

Running Head: NCO LEADERSHIP

NCO Leadership and OEF-P

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Operation Enduring Freedom – Philippines

04/15/2002 – 08/10/2002

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05 October 2006

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I. Introduction

Several key experiences have had a significant impact on my growth as an NCO and leader. First, I served in two 0-3 positions where I lead cadets as a ROTC instructor and NCOs as a Special Forces Detachment Commander. Second, a deployment during OEF-P reinforced to me the value of quality people and solid SOPs. My personal experience paper is not so much about anything I may have accomplished but what I hope to leave with the reader. The experiences mentioned above have changed how I view my role as an NCO. Our NCO corps is the best in the world. However, we still have tremendous untapped potential. I believe we should strive to increase our scope of responsibility and redefine our leadership role to maximize our experience and abilities.

II. NCO Leadership

I began my assignment as Operations Sergeant for ODA-172 (Mountain) in June of 2000. After six months the current Detachment Commander moved to the HALO team and the position on 172 remained vacant for more than a year. For several months a warrant officer assumed command until his eventual relief. This left my detachment with strictly NCO leadership, a rare occurrence for an ODA. A shortage of incoming gains played a role in this, which forced the Battalion Commander to use his officers wisely. As new captains arrived in 3rd Battalion, the Commander routinely assigned them to a different team. Like many NCOs in Special Forces, I believed a detachment did not need a captain and could perform equally as well if not better without one. I found myself in a position to prove this belief. I occupied the position of Detachment Commander and my Intelligence Sergeant occupied the position of Operations Sergeant (Team Sergeant). As each mission came and went the performance of our ODA

continued to increase under NCO leadership alone. As time passed by I realized our performance had gained the confidence of the entire chain of command, they wanted to leave well enough alone. The NCOs seemed to revel in this unique situation and took tremendous pride maintaining the highest levels of performance. They knew if performance dropped, the chain of command would take steps to fill a perceived leadership void. I became very comfortable in command, but also came to realize the mental burden involved with being ultimately responsible for an organizations' performance. I have kept this perspective with me ever since.

This was not the first time I occupied and served in the position of a captain. I spent 2 ½ years at the University of Oregon ROTC detachment teaching, coaching and mentoring future officers. During that time a shortage of officers first pressed me into a position normally filled by a captain. The Military Science III instructor position is the most critical because it prepares cadets for Advanced Camp. The areas of evaluation for ROTC programs are recruiting and cadet performance at advanced camp. The job revolved around instructing basic Soldier skills, tactics and most importantly teaching and evaluating leadership ability.

All measurable statistics in terms of cadet performance remained constant or increased under NCO leadership. My story is not unique in ROTC, many combat arms NCOs proved that an NCO is every bit as capable to LEAD and think big picture as any member of the officer corps. While serving in an ROTC assignment I learned a great deal about the differences in the development, education, mental conditioning and expectations between officers and NCOs. An officer is groomed from day one to BE a leader with all the expectations of personal accountability and responsibility, to be a thinker at a macro level. The NCO corps education system could do a better job of instilling this ethos. After my ROTC assignment and return to

Special Forces I was eager to serve in a position that allowed similar amounts of freedom and responsibility. I had no idea another opportunity would present itself.

After the NCOs of ODA-172 discovered how successful they could be without a detachment commander, a great deal of reluctance was felt at the thought of a new captain. Finally, a number of gains arrived and we reviewed their ORBs, conducted interviews, and selected one for approval by the battalion commander. After having lead ODA-172 for better than a year, I saw an opportunity to really mentor and groom a quality commander. I embraced my role and once again affirmed that NCO leadership is absolutely vital in the development of the officer corps. I also learned that our experience and competence, when given and received openly, will win the trust and confidence of the officer corps. In this way we can have a greater impact on the success of any mission and organization. Our new commander had to catch on quick, as we would soon deploy on a demining mission in the Kingdom of Thailand.

III. Operation Enduring Freedom - Philippines

While the war on terror continued in the Middle East and 2/1 SFG(A) conducting the first rotation on OEF-P, 3/1 SFG(A) continued to conduct JCETs across the Pacific. Upon return from Thailand, we received a warning order for an upcoming mission to the Philippines in support of OEF-P. We deployed to the Republic of the Philippines under guise of the Joint Exercise "Balikatan" umbrella. FOB-13, 3/1 SFG(A) provided command and control with three ODBs from 3rd Battalion. Our package was the second rotation into the island of Basilan, Philippines in early March of 2002 to combat the Abu Sayaf Group. We staged at Torri Station in Okinawa, Japan, home of 1/1 SFG(A) on 14 April 2002 for a two-week work up, repack and infill. I was back in my job as Team Sergeant with a brand new commander. Our seasoned

NCOs were competent and had been together for more than a year. The detachment was as highly trained and cohesive as at anytime during my tenure and comparable to any team I have been assigned. ODA-172 deployed at slightly less than full strength with 11 personnel, short one Communications Sergeant.

The 1st SFG(A) AOR is Southeast Asia, which has a large Muslim population (Indonesia, Philippines). After September 11, 2001 and the invasion of Afghanistan, the 1st SFG(A) commander (COL Freidovich) began planning to combat rebels and terrorists in the southern portion of the Philippines. The highest profile group known as The Abu Sayaf operated in and around the islands of Basilan and Jolo. This group held hostage a high profile missionary couple (Gracia and Martin Burnham) and has a reputation for brutality, extortion, and acts of terror against the Philippine government. Locating, and eliminating the Abu Sayaf was the primary focus. Securing the release of the Burnham missionaries was being worked at the State Department level, but was high on the priority list for Special Forces. We all knew it would only be a matter of time before we would locate them and then what. To accomplish the main mission we began by training and equipping the Philippine Army and establishing aggressive HUMINT networks. A key constraint in the conduct of operations is the Philippine constitution, which does not allow foreign forces to engage in combat on Philippine soil. To overcome this we engaged in operations as “advisors” at company level.

Special Operations Forces were the main effort for the JTF-510 mission. 3/1 SFG(A) divided the island of Basilan into three AOs and deployed an ODB and their assigned ODAs into each. We began work training the CAFGU, a reserve army/police type organization, in small unit tactics and marksmanship. After a couple of training iterations, several units murdered civilians trying to settle old family feuds. Consequently, CAFGU training halted and we

relocated to Camp Malagutay, Zamboanga to establish a NCO leader course. The Philippine officers admired and respected the American NCOs and wanted to create a similar capability in their NCO corps. ODA-172 and four Philippine Special Forces NCOs developed and implemented a 4-week course dubbed the Tactical Leader Course (TLC, we should have spent longer deciding on a name). This course earned BNCOC equivalence and became the standard for Philippine SOUTHCOM NCOs after the first training cycle. I was absolutely convinced after that experience, our NCOs are what differentiate the United States Army from any other military in the world.

During the last week or so of the first TLC iteration I received a phone call. “Master Sergeant Hayes” a sharp, decisive voice filled with urgency rang out over my cell phone. It was early afternoon on another sweltering day in Zamboanga City, Philippines and I was on a supply run with my counterparts. “Roger...Who is this?” “This is the S2, how fast can you get your team assembled?” My first reaction brought visions of details in the carnal variety. I was stationed close to the JTF-510 HQ, too close. “About two hours” I responded, thinking this whitewashed version of the truth could excuse my detachment from any future unpleasentries. “ TWO HOURS! You need to get to a STU-3 ASAP we need to talk secure, I have already contacted your team.” My mind started to race, I began to think in all directions at once “20 minutes, sir” I responded. I stomped the accelerator weaving recklessly through traffic, adrenalin began coursing through my body and I thought, this is it!

When I arrived at Camp Malagutay the team was in the last hurried moments of loading our vehicles. We were not all assembled yet and I was missing three NCOs and my warrant officer. I ran into our hooch and hurriedly changed, grabbed my pre-packed “scat bag”, combat gear and sprinted to the truck. The guys were waiting for me, I jumped in the front of one of the

trucks, and we raced out of the camp. On the way to the JTF HQ I kept trying to reach the other members of the team, without any luck. At this point resignation set in, I knew they would not be coming with us and I would be short four guns and a great bunch of men. We arrived at the briefing room and the Group XO looked at us strangely, almost apologetically. There was a short quiet pause as we waited for everyone to assemble. Another ODA Commander, 1SG Douglas, and my team waited uneasily, the XO looked up and began his brief. He handed everyone a photocopied map with a small "X" marking a hilltop, "The Phil's have located the Burnham's and are in a firefight with the Abu Sayaf "...silence..."This is the location" he pointed to the "X". "That's all the information we have, move to the airfield, two CH-47s are spinning and waiting." Wow, that was not the kind of S2 brief I was expecting. We all walked out and slowly moved to our waiting vehicles with too many questions. "What the fuck are doing walking?" COL Friedovich yelled. That got us moving with a sense of urgency.

We ran past another ODA on the grass outside the briefing room, half dressed with their gear exploded around them...the designated QRF. I smiled and waved as we sped past them to the choppers. I didn't like those guys anyway and it warmed my heart to leave them on the tarmac doing their mission. After racing across the airfield our trucks screeched to a halt under the rotor wash. I grabbed all the magazines I could carry from support guys hanging around at the airfield stuffed and them in my cargo pockets. I got accountability, then one last little chat with the DACO and ran up the ramp onto the helicopter. I could see several guys from another ODA up front adjusting their gear. One of them was on a knee, holding his weapon tightly. As we crowded in around him he just stared at the floor of the helicopter, trapped in his thoughts. I made a mental note to get as far away from that guy as possible when the shit hit the fan.

My guys looked confident, I made eye contact with each one of them, and I felt very good. Two CH-47s departed the airfield rigged for fast rope operations, the lead helicopter carried a composite group of Special Forces ODAs and the trail bird carried members of a Navy SEAL team. Within minutes both choppers leapt into the air, banking sharply, straining mightily under their own urgency. We finalized some contingency plans amongst ourselves on our way out to sea; hell nothing else could be done. Now I had time to think of the potential consequences: my guys might die, I might die, and my commander might die, in that order. I shook myself back to the present and assessed my situation. The mission: we were going to fast rope into a gun battle, unknown enemy, unknown location, and unknown duration...not much to feel good about.

I saw the crew chief adjusting the fast ropes and give a strange hand and arm signal to all of us. Then it hit me, we had no fast rope gloves in our "scat bags." I looked at my medic and commo guy, each had large rucks that looked fucking heavy. "3 Minutes" the crew chief yelled. We stood up and rapped the crew of their fight gloves, fire retardant gloves, and bandanas, anything we could find and inched closer to the ramp of the CH-47. At this point the sounds beating rotor blades and engine noises began to fade out for me. I became completely focused on my guys and what to do when we hit the ground. "1 Minute" I faintly heard the crew chief yell again. That brought me back and we started to pack it tighter and closer to the edge of the ramp, anticipating what was coming next. The chopper started to flare a little sharper than I could ever recall, my legs strained keeping my body upright. Holy shit, we're really going in, I thought! Then, without warning the helicopter banked sharply, broke off its approach and began to pickup speed in a new direction. Shock and bewilderment was in everyone's eyes.

We flew for a very short time and landed in a rice paddy, where we reconfigured for night operations. After about an hour we lifted off and headed back to camp, bitterly disappointed at not having had a chance to take care of our fellow Americans. The Burnham's were rescued that night, but not in a manner we anticipated. Gracia was shot in the leg and survived while her husband Martin was murdered at the outset of the battle. The NCOs from my team that did not make it on the helicopter secured the LZ at the hospital for Gracia and her dead husband. Although the papers recognized the Philippine Army for their efforts in the rescue attempt, we were not satisfied with the result and knew we could have done better given the opportunity. In fact, many newspapers chastised the American military for its failure to safely rescue the couple.

IV. Conclusion

First and foremost, the American NCO is an incredibly capable and professional Soldier, arguably the best NCO in the world. We can assume the duties of the officers appointed over us and perform them equally well if not better. My time as a commander taught me NCOs are full of untapped potential. We must unleash this by providing more educational opportunities, increase the number of OCS slots, and expand the leadership role of senior NCOs. We need to change doctrine concerning senior NCO ranks by expanding our duty description to take advantage of the untapped potential.

Secondly, never underestimate the value of preparation and planning. The actions during OEF-P drove that home with a sledgehammer. Well-trained quality NCOs acting without specific supervision, and solid SOPs enabled us to board the helicopters instead of the QRF. Sound preparation comes from quality and detailed AARs, tough realistic training and mission

focus. Lastly, an AAR was not needed to learn a very valuable lesson; we packed our gloves in our “scat bags” as soon as we returned to camp.