



The Pacification of Zaganiyah (Part One): Fighting for Intelligence to Overcome the Information Gap

by James Michael Few¹



Figure One. Zaganiyah, Iraq, March 2007. A/5-73 Recon (Airborne) paratroopers seize an al Qaeda headquarters and convert to an American patrol base. Photograph by Yuri Kozyrev, Time Magazine.²

¹ Special thanks to the friends of *Small Wars Journal* and the faculty of the Defense Analysis Department (DA) at the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) for their unwavering support in helping frame and review this body of work.

² See also Mark Kukis and Yuri Kozyrev's Photo Essay, "The Battle for Diyala," for Time Magazine, March 2007. http://www.time.com/time/photoessays/2007/kozyrev_qubah_multimedia/

The attacks of 9/11 and subsequent Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) thrust the United States military General Purpose Forces (GPF) into a host of small wars. As we relearned the timeless art of counterinsurgency, much debate surrounds perfecting the proper mixture of gentle influence and violent coercion required as an external intervention force. In the beginning, this mixture is irrelevant. Instead, the most difficult problem facing the commander is one of information. How does one discover and define the current situation on the ground? This understanding is the critical foundation of all other planning and actions.

This essay describes how one Army reconnaissance unit answered this question in a small village perched in a rural, hostile valley. It is the first part in a larger work describing company-level counterinsurgency efforts in the Diyala River Valley during the Iraq Surge. The intent is to describe our initial reconnaissance efforts to define the operational environment and develop a plan to intervene. The purpose is two-fold: 1. inform policy makers on the costs, requirements, and time needed for such GPF interventions, and 2. provide young leaders with an example of applying theory to practice.

While this individual case is unique in study, the methodology is universal. Basic military tactics and techniques appropriately applied for the given environment provide the highest probability for a successful outcome. This valley would serve as watershed moment for the junior combat leaders involved, and they would eventually apply these lessons learned in the streets of Baghdad at the tail end of the Iraq Surge, the ravaged airfield and slums of Port-au-Prince, Haiti after the 2010 earthquake, and the seemingly unconquerable valleys of Kunar Province along the Af-Pak border during the Afghanistan Surge.³

Armis Exposcere Pacem⁴

By late 2006, Iraq bordered on the brink of civil war. Various Sunni insurgent groups some aligned with the al Qaeda terror network claimed control of Anbar, Salah ad-Din, and Diyala Provinces. These groups' militias and the predatory criminal gangs that sprang up in the chaos challenged the legitimacy of the nascent Iraqi government and U.S. occupying forces supporting it. These denied areas, defined as "area(s) under enemy or unfriendly control in which friendly forces cannot expect to operate successfully within existing operational constraints and force capabilities,"⁵ provided safehavens that al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) used as a foothold to build and expand its shadow government, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). These groups used the "No-Go" areas as training camps, staging areas, and weapons depots in order to prepare for future offensive operations.

My earlier work The Break Point described how al Qaeda operatives overtook the town of Zaganiyah, a central village in the Diyala River Valley (DRV), using "a four-phased plan: clandestine organization, psychological preparation of the people, expansion of control, and consolidation of power."⁶ These efforts were deliberate, well-organized, coordinated, and ruthless. In three months, al Qaeda "established its zone of control, effectively killing or

³ CPT Jeffrey Black would command C/5-73 Recon (Airborne) in Sadr City in 2009. CPT Michael Anderson, B/1-73 Recon (Airborne) deployed as the first GPF boots on the ground after the Haiti Earthquake. CPT Tye Reedy currently commands Charlie Company/2-327th (No Slack) in the fight in Kunar Province.

⁴ "They demanded peace by force of arms." Motto of Mortar Platoon, "The Lost Boys," Alpha Troop, 5-73 Recon (Airborne)

⁵ *Joint Publication 1-02, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 31 December 2010, p.103, Available at http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf. Accessed on 8Feb2011.

⁶ See James Few, "The Break Point: How AQIZ established the ISI in Zaganiyah." Available at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2008/04/yet-another-17-april-swj-onlin/>. Accessed on 8Feb2011.

displacing 5,000 Shia residents, dissolving the Iraqi Government presence, instituting an Islamic government, and implementing Shar’iah law.”⁷ Government officials continue to uncover mass graves in excess of 150 men, women, and children murdered throughout Diyala Province by al Qaeda forces from 2006 to 2007.⁸

In February 2007, 5-73 Recon (Airborne) began clearing the DRV of AQI to reclaim the area for the Government of Iraq (GoI). During this operation, I served as the commander of Alpha Troop, 5-73 Recon (Airborne). We accomplished this mission using a three-phased plan: fighting for intelligence to overcome the information gap, forced initial entry to establish a foothold, and destroying the enemy infrastructure and support networks. The endstate of this pacification was achieving the insurgent break point, the point at which the insurgents ability to control terrain is less than that of the counterinsurgent,⁹ a philosophy we dubbed terrorizing the terrorists.

While Ali Latif al-Zaharie’s al Qaeda network used Mao’s playbook to assume control,¹⁰ we countered with an operation akin to the British approach in the early stages of the Malayan Emergency. As noted by the historian, Karl Hack, “You cannot, for instance, go straight to a comprehensive approach for ‘winning hearts and minds’ and expect it to work, if you have not first broken up the larger insurgent groups, disrupted their main bases, and achieved a modicum of spatial dominance and of security for the population of the area concerned.”¹¹ In Malaya, prior to the population-centric counterinsurgency campaign, Sir Robert Thompson and General Gerald Templer led a military effort that focused on psychological warfare, restrictive population control measures, persistent small-unit patrolling, and targeted ambushes to quell the violence and separate the enemy from the populace.¹²

Zaganiyah would be no different. Simply put, given the existing levels of violence, we determined that the first part of our comprehensive counterinsurgency plan must establish security if there was to be a chance for a negotiated peace. This process of pacification would take four months with a price paid in thirty American soldiers,¹³ many more injured, and a heavy emotional toll that burdened us long after we returned home. In his song “Sand Hills to Sandals,” 5-73 veteran Stephen Covell expressed it best when he sang, “try as I might, I can’t escape it / those burning fields and nights spent awaking, / listening to the thunder we pulled down.”¹⁴

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jack Healy. “Bomber Strikes Shiite Pilgrims’ Bus in Iraq” <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/13/world/middleeast/13iraq.html>. Accessed on 11Mar11.

⁹ Gordon McCormick, Steven B. Horton, Lauren A. Harrison. “Things fall apart: the endgame dynamics of internal wars.” Third World Quarterly, Volume 28, Issue 2 March 2007 , pages 321 – 367. Available at <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a771160834~frm=titlelink> Accessed 8 February 2011.

¹⁰ While “The Break Point” shows how Ali Latif conducted mobilization and occupation, the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at the United States Military Academy (USMA) has translated hundreds of intercept messages and doctrine from the al Qaeda network in Iraq. Specifically, see “**Thoughts about Security of Principal Squads**” available at <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/aq/pdf/AFGP-2002-600002-Trans.pdf> Posted on 17 Mar2006 and accessed on 24 Mar2011.

¹¹ See Octavian Manea’s Interview “Setting the record straight on Malayan Counterinsurgency Strategy,” <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2011/02/setting-the-record-straight-on/> Accessed on 11Mar11.

¹² See R. W. Komer, “The Malayan Emergency in Retrospect: Organization of a Successful Counterinsurgency Effort.” Rand, February 1972. Available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/2005/R957.pdf>. Accessed on 24Mar2011.

¹³ During the four month operation, twenty-one paratroopers from 5-73 Recon were killed. Additionally, one Navy EOD tech, two Kiowa pilots, and six cavalrymen from 6-9 ARS died in the valley.

¹⁴ See Stephen Covell, “Sand Hills to Sandals,” YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oj5mVD_QUa8.

Some initial findings from our fight include the following:

- *Understand the limits of your own control.* You won't solve or transform societies in one year. It's not your job to "fix" your area of operations. Concentrate on what you can accomplish- stopping the bleeding and reestablishing security. Limit your goals to reasonable ones.
- *Reconnaissance helps in overcoming the fog and friction of war.* Use it. It is foolish to go into a situation blind when you don't have to. Take the time to maximize your military and technological advances to help you define the environment. Additionally, these operations provide your soldiers with familiarity of the area and build confidence in their own abilities.
- *People are people regardless of culture.* Human terrain and social sciences only go so far in sophistication to define our differences. In the end, people make decisions based on their hearts (emotions), minds (thoughts), and souls (will). Building personal and professional relationships is the key terrain in small wars. Discretion in whom to trust is paramount.
- *Engagements are tricky and similar to high stakes games of poker.* Everyone wants something; there is always an angle. You must learn to discern interests and motivations. If you can't identify the mark in the room, then you are it. Once understood, then you must determine how to best influence or coerce to accomplish your mission.

Squadron Philosophy

In June 2005, I redeployed back home to Fort Bragg, NC after my third tour and joined the paratroopers of 3-505 PIR to assist in transforming this famed battalion into a Reconnaissance, Surveillance, Targeting, and Acquisition (RSTA) squadron in accordance with the Army's new modularity concept. As we designed the squadron, Iraq weighed heavily on my mind. It felt like we were losing badly. While we did not have any answers to the problem, we decided that we wanted to try something different during our next tour. We refused to spend the year driving around waiting to get blown up by the random roadside bomb. During my previous tour, I served as a staff officer with 10th Special Forces group, and they provided me with instruction in unconventional warfare that I wanted to apply to the squadron and troop's standard operating procedures (SOP).

The squadron was a mixture of infantrymen and cavalry scouts with backgrounds in Heavy and Light Cavalry units, regular Airborne Infantry units, Long-Range Reconnaissance Detachments (LRRSD), Ranger Regiment, and Scout Platoons. During pre-deployment training, officers and non-commissioned officers trained at Ranger School, Reconnaissance and Surveillance Leader Course (RSLC), Sniper School, Air Assault School, and Scout Leaders Course (SLC). These intrinsic skill sets gave us a distinct advantage in the rural, wooden terrain of the DRV.

In garrison, we conducted a Spartan regiment of military and physical training developed by Major Townley Hedrick, then the squadron's operations officer. All training was combat focused— strenuous, relentless efforts to build our phalanx. In September 2005, the squadron would deploy to New Orleans, LA to help secure the Big Easy in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Patrolling the ravaged parishes would provide our young paratroopers with an understanding of

how society can break down after a traumatic event. This experience would prove pivotal as we entered into the breach of Zaganiyah's collapse.

Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield

In any counterinsurgency effort, the most difficult problem facing the counterinsurgent is often identifying the enemy's disposition and composition. Basically, the insurgent can see the government's security forces, but the government cannot see him. This information gap provides a source of strength for the insurgent and a comparative advantage in the early stages of the conflict.¹⁵ This lack of information is often frustrating and sometimes feels as if "we attack an enemy who is invisible, fluid, and uncatchable."¹⁶ We were neither immune to this frustration nor did we underestimate our enemy; however, we felt that by applying the basic military tactics described below that we could lower the detection threshold¹⁷ and overcome this gap.

The first step necessary is intelligence collection. There are many ways to accomplish this key task, but methods must be properly chosen to match the environment. The intent of this phase is to find the enemy's approximate size and location. As a reconnaissance squadron, our unit was uniquely equipped to handle this task.

Mission, Enemy, Time, Troops, Terrain, Civilians (METT-TC)

Squadron Mission. 5-73 Recon (Airborne)¹⁸ seizes the Diyala River Valley no later than 1 April 07 in order to destroy the Islamic State of Iraq and re-establish the Government of Iraq (GoI).

Enemy. In February 2007, the situation in the Diyala River Valley was uncertain; the problem set offered more unknowns than known facts. Early in the fight, we only knew that al Qaeda had forced out American and Iraqi forces. From our friends and sources, we received preliminary reports describing the severity of AQI's occupation, but we would have to sort through the muddle in order to distinguish rumors from intelligence. An estimated 1,000 fighters (1% of the valley's total populace, 10% of Zaganiyah) operated in the valley under the military command of Ali Latif al-Zaharie. Political control was under Abu Masri al Iraqi, and economic control under Sheik Septar al-Zaharie.

Time. Historically, counterinsurgencies take roughly ten years to conclude.¹⁹ During the Iraq Surge, we were not afforded the luxury of time. The American public was growing weary of external intervention, and General David Petraeus demanded quick results. We had six months to pacify Zaganiyah and show substantial results.

¹⁵ See Gordon H. McCormick and Frank Giordano, "Things Come Together: Symbolic Violence and Guerrilla Mobilization," Third World Quarterly Vol. 28, No. 2, 2007, p. 300.

¹⁶ Roger Trinquier's *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency*

¹⁷ The detection threshold defines the specific amount of information required to know where the enemy resides. In *Counterinsurgency*, Dr. David Kilcullen covers this topic in greater detail; however, our approach to overcoming this threshold would differ than his.

¹⁸ For this operation, 5-73 Recon deployed as a squadron minus element of 300 paratroopers dubbed Task Force 300. HHT, A Troop, and C Troop took responsibility for the Diyala River Valley. B Troop maintained responsibility for Turki Village.

¹⁹ See Ben Connable's "The End of an Insurgency." Available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66749/ben-connable/the-end-of-an-insurgency?page=show>. Accessed on 28Mar2011.

Figure Two. Timeline of Events

Time	Event
6 Aug -1 Nov 06	A/5-73 responsible for Diyala River Valley
Sept-Oct 06	Patrol base established in Abu Saydah
15-Oct-06	AQI declares Baqubah as Caliphate for Islamic State of Iraq
1-Nov-06	A/5-73 Recon leaves Zaganiyah to assist in dismantling AQI training camps in Eastern Diyala Province
1 Nov 06-1 Mar 07	The Break Point: AQI establishes the ISI in Zaganiyah
10-Nov-06	Break Point- AQI overruns Zaganiyah Police Station. Zaganiyah declared "No-Go" area. AQI occupies and establishes Islamic State of Iraq.
15-Feb-07	5-73 Recon receives change of mission to seize Diyala River Valley. Conducts move from FOB Caldwell to FOB Warhorse.
March-June 07	The Pacification of Zaganiyah
1-15 March 07	Phase One: Fighting For Intelligence to Overcome the Information Gap
16-29 March 07	Phase Two: Forced Initial Entry to Establish a Foothold
29 Mar-30 Jun 07	Phase Three: Destroying the Enemy Infrastructure and Support
30-Jun-07	The Insurgent Break Point
Jul-Nov 07	Transitioning Zaganiyah

Troops. This operation would be a squadron (minus) effort of three hundred paratroopers dubbed Task Force 300. In Alpha Troop, I commanded around one hundred paratroopers with attachments. Additionally, two hundred Iraq police and military personnel would provide assistance to our troop in the latter part of the pacification.

Terrain. The Diyala River Valley is part of Iraq's breadbasket. Much of the terrain and industry depends on agriculture. The Diyala and Crescent rivers erect natural boundaries with few crossing points. That makes bridges key to controlling the roads, including the semi-paved and dirt byways interconnecting throughout the valley. Foot trails throughout the valley provide hasty dismounted movement and the lush vegetation and farms lend excellent cover and concealment for reconnaissance forces.

Civilians. An amalgam of Iraq, sects, religions, and tribes intersect in the Diyala River Valley. This contested area is home to Sunni, Shia, and Christians as well as Arabs and Kurds. This mixture tends towards significant internal disputes and mixed factions with unknown or casual allegiances. In this area, truth and trust are often complicated and relative to the observer. An estimated 100,000 civilians lived in the valley with an estimated 10,000 in the village of Zaganiyah.

Reconnaissance Guidance

Even in small wars first impressions are important, and the initial reconnaissance guidance must reflect one's attitude and tone. Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Poppas²⁰ today the commander of 1st “Bastogne” BCT, 101st Division (Air Assault), commanded 5-73 Recon (Airborne). His guidance was simple, “Go behind enemy lines and find the enemy.” Alpha Troop would take the lead for this collection effort.²¹ My guidance to my troop was to “terrorize the terrorist—find him, take away his security and protection, and put him on the defensive.” For this effort, we would apply reconnaissance pull.

Psychological Warfare Operations

LTC Poppas felt that if we took the fight to the enemy, then we could force a decisive victory. He understood that in a protracted counterinsurgency most of “the population will support the team they know will win,”²² but there are always some folks whose minds will not change. On the battlefield, we would attempt to force a linear fight with those that continued to rebel, an area where we had another distinct advantage.

In LTC Poppas’s mind, we had to be the strongest tribe.²³ Since control is most often an illusion or fleeting feeling, we wanted the population to perceive that we were the most fearless, powerful force in the valley. Through a lethal targeting plan, we wanted to force the enemy to fear us. This approach would allow us to move into the role as the neutral arbitrator. While this approach may seem extreme, the conditions on the ground demanded desperate measures. In order to reestablish law and order and stop the violence bordering on genocide in some villages, we would occupy as a benevolent dictator. Throughout the tour, we made it known to the populace that we could be anywhere at any time. We were always watching.

This mentality translated into a culture of decentralized, independent small unit teams capable of extended covert reconnaissance operations. This attitude would transcend our actions, and our actions would nest directly into our overall psychological warfare operations.

In reality, we realized the limits of our own control, but this posturing would work well in a village recovering from forty years of authoritative rule. Our goals were relatively limited. Rather than attempting to transform an entire society, we simply wanted to affect one behavior initially—that is, stopping the violence and reestablishing security. We were not trying to fix Zaganiyah. They would have to choose to do that on their own time.

Reconnaissance Pull: A Process of Discovery

My father was a commercial developer in a town transitioning from rural farmland into a major affluent suburb. As a child, he taught me his methodology that would later prove relevant in this valley. Prior to building a new medical park, we would survey the town using local maps. Then, we would drive around town, talk to our neighbors, and get to know the area. These trips

²⁰ Colonel Andrew Poppas is currently applying a similar model to RC-East in Afghanistan.

²¹ From August-November 2006, A/5-73 Recon was responsible for the Diyala River Valley.

²² William F. Owen, “Seek and Destroy: The Forgotten Strategy for Countering Armed Rebellion,” Infinity Journal. Available at http://www.infinityjournal.com/article/9/Seek_and_Destroy_The_Forgotten_Strategy_for_Countering_Armed_Rebellion. Accessed on 24Mar2011.

²³ In Anbar Province, according to Bing West in *The Biggest Tribe: War, Politics, and the Endgame in Iraq*, the Marines reached the same conclusion.

would be made at various times during the day so that he could gauge the traffic congestion. Next, when he picked out a potential piece of land, we would rent a helicopter and fly over the area to see it from above. I asked him why we were this deliberate. He told me that it was necessary in order to get a feel of the land and minimize the risk of a bad investment. He needed to know how the city worked, who the key players were, and ensure that the medical offices were in the proper spot given the other neighborhoods, schools, and businesses in the area. I listened well and would translate this methodology into practice upon entering the Diyala River Valley. While my father built medical parks to help the sick, we would shape the terrain in this foreign valley to prevent further bloodshed.

The Army provides a “scientific method” for use when entering a new area where the situation is unknown called reconnaissance pull. It is a process of discovery, bottom-up and intelligence driven, where the information gained from the ground drives the decision making process. We would apply reconnaissance pull in four forms: map reconnaissance, aerial reconnaissance, route reconnaissance, and ground reconnaissance.

During the initial Military Decision Making Process (MDMP), we would begin with a collaborative, brainstorming exercise asking four general questions:

- What do we think we know about the area?
- How permissive is the environment?
- What is really going on in the area?
- What information are we missing?

The preliminary answers would provide a hypothesis that we would later test through detailed reconnaissance and surveillance efforts.

Hypothesis to test. Al Qaeda occupied the DRV and established systems of government, economic, and military control.

Preliminary reconnaissance of over three hundred reconnaissance patrols was completed from August through October 2006 by Alpha Troop. Over the course of three weeks in early March 2007, Alpha and Charlie Troop would serve as the eyes and ears of the squadron conducting over one hundred reconnaissance patrols.

Raw information collected from the platoons would be sent to the troop’s operations and intelligence cell. This team consisted of Sergeant Joshua Kinser and I in a dusty, makeshift command post (CP) forged inside the excess personnel tents at FOB Warhorse working late into the night trying to sort through and decipher the evidence. Kinser, a scout in third platoon, volunteered to help me with the analysis. He was on his second Iraq tour, had fought in the Battle of Fallujah and throughout the Diyala River Valley, and he taught himself conversational Arabic during his free time. His efforts were invaluable.

Next, our final reports were consolidated into an Intelligence Summary (INTSUM) and sent to squadron headquarters. Major Brett Sylvia the squadron’s operation officer and senior brain trust would lead the staff sections through analysis to paint the picture in order to allow the squadron commander to define the environment.

(1) *Map Reconnaissance.* Initially, we would study all existing maps and satellite imagery to gain an understanding of the physical terrain. Simultaneously, we would read previous intelligence reports to learn from those who had worked in this area before us.

- (2) *Aerial Reconnaissance.* After intelligence briefings and prior to initial entry, key leaders would conduct an aerial reconnaissance over the new area of operations in order to see the area from a different perspective whenever possible. This process served as another approach to learning the area. In August 2006, squad leaders and above from Alpha Troop conducted aerial reconnaissance via Blackhawk helicopters. Flying near treetop level, my scouts were able to grasp a broader understanding of the restrictive terrain that they were about to encounter.
- (3) *Ground Reconnaissance.*²⁴ From area and zone reconnaissance to visual tracking and hunting, this form of reconnaissance required our paratroopers to covertly infiltrate on foot under the cover of darkness to “take a look around and see what’s really going on.” These patrols allowed us to confirm or deny intelligence reports and observe the enemy actions when he thought that he was “safe.”

Paratroopers would maintain observation posts within the DRV for durations extending up to seventy-two hours. As a young tank platoon leader during the first five days of the initial invasion, I slept less than twelve cumulative hours and suffered the consequences of sleep deprivation. I knew that my scouts would lose their situational awareness after three days so we limited the duration of our fixed-site observation points.

In the case of detection, forces would react by fire to close with and destroy the threat. Otherwise, forces broke contact in order to maintain the element of surprise. The focus of this collection was to determine where the enemy operated, his size, and his routines.

In August 2006, Red Platoon, 1/A/5-73 Recon (Airborne) led by 1LT Michael Anderson and SFC Mitchell Gonzales, deployed north of FOB Warhorse to find a crossing point along the Diyala River. We wanted to know how the local fishermen crossed the river. The platoon drove to the release point (RP) where Mitch Gonzales established an assembly area (AA). He would be responsible for truck security, communications to the troop, and casualty evacuation. Then, Mike Anderson took the dismount team and began insertion. The teams would break into two sections, and the section sergeants, our unsung workhorses, led the sections quietly into the palm groves navigating the dismounted elements along the river in search of boats, enemy caches and fighting positions, and rope bridges. Staff Sergeant (SSG) Glenn Bennett found boats stashed on the north side of the river. In subsequent missions, Mike Anderson and First Platoon would use these boats to covertly cross the river and bypass the enemy’s early warning system.

In October 2006, Blue Platoon, 3/A/5-73 Recon (Airborne) led by 1LT Jeffrey Black and SFC Shane Bates, deployed north of Zaganiyah to monitor the village from across the river. Infiltrating in at night and conducting exfiltration before dawn daily over a two-week period, this platoon positively identified one safe house and command and control network. Maximizing our technological advantage, the platoon collected both image and video to help describe the target house. In a subsequent raid, one enemy sniper was killed and sensitive site exploitation revealed detailed maps of local American bases.

In March 2007, White Platoon, 2/A/5-73 Recon (Airborne) led by 1LT Tye Reedy and SFC Ray Hernandez deployed northeast of Zaganiyah to monitor the town of Qubbah from across the river. Over a seventy-two hour period, combining mounted and dismounted

²⁴ See also John D. Hurth and Jason W. Brokaw’s “**Visual Tracking and the Military Tracking Team Capability.**” Available at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2010/12/visual-tracking-and-the-militia/#c018196>. Accessed on 17 March 2011.

patrolling, the platoon discovered the location of a building used to manufacture Explosively Formed Penetrators (EFPs). Locals detesting the al Qaeda occupation pointed out the location of the building. Later, as part of a combined attack, we would destroy this factory.

These patrols allowed us a significantly better understanding of the environment. When patrols gained contact with the enemy, we were able to define the boundaries of al Qaeda's physical control of the terrain. When the patrols went undetected, we were able to determine where the enemy was operating and begin to define his routine. Later, this understanding would allow us to interdict into his decision making cycle.

(4) *Route Reconnaissance*. During the fall of 2006, route reconnaissance was the first critical task issued to my troop. While we knew that most coalition and Iraqi forces travelled along Canal Road, we needed to know all available routes in and out of the valley. This information would provide key avenues of enemy movement for IED emplacement. In the spring of 2007, squadron-level route reconnaissance focused on determining what crossing points existed along the rivers and how extensively al Qaeda had mined the main roads.

In March 2007, Jeff Black deployed Third Platoon southeast of Zaganiyah to survey crossing points along Canal Road. During their patrol, the platoon identified al Qaeda's primary avenue of approach to bypass Iraqi Army elements enroute to Baqubah. Later, during our initial infiltration, we would use this route to bypass the enemy's defensive network of one hundred deep buried IEDs, saving countless lives.

These mounted patrols were not without substantial cost. In trying to determine the utility of the roads, the squadron would receive two to three daily IED attacks. These attacks caused significant casualties in our squadron to include the squadron surgeon who suffered a traumatic brain injury as shrapnel penetrated his skull after a blast while on patrol with Charlie Troop.²⁵ Despite the cost, the patrols were essential to understanding the gravity of the situation.

(5) *ISR Assets*. To complement the work our paratroopers conducted on the ground, squadron would employ various ISR platforms throughout the valley in order to refine our assessment and provide a better understanding.

The Art of the Engagement

While our recon platoons focused on tactical ground reconnaissance, the command visited key government, social, and religious leaders to gather information to assist in confirming or denying our hypothesis. These meetings complimented the work of our recon elements allowing us to survey both the physical and human terrain prior to intervention.

In *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Dale Carnegie reminds us that "when dealing with people, remember you are not dealing with creatures of logic, but with creatures of emotion, creatures bristling with prejudice, and motivated by pride and vanity."²⁶ Even in a protracted insurgency, people make decisions based off the *perceived* expected costs and benefits from both the government and the insurgency.²⁷ Sometimes, these decisions are rational when based strictly on thoughts (minds). Other times, the decisions are foolish when one base

²⁵ Thankfully, the doctor underwent a full recovery after medical evacuation and subsequent treatment.

²⁶ Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.

²⁷ Seminar on Guerilla Warfare, Dr. Gordon McCormick. NPS, Monterey, CA, Winter 2008.

decisions from an emotional response (heart). Sometimes, this perception is driven from a combination of one's heart and mind. It can be influenced or coerced by a host of options ranging from physical violence to financial gain. At the confluence of the heart and mind, small wars appear as a contest of wills or a battle for the soul.²⁸

We learned that relationships are essential to counterinsurgency operations for intelligence and collection value; however, one must remember that the mission comes first and the intent is to influence, coerce, or persuade the subject in order to force him/her to agree to your mission. It is quite naive to believe that you are attempting to win anyone's heart and mind during a violent insurgency.

Honey not vinegar. The art of engagement is probably best practiced by seasoned journalists. People often simply want to be listened to, and a journalist quickly learns that skilled questioning, good conversation, and active listening pay great dividends. I learned a great deal of this art from my friends in media for initial engagements; however, as time would pass, our processes differed. While journalists try to remain objective, our mission was much more involved.

The most important meeting came from an unlikely ally named Sheik Adnon al Tamimi. From our previous time in the area, Adnon and I had developed a close relationship. Despite my continued pressure and persistence, he was often reluctant to provide exact intelligence given the sensitivity of his position.²⁹ Often, he would hint using metaphors and measured stories. Adnon, the cousin of Diyala Governor Ra'ad al Tamimi, served as both the political and economic leader in the Abarra Nahiya (the government designation for this sector of the DRV) for the Government of Iraq. Through a combination of savvy and intuition, Adnon successfully managed to mediate between the tribes, family, and religious factors since the initial U.S. invasion and regime change. Adnon did not take sides lightly, choosing instead self-promotion. In late October 2006, as daily attacks increased and the pressure continued to mount, Adnon was forced to dismantle the local government and suspend his business ventures.

In late October 2006, we visited Adnon's compound for the annual feast to celebrate the end of the fasting for the end of Ramadan, and he introduced us to the two hundred Shia refugees from the valley that he was housing. I listened to individual tales of horror: of homes destroyed, family members executed, and farms lost. By introducing me to the plight of the refugees, this was his first attempt to show the growing instability in the region. We talked late into the night about religion, our children's futures, and the future of Iraq, but he was still not convinced that he needed to personally intervene in the present situation. By March 2007, his tone changed. This decision was quite rational. The Zaharie tribe usurped control of the valley with the assistance of al Qaeda in Iraq, and the threat of the Islamic State of Iraq now outweighed his personal risks in cooperating with the Americans.³⁰

In early March 2007, we coordinated a meeting with LTC Poppas at Adnon's compound. From the outset, Adnon's appearance had deteriorated from the last time we had spoken:

²⁸ French counter-rebellion literature from the colonial period is very descriptive in describing the hearts, minds, and soul of small wars. Specifically, see the writings Jean Pouget in Major Jonathan D. Howell's [Law, Ethics, And Morality In War During The Battle Of Algiers](#)

²⁹ See also "**Building Relationships and Influence in Counterinsurgency: One Officer's Perspective**" by Eric von Tersch <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2011/03/building-relationships-and-inf/>

³⁰ See also Michael C. Sevcik's "Moral Intuition and the Professional Military Ethic." Available at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2011/03/morale-intuition-and-the-profe/>. Accessed on 6April2011.

sunken, tired eyes, hunched shoulders, and a perpetual scowl. He admitted that months had passed since he could leave the protection of his compound due to the ever deteriorating security situation. Moreover, he was frustrated that he could not travel to Baqubah in order to see his mistress. This insight was his second attempt to describe the full impact of al Qaeda's occupation. As LTC Poppas talked to Sheik Adnon, we observed him intently trying to discern whether Adnon was being truthful or was playing us for a mark. Adnon was no fool. In truth, he was a sly political operative with a knack for self-preservation.

One of the main reasons that Adnon was so endearing was because he was always upfront about where his interest lay—that is, promoting the Adnon “brand.” However, this conversation was different. First, Adnon provided a map from a source who gave us a detailed description of both the al Qaeda disposition and composition in Zaganiyah. This information accurately matched that provided earlier by Mufasa “Moose” Fahmi al Zaharie, my trusted interpreter. Secondly, he admitted to the overreach of the Iraqi Army and Police forces in forcing the Sunnis hand towards al Qaeda. In the past, the security forces, mostly comprised of Shia, used their power and authority within the valley to settle political and personal scores with the tacit or unknowing consent of American forces. This agitation laid the groundwork for grievances amongst the Sunni community which al Qaeda exploited. This specific revelation was the key factor that led to me believing Sheik Adnon. He finally informed on his own people, information that I had waited impatiently for six months to receive.

Simultaneously, we attempted to reach out to Sheik Septar Al-Zaharie, the local Sunni leader for possible negotiations to disarm prior to intervention. Unfortunately, events had escalated to a point where his faction became non-cooperative and different measures were necessary.

Defining the Environment

Combing the collected information, initial observations, and survey collection provided confirmation of the most dangerous enemy course of action: the enemy effectively occupied the DRV and established systems of government, economic, and military control. As we navigated along the Diyala River during insertion, bloated bodies of civilians executed by the shadow government floated eerily south down the river every day. An extensive network of deep-buried IED’s along Canal Road, the main avenue of approach through the valley, provided a blocking minefield. Local paramilitary forces ran checkpoints and security patrols as measures of population control. Moreover, these forces utilized captured Iraqi police trucks and radios for transportation and communication.

In the town of Qubbah, government, economic, and judicial offices were established for the Islamic State of Iraq. In Zaganiyah, forces occupied the local girl’s elementary school to establish the military headquarters. The towns of Had Masker and As Sadah were used as buffer zones and staging areas to plan and execute attacks on the Iraqi Government in Abu Sayda, al Abarrah, al Durah, and Baqubah. In the farmlands, extensive military training camps provided recruits from Baqubah and Baghdad with military skills and tactics. While our small unit was a mere shaping force to the supporting operations in Baqubah, this safe haven provided strategic importance to al Qaeda’s efforts in Iraq. The next step was course of action development to determine how we would intervene to stop the bleeding.

Course of Action Development

After we defined the environment, we narrowed the parameters and determined that we had two preliminary problems to solve. First, what to do about the corrupt, overbearing Iraqi security forces on the periphery of the DRV fueling the Sunni/Shia divide? Second, how do we infiltrate and ultimately seize the DRV? Before we could answer these questions, a third problem arose that was potentially fatal.

We found that selection and retention of good interpreters another critical task. The interpreter is your guide through both the physical and human terrain, and they control the conversation. We had to be cautious and aware to the interpreter's internal motivations and external feuds. Moreover, in Diyala Province, many interpreters were Kurdish and spoke only broken Arabic. After exhausting six interpreters, I found Mufasa "Moose" Fahmi al Zaharie. Long considered the best interpreter in the province. Moose hailed from Zaganiyah, and his rolodex included every major sheik and power player in the province. Furthermore, Moose personally saved my own life on three separate occasions by having his friends call us when insurgents would place an IED on our path. This prestige led to privileged status on American Forward Operating Bases (FOBs). Moose was my right-hand man. He lived and dined with us, characteristics unheard of on FOB Warhorse where interpreters were segregated. This status provoked much jealousy amongst the other interpreters outside of our squadron, and they concocted a plan to undermine and spite him.

The civil war raging in Iraq was not isolated within the American FOBs, and the same Sunni-Shia divide affected the interpreters. In mid-March, I received a call from MAJ Sylvia after returning from a reconnaissance patrol. The Brigade S2, intelligence officer, wanted to arrest Moose on suspicion of working with al Qaeda. I laughed and deemed it impossible. Not only had Moose provided us with a house by house description of Zaganiyah to include exactly who the power players were and how they had gained control, but his house had been destroyed by AQI in December 2006 in retribution for working with the Americans. However, I soon found that this arrest was deadly serious. When I asked for the source, it was two Shia interpreters who were simply jealous of Moose. Without context, the evidence appeared staggering. Moose was in the Zaharie tribe related to both Sheik Septar and Ali Latif. On some black and white link diagram, it seemed like a perfect connection that Moose was operating as an al Qaeda spy—that is, until you consider that he was informing on the same folks that he supposedly working for. I pleaded my case through the brigade command and lost. When it was time for Moose to go to jail, I personally escorted him, hugged him, and apologized. We lost Moose prior to intervention, and with his absence, we lost our best guide into the valley.³¹

Despite our feelings over losing our friend and comrade, we had to concentrate on the mission. The next step was determining what to do about the corrosive security forces. Their individual actions helped ease this decision. Charlie Troop caught LT Ali, a Shia from Kharnabhat and commander of the IA, torturing prisoners in the Al Abarra IA compound. We arrested LT Ali and convinced COL David Sutherland, 3/1 BCT CAV Commander to whom we were attached, to reposition this sectarian laden force to Baqubah and replace them with a more

³¹ For the past four years, I followed Moose's case leading to his ultimate release from detention. For his assistance helping the United States Government, Moose faces daily assassination attempts. Currently, we are working through the US State Department and the Department of Homeland Security to garner him a United States citizenship. If he gets approved, I plan to sponsor his transition in the US. For his sacrifice, it is the least that I can do.

seasoned army unit. With these changes made, we were able to mitigate the government's internal attempts to persecute the Sunnis.

Next, we had to decide how to seize the valley. LTC Poppas decided that we must clear through the valley with an endstate of establishing a patrol base in Zaganiyah, the key terrain of the valley. To get there, we would village hop through As Sadah and Qubbah enroute to Zaganiyah while attempting to bypass the extensive defensive network. Phase One ended with his decision and subsequent planning. This phase would take three weeks, and during the reconnaissance, approximately ten paratroopers were wounded and fifteen insurgents killed. However, this deliberate reconnaissance effort would allow us a greater understanding of the area prior to intervention.

Conclusion

As I reexamine this reconnaissance effort four years after the operation began, I sometimes wonder if enough time and space have passed for proper analysis. I am keenly aware that it is a one-sided story, and there is a natural tendency to unintentionally inflate the direct impact my troop had on the village. For a proper historiography, we would need to interview the enemy combatants and citizens of Zaganiyah to gain their perspective. Currently, I cannot facilitate that process. With these shortcomings identified, I will share what I learned from this operation as honestly as I can.

For some young leaders, soon, you may be tasked with a mission similar to mine in an isolated, rugged valley in a foreign country. My hope is that you can learn from our successes and my failures prior to experiencing them on your own. While Zaganiyah will be different from your fight, the principles remain the same. You just have to learn to interpret the METT-TC.

My own watershed moment occurred in Western Baghdad in May 2003. After the Thunder Runs and the capitulation of Saddam's Army, Iraq did not immediately convert into a Jeffersonian Democracy. After the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) disbanded the Army and outlawed the Ba'ath Party, the state essential support structures crumbled.³² Without something or someone to replace these structures, I watched with a sense of helplessness as the masses moved to the street looting and rioting. What I directly observed prompted me to remain in the U.S. Army until the mission was fully accomplished. I wanted to understand why the situation unraveled and attempt to fix it.

As I framed this narrative, I felt that it was important to separate the reconnaissance effort into its own story. Reconnaissance takes time and careful precision, and a commander pressured for action and quantifiable metrics may skip or minimize this step. This decision is a foolish one. As with the construction of a home, reconnaissance is the foundation of all other planning and operations. For the external intervention force, learning and understanding one's environment is a process of discovery. Reconnaissance provides the way towards gathering information and intelligence. Reconnaissance is a boring, tedious endeavor. Often, we would spend nights in observation post staring at an empty street. With persistence, eventually you'll find the right OP and the right street to observe.

³²The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA): Origin, Characteristics, and Institutional Authorities. CRS Report for Congress. Available at <http://www.fas.org/man/crs/RL32370.pdf> Accessed on 6Apr2011.

Throughout this narrative, I expressed the feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and losing. I found that small wars have a way of abruptly breaking a young man's sense of invincibility, and a good counterinsurgent must harness and develop his/her emotional intelligence. This process begins with an understanding of one's limits of personal control. In Zaganiyah, I learned that I could not fix the village. Winning and mission accomplishment were not defined by lofty ideals. Rather, this understanding allowed us to concentrate on what we could accomplish. In the case of Zaganiyah, we set our goals to stop the rapidly escalating violence and suppress the al Qaeda presence.

Eventually, you may have to pick a side in the conflict. This requires discretion and discernment on whom to trust. Even in Zaganiyah, the overall conflict was local- tribes, families, and criminal gangs competing for political and economic control. Both al Qaeda and U.S. forces externally intervened to force their own objectives. The Zaharie tribe sided with al Qaeda, and the Tamimi tribe sided with U.S. forces.

This reconnaissance effort served as the first phase of our efforts to pacify Zaganiyah. During this two week operation, we conducted IPB, reconnaissance pull, and local engagements, defined the environment, and developed the specific course of action to employ. Next, we would conduct forced initial entry to establish a foothold. This phase would last two weeks. With a general understanding of the valley complete, we would maximize surprise and speed to seize the valley and establish a patrol base in Zaganiyah. Once established, we began the final phase destroying the enemy infrastructure and support networks. This phase would take ninety days and require the support of the local populace to pacify the resistance. As we moved deeper into the valley, the fight would become much bloodier.

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