

Personal Experience Paper

Iraq's Election

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Iraqi Elections, Baghdad 22 – 30 January 2005

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22 August 2006

Class #57

Abstract

It's January 2005 and Iraq is preparing for its first free election. Cobra Company is preparing their sector for what the Insurgents promised to be the bloodiest day in Iraq's history. With ten months in country Cobra Company fought in two uprisings suppressing a Shiite Cleric's attempt to collapse the fledgling government. Now the task was to protect the masses as they go out to vote, a vote for freedom and democracy. One week away from the election Cobra Red makes a startling discovery.

Table of Contents

Section I: Context

Section II: Charley Company

Section III: The Barrier Plan

Section IV: The support elements

Section V: The attachments

Section VI: SGT Bowman and the cache

Section VII: Lessons learned

Appendix – A: Company sector

Appendix – B: Photos of the elections

Appendix – C: Photos of the cache

Context

Cobra Company:

Cobra Company was comprised of four Platoons, and had been in country for ten months. Cobra had fought in the Shitte uprisings during the months of April and November 2004. Cobra had conducted several different types of missions was ready for the task at hand. Charged with the security of over one million Iraqi civilians, and the facilitation of safe delivery of the ballots. We had 150 Soldiers attached to us from the Third Iraqi Baghdad Battalion and a company of Iraqi Special Forces.

The company had gone thru a rigorous training cycle at Ft. Hood. Mount training was the focus and we received some advanced rifle training while in Kuwait. Each Platoon patrolled their sector twice a day. The squads worked day on and day off.

Cobra Company, Baghdad Iraq, FOB Falcon, January 2005.

My company was located in the Dora District of southern Baghdad. It is January 2005 and two weeks before Iraq's elections Cobra was charged with the security of over one million Iraqi civilians, and the facilitation of safe delivery of the ballots. Three Mohalla's (Neighborhoods) divided up Cobras sector Al-Sahaa, Abu-Dasheer, and Al-Mechanic,

Red Platoon, (1st Platoon) Two squads, seventeen combat soldiers and one medic. Equipment two M1A2 Tanks SEP, two M1114's, and two M998s with add on armor Kits. Red's sector was Al-Mechanic located on the eastern most side of the Companies sector. Al-Mechanic was inhabited mostly by, ex-Bathh party and Saddam's Police forces, making it the most wealthy section in sector. It was mostly quiet but the occupants supported the insurgency financially.

White Platoon, (2nd Platoon) Two squads, eighteen combat soldiers and one medic. Equipment two M1A2 SEP Tanks, three M1114's, and one M998 with add on armor Kits. White's sector was Abu-Dasheer located in the Southwestern part of sector. Abu-Dasheer is Baghdad's southern slum, a kinder box and haven for Muqtar Al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. It was by far are most active sector and the location of the Battalions two largest battles during our tour.

Blue Platoon, (3rd Platoon) Two squads, eighteen combat soldiers and one medic. Equipment two M1A2 Tanks SEP, one M1114's, and three M1028s with add on armor Kits. Blue's sector was Al-Sahaa the northeast end of sector. Sahaa was interesting and famous in Iraq for its prostitution. This also was a fairly quiet

neighborhood, frequented by gun smugglers, and drug dealers when they had a pocket full of money. An occasional raid on a Brothel would provide us with information on gun smugglers and gun dealers.

Green Platoon, (4th Platoon) Three squads, thirty personnel attached to us from the 4/5 Artillery Battalion was comprised mostly of Cooks and Mechanics. Equipment two M1114's, and two M1028s with add on armor Kits. Green's sector was a small piece of Sahaa and Abu-Dasheer. It bordered Iraq Highway eight also known as airport road. The sector was small and dangerous; it was closest to FOB Falcon, and used by the enemy to launch motor attacks against the FOB. Also home to one of Sadr's top lieutenants and a popular Shiite Mosque.

Black Platoon, (Headquarters Platoon) Two squads, twenty personnel sixteen combat troops, one medic, and three support personnel. Equipment one M1114, two M998s with add on armor Kits, one LMTV with kit, and two five tons. Patrolled the entire company sector and supported platoons in their sectors as needed.

The Barrier Plan:

CPT Schmucker and the Platoon Sergeants (with input from the Platoon leaders) developed a plan to use cement barriers and concertina wire to secure the poll sites. The plan was to prevent suicide car bombers from getting into to the crowds. The Iraqi's Third Battalion, Baghdad Division was attached to the Mustangs (1/8 Cav). Troops from the Third Iraqi Battalion would be used at the Poll sites to search Civilians as they entered the sites. To prevent the enemy from pre-positioning explosives the sites were kept secret, until the Third Iraqi Battalion could be moved into to secure them. 170 cement barriers and 1000 rolls of concertina wire were allocated for our sector. Headquarters Platoon would emplace the barriers, in order, to prevent pulling platoons from their sectors. Platoon Sergeants would accompany the Headquarters element, during operations to ensure emplacement of the barriers meet their intent.

Once the Poll sites were secured, the Platoon Sergeants and Squad leaders notified the local civilian leaders of the barrier emplacement. This was done to prevent cars from being blocked in behind the barriers, and they would be aware of the traffic disruptions. The barrier emplacement was conducted after the 2200hr curfew, and completed prior to daylight. The equipment needed to move the barriers, trucks with cranes, were limited making emplacement a logistical challenge.

Red's sector held most of the poll sites and was farthest from the FOB and would be first to receive barriers. Red One, (one = Platoon leaders call signs, four = Platoon Sergeants) and Cobra Six, (six = Commanders at all levels) along with Cobra

Nine, (nine = First Sergeant and Sergeants Major's call signs in the Cav) conducted a detailed reconnaissance of AL-Mechanic's poll sites. All of the Platoons took personnel ownership of their neighborhoods, and tended to ask for more material than they actually needed. 170 concrete barriers was our limit, although the Platoons had request a total of 240 barriers. Concertina wire would be used to make up the shortages. Al-Mechanic would be a two-day operation.

Abu-Dasheer would be second in line, being the most volatile area, and would require the bulk of the barriers. Black conducted a joint recon with Green and White platoons throughout their sector it also, would be a two-day operation. Close to the FOB and easily accessed it would be an easy operation, providing the enemy would cooperate. White would also use most of the concertina wire. It would be emplaced the day before the elections, to prevent theft by the locals. Routine patrols conducted by White supported by Black and Green would conduct the wire emplacement.

Blue's sector would be a one-night operation with only two poll sites. Both sites where easily accessed and would only take two convoys to complete. This would be the driver's fifth night in sector and they would have driven all routes, into and out of sector. The challenge for us was the use of an Iraqi Special Forces Company that was attached to us within the finale days of the operation. The decision was made to give Blue this new element to secure its poll sites.

The Support elements:

The Support Battalion had two wreckers capable of lifting the barriers. The trucks on the FOB would be loaded with a crane and unloaded in sector with the wreckers. The flat bed trucks could haul eight barriers at a time, and this would be the first time for most of the drivers to be in sector. Cobra Black would escort the convoys into sector and provide dismounted security while emplacement operations were conducted. You could sense the anxiety in the drivers. During the first ten months we rotated our Mechanics into our squads, giving them patrol experience. That paid dividends for us during this operation.

Prior to any patrol leaving the FOB a convoy brief was conducted. To ensure everybody had the proper frequencies, knew the succession of the Chain of Command, location of the medic, and actions on contact. The Mechanics had a familiarity of the sector and would be used as vehicle Commanders, (TCs) gunners, and drivers on the support trucks. Cobra Six would lead the convoy, and Black Four provided security for the middle, and myself Cobra Nine would provide rear security. Operations are going to be conducted after curfew so it wouldn't be hampered by local traffic, but was still open to insurgent attacks. Some of the female drivers had been in sector as part of female searcher teams during raids, but it would be their first time conducting this type of operation, in one case a female served as a gunner on one of the wreckers.

The first night out was going to be a long one. On the Road March into sector the second truck in the convoy took a turn too sharp and lost his barriers, blocking the road for the rest of the convoy. Luckily the truck behind him was a wrecker driven by

one of Cobra's SGT Mechanics. The young SGT quickly used the wreckers heavy bumper as a plow and cleared the route for the rest of the convoy. Lose of the barriers would set us back a day.

Once on site in Al-Mechanic I brief the commander of the situation. My recommended course of action would be for me and Black Four to escort the empty truck back to the FOB, swap it out with a full one, and get this one reloaded, and put into the second serial. Cobra Six started to emplace the barriers, as I briefed the NCOs in the convoy of the required security and their responsibilities. I had Black Four reduce our crews to the minimum required to travel and used the rest to provide security for the operation. I notified Mustang TOC of the situation, and requested that they contact the support Battalion to help facilitate the change, to keep the mission on schedule.

Before leaving the site I inspected the security and talked to the operators to ensure they knew what was going on, and weapons systems where properly oriented. Enemy activity had been surging in this sector over the past few days. We departed using the most direct route to the FOB. All coordination was completed once we returned to the FOB and the swap out went smoothly. The coordination was conducted and executed by junior NCOs, from both Battalions. We were able to rendezvous with Cobra Six at the second site, with no incidents, and kept the operation on schedule. With four companies in need of the support assets, it was vital to mission success that we completed our mission according to schedule.

The Attachments:

The Third Battalion numbered 300 Iraqi soldiers and was attached to Cobra and Dog companies after Angle and Bandit companies reported that they didn't need the extra support. Along with 150 from the Third Battalion we were given a company of Iraqi Special Forces. The Special Forces would go to Blue, and one Iraqi Company each from the third Battalion went to Red and White's sectors.

The Special Forces Company was brand new and full of young recruits. I will always remember the first day with the Special Forces. They arrived on the back of a five-ton in Al-Sahaa; I was on Patrol in Abu-Dasheer with White Two when we heard a burst of gunfire in Blues sector. We contacted Blue Four who was on patrol to see if he was in contact, he reported, that from his position it sounded like an attack on our Iraqi Police Station (IPs). We coordinated our movement to support the IPs. While Blue Four moved in from the east to link up with us coming up from the south. At the linked up site we found Blue Four and his patrol, had already defused the situation. Blue Four's brief went like this. "Top one of those kids jumped out of the five-ton and discharged his weapon. Then the other ninety-nine, thinking they were under attack responded, with weapons fire in all directions." To this day I don't know how they kept from killing any civilians.

With the Third Battalions Troops in position on the Poll sites, we executed the barrier plan after dark. When Cobra Six entered the first poll site, he received some small arms fire. Which confused me at first, because the sites were secure. The fire was coming from the friendly Iraqi forces. I contacted Mustang TOC to inform the

third Battalions Chain of Command of the situation. After twenty minutes we were able to continue mission. As I said earlier the first night was a long one. Each Platoon on patrol that night received warning shots. Lessons learned we pulled the Iraqi Company Commanders together on day two and worked out recognition signals. After the elections the third Battalions leadership was responsible for picking up the ballots, and transporting them to a secure location outside of Baghdad to be counted. They performed admirably; the Battalion Commander and S-3 were well trained, spoke English, and were in sync. As each poll site closed down they would convoy around gathering the ballots. Our mission during the election was to stay out of the way, and allow the Iraqi military to handle it. We patrolled the sector continuously, and sealed off all routes in and out of the sector, with Tanks and Dismounts. There was no civilian traffic allowed in sector to reduce the threat of attack. It was an emotional day for us, and the Iraqi population. We watched them come out to vote, entire families in their best clothes walking down the streets holding hands. It was a powerful message the people were sending to the enemies of democracy. As the polls closed we watched as the people of Iraq came back out and rejoiced. It truly had a holiday feeling. Children played in the vacant streets and adults watched as they celebrated their newfound freedom.

SGT Bowman and the weapons cache:

While operations were on going we received a report that a white Toyota pickup truck was paralleling our patrols in the Al-Mechanic sector. SGT Bowman was the gunner on Red One's truck; during a routine patrol in their sector he observed a white truck pull out of a house. Remembering the report he informed Red One, they put together a plan to capture the truck and operator. As the truck moved down a parallel street they moved to intercept. The lead truck rammed into the suspect's vehicle stopping him in his tracks. Inside the vehicle they found two 155MM rounds rigged as IEDs ready for emplacement. They notified Cobra TOC and Cobra relayed to Mustang TOC, Cobra Six and I took a patrol to link up with Red One to conduct a search of the suspect's house. The detainee was taken back to battalion for interrogation.

We arrived at the suspect's house and conducted a raid. Once inside we found four more 155MM IEDs and several cell phones setup as detonators. We notified Mustang TOC, of the additional find and requested metal detectors. A through search of the house turned up some IP uniforms and a sweep of the grounds turned up five barrels buried in the ground. It was unbelievable how much stuff was there, the list included Det-cord, 1000s of 7.62 rounds, machine guns, RPG launchers, C4, and home made rocket launchers.

Mustang Six showed up at the scene with the detainee. After we showed him the weapons we found, another interrogation was conducted on him. He quickly informed us of another cache. We put together a raiding party and moved to the new

address. At this house we found medical supplies and detained four more individuals. The house next door was abandoned, so we conducted a quick search and found more weapons and ammo in it. One of the detainees said the he owned the home, but said he had it rented to some people who lived in the country. This was Dog companies sector, Mustang six-contacted Dog and they moved south to continue operations based on the new information. Dog conducted three more raids rounding up suspect after suspect.

We notified EOD about the cache and continued cleanup of our two sites. Once everything was loaded up we moved back to the FOB. After all the dust settled from this operation there were a total of seventeen suspects arrested, enough weapons, ammo, and explosives to make the elections a very exciting event. Sergeant Bowman had great situational awareness and it saved countless lives.

Lessoned Learned

The dissemination of information, gunners have a position of advantage with 360 degrees of visibility.

Maintain security time the release of information to foreign forces to avoid any leaks.

Know your enemy and his Culture; you can use this against them.

Situational awareness is key in avoiding friendly fire situations.