Leonard Wood to Ft Hood in Texas and back to Ft Leonard Wood for fast water training on the Missouri River. This mobilization was different in that we had a different Commander and mobilization station; however, it was the same with all the issues that First Sergeants deal with. As National Guard units go, we had a vast base of civilian acquired skills which would come into play as our missions proceeded. I am in law enforcement on the civilian side with years of experience in recovering bodies and dealing with death. I was the assistant dive team supervisor of the state underwater recovery team and the main dive instructor. I had been face to face with numerous bodies both on land and in water on difficult dive missions with multiple bodies.

The 1438th MRBC was ready to conduct all bridging systems missions and transport if needed. Its rich history went back to the Korean War as the 1438th Treadway Bridge Company. For this deployment we added a few Soldiers to fill our roster and trained them as Bridge Crewmembers from traditional Combat Engineers. This time we

knew we wouldn't be turned around. We arrived in Kuwait in mid October and moved across the Line of Departure on November 2nd, Election Day. We arrived several hours later in three serials at Tallil Air Base near Nasiriyah. Iraq was set up for bridging operations with two locations for the entire country, Northern Bridge Park and Southern Bridge Park. We were responsible for all bridging in the south. The Engineer Work Line went from Baghdad due east to the Iranian border and from Baghdad Northwest to the Syrian border. Everything south of that was our responsibility and it was a vast area to cover for one bridge unit. When we arrived at the motor pool, the Group Commander and CSM were waiting for us. They immediately gave us a Warning Order for an operation in Fallujah to be conducted in 48 hours. As it turned out we weren't needed for bridging there.

Over the next few days, we settled into the RIP process and organized our equipment. Although we didn't replace an Army bridge company, there was a Marine bridge company that was due to rotate out shortly after we arrived. We fell into the 1140th Engineer Battalion that was from our own Brigade in Missouri and knew many of the Soldiers although we weren't in the same Battalion at home. They were due to leave in three months which made it a short task organization period. On December 7th, we received a short suspense to conduct a Mass Grave Recovery Mission. When I heard the details and what we might find I advised the Commander to send me as the NCOIC. He knew I had the experience to handle the Soldiers' issues if we found multiple bodies.

A bridge company has a piece of equipment which made it the perfect choice for this mission known as a Hyex. It's a Hydraulic Excavator similar to a backhoe except it is much larger and on tracks. Our mission was to link up with a Major from the U.S.

Embassy in Baghdad and excavate a site near Karbala where the suspected mass graves of approximately 30 bodies were believed to be located. The Major had been assigned to recover bodies of citizens from Kuwait all over Iraq. During Desert Storm, Saddam Hussein ordered the kidnapping of Kuwaiti civilians to be used as human shields if the U.S. led coalition forces moved north into Iraq. The total was later determined to be 605 civilians. At the time we received our mission there had been 300 found and 200 of them identified. Our assignment was to convoy to Camp Lima in east Karbala with an escort provided by a Field Artillery unit re-tasked as convoy escort. Once there we were to link up with the Polish Army responsible for the area along with Navy EOD and a Marine security detail. The area of interest was south of Al-Razzaza Lake on the west side of Karbala approximately 30 kilometers. Karbala was a city that continued to have insurgent activity during the period we were excavating which made traveling through the city difficult with large construction equipment.

Our group was initially configured with a command vehicle, a 920 tractor and trailer loaded with the Hyex, a contact truck (maintenance) and a HEMTT Wrecker. I along with the Support Platoon Leader and two Soldiers were in my vehicle, two maintenance Soldiers in the contact truck, two Hyex operators in the 920 tractor and two soldiers from the 1140th EN BN operated the wrecker.

On Day One, we met at a rest over night (RON) site with the FA escorts where we mapped out our route and conducted the convoy brief. In charge of the escort was a Captain who appeared to be experienced in the area we were convoying to. In addition to the vehicles we had, a refrigerated civilian truck assigned and operated by a contractor. We left at noon moving north to FOB Duke where we fueled our vehicles. Shortly after

continuing movement the sun faded away and we travelled the rest of the way to Camp Lima in darkness. A few miles south of Lima we encountered a canal with roads on both sides. Our escorts turned up the first road and we soon became aware it was the wrong road. As our convoy progressed up the road it turned to dirt and then virtually disappeared with low hanging electric lines blocking our movement. The Hyex on the trailer stood too high to pass under any low hanging wires. We were stuck in an area that none of us were familiar with and crowds started forming. Iraqi vehicles began stopping on the opposite road across the canal and we were without an interpreter. The situation was deteriorating rapidly. The 920 Tractor could not turn around and backing up was not feasible due to the twists and turns in the dirt road. Larger crowds were forming and it was time to make a decision. I sent Soldiers out in a 360 perimeter while the FA Captain attempted to locate an exit for us. We discovered a small bridge about 75 meters ahead which was our only choice. We eased the Hyex up to the wire and it fortunately slid past the boom and cleared the wire. It took some time to move the 920 across the bridge but we finally managed to get everything across. We pulled into Camp Lima at about 2100 hrs and within five minutes we heard gun fire from one of the towers on the south side of the camp followed shortly by fire from the north side. This continued all night.

Day Two started with the link of all elements involved in the convoy to the dig site and staging of vehicles. We had met with the Embassy Major and Captain the night before and were ready for the mission. There was something different about the Captain but I couldn't put my finger on it. It was just small things about his wearing of the uniform and weapon handling, the way he spoke and interacted with other Soldiers that made me question in my mind just exactly who he was.

The convoy was led by Navy EOD that would travel 1000 meters ahead followed by the Polish escort. We were in the middle with more escorts than the Marines behind us and then the Poles brought up the rear. Each day we planned to go out and return by different routes so we wouldn't be patterned. I didn't realize how important that was until later. As we travelled to the dig site we went through some very built up areas until we reached the western edge of Karbala. I noticed very quickly that the locals would get far out of the way when they saw us coming. I noted that the Poles had them trained well to do that when they saw us coming.

We reached the turn off to the site which appeared to me to be the desert without a notable road. As we got deeper into the desert our reefer got stuck in the loose sand. Most of the sand had a crust on top but after several vehicles passed it became very loose. After pulling the reefer out we made a decision to leave it there until we needed it. While that operation was underway, I along with my driver coordinated with the Embassy Major and began to conduct a short recon to the site. Following her direction we turned west after passing the cliff and popped over a small hill and I yelled stop as loud as I could. We had almost entered a mine field. I could faintly see where the sand had blown off the top of the mines row after row. We backed out carefully in our same tracks and returned to the reefer. As it turned out she had given bad directions. We marked the area and advised everyone on the team of the danger.

The area the informant described as the mass grave site was in a natural bowl with a one way in one way out entrance/exit. The Marines took up positions on the rim of the bowl and remained there 24 hours a day until the end of the mission for site security. We unloaded the Hyex and the Embassy Major directed us to the suspected location. After

several trenches were dug we thought the earth was much too compacted to have been disrupted 13 years earlier but we continued to dig. We all looked anxiously into the trenches for bone and cloth material as each bucket scraped out the dirt bucket after bucket. About 1300 hrs, two Blackhawk helicopters landed caring the Kuwaiti forensics team. The team was comprised of Scientists, Pathologists and Security Soldiers. We could tell they weren't comfortable being in Iraq. They would be part of our team for the rest of the mission and would stay in our tent back at Camp Lima every night.

At 1500 hrs it was time to load up and leave for the day. I asked why so early and the reply was it wasn't safe to travel through Karbala after darkness. Returning was an eye opener as to how the Poles rolled, as we would come up to each intersection I watched the Poles lay down machine gun fire across the road and the cross traffic would come to a screeching halt and we would roll through without stopping. I know knew why they gave us such a wide berth earlier. Other than that, the convoy back was uneventful and I appreciated the early departure. Much like the evening before, gunfire was heard all night long.

Day Three began with the convoy taking a different route out which was much more rural than the previous day. The Poles were moving very fast and I was impressed with my 920 driver's ability to keep up. The problem with rural areas is again low hanging electric wires. This was not an area to stop and ease past the lines so we rolled on keeping up with the Poles while electric lines sparked brightly as the Hyex struck them.

We dug for several hours that morning and nothing was unearthed. The informant was brought in about noon and there was much discussion about location and poor

memory and how the event took place 13 years earlier. I began to think he really didn't want to tell the truth out of fear.

Day Four when we arrived we discovered that the Marines had been probed over night. More than likely it was out of curiosity to see if we had found anything. The Embassy Major decided we should try a different location within the bowl so we had the Navy EOD team clear the new area. They found several UXO's to collect and took them over a hill and destroyed them creating a large fireball. During the days dig I decided to test my theory about the Captain from the Embassy. I approached him and noted my observations to him and he very quickly admitted he was not a Soldier and that the Embassy thought there would be fewer questions if he wore a uniform. He wouldn't tell me exactly who he worked for and I didn't ask but I suspect it was one of the three letter agencies.

It was a little later in the day when the Major halted the digging and the Hyex maintenance took a little longer than expected. I didn't have a good feeling about the departure time and advised my Soldiers to be on their toes on the return convoy. As we passed the western edge of Karbala we saw an entire grid of lights go out of what we would consider at home of a couple of blocks. I got on the radio and again cautioned my Soldiers. As we passed through a market area and approached an intersection slowing us about two kilometers from the power outage a burst of small arms fire came from our left flank. There were a large number of civilians all around and we couldn't identify the threat. None of the vehicle reported taking hits immediately and we pushed through. The Pols took the opportunity to unleash several machine gun bursts from their gun trucks as we maneuvered through the serpentine intersection. Another lesson learned on

command and control; don't get so focused on what MAY be a single 50 meter target when an ambush (multiple 100 meter targets) is more likely to occur after hours.

Day Five brought in a high level visitor to the dig site. A Polish Army Major General visited the site to observe the progress. He may have had some wisdom to share about the mission and the apparent bad intelligence from the informant. Shortly after his departure we received a change of mission. We returned to Camp Lima and shared a few minutes with the Kuwaiti Forensic Team while we waited for our FA escort. We departed Lima and arrived at FOB Duke late that evening and enjoyed a peaceful night without gunfire.

The Sixth and final day of the mission took us back through Scania and on to Tallil with only one issue of a blown tire on the reefer. We had spent nearly a week working with countries we had never worked with, organizations we had never had any dealings with and on a mission we had never contemplated. What we did successfully accomplish was without a doubt; rule out that there was a mass grave in that immediate vicinity. I also, if at all possible, will never rely on a map recon. The NCO's and Soldiers responded very effectively to everything that was thrown at them. This was not to be the only mass grave recovery mission the 1438th MRBC was tasked with over the next several months. Almost a year later we redeployed back home without losing a single Soldier even though we were shot at, motored, rocketed and engaged with IED's. I attribute that to great NCO leadership.