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MSG Steven S. Mapes

Rocket Attack, Operation Iraqi Freedom, Mahmoudiyah, Iraq, 07/2004

11Z, First Sergeant, Aco 1-6 Infantry

15 September 2006

Class 57

Abstract

One of the bedrock responsibilities of a Noncommissioned Officer is accountability. We receive and submit status reports on our Soldiers on a daily basis to insure we know their whereabouts. Accountability is a discipline exercised in garrison as well as in combat, yet the experience I will share with you is one in which accountability was lost. This is an account of how complacency and laziness on the part of a first line supervisor almost cost a Soldier his life. I will illustrate how the routine rhythm of battle resulted in a Noncommissioned Officer making the worst of choices when accounting for his Soldiers and how his terrible decision was used to educate an entire infantry rifle company.

Accountability

On or about the fifteenth month of our rotation, the biggest enemy we had to fight was complacency. It was July 2004, in a small town called Mahmoudiyah, Iraq. The Soldiers of FOB St. Michael and Task Force 2-6 Infantry were starting to load their gear for redeployment back to Germany. The men of Aco 2-6 Infantry “Assassins”, 1st Armored Division had Soldiered through a 12 month deployment and pushed through an additional three month extension in stride. Thankfully, we were about to finish a very successful deployment. The discipline of the Soldiers and the professionalism of the “Assassins” NCOs were superb. The Company had suffered its share of injury and its share of fallen comrades, yet they remained disciplined through the pain.

One of the most important disciplines I stressed upon my guys was to fight complacency and continue to operate each day as if it was your first day in country; to patrol the streets as if they knew they were about to be attacked. With this approach to our daily operations, it wasn't hard to maintain a steady rhythm of discipline in the company. Disciplines such as timely reporting and accountability became refined, smooth, and accurate. We could count on our leaders to deliver honest real time updates to the CP in accordance with the Company SOP. Some reports were rendered on a scheduled basis, while others were situationally dependant. Though the “Assassins” seemed to have this discipline all but perfected, not everyone on FOB St. Michael shared this achievement.

Like most FOBs in Iraq, FOB St. Michael was a mortar magnet from the first day we conducted our Transfer of Authority (TOA) with the Marines in May 2004. You could practically set your watch by the attacks. Although we had achieved some degree of success in capturing or killing some of the attackers, our efforts did not altogether stop the frequent mortar and rocket attacks on the FOB. The Company SOP during an indirect fire attack on the FOB

was first to seek cover wherever you may be in the FOB. Once the attack appeared to be over or paused, get back to the company area immediately, before another attack began. If the attack resumed while the troops were returning to the company area, they were to take cover under one of the many concrete bunkers that littered the FOB. Once the Soldiers made it safely back to the company area, their first priority was to get into the proper uniform, depending on the FOB threat level. After an indirect fire attack on the FOB, the uniform was helmet and armor, in case we received a second barrage, or a follow on direct fire attack. Once the Soldiers were in the proper uniform, and it was clear to move about the FOB, they were to find their first line supervisor, usually in the same tent, and reported in. If the supervisor did not receive a report from all his troops in a timely manor, a search for the Soldiers would begin until everyone was accounted for. Ultimately, all Platoon Sergeants would render an accountability report to me after every attack.

The practice of rendering a report after an attack was called a “Green 2” report. This meant that you had accountability of all your personnel and equipment, but these reports are not just given after an attack. They are given several times a day, seven days a week, three hundred sixty five days a year. You can see how an undisciplined leader could get complaisant and be tempted to render an unverified report, without actually accounting for his Soldiers or equipment. This is exactly what happened that night in July.

The FOB was home to slice elements of many different units comprising TF 2-6. While all were seasoned and battle hardened at this point, not all had managed to maintain a stern level of discipline through the extension. At approximately 21:30, the silence of the night was broken by a huge explosion in the motor park area of the FOB. We knew exactly what it was. You never hear just one explosion; even if its only one mortar or one rocket, there is always a “launch blast”. A launch blast is not as big as the impact, but you can almost always hear it. We heard

the launch blast and knew something was about to hit us. As the rocket exploded, we waited in our bunkers. To our surprise, nothing else fell from the sky. My leaders immediately began collecting their Green 2 reports and gave them to me. It was 21:40 and we were “Green 2 Green”.

After an attack, it was unit SOP to inspect the motor park and conduct a Battle Damage Assessment (BDA). We had sustained mortar damage to our equipment in the motor park on several occasions and we needed to make sure nothing was hit this time. As the Platoon Sergeants split off to their perspective lines, I trooped the company line to get an overall look at our kit. After the Platoon Sergeants confirmed that their equipment was undamaged, they returned to the company area. It was 22:00.

As I walked back to the company area, I passed the vehicle line of a unit attached to the Task Force. Their vehicles consisted of about 7 M109s and about 4 flatbed trucks. I didn't expect to see anyone else out that night; not every unit conducted BDA after an attack. To my surprise, I heard a faint moan coming from somewhere on the line. After combing the line, I discovered the bleeding broken body of a 19-year-old Private First Class, lying between two flat-bed trucks. I ran to his side and immediately cried out for a medic. It was 22:05.

The Soldier belonged to the unit that owned the vehicles on this line. At the time of the rocket attack, he was standing on the back of one of the flat-bed trucks talking on a mobile phone to his family in the states. As the rocket came in, it struck the inside berm that encircled the FOB. The point of impact just happened to be at knee level as the young Soldier stood on the bed of this truck, backed up directly against the berm. He was no more than 10 feet from the blast. The explosion ripped through his left leg, blowing it completely off at the knee. His right leg sustained so much damage that it was doubtful that anyone would be able to save it. When the blast took his left leg, he was thrown off the bed of the truck and to the ground, landing between

two vehicles. This is where he lay for over half an hour. His phone was still connected.

Since this particular vehicle line was in close proximity to the owning unit, one of their NCOs arrived on the scene with me when he heard me call for a medic. He immediately knew who the Soldier was and rushed to get help. Shortly after, one of my NCOs came running over to investigate. I dispatched him to initiate a nine-line medevac request from our CP. I applied a tourniquet to the Soldier's missing limb as the medics arrived and took over from there. After the medics took control of the treatment, I ground guided an FLA to the wounded Soldier. He was loaded up and quickly taken to the TF aid station. About 15 minutes later, the aircraft arrived for the medevac and the Soldier was taken to Baghdad for surgery. We recovered his left leg from underneath one of the trucks and placed it in a plastic bag. Soldiers were kicking it around in the dark during the recovery. It would later be discovered that this unit had already turned in their Green 2 report to the TF headquarters; a false report that started with this young Soldier's first line supervisor. He was not accounted for and he was not safe.

After the dust settled and everyone got a little cleaned up, I called all my NCOs together and told them what had just happened. It had been over half an hour from the time of the attack to the time this Soldier was discovered. No one was looking for him because no one knew he was missing. He lay bleeding to death, in shock in the middle of the motor park because one NCO refused to do his job. Instead of searching for his unaccounted for Soldier, this NCO assumed the Soldier was with some of his buddies somewhere on the FOB and reported him "accounted for". I pressed upon my NCOs the importance of HONEST reporting and how the injured Soldier was probably waiting there in the rocks, face down for his team leader to find and rescue him. As the adrenalin began to wear off, the emotion of the event began to take hold and you could see the horror of my story in the eyes of my young leaders. Horror not of the attack, or even of the injury, but of the despicable failure on the part of this young man's leaders.

While I like to think that most of the reports I received while in Iraq that year were accurate, I am not naive enough to believe that every report was perfect. The lives of many of us were changed that night, and the care and attention we give our Soldiers will never be the same. The consequences of a false report will be burned into our minds forever. We saw first hand what can happen when a leader succumbs to complacency and laziness. America's mothers, fathers, husbands and wives expect more from us. They expect us to care for these young patriots as if they were our very own. They entrust us with what they love the most. I pray that I am never again presented with such a perfect example of leadership failure as was displayed that July night.