



Situational Awareness

How To Stay Alive....Anywhere!

by Lieutenant Colonel James F. Walker, Retired

“Banshee Six, this is Banshee One Six. We’ve crossed Phase Line Yellow and have reached Alpha, over.”

“This is Banshee Six, Roger One Six, understand Alpha. Set up defensive position and cover main corridor between Alpha and Charlie. Report any movement and engage if necessary, over.”

“Wilco, Six. Banshee One Six, out.”

Lieutenant Dood was in the vanguard of the battalion advance through a mountain corridor notorious for its use by enemy mechanized elements in taking a heavy toll of unwary TF units. His platoon of four M1A1 Abrams tanks was charged with covering the advance of his tank company to the phase line he’d just crossed. He’d been briefed on the general disposition and capabilities of the enemy in this sector and knew that he would be facing a variety of armored threats including T-80 tanks, BRDM and BTR reconnaissance vehicles armed with ATGMs, and BMP 3s with supporting infantry. All elements had been warned of the possible use of chemical agents by the enemy to cover their advance to contact. Brigade scouts had identified several mixed armored scout elements screening for the MRB moving toward

the TF routes of advance. That information was fairly recent, only one hour old. He should have time to set up and keep the bad guys off of his company as they approached the corridor.

LT Dood set up on the north slope of a hill just below the military crest with his four tanks in hull defilade about 50 meters apart in a trail right formation facing west. He had a clear, unobstructed view and open fire lanes over 75 percent of the main route of advance to his north. His left flank, including the crest and the south slope, would be linked to and be covered by the second platoon currently approaching from the east. At least that was the plan.

The NBC alarm went off as he was assigning fields of fire. Playing back his NBC defense drills in his head, LT Dood ordered his platoon into their MOPP gear and to button up immediately. The fear of a chemical attack haunted all ranks of the combat arms since the Gulf War and he did not want his platoon to be the first to fall to ‘gas’ since World War I. Busily he and his other tank commanders went about donning their protective gear.

He needn’t have worried. His world and consciousness ended when a 125-mm long rod penetrator tore through

his tank, fired from a point blank range of less than 50 meters by a T80. The enemy vehicle had simply climbed the short vertical distance up the south slope of the hill, traversed the open crest unobserved and popped Dood’s tank from the left flank. It similarly made its way down among the platoon, destroying each tank in order from similar close ranges without so much as a shot fired in its direction.

Can this really happen with today’s high tech observation capabilities and equipment? You bet it can. And it does, regularly, at the Army’s premier training facility, the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif. Is it symptomatic? Where’s the weakness? Who’s at fault? And aren’t these only training exercises? And most important, what are the far-reaching implications of this seemingly isolated action to our combat forces and their current and future deployment environments?

We can’t blame it all on LT Dood and his tank commanders. He, like countless predecessors in every branch and situation, failed in the most elementary of assessments, SITUATIONAL AWARENESS. Every combat environment, regardless of its geography, season, or situation, demands that the

combatants, especially those responsible for direct action, MUST have as complete a picture as possible of what is going on around them. This refers not only to the information overload offered today by weaponry's techno wonders and several layers of command and staff screaming into one's earphones, but critically, it means knowing the situation within 50 meters or less of your foxhole, your tank or the rock you are presently hiding behind... that's eyesight and earshot, boys and girls! And it is these simplest of factors which will not only get you dead but can and will destroy all of your command in detail.

My personal response to LT Dood's situation (which occurred at the NTC, the incident embellished of course for impact) was "What are they teaching these kids?" Certainly it's important to follow the dictates of your primary mission, in this case a platoon overwatch of the main route of advance for his company and battalion. However, his concerns with the mission, and all of its map symbols and radio chatter, plus the sudden emergence of the NBC factor, overwhelmed his most basic of responsibilities, being fully aware of his platoon's immediate situation, tactical and terrain, and setting up accordingly. I speak from hard-earned personal experience where combat engagement distances were measured more in feet than meters, where the terrain did not offer vast expanses of visual advantage and clear fire lanes, where most combat was fought on the enemy's terms in meeting engagements or ambush. Vietnam.

The Vietnam tank unit commander (used here to parallel the experience of LT Dood... could be infantry or even a convoy commander) was faced with most of the challenges of his modern counterpart, save for the wonders of the IVIS system, FLIR or thermal imaging/sighting systems, GPS, etc. Place LT Dood in a tank on some dense jungle trail and the situation would not be much different. He must have a general picture of what's out there. He must have control of his tanks. He must be in direct contact with his next higher command. He must pursue his mission. Regardless of that mission, he would have maintained visual contact with all of his tanks. He would have had at least one individual atop each tank at all times, providing direct input to him and to the tank commander on that tank's

situation. No one buttons up unless absolutely necessary. Had he been part of a company-size advance, he would have maintained visual contact with his flank elements at all times. Count the ways LT Dood violated these basic principles.

This type of situation is waiting out there today, especially in deployment zones such as Bosnia or Kosovo where the terrain favors any potential enemy, where heavy forest covers much of the landscape, where weather is fickle and mountains and water courses further restrict and reduce tactical options. Situational awareness in its most elemental form is the soldier's personal reconnaissance and quick estimate of his own battlespace which, when tied together with the same information from his other squad members, other tank or Bradley crews, or team members, form the composite assessment from which the local commander can act. It must become an automatic, ongoing function of every soldier throughout a mission. It must be taught from basic individual training through squad, platoon, and company levels. Commanders must inculcate individual and crew/squad appreciation of the absolutes of situational awareness through constant, realistic training in every venue. Knowing what's around you is not limited to jungles, forests, or deserts. The new MOUT training facilities inject another, very real need for maximum awareness by the team/crew.

Combat in built-up areas... street fighting, is a horror to the combat soldier. All who have experienced it know its deadliness and the suddenness with which a situation can change. The burden of awareness multiplies with the added dimension of height and increased concealment capabilities for an enemy. Tet, 1968, in Vietnam, Khafji in the Gulf War, and even Panama, glaringly exemplified the Army's need for better preparing its troops for combat in urban areas, and a need for a combined arms approach for new doctrine. The riots of the late 1960s in our own cities added to the imperatives of this need and to the requirements of enhancing our soldier's abilities and appreciation of situational awareness at all levels of command.

The need begins with the individual soldier. It becomes more acute with its application to his squad or vehicle crew. It compounds in importance with that crew's role as part of a combat

team or platoon and exponentially grows with the size succeeding levels of command. The need for developing and sustaining the soldier's appreciation of situational awareness grows with each deployment and potential combat venue. It must become an ingrained, habitual activity individually and collectively in every unit, regardless of its role in the scheme of maneuver and regardless of the availability of mechanical aids or data.

LT Dood followed his mission and training (as far as it went) to the letter, *reacting* to situations *as they developed*. Better situational awareness and fewer assumptions on his part and that of his platoon would have allowed him to cover his exposed left flank and preempt the enemy incursion. Crew and squad drills must include the maintenance of awareness of *the immediate* combat situation...that which affects that particular crew at any given time. Being proactive can significantly tip the tide of battle in one's favor. However, that can only happen with optimum situational awareness across the command.

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