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NIGHTMARE ON WAZIR STREET



Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures

Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL)

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Combined Arms Center (CAC) • Ft. Leavenworth, KS

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Preface

2LT Backsight Forethought's Family Lineage

**Yes, makin' mock o' uniforms that guard you while you sleep
Is cheaper than them uniforms, an' they're starvation cheap;
An' hustlin' drunken soldiers when they're goin' large a bit
Is five times better business than paradin' in full kit.
Then it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Tommy, 'ow's yer soul?"
But it's "Thin red line of 'eroes" when the drums begin to roll,
The drums begin to roll, my boys, the drums begin to roll,
O it's "Thin red line of 'eroes" when the drums begin to roll.**

Tommy
Rudyard Kipling

This recollection of combat nightmares is dedicated to those who “stand ready to deploy, engage, and destroy the enemies of the United States of America in close combat.”

A little more than a century ago, my great-great-grandfather Backsight Forethought returned to Ireland from service in the Boer War as a lieutenant in the Royal Irish Rifles. BF was, according to family oral history, something of a weird duck given to long walks and even longer conversations with himself. Most disturbing to his fellow Irishmen of the day was his tendency to refer to dreams as a guiding source in his life after his return from South Africa. Ultimately, the confining nature of Irish society, climate, and country prompted BF to emigrate from Ireland to the United States, where his ways blended in and he enjoyed greater room to roam as he murmured to himself about somebody named “Oom.” BF passed away in 1945 with his family and heirs around him. One was my great-grandfather, BF II, and another was his son, BF III, my grandfather. True to our Irish roots, we had kept alive the patrilineal heritage, naming each firstborn son after the man who brought the family to America.

With that shared name came a shared but selective gift. You see, every BF since Great-Great-Grandpa BF has been guided by his dreams. BF the First chose to write a short book about his dreams in the Boer War, hoping to share his hard won insights with following generations of lieutenants facing combat for the first time. BF II said that short work helped him survive the tragedy of the trenches in WWI. BF III, just back from Europe in 1945, assured his grandfather, BF the First, that his dreams had guided him in the long march up the Italian boot. My father, BF IV, experienced the same in Vietnam.

And so it has proved for me. Like my great-great-grandfather, I have chosen to recount my experiences on paper. This tale encompasses an amalgamation of events and lessons learned that took place during the Iraq phase of the Global War on Terrorism. I hope that by reading this narrative, some leader on a future battlefield will apply the basic principles illuminated through the pain of another. Nowadays it is important to remember, when making an assessment of our enemies, that the insurgent has been practicing insurgency for a few years. He is extremely smart and adaptive. Right now one of them is hard at work developing a diabolical plan to try and kill you. Remember, all the dumb insurgents are dead.

Backsight Forethought, V

2LT, Infantry*

* With respectful acknowledgement of *The Defence of Duffer's Drift* by then Captain E.D. Swinton, D.S.O., R.E. (later Major General Sir Ernest Swinton, K.B.E., C.B., D.S.O.)

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Prologue

Arrival in Iraq

We're not so old in the Army List,
But we're not so young at our trade,
For we had the honour at Fontenoy
Of meeting the Guards' Brigade.
'Twas Lally, Dillon, Bulkeley, Clare,
And Lee that led us then,
And after a hundred and seventy years
We're fighting for France again!
Old Days! The wild geese are flying,
Head to the storm as they faced it before!
For where there are Irish there's memory undying,
And when we forget, it is Ireland no more!
Ireland no more!

The Irish Guards
Rudyard Kipling

Baghdad was, and still is, brutally hot and terribly crowded. The neighborhoods were a dense maze of houses squeezed together. Aside from rare exceptions, the houses had concrete or cinder block walls around them with a small courtyard. Masses of Iraqi people continued to go about their business despite the threat of multiple ways of meeting a violent death. Traffic was incredibly congested, with little or no adherence to any kind of traffic laws.

Wazir Street was pretty much indistinguishable from any other street except for the huge green domed mosque on the southern edge of the market area. The mosque had a minaret that had to be the tallest for miles around and served as a landmark for everyone in the battalion. Wazir Street was in my company's area of operations, and my platoon was new to the neighborhood.

Post Relief in Place/Transfer of Authority Jitters

The relief in place was not all it was cracked up to be. The battalion we relieved damn nearly killed us with PowerPoint presentations filled with statistics, pictures, trends, projects, contacts, improvised explosive devices (what we call IEDs), and hotspots. The rides around the area of operations were generally uneventful. The scout platoon had an IED damage a gun truck, but no one was hurt. I tried to get the hang of the area and took special note of advice on how not to get killed. It was like drinking from a fire hose, and I wondered if I was the only one feeling this way.

My platoon sergeant told me there is no substitute for experience in any area of operations. His advice was to definitely pay attention to where the IEDs usually are and where the complex attacks have taken place. That information would get us through the first month without any stupid mistakes, until we got to know our area of operations. I thought it was good advice, and I noted that Wazir Street had never had anything bad happen; maybe the Iraqis there liked us or just didn't want any trouble. You would think with a name like Wazir Street, the area would be a bit tougher on us "infidels."

The outgoing company eventually gave us the high five and departed. My company took charge of what they told me was approximately 50 square blocks of dense urban area and somewhere around 125,000 Iraqis of various religious and ethnic denominations. I figured that if only one percent of the population actually hated us enough to try and kill us, then that would be about 1,250 bad guys. 1,250 bad guys versus the company of Soldiers that stood in formation when we left Fort Bellcamp was not a good ratio. As I lay awake, somewhat concerned about those 1,250 bad guys, I realized that my one percent guesstimate was more than likely on the low side.

Even though I was concerned by those odds, I remained confident. The brigade had known since I arrived at Fort Bellcamp that we were going to Baghdad. This advance knowledge of the terrain drove the training. Colonel Herity, the brigade commander, emphasized urban combat training, so my battalion and company commanders enthusiastically pushed urban-type training. With the full support of the chain of command, we prepared for the urban fighting that would soon be upon us.

Stoked to Stack and Attack

Everyone seemed to focus on battle drill six (BD6): enter building/clear a room and close-quarters combat. We built plywood mazes for BD6 training in the motor pool, we did glass house drills, and we conducted dry and live fires at the shoot house until it was second nature. At the military operations on urbanized terrain site, we practiced clearing hallways and stairwells. We rehearsed and practiced the “stack” so that everyone knew the job of every numbered position in the “stack.” Quick fire drills, rapid magazine changes, and stress shoots gave us the confidence to take on the enemy.

We got so good that in training, when the opposing force made contact, BD6 was automatic, and a “stack” of men was “taking the house down” rapidly. Words that rang in my head were “audacity, violence of action, momentum, and close with and destroy.” Looking back on the training in the States, I felt more at ease and drifted off to sleep until I was startled awake by a heavy volume of small arms fire. As I bounced out of the hooch in my underwear and body armor, one of my squad leaders told me that it was just the forward operating base rifle range. I felt like an idiot, and I could just imagine one of my veteran Soldiers saying “Welcome to the war, CHERRY!”

After getting over the rifle range attack, I settled down again into a tormented sleep. Gastrointestinal issues (due to not washing my hands before eating), the medicine to control my case of the “Montezuma’s Revenge,” and the anxiousness of being in a combat zone caused a series of nightmares about my inevitable “Rendezvous with Destiny.”

To understand what I explain here in these pages you must understand how these nightmares played out. Each nightmare of combat occurred in the same place and time with the same assembled cast of characters, both enemy and friendly. While I was asleep, each horrible dream was entirely separated from the former. I could not remember what had previously taken place. The only thing that remained with me throughout my tormented sleep was the overriding lessons learned the hard way in the previous nightmares.

Thankfully, these lessons, once applied, finally produced a measure of success.

Upon awakening, all the nightmares and the lessons learned came together in a continuous stream of consciousness in my memory. I wrote the dream world narrative down immediately to ensure that I would not have to repeat the nightmares in the real world.



The First Nightmare

Avoid the Obvious

**When first under fire an' you're wishful to duck,
Don't look nor take 'eed at the man that is struck,
Be thankful you're livin', and trust to your luck
And march to your front like a soldier.
Front, front, front like a soldier . . .**

The Young British Soldier
Rudyard Kipling

The blast was insanely loud. Unbelievably, the driver of the targeted truck maintained a straight course and brought the wounded truck to a stop 100 meters past the blast site. In the immediate chaos of blast and smoke, the driver of the second truck dumped himself into the large blast hole that was just suddenly created. The vehicle that took the blast had three blown tires and was leaking fluids like a sieve. The gunner was not up in the turret. The truck in the blast hole was definitely stuck. Suddenly, I was shaken by fear, thinking that the unseen gunner was dead, and that we were sitting ducks immobilized by broken and stuck trucks. I took stock of what I had available for what I thought would be my version of "Custer's Last Stand."



Five gun trucks with 24 Soldiers and one interpreter left the forward operating base enroute to a mission. A mission whose task and purpose had suddenly escaped me. In our element, we had two mounted .50 caliber heavy machine guns, one Mark 19 automatic grenade launcher mounted, and two M240 medium machine guns mounted. It didn't seem like much to go against my guesstimate of 1,250 or more bad guys in this part of town.

As I just sat there in shock, I saw my platoon sergeant and medic run up to the blasted vehicle. The radio came to life. The blasted truck had a squad leader in charge that was on his second trip to Iraq. He calmly reported that the gunner was straight knocked out, and the truck would have to be flat-bedded out. Otherwise, they were all good. The stuck truck already had a group of Soldiers hooking it up to a tow strap. It looked like they would easily pull it out of the blast hole. I began to get a grip and picked up the hand mike to report our situation to the command post. We had a big boom and then... nothing. The "last stand" scenario didn't seem like it was going to play out.

Soldiers pulled security while others tried to figure out how to fix our vehicle problems. The knocked out gunner was starting to come out of it, albeit with a raging headache. I was watching some of the Soldiers put the finishing touches on hooking up the tow strap when one of them just collapsed in a heap, while the others scrambled every which way. I heard multiple pings on my truck, and my gunner dropped down yelling a stream of expletives. I looked out the window to see where it was coming from, and the bullet proof glass cracked and splintered in front of my face. Game on again; the bad guys were obviously still around and ready for more.

A M240 began firing only a few seconds after my window was cracked. Reports came from the gun truck looking down the long axis of a street. He was firing his M240 machine gun at an insurgent with an AK47 at about 100-meter distance. He thought it might also be the triggerman. The gunner saw the AK man and another insurgent jump a courtyard wall and disappear from view. Two trucks led by Staff Sergeant Madden tore off in the direction of the escaping bad guys, determined not to let them get away in the maze of buildings. We were getting spread out. I called to the command post to report the new situation and asked how long it would be before recovery assets could get to us. I ran over to where the one Soldier had crumpled and realized that he was dead —shot through the neck. There was blood everywhere. Sergeant First Class Blessing started to drag him behind a truck for treatment, but I knew he was gone. Madden was yelling over the mike that he thought he saw the two bad guys run into another courtyard of a rather large house.



Figure 1-1. BF looking toward Wazir Street and target house.

The house was on a corner, so he had it somewhat covered in the front and the side. He wanted to clear the house, since he was certain this is where they ran to. The damaged truck felt like a ball and chain on the platoon. It couldn't move, and we couldn't leave it.

The adrenaline began to pulse, not flow, through me as I began to get a grasp on everything that had just happened. The bad guys had just killed one of my men, destroyed a truck, and were now probably trapped by Madden's group. We were going to even the score. I told Blessing to stay with a squad and the damaged truck. I would take all the rest of the men to Madden's position, take the house down, and kill the insurgents who did this to us.



Figure 1-2. BF looking at house and gate from end of wall

We moved dismounted down the street, slowed, and peeked around the corner. Madden was standing behind an open M1114 door waving at me and then pointing to the house. The house was big and had the standard courtyard with gate. From my position around the corner, I was only 25 meters from the gate.

The bastards had screwed up, because they had left the gate open. That gave me an easy path to get to the front door. I grabbed one team and told them we were “going in.” I told Madden to send his dismounts into the building once we established a foothold in the house. We then moved around the corner and sprinted for the near side of the courtyard wall. Once there, I peeked around the gate opening and identified the door that we would go through. This door was also partially left open.

No doubt the bad guys failed to close it in their haste to escape. We squeezed “ready up” to the number one man, who was me. I was going to lead the way. I got the squeeze, and I went.

Click, flash, pain, no sound, thump.. blackness, I was dead, and so were the men that followed me.

Bright light, just like in the movies, and I was floating upward to St. Peter’s judgment desk. My body, or more specifically the torso (I didn’t see any other parts), was up against Madden’s vehicle. From my floating position, I could see what was happening on Wazir Street but could not now affect anything on the ground.

Madden was trying to recover the body parts, and his gunners were firing hundreds of 7.62-mm rounds into the building. At the back of the building I noticed five men run out the back door, hop a wall, then another wall, get in a vehicle, and drive away. The bad guys were going to get away! I was

dead, five of my men were dead, and the bad guys were gone. While floating upward toward what I assumed was St. Peter and judgment, I looked slightly below and saw a dead man in a man-dress. He was also on his way up. This was one of the bad guys from the house. We killed one, thankfully! Somehow the curse from the Tower of Babel was erased, and for some reason, I felt no animosity toward my former enemy.

Why did the insurgents jump over the wall? ...To avoid going through the gate.

After introductions, in which I learned his name was Ahmed, I began the conversation with “how did we kill you?” Ahmed said that we did not kill him. He had been “caught looking” at the front gate explosion and took a piece of shrapnel in the head. I remembered my instructor at the grenade range telling us not to do that. He said he just couldn’t help looking, because I had done exactly what was predicted. It was depressing news that we had not killed Ahmed ourselves, and that he had done it to himself, accidentally.

We had showed no skill at all. Ahmed told me that their plan had been to lure us through the front gate by leaving it open. The night before, they had buried three 155-mm rounds right at the gate opening. It was pressure plate activated to ensure perfect timing. Ahmed had hooked the power source up himself just five minutes before I stepped on it. Ahmed insisted on calling me “Captain Obvious” for the whole trip up, even though I informed him I was only a lieutenant. This strange after action review with my enemy, Ahmed, brought out four key lessons:

1. If the enemy leaves an open route to attack, it may not really be open. Don’t do the obvious, because the enemy is counting on it to kill you.

2. Make sure that you block avenues of escape or what is commonly referred to as “isolate the objective.”

3. Make the enemy react to you, and make him pay for those reactions. I had only provided the enemy a problem, which he readily solved. I needed to create a dilemma for the enemy in which any choice was bad.

4. Leading means controlling your men and yourself. Expect your own emotional reactions, and you can better control them. Control yourself, and you will better control your Soldiers. My anger and desire to kill the enemy who had killed my Soldier got more of us killed.

My moment of ethereal clarity passed, and I returned to my dreams...



The Second Nightmare

Set the Conditions

**When ‘arf of your bullets fly wide in the ditch,
Don’t call your Martini a cross-eyed old bitch;
She’s human as you are — you treat her as sich,
An’ she’ll fight for the young British soldier.
Fight, fight, fight for the soldier . . .**

The Young British Soldier

Rudyard Kipling

The nightmare picked up again at the point where Madden was waving at me and then pointing to the building where he thought the insurgents ran. I peeked around the corner of the wall and noticed the front gate was wide open. A quick glance around at the other gates on the street told me that all Wazir Street residents seemed to keep their gates closed except this one house. I thought it strange and decided to not take the path of least resistance through the gate, as it seemed like the thing any fool would do.



Looking around at Madden's trucks, I realized that he had not isolated the enemy's corner house position. Madden had the front and the left side of the house covered. The back was an open path for escape. The right side of the house was covered by the men in the front, since the bad guys would have to jump a wall and expose themselves. I told Madden that we needed to reposition the left side truck down the street a little to cover the back of the house. Madden told his other truck to reposition, with the concern that he could now not see them anymore. I thought about it but was willing to risk spreading out more in order to prevent the enemy's escape.

I called Blessing on the land mobile radio and told him to report to the command post that we have at least two bad guys trapped in a house at grid WQ12345678, and that we were going to assault the house. He told me that the battalion quick reaction force platoon with the recovery assets was only minutes away. My own company was moving a platoon to assist, but it was also about ten minutes away. The company commander was way off at Camp Champion dealing with property book "adminis-trivia," so the executive officer, First Lieutenant Newton, was in charge.

Blessing reported the truck unstuck, fully operational, and helping to pull security. He had already asked for attack aviation support, but there was none currently available. Within the brigade, there were ongoing troops in contact and a medical evacuation escort mission. It seemed the enemy was coordinating multiple attacks across the battalion area of operations to challenge us, the new unit. It would be awhile before any helicopter support would arrive.

It had been at least ten minutes since the initial IED blast, and I felt that the platoon had everything covered. There was no sign of the enemy in the house, but Madden insisted that at least two bad guys went into the house. I couldn't be sure if they escaped out the back before I repositioned the truck. With phrases like "momentum and audacity" in my head, I decided that now was the time to act. Better to keep the enemy under pressure then let him prepare a defense.

I briefed the men that were with me. We would climb the wall where an outhouse-type shack was located. I told Madden the plan via the radio, and he produced a folding assault ladder from the back of his truck. He placed it near the outhouse shack. The squad leader that was with me asked me not to lead, but I decided that I needed to lead the men "over the top." I felt the location of the outhouse on the wall was away from the front door area and would be an unexpected avenue of approach from the bad guys' perspective. From there we could move straight to the door. The Halligan tools were out and ready, and one man had a shotgun as a secondary weapon. Two bad guys versus a highly motivated infantry squad minus. They did not have a chance as long as we maintained good "violence of action." Blessing came over the radio saying that as soon as the battalion quick reaction force arrived and took over the recovery operation, he would move to my location. I agreed. Finally, I looked at the squad and asked if everyone was ready, and we moved to the wall and ascended the ladder.



Figure 2-1. BF over the wall in courtyard next to outhouse

Three men plus myself had gotten over the wall. Once the four of us got over, we began to move to the front door. There was a car parked in the courtyard, and we moved around it toward the door. The last man was just cresting the wall when a burst of AK fire hit him. Instantly, he fell six feet headfirst to the ground on the enemy side of the wall. The three that were with me were engaged near simultaneously by heavy small arms fire. The lead man fell wounded immediately. The rest ducked behind the car seeking cover. The wounded man low-crawled back toward the car and was hit again in the calf, tearing it off.

The squad automatic weapon gunner propped his gun on the hood and sprayed his whole 100-round ammo “sack” at the building, while another pulled the lead man behind the car. Madden was on the radio reporting to Blessing. I wanted suppressive fire on the house from the gun trucks, and Madden yelled on the radio that they were spinning the turrets, time now. The 240 gunners had been focused on the streets and not the house. When the gunner dropped down to reload, I heard clunk on the hood, and a grenade hit the ground. It exploded in the midst of the four of us. I noticed my hand was missing, and then another grenade plunked on the ground. Someone yelled “grenade,” and that was it.

Floating up dead again! Damn it! I saw Ahmed rising just below. I had not followed the path of least resistance and tried to stay away from the obvious. I asked Ahmed what happened to him. He said that the gunner had popped up and shot him as he was shooting at a crawling man. I looked down at the scene; all of the men who were with me were now beginning their own ascents toward judgment. Back down on earth, Blessing was just now arriving with the remainder of the platoon. I looked to the back of the house, and no bad guys were escaping this time. At least they couldn’t get away.

A stairway to heaven...

Ahmed was generally happy at his predicament. He had died for a cause he believed in. Ahmed said that once the house was surrounded, they had all decided to die a “voluntary” death, sending as many Americans to hell as possible. Matter-of-factly, Ahmed claimed there should be a Hell’s Highway turn off for me as we floated up. I asked him about my wall plan. He said that as they saw the ladder get put in place, everyone repositioned in the house to fire in that direction. Another insurgent advised to let at least five Americans get over the wall, since they could not easily get back over it. Ahmed’s leader wanted to kill as many Americans in the courtyard as possible. One man was assigned to throw as many grenades as possible on the other side of the car. Ahmed said that was the only available place for the Americans to hide once the shooting started.

After speaking with Ahmed, more hard lessons of combat came to mind:

5. The enemy can figure out that units carrying ladders will try to climb walls. I had not set my platoon up for success. The wall climb and ladder, I thought, was really tricky and would get us to “enter a building” in a flash. Looking back, it wasn’t tricky at all, and anybody could have seen us set the ladder up and known which way we were coming.

6. Getting to the fight is part of the fight. I had treated the wall climb as if it was a bridge across that infernal courtyard. It turned out to be a stairway to heaven for those of us who went “over the top,” because I had totally disregarded the enemy having eyes that were connected to an intelligent brain.

7. I had failed to suppress my enemy as I leaped into his kill zone. Stupidly, I had not planned any kind of suppression measures. Since no one was shooting at us, I did not feel I had the right to prep the movement over the wall with continuous suppressive fire from the M240s. I didn’t even discuss suppressive fire with Madden, and the guns were all pointed in the wrong direction. We may have survived the courtyard in the seconds it took the guns to spin in the turret. The grenades came from the roof.

8. War is not a “timed event.” You don’t gain any points by finishing before a non-existent bell rings. I wondered why I had been in such a rush to die. Looking down on the scene, I could see the platoon hammering the building with M240 and now .50 cal fires from Blessing’s group, and it was clear no enemy would escape the fires. From the depths of my memories of training at Fort Benning, I recalled the phrase “set the conditions.”

9. Remember that you will react the way you trained to react. I had trained hard for the fight in the building but never really considered how to actually get to the building.

My dreams again took me.



The Third Nightmare
Don't Make Fatal Assumptions

**When shakin' their bustles like ladies so fine,
The guns o' the enemy wheel into line,
Shoot low at the limbers an' don't mind the shine,
For noise never startles the soldier.
Start-, start-, startles the soldier . . .**

The Young British Soldier
Rudyard Kipling

Again, Madden pointed to the corner house as I sized up the situation. Madden was adamant that two bad guys had gone into that particular house. I was extremely pissed off at what had happened so far: one Soldier dead and one destroyed truck. My adrenaline was pulsing, and I could feel the platoon's urge to kill and kill now. I directed Madden to reposition a truck to isolate the back side of the house and prevent escape. Something inside me warned me against hasty decisions. I could remember how one of my Infantry Officer Basic instructors counseled against "rushing to failure." With the truck repositioned, no one could leave the house without someone in the platoon seeing them. Why rush? If there were bad guys in the house, they were not going anywhere. I peeked around the corner and saw that the front gate was wide open.



This was an obvious route to the house, and one I immediately disregarded. I thought about climbing the wall. I told Madden to get ready to suppress the second floor with his machine guns. Madden agreed that this was the only way to go over the wall, but if there were no bad guys in the house, we would get hammered in the 15-6 investigation especially if the suppressive fire caused any collateral damage. Madden was sure he saw the bad guys run into the house, but he could not be sure they had not escaped before he isolated the back side of the house. The Fallujah “game on” light was not lit in this part of Baghdad. Suppressive fire while going over the wall was a “no go.” I decided that if I could not suppress while assaulting, then at least the platoon would be in a position to do so instantly if called for.



Figure 3-1. Courtyard, mosque in background, crest on wall at left marks BF's first position

Blessing reported that the battalion quick reaction force had arrived to take over the vehicle recovery mission. Two men from the dead Soldier's squad would escort his remains back to the forward operating base with the quick reaction force. I decided to wait for the rest of the platoon before launching any assault on the building. I gave instructions to Blessing to expand our perimeter and occupy the roofs of two houses with some of our squad designated marksmen. These houses provided excellent overwatch of the target building. Blessing reiterated that every man covering down on the house had an assigned window or sector of the roof, to ensure all potential threats to the assault element would be eliminated.

Once everything was set, Madden put the ladder up, and the assault element and I went over the wall. Right when the last man crested the wall he was shot and fell on the enemy side of the wall. The Soldiers covering the windows opened fire instantly as the remainder of the assault element ducked for cover behind a car parked in the courtyard. One man dragged the wounded Soldier behind the car. I heard a grenade explode on top of what I thought was the roof.

The squad automatic weapon gunner with me propped his weapon on the hood and suppressed the only first floor window facing us. There was no more effective fire on us as far as I could tell. The gunner was only a foot away from my head, and his staccato fire was loud as hell.

I heard myself screaming, “Let’s go, let’s go!” just like I had so often in training. With automatic weapons fire suppressing the window, we moved to the open front door and stacked on the wall. The gunner caught up with us and fell in as the number three man in the stack.



Figure 3-2. BF looking at front door from car position

I had three men with me who would establish a foothold. Behind the car, the wounded man was with a buddy who was putting a tourniquet on his arm. We squeezed “ready” up the stack. Just then, Blessing yelled over the radio to hold tight, but my adrenaline carried us through the door. Almost as soon as the number one man stepped through the door, he was hit in the face and collapsed dead. I tripped over him, fell, and saw the number three man get hit in the groin and legs as bullets ripped over me. Total chaos! Lying on the floor, I had a chance to look down the hallway just long enough to see a barricaded machine gun firing the bullets that killed me.

Open doors don’t mean welcome...

Along the way to St. Peter’s ultimate counseling session, I met up with Ahmed. Ahmed was happy to have served his cause but upset about the way the fight had developed. I asked him to explain what happened from his side of the fight. Ahmed stated that the plan was to kill as many Americans as possible in the courtyard. They had seen us set up the ladder and had repositioned to fire in that direction. One man was to throw grenades from the roof. Another man was set up to cut down any “infidels” who miraculously made it through the door. It was left open on purpose to draw the Americans into the teeth of the machine gun at the end of the hall.

Another dead insurgent, named Mohamed, broke into the conversation. Mohamed was the grenade thrower. As he stood up to toss the grenade, an infidel sniper shot him in the throwing arm. The grenade dropped, and since he had pulled the safety, it exploded on the roof, blowing him in half. Mohamed seemed upset that he didn't get to kill any infidels. Ahmed was upset that as soon as he shot the man on the wall, all hell broke loose. We had filled the second floor with bullets, making it impossible to shoot the rest of us in the courtyard. Ahmed got killed just trying to get off a few rounds at us.

More hard lessons of combat came to mind:

10. Suppressive fires work. Blessing's insistence on assigned sectors ensured that Mohamed, the grenade thrower, didn't kill us in the courtyard. I got the stack to the door.

11. Unless the enemy is forced to have his head down or distracted, he can still shoot. Even with my men ready to fire, the enemy still shot one of my men crossing the wall. I should have distracted the enemy as we exposed ourselves going over the wall.

12. Don't assume the enemy has no depth to his defense. Getting across the courtyard was part of the battle. It was not all of the battle.

13. Doors epitomize the obvious entry point. They don't call a doorway the "fatal funnel" for nothing. Stacking and entering without a prep only offered a better target. The men with me would have needed the skills of "Neo" in the Matrix to have had any success inside that hallway. Any determined insurgent with an automatic weapon could have cut us down in that situation. I should have avoided the "fatal funnel" like the plague.

14. Just because you trained to enter does not mean you have to enter. I asked myself why I had automatically assumed that going into the house was my only choice.

I wondered, as I drifted off, just how many times I was going screw this mission up.



The Fourth Nightmare

War Is Not Fair: Use All the Advantages Available to Kill the Enemy

**If your officer's dead and the sergeants look white,
Remember it's ruin to run from a fight:
So take open order, lie down, and sit tight,
And wait for supports like a soldier.
Wait, wait, wait like a soldier . . .**

The Young British Soldier

Rudyard Kipling

Once again, the scene selection in my nightmare's DVD resumed play outside the house. No one in the platoon reported any activity in the house. I took stock of the situation. I was pretty sure that there were at least two bad guys in the house we had surrounded. They had blown an IED and killed one of my men. They could not escape if they were in fact still located in the surrounded house. I did not want to assault the house frontally, either by going through the open gate or jumping the wall. Either way exposed my men to the enemy's ready-made engagement area called the courtyard.



I thought about the enemy's options:

Option 1. They were already gone and drinking tea, leaving behind a booby-trapped house.

Option 2. They could surrender, since they were surrounded.

Option 3. They could try and escape.

Option 4. They could fight.

Option 1 was possible and still dangerous. Option 2 was still a possibility, but maybe they thought we would shoot as soon as they came out. Option 3 was next to impossible and the least likely, since we had the place surrounded. Option 4 was possible and maybe even likely, should our enemy be looking for martyrdom.

Blessing called with the news that the battalion quick reaction force was taking over vehicle recovery operations, and that two of our guys would escort our dead comrade back to the forward operating base. The remainder of the platoon with Blessing was moving to my location. I told him to expand our perimeter and get teams up on the roofs of two taller buildings to provide overwatch.

I formulated a plan to deal with the different enemy options. I would give the enemy a chance to end this by using an interpreter with a bullhorn to demand their surrender. I told the interpreter to promise they would not be harmed if they gave up.

If surrender did not work, I would use a deception plan to draw a reaction from the enemy. If the enemy reacted as hoped, then writing the paragraph in the 15-6 that justified using suppressive and destructive fire would be a sure bet.

When all else failed, I would continue to secure the house and request the company's robot to go through the front door and check for bad guys and booby traps. I would treat the house like an IED. I told myself not to lose Soldiers to stupidity or impatience. Personally, I hoped that the deception plan would work, so that we could exact our revenge.

After informing everyone on the succession of plans and when the conditions were set, I handed the bullhorn to Kyle, our trustworthy interpreter. Nothing, no reaction. They were either gone or going to fight. In my mind, I was only dealing with enemy Option 1 or 4.

I cued the deception plan. One squad moved to the near side of the wall and made a lot of noise as they set up an assault ladder. They threw a lot of smoke into the courtyard and then fired a M249 into the ground safely. Then a M240 fired a few bursts specifically aimed to impact the side of the house without killing anyone.

Nobody went over the wall into the courtyard.

It was too much for one of the insurgents inside. One enemy fired wildly into the smoke-filled courtyard, and another followed up by chucking a grenade from the roof into the courtyard. One of our squad designated marksmen on overwatch shot the grenade thrower when he rose up to throw a second grenade. I had my answer: the enemy had selected Option 4.

I reported the enemy situation to the executive officer, First Lieutenant Newton, who immediately told me to continue to isolate, suppress, but not to assault. I was more than happy not to assault. Nobody was going to go into that house.

Newton came back on the radio and asked if there were any helicopters overhead. I said no. He then said that everyone needed to find cover in the trucks or in a house, and everyone needed to be at least 75 to 100 meters away from the house. The battalion commander had gotten approval to use the 155 Excalibur Global Positioning System round.

A walled courtyard makes a dandy blast containment system...

My battalion commander, having been briefed by Newton earlier about my plan, had anticipated a need for this type of fire support. Thankfully, he started the request process immediately. I was going to use .50 cal and MK19, but this Excalibur idea was even better. Newton said the grid to the house was being verified and refined at the tactical operations center.

One or two minutes later, Newton called back and said the airspace was clear, and that the guns were “at my command” to fire two rounds with delay fuses. He would be my relay to the artillery’s fire direction center. Once all squads were briefed and in a safe position, I told Newton to fire. Antiseptically, he announced, “Shot, rounds complete” and about 30 seconds later “Splash.”

The impacts of the two rounds were dead on and collapsed half the house. There was also a terrific explosion at the gate that I could not quite figure out. It was like a secondary explosion but in a weird place. This explosion collapsed part of the exterior wall exposing the front of the house. One man crawled out of the rubble with a tactical vest on and was immediately shot down from multiple directions.

Some of the men from the platoon gleefully cheered on the radio at our enemy’s demise. Blessing brought everyone under control on the platoon net with a sharp rebuke. I have to admit I cheered too—but Blessing pretended not to notice. Anyway, he grinned as he put down the mike.

The whole of the day’s emotions began to hit me, and I had a hard time controlling a jittering in my jaw and a shaking in my hands. I was not cold, and I was not scared. I think it was just a lot for me to emotionally get control of. This dream was different, because I was not reviewing my mistakes as a dead man. Not only had I not made the same mistakes as before, I had done things correctly that I had not considered.

More hard lessons came to mind:

15. War is not a sport, but it is a team effort. Not only had I listened to the near instinctive lessons of my previous dreams, I also took advantage of the leaders around and above me. My noncommissioned

officers guided my tactical planning below, and my superiors supported me from up the chain.

16. War is not fair, so use all the advantages you have to kill the enemy before he can kill you. In this case, my original intention to use heavy fire against the house would have killed the enemy. It would have, however, left at least some of my Soldiers exposed. Using the pinpoint artillery strike allowed us to kill the enemy without risk.

17. The first step in gaining the initiative is to grasp what the enemy is likely to do. I didn't have time to conduct a full blown study of what the enemy was going to do. I did have time to do a quick leader's appreciation, and it paid off.

18. Never forget the enemy is studying you as you study him. Deception works if you show him something he expects to see.

I prayed for our Soldiers killed in action and hoped that the other 1,245 estimated bad guys in this sector would be less inclined to fight. Unfortunately, these days, the conquered refuse to act like they've been conquered. The fight goes on.

Suddenly, I awoke with an intestinal tidal wave urge to defecate an extremely loose stool. The common term of "mud slide" would accurately describe my problem. I made it to the Porta Potty in the nick of time. In the rush, my nightmares were almost erased from memory. Once settled in, I pulled down the "wash your hands" sign taped on the inside of the door, and I began to jot down the nightmares on the back of the paper. The lessons learned in the nightmares served me well during a long deployment that could only be described as a constant movement to contact that went in circles. Great-Great-Grandpa BF would be proud.

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