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3rd PLT, C. Co, 2-3 IN, 3rd SBCT, 2 ID
Deployed Jun 2006 – Sep 2007



Deployed initially to Mosul, IZ, eventually maneuvered to Baghdad, IZ. Operated in East Rashid, West Rashid, Monsour, Shaap, Ur, Sadr City, New Baghdad, Adimyha, Najaf, Karbala, Iskandariah, Hilla....eventually redeployed in late September 2007.

Date of interview: 16 January 2008

1. What was your toughest leadership challenge during the deployment, and how did you address it?

There were four big leadership challenges that I faced during deployment: Complacency, Purpose, Loss of a Soldier, and Disagreements among leaders.

Complacency. Everyone always harps on complacency, and I always thought that I was pro-active enough to combat its effects on my platoon. I was wrong and you will be, too. Complacency is a factor that leaders at all levels will encounter. I saw it on the FOB where uniform standards and physical fitness became lax and off the FOB where Soldiers thought it was ok to throw trash in the street, take the ACH off in homes, not pay attention on security, ride higher in the hatches...etc. The only way to address this issue is to be honest with yourself. Take the time at the end of the day or the end of a mission to analyze what you saw and did that day. If you see the signs, talk with your subordinate leaders, make them aware and ensure the behavior is changed, and most importantly, lead by example.

Purpose. The company I was in moved all over Iraq, often being the first ones into an area to fight some other unit's fight that they didn't have enough assets to accomplish without the help of a Stryker BN. The constant movement and danger level started to get to my Soldiers. They complained that we were another unit's "bitches" for whatever they didn't want to do. I thought it was an easy fix to turn the reality into, "Yea, we are doing something another unit doesn't want to do...because they are scared and because you guys are better than them!" That worked for a while but eventually faded, and an explanation of the bigger picture was needed to demonstrate not only the area's fight but also the entire Baghdad-area fight.

Loss of a Soldier. On March 21st, 2007, I lost my 1st Squad Leader, SSG Darrel R. Griffin. He was shot and killed by SAF while moving back from a mission in Sadr City. After we CASEVAC'ed him to the CSH on the IZ, we made it back to our tents on BIAP after dark...sometime around 2100. It was at that time we learned that he did not make it to Balad, dying shortly after he arrived there. Our company still had a mission to accomplish; we were scheduled to SP the following morning around 0300 or 0400. With

mission planning still ahead of me, little rest, and a platoon of mourning Soldiers, I had little time to prepare for everything. I pulled my platoon together and explained to them that “Griff” didn’t make it and that regardless of our loss, we still had a mission to do. I told the guys that we will honor our buddy by taking care of each other through the next few days and ensuring that we keep our heads on a swivel regardless of what we are going through.

It was difficult for me to do show no emotion towards my men. I was hurting inside. I was scared. It wasn’t the first time that I saw a dead body. It wasn’t the first time I saw a wounded Soldier. It was, however, the first time that I watched as one of my Soldiers, a man who seemed invincible to those who knew him, lie lifeless on top of my men in the troop compartment of my truck while his Soldiers screamed for him to hold on as they attempted to stop the bleeding from his head. I wanted to cry and give up. No longer did I want to be in Iraq. I didn’t care anymore. I just wanted to go home. But that wasn’t possible, and I had Soldiers who looked up to me.

My Company 1SG took me aside earlier that day and said, “Sir, your men are going to look at you to see how to act. This is make-or-break time for the platoon if you don’t hold them together. They are trusting in you to bring them home.” I relied on what my 1SG told me. I mourned briefly in the arms of a fellow PL away from Soldiers’ sight and then planned the next mission. With a senior E-5 (P) from the squad that SSG Griffin led, I put them as the main effort of the mission the following morning. That morning we moved out on a dismounted clearing operation with “Griff’s” squad out in front. That day I walked a little taller and a little further forward, showing that I wasn’t scared, that they have no reason to be scared either. I made sure we did nothing different that morning. I joked, I smiled, and I didn’t change anything. My men needed to see that the mission still goes on.

A few weeks later, I spoke with a couple of my SL’s in private and confided in them that I felt ashamed that I didn’t show more emotion to the guys. I didn’t want them to think that I was a cold, heartless leader who cared nothing if they lived or died. My SL’s said, “Sir, how you acted is exactly what they needed to see. They know how you feel. We know how you feel. But we still have more to bring home...you couldn’t have done it any better, sir.” I don’t believe they were blowing any smoke. I respect these men and am honored to have been told that by them.

Disagreements among Leaders in the Platoon. My PSG and I differed greatly in our aggression and overall patriotism. I am a grandson of a WWII veteran who earned his CIB on the front lines of the Battle of the Bulge. I was eager to fight the insurgency and earn my CIB while defending our country. Most of my Soldiers and all of my squad leaders shared the same sense of duty. As we have all been taught since the conception of our officer careers, a PL and PSG are battle buddies charged with providing a unified front. Unfortunately, I failed to make this happen. My SLs routinely came to me to complain about their PSG. And it was a difficult challenge because I often agreed with the SLs’ point. It took a toll on me, and working with the PSG eventually didn’t yield much result. It was a difficult situation that I really never fixed or figured out.

2. What was the most important training that you executed before combat or during your deployment? What did you do, and would you train anything differently if you could do it again?

I joined my unit less than two months prior to deployment, so I conducted no training with them or the Soldiers that I would eventually lead. For me, the most valuable ‘training’ was the on-the-job training I got when I was tasked with being a battle captain in our BN’s TOC during the first few weeks of the deployment. At the platoon level, you don’t fully grasp what the BN is managing at any given time. As a battle captain, I was able to see the big picture, but more importantly it helped groom me as a leader. As a battle captain, I had my first glimpse of managing multiple tasks and situations with little time to make decisions. Any failure on my part would have led to Soldiers on the battlefield not receiving the assets they needed in the time they needed them. I am grateful for having had the opportunity to be truly stressed out of my mind in that position before being stressed and scared in the face of the enemy in front of my platoon.

Tasks that the platoon always trained at squad-and-below were enter/clear a room, dismounted movement, enter/exit vehicle, and any misc. jobs, e.g., placing a charge, use of CAF, etc. The PSG and I put out minimal guidance as to what to focus on. Toward the end of the deployment, it was easy to see which SL trained the most and who trained the least.

Things I would do differently—EOF and ROE [Escalation-of-Force procedures & Rules of Engagement]. Higher harps on them and my PLs and I bitched about them. We always did the minimum and expressed the importance of each, but with the mission we had—often more conventional fighting with raids and movement to contacts—it was sometimes difficult to relate to everything. I had an incident where two TLs of mine expended a number of less-lethal munitions, needlessly damaging property and harming LNs, as well as a SL who failed to report these incidents. I had failed to train them properly and allowed my Soldiers to jeopardize their careers.

One discussion that stemmed from this incident was a fellow PL who complained to our battalion commander that EOF and ROE are too complicated for Soldiers. He expressed his Soldiers’ concern that their CoC would leave them hanging in the wind if they made a mistake. His argument became very heated when we discussed it, because I felt the opposite. I view my role as the Platoon Leader as being the person who serves as the filter between complicated guidance and Soldier language. It is our job as PLs to break things like ROE and EOF down to the level that a Soldier understands...not to complain about a BC speaking in too “big” of words. His argument also bothered me because I see myself, as the PL, as the first level of leadership where a Soldier would feel he was being “left hanging in the wind.” It is not a CO’s or BC’s job to make every Soldier feel supported; the PL can make that happen. As a PL, I made it absolutely clear that if intentions were genuine and a Soldier simply makes a mistake (no matter how big), that I would always be standing alongside them facing “the man.”

3. Can you tell us about your relationship with your NCOs? What advice do you have for other PLs?

I got along amazingly well with my SLs, professionally and personally. However, my PSG and I did not. Personally, we got along and were able to support each other when it came to family and non-mission-related tasks, but when it came to tactics and operations, we differed greatly. He took a much more 'reactive' approach to COIN while I took a more 'proactive' approach. He liked to continue to use things that 'work' instead of constantly changing it up to make sure things never 'didn't work'.

I had great relationships with all other NCOs in the platoon because I gave them Task and Purpose and left them alone. I let my SLs know that behind closed doors, they could say, "Sir, what you did was fucked up and you should have done it this way..." But they understood that in front of our Soldiers, a strong CoC is what builds a strong team. I took a vested interest in my TLs. They were the young leaders who would be taking over Squads when they got back. I made sure to informally counsel them regularly so that they became familiar with working alongside a lieutenant, and I pointed out characteristics in fellow leaders that I found admirable.

The one thing that I always made sure to do was never to step over any leader's subordinates. "I" had four Squad Leaders; they were "my" team. My four Squad Leaders had two Team Leaders in "their" team. Their Team Leaders had Soldiers that were "their" team. Together we were a Platoon. This worked for me.

4. What do you think best prepared you for the challenges of leadership in combat? Why?

My father is a Police Officer who has worked hard through his career to become a leader of his department. The lessons my father taught me about leadership growing up influenced me greatly. He always taught me that a leader is no more important than a follower; that just because someone holds a lower-ranking position, doesn't mean that the person doesn't deserve equal, fair, and honest treatment. I took that to heart when I look at Soldiers. They deserve the best leadership possible, just as I deserve the best from my higher, whether in combat or not. Leadership in combat requires a person to be mentally and physically strong, with the compassion to understand Soldiers. I did my best because Soldiers deserved nothing less.

5. What role(s) did you perform when your unit was in contact? Can you relate a story of a contact and describe what you did (report, direct fires, maneuver, etc.)?

Unfortunately, I was a member of a highly 'in contact' unit that saw every type of engagement, from harassing SAF to large-scale offensives where direct, indirect, and CAS were all coordinated to fight through and destroy an enemy. There were times in

contact where Soldiers reacted perfectly, ID'd enemy positions and returned fire. There were other times when Soldiers were scared shitless.

When they knew how to react, I sat back, allowed the Squad in contact to develop the situation and report to me. During the times when Soldiers are scared, sometimes it simply takes swallowing your own fear, moving up to the front, patting the Soldier on the back, firing a couple rounds, and saying, "Let's go, man." I found that the whole "leading from the front" slogan *actually* works from time to time!

Regardless of the situation, my main focus was always "battlefield management." I viewed my role as a coordinator between a 'squad in contact' and higher (company or battalion) who could provide the squad or squads in contact with the needed assets. My company commander said at his CoC Ceremony that, at whatever rank he attains, he will ensure he works to provide squads with the resources and assets to fight the fight. I viewed platoon level the same.

For example, when 1st Squad was in contact, I asked myself, "What do I need to do to provide them with what they need?" A SL certainly doesn't need a LT to fight. My role was to maneuver 2nd Squad into position to support; notify higher; request attack weapons; coordinate with my PSG for the best CCP position. 1st Squad now had everything it needed to fight through and destroy the enemy.

6. What story/image/event/feeling/etc. do you think you will best remember in 50 years? Why? Can you tell us about it?

The one image will definitely be watching one of my SLs die in front of my eyes. I explained some of the story in my answer on Question 1. It's not hard to understand why that image would stick with someone for 50 years.

Another image that will always stick with me is the time my platoon responded to an adjacent unit in contact. My company was operating in our battle space for 12-hour shifts, company pure. It was nearing the end of one of our shifts when we heard and felt an IED concussion that seemed fairly close. My CO gave me the WARNO that if the adjacent unit needed support, then my platoon, him, and the MEV will be moving to that location. I prepped my Soldiers and prepared for movement. My CO gave us the word to move. It was approximately 1000 meters away in a very dense area of Dora, Baghdad.

As we pulled up, the platoon herringboned down side streets as 1st Squad and I moved to the location dismounted and 2nd Squad maneuvered for high-side security. As we moved dismounted, we passed the top half of a HMMWV turret. 1st Squad was so focused on security and assaulting/clearing up to the blast site that they didn't even see the KIA Soldier, covered in soot, ACH blown off, IBA barely on, but an IPOD headphone still in his ear.

On site, there were three destroyed HMMWVs. One was upside down from an 8-foot deep, 15-foot wide blast crater, 25m away, burning with the remains of four Soldiers left inside. Another HMMWV was in the blast crater, partially submerged in water from a water main rupturing, and the other HMMWV was 25m in the opposite direction with its back end blown off. It was the most horrific sub-surface IED detonation I saw the entire deployment.

Most disturbing was lack of leadership from that unit. It seemed like no movement was being initiated whatsoever. We began CASEVAC runs with our Company MEV and my CO took on-scene command. Eventually, a high-ranking officer came strolling through the area like he was on parade. After it was all said and done, we found out that it was a coordinated attack with the IED as the initiator for an ambush with multiple SAF positions and a number of RPG firing points. What upset me the most was the thought that perhaps some of those Soldiers' deaths could have been prevented. It was apparent the HMMWV column was driving within 20m of each other at low speeds. Perhaps that was the TTP of that unit, I don't know, but given the terrain, a much more spread out movement may have been more tactically sound.

I always picture that young Soldier who was lying dead in his turret when we first approached, IPOD still in his ear. Did his leadership know he was distracted by music, unable to hear the battlefield? If his leadership knew, is this a sign of other complacencies? I think about that day because 5 Soldiers were KIA and a number were WIA, and I think about how, in any instant, hell can break loose...will I be prepared as a leader?