
MISSION:

Combat Reconnaissance Patrol

by Captain Daniel B. Miller

“Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult.”¹

On 18 February 1991, I Troop, 2d Armored Cavalry Regiment received a mission to reconnoiter the terrain in our sector of responsibility along the Saudi Arabia-Iraq border. The patrol had to pay particular attention to the “border berm,” and to locate primary and alternate crossing sites. This was in preparation for “Phase I,” the regiment’s crossing into Iraqi territory on G-1. For OPSEC reasons, the patrol had to execute the mission on foot.

In peacetime, this would have been almost too easy. As troop commander, I would select one of the scout platoons, have the platoon leader select a scout section, and follow the usual troop leading procedures. The scouts had routinely executed similar patrols along the Czech border, and at the CMTC (Hohenfels). This was not peacetime, however, and the decision about who would go was not that simple.

“Train as you fight” is a vital rule of thumb. It is easier said than done, however. This was the troop’s first combat action since WWII. I had absolute confidence in 1LT Tom Isom, the 3d platoon leader, (later to earn the Bronze Star for valor at 73 Easting). An experienced scout platoon leader, he had led patrols before, often with great success.



PHOTO: Greg Stewart

1LT Isom had shown that he was fully capable of planning, organizing, and leading the patrol. All he needed was appropriate support from 3d Squadron and myself.

However, I had a big question to answer. That question was whether or not to lead the patrol myself.

It might seem as if this was a question that did not even need consideration. But several factors made this a difficult decision. Only two soldiers in the troop (SFC Mullinix and SSG Thacker) had combat experience, both in Vietnam. I was obviously in the non-veteran category, and therefore an unknown quantity in the Iron Troopers’ eyes. Everything I did or did not do would factor into their view of me as a

worthy leader. I did not want to make a poor decision here, and start off with a bad precedent. Several factors influenced my final decision.

Strong lessons from military history teach that the vast majority of successful commanders led from the front. My experience of observing and working for several commanders had proved the validity of this lesson. To me, the front would be with the patrol, not in “the rear” (defined as anywhere behind the patrol).

In addition, many successful battlefield commanders showed a virtual contempt for danger,

both real and potential. Some paid the ultimate price for their actions, but their soldiers never doubted their personal courage for a moment. I did not want to appear a shirker or a coward to the troopers by asking them to do something I apparently was not willing to.

The last factor influencing my inclination to lead the patrol was that by doing so, I would see the ground on which the troop would operate. Again, numerous examples in history point out how critical it is to know the ground. History is also replete with examples of the high price paid in soldier’s lives when their commanders did not have an appreciation of the terrain. At this point, my knowledge of the terrain was from map reconnaissance and some

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Aviation and Special Forces intelligence reports. As far as I knew this would be (and was) my only chance to personally view the ground.

Several factors mitigated against leading the patrol, however. 1LT Isom’s credibility as a leader was on the line as well. His platoon was looking for and expected the same quality leadership from him as the troop did from me. No matter how I tried to convince LT Isom and the soldiers, leading the patrol myself would show I lacked confidence in his ability. Neither he nor I could afford that, as we still had to get through the rest of the operation.

Attaching myself to the patrol while letting LT Isom lead it was not a viable option. It would still look to the soldiers as if I were checking on or “baby-sitting” him. In addition, if I went on the operation I would be THE leader. Lieutenants should not lead captains, and allowing this to occur would be wrong for both of us.

Both doctrine and “train as you fight” dictate that the commander place himself where he can best control his unit. If I went on the patrol, my span of control would effectively be the eight soldiers on it, even with a radio. Orchestrating an extraction under fire would be extremely difficult at best if I were pinned down with the rest of the patrol. The XO, 1LT Paul Calvert, was fully qualified to do this himself, but should this be his responsibility, or mine?

Also, I was neither a world-class scout, nor a normal member of that team. Both points, but particularly the latter, made me more of a potential disadvantage than an asset. Again, “train as you fight” seemed to indicate that my role lay somewhere other than with the patrol.

On a personal level, I am somewhat accident-prone. Due to the enemy situation as we knew it, I was not particularly concerned with getting shot. But I

was deathly afraid of doing something stupid, like breaking an arm or a leg in a fall. While no one person is irreplaceable, I did not want to miss the upcoming operation doing something I was not supposed to. As it was, I had my head split open by a tent pole the day before we crossed the border. Fortunately for me, my gunner patched me up, and I was able to lead the troop into Iraq.

It seems trivial now, but at the time I agonized over what I should do. My training told me to let LT Isom and 3d Platoon accomplish the mission. My gut kept making me reconsider that decision. Fortunately, I was able to talk it over with the XO, LT Calvert. He is a highly professional officer, and we were able to discuss it in a detached manner.

My final decision was a compromise. While I did not actually go on the patrol, I moved as far forward as possible with the FIST-V and the Bradleys of the scout section assigned for extraction. I viewed as much of the terrain as possible from the FIST-V’s hammerhead, which also allowed me to occasionally glimpse the patrol as it moved to its various observation locations. With the communications capabilities afforded by the FIST-V, I could effectively coordinate the actions of the troop, while being as far forward as physically possible.

In the end, the patrol was successful. They made no contact, brought back valuable information on suspected enemy locations, and selected not two, but three, potential crossing points. They also gave me the make-up of the border berms, and an estimate of how easy it would be for the ACE to breach it. Even though there was no sign of enemy activity, the fact that the patrol went off without a hitch set a good precedent for the troop. LT Tom Isom had a great start on proving himself as a combat platoon leader. I was still an

unknown quantity to the troop, but we had “fought as we trained.”

The point of this article is that in a combat situation, simple decisions are not always so simple. Given roughly the same set of circumstances, other troop commanders in the regiment went on the patrol with their scouts. I decided to fight as we trained. Perhaps I agonized over something that should not even have been an issue. There are other solutions to this dilemma. What would you have done?

Notes

¹Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 127.

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