

# CHAPTER 3

Believe

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## **SHARKBASE, CAMP RAMADI, IRAQ: QUESTIONING THE MISSION**

*This makes no sense, no sense at all, I thought as I read through the mission statement from higher command. We were to execute missions “by, with, and through Iraqi security forces.” Unlike my first deployment to Iraq where SEALs worked almost exclusively with our own SEAL Team and other U.S. or NATO special operations units, my SEAL task unit had now been directed to work with conventional forces. But not just any conventional forces—Iraqi conventional forces.*

The SEALs in Task Unit Bruiser were like a professional sports team, exceptionally well trained to perform at the highest level. We knew each other so well that we could anticipate each other's thoughts and moves. We could recognize each other's silhouettes on patrol in the darkness. This was the result of years of training, not only in BUD/S, the basic SEAL training course from which we all had graduated, but in the year-long training cycle that the entire task unit had gone through together. That workup consisted of training and practicing as a team: in desert, urban and maritime

environments in vehicles, boats, planes, helicopters, and on foot. We had fired thousands of rounds through our vast arsenal of weapons, until we could do so with the highest degree of accuracy while under substantial pressure. We had trained for hundreds of hours, iteration after iteration, drill after drill, until we could operate not just as a group of individuals, but as a team—a synchronized machine, maneuvering with precision and efficiency through the challenges of chaotic battlefields.

As SEALs, we kept ourselves in peak physical condition so that we could execute tough missions and meet the extreme physical demands of combat. We did hundreds of pull-ups and push-ups, ran for miles, lifted heavy weights, swam long distances in the open ocean—all to prepare for combat. During our training cycle, in the precious few hours we didn't have a scheduled training evolution, we were in the gym physically pushing ourselves through punishing, high-intensity workouts. If there was no gym at our training location, we'd be out on the road for a hard run, in the parking lot dragging or flipping heavy tires, or on the mats in fierce grappling and jiu-jitsu contests—whatever we could do to stay strong and conditioned. Each man was expected to maintain that high level of physical conditioning so that he could pull his weight and never falter on an operation. We had to be ready to carry a wounded comrade in full, heavy combat gear to safety across rugged terrain. As a critical part of our culture, we constantly challenged each other to tests of physical strength.

We also had some of the best gear in the world: encrypted radios, night-vision goggles, infrared lasers, lights and markers, uniform Kevlar vests and helmets. In the hands of operators who knew how to use this gear, the tactical advantage over the enemy was huge.

Now I was being told that Task Unit Bruiser—my friends, my *brothers*, these highly trained and motivated men—would have to

fight alongside conventional Iraqi Army soldiers, arguably some of the *worst* combat troops in the world. Most Iraqi soldiers were poor, uneducated, untrained, undernourished, and unmotivated. With dire economic conditions across Iraq, many simply joined for a paycheck. When the going got tough, they often deserted (as we later witnessed).

All of the soldiers had, to their credit, risked their lives to be part of the Iraqi Army. Often their families were targeted by terrorists, their lives threatened while the soldier deployed to fight in a distant Iraqi city. Of course, there were some better soldiers among them. But the competent and capable Iraqi soldier was the rare exception, not the rule. The vast majority of soldiers in the Iraqi Army, as fighting men, were far below the standard expected of any military, and certainly far below what was needed to take on and defeat Iraq's growing insurgency.

Back in 2003, the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority disbanded Saddam Hussein's Iraqi Army completely. It then had to be rebuilt from the ground up. The new Iraqi Army's training was disorganized, ad hoc, and scattered, at best. Some Iraqi soldiers had almost no training. Officers often bribed or bought their way into their rank. Young enlisted Iraqi soldiers' primary goal was survival, not victory. Physically, they were weak. Most Iraqi soldiers were incapable of doing even a few push-ups or jumping jacks. Tactically, they were dangerous and unsound, regularly violating basic safety procedures.

Worse, some of the Iraqi soldiers had questionable loyalty to the coalition and to the new government of Iraq. Some Sunni soldiers remained loyal to Saddam. But most Iraqi soldiers were Shiites, and many of these saw Muqtada al-Sadr, the fiery cleric hostile to Americans and closely allied with Iran, as a national hero. Every so often, reports surfaced of Iraqi soldiers who turned their weapons on their U.S. Army or Marine Corps advisors. With that knowledge, how could trust be built?

In addition to poor training, the Iraqi soldiers were barely equipped for a camping trip, much less combat operations. Some wore sneakers or sandals. Their uniforms were a mix-and-match collection of military clothing in American, Soviet, or Middle Eastern camouflage. The variety of clothing made it hard to distinguish friend from foe—especially in an environment where the enemy also wore paramilitary uniforms and gear.

Iraqi soldiers' web gear (or load-bearing equipment) consisted of tattered canvas Soviet-era chest rigs with AK-47 magazine pouches that often fell apart. The weapons they carried were a mix of rifles confiscated from insurgents, many of them poorly made Iraqi or Chinese copies of the AK-47. Most were in poor shape and far below the standards of the original Russian design. It was not uncommon to find the weapons rusted to the point that the sites could not be adjusted. Their technology generally stopped at their weapon. They had no night-vision goggles, no lasers, no radios. In fact, very few even had a simple flashlight. Their body armor was ancient with questionable effectiveness.

Task Unit Bruiser was charged with getting our Iraqi soldiers equipped, organized, and, most important, trained and ready to fight the insurgents who seemed to be increasingly effective against U.S. military forces. In less-hostile areas of Iraq, this meant building training programs on secure bases and running Iraqi soldiers through basic soldiering skills and finally some advanced infantry tactics before taking them out on patrol in enemy territory.

But this was Ramadi, the epicenter of the insurgency and the decisive battle for Anbar Province. There was fighting to be done, outposts to protect, and enemy fighters to capture and kill. To pull Iraqi soldiers from the battlefield for training beyond a day or two was simply impossible.

Our mission as SEALs was to go into hostile territory with

these ragtag Iraqi soldiers and fight against hardcore insurgent *mujahideen* fighters determined to kill as many of us as they could. Now, SEALs are known to run to the sound of the guns. But running to the sound of guns is much easier when a SEAL is surrounded by other SEALs; when we know the man covering our "six" (or backside) is someone who has been through the same training, has the same gear, and speaks the same language—someone we *trust*. For a SEAL to put his life in the hands of someone he doesn't know—a person he has barely worked with, who is not well trained, undisciplined, speaks a different language, and whose trustworthiness is doubtful—is asking a hell of a lot. In the SEAL Teams, the bond of our brotherhood is our strongest weapon. If you take that away from us, we lose our most important quality as a team.

When our SEALs in Task Unit Bruiser learned that they would be allowed to conduct combat operations only alongside Iraqi soldiers, they were livid and completely against the idea. We knew that the dangers in Ramadi from the enemy were already extremely high. There was no need to increase the risk to our force. Yet that is exactly what we were being directed to do.

Even my initial reaction was *Hell no*. It just wasn't worth the risk. Why would we go into combat without every possible advantage, much less a self-inflicted distinct disadvantage? I didn't believe that this mission made sense. I didn't believe it was smart. I didn't believe it would be successful. To imagine a firefight alongside Iraqi soldiers with such inferior training and questionable loyalty seemed outrageous, perhaps even suicidal. But as Task Unit Bruiser's commander, I knew my actions and mind-set carried great weight among my troops. These were my orders, and for me to lead, I had to believe. So I kept my doubts to myself as I asked the simple question: *Why?*

Why would the U.S. military leadership on the ground in Iraq

and back in America—from Baghdad to the Pentagon to the White House—task Navy SEALs, other Special Operations, and U.S. Army and Marine Corps units with such a high-risk mission? I had seen how difficult combat could be with the best people by my side. Why make it harder?

I knew I had to adjust my perspective, to mentally step back from the immediate fight just outside the wire and think about this question from a strategic level, as if I were one of those generals in Baghdad or back at the Pentagon. Sure, they were far from the front lines, but certainly, they had the same goal we did: to win.

That led to another question: What was winning? It certainly wasn't winning in the traditional military sense of the word. There would be no surrender from this enemy we fought against. There would be no peace treaty signed. Winning here meant only that Iraq would become a relatively secure and stable country.

So I asked myself: *How can we prepare the Iraqi soldiers to handle security in their own country?* They needed to start somewhere. If there wasn't time to train Iraqi soldiers off the battlefield in a secure environment on base, then they would have to learn by doing, through OJT (on the job training). If the Iraqis never reached a level of skill at which they could defend their country from terrorist insurgents, then who would defend it? The answer was all too clear: us, the U.S. military. We would be stuck here securing their country for them for generations.

The disparity between the capability of the poorly trained, ill-equipped, and unmotivated Iraqi soldiers and that of the determined, well-equipped, and highly effective insurgent fighters they were up against was gigantic. Virtually every time an American outpost in Ramadi was handed over to the control of Iraqi soldiers, insurgents attacked and overran their position, killing dozens of Iraqi troops and sometimes the U.S. Marine or Army advisors assigned to them. The Iraqi soldiers were no match for

the insurgents. It would take generations of training to get the Iraqi soldiers to the level needed to overcome and defeat such an aggressive enemy. Even then, such lackluster soldiers would likely never be capable of fighting and defeating a serious adversary. For those of us on the front lines of this conflict, it was clear that there were many senior U.S. military officers who, far removed from direct interaction with Iraqi soldiers, did not understand the Iraqi Army's true lack of capability. They were simply terrible, and no amount of training would make them *excellent* soldiers; but perhaps we could make them *good enough*.

As I thought about this, I realized that there was something that we—Task Unit Bruiser and other U.S. and coalition forces—could do. These Iraqi troops, or *jundhis*,\* as they called themselves in Arabic, may never be good enough to take on a well-equipped and determined enemy. But they could be good enough to handle a less substantial enemy. We could ensure the current enemy fit into that category by reducing the insurgents' ability to wage war. In addition to building the Iraqi Army's capability through training and combat-advising on the battlefield, we (our SEALs and U.S. forces) would have to crush the insurgency and lower its capability to a point where Iraqi soldiers and police would at least have a chance to maintain a relative peace by themselves—a chance to win. In order to do that, our Task Unit Bruiser SEALs needed to get outside the wire, onto the battlefield, and inflict serious damage on insurgent fighters. But we couldn't operate unless our combat missions received approval through our chain of command. The SEAL task unit that had been in Ramadi for the months prior to our arrival had told us they planned a number of combat operations that consisted of only SEALs—without Iraqi soldiers. Almost all of those operations had been denied

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\* Meaning soldiers

approval. In order to receive that approval, I knew we must take Iraqi soldiers with us on every operation. They were our ticket to leave the base, push into enemy territory, and unleash fury upon the insurgents.

With that, I understood, and I believed. Now, I had to ensure that my troops understood and believed.

I called for a meeting and pulled all the SEAL operators from Task Unit Bruiser together into the briefing room.

"Alright fellas," I said. "You've heard the rumors. Every operation we conduct will include Iraqi soldiers." There were mutterings of obscenities and loud exhales of disgust. I repeated: "Every mission we undertake we will fight alongside *jundhis*." The room cut loose again, this time with louder disagreement and curses. The consensus from our SEALs, the frontline troops who would execute our missions, was clear: "This is garbage."

I cut the not-so-subtle protest short: "I understand. The battlefield here in Ramadi is dangerous. It's difficult. Why make it even harder by forcing us to fight alongside Iraqi soldiers?" *Damn right*, nodded much of the room in agreement.

"Well, let me ask you something," I continued. "If the Iraqi military can't get to a point where they can handle security in their own country, who is going to do it?"

The room fell silent. I drove the point home by restating the question: "I say again, if the Iraqi military can't handle the security in this country, who is going to do it?" I had their attention, and they knew the answer. But to ensure everyone clearly understood the strategic importance of *why* we were being directed to do this, I made it perfectly clear: "If Iraqi soldiers can't do it, there is only one group that will—us. If we don't get these guys up to speed we will have this mission next year and the year after and the year after. The U.S. military will be stuck here for generations. It will be up to our sons and our sons' sons to secure Iraq."

I could see that, although there was still resistance to the idea

of working with Iraqi soldiers, they were beginning to see this mission from a strategic perspective.

I continued: "Like you, I understand that no matter how much we train them, the Iraqi Army will never come close to achieving the standards we set for ourselves. But we will help them get better. And there is something else we can do to help them. We will close with and destroy the enemy on the streets of Ramadi to reduce the insurgents' military capability and lower the level of violence. When the enemy is beaten, then the Iraqi Army can take over security duties for themselves."

I saw some heads nod in agreement.

"But to do that," I said, "we have to get each mission—each operation—approved. And if we want our missions approved, we must have Iraqi soldiers with us on every operation. Does anyone not understand this?"

The room was quiet. Everyone understood. They didn't have to jump for joy at the thought of fighting alongside Iraqi soldiers on a dangerous battlefield. But they did have to understand why they were doing it so that they could believe in the mission.

Afterward, I spoke to my key leaders in greater detail about why this mission was important. Unlike the previous SEAL task unit, I told my officers and chiefs they were not to submit *any* concept of operations (CONOPS)—a document that lays out the basic idea of an operation for approval by higher headquarters—without Iraqi soldiers as part of our force.

"What about all the unilateral\* operations you did on your last deployment?" Leif asked me. "Didn't they make a difference?" The other platoon commander and both platoon chiefs waited for my response.

"Yes. We did a whole lot of unilateral DAs† in Iraq two years

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\* SEAL only

† direct-action capture/kill raids

ago," I answered. "And since that time, coalition forces across Iraq have continued to do them. But, here are the facts: in the last two years, enemy attacks are up three hundred percent. Three hundred percent! This place is on a downward spiral. We've got to do something different if we want to win."

"Every one of your operations will have Iraqi soldiers," I told them. "These Iraqi soldiers are our means to do something different—our ticket to operate. We will get them up to speed. We will prepare them the best we can. We will fight alongside them. And we will crush the enemy until even the Iraqi Army will be able to fight them on their own. Any other questions?"

There were no more questions. The most important question had been answered: Why? Once I analyzed the mission and understood for myself that critical piece of information, I could then believe in the mission. If I didn't believe in it, there was no way I could possibly convince the SEALs in my task unit to believe in it. If I expressed doubts or openly questioned the wisdom of this plan in front of the troops, their derision toward the mission would increase exponentially. They would never believe in it. As a result, they would never commit to it, and it would fail. But once I understood and believed, I then passed that understanding and belief on, clearly and succinctly, to my troops so that they believed in it themselves. When they understood why, they would commit to the mission, persevere through the inevitable challenges in store, and accomplish the task set before us.

Most of the operators accepted my explanation. Not every member of Task Unit Bruiser was convinced immediately. We had to reinforce the importance of combat-advising Iraqi soldiers continuously.

Through the course of the deployment, our SEALs conducted every major operation with Iraqi soldiers. Often the Iraqi soldiers did things that were stupid and dangerous. On one combat op-

eration, an Iraqi soldier accidentally squeezed the trigger of his AK-47 rifle and blasted a dozen rounds of fully automatic fire into the floor next to the SEAL operators standing near him. The bullets missed some of our SEALs by inches. On another operation, Leif and his SEAL combat advisors had to rip the rifles out of the hands of Iraqi soldiers who, while under fire, ran from the enemy contact while shooting their AK-47s backward over their heads, with other SEALs and Iraqi soldiers downrange from them—incredibly foolish. Another time, Iraqi soldiers on patrol with our SEALs were engaged by enemy fighters. An Iraqi soldier was hit, and his comrades abandoned him in the street and ran for cover. Two SEALs had to run through a hailstorm of enemy fire across an open street (what we called a “Medal of Honor” run) to retrieve the wounded Iraqi soldier and drag him to cover while bullets impacted all around them.

The Iraqi soldiers frustrated the hell out of our SEALs who trained and fought alongside them. But they also proved useful in ways we hadn’t anticipated. A SEAL breacher might use a sledgehammer or explosive charge to open a gate—an effective method, though extremely loud—which let everyone in the neighborhood know we were there. Our Iraqi soldiers knew how the doors and gates were secured and would quietly pop them open by hand with little effort. They also could tell the bad guys from the good. To our American eyes, when unarmed enemy fighters were hiding among the civilian populace, we often couldn’t tell the difference. But our Iraqi soldiers could discern dress, mannerisms, and Arabic accents that were different from that of the local populace. Their local and cultural knowledge were advantageous in helping us better understand and identify the enemy.

Over the next six months, we took Iraqi soldiers right into the thick of some of the biggest battles for the city of Ar Ramadi. Several of them were killed in action. Others were wounded. Despite

the grumblings from Task Unit Bruiser, a certain base level of camaraderie formed between our SEALs and their Iraqi counterparts through the blood, sweat, and tears of difficult combat operations.

Through the success of the U.S. Army 1st Armored Division Ready First Brigade Combat Team's Seize, Clear, Hold, Build strategy, enemy fighters were forced out of their former safe havens within Ramadi. Because we included Iraqi soldiers with us on every operation, our chain of command approved all of our plans to push deep into dangerous enemy territory in support of this strategy. That enabled us to hammer enemy fighters with deadly effect, making those areas a little safer for the U.S. Soldiers and Marines that built the permanent combat outposts and lived and patrolled out of them, forcing the insurgents out of their former strongholds. As a result, the local people ceased passive support of the insurgents and instead switched sides to support U.S. and Iraqi forces. Over time, the level of violence decreased dramatically, as did the insurgents' military capability. By the end of our deployment, the area was secure enough to enable our Iraqi Army units to begin operations under their own command and control: patrolling into the city, engaging the enemy, and capturing or killing insurgents. That portion of the mission was a success by any measure.

### PRINCIPLE

In order to convince and inspire others to follow and accomplish a mission, a leader must be a *true believer* in the mission. Even when others doubt and question the amount of risk, asking, "Is it worth it?" the leader must believe in the greater cause. If a leader does not believe, he or she will not take the risks required to overcome the inevitable challenges necessary to win. And they will not be able to convince others—especially the frontline troops who must execute the mission—to do so. Leaders must always operate with the understanding that they are part of something

greater than themselves and their own personal interests. They must impart this understanding to their teams down to the tactical-level operators on the ground. Far more important than training or equipment, a resolute belief in the mission is critical for any team or organization to win and achieve big results.

In many cases, the leader must align his thoughts and vision to that of the mission. Once a leader believes in the mission, that belief shines through to those below and above in the chain of command. Actions and words reflect belief with a clear confidence and self-assuredness that is not possible when belief is in doubt.

The challenge comes when that alignment isn't explicitly clear. When a leader's confidence breaks, those who are supposed to follow him or her see this and begin to question their own belief in the mission.

Every leader must be able to detach from the immediate tactical mission and understand how it fits into strategic goals. When leaders receive an order that they themselves question and do not understand, they must ask the question: why? Why are we being asked to do this? Those leaders must take a step back, deconstruct the situation, analyze the strategic picture, and then come to a conclusion. If they cannot determine a satisfactory answer themselves, they must ask questions up the chain of command until they understand why. If frontline leaders and troops understand *why*, they can move forward, fully believing in what they are doing.

It is likewise incumbent on senior leaders to take the time to explain and answer the questions of their junior leaders so that they too can understand why and believe. Whether in the ranks of military units or companies and corporations, the frontline troops never have as clear an understanding of the strategic picture as senior leaders might anticipate. It is critical that those senior leaders impart a general understanding of that strategic knowledge—the *why*—to their troops.

In any organization, goals must always be in alignment. If goals aren't aligned at some level, this issue must be addressed and rectified. In business just as in the military, no senior executive team would knowingly choose a course of action or issue an order that would purposely result in failure. But a subordinate may not understand a certain strategy and thus not believe in it. Junior leaders must ask questions and also provide feedback up the chain so that senior leaders can fully understand the ramifications of how strategic plans affect execution on the ground.

Belief in the mission ties in with the fourth Law of Combat: Decentralized Command (chapter 8). The leader must explain not just what to do, but *why*. It is the responsibility of the subordinate leader to reach out and ask if they do not understand. Only when leaders at all levels understand and believe in the mission can they pass that understanding and belief to their teams so that they can persevere through challenges, execute and win.

### APPLICATION TO BUSINESS

"This new compensation plan is terrible," said one of the midlevel managers. "It will drive our best salespeople away." The rest of the class agreed.

Toward the end of a short leadership-development program for the company's midlevel managers, my discussions with the class had revealed a major issue that created stress and fragmentation among the ranks of the company.

Corporate leadership had recently announced a new compensation structure for their sales force. The new plan substantially reduced compensation, especially for low-producing salespeople.

"What's the issue?" I asked the group.

"It's hard enough to keep salespeople here; this doesn't help!" one manager responded.

"They don't get how hard it is in this market," said another,

referring to corporate senior leadership. "This new compensation plan will push people to our competitors."

"Some of my folks have already heard rumors about it; they don't like it at all. And I can't convince them otherwise. I don't believe in it myself!" another responded.

I asked them all a simple question: "Why?"

"Why what?" one of the managers responded.

"Why is your leadership making this change?" I asked.

"Hell if I know!" one manager stated emphatically, which brought laughs from the group.

I smiled and nodded. Then I asked again: "OK, but *why* do you think they are implementing this plan? Do you think they want to push your best salespeople out the door? Do they want those salespeople to go to your competitors? Do you think they actually want the company to lose money and fail?"

The room was quiet. The managers—most of whom respected their bosses and maintained good relationships with the company's corporate leadership—knew their leaders were smart, experienced, and committed to the success of the company. The problem was that no one could understand why this new plan had been implemented.

"Has anyone asked?" I questioned them.

The room fell silent. Finally the class clown blurted out, "I'm not asking. I like my job!" Laughter erupted from the room.

I smiled and let them settle down. "Understandable," I replied. "So the CEO, is she unreasonable? Would she actually fire someone for asking the question?"

The group of managers mumbled, "No."

"What is it then?" I asked.

Finally, one of the more senior managers spoke up with a serious answer: "I'd feel pretty stupid asking. Our CEO is smart and has a lot of experience. She gets this business."

"OK," I shot back. "So you're all just scared to look stupid?" Heads nodded in a universal *yes*.

I nodded as well, now more fully understanding the issue. No one wants to look stupid, especially in front of the boss. "Let me ask you this," I continued. "When you can't explain the reason behind this new compensation plan to your sales force, how does that make you look?"

"Stupid and scared," the class clown responded.

"Exactly!" I shot back, in jest. But I knew a simple, easy way to solve the problem had been uncovered.

That afternoon I swung by the CEO's office. She was meeting with the company's president of sales.

"How is the workshop going?" the CEO inquired.

"It's going pretty well," I said. "You have a solid crew of managers."

"Absolutely. They are a great group," replied the CEO.

"How is your relationship with them?" I asked.

"Oh, I think it is very strong with most of them. Some of the newer ones I don't know all that well yet, but as a whole, I have a good relationship with our managers," the CEO answered.

"Do they ever confront you on anything or ask questions?" I asked.

The CEO thought for a few seconds. "Not really," she acknowledged. "I think they get the business, and I think they know what we are trying to do. So there really isn't much that they would need to confront me on. I've been in this game a long time. I wouldn't be here today if I didn't know what I was doing. They know that and I think they respect that. Experience counts for a lot in this business. But I think if they had an issue, they would certainly bring it up to me."

A common misperception among military leaders or corporate senior executives, this was an example of a boss who didn't

fully comprehend the weight of her position. In her mind, she was fairly laid back, open to questions, comments, and suggestions from people. She talked about maintaining an "open-door policy." But in the minds of her sales managers, she was still *The Boss*: experienced, smart, and most important, powerful. That position demanded a high level of reverence—so high, in fact, that for an employee to question her ideas seemed disrespectful. None of them were comfortable questioning her, even though none of the midlevel managers actually worried about losing their jobs because they asked a question. But they were certainly worried about looking bad in front of The Boss.

"I'm not sure they are as comfortable confronting you or opening up to you as you think," I stated bluntly.

"Really?" The CEO asked with a slightly puzzled face.

"Let me give you an example that came up today," I replied. "The new sales compensation plan."

"What about it? Don't they like it?" the CEO asked with surprise.

"It's not that they don't like it," I answered. "I don't think they get it."

"Don't get it? The plan isn't really that complex. In fact, it is simple," said the CEO, preparing to give me the quick explanation.

"It's not that they don't get what the plan is," I said. "You're right: it is simple. It reduces overall compensation for sales staff, especially for the low producers."

"Exactly. What's the issue with that?" the CEO said. She was right. Even I, without experience in this particular field, had no trouble understanding the basic concept of the new compensation plan.

"The issue is not that they don't understand the plan, but that they don't understand *why* the plan is being implemented. They don't believe in it. They think this plan will drive away good

salespeople, who will look for and possibly find better compensation plans at your competitors," I explained.

The CEO now got a little defensive. "Then they clearly don't understand what I am doing with the business," she stated. "When we cut compensation, especially on the low-producing salespeople, that savings reduces cost. When I reduce cost for salespeople, it reduces our overhead. With overhead reduced, I can lower the price of our products. That will allow our bigger producers to bring in even more business. Sure, the new compensation plan is punitive toward our bottom people, but those bottom people really don't move the needle in our business. If some of them leave, it won't impact our business. In fact, it will allow some of our better producers to expand into those accounts and increase sales. So there is opportunity for our sales force to do even better."

"That makes a lot of sense," I replied.

"It absolutely does," said the CEO. She explained how she had made this move before in a tough market. "It almost always helps. It might reduce the overall size of our sales force, but it will increase our volume in the long run. A smaller, more effective sales force also reduces overhead: lower health care costs, fewer desks, fewer computers to buy, greater efficiency. It is a win-win."

"That sounds brilliant. There is only one problem with it," I said.

"What's that?" the CEO asked, incredulous.

"Your midlevel managers don't understand those points—they don't understand *why*—and so they don't believe in the strategy. If they don't believe, neither will your sales force. If this plan rolls out and those executing it don't believe in it, your plan is far more likely to fail."

"So what can I do to make them believe?" asked the CEO.

"It's easy," I explained. "Just tell them *why*."

The CEO finally understood what she needed to do.

For my training with the midlevel managers the next day, the

CEO made an appearance and kicked things off with a short presentation.

"Good morning, everyone," she began. "Jocko pointed out to me that you all had some issues with the new compensation plan. What don't you like?"

After a few moments of silence, one of the more senior managers finally mustered the courage to speak up. "Cutting into our sales team's take-home pay hurts," said the manager. "It may drive some of them elsewhere, and that could hurt us in the long run."

The CEO smiled. She explained the details of the strategy behind the plan: the increased volume, the reduced overhead, the greater capture of existing accounts when handled by higher producing salespeople. The managers quickly saw the connection and understood the benefits of the plan.

"Does anyone have any questions?" the CEO finished. No one spoke up. "Seriously. Does anyone have any questions? Don't be afraid to ask. I obviously didn't make this clear to you. And unfortunately, none of you asked!" she jabbed.

"No, I think we get it now," one of the managers replied.

"Do you think you can explain it to your sales force in a manner that they will understand?" asked the CEO.

"I do," a manager answered. "But I still think some of the low producers will be upset."

"I'm sure some of them will be," the CEO replied. "As I said, that is part of the strategy here. The ones I want you to focus on here are the big producers and those that you think have the potential to become big producers. I have done this before; we will get results. Anyone else have anything?"

The room, now loosened up by the straight-shooting conversation with the CEO, relaxed and broke into some small talk before the CEO went on her way. The class continued.

"What do you think?" I asked the class.

"That is exactly what we needed," said one manager.

"Now I get it," remarked another.

"I wish we would have known that all along," a third manager stated.

"Let me ask you another question: Who is to blame for the CEO not explaining this to you in more detail?" I asked.

The managers in the room remained silent. They knew the answer and nodded as they acknowledged a topic that I had covered in detail earlier.

"That's right," I said, "you! That is what Extreme Ownership is all about. If you don't understand or believe in the decisions coming down from your leadership, it is up to you to ask questions until you understand how and why those decisions are being made. Not knowing the *why* prohibits you from believing in the mission. When you are in a leadership position, that is a recipe for failure, and it is unacceptable. As a leader, you must believe."

"But the boss should have explained this to us, right?" one manager asked.

"Absolutely. I explained that to her, and, sure enough, she came down here and did just that. But she's not a mind reader. The CEO can't predict what you won't get or understand. She's not perfect; none of us are. Things are going to slip through the cracks from time to time. It happens. I made all kinds of mistakes when I led SEALs. Often, my subordinate leadership would pick up the slack for me. And they wouldn't hold it against me, nor did I think they were infringing on my 'leadership turf.' On the contrary, I would thank them for covering for me. Leadership isn't one person leading a team. It is a group of leaders working together, up and down the chain of command, to lead. If you are on your own, I don't care how good you are, you won't be able to handle it."

"So we let the boss down when we didn't ask questions and communicate with her," said one of the quieter managers in the back of the room.

"Yes, you did," I confirmed. "People talk about leadership requiring courage. This is exactly one of those situations. It takes courage to go to the CEO's office, knock on her door, and explain that you don't understand the strategy behind her decisions. You might feel stupid. But you will feel far worse trying to explain to your team a mission or strategy that you don't understand or believe in yourself. And, as you pointed out, you are letting the boss down because she will never know that her guidance is not being promulgated properly through the ranks. If you don't ask questions so you can understand and believe in the mission, you are failing as a leader and you are failing your team. So, if you ever get a task or guidance or a mission that you don't believe in, don't just sit back and accept it. Ask questions until you understand *why* so you can believe in what you are doing and you can pass that information down the chain to your team with confidence, so they can get out and execute the mission. That is leadership."



Bruiser SEALs take the high ground, South-Central Ramadi. Charlie Platoon's point man and lead sniper, Chris Kyle, observes smoke from Team Bulldog, Bravo Company, (B/1-37) Abrams tanks' 120mm main gun impacts in the distance. The Soldiers of Team Bulldog, an exceptional combat unit, continuously braved treacherous IED-laden roads to bring the thunder from their M1A2 Abrams tanks in support of Charlie Platoon SEALs. Bulldog's courageous efforts saved SEAL lives and systematically beat back the insurgency from one of the most dangerous areas of Ramadi. SEALs and Soldiers formed an unbreakable bond that remains to this day.

(Photo courtesy of the authors)

# CHAPTER 4

Check the Ego

*Jocko Willink*

## **CAMP CORREGIDOR, RAMADI, IRAQ: WELCOME TO RAMADI**

Enemy tracer rounds were zipping overhead as I raced up the stairs to the third-story rooftop of our tactical operations center (TOC) building. Our camp was under attack. I hadn't even had time to fasten my body armor. When the shooting started, I grabbed my helmet and rifle, slung my load-bearing equipment over my shoulders, and headed for the roof. SEALs were arriving by the dozen, some in flip-flops with only shorts and T-shirts under their body armor, but helmets on and weapons at the ready.

Just across the river, in the darkness, enemy fighters had unleashed heavy volleys of machine gun fire on two separate U.S. outposts and the American Soldiers were returning fire with a vengeance. The bright glow of tracer fire was evident in both directions. Another group of enemy fighters had engaged our camp and were hammering our TOC building with gunfire from the far bank of the Euphrates River.

But they hadn't counted on the response. Within minutes, every Navy SEAL in Task Unit Bruiser and several of our

non-SEAL support personnel were on the rooftop shooting back. Some SEALs had brought their M4 rifles, others M79 40mm grenade launchers, others their Mk48 and Mk46 belt-fed machine guns. We unleashed incredible volleys of fire back at the enemy fighters' muzzle flashes. I directed an M79 gunner to put some 40mm illumination rounds up so we could better identify our targets.

Leif was on the rooftop right next to me, shooting and directing fire. The SEAL just beside him unloaded two full hundred-round belts through his machine gun, spewing spent shell casings across the rooftop that bounced with a metallic *clink*. Everybody was shooting, having a hell of a time. There was much laughter as guys unloaded what was clearly a ridiculous amount of gunfire at the enemy. Soon, the enemy fighters were either dead or retreating and their attack subsided. The SEAL machine gunner looked around with a smile.

"This is my third deployment to Iraq," said the SEAL machine gunner, excitedly. "And that's the first time I've ever fired my machine gun in combat." It was his first day on the ground in Ramadi.

A few of us had been here for a week, including Leif, some of the other key leaders, and me. But most of Task Unit Bruiser's SEALs had arrived only that day. As much fun as we had shooting from the rooftop, this was a wake-up call for everyone in Task Unit Bruiser. This was Ramadi, a total war zone and the most violent place in Iraq. For those of us who had deployed to Iraq previously, it was a realization that this time would be different—and a lot more dangerous. Welcome to Ramadi.

Throughout 2005 and 2006, the vast and volatile Al Anbar Province was the most dangerous place in Iraq, accounting for the majority of U.S. casualties in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Of all the places in Anbar, the city of Ar Ramadi was the most deadly.

Located on the Euphrates River, Ramadi, with four hundred thousand residents, was the capital of Anbar Province and the epicenter of the violent Sunni insurgency. The city was strewn with rubble-pile buildings, burned-out hulks of twisted metal that had once been vehicles, and walls marred by bullet holes. Giant bomb craters from IEDs\* dotted the main roads through town. Thousands of heavily armed Sunni insurgent fighters loyal to al Qaeda in Iraq controlled some two-thirds of the geographic area of the city. U.S. forces couldn't even begin to penetrate these areas without sustaining massive casualties. Al Qaeda in Iraq claimed the city as the capital of their caliphate.

Valiant U.S. Army Soldiers and Marines ran convoys and patrols along the deadly, heavily IED'ed roads. They conducted cordon and search operations into enemy territory and engaged in fierce fighting. Most of the several thousand U.S. troops in Ramadi were located on large secure bases outside the city itself. But along the main road through the city, a string of isolated U.S. Marine and Army outposts were constantly under attack.

The level of determination and sophistication from insurgent fighters in Ramadi was alarming—far beyond what any of us in Task Unit Bruiser had seen on previous deployments. Several times a week, groups of twenty or thirty well-armed enemy fighters launched hellacious attacks on U.S. forces. These were well-coordinated, complex attacks executed simultaneously on multiple U.S. outposts separated by several kilometers. They were hardcore *muj*.

Many enemy attacks followed a similar pattern. Each began with a sudden barrage of accurate, devastating machine gun fire from multiple directions, which hammered the American sentry posts and forced those on guard to take cover. Then, while Soldiers

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\* IED, or improvised explosive device, the deadly roadside bombs that accounted for roughly 70–80 percent of U.S. casualties in Iraq in 2006.

or Marines were hunkered down, deadly RPG-7 shoulder-fired rockets were launched in rapid succession, impacting with violent noise and lethal shrapnel. Next, mortars (fired from some distance away) rained down inside the walls of the coalition compound, often impacting with alarming accuracy. All this was done in an effort to take out the sentries or force them to keep their heads down long enough so they couldn't return fire, while the enemy launched their final and most devastating weapon: the VBIED suicide bomber driving a large truck or vehicle filled with several thousand pounds of explosives.\* If the truck made it past the concrete barriers, past the Marine or Army sentries that would engage them, and inside the compound, the results could be catastrophic—as deadly as the most powerful U.S. Tomahawk missile launched from a Navy warship or Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) guided bomb dropped from U.S. aircraft.

These enemy attacks were well coordinated and viciously executed. The Sunni jihadi militants were far more capable than those I had previously seen in Iraq two years before and eager to wipe out the American outposts, leaving dozens of Marines or Soldiers dead and many more wounded. But those fearless Marine and Army sentries held their ground every time and beat the insurgents back. Instead of taking cover to save themselves, the young Marines and Soldiers who manned the watchtowers and sentry posts courageously stood fast and returned fire with deadly accurate machine gun fire of their own. Their selfless stands almost always prevented those VBIEDs from entering all the way into compound. The VBIED might explode in a massive fireball and concussion, but the enemy could not get close enough to U.S. forces, protected behind sandbags and concrete barriers.

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\* what the U.S. military called a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device, or VBIED

The Marines and Soldiers fought off those attacks with such frequency that they almost became commonplace—just another day in Ramadi.

In Task Unit Bruiser, we were confident and perhaps even a little cocky. But I tried to temper that confidence by instilling a culture within our task unit to never be satisfied; we pushed ourselves harder to continuously improve our performance. I reminded our troops that we couldn't take the enemy for granted, that we could never get complacent. With all that in mind, the boys of Task Unit Bruiser were fired up and eager to prove themselves as we deployed to Ar Ramadi in the spring of 2006.

Immediately upon arrival, we were humbled by the violence of the battlefield and the incredible heroism of conventional U.S. Soldiers and Marines of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 28th (2-28) Infantry Division. Our SEALs had the benefit of much more advanced training and all the finest weapons, lasers, optics, and gadgetry that the enormous Special Operations Command budget could buy. But we were in awe of the Soldiers and Marines who manned the outposts in enemy territory and were daily locked in a deadly struggle against a fierce and determined enemy. When the 1st Armored Division's Ready First Brigade Combat Team arrived to replace 2-28 a month into our deployment, again we developed a deep respect and admiration for these brothers-in-arms and were proud to serve alongside them. Every one of the conventional units\* we worked with had seen extensive combat; all had lost troops, and suffered many more wounded. These Soldiers and Marines were the real deal. They epitomized the term "warrior."

The enemy was also strong and incredibly capable. They were deadly and efficient, always watching, analyzing, and looking for

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\* Now called General Purpose Forces.

weaknesses to exploit. If U.S. forces were to win in Ramadi, I saw right away that all of us—U.S. conventional Army and Marine units and Special Operations units like our SEALs in Task Unit Bruiser—had to work together and support each other. Unfortunately, there were a small number of U.S. special operations units, including some SEALs, who viewed themselves as a cut above regular U.S. Army Soldiers and Marines and would only operate independently. That cockiness produced some conventional Army and Marine commanders who didn't like special operations units. But if U.S. forces were to win this difficult fight here in Ramadi, we would all need to check our egos and work together.

From our earliest arrival, we established the precedent that in TU Bruiser we would treat our Army and Marine brothers-and sisters-in-arms with nothing but the highest professional respect and courtesy. SEAL units are sometimes known for long hair and sloppy uniforms. But to conventional units, appearance was a measure of professionalism. In Task Unit Bruiser, I insisted that our uniforms be squared away and our haircuts military regulation. We sought ways to work together with these units in support of one another. The goal was simple: secure and stabilize Ramadi. With this attitude of humility and mutual respect, we forged strong relationships with the Army and Marine battalions and companies that owned the battlespace in and around Ramadi. We took great risks to patrol deep into enemy territory to provide sniper support and protect friendly troops in the streets. Those Soldiers and Marines, in turn, constantly put their troops at risk to come help us with heavy fire support—M1A2 Abrams tanks and M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicles—and casualty evacuations when we needed it.

After a month on the ground in Ramadi, Task Unit Bruiser had made a mark. We had figured out how to position ourselves

on the high ground where we could do the most damage to enemy fighters and best support the U.S. Army and Marine units operating in the city. When the enemy rallied to attack, SEAL snipers sprung into action and engaged with precision sniper fire, killing large numbers of well-armed *muj* fighters and routing their attacks. As enemy activity escalated, so did SEAL aggression. Once our SEAL elements were discovered, our positions transitioned from clandestine sniper hide sites into fortified fighting positions. SEAL machine gunners joined in the fight, hammering enemy fighters with hundreds of rounds from their belt-fed machine guns. Other SEALs lobbed 40mm high-explosive grenades and launched our own shoulder-fired rockets at the enemy. Rapidly, the number of enemy fighters killed at the hands of our Task Unit Bruiser SEALs grew to unprecedented levels. Every bad guy killed meant more U.S. Soldiers, Marines, and SEALs survived another day; they were one day closer to returning home safely to their families. Every enemy fighter killed also meant another Iraqi soldier, policemen, or government official survived, and more Iraqi civilians lived in a little less fear of al Qaeda in Iraq and their insurgent allies. We fought an evil enemy, perhaps as evil as any the U.S. military had faced in its long history. These violent jihadis used torture, rape, and murder as weapons to ruthlessly terrorize, intimidate, and rule over the civilian populace who lived in abject fear. The American public and much of the Western World lived in willful naïveté of the barbaric, unspeakable tactics these jihadis employed. It was subhuman savagery. Having witnessed this repeatedly, in our minds and those of the people who suffered under their brutal reign, the *muj* deserved no mercy.

For our relatively small group of about thirty-six SEALs, the number of enemy fighters killed on a daily basis drew attention from

the upper echelons of our chain of command. As Task Unit Bruiser continued to operate with awesome lethality, some other units across Iraq wanted in on the action in Ramadi.

One particular group of advisors from another part of Iraq had similar capability to our SEALs in Ramadi and worked alongside a well-trained Iraqi Army unit. Unlike most Iraqi soldiers, these troops were equipped with good gear including some of the best rifles, scopes, lasers, night-vision goggles, and body armor in Iraq. With the right training and the right equipment, these Iraqi soldiers' skill level and operational capabilities far exceeded any of the other Iraqi Army units we worked with in Ramadi. Because of their superior training and high level of visibility with U.S. top military brass, this Iraqi unit and their U.S. advisors had a great deal of leeway to operate wherever and however they wanted. When they got wind of the action in Ramadi, they quickly gained approval to move there and get to work.

When the new unit arrived, they were sent to Camp Corregidor Forward Operating Base on the eastern side of the city. Camp Corregidor was owned and operated by the U.S. Army 101st Airborne Division's First Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment—the legendary “Five-O-Sixth” made famous by Stephen Ambrose's book *Band of Brothers* (which became an HBO miniseries). The book followed a single company's heroic efforts in the European campaign against Nazi Germany in World War II. Those brave men had set a high standard, and the modern-day Soldiers of the 1/506th carried on that tradition with pride and added to their historic legacy.

The 1/506th Battalion was commanded by a U.S. Army lieutenant colonel, an extremely smart, charismatic, and professional officer who set the standard for military leaders. He was one of the finest battlefield commanders with whom I had the honor to serve. The colonel commanded with subtle intensity

that was complemented with a genuinely kind and easygoing attitude. He was an incredible leader; and leading men in the violent battle in Ramadi demanded every ounce of leadership possible.

Camp Corregidor was combat living defined. Everything was difficult there. A fine, powderlike sand, which U.S. troops called "moon dust," caked buildings, equipment, weapons, vehicles, clothing, and skin. But that was the least of the problems. Camp Corregidor bordered one of the most dangerous areas of Ramadi, called the Ma'laab District. The camp was under constant attack from mortars, machine guns, and rockets.

The colonel expected the highest level of discipline from his 1/506th Soldiers; he knew that slacking here, even when just going to the chow hall for lunch, could result in horrific wounds and death. Discipline in such a situation started with the little things: high-and-tight haircuts, a clean shave every day, and uniforms maintained. With that, the more important things fell into place: body armor and helmets worn outdoors at all times, and weapons cleaned and ready for use at a moment's notice. Discipline created vigilance and operational readiness, which translated to high performance and success on the battlefield.

We sent Task Unit Bruiser SEALs from Delta Platoon to live and work out of Camp Corregidor to train and combat-advise Iraqi soldiers there and support the 1/506th Band of Brothers. When the SEAL element arrived, they humbly took on the same habits as their 1/506th hosts. Despite more relaxed grooming standards SEALs typically enjoy elsewhere, the SEALs at Camp Corregidor cropped their hair short, shaved every day, and even donned the same ACU (army combat uniform) camouflage as their Army counterparts. This overt sign of camaraderie endeared the SEALs to the Soldiers of the 1/506th. These Soldiers had been in a bloody fight for nearly six months, and the SEALs treated them with

professionalism and respect. The Army returned that respect, and a bond quickly formed between Soldiers and SEALs.

Our SEALs had been working out of Camp Corregidor for several weeks, carrying out dangerous operations with courage, skill, and effectiveness when the new unit arrived. At first, the SEAL platoon commander at Camp Corregidor was concerned at the arrival of the new well-trained Iraqi unit and their American advisors. He called me on the field-expedient telephone and confided, "This unit that just arrived likely has a much better capability than us. They have a lot of experience. Their Iraqis' skill level is far and above our conventional *jundhis*. They have much better gear and good weapons; and their Iraqis even have a sniper capability."

I replied, "That's good. I'm glad there are Iraqi soldiers that have progressed that far. If you show them the ropes and get them familiar with the battlespace, they will be a great asset."

"I don't know," the SEAL platoon commander replied. "I'm worried these guys will be better than us and take over our mission. Maybe I should just let them figure it out on their own," he said.

I quickly realized what was going on. As good as this platoon commander was, his ego was being threatened. In an environment like Ramadi, trying to figure things out for yourself could easily get you killed. This was no place for ego.

"No. Don't even think about that. Listen: the enemy is outside the wire," I told my SEAL platoon commander bluntly.

Our enemies were the insurgents lurking in the city of Ramadi, not other coalition forces "inside the wire" on the U.S. bases with us. We had to all work together toward the same goal of defeating that insurgency. We couldn't let ego get in the way.

I continued, "This new advisor unit—these are Americans and good Iraqis, possibly the best Iraqis; you do whatever you can to help these guys. If they outperform your team and take your

mission, good. We will find you another one. Our mission is to defeat this insurgency. We can't let our egos take precedence over doing what is best to accomplish that."

"Got it, boss," said the platoon commander. A smart and humble warrior, he quickly recognized his viewpoint was wrong and changed his attitude. It was immaterial which units did what or who conducted the most operations. It was about the mission and how we could best accomplish it and win. The platoon commander and his element of SEALs had been bravely fighting hard. They had been in dozens of firefights in the few weeks they had been at Corregidor and could use all the help they could get from another capable unit.

While the SEAL platoon commander quickly put his ego in check, unfortunately, there were other egos getting in the way. As the new unit began to interact with the SEALs and the 1/506th personnel, some of their attitudes raised eyebrows. A few of them did not carry themselves with the same humility as the Band of Brothers 1/506th Soldiers and our SEALs did on Camp Corregidor. A handful of the troops from the new unit flaunted an undisciplined appearance. Some had mustaches and goatees with long hair. They wore dirty baseball caps and cutoff T-shirts with mismatched uniforms. Now, some military units on remote, isolated bases might ease their grooming standards in order to fit in with the local populace or with the foreign military units they are working with. In some cases, such an appearance might even be required. But here in Ramadi, in close proximity with conventional forces on bases owned and operated by the Army and Marine Corps, this was bound to cause friction.

In the minds of some of the members of this new unit, they were above conforming to the colonel's strict grooming policies. But that alone was an issue that could be overcome. After all, a clean uniform does not a good soldier make. But the problems didn't stop there. Some of the unit's U.S. advisors did not address the

1/506th Soldiers with professionalism and respect. They talked down not only to rank Soldiers but also to senior leaders. Considering virtually every rifleman in the 1/506th had more combat experience than most of the men in this unit ever would, this was especially shocking.

To make matters worse, the new unit made it clear that they had little interest in listening to advice or learning from the SEAL platoon commander and his men. After weeks of sustained combat operations in one of the worst sectors of Ramadi, our SEALs had learned lessons that saved lives. From specific gear needed to how much ammunition to carry, to the amount of water needed for missions, to effective tactics and communications plans, the SEALs had learned a great deal about conducting operations with 1/506th in this specific area. When they attempted to pass this valuable information on to the new unit, their advice was shunned. Overconfidence was risky in such a hostile environment, a mistake most often made by warriors who had never truly been tested.

Because of the thousands of well-armed insurgents and the extreme violence that engulfed Ramadi, every U.S. unit had to carefully coordinate plans and be ready to support each other. Here the constant threat from a large-scale enemy attack, with the potential to overwhelm and annihilate a small group of U.S. troops, was very real. That meant everyone had to share operational details of plans as much as they could in order to ensure synchronized efforts. From large battalion-size operations to simple logistics convoys, it was essential to coordinate and keep other units informed in order to give everyone the greatest chance of survival and prevent fratricide. Yet, when planning their missions, this new unit working in 1/506th battlespace refused to disclose their plans, locations, timelines, or other operational details. They didn't think they needed to inform the colonel

of their plans. This meant they intended to go out into the colonel's battlespace, among his units, rely on his support when things went sideways, and conduct operations without fully coordinating. When the 1/506th battalion operations officer confronted them and asked for the plan detailing their first mission, the new unit's leader told him, "We'll tell you later on a need-to-know basis."

When the 1/506th tactical operations center (TOC) inquired about the unit's specific planned location for a mission, (a standard practice to prevent friendly units operating in the area from accidentally engaging them, and enabling the 1/506th TOC to send help to their location when needed) the unit's leader provided a four-digit grid (from the military grid reference system). This meant that the unit's troops could be located anywhere within a thousand-meter grid square—all but worthless to the 1/506th TOC. Earlier, we had learned some tough lessons in information sharing, or lack thereof, that had resulted in fratricide. In such a dangerous operating environment with large numbers of well-armed enemy fighters and multiple friendly units maneuvering in the same battlespace, such lack of coordination could well mean a death sentence.

The SEAL platoon commander soon reported back to me on the friction between the new unit and the 1/506th Soldiers. My advice was simple: "Give them what they need and try to help them if you can, but it sounds like they will make their own bed."

Unfortunately, the platoon commander was not able to help and the situation did not improve. In less than two weeks, the colonel directed the unit to leave Camp Corregidor. With such impressive operational capability, they should have been a big contributor to the fight. But the colonel and his troops simply could not risk working with a group where some members' egos

prevented them from ever fully integrating with the 1/506th battalion. As a result, the unit had to watch the historic Battle of Ramadi from afar as Delta Platoon SEALs and 1/506th Soldiers took the fight to the enemy in the Ma'laab, killing scores of insurgents and helping to accomplish the strategic objectives of securing and stabilizing the city.

### PRINCIPLE

Ego clouds and disrupts everything: the planning process, the ability to take good advice, and the ability to accept constructive criticism. It can even stifle someone's sense of self-preservation. Often, the most difficult ego to deal with is *your own*.

Everyone has an ego. Ego drives the most successful people in life—in the SEAL Teams, in the military, in the business world. They want to win, to be the best. That is good. But when ego clouds our judgment and prevents us from seeing the world as it is, then ego becomes destructive. When personal agendas become more important than the team and the overarching mission's success, performance suffers and failure ensues. Many of the disruptive issues that arise within any team can be attributed directly to a problem with ego.

Implementing Extreme Ownership requires checking your ego and operating with a high degree of humility. Admitting mistakes, taking ownership, and developing a plan to overcome challenges are integral to any successful team. Ego can prevent a leader from conducting an honest, realistic assessment of his or her own performance and the performance of the team.

In the SEAL Teams, we strive to be confident, but not cocky (see chapter 12). We take tremendous pride in the history and legacy of our organization. We are confident in our skills and are eager to take on challenging missions that others cannot or aren't willing to execute. But we can't ever think we are too good to fail or that our enemies are not capable, deadly, and eager to exploit our

weaknesses. We must never get complacent. This is where controlling the ego is most important.

## APPLICATION TO BUSINESS

*Leif Babin*

"I've got an immediate fire that's causing us a big issue, and I need some help with this," said the voice mail. "Please give me a call as soon as you can."

The voice mail was from Gary, a midlevel manager in the operations department of a corporation with which Jocko and I had worked through our company, Echelon Front. We had developed a twelve-month leadership program for the corporation. Every few weeks, we traveled to their corporate headquarters for training with a class of a dozen midlevel managers from various departments. In addition to the classroom sessions, we provided coaching and mentorship to help our course participants apply what they learned in class to their everyday leadership challenges.

Jocko and I had spoken to Gary by phone several times over the past few months and helped him solve some minor leadership dilemmas and build a more effective team. He was a hard worker, dedicated to his job and his team, and he was eager to learn. It was rewarding to watch him grow as a leader over the months of our course. As a result, he had much greater confidence in himself to make the decisions that would help his team more effectively execute their mission. Now he had a major issue—a serious leadership challenge that was pressing. I was eager to help.

I quickly gave him a call to find out what had happened and what I could do.

"How you doing, Gary?" I asked when he picked up the phone.

"Not too good," Gary responded. "We just had a major issue on one of our critical projects."

"What happened?" I asked. I couldn't hope to match Gary's

expertise in this industry. But I could help him solve his leadership challenges, improve communication, and run a more effective team.

"Our drilling superintendent made a call on his own to swap out a critical piece of equipment," said Gary. "He totally violated our standard operating procedures. I have told him before how I wanted this done, and he completely blew me off!" Gary was angry.

Obviously, Gary's ego had been bruised by the fact that the drilling superintendent hadn't cleared the decision through him.

"This was something he knew he should have run through me," Gary continued, "and he blatantly did not. He made the wrong call, and that set our completion date back several days, costing our company serious capital." In this industry, each day lost on the project could cost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"Tell me about your superintendent," I said. "Why do you think he would do that?"

"No idea," said Gary. "He knows he has to run that call through me. But he's been in this business way longer than I have, and he's got a ton of experience. Sometimes he looks at me, and his face says *What the hell do you know?* I'm sure he thinks he knows better than me."

"Perhaps he was just pushing the envelope to see what he could get away with," I replied. "Which can escalate if you let it go."

"That's part of the problem. I'm worried about how he will respond to my critique," said Gary. "With his years of knowledge and experience, he is a critical member of this team. We can't afford to lose him. If I call him out, he is going to blow up at me and the friction between us is likely to get even worse than it already is. And you know the climate in this industry. With his experience, he can find another job tomorrow if he wants to."

"That means you will have to check your ego in order to

have a constructive discussion with him and get this under control," I responded.

"Let's think through this," I continued. "Do you think he deliberately tried to shut down drilling operations and cost the company money?"

"No," admitted Gary. "I'm sure he thought he was doing what was best for the immediate situation as it presented itself."

"At the tactical level, on the front lines where the guys in the field execute the mission," I said, "it is critical that the troops grasp how what they do connects to the bigger picture. Your superintendent may not have really understood how his failure to follow procedure and get approval for these changes would result in hundreds of thousands of dollars lost. Do you think that is possible?"

"Definitely. He has exceptional hands-on knowledge of drilling, but he doesn't really deal with the big picture," Gary replied. His anger subsided and his bruised ego diminished as he realized the superintendent had probably not been willfully insubordinate. He now began to understand the reasons the superintendent made the decisions he did.

"As a leader, it is up to you to explain the bigger picture to him—and to all your front line leaders. That is a critical component of leadership," I replied.

But Gary was still concerned about how to deal with his drilling superintendent—and the superintendent's ego. "How can I communicate this to him without ruffling his feathers and getting him all pissed off at me?" asked Gary. "If I confront him about this, our communication will get even worse than it already is."

"That is another critical component of leadership," I quickly replied. "Dealing with people's egos. And you can do so by using one of the main principles we have taught you during our course: Extreme Ownership."

Gary responded, "Ownership of what? He's the one that

screwed this up, not me." It was clear Gary's ego was getting in the way of the solution to this problem.

"Ownership of everything!" I answered. "This isn't his fault, it's *yours*. You are in charge, so the fact that he didn't follow procedure is your fault. And you have to believe that, because it's true. When you talk to him, you need to start the conversation like this: 'Our team made a mistake and it's my fault. It's my fault because I obviously wasn't as clear as I should have been in explaining why we have these procedures in place and how not following them can cost the company hundreds of thousands of dollars. You are an extremely skilled and knowledgeable superintendent. You know more about this business than I ever will. It was up to me to make sure you know the parameters we have to work within and why some decisions have got to be run through me. Now, I need to fix this so it doesn't happen again.'"

"Do you think that will work?" asked Gary, sounding unconvinced.

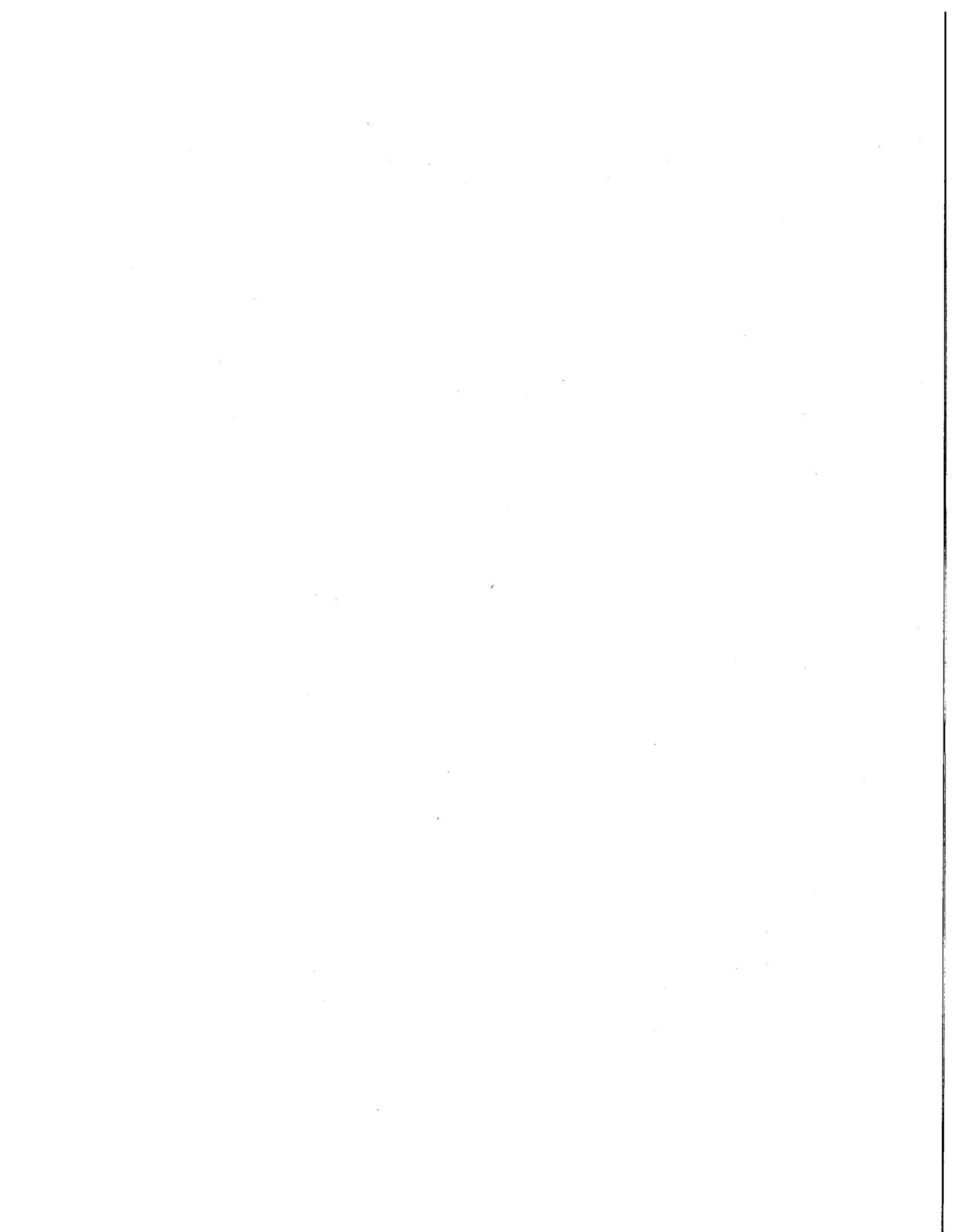
"I'm confident it will," I replied. "If you approached it as *he* did something wrong, and *he* needs to fix something, and *he* is at fault, it becomes a clash of egos and you two will be at odds. That's human nature. But, if you put your own ego in check, meaning *you* take the blame, that will allow him to actually see the problem without his vision clouded by ego. Then you both can make sure that your team's standard operating procedures—when to communicate, what is and isn't within his decision-making authority—are clearly understood."

"I wouldn't have thought to take that tact," Gary admitted.

"It's counterintuitive," I said. "It's natural for anyone in a leadership position to blame subordinate leaders and direct reports when something goes wrong. Our egos don't like to take blame. But it's on us as leaders to see where we failed to communicate effectively and help our troops clearly understand what their roles

and responsibilities are and how their actions impact the bigger strategic picture.

“Remember, it’s not about you,” I continued. “It’s not about the drilling superintendent. It’s about the mission and how best to accomplish it. With that attitude exemplified in you and your key leaders, your team will dominate.”



# **PART II**

## **THE LAWS OF COMBAT**



Bruiser SEALs clear target buildings in central Ramadi. Ruthless insurgents could be waiting behind every door or firing from every window or rooftop. Enemy mortars, rifles, machine guns, RPG-7 rockets, and IEDs made every clearance a challenge.

(Photo courtesy of the authors)

# CHAPTER 5

## Cover and Move

*Leif Babin*

### **SOUTH-CENTRAL RAMADI, IRAQ: COVERING THE FLANK**

“So what are we doing?” asked our leading petty officer.

The clock was ticking and every second counted. There were no good options. Each one could have deadly consequences. But I had to make a call.

As SEALs, we often protected the troops in the streets with our snipers and machine gunners in a type of operation we called “sniper overwatch.” By taking the high ground in buildings and positioning SEAL snipers where they could best observe and engage enemy fighters maneuvering to attack, we could eliminate threats and disrupt insurgent attacks before they could fully materialize. This helped mitigate the substantial risks to U.S. and Iraqi troops patrolling the streets, enabled them to more safely accomplish their mission, and ensured more U.S. Soldiers and Marines came home alive to their families back in the States.

The U.S. Army’s Ready First Brigade Combat Team (1st Armored Division) adopted a radical and innovative strategy to take

back Ramadi from the malevolent clutches of the insurgency—Seize, Clear, Hold, Build. It called for U.S. forces to penetrate into the most dangerous enemy-held neighborhoods, push back insurgent fighters, and construct permanent U.S. combat outposts from which to base further operations. Iraqi soldiers were brought in to take part in the effort. Once a foothold was established in enemy territory, the next step required a show of force in enemy controlled areas and engagement with the Iraqi populace in the neighborhood. Though the battles raged around them, hundreds of thousands of civilians lived in the city and simply tried to survive. Securing the people and protecting them from the brutal jihadi fighters that hid among them was the key to victory. Integral to the success of this strategy were cordon and search operations—clearing through city blocks house by house. Often executed during daylight hours, these operations could be treacherous for the U.S. Army Soldiers, Marines, and Iraqi troops as they cordoned off neighborhoods (or sectors) and moved street to street, building to building through some of the most violent areas of the city.

On one particular operation, Team Bulldog (U.S. Army Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 37th Armored Regiment) planned a large cordon and search operation in a particularly dangerous area of South-Central Ramadi spanning several blocks from their base located in the heart of enemy territory, a combat outpost called COP Falcon. Such an operation required some one hundred Soldiers on the ground, supported by armor—M1A2 Abrams Main Battle Tanks and M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicles—with their substantial firepower. Additional forces from the battalion were brought in to reinforce Team Bulldog in this effort.

Through dozens of dangerous combat operations, we had built an excellent working relationship with the U.S. Soldiers and tankers of Team Bulldog. Bulldog's company commander was one of the finest combat leaders I have known. He and his Soldiers were

exceptional warriors. Our SEALs had tremendous respect and admiration for their courage and fighting spirit as they lived everyday under constant attack, right in the heart of dangerous enemy territory. Our SEAL elements worked out of COP Falcon and from there pushed even deeper into al Qaeda battle space. When we were ferociously attacked by insurgents, which was often, the company commander personally mounted up in his tank, rallied his troops, and brought the thunder with the main guns of Team Bulldog's M1A2 Abrams tanks to bear on our behalf. He and his Bulldog Soldiers were an outstanding group, eager to close with and destroy the enemy, and we loved them for it.

On this particular cordon and search operation, our SEALs from Charlie Platoon and Task Unit Bruiser would provide sniper overwatch, while our SEAL combat advisors would manage a platoon of Iraqi soldiers participating in the clearance on the ground. Jocko teamed up with the Army battalion's operations officer, who would help manage the clearance, while Jocko would provide command and control as well as coordination of our SEAL elements supporting the operation.

In planning, we decided to set up two separate SEAL sniper overwatch positions several hundred meters apart to cover the U.S. Army and Iraqi Army cordon and search teams as they entered buildings block by block across the sector. The first SEAL sniper overwatch position, OP1, led by Charlie Platoon's assistant officer-in-charge, would take position in a large four-story apartment building some three hundred meters to the east of COP Falcon to protect the northern flank of the cordon and search teams. I would lead a second SEAL sniper overwatch position, OP2, of eight SEALs and seven Iraqi soldiers. We planned to take position about one kilometer southeast of COP Falcon along the southern flank of the cordon and search teams. The area was heavily IED'ed.

At 0200 local time (or two o'clock in the morning), those of us in OP2 stepped off via foot patrol from COP Falcon into the dark

and dangerous Ramadi streets. Empty at this hour, all appeared quiet. But in this neighborhood, enemy fighters could be waiting around every corner. The other SEAL overwatch team, OP1, would depart an hour later, since their position was very near the friendly combat outpost and it was one they knew well, having utilized this position before. My team, OP2, had much farther to travel, and not having been in any of the buildings in the immediate area, we would need more time to establish a good position. On the patrol in, I served as patrol leader positioned second from the front, just behind the point man. We moved as quietly as possible through the streets, weapons trained at every angle, watching for enemy, ready for contact at all times. We took great care to avoid debris, such as trash piles on the street or other suspicious items, being deliberate in where we stepped, as the threat from IEDs was substantial. Each man carried a heavy load of weapons, ammunition, and water, in anticipation of what we knew could likely be a big and lengthy fight come daylight.

This urban war zone was straight out of a Hollywood set for a World War II movie, like the ones we watched growing up: walls riddled with bullet holes, burnt-out cars in the streets, rubble buildings, and bomb craters. It was surreal to be in a place filled with such violence and destruction. We continued our patrol down the dusty, trash-covered streets, weapons bristling in all directions. Our patrol snaked through alleyways, avoiding the rare operating streetlamp (most had been shot out or didn't have electrical power), and maneuvered the best we could around packs of mangy street dogs whose barking could give away our position. We planned to utilize a two-story house as our OP2 overwatch position and thought it would provide a clear view to cover the cordon and search teams' southern flank.

After a twenty-minute patrol without incident we arrived at the location. Just outside the walled compound, the entire element took up security positions around the gate. With weapons cover-

ing, we boosted a couple of our Iraqi soldiers over the wall. They quickly unbolted the gate from the inside and then let the rest of us in. SEAL shooters and Iraqi soldiers swiftly but quietly flowed into the compound and moved toward the house's front door. Iraqi soldiers knocked and instructed the family inside to open up. A bewildered Iraqi man answered the door and complied. SEALs quickly cleared the compound, checking each room, a second-story balcony, the rooftop, and the interior courtyard for threats. Once clear, we set security positions.

The house provided a decent view in one direction along the main road. In the other direction, however, it offered little vantage point except from an exposed balcony. It was also difficult to place key security positions without exposing personnel to attack from surrounding buildings. Our OP2 snipers brought these significant concerns to me and our platoon's leading petty officer (LPO)—one of my most trusted leaders. We were in a bind.

"We could take the building next door and maintain a security contingent there," the LPO offered. It was a great idea, and we decided to pursue that option.

Leaving a team in place, we sent a clearance team to the adjacent building. But what they found was not encouraging: the vantage point was no better. Positioning adequate security forces in two different buildings would spread us extremely thin, especially in such a dangerous neighborhood crawling with heavily armed *muj*. With this option not practical, I talked things over with the LPO. It was still dark, but sunrise was not far off, and the first call to prayer would soon echo from the mosque minarets and awaken the city. Time was running out to get into position, especially as the cordon and search teams of Army Soldiers, our SEAL advisor teams and Iraqi soldiers would commence their operation soon and were depending on our sniper overwatch team to cover them.

"No options are good," I lamented. "But our least bad option

is to pull everyone back to our original building and secure that position as best we can." The LPO agreed and immediately executed the plan. We knew the position had substantial vulnerabilities, but we would have to do all we could to mitigate such risks. Our SEAL snipers took positions to best protect the troops on the ground, and then we placed the rest of our team in positions to protect the snipers, one of whom was somewhat exposed on the balcony. With the position set, OP2's SEAL radioman made a call to our other SEAL sniper overwatch, OP1, reporting our position. We then checked in on Team Bulldog's net and passed our location to Jocko, who was with Team Bulldog at COP Falcon, so he could coordinate with the other troops on the ground.

*"Aaaaalllllllaaaaaaaaahhhhhuu Akbar . . ."* echoed the first call to prayer from the minaret loudspeakers of mosques throughout the city, signaling the dawning of the day. Soon, the first rays of light painted the eastern horizon, and South-Central Ramadi began to awaken. Even in this war-torn city, some semblance of normal life carried on. People emerged from their houses. Cars and trucks backed out of driveways and made their way down city streets. Shepherd boys drove their herds of sheep down the road to graze along the fertile banks of the Euphrates River. The sun rose with searing heat which would crescendo midday to baking temperatures of over 115 degrees Fahrenheit.

Over the radio, the Soldiers of Team Bulldog signaled their cordon and search operation was under way. Dozens of Soldiers (including the SEAL advisor and Iraqi soldier clearance team) moved out from COP Falcon accompanied by armored firepower from Abrams tanks and Bradley vehicles. From our position hundreds of meters away, OP2 could hear the heavy grind of tank tracks on pavement and the rev of their powerful gas turbine engines. I checked in with Jocko via radio, as he moved out with the cordon and search team. All was proceeding according to plan.

In such a nasty neighborhood, it didn't take long for enemy fighters to mount an attack. The first attempts came from the north. OP2 could hear the report of big rifles as OPI's SEAL snipers hammered a couple of armed insurgents moving to attack. Soon, our OP2 snipers observed three enemy fighters with AK-47s and an RPG rocket maneuvering through the streets toward the clearance teams. SEAL snipers engaged, hitting two of the three and sending the third running for cover. With those shots, the enemy had a good indication of where we were. Within the hour, the first bursts of *muj* machine gun fire snapped over the heads of the two SEALs positioned on the balcony. It was only the beginning, as the enemy sporadically engaged our building and probed our position. We knew their attacks would no doubt grow bolder as they pinpointed our position and the day progressed.

The cordon and search operation proceeded with sporadic gunfire and a few warning shots fired. The SEAL sniper overwatch positions were able to help thwart any major attacks before they could materialize. The vigilant Team Bulldog Soldiers with their tanks at the ready were also a substantial deterrent. Within about two hours of sunrise, the Army Soldiers along with Jocko and the small team of SEAL combat advisors with their Iraqi soldiers had cleared every building in the sector. Having accomplished their mission, they all moved safely back to COP Falcon. It had been a relatively smooth operation, which, in such a dangerous neighborhood right in the heart of South-Central Ramadi, was somewhat miraculous. No American or Iraqi soldiers had been wounded or killed. That was also a testament to good planning and execution by the U.S. forces involved and a tribute to the effectiveness of the SEAL sniper overwatch teams.

With the cordon and search force back at COP Falcon, both SEAL overwatch teams—OPI and OP2—had accomplished our objectives. Our standard operating procedure (SOP) dictated we

remain in position until nightfall and then patrol back to base under cover of darkness, when we could more safely move through the dangerous streets. A small element patrolling in broad daylight through enemy territory presented serious risk of almost certain contact. Enemy machine guns, RPG-7 shoulder-fired rockets, and IEDs could be utilized to deadly effect. But for OP2, remaining in our current position also presented great risks. The building we held had substantial tactical vulnerabilities. The enemy knew where we were, and there was a high probability that with enough time, enemy fighters would mount a serious attack. Should they do so, we might very well take significant casualties and even find our position overrun by determined enemy fighters at close quarters.

This presented quite a leadership dilemma. Again, I discussed options with my trusted LPO: "We can stay where we are and wait until nightfall. Or we can quickly break out of here and foot-patrol back to COP Falcon. Or we could call in the Bradleys\* for extract, though that could take some time." Bradley Fighting Vehicles provided protection from small-arms fire behind their armored plating, and they brought significant firepower with a 25mm chain gun and 7.62mm coaxial machine gun. But they required some time to coordinate—to brief crews and drive to our position. Bradleys were loud and the bad guys would hear them coming from some distance. This option would also expose the U.S. Soldiers that crewed the vehicles to the substantial IED threat, as the roads in the vicinity of our position were extremely dangerous and had not been swept by the IED-clearance teams. This could very well result in an IED strike—a deadly explosive buried in the road, which might kill or seriously wound the Soldiers inside. Were this to happen, it would require sending even more vehicles and troops in harm's way to extract casualties and downed vehicles.

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\* M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicles could carry six soldiers each

Calling in the Bradleys meant waiting for perhaps another half hour and would put Team Bulldog Soldiers in significant danger. It would also endanger us riding in the vehicles through heavily IED'ed streets. If we stayed in position until dark in accordance with SOP, we would almost certainly have to fend off increasingly violent enemy attacks for another eight to ten hours. Should those attacks exploit the significant weaknesses of our defenses, we might be pinned down and unable to depart without calling in massive fire support and putting more forces at even greater risk to bail us out.

If we pulled out on foot immediately and quickly patrolled back to COP Falcon, we would probably get shot at. But it would likely be a hasty attack that the *muj* wouldn't have enough time to coordinate for maximum effectiveness. We could help mitigate that risk by moving quickly and utilizing misdirection in the streets and alleyways to prevent the enemy from predicting our exact route back to COP Falcon so they couldn't set an ambush. Still, any gunfire we received no matter how hasty could certainly kill or horribly wound any of us.

No options were good options. We had to choose the least bad option.

"So what are we doing, L-T?"\* asked the LPO. Time was ticking.

I had to make a call. "We're pulling out," I decided. It was the least bad option. "Let's get packed up quick and break out of here as soon as we can."

"Roger that," said the LPO. He passed the word to the rest of OP2, and everybody quickly gathered up their gear and double-checked to ensure nothing was left behind. Our OP2 radioman contacted OP1, the other sniper overwatch team, to tell them we were moving back on foot to the combat outpost. We also notified

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\* "L-T": a common nickname in the U.S. Navy SEAL Teams for the junior officer rank of U.S. Navy Lieutenant.

Team Bulldog's Soldiers back at COP Falcon, where Jocko and a few of our SEALs with the clearance team had returned.

For OP1, only a short three-hundred-meter patrol from COP Falcon, there was no such dilemma about what to do. They had an easy foot patrol back to COP Falcon, covered by COP Falcon's nearby tanks and heavy machine guns the entire way. OP1 radioed to us in OP2 that they too were pulling out. But OP1 made the mistake of not telling Jocko, which meant he could not coordinate the movement.

"Roger that," our OP2 radioman responded to OP1's call. He relayed the information to the LPO and me. With our focus entirely on getting OP2 moving out in a hurry, we thought little of it. Every minute that passed by gave enemy fighters more time to coordinate a serious attack on our position. Within a few minutes, everyone was ready. We quickly briefed the team and emphasized that we needed to move fast.

"Let's do this," was the consensus. Everybody knew we would likely get in a gunfight. But we wanted that gunfight to be on our terms, not the enemy's.

With everything ready, we broke out of the building and emerged onto the street, our weapons pointed in all directions, ready for a fight. We quickly moved out and made our way through the streets, covering and moving as a team past Iraqi citizens who stared at us with some surprise. When aggressive men with guns pointed their weapons at them, the locals knew to keep their distance. Anyone who didn't avoid interfering with a heavily armed SEAL squad was certainly looking for trouble. Rapidly, we pushed past parked cars and piles of trash. Threats were everywhere in this urban environment. Every gate, door, and alleyway that we passed, the distant intersections down the street at ground level, and above us from every rooftop, balcony, and upstairs window—each presented the possibility of well-armed *muj* fighters ready to inflict horrible wounds or death upon us.

Our tactic, which we had trained for, practiced, and utilized, was a fundamental one we called "Cover and Move." Within our OP2 squad, we had four elements of smaller teams. One team covered, their weapons trained on threats, while the other team moved. Then those teams reversed roles. In this way, the teams leapfrogged in bounds, constantly utilizing Cover and Move to ensure we were prepared to fend off an attack as we maneuvered through the streets.

For about five hundred meters, OP2 moved along steadily, making our way back toward COP Falcon. Then all hell broke loose. Fully automatic gunfire erupted from the rear of the patrol. Insurgent fighters had followed us and heavily engaged us with AK-47s and PKC belt-fed machine guns, and rounds smashed into nearby walls and kicked up dust in the street right at our feet.

Immediately, we responded with withering gunfire of our own. Our SEAL machine gunners were an awesome sight to behold, fearlessly laying down fire with deadly accuracy, even as enemy rounds impacted all around them. Like a well-oiled machine, we executed a "center peel" maneuver: a coordinated tactic where two columns systematically alternate shooting at the enemy and moving away in a safe direction until able to break contact. I lobbed a few 40mm grenades over the heads of our patrol and onto enemy positions to help keep their heads down as we bounded back. Our overwhelming fire quickly repulsed the enemy attack, and we continued to a street corner that provided additional cover, moving in a hurry toward COP Falcon. Those courageous SEAL machine gunners had provided the cover fire that enabled us to move safely through the maelstrom. Within minutes, we covered the remaining distance to the COP and made our way past the Abrams tank guarding the entrance. We pushed past the concertina wire and concrete barriers into the relative safety of the U.S. Army combat outpost. We were breathing hard after running and gunning in the late morning heat with

heavy gear. But we had all survived without a scratch. The LPO and I smiled and laughed at each other. We had just gotten ourselves into a solid gunfight on the street, hammered the enemy, and brought everyone back unscathed. It was awesome. We were fired up.

But already back at COP Falcon was our platoon chief. He had been with the cordon and search force and had returned earlier with Jocko and the rest of our small team of SEALs and the Iraqi soldiers. Chief wasn't happy. He pulled me aside.

"What the hell were you guys doing out there?" the chief asked sternly.

"What do you mean?" I asked, immediately getting defensive.

The chief was a hell of a battlefield leader—extraordinary in a gunfight. With a long career of nearly twenty years, he was the most experienced SEAL in the task unit, and we highly valued his guidance and mentorship. Never one to shy away from a fight, he was courageous and always eager to close with and destroy the enemy. So why now was he critical of us, particularly my leadership on the battlefield?

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"Why didn't you leave the other SEAL sniper overwatch position—OP1—in place to cover your movement back here to COP Falcon?" the chief asked.

I thought about that for a moment. My initial defensiveness wore off. He was right.

"No reason," I replied, understanding that his logic was absolutely correct. I realized my error. "I was so focused on our own squad's dilemma, I didn't think to coordinate with the other team, OP1, to work together. We absolutely should have." This was the first rule in Jocko's Laws of Combat: Cover and Move. I had broken it. We had used Cover and Move within my own immediate OP2 team, but I had forgotten about the greater team and support available. We had operated independently, failing to support

or help each other. Had we left OP1 in place, they would have had an excellent vantage from the high ground and could have covered our OP2 movement much of the way as we patrolled through the dangerous streets back to COP Falcon. Once at the COP, we (OP2) could have provided additional cover for OP1 as they returned to COP Falcon.

It was foolishness not to work together. Though we were working in small teams with some distance between us we weren't on our own. We were all trying to accomplish the same mission. The enemy was out there working against us—all of us. It was essential that we support each other and work together. One element must cover so that the other element could move. Our OP2 had gotten lucky this time around, damn lucky. But my chief knew, and I now recognized, that we had taken a needless and foolish risk. We should have utilized every strength and tactical advantage possible against these ruthless enemy fighters occupying Ramadi. The most important tactical advantage we had was working together as a team, always supporting each other.

It was a rude awakening for me. I had become so immersed in the details, decision points, and immediate challenges of my own team that I had forgotten about the other team, what they could do for us and how we might help them.

Going forward I never forgot my chief's guidance. We utilized the principle of Cover and Move on every operation: all teams working together in support of one another. That realization and the lesson learned implemented no doubt saved lives, greatly reduced casualties and enabled us to more effectively accomplish our mission and win.

### **PRINCIPLE**

Cover and Move: it is the most fundamental tactic, perhaps the only tactic. Put simply, Cover and Move means teamwork. All

elements within the greater team are crucial and must work together to accomplish the mission, mutually supporting one another for that singular purpose. Departments and groups within the team must break down silos, depend on each other and understand who depends on them. If they forsake this principle and operate independently or work against each other, the results can be catastrophic to the overall team's performance.

Within any team, there are divisions that arise. Often, when smaller teams within the team get so focused on their immediate tasks, they forget about what others are doing or how they depend on other teams. They may start to compete with one another, and when there are obstacles, animosity and blame develops. This creates friction that inhibits the overall team's performance. It falls on leaders to continually keep perspective on the strategic mission and remind the team that they are part of the greater team and the strategic mission is paramount.

Each member of the team is critical to success, though the main effort and supporting efforts must be clearly identified. If the overall team fails, everyone fails, even if a specific member or an element within the team did their job successfully. Pointing fingers and placing blame on others contributes to further dissension between teams and individuals. These individuals and teams must instead find a way to work together, communicate with each other, and mutually support one another. The focus must always be on how to best accomplish the mission.

Alternatively, when the team succeeds, everyone within and supporting that team succeeds. Every individual and every team within the larger team gets to share in the success. Accomplishing the strategic mission is the highest priority. Team members, departments, and supporting assets must always Cover and Move—help each other, work *together*, and support each other to win. This principle is integral for any team to achieve victory.

## APPLICATION TO BUSINESS

“Those guys are horrible,” said the production manager. He described a subsidiary company, owned by their parent corporation, on which his team depended to transport their product. “They can’t get their jobs completed on schedule. And that prevents us from doing our jobs.” Clearly, there were major issues between his field leaders—the frontline troops of his team—and those of the subsidiary company.

Jocko and I stood before the class of a dozen midlevel managers seated at tables forming a U-shape in a conference room of the company’s corporate headquarters. In the second session of a twelve-month leadership-training program, our presentation and discussion centered on the Laws of Combat. We solicited from each of the class participants specific leadership challenges that they currently faced. Jocko and I set about to help them solve these challenges through the application of the SEAL combat leadership principles they had just learned.

The production manager explained that his team struggled to minimize downtime in their production—the times when they had to cease making product. These disruptions occurred for a variety of reasons, but they stopped product from moving to market, and every hour and day of downtime cost the company huge revenues and substantially impacted the bottom line. With his crew just getting up and running, there had been a steep learning curve. The production manager’s team maintained an average downtime that was much worse than the industry standard. Such a glaring discrepancy was a major detriment to the company’s profits. As a result, the production manager was under scrutiny and intense pressure to reduce downtime. The subsidiary company on which his production team depended became the major scapegoat to blame.

“We spend a lot of our time waiting on them [the subsidiary

company], and that causes big problems and delays for us," said the production manager. "Those delays are impacting production and costing our company serious revenue."

"How can you help this subsidiary company?" I asked the production manager.

"I can't!" he replied. "They don't work for me. We don't work for the same bosses. They are a different company." While he was right that they were a different company, both companies fell under the leadership of the same parent corporation.

"Besides," he added with indifference, "they aren't *my* problem. I've got my own team to worry about."

"It sounds like they *are* your problem," I responded.

"In that sense," he agreed, "I guess they are."

"What's worse," continued the production manager, now on a roll of bashing the subsidiary company, "because corporate owns them, we are forced to use their services."

"What you just called the worst part should be the best part," Jocko responded. "You are both owned by the same corporation, so you both have the same mission. And that is what this is about—the overall mission, the overall team. Not just your team, but the whole team; the entire corporation—all departments within your company, all subsidiary companies under the corporation, outside contractors, the whole enterprise. You must work together and support each other as *one team*."

"The enemy is out there," I said, pointing out the window to the world beyond. "The enemy is all the other competing companies in your industry that are vying for your customers. The enemy is not in here, inside the walls of this corporation. The departments within and the subsidiary companies that all fall under the same leadership structure—you are all on the same team. You have to overcome the 'us versus them' mentality and work together, mutually supporting one another."

Just as I had on the battlefield in Ramadi years before, the

production manager was now so focused on his own department and its immediate tasks that he couldn't see how his mission aligned with the rest of the corporation and supporting assets, all striving to accomplish the same strategic mission. As I had done after some constructive guidance from my chief, the production manager must now be willing to take a step back and see how his production team's mission fit into the overall plan.

"It's about the bigger, strategic mission," I said. "How can you help this subsidiary company do their job more effectively so they can help you accomplish your mission and you can all win?"

The production manager pondered this. He was still skeptical.

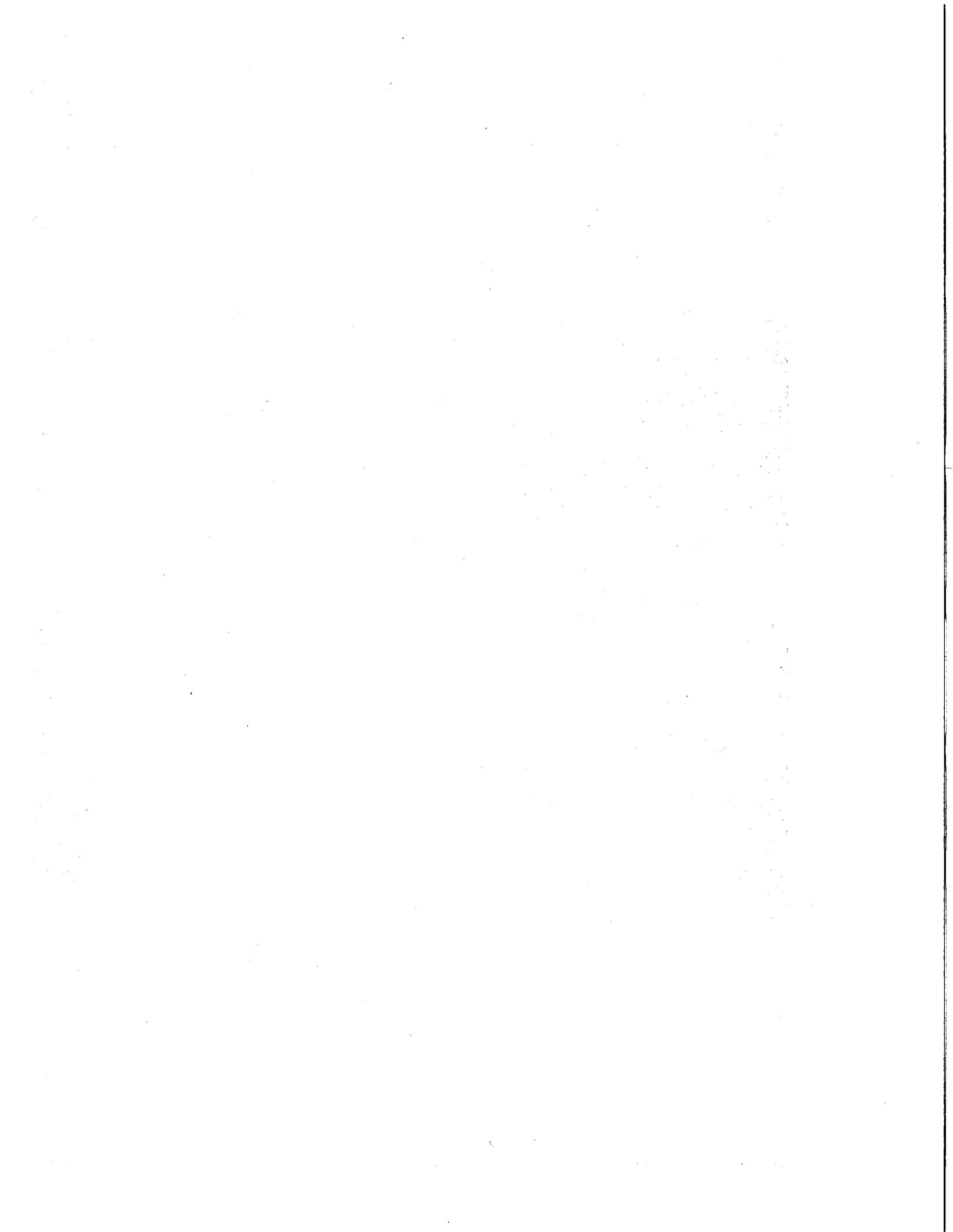
"Engage with them," directed Jocko. "Build a personal relationship with them. Explain to them what you need from them and why, and ask them what you can do to help them get you what you need. Make them a part of your team, not an excuse for your team. Remember the stories Leif and I have told about relying on other units to support us? Those Army and Marine Corps units we worked with were not under our control. We had different bosses. But we depended on them and they depended on us. So we formed relationships with them and worked together to accomplish the overall mission of securing Ramadi. That's Cover and Move. You need to do the same thing here: work together to win."

The production manager was a driven leader who wanted his team to perform at the highest level. Now, he began to understand true teamwork. The proverbial lightbulb went off in his head, and his attitude completely changed: if he wasn't working together with this subsidiary company, then he was failing his team.

Over the next weeks and months, the production manager made every effort to positively engage with the subsidiary company, to communicate with them, and establish a better working relationship. He came to more fully understand the myriad challenges that impacted their timelines and caused delays and what

he could do on his end to help mitigate those issues. It wasn't that they were "horrible," as he had initially surmised. They were operating with limited resources and limited manpower. Once he accepted that they weren't out to sabotage his team, he realized that there were steps that he and his team could take to help the subsidiary company become more efficient and fill in gaps that had caused their delays. Instead of working as two separate entities against each other, they began to work together.

With this shift in mind-set, the production manager's encouragement enabled his field leaders to see the subsidiary company employees in a different light: not as adversaries but as critical resources part of the same greater team. Most important, the production team began to work with the subsidiary company's field team. Within a few months, the production team's field leaders encouraged key personnel from the subsidiary company to sit in on their coordination meetings. Very soon, the "us versus them" mentality had all but disappeared. They had broken through the silos and no longer worked against each other. The production team's downtime radically improved to industry leading levels. They now worked together as one team—Cover and Move.





Band of Brothers: Iraqi soldiers and U.S. Military Transition Team advisors, SEALs from Task Unit Bruiser, and U.S. Army Soldiers from 1/506th, 101st Airborne (Task Force Red Currahee) use smoke grenades to mask their movement from enemy shooters, on patrol in Ramadi.

(Photo courtesy of the authors)

# CHAPTER 6

Simple

*Jocko Willink*

## **COMBAT OUTPOST FALCON, RAMADI, IRAQ: INTO THE FRAY**

*WHOOM!*

A massive explosion shook the walls of the building I was sitting in right in the middle of Combat Outpost (COP) Falcon. Adrenaline shot from my core, down my arms, into my hands. Seconds later, another explosion rocked the compound. Soon the word spread: mortars. Insurgents had lobbed 120mm mortar rounds smack-dab into the center of COP Falcon with deadly accuracy. "One-twenties" were vicious. Each massive projectile carried twenty-plus pounds of high explosives wrapped in a half-inch-thick steel jacket designed to throw jagged pieces of shrapnel in all directions, causing catastrophic wounds and death. The rounds had wounded several American Soldiers at COP Falcon, one critically, who later succumbed to his injuries. A third 120mm mortar round hit the roof of the building I was in, but thankfully for the Soldiers nearby, it didn't explode: it was a dud. The mortars were alarmingly accurate, proving once again that the insurgents we

were fighting were highly capable. As daylight dawned on this early morning, it was a grim reminder that this was dangerous territory, and we were sitting right in the middle of it.

The night before, Leif and his SEALs from Task Unit Bruiser's Charlie Platoon had inserted from U.S. Marine Corps Small Unit Riverine Craft (SURC) boats manned by a great crew of highly motivated Marines. Charlie Platoon's SEALs, accompanied by an expert team from the 2nd U.S. Marine Air-Naval Gunfire Liaison Company (ANGLICO) with which they often worked closely, a small Army sniper team, and a partner force of Iraqi Soldiers had hopped from the SURC boats onto the riverbank. They quietly sneaked into this enemy-controlled neighborhood—one of the most violent areas of Ramadi. Our SEALs were the first U.S. boots on the ground. They led the opening salvo of this massive operation involving hundreds of U.S. Soldiers, tanks, and aircraft to establish a combat outpost, literally in the center of enemy-controlled territory. Within minutes of their arrival, Charlie Platoon had killed an armed insurgent fighter patrolling the neighborhood in the early morning darkness. SEALs then seized and cleared the building complex that was to become COP Falcon and held it for a few hours into the night while SEAL snipers provided cover for the dozens of U.S. Army tanks and vehicles that followed the IED clearance teams along the road into the area. I had ridden in with the U.S. Army battalion Task Force 1-37 Bandits (1st Battalion, 37th Armored Regiment, 1st Armored Division) in an M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicle early in the morning before the sun had risen, to link up with Leif and Charlie Platoon. My job was command and control of our SEALs. I would coordinate their efforts with Task Force Bandit's Soldiers.

Shortly after our arrival, Charlie Platoon's SEALs turned the buildings they had cleared and occupied over to the U.S. Army company commander of Team Bulldog and other Soldiers of Task

Force 1-37 Bandit. Then Leif and most of the SEALs pushed out to a building a few hundred yards down the road to set up another sniper position. I remained at COP Falcon to coordinate their movements providing overwatch for the Army combat engineers as they built COP Falcon into a defensible position. This required extensive planning, coordination and hours of intense labor to haul and emplace some 30,000 sandbags, over 150 concrete barriers, and hundreds of yards of concertina wire. It had been a long night. The jarring impact of the deadly mortars was our morning wake-up call.

There had been intermittent small-arms fire throughout the night, but no serious firefights. The mortars were the first real attack that did damage and inflicted casualties. Not that it slowed down the operation. The courageous Army engineers had a job to do and they kept working, swinging hammers and operating heavy machinery even as bullets flew; they were brave Soldiers, to a man. As the hot Iraqi sun rose above the dusty city streets and people awakened, so did the bulk of the enemy fighters. I soon heard the loud report of SEAL sniper rifles from Charlie Platoon's position on the high ground in a four-story apartment building a few hundred meters down the street. Leif relayed to me via radio that his SEAL snipers had engaged enemy fighters maneuvering to attack COP Falcon.

But building the combat outpost in enemy territory was only the beginning. There was more to be done. One of the primary objectives in placing this combat outpost in the heart of enemy territory was to show the local populace that we, the coalition of American and Iraqi soldiers, were here to stay and that we did not fear the al Qaeda insurgents who had controlled most of Ramadi unchecked for years. This could not be accomplished by sitting and hiding inside heavily reinforced bases. The troops had to go out and *into* the neighborhoods surrounding the COP. They had to

conduct a type of operation so straightforward its name requires almost no explanation: a presence patrol. It required a group of soldiers to push into enemy-held areas to establish their presence among the populace. In this situation, the mission called for a combined operation including Iraqi and American Soldiers working together.

A U.S. Army officer from a military transition team (teams of U.S. Soldiers or Marines built and deployed to train and combat-advise Iraqi soldiers, known as MiTTs) planned to lead a group of Iraqi soldiers out into the neighborhood. The MiTT leader was very excited to get out on patrol with his Iraqi soldiers and test their mettle. He had been working and training with them for several months in another city in northern Iraq and had conducted some fairly benign patrols and combat operations with them. But this was Ramadi. There would be nothing easy or benign about patrolling into these neighborhoods. Here, the enemy was determined, well armed, and ready. They would be waiting to attack and kill any U.S. Soldier, SEAL, Marine, or Iraqi soldier that they could. My immediate discussions with the MiTT leader revealed he did not fully appreciate the dangers that lay in store. I was also concerned that his Iraqi soldiers might not yet be ready for the intense street fighting that was likely to take place in this sector of Ramadi. So I assigned a small group of our SEALs to accompany him and his Iraqi soldiers as command and control to help coordinate any help should they need it.

I stood with one of Charlie Platoon's young SEAL officers, who would lead the SEAL element accompanying the Iraqi soldiers, as the MiTT leader strolled over to us and pulled out his battle map to brief us on the route he intended for the patrol. He outlined a path that snaked through the treacherous city streets and stretched clear across South-Central Ramadi over to the next U.S. combat outpost to the east, COP Eagle's Nest. This was nearly

two kilometers through some of the most hostile territory in Iraq held by a determined and vicious enemy. None of the roads had been cleared by the U.S. minesweeping teams, so no doubt massive IEDs lay buried along the route. That meant U.S. armored vehicles and firepower could not get to the patrol along much of the leader's planned path without putting the vehicles at huge risk should he and his Iraqis (and now our SEALs) get pinned down.

Beyond that, his planned route passed through battlespace owned by different American units, including two U.S. Army companies, another Army battalion, and a U.S. Marine Corps company. Each had unique standard operating procedures and utilized separate radio nets. That would mean coordinating with all these units prior to launch and setting up contingency plans for help should something go wrong. The amount of water needed for such a long trek in the Iraqi summertime heat that exceed 115 degrees Fahrenheit, along with the massive amount of ammunition required to penetrate so deeply into enemy territory added up to far more than anyone could effectively fight with or carry. Even in a much more permissive or peaceful environment, the MiTT leader's plan for the patrol across battlespace owned by different units would be extremely complex. To try to accomplish this in the worst neighborhoods of Ramadi—the most hazardous battlefield in Iraq—was just plain crazy.

I listened to the plan. When I understood the overall idea and the complexity it involved, I finally commented, "Lieutenant, I appreciate your motivation to get out there and get after it. But perhaps—at least for these first few patrols—we need to simplify this a little bit."

"Simplify?" asked the MiTT leader incredulously. "It is just a patrol. How complex can it get?"

I nodded my head respectfully. "I know it's *just* a patrol," I

said. "But there are some risks that can compound when working in an environment like this."

"It's nothing I haven't trained these Iraqis on," he responded confidently.

While I appreciated his confidence, I knew it was hard for the lieutenant to fully grasp the complexities of the mission he was planning when he had not executed missions in such a hostile environment.

"I know you have trained them well, and I'm sure your Iraqi soldiers are a good group," I said, knowing it was likely they had never been in a serious firefight together. "But let's look at what you have here: this route will take you through three separate battlespace owners—two Army and one Marine Corps. It will take you into areas that are known to be heavily IED'ed, which will make any type of support, like CASEVAC\* or fire support from tanks, extremely risky. They may not even be able to get to you at all. Even though you have worked extensively with these Iraqi soldiers, my SEALs haven't worked with them at all. So, do you think—at least for this first patrol—we can simplify this a little by cutting down the distance and keeping the entire patrol inside battlespace owned by this company, Team Bulldog?"

"That will only be a few hundred meters out," the MiTT leader objected.

"I know," I replied. "I know it seems short, but let's just keep it simple to start, and we can expand as we get more experience." I knew that one real operation in this environment for the MiTT leader would convince him that simplicity was key. After some further discussion, the MiTT leader agreed to a much shorter, simpler route.

Soon after, the MiTT leader, his Iraqi soldiers, and a small contingent of SEALs gathered around to go through an OPORD

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\* casualty evacuation

(operations order, the pre-mission brief that explains the details of the operation to the members of the team). It was this Iraqi element's first patrol in Ramadi, and despite the mortars that had hit and wounded several U.S. Soldiers, and the constant sound of gunfire in the background, they didn't seem too concerned. Neither did the MiTT leader. Neither, for that matter, did my SEAL element leader. Everyone seemed pretty nonchalant about the patrol. I knew that contact with the enemy was highly likely—if not imminent.

After the brief they split up to do some final preparations: grab water, check ammo and weapons, and go over individual instructions. I went in and covered the route again with the SEAL element leader, noting landmarks such as easily recognizable buildings, unique intersections, water towers, and mosque minarets, which could be used as reference points. We also looked at the battle map, with an overlay of numbers assigned to every building in this sector of the city. The young SEAL officer and I reviewed the building numbers of prominent buildings in the area so we could better communicate both the patrol's position and the position of the enemy, should we need to do so.

The combined element then mustered to form up and begin the patrol. I had already coordinated with Leif to have his element of SEALs, in their sniper overwatch position in the four-story building three hundred meters outside the perimeter of COP Falcon, cover the movement of the presence patrol. With precision sniper fire, machine guns, rockets, and an elevated fighting position, Leif's element could effectively protect the movement of the patrol through the streets. That would help mitigate the risk of enemy attack. I watched closely the attitude of the troops getting ready to head out. It wasn't real for them yet. Finally, I walked up to the young SEAL leader, looked him in the eye, and said, "You are going to get contacted out there. It will happen quick. Stay sharp. Understand?"

My serious tone impacted the young SEAL lieutenant, who nodded slowly and confirmed, "Got it, Sir. Will do."

With that, I stepped back and watched the patrol head out the gate of COP Falcon and into enemy territory. Curious as to how long it might take for enemy fighters to attack, I pressed START on my stopwatch as the patrol stepped off. This was the first overt presence patrol into this section of South-Central Ramadi by Coalition Soldiers in months, perhaps years. Task Unit Bruiser's Delta Platoon, working in an adjacent sector across the city, had for the past two months been attacked by enemy fighters on almost every single patrol.

I monitored the radio at COP Falcon, tracking the patrol's progress. Suddenly, gunfire rang out, echoing across the city blocks.

*Da-da-da-da-da-da-da*, sounded an enemy AK-47 in the near distance.

*Bu-bu-bu-bu-bu-bu-bu-bu-bu-bu-bu-bu-bu-bu-bu-bu-bu*, a SEAL machine gunner answered. It was immediately joined by dozens of other weapons that let loose a hellacious barrage of fire, which confirmed to me that these were my SEALs in contact. There was no other unit that unleashed such fury when the shooting started. I looked at my watch. It had been twelve minutes since the patrol stepped off from COP Falcon.

From my position at the COP, I listened to the radio calls. They were broken and jumbled, weakened by the thick concrete walls of city buildings that radio waves could not always penetrate. The shooting continued. It was a substantial firefight. Volleys of gunfire rattled back and forth between the patrol and enemy fighters. More garbled communications. I recognized the voice of the SEAL element leader with the patrol but couldn't make out what he was saying. Leif, on the high ground with direct line of site to both of us, had good radio communications both with the SEAL

leader on the ground with the patrol and with me. Leif received a situational update from the patrol. He and the young SEAL element leader both communicated with a clear, calm voice, despite the chaos of the situation, just like we had trained. Leif relayed the report to me: two friendlies wounded, need CASEVAC and fire support.

In order to quickly get tanks and CASEVAC vehicles out to help the patrol, I needed to get direct radio communications with the SEAL officer in the patrol and confirm their position. I quickly sprinted to the top of the largest building on COP Falcon, stood up, and extended my radio antenna for maximum reception.

I keyed up my radio to try and reach the patrol: "Redbull,\* this is Jocko."

"Go Jocko," responded the SEAL leader with the patrol in a calm voice. We now had direct radio communications.

"What do you got?" I asked.

"Two wounded. Need CASEVAC. And fire support," he responded. Just as he had been taught: simple, clear, concise information—exactly what was needed.

"Roger. Confirm your location," I said.

"Building J51†," he replied.

"Are all your troops in J51?" I asked.

"Affirm. All friendly troops in J51," he confirmed.

"Roger. Tanks and CASEVAC inbound," I notified him.

I sprinted back down to the first floor into the makeshift TOC where Team Bulldog's company commander stood waiting for the information he needed to get his troops and tanks moving out.

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\* our call SEAL sign at the time in that particular battlespace

† J51, spoken in the phonetic alphabet as "Juliette Five-One."

"What's going on out there, sir?" the company commander asked. "What do they need?"

Calmly, I relayed to him the critical info: "They need fire support and CASEVAC in vicinity of building J51. All friendly personnel are consolidated inside building J51. There are two wounded." I stepped to the huge battle map hanging on the wall next to us and guided my finger to building fifty-one on the map. "Right here," I said and pointed to ensure everybody was clear.

"Got it, sir," answered the company commander. "I'll take a section of tanks\* and an M113† to building J51. All friendlies are located in that building. Two wounded."

"Check," I replied, confirming he had all information correct.

He quickly flew out the door toward his tank, briefed his troops, and personally mounted up. He and his men would brave the dangerous IED-laden streets to get to the SEALs, American MiTT advisors and Iraqi troops pinned down under enemy attack. They would do their utmost to save the lives of their wounded.

Meanwhile, from the vantage point of Leif's overwatch position, his SEAL snipers and machine gunners engaged numerous enemy fighters as they rallied to join the attack on the patrol. The powerful sniper rifles our SEALs used made a distinct *crack* as they engaged multiple enemy fighters sneaking toward the friendly patrol hunkered down in building J51. As insurgent fighters rallied to attack the patrol, SEAL machine gunners from the overwatch position joined in and laid down a barrage of fire, beating back the enemy assault.

Within minutes, Team Bulldog's tanks and M113 arrived at building J51. At the sight of the tanks, most of the enemy fighters quickly disappeared into the urban landscape, hiding their weap-

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\* two M1A2 Abrams Main Battle Tanks with heavy firepower

† M113 Armored Personnel Carrier used to evacuate casualties

ons to blend in among the civilian populace. The two casualties were Iraqi soldiers. Both had been shot; one while crossing the street had been abandoned by his fellow Iraqi soldiers who fled to cover. Luckily for him, two SEALs risked their lives to run out into the street through a hail of enemy gunfire and drag him to safety. Both casualties were evacuated. One Iraqi soldier survived, the other unfortunately died from his wounds. Under the cover of the tanks firepower, the rest of the patrol exited building J51 and fell into a column formation, bracketed by the two Abrams tanks, one fore and one aft, like a scene from World War II. Together, they moved back toward COP Falcon. As Team Bulldog's tank covered the rear, an insurgent fighter with an RPG-7 rocket rounded a corner to take a shot at the patrol. But before he could fire the rocket, Team Bulldog's company commander, sitting in the turret of his tank, plugged him in the chest with a .50-caliber machine gun.

When the patrol made it back to COP Falcon, I met them as they entered the compound. Making eye contact with the young SEAL leader in the patrol, I gave him an approving nod that, without words, said: *Well done; you kept your composure and you made clear calls. You got the help you needed and kept the rest of your team alive.* The SEAL leader nodded back: he understood.

The MiTT leader was clearly shaken up. It had been his first serious firefight—his first real test as a leader. Luckily, he had our SEAL element with him, which helped ensure his patrol's survival. Fortunately, he had agreed to keep his mission simple, to minimize complexity for the inevitable contingencies that could arise. It was a worst-case scenario. Had this gunfight happened where he had originally planned to go—much deeper into enemy territory, out of the range of COP Falcon, with separate supporting Army or Marine elements that had different radio frequencies and different operating procedures—it would likely have been catastrophic. If they had made this patrol more difficult and complex

than it already was, the MiTT leader and all his Iraqi soldiers might have been killed.

I gave the MiTT leader a different nod than the one I gave the SEAL leader. This nod said, *That's why we keep it simple*. The MiTT leader looked back at me. He didn't say a word, but his eyes communicated to me clearly, *I know that now. I understand*.

### PRINCIPLE

Combat, like anything in life, has inherent layers of complexities. Simplifying as much as possible is crucial to success. When plans and orders are too complicated, people may not understand them. And when things go wrong, and *they inevitably do go wrong*, complexity compounds issues that can spiral out of control into total disaster. Plans and orders must be communicated in a manner that is simple, clear, and concise. Everyone that is part of the mission must know and understand his or her role in the mission and what to do in the event of likely contingencies. As a leader, it doesn't matter how well you feel you have presented the information or communicated an order, plan, tactic, or strategy. If your team doesn't get it, you have not kept things simple and you have failed. You must brief to ensure the lowest common denominator on the team understands.

It is critical, as well, that the operating relationship facilitate the ability of the frontline troops to ask questions that clarify when they do not understand the mission or key tasks to be performed. Leaders must encourage this communication and take the time to explain so that every member of the team understands.

Simple: this principle isn't limited to the battlefield. In the business world, and in life, there are inherent complexities. It is critical to keep plans and communication simple. Following this rule is crucial to the success of any team in any combat, business or life.

## APPLICATION TO BUSINESS

"I don't have any idea what this means," the employee said as he held up a piece of paper that was supposed to explain his monthly bonus. "Point eight-four," he continued. "I have no idea what that number means. What I do know is that my bonus for this month was \$423.97. But I have no idea why. Last month I made \$279 bucks. Don't know why. I did the same amount of work; produced about the same amount of units. But for some reason, I got short-changed last month. What the hell?"

"Are they trying to get you to focus on one aspect of your job?" I inquired.

"Honestly, I have no idea," he replied. "I mean, I'm happy for the bonus, but I don't know what they want me to focus on."

I spoke to several other assembly technicians in this division on a visit to the manufacturing plant of a client company. Over and over again, I heard similar answers. People weren't sure what they should be focused on. They had no idea how their bonuses were calculated or why they were being rewarded or penalized in pay each month.

The next day I met with the chief engineer and plant manager. They were both extremely smart and passionate about the company and took a lot of pride in their products. They also recognized that there was a disconnect.

"We definitely are not maximizing our efficiency with our production staff," said the plant manager, her frustration evident.

"No doubt about it," explained the chief engineer. "We have a relatively small line of products here. There are some nuances, but they are all similar to produce. We thought we could ramp up production when we created the bonus plan, but it hasn't really worked."

"Yeah," added the plant manager, "there is real opportunity to make significant money through the bonus plan, but the

employees on the line don't seem to adapt and focus to take advantage of it."

"Explain to me how the bonus system works," I said.

"OK. It's a little tricky," warned the plant manager.

"That's fine, I'm sure it can't be too hard," I replied, knowing that excessive complexity was one of the major problems of any SEAL unit (or any military unit) on the battlefield. It was essential to keep things simple so that everyone on the team understood.

"Honestly, it is pretty complex," the plant manager answered, "as there are a lot of different aspects that we needed to work in to ensure that the different facets of production were accounted for."

"Well maybe you could just give me the basics then," I requested.

The plant manager began: "OK. So it all starts off with a base level of productivity. Now, as you know, we have six different units that we assemble here, each with varying levels of complexity. So what we did was give them a weight. Our most commonly produced model sets the standard with a weight of 1.0. Our most complex model is weighted 1.75 and the simplest model is a .50, with the other models weighted somewhere in between based on the level of difficulty in assembly."

"Of course, those are what we call the 'base weights,'" added the chief engineer. "Depending on the orders we get for various models, we sometimes need to increase production of certain models, so we have a variable weight curve, which means the weight can be adjusted up or down depending on the specific demand at anytime."

"This is where we had to get crafty: we then take the total weighted number of units produced and we have a tiered efficiency metric," the plant manager said, clearly proud of the complex system they had developed. She explained in intricate detail

how the variable tier system worked, stratified based on the number of people that made bonus in each tier every month.

"That way, a certain level of competitiveness is inspired and we prevent ourselves from paying out too many bonuses, which we feel would decrease their impact," concluded the plant manager.

But it didn't end there. She went into greater detail on how the efficiency metric was then compared to the employee's previous six-month tiered breakout and how an employee who maintained the top 25 percent stratification could receive an additional percentage on their bonus.

On top of that, they factored in the quality of the product. The chief engineer and the plant manager outlined a list of common faults, breaking these out as either "hold faults," which could be corrected, or "fatal faults," which rendered a unit unusable. For each fault and type of fault registered, a graduated weight system multiplied by a certain factor reduced an employee's potential bonus. A similar multiple added to the bonus for employees who had no registered faults in the units they produced. While the senior management expressed pride in the bonus system they had created, it was staggeringly complex.

I was quiet for a few moments. Then, I asked, "That's it?"

"Well," answered the plant manager, "there are several other little nuanced factors that we do calculate for—"

"Really?" I questioned, surprised that they didn't catch my sarcasm. "I'm kidding. That is crazy."

"Crazy? What's crazy?" she asked defensively.

They were so close to the bonus plan, so emotional and passionate about it, that they didn't recognize the vast complexity of it. They didn't see their own "fatal fault" in the confusing and elaborate scheme they had created, one that no one in the team understood.

"That is an extremely complex plan, *too* complex. I think you really need to simplify," I said.

"Well, it is a complex environment. Perhaps if we drew it out for you, you would understand it," the chief engineer responded.

"It doesn't matter if I understand it," I responded. "What matters is that *they* understand it—your production team. And not in some theoretical way. They need to understand it to a point that they don't need to be thinking about it to understand it. It needs to be on the top of their minds all the time."

"But we have to make sure we incentivize them in the right direction," said the chief engineer.

"Exactly," echoed the plant manager. "We have got to take the variables into account so that they are constantly pushed or pulled the right way."

They had each very clearly put extensive time and effort into the bonus plan and now tried desperately to defend their efforts despite its glaring overly complex deficiency.

"How well is this bonus plan working to incentivize them now?" I asked. "You just told me they aren't taking advantage of it, so they aren't being effectively incentivized to do anything differently or to move in any direction. Your plan is so complex that there is no way that they can mindfully move in the direction that would increase their bonus. Even when they use operant conditioning on rats, the rats have to understand what they are being punished or rewarded for. If there is not a strong enough correlation between the behavior and the reward or the punishment, then behavior will never be modified. If the rats don't know why they received a sugar pellet or why they were just given an electric shock, they will not change."

"So our people are rats?" the chief engineer said jokingly.

I laughed—it was funny—but then I replied, "No, not at all. But all animals, including humans, need to see the connection between action and consequence in order to learn or react

appropriately. The way you have this set up, they can't see that connection."

"Well, they could see it if they looked and took the time to figure it out," replied the production manager.

"It certainly is possible that they *could*. But they *don't*. People generally take the path of least resistance. It is just in our nature. Let me ask you this: What kind of quantifiable lift have you gotten out of this incentive plan?" I asked.

"You know, honestly we haven't seen any real, meaningful pickup," the production manager admitted. "Definitely not as much as we thought we would."

"This actually isn't surprising to me," I said. "Your plan violates one of the most important principles we adhered to in combat: simplicity. When young SEAL leaders in training look at targets for training missions, they often try to develop a course of action that accounts for every single possibility they can think of. That results in a plan that is extraordinarily complex and very difficult to follow. While the troops might understand their individual pieces of the plan, they have a hard time following all the intricacies of the grand scheme. Perhaps they can even get away with that a few times if everything goes smoothly, but remember: the enemy gets a vote."

"The enemy gets a vote?" the plant manager repeated, questioning what that meant.

"Yes. Regardless of how you think an operation is going to unfold," I answered, "the enemy gets their say as well—and they are going to do something to disrupt it. When something goes wrong—and it eventually does—complex plans add to confusion, which can compound into disaster. Almost no mission ever goes according to plan. There are simply too many variables to deal with. This is where simplicity is key. If the plan is simple enough, everyone understands it, which means each person can rapidly adjust and modify what he or she is doing. If the plan is too

complex, the team can't make rapid adjustments to it, because there is no baseline understanding of it."

"That makes sense," the chief engineer said.

"We followed that rule with everything we did," I continued. "Our standard operating procedures were always kept as simple as possible. Our communication plans were simple. The way we talked on the radio was as simple and direct as possible. The way we organized our gear, even the way we got a head count to ensure we had all of our people was broken down into the simplest possible method so we could do it quickly, accurately, and easily at any time. With all this simplicity embedded in the way we worked, our troops clearly understood what they were doing and how that tied in to the mission. That core understanding allowed us to adapt quickly without stumbling over ourselves."

"I can see how that would be a huge advantage," said the plant manager.

"OK then," I concluded. "We have nothing to lose. The best way to make your bonus plan work is to go back to the drawing board and try to figure out a new model for compensation, with two or three—no more than four—areas to measure and grade upon."

The chief engineer and the plant manager accepted the mission I laid out for them and headed back to their office to get to work.

The next day, I walked into the office. They had the plan written up on their dry-erase board. It had only two parts: (1) weighted units; (2) quality.

"That's it?" I inquired, this time without sarcasm.

"That's it," the plant manager replied. "Very simple. You produce as many units as you can. We will still adjust the weights of the units based on demand, but we will set the weights on Monday and let them stay there until Friday. That still gives us time the next week to make adjustments and change weights if demand

spikes on a certain unit. And we are going to post the weights of each unit out there on the bulletin board so that every employee on the line sees it, knows it, and is thinking about it. The quality piece we will measure each month. Anyone with a quality score of ninety-five percent or higher will receive a fifteen percent increase in their bonus."

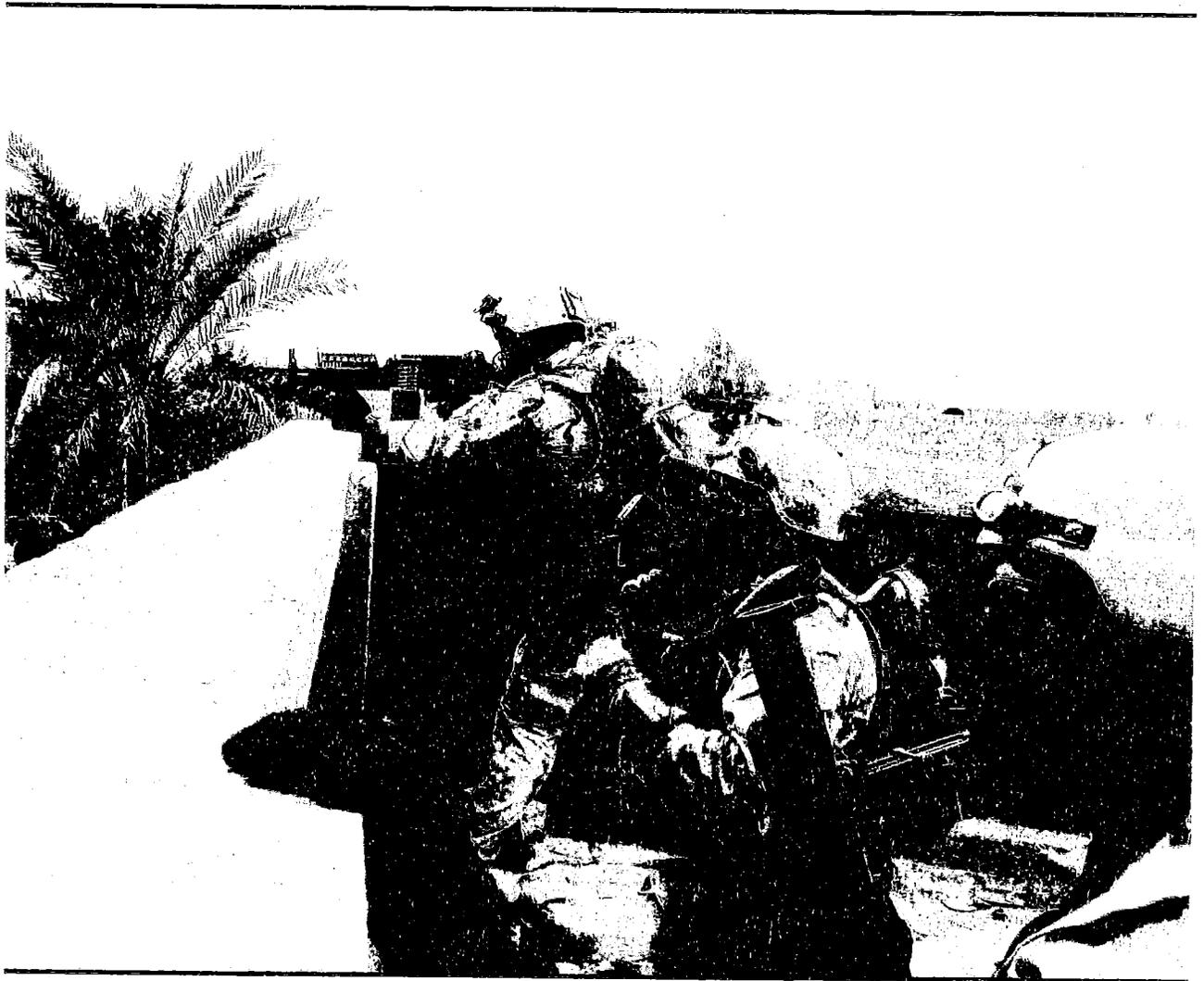
"I like it," I replied. This plan was much easier to communicate and much easier to understand. "When you need to adjust it, you will be able to do so with ease."

That afternoon, I watched as the chief engineer and the plant manager discussed the plan with the team leads and the afternoon shift. The response was great.

The employees now had a good understanding of what it was they needed to do to earn their bonus. As a result, the bonus now truly incentivized behavior and could thereby make the company more productive.

In the coming weeks, the plant manager and chief engineer reported an almost immediate increase in productivity. More employees focused their energy on what product would make them more money, which was of course aligned with the goals of the company. There were secondary effects as well. As the higher-producing employees strove harder to increase their bonuses, the lower-producing workers were left with less orders to fulfill. Within a month, the company let go the four employees with the lowest bonus scores, who had long been the weakest performers and had dragged the entire team down. Now, the company no longer needed them, as the rest of the crew had drastically increased their efficiency.

The most impressive thing about this improvement in performance was that it did not come from a major process change or an advance in technology. Instead, it came through a leadership principle that has been around for ages: Simple.



"Frogman on the roof," was the radio call that let friendly forces know SEALs were on the high ground. Here, SEAL machine gunner Marc Lee engages insurgents with lethal machine gun fire as another SEAL assesses the situation and a SEAL grenadier scans for targets.

(Photo courtesy of Todd Pitman)