

# CHAPTER 7

## Prioritize and Execute

*Leif Babin*

### **SOUTH-CENTRAL RAMADI, IRAQ: THE HORNET'S NEST**

All day, murderous bursts of machine gun fire hammered our position, shattering windows and impacting interior walls, each round with the violence and kinetic energy of a sledgehammer wielded at full force. Some of the incoming rounds were armor-piercing and punched through the thick concrete of the low wall surrounding the rooftop. All our element of SEALs, EOD bomb technicians and Iraqi soldiers could do under such accurate enemy fire was hit the deck and try not to get our heads shot off. Rounds snapped inches above us, and shards of glass and concrete fragments rained down everywhere.

“Damn! Some of these bastards can shoot!” yelled a SEAL operator pressed as close to the floor as humanly possible. We couldn’t help but laugh at our predicament.

RPG-7 rockets followed in rapid sequence of three or four, exploding with tremendous concussion against the exterior walls. Hunkered down inside the building, we were separated from the bone-jarring explosions and deadly shrapnel by a foot or so of

concrete. One errant RPG rocket missed its mark and sailed high over the building, trailing across the hazy, cloudless Iraqi summer sky like a bottle rocket on an American Fourth of July. But if just one of those rockets impacted a window, it meant red-hot fragments of jagged metal ripping through just about every man in the room.

Despite the onslaught, we held our position in the large four-story apartment building. When the fury of the attack subsided, our SEAL snipers returned fire with devastating effect. As armed enemy fighters maneuvered through the streets to attack, SEAL snipers squeezed off round after round with deadly accuracy, confirming ten enemy fighters killed and a handful more probable kills.

As the platoon commander, in charge of the entire element, I made my way from room to room on each floor to get a status check and make sure none of our guys were hit. Gathering information on our snipers' engagements, I passed situational reports over the radio to the U.S. Army's TOC in the distant friendly combat outpost.

"You guys good?" I asked, ducking into a room with SEAL snipers and machine gunners manning positions, while others took a break.

"Good to go," came the response.

In another room, I checked in with our SEAL platoon chief. Just then, enemy fire poured through the windows bracketing his position as he pressed against the corner wall. He laughed and gave me a thumbs-up. Chief was a badass. SEAL machine gunners came looking for work, and we directed their fire at the enemy's location; the gunners quickly hammered the enemy position with an accurate barrage of 7.62mm link.

One SEAL gunner, Ryan Job, eagerly employed his big machine gun with deadly accuracy. He fearlessly stood in the

window braving incoming enemy rounds as he unleashed three to five round bursts of his own into insurgent positions. A group of armed insurgents tried to sneak up even closer to us using the concealment of a sheep pen to hide their movement. Ryan hammered them and beat back their attempt before it could even materialize. The sheep in the pen took some casualties in the crossfire.

"Damn," I told him. "Those sheep just took heavies."

"They were *muj* sheep," Ryan laughed.

I lobbed several 40 mm high-explosive grenades at a doorway where Chief had seen enemy fighters engaging us. *Whoomph!* sounded the explosion, as one round landed right inside the doorway with a fiery blast. That should keep their heads down for a little while at least.

Long before dawn broke that morning, before the day's first call to prayer echoed from the minaret speakers of the many mosques across South-Central Ramadi, our group of Charlie Platoon SEALs, our EOD operators (who were very much a part of our platoon), an interpreter, and Iraqi soldiers had stealthily foot-patrolled under the cover of darkness through the dusty, rubble-strewn streets. We had "BTF'ed in," as our chief called it. BTF stood for "Big Tough Frogman," an unofficial mantra adopted by Charlie Platoon. BTF entailed taking on substantial physical exertion and great risk and persevering by simply being a Big Tough Frogman. Pushing deep inside enemy territory was a BTF evolution. We knew it likely meant a gunfight was in store for us—what chief called a "Big Mix-It-Up." Our routine for most of these operations, in chief's terminology, was this: "BTF in, Big Mix-It-Up, BTF out." Then, once back on base, we'd hit the mess hall for "Big Chow."

We had patrolled out of COP Falcon in the early morning darkness through the densely packed urban neighborhood of

two-story houses, adjoining compound walls, and heavy-duty metal gates. We "BTF'ed in" on foot for about 1.5 kilometers, carrying our heavy gear and substantial firepower, into another violent, enemy-held neighborhood of the city—an area firmly in the grasp of a brutal insurgency. Driven back from the areas to the east and the west, enemy fighters chose to stand and fight for this dirty patch of ground in the city's geographic center. We took position in a building just up the street from a mosque that frequently rallied the call to jihad from its minaret speakers to the hundreds of well-armed *muj* that occupied this area.

Not long before, off this very street, a large force of enemy fighters had attacked a squad of U.S. Marines and pinned them down for several hours before they could evacuate their wounded. Two weeks before, only a half block to the south, that street witnessed the destruction of a heavily armored U.S. mine-clearance vehicle by the massive blast of an IED. Nearly a dozen American tanks and armored vehicles had been destroyed in this section of the city. The "vehicle graveyard" back at Camp Ramadi became the final resting place for their charred wreckage. The burned-out hulks of blackened, twisted metal stood as a stark reminder of the intensity of violence in the streets and the many wounded and killed.

Our SEAL platoon had chosen this particular building for its commanding views of the area. Most important, it was right in the enemy's backyard. Here, insurgent fighters had enjoyed complete safe haven and freedom of movement. The frequent and intense onslaught of enemy machine gun fire and RPG rockets now served as a testament that our presence here was most unwelcome.

We had stirred up a hornet's nest, but it was exactly where we wanted to be. Our plan: go where the bad guys would least expect us in order to seriously disrupt their program, kill as many enemy fighters as we could, and decrease their ability to attack

nearby U.S. Army and Marine combat outposts. We wanted the enemy to know that they no longer could enjoy safe haven here. This neighborhood was no longer theirs. We owned this ground.

Pushing this far into enemy territory carried tremendous risks. Though the nearest U.S. combat outpost was not more than 1.5 kilometers or so in a straight-line distance from our position, the extreme IED threat and heavy enemy presence could render any support we needed from tanks or armored vehicles extremely hazardous and difficult, if not impossible. Although our Army brethren would come to our aid if we called, we knew we would be putting them at great risk to do so. It was a tactic we had learned from the U.S. Marine companies stationed along the main route through the city: unless we had an urgent casualty, we would hold our position hunkered down right where we were. We would not call in vehicles or additional troops and put them at risk unless we took serious casualties and absolutely needed them.

The apartment building our SEAL platoon now occupied provided an excellent tactical position. With a higher vantage point above the buildings around us, its thick concrete walls provided some protection from enemy fire. There was only one problem: the building had only one entrance and exit from the second story—a narrow stairway leading down to the street. There was no way of watching the entrance or the street surrounding it during daylight without exposure to enemy fire. This meant the enemy could possibly emplace IEDs near the entrance while we were inside and detonate them on us as we exited. We had heard stories of how this had happened to a Marine sniper team and other American units during our tour. To counter the threat, my chief and I considered occupying a house across the street that would allow us to watch the entrance. But we didn't have the manpower. With no viable alternative, it was a vulnerability we were forced

to accept. To mitigate the risk of an IED being planted at the doorstep, the EOD operators studied the area in detail around the exit door and planned a meticulous sweep for explosives prior to our anticipated departure later that night.

The onslaught of heavy enemy fire continued frequently throughout the day, with periods of intense violence and periods of calm. Enemy fighters attacked from multiple directions, and SEAL snipers engaged and killed many of them. Our SEAL machine gunners returned fire into enemy positions with devastating effect. Other SEALs fired LAAW (light anti-armor weapon) rockets and 40mm grenades at enemy fighters hiding behind concrete walls. Even the Iraqi soldiers, typically far more focused on self-preservation, joined in the fight and returned fire with their AK-47s and PKC belt-fed machine guns. As the day faded and the sun dipped below the horizon, the attacks diminished. Gunfire and explosions subsided. With the darkness an eerie quiet descended upon Ramadi, broken only by the evening call to prayer that echoed across the dusty rooftops.

Our SEAL platoon and Iraqi soldiers packed our gear and prepared to depart. Remembering the vulnerability of the single exit to the street, our two EOD bomb technicians went to work. Peering over the second story balcony through their night-vision goggles they scanned the area around the exit door and the surrounding street littered with trash and potholes, in some places scarred by the craters of previous IED blasts. But something was out of place; something looked different than when they had scanned the area in the early morning darkness before dawn. An otherwise unobtrusive item lay against the building wall only feet from the exit door, covered with a plastic tarp. Just a tiny sliver of a smooth, cylindrical object peeked out from under the edge of the tarp.

"Something looks suspicious," an EOD operator relayed to me. It was most unwelcome news, as the stairway to the street was our only easy means of departure.

I called a huddle with chief, our leading petty officer (LPO), and our platoon junior officers. "We need to figure another way out of here," I said. That was no easy task.

From the second story, three sides of the building offered a near-twenty-foot drop from a window or balcony straight down to the street. We had no rope. Jumping with all our gear and heavy equipment was likely to result in serious injury, and that same street had at least one explosive device. We had to assume there were more.

Somebody suggested a children's cartoon prison escape method: "What if we tie bed sheets together and climbed down from the third-story windows onto the rooftop next door?" It was a harebrained idea, but under the circumstances, an option that had to be seriously considered.

The fourth and remaining wall of the second story was solid concrete with no windows, doors, or openings. We certainly couldn't go around it or over it. But we could go through it.

"Looks like it's time to BTF," said the LPO. It meant we were about to tackle another serious feat of strength and toughness that would challenge us to our physical limits. But Charlie Platoon took great pride in accomplishing such feats. "Let's get our sledgehammer on!"

We always carried a sledgehammer with us to make entry through locked doors and windows when necessary. The LPO called for the "sledge" and went to work. He began swinging the hammer with full force against the concrete wall, each swing impacted with a loud, head-jarring *THWACK!* He and a handful of other SEALs rotated every few minutes as they hammered through the thick wall. It was painfully slow, back-breaking work. We needed a hole big enough for operators with rucksacks and heavy gear to walk through onto the flat rooftop of the one-story building next door.

In the meantime, our EOD operators carefully went to work

on the IED planted at our doorstep. Through meticulous investigation, they uncovered two 130mm rocket projectiles whose nose cones were packed with Semtex, a plastic explosive. Had they not discovered the device—and had we triggered it—the massive explosion and deadly shrapnel could have wiped out half our platoon. We couldn't leave this IED here to kill other U.S. Soldiers, Marines, or innocent Iraqi civilians. So EOD carefully set their own explosive charge on it to set it off (or “blow it in place”) where it lay. Once prepared, the EOD operators notified me and waited for the command to “pop smoke” and ignite the time fuse that would initiate the charge.

After a solid twenty minutes of furious sledgehammering, the LPO and his rotating crew of BTF SEALs finally broke through the concrete wall. They were winded and sweating profusely in the sweltering heat, but we now had an alternate exit that would enable us to circumvent the IED threat.

Everyone double-checked their gear to ensure we left nothing behind, then we lined up next to the jagged hole in the wall and made ready to exit the building.

“Stand by to break out,” I said over the intersquad radio. SEALs and Iraqi soldiers shouldered their rucksacks. “Pop smoke,” I passed to the waiting EOD techs. One popped smoke while the other started a stopwatch that counted down to detonation. We now had only a few minutes to get everyone to a safe distance from what would be a significant blast. Swiftly, we pushed through the jagged hole in the concrete and onto the flat, dusty rooftop of the adjacent building. SEAL shooters fanned out, scanning for threats, weapons trained on the darkened windows and rooftops of the higher buildings surrounding us. Tactically, this was a hell of a bad position: a wide-open rooftop with no cover, surrounded by higher buildings all around, deep in the enemy's backyard after having taken heavy fire all day.

“We need a head count; make sure we got everybody,” I said

to the LPO. The LPO had already positioned himself for this and was making it happen. Suddenly, a SEAL moving along the edge of the rooftop just steps ahead of me crashed through the roof and fell twenty feet to the ground, landing hard with a loud smack on the concrete.

*Holy shit!* I thought, standing just behind him. This was crazy. What had appeared in the darkness to be the edge of the rooftop was actually only a plastic tarp covered with dust. In an instant, things had spiraled into mayhem.

The SEAL lay on the ground groaning in pain. We called down to him and tried to contact him via his radio.

"Hey, you alright?" I asked him. There was no response. The SEALs up ahead immediately tried to find a way down to him, but the door to the only stairway leading down from the rooftop was blocked by a gate of heavy iron bars, chained and locked.

This was *bad*. Dreadfully exposed on a wide-open rooftop with no cover, we were completely surrounded by higher, tactically superior positions in the heart of an extremely dangerous, enemy-controlled area. Large numbers of enemy fighters had total freedom of movement here, had attacked us throughout the day, and knew our location. Even worse, the clock was ticking on an explosive charge that would set off a huge IED blast, throwing deadly metal fragments (or "frag") in all directions. Our SEAL element did not yet have a full head count to ensure all our personnel were out of the building. And now, one of our SEALs lay helplessly alone and unable to defend himself on the most dangerous street of the nastiest, enemy-held area in Ramadi and we couldn't get to him. His neck or back might be broken. His skull could be fractured. We had to get a SEAL corpsman—our combat medic—to him immediately. But we could not even reach him without breaking through a locked iron gate to get to the street below. The massive pressure of the situation bore down on me. This was a hell of a dilemma, one that could overwhelm even the

most competent leader. How could we possibly tackle so many problems at once?

Prioritize and Execute. Even the greatest of battlefield leaders could not handle an array of challenges simultaneously without being overwhelmed. That risked failing at them all. I had to remain calm, step back from my immediate emotional reaction, and determine the greatest priority for the team. Then, rapidly direct the team to attack that priority. Once the wheels were in motion and the full resources of the team were engaged in that highest priority effort, I could then determine the next priority, focus the team's effort there, and then move on to the next priority. I could not allow myself to be overwhelmed. I had to relax, look around, and make a call. That was what Prioritize and Execute was all about.

Through dozens of intense training scenarios throughout the previous year, our SEAL platoon and task unit had rehearsed in chaotic and difficult situations. That training was designed to overwhelm us, to push us far outside our comfort zone, and force us to make critical decisions under pressure. Amid the noise, mayhem, and uncertainty of the outcome, we had practiced the ability to remain calm, step back from the situation mentally, assess the scenario, decide what had to be done, and make a call. We had learned to Prioritize and Execute. This process was not intuitive to most people but could be learned, built upon, and greatly enhanced through many iterations of training.

Here, I recognized our highest priority, and I gave the broad guidance to execute on that priority with a simple command: "Set security!" Though I, like everyone else in our platoon, wanted desperately to help our wounded man lying in the street below, the best way for us to do that was by occupying the strongest tactical position to defend ourselves. With threats all around and above us, we needed SEAL shooters in covering positions with weapons

ready to engage any enemy threat to the men on the exposed rooftop, those SEALs and others still exiting the building, and the wounded man lying helpless in the street below.

Chief immediately stepped in and started directing shooters flowing through the hole in the wall and onto the rooftop. "Give me some guns over here!" he shouted.

Within moments, we had weapons, and in particular machine gunners, in key covering positions and had security set.

Second, the next priority: find a way down to get everyone off the exposed rooftop and get to our wounded man. To accomplish this, the SEALs up front needed a SEAL breacher to break through the locked iron gate to a stairwell that led down to the street. All the training had imparted the instinct of Prioritize and Execute on the whole platoon. The entire team would simultaneously assess problems, figure out which one was most important with minimal direction from me, and handle it before moving on to the next priority problem. And the SEALs up front who could see the locked gate got the job done with no direction needed. With a simple "breacher up" call, a breacher quickly moved forward and went to work on the gate to break through.

Third, the next priority: ensure a full head count of all personnel and confirm they had exited the building to a safe distance from the imminent explosion.

"Head count," I called to the LPO. Despite the immediate chaos around him, our LPO remained calm, stayed focused, and ensured a proper head count of every single person exiting the building.

Within moments, he let me know: "We're up," said the LPO. Everyone was out of the building, which included the operator who had fallen to the street. It was welcome news.

In less than a minute, the SEAL breacher broke through the

locked gate. Now, we had a way down to our wounded man and we could all get the hell off the exposed rooftop. If we got shot at here, with no cover, we would take substantial casualties.

"Let's move," I urged, as the voice of our chief joined in to assist in this effort, directing shooters to fall back to the stairwell down and keeping shooters with guns up to cover other SEALs as they descended to the street. SEAL shooters rushed down to the street below and set security there with weapons pointed up and down the street. Then others moved to recover the down man. With that, our entire element followed suit down the stairway and out onto the street. Once down, we moved out quickly to a safe distance from the impending IED blast. There, we halted briefly to double-check our head count to ensure no one was left behind. Fire team leaders reported to squad leaders, who reported to our LPO, who reported to me: "We're up." In only minutes from the time we exited the building, our SEAL platoon, EOD, and Iraqi soldiers moved out on foot to safety with a full head count.

*BOOOOOOOOMMMMM!!!!* The deep concussion of the massive blast and huge fireball lit up the night and rained frag down for a full city block in all directions.

It was our EOD technician's explosive charge that set off the IED, right on time with their stopwatch. The terrific concussion shattered the stillness of the night. IEDs were devastating—and deadly. But no American or Iraqi troops would be wounded or killed by that particular one, thank God. Luckily, the SEAL operator who had fallen through the roof had landed on his rucksack, which helped break his fall. He was shaken up, with a nasty laceration on his elbow, but was otherwise OK. Upon our return to base, the docs sewed him up, and he was soon out with us again on the next operation.

**PRINCIPLE**

On the battlefield, countless problems compound in a snowball effect, every challenge complex in its own right, each demanding attention. But a leader must remain calm and make the best decisions possible. To do this, SEAL combat leaders utilize Prioritize and Execute. We verbalize this principle with this direction: "Relax, look around, make a call."

Even the most competent of leaders can be overwhelmed if they try to tackle multiple problems or a number of tasks simultaneously. The team will likely fail at each of those tasks. Instead, leaders must determine the highest priority task and execute. When overwhelmed, fall back upon this principle: Prioritize and Execute.

Multiple problems and high-pressure, high-stakes environments are not exclusive to combat. They occur in many facets of life and particularly in business. Business decisions may lack the immediacy of life and death, but the pressures on business leaders are still intense. The success or failure of the team, the department, the company, the financial capital of investors, careers, and livelihoods are at stake. These pressures produce stress and demand decisions that often require rapid execution. Such decision making for leaders can be overwhelming.

A particularly effective means to help Prioritize and Execute under pressure is to stay at least a step or two ahead of real-time problems. Through careful contingency planning, a leader can anticipate likely challenges that could arise during execution and map out an effective response to those challenges before they happen. That leader and his or her team are far more likely to win. Staying ahead of the curve prevents a leader from being overwhelmed when pressure is applied and enables greater decisiveness. If the team has been briefed and understands what actions to take through such likely contingencies, the team can then rapidly execute when those problems arise, even without specific direction

from leaders. This is a critical characteristic of any high-performance, winning team in any business or industry. It also enables effective Decentralized Command (chapter 8).

When confronted with the enormity of operational plans and the intricate microterrain within those plans, it becomes easy to get lost in the details, to become sidetracked or lose focus on the bigger effort. It is crucial, particularly for leaders at the top of the organization, to “pull themselves off the firing line,” step back, and maintain the strategic picture. This is essential to help correctly prioritize for the team. With this perspective, it becomes far easier to determine the highest priority effort and focus all energies toward its execution. Then senior leaders must help subordinate team leaders within their team prioritize their efforts.

Just as in combat, priorities can rapidly shift and change. When this happens, communication of that shift to the rest of the team, both up and down the chain of command, is critical. Teams must be careful to avoid target fixation on a single issue. They cannot fail to recognize when the highest priority task shifts to something else. The team must maintain the ability to quickly reprioritize efforts and rapidly adapt to a constantly changing battlefield.

To implement Prioritize and Execute in any business, team, or organization, a leader must:

- evaluate the highest priority problem.
- lay out in simple, clear, and concise terms the highest priority effort for your team.
- develop and determine a solution, seek input from key leaders and from the team where possible.
- direct the execution of that solution, focusing all efforts and resources toward this priority task.

- move on to the next highest priority problem. Repeat.
- when priorities shift within the team, pass situational awareness both up and down the chain.
- don't let the focus on one priority cause target fixation. Maintain the ability to see other problems developing and rapidly shift as needed.

## APPLICATION TO BUSINESS

*Jocko Willink*

There was only one major problem: the company was losing money. Through years as a profitable player in the pharmaceutical industry, the company experienced several phases of expansion. All seemed well, but recently revenues had taken a slight downward trend. At first, that trend could be blamed on "market conditions" or "seasonal discrepancies," but when the downward trend continued, it was clear that the lower revenues had metastasized from temporary setback to the new reality.

The CEO of this pharmaceutical company brought me in for leadership training and consultation. The CEO and his executives prepared a "State of the Company" brief that detailed the company's strategic vision in order to improve performance. The brief included multiple sections, each with a number of tasks and projects embedded within.

He sat me down and ran through the brief so I could get a feel for what they were doing. It contained a plethora of new initiatives, each with its own set of challenges. First, the CEO planned to launch several lines of new product, each with its own marketing plan. With the aim of expansion, the CEO hoped to establish distribution centers in a dozen new markets in the next eighteen to twenty-four months. Additionally, he planned to break into the laboratory-equipment market, which he hoped to sell through their access to doctors and hospitals. The CEO also

discussed a new training program designed to educate managers and improve their effectiveness as leaders. Additionally, the company planned a complete Web site overhaul to update their antiquated site and improve customer experience and branding. Finally, with the aim to improve sales, the CEO also planned to restructure the company's sales force and compensation plan. This entailed an activity-management system that would more efficiently focus the sales force on income-producing activities and reduce wasted time and effort. The CEO went into great detail through a multitude of very impressive sounding plans. He was clearly passionate about the company and excited to implement this array of new initiatives to get the company back on track. At the end of the brief, the CEO asked if I had any questions.

"Have you ever heard the military term 'decisively engaged'?" I asked.

"No, I haven't. I was never in the military," the CEO replied with a smile.

"Decisively engaged," I continued, "is a term used to describe a battle in which a unit locked in a tough combat situation cannot maneuver or extricate themselves. In other words, they cannot retreat. They *must* win. With all your new initiatives, I would say you have a hell of a lot of battles going on," I observed.

"Absolutely. We are spread pretty thin," the CEO acknowledged, wondering where this was going.

"Of all the initiatives, which one do you feel is *the most important*?" I asked. "Which one is your *highest priority*?"

"That's easy," the CEO quickly answered. "The activity management of our sales force is the highest priority. We have to make sure our sales people are engaged in the right activities. If they aren't getting in front of customers and selling our products, we will no longer be in business," said the CEO.

"With all that you have planned, do you think your team is clear that this is your highest priority?" I asked.

"Probably not," the CEO admitted.

"On the battlefield, if the guys on the front line face-to-face with the enemy aren't doing their jobs, nothing else matters. Defeat is inevitable," I replied. "With all your other efforts—all your other focuses—how much actual attention is being given to ensuring your frontline salespeople are doing the best job possible? How much of a difference would it make if you and the entire company gave them one hundred percent of your attention for the next few weeks or months?"

"It would probably make a huge difference," the CEO admitted.

"As a SEAL, I often saw this with junior leaders on the battlefield," I continued. "With so much going on in the chaos and mayhem, they would try to take on too many tasks at once. It never worked. I taught them to Prioritize and Execute. Prioritize your problems and take care of them one at a time, the highest priority first. Don't try to do everything at once or you won't be successful." I explained how a leader who tries to take on too many problems simultaneously will likely fail at them all.

"What about all the other initiatives?" the CEO asked. "They will help us as well."

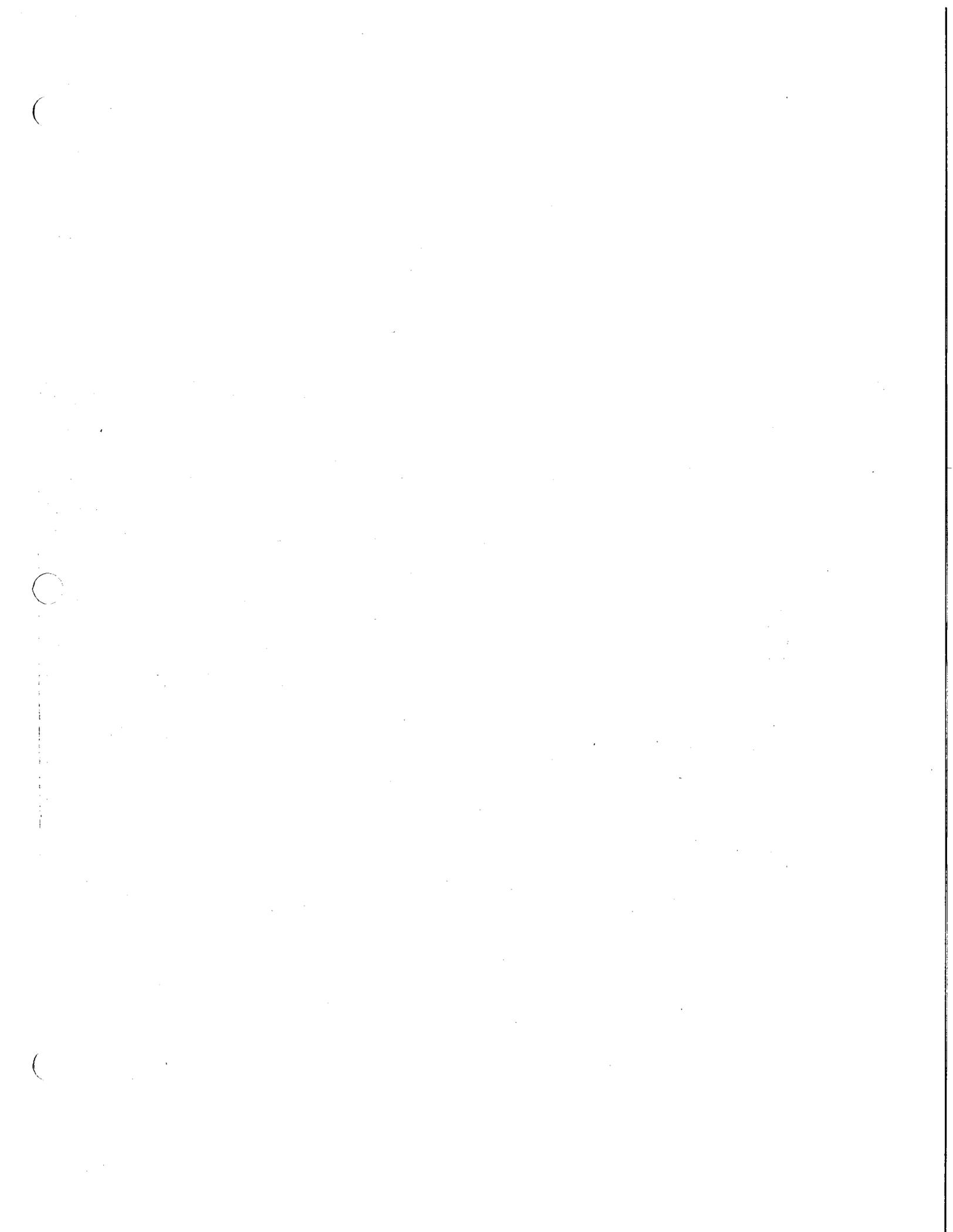
"I'm not saying to throw them away," I replied. "They sound like great initiatives that are definitely important. But you won't move the needle on them when you are spread so thin. My suggestion is to focus on one and when that one is completed, or at least has some real momentum, then you move on to the next one and focus on it. When that one is done, then move on to the next, and so on down the line until you have knocked them all out."

"Makes sense," the CEO replied. "I'll give it a try." He was eager to turn the company's performance around.

For the next several months the CEO focused the efforts of the entire company on supporting the frontline sales force, making it clear that this was the company's highest priority. The labs set up

tours for customers. The marketing designers helped create new, informative pamphlets for products. Sales managers set minimum marks for the number of introductory meetings with doctors and medical administrators that the sales force had to achieve each week. The company's marketing team created online videos interviewing their top salespeople on the most successful techniques so that others could watch and learn. It was a full focus of effort on the highest priority initiative to increasing the company's business.

This focus on a singular initiative unified the efforts of the entire company. Progress was seen quickly and gained momentum. The CEO recognized the traction, and the effectiveness of the method: Prioritize and Execute.





Sunrise over South-Central Ramadi. An M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicle provides cover for American and Iraqi troops on the ground and a SEAL sniper overwatch out beyond the forward line of advance. The morning call to prayer signaled daybreak in Ramadi, soon followed by vicious enemy attacks that continued throughout the day.

(Photo courtesy of the authors)

# CHAPTER 8

## Decentralized Command

*Jocko Willink*

### **SOUTH-CENTRAL RAMADI, IRAQ: A RECKONING**

"We've got armed enemy fighters on top of a building. Appear to be snipers," the radio blared. The concern and excitement in the American Soldier's voice relaying the information was evident.

This report was alarming and immediately struck a cord with everyone on the radio net. Enemy snipers were deadly. While they could never compare to the level of skill, training, and equipment that our own U.S. military snipers possessed, the enemy certainly had some skilled marksmen who inflicted substantial damage, regularly killing or wounding American and Iraqi soldiers with accurate rifle shots.

Two different elements of our Task Unit Bruiser SEALs were out there in enemy territory among a hostile insurgent force with friendly U.S. Army troops moving into the area. My job was command and control of thirty plus SEALs and their partner force of Iraqi soldiers, but I could only manage this effectively through Decentralized Command. It was the only way to operate.

. . .

On the battlefield, I expected my subordinate leaders to do just that: *lead*. I had groomed and trained them—Leif and his fellow SEAL officers, their platoon chiefs, and senior petty officers—to make decisions. I trusted that their assessment of the situations they were in and their decisions would be aggressive in pursuit of mission accomplishment, well thought out, tactically sound, and would ultimately further our strategic mission. They confirmed that trust over and over again throughout our months in Ramadi. Leif and my other leaders were put in some of the worst situations imaginable: enemy fire, confusion and chaos, friendly fire, and worst of all, the pain and emotion of our brother SEALs wounded or killed. In each of those situations, they led with authority and courage, making rapid, sequential, life and death decisions in harrowing situations with limited information. I trusted them.

They had earned that trust through many months of training, of getting it wrong and learning from their mistakes as I watched them closely and coached them in the leadership principles I had learned through fifteen years in the SEAL Teams. Both of my platoon commanders were relatively new to the Teams, but luckily, they were both eager to learn, eager to lead, and most important, humble yet confident to command.

But once we were in Ramadi, I could no longer be with them to look over their shoulders and guide them. I had to empower them to lead. After seeing them evolve during our training cycle into bold, confident leaders, I knew Leif in Charlie Platoon and his fellow platoon commander in Delta Platoon would make the right decisions. And I knew they would ensure that their subordinate leaders within each of their platoons would make the right decisions. I unleashed them on the battlefield to execute with full confidence in their leadership.

Pushing the decision making down to the subordinate, front-line leaders within the task unit was critical to our success. This

Decentralized Command structure allowed me, as the commander, to maintain focus on the bigger picture: coordinate friendly assets and monitor enemy activity. Were I to get embroiled in the details of a tactical problem, there would be no one else to fill my role and manage the strategic mission.

The proper understanding and utilization of Decentralized Command takes time and effort to perfect. For any leader, placing full faith and trust in junior leaders with less experience and allowing them to manage their teams is a difficult thing to embrace. It requires tremendous trust and confidence in those frontline leaders, who must very clearly understand the strategic mission and ensure that their immediate tactical decisions ultimately contribute to accomplishing the overarching goals. Frontline leaders must also have trust and confidence in their senior leaders to know that they are empowered to make decisions and that their senior leaders will back them up.

This skill of Decentralized Command had not been magically bestowed upon Task Unit Bruiser. It had come only through difficult preparation and training, driven home during the months of effort before we deployed to Iraq. We learned our greatest lessons in this during MOUT (military operations, urban terrain) training at Fort Knox, Kentucky. There, under intense pressure and extremely challenging scenarios, we learned how to employ this tenet effectively in even the most chaotic scenarios.

The MOUT facility was a multiblock mock city of concrete structures, ranging from simulated one-room houses to large and complex multistory buildings built to prepare military units for the challenges of urban combat—exactly the environment in which U.S. forces were then heavily engaged in Iraq. The SEAL training detachment, or TRADET (which I would later command), was tasked with preparing SEAL platoons and task units for deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, and we knew they would

put us through the ringer. The TRADET instructor cadre constructed training scenarios to confuse, disorient, physically and mentally stress and overwhelm the participating SEAL units, particularly the leaders. The instructor cadre would “mud-suck”<sup>\*</sup> us at every turn. Their role players acting as “enemy forces” in the training scenarios often wouldn’t follow the rules of play. Some SEALs scoffed at this, thinking the training was unrealistically challenging, and accused TRADET of cheating.

I disagreed. The enemy we would face in Iraq had no rules. They didn’t care about collateral damage. They didn’t care about fratricide or friendly fire. Iraqi insurgents were experts at analyzing and exploiting our weaknesses. They were brutal savages, and their method of operation was to think of the most horrific, cowardly, and *effective* ways to kill us. So we actually *needed* TRADET to do the same thing to us.

During the first few days of Task Unit Bruiser’s MOUT training, my SEAL leaders tried to control everything and everyone themselves. They tried to direct every maneuver, control every position, and personally attempted to manage each one of their men—up to thirty-five individuals in Task Unit Bruiser. It did not work. In a striking realization that military units throughout history have come to understand by experience, it became clear that no person had the cognitive capacity, the physical presence, or the knowledge of everything happening across a complex battlefield to effectively lead in such a manner. Instead, my leaders learned they must rely on their subordinate leaders to take charge of their smaller teams within the team and allow them to execute based on a good understanding of the broader mission (known as Commander’s Intent), and standard operating procedures. That was effective Decentralized Command.

So, we divided into small teams of four to six SEALs, a man-

---

\* a SEAL term for a serious cheap shot or sucker punch

ageable size for a leader to control. Each platoon commander didn't worry about controlling all sixteen SEAL operators assigned, only three: his squad leaders and his platoon chief. Each platoon chief and leading petty officer only had to control their fire team leaders, who each controlled four SEAL shooters. And I only had to control two people—my two platoon commanders.

Each leader was trusted to lead and guide his team in support of the overall mission. Those junior leaders learned that they were expected to make decisions. They couldn't ask, "What do I do?" Instead, they had to state: "This is what I am *going to do*." Since I made sure everyone understood the overall intent of the mission, every leader worked and *led* separately, but in a unified way that contributed to the overall mission, making even the most chaotic scenarios much easier to handle.

When Task Unit Bruiser deployed to Ramadi, Iraq, Decentralized Command played a crucial role in our success. We supported many large-scale operations and participated in virtually every big push into Ramadi, as coalition forces established footholds in enemy territory.

A few months into our deployment, we conducted our largest operation yet. It included two different U.S. Army battalions, each with hundreds of Soldiers, a U.S. Marine battalion, nearly one hundred armored vehicles on the ground, and American aircraft in the skies overhead. Many of these units operated on different communications networks, which greatly added to the complexity and compounded the risk.

Our SEAL sniper teams would lead the way into the area of operations. By occupying the high ground with the best visibility over the battlefield, Task Unit Bruiser SEALs would gain substantial tactical advantage over the enemy and protect other U.S. forces on the ground. But all this movement could create chaos. My job was to provide command and control to coordinate between

my SEAL sniper overwatch teams from Charlie and Delta Platoons and the U.S. Army and Marine Corps units.

This operation centered around a major north-south road that was sandwiched between two notoriously violent neighborhoods—the Ma'laab District, a war-torn neighborhood to the east, and to the west, the J-Block: an American designation for an equally violent section of Central Ramadi. In the Ma'laab, Task Unit Bruiser suffered our first casualty during the initial weeks of our deployment. A young SEAL operator sustained a gunshot wound from an enemy armor-piercing machine gun round, which shattered his femur and ripped a massive hole in his leg. SEAL machine gunner Mike Monsoor laid down suppressive fire and helped drag him out of the street to safety. Luckily, the wounded SEAL survived and returned to the States for a long road to recovery. The SEALs in Corregidor were in firefights on an almost daily basis in the Ma'laab.

Leif and the SEALs of Charlie Platoon had been likewise heavily engaged in constant gun battles with enemy fighters. In the J-Block, only a couple of weeks prior, Ryan Job was shot in the face by an enemy sniper and left blind. Later, on the same day Ryan was wounded, Marc Lee was shot and killed just down the street in the J-Block from where Ryan had been wounded. Marc was the first member of Task Unit Bruiser killed in action and the first Navy SEAL killed in Iraq.

We were still reeling from those losses suffered during what was one of the most furious battles that had taken place in Ramadi. Leif had also been wounded, hit in the back with a round during the battle. Although injured, it had not stopped him from continuing to lead during that operation. Nor had it dulled his desire to hunt down the enemy and kill them.

It was no coincidence that our largest operation would take place in this area. It was a reckoning.

The operation began as our SEALs, under cover of darkness,

patrolled on foot into position—Charlie Platoon from COP Falcon to the west, and Delta Platoon from COP Eagle's Nest to the east. They passed their positions over the radio periodically so that I, staged with our Army counterparts at COP Falcon, and other friendly forces could track their movement.

Both Charlie and Delta Platoons had preselected locations for their sniper overwatch positions based on careful map studies of the area. With the greater strategic picture to coordinate, I had left this entirely up to them. They also had full authority to shift locations if those preselected positions weren't adequate once they were on the ground. As they had been trained, the senior leader of each SEAL sniper overwatch element made their decisions based on the underlying commander's guidance that drove our overwatch operations:

1. Cover as many possible enemy ingress and egress routes as possible.
2. Set up positions that mutually support each other.
3. Pick solid fighting positions that could be defended against heavy enemy attack for an extended period of time if necessary.

With their lives and the lives of their men at risk, my platoon commanders understood this guidance as well—perhaps even better than I. Therefore, I did not need to spell it out for each operation; it was embedded in their thoughts. With it, my frontline leaders were empowered to make the tactical decisions during the operation. They were the ones who were on scene to make the call while I was located over a kilometer away at COP Falcon, tracking the mission alongside the U.S. Army commanders.

Sometimes, despite detailed map studies and planning, my frontline leaders discovered that their preplanned locations were not viable. On numerous occasions, our overwatch elements

arrived at a building they had planned to utilize only to realize that the building was set farther back from the road than it appeared on the map or did not have optimal angles to cover enemy routes and protect friendly positions. Other times, the building was surrounded by "dead-space"—areas that would be difficult to see and difficult to defend. Then it was up to the platoon leadership to select another building that could best accomplish the mission.

Here, Decentralized Command was a necessity. In such situations, the leaders did not call me and ask me what they should do. Instead, they told me what they were going to do. I trusted them to make adjustments and adapt the plan to unforeseen circumstances while staying within the parameters of the guidance I had given them and our standard operating procedures. I trusted them to *lead*. My ego took no offense to my subordinate leaders on the frontlines calling the shots. In fact, I was proud to follow their lead and support them. With my leaders running their teams and handling the tactical decisions, it made my job much easier by enabling me to focus on the bigger picture.

On this particular operation, Charlie Platoon's preplanned position worked well. But Delta Platoon realized that they could not utilize the building they had planned to use. Delta's platoon commander and his senior platoon leadership scouted out another building that could work. The commander radioed and told me his platoon would move across the street to the other building, building 94.

I responded to him over the radio, "This is Jocko; I copy you want to move to building 94. Do it." Delta Platoon then immediately pushed this information to the rest of the friendly forces, including the U.S. Army battalion staff and company leadership with which I was co-located at COP Falcon. I sat back and watched as their plan was relayed and ensured the information was clear at higher headquarters. Once all friendly forces had been notified, and Delta Platoon confirmed that, they initiated movement into the newly selected building.

Building 94 proved to be a very good vantage point. One of the tallest buildings in the area, at four stories in height, it had a clear view of the major north-south road and of the location where the Army would soon construct COP Grant, the new combat outpost. Building 94 was easily defensible, and offered good firing positions that covered many potential enemy routes in and out of the area.

Once Delta Platoon was in position, their radioman reported, "Building 94 secure. Overwatch positions set in the fourth story and on rooftop."

"Copy," I acknowledged.

The radioman then relayed that information to other units in the area, and I confirmed that the other units understood the location of Delta's new position.

With Charlie and Delta Platoons now secured in their positions, American troops flooded into the area. This stage of the mission left U.S. forces highly vulnerable. With no permanent security yet in place, brave Army engineers began building the COP, a construction project in a hostile combat zone. Tensions rose in the streets and among the command-and-control element I was with back at COP Falcon. As friendly forces moved in, reports of possible enemy movement came in over the radio nets: lights came on in buildings, while in others, lights went out; vehicles started up, departed driveways, and moved through the streets; a military-age male maneuvered through the alleyways observing friendly troop movements. A report described a possible enemy force of two to four military-age males exiting a building and dispersing. Other men were seen talking on radios.

This was the most nerve-racking time—before the shooting started, waiting with anxious anticipation for a fight to happen. Our SEALs and the hundreds of U.S. troops in this operation had fought fierce battles with the enemy in the bordering neighborhoods for the past several months. Much American blood had

been spilled, including the blood of our SEAL brothers. Now it was only a matter of time before the enemy attacked, which we expected would be ferocious.

Then, from a Bradley Fighting Vehicle equipped with thermal sight for nighttime operations, the report came over the radio: "We've got armed enemy fighters on top of a building. Appear to be snipers."

A single enemy bullet had struck Ryan Job, severely wounding him, leaving him blind, and eventually leading to his death. A young Marine from 2nd ANGLICO, whom we frequently worked with, had been shot and killed by a single rifle shot just a few weeks before. Many others had been wounded or killed by a single round. Just as our snipers struck fear into the hearts of our enemy, an enemy sniper was a nightmare scenario for us: shooting accurately from unseen positions, inflicting casualties, and fading away. So now this report across the net that enemy snipers had been spotted caused everyone's defenses to spike and escalated the tensions in their trigger fingers.

Charlie and Delta Platoons, in their separate overwatch positions, heard the report on their radios and were also amped up by the call. Perhaps one or more of these enemy snipers were the culprits responsible for shooting Ryan and our Marine comrade. Any one of our SEALs would gladly eliminate the enemy snipers with lethal force. But despite the romantic vision of a sniper-versus-sniper stalking and shooting match, our preferred contest was a much more lopsided affair: enemy sniper versus the massive firepower of a U.S. M1A2 Abrams Main Battle Tank. An enemy sniper might barricade himself in a room behind sandbags and concrete. While this made for a difficult rifle shot, it was no match for the tanks' electronically enhanced optics and giant 120mm smooth-bore cannon fired from behind the safety of heavy armor. We all hoped for a quick engagement by the Bradley that had spotted the enemy sniper.

Of course, I wanted as much as anyone to see an enemy sniper or, even better, multiple snipers eliminated. But this was a complex battlefield, which could confuse and confound even the most experienced Soldiers and SEALs. The fog of war in a chaotic urban environment grows thick rapidly and could muddle even the most seemingly obvious situations.

The company commander (a U.S. Army captain) in charge of the Bradley Fighting Vehicle that reported the enemy snipers was an exceptional warrior and leader, whom our SEALs had come to deeply respect and admire. He and his Soldiers were an outstanding group. We had formed a tremendous bond with them through dozens of operations working together. Our SEAL snipers supported their operations, and they in turn responded continuously to our calls for help by rolling out in their tanks down extremely dangerous, uncleared roads to bring firepower to bear and provide evacuation of our SEAL casualties. Every time we called for help, the company commander fearlessly placed himself and his men at great risk. He personally saddled up and drove out in his tank to bring the thunder on our behalf and beat back enemy attacks on SEAL positions. Now, the company commander heard the report of enemy snipers. He responded over his radio, "Give a description of the target."

The Bradley's vehicle commander answered: "Several military-age males on a rooftop. They appear to have some heavy weapons, and some have what appear to be sniper weapons with scopes."

Monitoring the radio calls, I stood next to the company commander in the makeshift TOC inside COP Falcon. Knowing I had SEAL snipers on the rooftop near where the enemy was spotted, I quickly asked, "Find out what building number they see the enemy in." The company commander radioed his Bradley commander for an exact position.

"Building 79," replied the Bradley vehicle commander.

"Your guys aren't in building 79, are they?" the company commander asked me, just to be sure.

I looked at my battle map to coordinate the numbers I was hearing over the net. I located building 79, just down the street from where Delta Platoon was located, in building 94.

"Negative," I replied to the captain. "I've got SEALs in building 94; not in 79."

"Alright. Let's engage!" said the captain, fired up to take out some enemy snipers. Every one of us was eager to hammer enemy fighters and protect the U.S. troops on the ground in harm's way. But we had to be sure.

"Stand by," I said. "Let's confirm what we have here."

I keyed up my radio to talk to my SEALs on the less formal net that only we utilized. I spoke directly to Delta's platoon commander: "We have some enemy activity in your vicinity, possible snipers; want to engage with a Bradley main gun.\* I need you to confirm your position—one hundred percent."

"Roger," he replied, "I have already triple-checked. Building direct to our south is 91. South of that is the road. The roof of our building has an L-shaped room on the roof. You can see it on the battle map. I'm sitting in it. It is confirmed: we are in building 94. One hundred percent. Over."

I acknowledged the Delta Platoon commander's transmission. Then, to the company commander next to me, I said, "It's confirmed, my guys are in building 94."

"Alright then, lets hammer these guys," the company commander replied.

"Hold on," I said, checking one more time. "Let's confirm what your guys are seeing."

"We have confirmed: enemy snipers on the rooftop of building 79," responded the company commander. "There are no

---

\* 25mm chain gun with high-explosive rounds

other friendlies in that building. We need to engage while we can." He didn't want to miss a critical chance to take out enemy snipers.

I didn't like the idea of delaying an opportunity to eliminate enemy snipers any more than he did. But knowing the confusing chaos of the urban battlefield and how easily mistakes can happen, I had to be certain.

"Do me a favor," I asked the company commander. "Just to confirm, have your Bradley vehicle commander count the number of buildings he sees from the major intersection [where he was positioned] up to the building where he has eyes on the enemy snipers."

The company commander looked at me with a little frustration. If these were indeed enemy snipers, they might target U.S. forces at any moment. Allowing them to live even for a few more minutes meant they might very well kill Americans.

"I just want to be sure," I added. The company commander didn't work for me. I couldn't order him to delay. But through multiple combat operations together with our SEALs in this difficult environment, we had developed a strong professional working relationship. He loved our SEALs and appreciated the damage we inflicted on the enemy. He now trusted me enough to comply with my request.

"OK," he said. The company commander keyed up his radio and instructed his Bradley vehicle commander: "For final confirmation, count the number of buildings from the intersection where you're located to the building where you see the enemy snipers."

The Bradley vehicle commander paused at this, likely wondering why he was being asked to do this while enemy snipers waited to attack. But he did as directed, replying on the radio, "Roger that. Stand by."

It should have taken no more than fifteen seconds to count

the buildings up the block to the target building, but the silence over the radio was longer—too long.

Finally, the radio silence broke: "Correction: The suspected enemy position is Building 94. I say again, 94. I counted the buildings up the block. We misjudged the distance. Over."

"Hold your fire!" the company commander quickly said with authority over his battalion net, recognizing that the "enemy" reported in building 94 were really friendlies. "All stations: Hold your fire. Personnel in building 94 are friendly. I say again, building 94 is a friendly position. We have SEAL snipers on the roof of that building."

"Roger," said the Bradley vehicle commander in a solemn tone, recognizing his mistake had almost caused fratricide.

"Roger," answered the captain. Alarmed at how easily such a mistake could happen and acknowledging how deadly and devastating it could have been, the company commander looked at me and said heavily, "That was a close one."

Without formal street signs or numbers—with confusing intersections and alleyways—such a mix-up was something that could easily happen. But had they engaged, it would have been horrific. The 25mm heavy gun from the Bradley fired high explosive rounds that would have ripped through the rooftop, likely killing or wounding multiple SEALs in that position.

Thankfully, our troop operated under Decentralized Command. My platoon commanders didn't just tell me what the situation was, but what they were going to do to fix it. That sort of Extreme Ownership and leadership from my subordinate leaders not only allowed them to lead confidently, but also allowed me to focus on the bigger picture—in this case, monitoring the actions of coordinating units in this dynamic environment. Had I been engulfed in trying to lead and direct Charlie and Delta Platoons' tactical decisions from my distant position, I may very well have

missed the other events unfolding. This could have had catastrophic results.

Instead, Decentralized Command worked and enabled us, as a team, to effectively manage risk, prevent disaster, and accomplish our mission. Soon, the real enemy fighters struck with violent attacks to protect "their" territory along the central north-south street. But our enemy's enthusiasm was extinguished quickly when SEAL snipers and machine gunners killed them in the very streets they aimed to defend. Decentralized Command enabled us to operate effectively on a challenging battlefield and support our U.S. Army comrades to construct the new combat outpost and ensure more Soldiers came home safely. Ultimately, this furthered the strategic mission to stabilize Ramadi and secure the populace, which would prove highly successful over the coming months.

#### **PRINCIPLE**

Human beings are generally not capable of managing more than six to ten people, particularly when things go sideways and inevitable contingencies arise. No one senior leader can be expected to manage dozens of individuals, much less hundreds. Teams must be broken down into manageable elements of four to five operators, with a clearly designated leader. Those leaders must understand the overall mission, and the ultimate goal of that mission—the Commander's Intent. Junior leaders must be empowered to make decisions on key tasks necessary to accomplish that mission in the most effective and efficient manner possible. Teams within teams are organized for maximum effectiveness for a particular mission, with leaders who have clearly delineated responsibilities. Every tactical-level team leader must understand *not just what to do but why they are doing it*. If frontline leaders do not understand why, they must ask their boss to clarify the why. This ties in very closely with Believe (chapter 3).

Decentralized Command does not mean junior leaders or team members operate on their own program; that results in chaos. Instead, junior leaders must fully understand what is within their decision-making authority—the “left and right limits” of their responsibility. Additionally, they must communicate with senior leaders to recommend decisions outside their authority and pass critical information up the chain so the senior leadership can make informed strategic decisions. SEAL leaders on the battlefield are expected to figure out what needs to be done and do it—to tell higher authority what they plan to do, rather than ask, “What do you want me to do?” Junior leaders must be proactive rather than reactive.

To be effectively empowered to make decisions, it is imperative that frontline leaders execute with confidence. Tactical leaders must be confident that they clearly understand the strategic mission and Commander’s Intent. They must have implicit trust that their senior leaders will back their decisions. Without this trust, junior leaders cannot confidently execute, which means they cannot exercise effective Decentralized Command. To ensure this is the case, senior leaders must constantly communicate and push information—what we call in the military “situational awareness”—to their subordinate leaders. Likewise, junior leaders must push situational awareness up the chain to their senior leaders to keep them informed, particularly of crucial information that affects strategic decision making.

With SEAL Teams—just as with any team in the business world—there are leaders who try to take on too much themselves. When this occurs, operations can quickly dissolve into chaos. The fix is to empower frontline leaders through Decentralized Command and ensure they are running their teams to support the overall mission, without micromanagement from the top.

There are, likewise, other senior leaders who are so far removed from the troops executing on the frontline that they be-

come ineffective. These leaders might give the appearance of control, but they actually have no idea what their troops are doing and cannot effectively direct their teams. We call this trait "battlefield aloofness." This attitude creates a significant disconnect between leadership and the troops, and such a leader's team will struggle to effectively accomplish their mission.

Determining how much leaders should be involved and where leaders can best position themselves to command and control the team is key. When SEAL task units train in assaults—in what we call close-quarters battle, or CQB—we practice this in a "kill house." A kill house is a multiroom facility with ballistic walls, which SEALs, other military, and police units use to rehearse their CQB skills. For young SEAL officers learning the ropes of leadership, running through the kill house with the platoon provides a great training opportunity to determine how much they should be involved and where to position themselves. Sometimes, the officer gets so far forward that he gets sucked into every room clearance, meaning he is continually entering rooms and engaging targets. When that happens, he gets focused on the minutia of what's going on in the immediate room and loses situational awareness of what is happening with the rest of the team and can no longer provide effective command and control. Other times, the officer gets stuck in the back of the train, on cleanup duty. When that happens, he is too far in the rear to know what is happening up front and can't direct his assault force. I advised many officers that the right amount of involvement—the proper position for them—was somewhere in the middle, generally with the bulk of their force: not so far forward that they get sucked into every room clearance, but not so far back that they don't know what is going on up front. Contrary to a common misconception, leaders are not stuck in any particular position. Leaders must be free to move to where they are most needed, which changes throughout the course of an operation. Understanding proper positioning as a

leader is a key component of effective Decentralized Command, not just on the battlefield. In any team, business, or organization, the same rule applies.

The effectiveness of Decentralized Command is critical to the success of any team in any industry. In chaotic, dynamic, and rapidly changing environments, leaders at all levels must be empowered to make decisions. Decentralized Command is a key component to victory.

### **APPLICATION TO BUSINESS**

"Can I take a look at your org chart?" I asked the regional president of an investment advisor group. The "org chart" depicted his team's organizational structure and chain of command. Responsible for dozens of branches and over a thousand employees, the president was smart and driven. He didn't have a great deal of leadership confidence, though he seemed eager to learn.

"We don't really have one that is current," the president responded. "I like to hold that information close. If it gets out and people see it, they might get upset that they actually report to someone they see as one of their peers. I've had to deal with this before."

"So how do they know who is in charge?" I asked. "Without a clear chain of command—people knowing who is in charge of what—you cannot have empowered leadership. And that is critical to the success of any team, including the SEAL Teams or your company here."

"Let me pull up what we have," said the president.

He opened a document on his computer and swung an organizational chart onto the large plasma screen on the wall of the conference room.

I stood up and took a look. The team for which he was responsible was a region of substantial size and breadth. There were branches spread across a huge geographic area of the United States.

But there was something that stood out to me. The org chart lacked uniformity and seemed disorganized.

"What's this here?" I asked, as I pointed to a location that listed twenty-two people who worked there.

"That's a branch," the president answered.

"And who leads all those people?" I asked.

"The branch manager," he responded.

"He leads all twenty-one of those people? They all report to him?" I inquired.

"Yes, he is in charge of them all," said the president.

I looked at another area on the org chart. I tapped another office location, this one with three people in it. "And what is this here?" I asked.

"That is also a branch," the president replied.

"Who leads these people?" I asked again.

"The branch manager," he said.

"He leads two people?" I asked.

"That's right," said the president.

"So one branch manager leads twenty-one people, and the other branch manager leads two people?" I clarified.

"Yeah . . . a little strange, but it makes sense on the ground," the president offered.

"How?" I asked. If it wasn't clear to me looking at the org chart, I knew it was highly likely that it didn't make sense to the frontline troops that were out there executing the company's mission.

"Well, the bigger branches have more people because they are more successful, and they generally have a stronger manager. Because he or she is effective, the branch grows and requires more employees, which increases the number of direct reports. Over time some branches can get pretty big," the president explained.

"What happens to the efficiency of the branch when they grow?" I asked.

"You know, honestly, once a branch reaches a certain size, rapid growth slows," he admitted. "The branch manager usually just focuses on the best performers, and the rest kind of get lost in the shuffle of day-to-day business. Over time, most of these branch managers seem to lose track of the bigger picture of what we are trying to do and where we are strategically trying to grow."

"And what about the smaller branches?" I asked. "Why do they not grow?"

"Surprisingly, it is for a similar reason," he replied. "When a branch only has a couple people in it, there isn't enough revenue for the branch manager to really make money. So those managers are forced to personally generate business themselves. When they are in the field selling, they generally don't have time to focus on leadership and management of their teams and they lose track of the bigger picture—building and growing."

"So what would you say the ideal size would be for a team or branch in your company?" I asked.

"Probably five or six, four or five financial advisors and support people," answered the president.

"That makes perfect sense," I said. "The SEAL Teams and the U.S. military, much like militaries throughout history, are based around building blocks of four-to-six-man teams with a leader. We call them 'fire teams.' That is the ideal number for a leader to lead. Beyond that, any leader can lose control as soon as even minimal pressure is applied to the team when inevitable challenges arise."

"So how do you lead larger teams on the battlefield?" asked the president with genuine curiosity.

"Sometimes for our units, we can operate with as many as one hundred fifty personnel on a particular operation," I answered. "While we might only have fifteen or twenty SEALs, when you tack on Iraqi soldiers and mutually supporting troops from the

U.S. Army or Marine Corps, our ranks could easily grow to over a hundred or a hundred and fifty," I explained. "But the truth is, even with all those men out there, I could only truly lead, manage, and coordinate with about four to six, max."

I could see this had sparked some interest with the president. "That is why we had to utilize Decentralized Command," I explained. "I couldn't talk to every shooter in every platoon, squad, and fire team. I would talk to the platoon commander. He would take my guidance and pass it down to his squad leaders. His squad leaders would pass it on to their fire team leaders. And they would execute. If there was an Army company supporting us, I would talk to the company commander, or perhaps one of the platoon commanders, and again, they would pass my guidance down to their subordinate leadership."

"Couldn't things get confused? Like in the old game of telephone, where you whisper a word around a circle of people and it comes back different from how it started?" asked the president.

"That is why simplicity is so important," I answered. "Proper Decentralized Command requires simple, clear, concise orders that can be understood easily by everyone in the chain of command. I spelled out my Commander's Intent directly to the troops so they would know exactly what the ultimate goal of the mission was. That way they would have the ability to execute on the battlefield in a manner that supported the overarching goal, without having to ask for permission. Junior leaders must be empowered to make decisions and take initiative to accomplish the mission. That was critical to our success on the battlefield. And it will greatly help you here."

"But can't you end up with a bunch of little individual elements just doing whatever they want—helter-skelter?" asked the president with skepticism.

"You could end up with that *if* you, as a leader, failed to

give clear guidance and set distinct boundaries," I explained. "With clear guidance and established boundaries for decision making that your subordinate leaders understand, they can then act independently toward your unified goal."

"I get it," said the president—"a mission statement."

"That's part of it," I replied, "but there is more. A mission statement tells your troops what you are doing. But they have got to understand *why* they are doing it. When the subordinate leaders and the frontline troops fully understand the purpose of the mission, how it ties into strategic goals, and what impact it has, they can then lead, even in the absence of explicit orders."

"That makes sense," he acknowledged.

"The teams have to be small enough that one person can truly lead them," I continued. "'Span of control' is the commonly used business term. How many people can a leader effectively lead? In combat, depending on the experience and quality of the leader, the skill level and experience of the troops, and the levels of violence and potential mayhem in an area; those numbers vary. You need to find out the optimal size for your teams. And if it is five or six, with a leader at the top, then that is the way you should set them up."

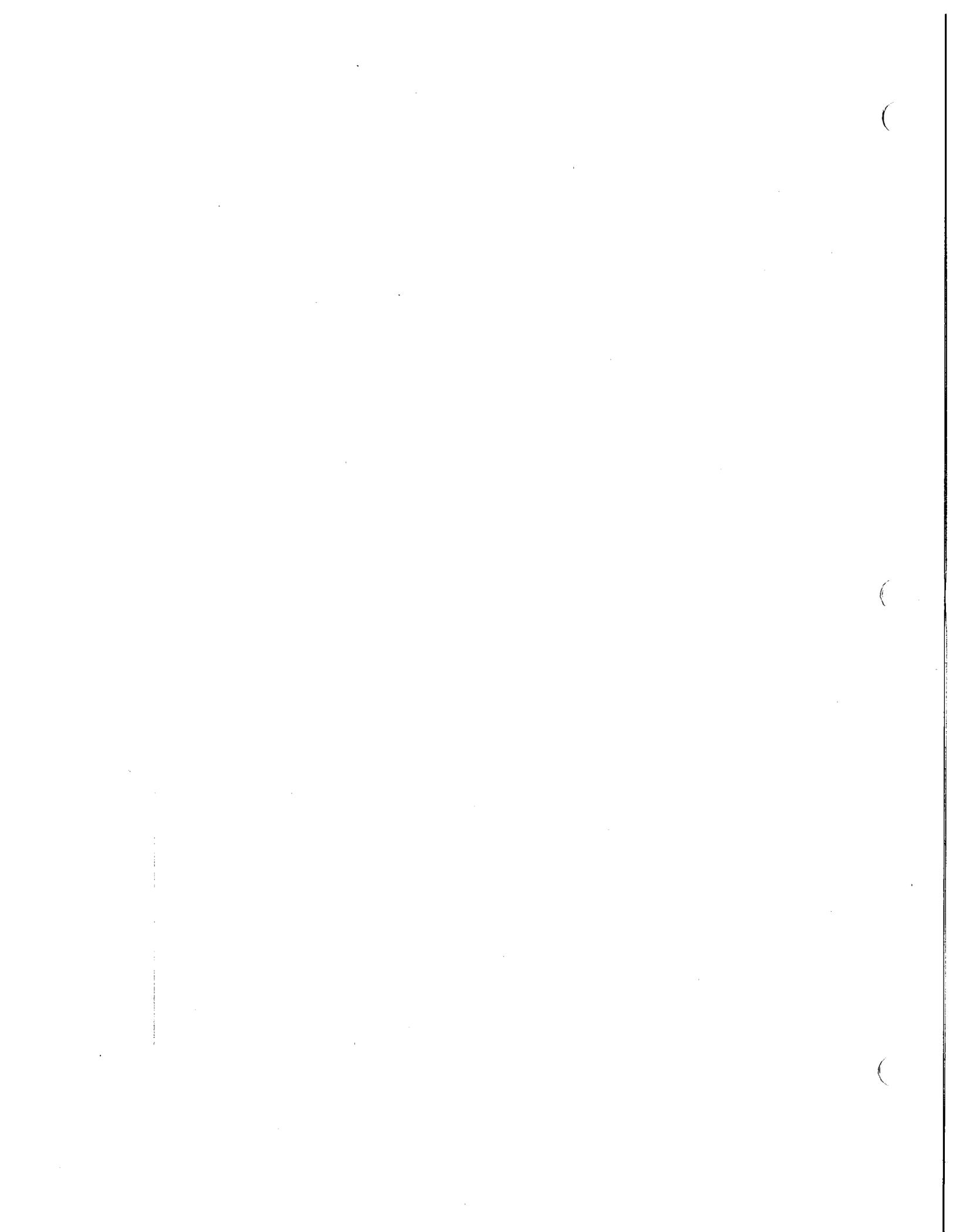
From a leadership perspective, I explained to the president, there is truly nothing more important than an understanding of the dynamics of Decentralized Command. This is proper command and control in a nutshell. It is one of the most complex strategies to pull off correctly. As a leader, it takes strength to let go. It takes faith and trust in subordinate, frontline leaders and their abilities. Most of all, it requires trust up and down the chain of command: trust that subordinates will do the right thing; trust that superiors will support subordinates if they are acting in accordance with the mission statement and Commander's Intent.

Trust is not blindly given. It must be built over time. Situations will sometimes require that the boss walk away from a prob-

lem and let junior leaders solve it, even if the boss knows he might solve it more efficiently. It is more important that the junior leaders are allowed to make decisions—and backed up even if they don't make them correctly. Open conversations build trust. Overcoming stress and challenging environments builds trust. Working through emergencies and seeing how people react builds trust.

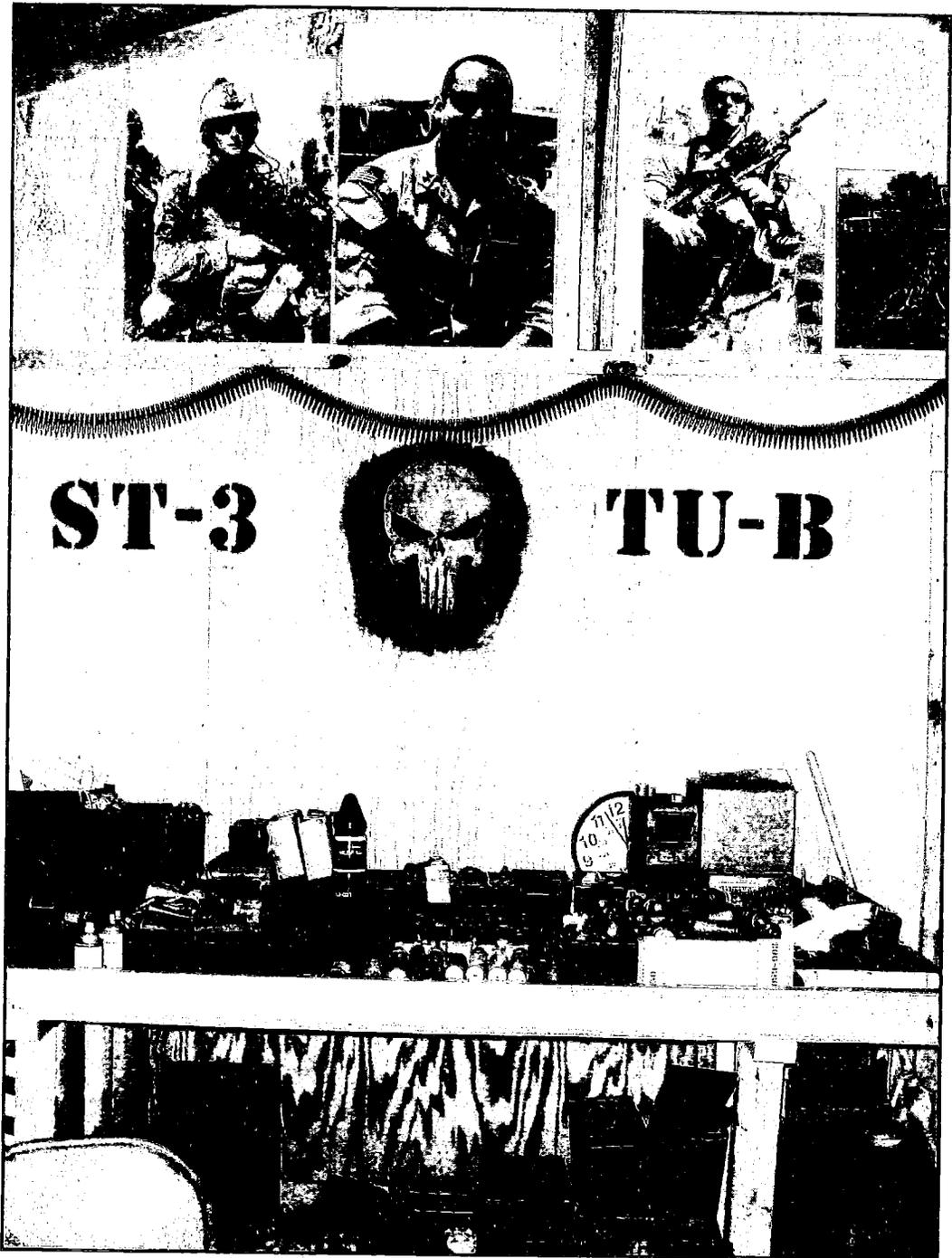
"Junior leaders must know that the boss will back them up even if they make a decision that may not result in the best outcome, as long as the decision was made in an effort to achieve the strategic objective," I explained, "That complete faith in what others will do, how they will react, and what decisions they will make is the key ingredient in the success of Decentralized Command. And this is integral to the success of any high-performance winning team."

"Understood," the president replied. "I will make it happen."



# **PART III**

## **SUSTAINING VICTORY**



SEAL Team Three, Task Unit Bruiser, Charlie Platoon Mission Planning Space at Camp Marc Lee. Ordnance table with ammunition at the ready, including loaded rifle magazines, machine gun rounds, hand grenades, signal flares, 40mm grenades, and 84mm rockets. The photos on the wall commemorate fallen SEAL brothers Mike Monsoor (left), Marc Lee (center), and Ryan Job (right) who later died after a surgery to repair wounds received in combat.

(Photo courtesy of the authors)

# CHAPTER 9

Plan

*Leif Babin*

## **RAMADI, IRAQ: HOSTAGE RESCUE**

“They have IEDs buried in the yard and bunkered machine gun positions in the house,” said our intelligence officer with a grave look of concern.

It was a hostage rescue mission, the ultimate high-stakes operation: not only bad guys to kill, but an innocent victim to save. We had trained for missions like this, but they were rare. Now Task Unit Bruiser had the opportunity to execute such an operation for real.

A young Iraqi teenager, the nephew of an Iraqi police colonel, had been kidnapped by an al Qaeda-linked terrorist group. They demanded his family pay a \$50,000 ransom and threatened to behead the young man otherwise. Kidnappings and beheadings were common occurrences in Ramadi and Anbar Province in those days. Often the hostages were tortured or killed, even if the family paid the ransom. These terrorist kidnappers were evil people, plain and simple, and could be counted on to carry out their gruesome threat. For Task Unit Bruiser, there was no

time to waste. We needed to put together a plan in a hurry, brief that plan to our troops, and launch as soon as possible.

Our intelligence indicated the hostage location was a house on the outskirts of a Ramadi suburb. The roads into the area were heavily IED'ed, and the threat extremely high. It was a dangerous, enemy-controlled neighborhood. But that's where the hostage and the bad guys who held him were believed to be, and we had to figure out the best way into and out of the area. Our plan had to maximize the chance of mission success while minimizing the risk to our assault force of SEALs, EOD bomb technicians, and our partner force of Iraqi soldiers.

Task Unit Bruiser had an intelligence department of a dozen SEAL and non-SEAL support personnel. At the head of Bruiser's intel shop was a young ensign (the most junior officer rank in the Navy) recently graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy. He wasn't a SEAL. His specialty was intelligence. He was new and inexperienced, but he was smart, hardworking, and highly motivated. In deference to the character from Comedy Central's *South Park* cartoon series, we nicknamed this young intelligence officer "Butters." Butters and his team of intelligence specialists data-mined hundreds of reports and gathered as much information as they could to help facilitate our planning. Meanwhile, we—the Task Unit Bruiser SEALs—set about putting together the plan.

As Charlie Platoon commander, I would serve as assault force commander for more than a dozen SEALs, an EOD technician, and fifteen Iraqi soldiers who would enter and clear the house. Jocko, as Task Unit Bruiser commander, would be the ground force commander with responsibility for command and control of all assets—the assault force, our vehicles, aircraft, and any other supporting elements—involved in the operation.

With the clock ticking, we analyzed the mission, laid out what intelligence we had, and detailed the supporting assets that were available: our own armored Humvees and two U.S. Navy HH-60

Seahawk helicopters. We put together a solid plan. A small team of SEAL snipers would clandestinely move into position some distance away to maintain eyes on the target and cover our assault force as we approached the target building. Our assault force would then enter the house, clear all rooms, eliminate threats, and (with any luck) recover the hostage. Jocko would remain with the vehicles and coordinate supporting assets until the target building was clear. We would all then return to base and get the hostage to medical care.

Moving with a purpose, I drove across Camp Ramadi, the large U.S. base on the outskirts of the city where the bulk of American forces lived and worked, for a quick meeting with the U.S. Army company commander in charge of the area where the target building was located. The major and his company had been deployed to Ramadi more than a year. They had fought fierce battles against a deadly enemy all through this particular section of the city, had lost several brave Soldiers, and suffered many more wounded. He knew the neighborhood like the back of his hand. His tanks and troopers would support us on the operation in the event we got in a bind. The major and his company were U.S. Army National Guardsmen, which meant that at home they were part-time Soldiers. Back in the world, he was a schoolteacher. But here in Ramadi, he and his men were full-time warriors, and damn good ones. He was an outstanding combat leader and professional officer. We had tremendous respect for the major and his company and valued his expertise in the area. I went over our plan with him, and he gave me some pointers as to how we could best get into the area undetected, and how his Abrams tanks and Bradley Fighting Vehicles might best support us. I listened carefully.

Back at our SEAL camp, known as "Sharkbase,"\* we finalized

---

\* We later changed the name to Camp Marc Lee in honor of Marc, the first SEAL killed in action in Iraq.

an innovative plan designed to catch the terrorists by surprise and reduce risk to our force while giving us the greatest chance of success. We then gathered all the SEAL operators into the mission planning space to brief the plan. In addition to the SEALs, EOD bomb technicians, and interpreters who would accompany us on the operation (we would link up later and brief the Iraqi troops), we pulled in the key support personnel from our task unit, who would remain behind and man the TOC. It was critical that we all understood the plan, how and when to communicate and what to do if and when things went wrong. Time was of the essence if we were to succeed in this hostage rescue. Quickly, we powered through the brief.

I gave my closing comments as assault force commander. Our shooters had just been fed a lot of information. My final remarks were a way to prioritize that information—the three most important things I wanted the assault force to remember and keep first and foremost in their minds:

- 1) Maintain the element of surprise; stealth is more important than speed as we approach this target.
- 2) After the breach, once we make entry, speed is most important. Let's get this target cleared and secured in a hurry.
- 3) Good PID (positive identification) of any potential threats. Be wary not to injure the hostage. And be ready to render medical assistance.

As ground force commander in charge of the operation, Jocko gave his closing comments, simplifying the complex legalese of our rules of engagement into a clear, concise statement that everyone understood: "If you have to pull the trigger, make sure the people you kill are bad."

With that, the brief concluded and SEALs streamed out of the

building. Everyone jockeyed up in their op gear, loaded vehicles, and conducted final equipment checks in a hurry. Jocko and I were the only ones left in the mission planning space talking through final big-picture details of our plan.

Suddenly, Butters burst into the room. "We just got some new intel," he said, in a concerned and excited voice. "They have IEDs buried in the yard and bunkered machine gun positions in the house." It meant the terrorists holding this hostage were ready for a fight, and the risk to our force was high. Butters stared at us with a grave look of concern.

Jocko looked at me. "I guess you guys are gonna get some," he said with a confident smile and a nod. He fully understood the risks. But he also knew our plan was sound and our assault force and supporting assets were well prepared to meet the enemy threat.

"I guess so," I said, smiling back at Jocko and nodding in agreement, adding a phrase we used when facing anything particularly challenging or miserable: "Good times."

We walked out to the vehicles, where our SEAL assaulters and vehicle crews were standing by, ready to depart.

"Here's the latest intel update," I passed to the troops. I told them about the reported IEDs in the yard and bunkered machine gun positions.

"Roger that," came the response from several SEALs. "Let's get some."

They were fired up. That was the Task Unit Bruiser way.

It wasn't cockiness or overconfidence. On the contrary, each man knew this was a dangerous operation and that he might very well come home in a body bag. But despite the new intelligence, we were confident in our plan. Our goal was to maintain the element of surprise and hit the bad guys before they even realized we were there. This would give us the greatest chance to rescue the hostage alive and protect SEAL assaulters from enemy

threats. After the brief, each individual operator understood the overall plan, his specific role, and what to do if things went wrong. Then we quickly walked through the operation in rehearsal with full gear. As a result, we were confident we could execute with proficiency. We had addressed and mitigated every risk that we could through planning. But *every* risk could not be controlled. This mission was inherently dangerous. Whether or not we could rescue the hostage alive would remain to be seen.

We loaded up our vehicles and launched on the operation, driving out the gate and into the darkness.

As we staged our vehicles some distance away, the assault force dismounted and lined up in patrol formation. I listened for updates from our sniper overwatch on my radio.

"No movement on target," they reported. "All looks quiet." Of course that didn't mean all was truly quiet, but only that they couldn't see any movement.

The night was dark as the assault force stepped off and swiftly but silently made our way up to the target building. As the assault force commander, I served as a double-check to my point man's navigation to ensure that we were in the right place. I kept my head on a swivel, constantly looking around to keep an eye on the target building and on the rest of the assault force.

As we crept closer, you could feel the tension rising. Once at the target, EOD led the way scanning for IED threats. Our SEAL breach team moved to the entry door and placed a big explosive breaching charge on the door.

*BOOM!*

*It's on, I thought to myself.*

With an Iraqi hostage to rescue, we had planned to let the Iraqi soldiers lead the way. But typical for our partner force, they choked with fear and balked at stepping over the shattered and

twisted metal of the door and into the smoke-filled room beyond. From here, every nanosecond counted. Our SEAL combat advisors, ready for this contingency, grabbed the Iraqi soldiers and unceremoniously flung them through the door and into the house. This was no time to delay.

Our SEAL assault force followed right on the Iraqi soldiers' heels, and when the Iraqis again failed to enter the next room, our SEALs quickly took the lead and rapidly cleared the house. Within a minute, every room had been cleared and all prisoners were under our control.

"Target secure," I called. No shots had been fired. Now we had to figure out who we had captured.

A bewildered young Iraqi teen was among those we had detained. We pulled him aside and, after some questioning through the interpreter, confirmed he was indeed the hostage who had been kidnapped. Marc Lee, part of the SEAL assault force, was never one to miss an opportunity to insert humor into any situation. Marc boldly strolled up to the Iraqi kid and, in his best impersonation of Lieutenant James Curran played by the actor Michael Biehn in the 1990 movie *Navy SEALs*, said: "We're a SEAL Team, we're here to get you out. There's no reason to thank us because we don't exist. You never saw us. This never happened." We got a good laugh at that as the Iraqi kid, who didn't speak a word of English, was nonetheless thankful and clearly relieved to have been rescued from his captors.

The plan had been perfectly executed. The first clue the bad guys had that SEALs were there was when their door blew in. We caught them completely by surprise in a manner they had not expected. I made my way to the rooftop of the target building, keyed up my radio, and called Jocko, who was now with the blocking force outside: "Jocko, this is Leif. Target secure." I passed our proword for "we have the hostage."

We had rescued the hostage alive and in one piece. We gave our Iraqi soldiers all the credit. The positive strategic impact of our Iraqi partner force successfully rescuing an Iraqi hostage was substantial. It served as a big win for the fledging Iraqi security forces in liberating the local populace from the brutality of the insurgency.

Best of all, none of our guys were hurt. We found no IEDs buried in the yard or bunkered machine gun positions in the house, though certainly the kidnappers had access to such weapons. We were lucky. But we had also made our luck. We had maintained the element of surprise. Our plan had worked like a charm, a testament to the solid mission planning skills we had developed in Task Unit Bruiser. Having the humility to lean on the expertise of the good U.S. Army major and his Soldiers who lived and fought in this area for a full year had helped us greatly in this success.

Back in San Diego a year later, I served as a leadership instructor at our SEAL basic training command. I used this very scenario for a leadership decision-making exercise. To a classroom filled with newly promoted SEAL platoon commanders and platoon chiefs, I set up the scenario: Iraqi kid held hostage, known location, hostage rescue mission planned and ready to go. "Just before launch," I told them, "the intelligence officer informs you there are IEDs buried in the yard and bunkered machine gun positions in the house. What do you do?"

There were varying degrees of combat experience among the participants in the room.

"Don't go," said one SEAL officer. "It's not worth the risk." Some in the room agreed.

A platoon chief said, "Replan the mission." Several others agreed with him.

I paused for a few moments to let them consider the options.

"Let me ask you a question," I said to the class. "On what capture/kill direct-action raid can you be certain there are no IEDs buried in the yard or bunkered machine gun positions in the house?"

Heads shook around the room. The answer was obvious: none. You could never assume that such hazards weren't waiting for you on a target. You had to assume they were, and you had to plan for them on *every* operation and mitigate the risk of those threats as much as possible. To assume otherwise was a failure of leadership. That was what mission planning was all about: never taking anything for granted, preparing for likely contingencies, and maximizing the chance of mission success while minimizing the risk to the troops executing the operation.

In Task Unit Bruiser, we were able to launch that hostage rescue operation, despite the new intel of deadly threats, because we had already taken those things into account and planned accordingly. We had implemented specific steps to mitigate the risk of potential IEDs in and around the target building. We had carefully planned our operation to maintain the element of surprise, so that even if the bad guys were manning bunkered machine gun positions, they wouldn't know we were coming until it was too late. Therefore, we didn't need to replan the operation. We were ready. And as a result of good planning and solid execution of that plan—combined with a little luck—we were successful.

Understanding how SEALs plan a combat mission provides techniques that apply across the spectrum. For any team in any business or industry, it is essential to develop a standardized planning process.

**PRINCIPLE**

*What's the mission?* Planning begins with mission analysis. Leaders must identify clear directives for the team. Once they themselves understand the mission, they can impart this knowledge to their key leaders and frontline troops tasked with executing the mission. A broad and ambiguous mission results in lack of focus, ineffective execution, and mission creep. To prevent this, the mission must be carefully refined and simplified so that it is explicitly clear and specifically focused to achieve the greater strategic vision for which that mission is a part.

The mission must explain the overall purpose and desired result, or “end state,” of the operation. The frontline troops tasked with executing the mission must understand the deeper purpose behind the mission. While a simple statement, the Commander’s Intent is actually the most important part of the brief. When understood by everyone involved in the execution of the plan, it guides each decision and action on the ground.

Different courses of action must be explored on how best to accomplish the mission—with the manpower, resources, and supporting assets available. Once a course of action is determined, further planning requires detailed information gathering in order to facilitate the development of a thorough plan. It is critical to utilize all assets and lean on the expertise of those in the best position to provide the most accurate and up-to-date information.

Leaders must delegate the planning process down the chain as much as possible to key subordinate leaders. Team leaders within the greater team and frontline, tactical-level leaders must have ownership of their tasks within the overall plan and mission. Team participation—even from the most junior personnel—is critical in developing bold, innovative solutions to problem sets. Giving the frontline troops ownership of even a small piece of the plan gives them buy-in, helps them understand the reasons behind the plan, and better enables them to believe in the mis-

sion, which translates to far more effective implementation and execution on the ground.

While the senior leader supervises the entire planning process by team members, he or she must be careful not to get bogged down in the details. By maintaining a perspective above the microterrain of the plan, the senior leader can better ensure compliance with strategic objectives. Doing so enables senior leaders to “stand back and be the tactical genius”—to identify weaknesses or holes in the plan that those immersed in the details might have missed. This enables leaders to fill in those gaps before execution.

Once the detailed plan has been developed, it must then be briefed to the entire team and all participants and supporting elements. Leaders must carefully prioritize the information to be presented in as simple, clear, and concise a format as possible so that participants do not experience information overload. The planning process and briefing must be a forum that encourages discussion, questions, and clarification from even the most junior personnel. If frontline troops are unclear about the plan and yet are too intimidated to ask questions, the team’s ability to effectively execute the plan radically decreases. Thus, leaders must ask questions of their troops, encourage interaction, and ensure their teams understand the plan.

Following a successful brief, all members participating in an operation will understand the strategic mission, the Commander’s Intent, the specific mission of the team, and their individual roles within that mission. They will understand contingencies—likely challenges that might arise and how to respond. *The test for a successful brief is simple: Do the team and the supporting elements understand it?*

The plan must mitigate identified risks where possible. SEALs are known for taking significant risk, but in reality SEALs calculate risk very carefully. A good plan must enable the highest

chance of mission success while mitigating as much risk as possible. There are some risks that simply cannot be mitigated, and leaders must instead focus on those risks that actually can be controlled. Detailed contingency plans help manage risk because everyone involved in the direct execution (or in support) of the operation understands what to do when obstacles arise or things go wrong. But whether on the battlefield or in the business world, leaders must be comfortable accepting some level of risk. As the U.S. Naval hero of the American Revolution and Father of the U.S. Navy, John Paul Jones, said: "Those who will not risk cannot win."\*

The best teams employ constant analysis of their tactics and measure their effectiveness so that they can adapt their methods and implement lessons learned for future missions. Often business teams claim there isn't time for such analysis. But one must make time. The best SEAL units, after each combat operation, conduct what we called a "post-operational debrief." No matter how exhausted from an operation or how busy planning for the next mission, time is made for this debrief because lives and future mission success depend on it. A post-operational debrief examines all phases of an operation from planning through execution, in a concise format. It addresses the following for the combat mission just completed: What went right? What went wrong? How can we adapt our tactics to make us even more effective and increase our advantage over the enemy? Such self-examination allows SEAL units to reevaluate, enhance, and refine what worked and what didn't so that they can constantly improve. It is critical for the success of any team in any business to do the same and implement those changes into their future plans so that they don't repeat the same mistakes.

---

\* Quote from U.S. Naval Academy Web site, Public Affairs Office, John Paul Jones quotes, [www.usna.edu/PAO/faq-pages/JPJones.php](http://www.usna.edu/PAO/faq-pages/JPJones.php).

While businesses can have their own planning process, it must be standardized so that other departments within the company and supporting assets outside the company (such as service contractors or subsidiary companies) can understand and use the same format and terminology. It must be repeatable and guide users with a checklist of all the important things they need to think about. The plan must be briefed to the participants, geared toward the frontline troops charged with execution so they clearly understand it. Implementing such a planning process will ensure the highest level of performance and give the team the greatest chance to accomplish the mission and win.

A leader's checklist for planning should include the following:

- Analyze the mission.
  - Understand higher headquarters' mission, Commander's Intent, and endstate (the goal).
  - Identify and state your own Commander's Intent and endstate for the specific mission.
- Identify personnel, assets, resources, and time available.
- Decentralize the planning process.
  - Empower key leaders within the team to analyze possible courses of action.
- Determine a specific course of action.
  - Lean toward selecting the simplest course of action.
  - Focus efforts on the best course of action.
- Empower key leaders to develop the plan for the selected course of action.
- Plan for likely contingencies through each phase of the operation.
- Mitigate risks that can be controlled as much as possible.
- Delegate portions of the plan and brief to key junior leaders.
  - Stand back and be the tactical genius.

- Continually check and question the plan against emerging information to ensure it still fits the situation.
- Brief the plan to all participants and supporting assets.
  - Emphasize Commander's Intent.
  - Ask questions and engage in discussion and interaction with the team to ensure they understand.
- Conduct post-operational debrief after execution.
  - Analyze lessons learned and implement them in future planning.

### APPLICATION TO BUSINESS

"We've got to establish a planning process," said the company's vice president of emerging markets. "Our success has stemmed from sending our experienced people into new areas. They figure things out, put a plan in action, and as a result, we win. But as our company grows—as we enter new markets—we need a standardized process for planning, a repeatable checklist others with less experience can follow."

The emerging-markets VP was an impressive leader and a key driver of the company's overall success. Like a good SEAL combat leader, he was aggressive and exercised Extreme Ownership to solve challenges and accomplish his mission. While he didn't have much patience for the company's bureaucracy, his drive made him highly successful, and he pushed his team to the highest standards of performance. His leadership and personal efforts had directly contributed to the company's rapid expansion and growth, with hundreds of new retail stores and hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue. His team was highly effective, establishing strong footholds in areas that had traditionally been dominated almost exclusively by their competitors. They were making bold moves and, as a result, huge gains.

I had just delivered an Echelon Front presentation on SEAL

leadership concepts to his emerging markets team, and in the discussion afterward, the VP had turned to planning.

"I constantly harp on my team about planning," said the VP. He asked one of his key leaders, a regional manager, "How many times have you heard me harp on planning?"

"Constantly," the regional manager responded. I could tell the regional manager respected her boss, but her body language indicated she didn't share his concerns about the importance of establishing a planning process. No doubt she was thinking: *We're doing well. Why do I need to take on the additional pain and paperwork requirement of writing down a planning process and teaching it to my key leaders?*

But she was wrong. And her boss—the emerging markets VP—had great strategic vision in understanding the importance of planning for the company's long-term success.

"Early in my career as a SEAL officer, there was a time when I felt that military mission planning was needless and burdensome," I told them. "But I was wrong. Establishing an effective and repeatable planning process is critical to the success of any team."

I told them how I had learned proper mission planning and briefing through years of trial and error and many, many mistakes and iterations of doing it wrong. It started back in my earliest days of SEAL training.

*The PLO is for the boys.* It was a statement often repeated in SEAL platoons and task units when I first joined the SEAL Teams. That statement implied that the brief for a combat mission should be designed and developed for the SEAL operators that would execute the operation. PLO stood for "platoon leader's order," a term used by SEALs since the Vietnam era. The rest of the U.S. military called it an operations order (OPORD). After 9/11, joint operations in close coordination with U.S. Army, Marines, and

Air Force, through the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, caused SEALs to adopt the OPORD term. But by whatever name, it meant the same thing: a mission brief. This brief laid out the specific details of who, what, when, where, why, and how a combat operation would be conducted. The OPORD was prepared for and given to the SEAL operators and supporting assets who were to participate in an operation. It was supposed to allow every member of a SEAL element and other U.S. (or foreign allied) forces involved to understand the overall plan, their role in the plan, what to do when things went wrong, and how to contact help if the worst-case scenario took place. A good plan was critical to mission accomplishment, and briefing that plan to the troops enabled effective execution of the plan. Without successful execution, the best-laid plans were worthless.

The trouble was, as a new SEAL officer in training, *The PLO is for the boys* concept simply hadn't held true. In training scenarios I had encountered, the PLO or OPORD brief had, in reality, always seemed to be about impressing the instructors or the senior officer in the room with our PowerPoint prowess. Through more than a year and a half of training in the SEAL pipeline, there were always SEAL instructors and/or SEAL officers sitting in on the brief to evaluate. Without fail, the instructor staff would tear apart our plan and, in particular, our brief, hitting every detail. Their criticism focused mostly on the presentation slides themselves, with one clear message: there needed to be more—more slides, more graphs, more timelines, more charts, more phase diagrams, more imagery, more everything. It was humbling but also overwhelming.

As a junior officer in a SEAL platoon, my job was to oversee the plan and put together the OPORD brief to best capture the tactical plan developed by our SEAL chief, a number of key players within the platoon, and me. I would compile all the information together into a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation and along

with those key players deliver it to the operators in the SEAL platoon and troop that would execute the mission. While the junior SEAL operators were preparing gear and the SEAL chiefs and leading petty officers were debating tactics and figuring out who was in charge of what portion of the mission, the officers worked on PowerPoint slides to assemble all this information into a brief.

Military mission planning seemed daunting. There were so many moving pieces and parts to every combat operation; so many variables. The OPOD briefing format we were given was developed for a 96-hour planning cycle: it assumed we would have at least four days to prepare for a combat mission. The format consisted of more than seventy PowerPoint slides. In actual practice, we had only a few hours to plan for our training exercises, so the long and detailed format invariably left us far too little time. We wasted most of our efforts building slides and neglected important pieces of the plan.

On my first deployment as a SEAL officer, we deployed to Baghdad, Iraq. The war in Iraq at that time thrust many U.S. military units into heavy combat. But I didn't get to experience the flood of combat operations as I had hoped. We spent most of our time providing security for one of the top officials of the interim Iraqi government. And I spent most of my time in the tactical operations center sitting at a desk making phone calls, monitoring our team via radio, and building PowerPoint slides. As SEAL officers, we were so inundated with PowerPoint that some officers had patches made for their uniforms to jokingly designate themselves "PowerPoint Rangers, 3,000 hours." It was typical SEAL humor to laugh at the misery.

Luckily, my executive officer saw the importance of getting his young leaders into combat, and he tasked me to lead a small element of SEALs in a series of sniper missions supporting a battalion of the historic "Big Red One"—the U.S. Army's 1st Infantry

Division—in the city of Samarra. We were able to make a difference and lower the number of attacks on U.S. Army Soldiers. But after three weeks, we only had one confirmed kill on an enemy fighter and a couple more probable kills. We coordinated with the Army units but didn't really conduct any detailed planning or briefing. If anything, I learned some bad habits when it came to planning.

When I joined Task Unit Bruiser at SEAL Team Three and became platoon commander for Charlie Platoon, I began working for Jocko. He expected me (and my key leaders in Charlie Platoon) to utilize the standard planning process used by small units in the rest of the military. He expected us to own it—Extreme Ownership.

Through a six-month-long training workup, Task Unit Bruiser learned to work together as a team across the full spectrum of SEAL operations in a host of different environments. At the end of every block of training, the final phase culminated in a series of field training exercises (FTXs). These were full-scale training missions that required us to put together a plan, brief that plan to our troops, and then execute. Our performance in training would dictate where we would be sent on deployment.

Of the three SEAL task units at our team, not everyone would deploy to the fight in Iraq. Our team had to allocate one task unit for what would be a largely noncombat deployment to the Philippines. Task Unit Bruiser, like the other task units, wanted to fight, to put our skills to use where we could make a difference. It was a competition: to excel in training so that we would be chosen by the command to deploy to Iraq.

By the time we were in our final block of training, a decision of who would go where was imminent. Our SEAL Team commanding officer (CO) and operations master chief informed us that they would visit us in Task Unit Bruiser to observe our brief for the final FTX. We knew that in order for us to be chosen, we had to knock this one out of the park.

"No pressure," said Jocko to the other SEAL platoon commander and me with a sarcastic smile. "Whether or not we get the chance of a lifetime to deploy to the war in Iraq all depends on whether you two can pull off a good brief."

Frantically, we put each of our platoon's key leaders to work developing a plan for the FTX mission and we began building the brief. But as we pieced it together, it was clear our brief was lacking in many areas. It was heavy on PowerPoint slides, overly complex, and not explicitly clear on the different pieces and parts of the execution. We were running out of time.

"We are going to fail," insisted the other platoon commander to Jocko and me. Frankly, I wasn't a whole lot more confident.

"Listen," said Jocko. "Here is what I want you to do: forget about all this crazy PowerPoint. I want this plan to be clear to everyone that is actually *in* your platoon. I'm not worried about the CO or the master chief. Brief it to your guys: the troops who will be executing the mission."

"The true test for a good brief," Jocko continued, "is not whether the senior officers are impressed. It's whether or not the troops that are going to execute the operation actually understand it. Everything else is bullshit. Does any of that complex crap help one of your SEAL machine gunners understand what he needs to do and the overall plan for what will happen on this operation?"

"No," I responded.

"Far from it!" Jocko continued. "In fact, it's confusing to them. You need to brief so that the most junior man can fully understand the operation—the lowest common denominator. That's what a brief *is*. And that is what I want you to do. If there is some flak over this from the CO, don't worry. I will take it."

With this guidance, we revamped our OPORD presentations. We simplified and cut down the number of PowerPoint slides and focused on the most important pieces of the plan, which would give our troops a chance to ask questions to clarify anything that

wasn't understood. We hung maps on the walls—the same ones that we would carry in the field—and referenced them so that everyone was familiar. We incorporated hand sketches and manning lists on dry-erase boards. We had the troops brief the parts they were planning or leading and asked them questions during the process to ensure their piece of the plan was clear and that they understood it fully. That was something we never had time for when we were bogged down creating massive PowerPoint briefs with a hundred slides.

Most importantly, Jocko explained to us that, as leaders, we must not get dragged into the details but instead remain focused on the bigger picture.

"The most important part of the brief," said Jocko, "is to explain your Commander's Intent." When everyone participating in an operation knows and understands the purpose and end state of the mission, they can theoretically act without further guidance. This was a completely different mind-set for us, and we ran with it.

While Jocko pushed us to focus on Commander's Intent and the broader plan, he encouraged us to let the junior leaders in the platoon sort out and plan the details. "As a leader, if you are down in the weeds planning the details with your guys," said Jocko, "you will have the same perspective as them, which adds little value. But if you let them plan the details, it allows them to own their piece of the plan. And it allows you to stand back and see everything with a different perspective, which adds tremendous value. You can then see the plan from a greater distance, a higher altitude, and you will see more. As a result, you will catch mistakes and discover aspects of the plan that need to be tightened up, which enables you to look like a tactical genius, just because you have a broader view."

I realized this was exactly what Jocko did to us all the time.

It was a race against time, but just before the CO and master chief arrived, our platoons finished their portions of the plan and we talked through them. As Jocko had predicted, we noticed things they didn't see. With some minor adjustments, we filled in the holes. We ran through the plan with Jocko one last time, rehearsed the presentations, tightened up a few things, and made final adjustments. Already, our confidence had grown because we were briefing what we truly knew and understood and what we knew our platoon members also completely understood. Finally, our briefs were ready.

When the CO and master chief arrived, they sat in the back of the room as we presented our OPORD brief to the platoons. The other platoon commander and I gave an overview of the mission and then our key leaders got up and briefed the details. We pulled everyone out of their seats and gathered them around the map to walk through where we were going. We talked through each phase of the mission in plain English so that everyone understood. We stopped at key points and asked questions of the troops to ensure they were absorbing the information. We even had individual platoon members brief back portions of the plan to us to verify they had a clear understanding and could run the mission themselves if needed. When something wasn't completely clear, our SEAL operators asked for clarification, which enabled us to feel confident they understood and were taking ownership of their role. When the brief concluded, this time—much to our surprise—the CO and master chief gave us credit for a solid brief and delivery. The CO said that of all the mission briefings he had listened to during the workup, these were the ones he understood most clearly. We still had work to do to further enhance and refine our mission planning skills, but we had turned the corner by understanding what mission planning and briefing was all about.

Shortly thereafter, we received word that Task Unit Bruiser

had been chosen to deploy to Iraq. It was the news we had been waiting for. That set us on a path that led a few months later to the city of Ar Ramadi and through some of the toughest sustained urban combat in the history of the SEAL Teams. In that challenging environment, detailed mission planning and briefing played a critical role in our success. We planned and briefed hundreds of combat operations in Task Unit Bruiser and executed them with precision. We participated in the mission plans and OPOD briefs with U.S. Army and Marines for dozens of large-scale battalion and brigade-size operations, some involving as many as a thousand U.S. Soldiers and Marines on the ground and nearly one hundred tanks and armored vehicles.

We owned our planning process. After each combat operation, we pulled our platoon together and talked through the details in a post-operational debrief. In a concise and to-the-point format, we analyzed what had worked and what hadn't, how we might refine our standard operating procedures, and how we could do it better. As a result, we constantly learned and grew more effective. That ensured we performed at the highest levels and enabled our success. In such a dangerous environment, it helped us maintain an edge and allowed us to effectively mitigate some risks, which meant more of our guys came home alive.

Mission planning played an integral part in our success on the battlefield. The right process mattered. Disciplined planning procedures mattered. Without them, we would have never been successful.

With that lengthy story of how I learned to properly plan as a SEAL leader, I addressed how the emerging-markets VP and his regional manager would certainly benefit from such a system.

"You could use a planning procedure like we had," I told them. "You should develop a standard process with terminology and planning method that are interchangeable and can be

utilized across all elements within your team and within the company."

"That is exactly what we need," said the emerging markets VP. "We need to capture our standard operating procedures for planning. We need a process that is repeatable. Can you teach this to my team?"

"Absolutely," I said.

Over the next few weeks, I sent a workbook to the emerging-markets VP, his regional manager, and their senior staff. The workbook provided an overview of the military-mission planning process we had used with some adaptation to the business world. We scheduled several conference calls in which I explained our process and why. The VP and his leadership team adapted this planning process to the challenges of their industry. Once they had a good understanding of the planning framework, we scheduled a presentation to key leaders with the emerging markets team.

I flew out and presented the foundational knowledge of the planning process from the workbook in detail. We then gave the team a planning exercise using a realistic future operation similar to those they routinely encountered. The regional manager and I guided the team as they put together the plan.

After an hour or so, they had built the basics of their plan into a brief to present to us, just as a SEAL platoon or task unit would present an OPORD. During the presentation, the regional manager and I analyzed their plan. Afterward, we debriefed them on their plan's strengths and weaknesses, talked about where it was ambiguous and needed clarification, and brought up points that had been glossed over or neglected and why they were important. I instructed them to revise the plan with those thoughts in mind, under the tutelage of their regional manager.

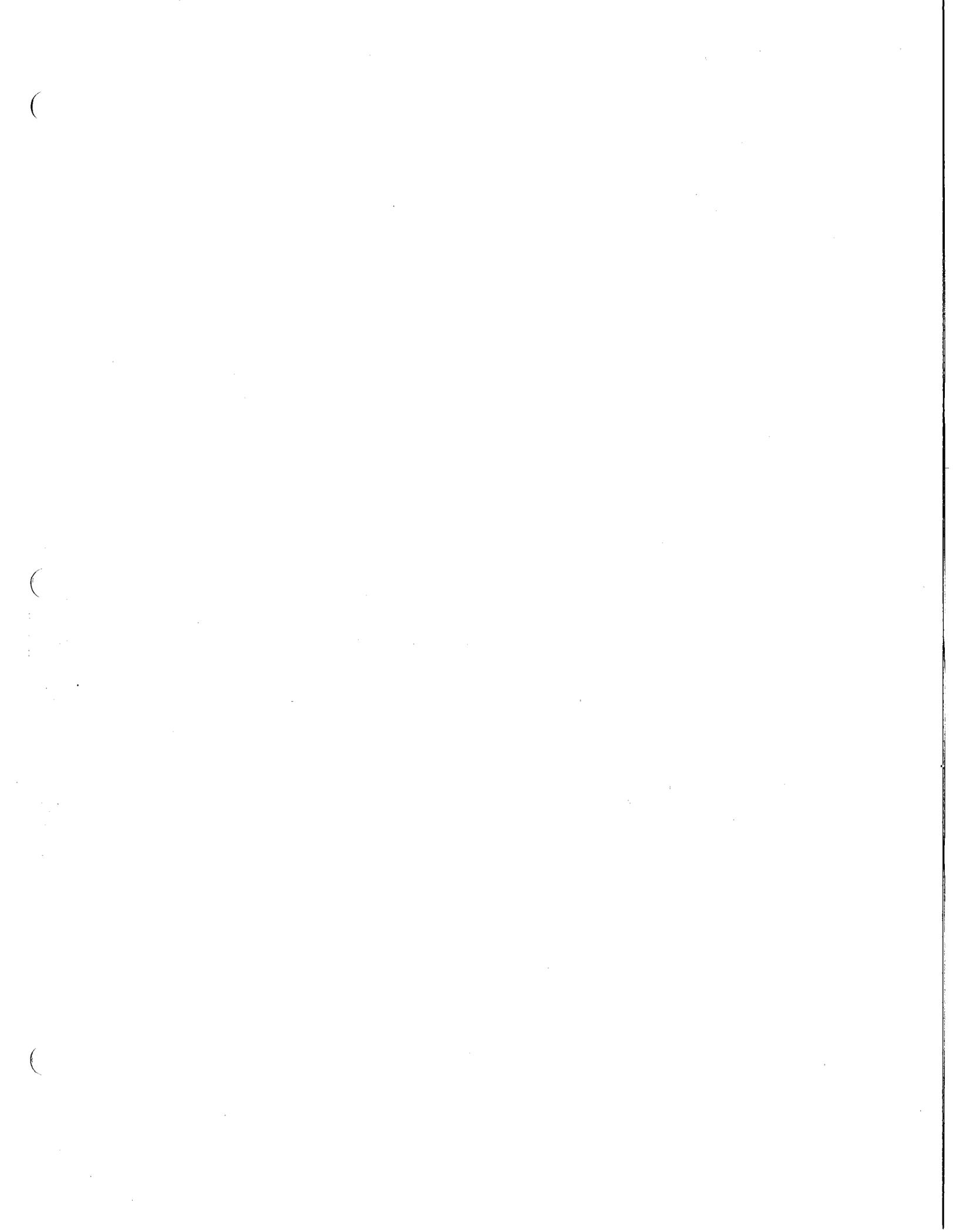
A month later, I placed a phone call to the regional manager to track the team's progress. She sent me a copy of their latest detailed plan.

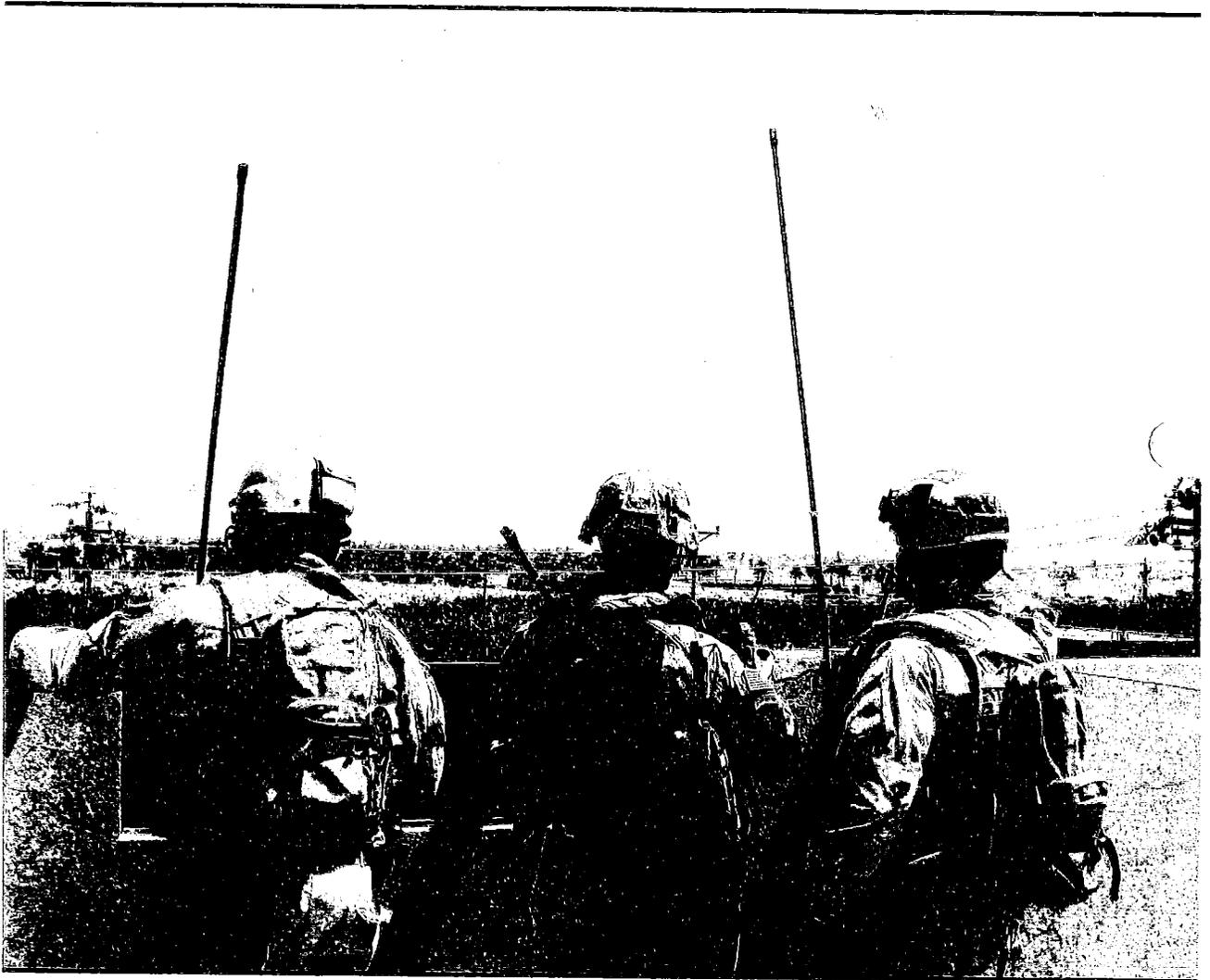
"I like the plan you sent," I told her. "It has improved much from the first attempt."

"Yes," the regional manager agreed. "And we just executed on that plan, and it went well. As a result of the planning, the team was able to anticipate and address some contingencies. Before, such contingencies would have cost us business and a decent loss in revenue. But now, with our planning process in place, we were prepared and the team knew how to respond. As a result, we continued to generate revenue."

"Great," I said.

"With everyone understanding my 'Commander's Intent,'" said the regional manager, "the team is able to be more decisive on the front lines. They can support the mission without having to run every question up the chain of command. Our ability to plan is enabling us to better execute and win."





Command and Control from the high ground: Jocko (right) and SEAL senior enlisted advisor (left) overlook the battlefield with U.S. Army company commander from Charlie Company, 1/506th 101st Airborne, call sign "Gunfighter." Charlie Company's battle-hardened Soldiers took the fight to the enemy on a daily basis.

(Photo courtesy of Todd Pitman)