

Love and Hate

Michael Few



Figure 1. “The Surge” as seen through the eyes of 5-73 Recon (Airborne) trench by trench, house by house, block by bloody block. Clockwise from top-left:

1. AQI beheading Shias in Zaganiyah (recovered video).
2. COL. Andrew Poppas comforting a dying boy struck by a suicide bomber (Yuri Zarakhovich, Time Magazine, 2007).
3. Paratroopers clearing the Islamic State of Iraq (Yuri Zarakhovich, Time Magazine, 2007).
4. A mother unnerved in the wake of Al Qaeda (Yuri Zarakhovich, Time Magazine, 2007).

One of my best commanders preached a very simple command philosophy. “Mike,” he would proclaim, “sometimes you got to give the love, and sometimes you got to give them the hate.”

To emphasize his point, he would clench both fists and extend mock punches: one representing the love and one representing the hate. This philosophy served our squadron well both in leading his airborne reconnaissance squadron and clearing Al Qaeda held safe-havens in Northern Iraq.

The premise behind this philosophy reflected many years studying the art of leadership and his straightforward assessment coupled a deep understanding in discretion and discernment tempered in the pragmatism of the complicated realities of real life mutually exclusive to the black and white moral world view preached at the academy.

In 1879, MG John Schofield declared that “the discipline which makes the soldier of a free country reliable in battle is not to be gained by harsh nor tyrannical treatment. On the contrary, such treatment is far more likely to destroy than to make an army.” Conversely, the leadership of coddling and friendship is marked with disrespect and irreverence from one’s subordinates.

Simply put, soldiers desire neither a dictator nor buddy in a commander. They demand leadership.

As the historical narratives of “the Surge” unfold, it is imperative to examine, cross-examine, dissect, and capture the elusive universal lessons learned. Personally, I cannot wait to read Thomas Rick’s [The Gamble](#) and David Kilcullen’s [The Accidental Guerilla](#). As crucial as it is to consolidate these hard fought stories into doctrine, we must fight as hard if not harder to avoid the incest of dogma derived from narrow, skewed, or incomplete data and analysis.

In order to voice truth to power, honor the nearly 4300 soldiers killed in action Iraq, and continue to protect and defend the Constitution against all enemies, we as military officers and should pursue two goals:

1. In telling the story, be forthright and honest concerning successes *and* mistakes.
2. Allow the separation of time and space to consolidate your memories into coherent thoughts.
3. In analyzing other narratives, seek to fill in the gaps to uninformed reader to minimize formulation of illogical conclusions.

Case in Point

Capt. Samuel Cook, who was commanding the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment's C troop in the northern Tigris Valley in Salahuddin Province had been pursuing the local leader of al Qaeda in Iraq, whom he considered a "very passionate, eloquent speaker, well educated." The terrorist leader offered to talk, and Cook took him up on it. "He was tired of being on the run, and he no longer believed in what he had once been preaching," Cook said. He provided information on the whereabouts of a higher al Qaeda leader for the province, who was killed in a firefight two weeks later. He also told them that al Qaeda in Iraq had three major sources of funding: crime, the Kurds, and the Iranians. Cook would use this information adroitly, asking local Sunni insurgents why they thought al Qaeda was their friend, if it was on the payroll of the dreaded Persian power. The insurgents, who had affiliated with al Qaeda as the surge began to hit them, also were growing tired, Cook recalled.

Cook had a light touch. In December 2007, he sent a letter to the community wishing them a happy Eid al- Fitr, a festival that marks the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, and one of the most significant Muslim holidays. At the beginning of the Eid feast, he met with the al Qaeda man, telling him that he had enough evidence to detain him. The man responded that Cook was wading into a fight between tribes, implying that he didn't understand the situation. Cook countered, "We have far too many reports from people in your own tribe to make this a tribal affair." Cook then told the man and some sheikhs who had waited outside that the reconciliation process is not easy and that the al Qaeda man and he disagreed on his guilt, but that out of respect for the Eid holiday, he wouldn't detain him at this time. As Cook hoped, those three actions: the letter, the meeting, and the show of respect persuaded other insurgents to come see the thoughtful American.

- Thomas Ricks, [*The Insurgent Who Loved 'Titanic'*](#)

Sam Cook is a classmate, colleague, and friend of mine. I beamed with pride as I read through his story. "Way to go Sam," I thought. During his deployment on the tail end of "the Surge," Sam was the right man at the right place at the right time expertly trading the love and the hate to negotiate his cavalrymen through the often impervious human terrain of the Tigris River Valley producing fruitful results to begin the arduous task of wrestling this insurgency away from the zero-sum game of civil war towards the compromise and negotiations of grievance reconciliation in the political realm.

Sam Cook is a brave American soldier; however, Sam is not the Messiah. Rick's narrative of Sam Cook is but a sample representation of the collective stories of those prosecuting the "Captain's War." As we muddled through this war, leaving our families time and time again, sometimes we got it right, and sometimes we got it wrong. Regardless, we deployed again into the breach to find some resolution and strive not to end this war in vain.

As proud as I was reading about Cook's actions in Salahuddin Province, I was stricken in despair over how his story would be perceived. After 9/11, the United States entered a collective state of compartmentalized psychosis, a temporary insanity. As strange as that sounds, it is the best way that I can describe it. Many political leaders told us that everything changed after 9/11, and we succumbed to a state stricken in fear of the proverbial terrorist bogeyman. In reality, everything did not change. The Good Book tells us that "there is a time for peace and a time for war." The world we live in is just different than what we expected, and we must adjust. In this new world of globalization and technological innovation, disenfranchised populaces attempt to take on the notion of people's revolution and the tactics of the anarchist to achieve their political goals. Personally, I refuse to live a life of fear.

As we engaged in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, our confidence ebbed and flowed with the quick successes of the Thunder Runs and Operation Anaconda and the frustrations of protracted complex insurgencies and transnational terrorism threats. At each corner, at each turn, we strived to find a Holy Grail: that magical solution that would provide all the answers.

Rereading Ricks' account of Sam Cook, I am concerned that his actions will be deemed another Holy Grail. I can imagine a young cadet, an enthusiastic PhD candidate, or a policy analyst reading Cook's tale and imagining a quick fix, a one-size fits all solution. Unfortunately, in small wars, there is no silver bullet. In truth, Sam Cook was simply the right man at the right place at the right time. Fortunately, Sam had the experience, fortitude, and brilliance to capitalize on his timing. The following analysis is not to take away from the bravery and professionalism of Sam and his men. Instead, the purpose is to expand the commentary and place it within the broader context of the fight in Iraq.

Salahuddin Redux

On a calm night following the ides of July 2007, on the night before I surrendered my command and redeployed home, I huddled with my fellow commanders in one last moment of brotherhood before we went our separate ways, and this moment became another storied archive in the long tale of the famed 82nd Airborne division. Over Cuban cigars and non-alcoholic beers, we traded stories of the countless valor and bravery of our paratroopers and the horrendous obstacles impeding Iraq. Currently, our actions were still a gamble. GEN Patraeus and LTG Odierno went all in with a pair of aces on the flop, and we were still waiting on the turn card. On the good days, it felt like Iraq avoided an implosion into all-ought civil war and anarchy. On the bad days, it felt as if we were one move away from teetering towards genocide and a failed state.

The Panther Brigade (3BCT, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), 82nd Division (Airborne)) spent the last year clearing the Salahuddin Province. My reconnaissance squadron detached to assist 3rd "Greywolf" BCT, 1st Cavalry Division in the clearance of Diyala Province. Throughout "the Surge," our efforts did not come without great cost. The Panther Brigade lost over 50 paratroopers killed in action. For the first time in over a year, I was able to relax for a moment and breathe. As I scanned this group of men hardened in the crucible of Iraq and shouldering the burden of command to include the tremendous responsibilities of the lives of the paratroopers within the various commands, I could see the physical deterioration of our youthfulness fade as the onset of crow's feet, the sunken eyes, and the thousand yard stare took their toll.

In the privacy of that night, we shared our experiences in candid fashion briefly dropping the Spartan persona necessary for commanding paratroopers. The truth evoked was one that could only be understood with a fellow brother in arms- one that had crawled through the trenches grenade in hand to destroy his enemy, one that cradled their dying driver mortally wounded in a suicide blast, and one that walked down the IED infested road to rally his men. I cannot share my brothers' tales in Salahuddin. It is not my place. What they shared was in strict confidence, and they will explain their story when they are ready.

I can tell you of a similar story. It is fairly simple. In the Rick's article, replace Sam Cook with Mike Few. Instead, this time the outcome is starkly different. I'm not ready to tell my whole story yet. I still have to reconcile some demons, but I will share a portion to contrast with the current narrative.

Dinner with Al Qaeda



Figure 2. Dinner with Al Qaeda, April 2007

After months of bringing the hate, Task Force 300 (5-73 Recon, 3rd BCT, 82nd Division (Airborne)) established a foothold in the Diyala River Valley (DRV) through the clearance of Zaganiyah. Previously, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) established the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) across the valley displacing Shia, enforcing Shar'iah law, and instituting a shadow government.¹ By April 2007, we reached a stalemate with Al Qaeda.

I thought it was time to offer the love, and I approached with a light touch. Through intermediaries, a meeting was brokered between Sheik Septar Al-Zuharie and me. We would have dinner at his home to negotiate the current situation. Septar was the leading Sunni sheik in Zaganiyah, and he straddled the fence in cooperation with Government of Iraq and coordination with Al Qaeda striving towards economic gain and power consolidation for his tribe. Unbeknownst to me, Septar invited the Al Qaeda leadership to this dinner to examine this commander's intent.

After a pleasant dinner of warm pita bread, lamb, and fresh vegetables, we sipped countless cups of chai, smoked cigarettes, and settled down to talk business. Pleasantries aside, I spoke frankly about the coalitions mistakes in the onset of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Specifically, I addressed our failure to secure the populace after the Thunder Runs, the mistake in outlawing the Ba'ath Party, and the haphazard decision to dismantle Saddam's Iraqi Army effectively placing a hundred thousand armed men into unemployment. Furthermore, I addressed the Sunnis mistake in not voting during the 2005 election, and the secondary and tertiary effects of the Shia controlled government failing to equally distribute essential services amongst the populace and the threat of Syrian and Iranian influence encroaching on the sovereignty of national unity. In sum, I empathized with Septar in the hopes of offering an olive branch of reconciliation and ending the violence.

After Septar weighed my thoughts and provided commentary, I extended my offer. I explained that he had to make one of two choices:

¹ For further reading on how AQI gained control of Zaganiyah, see "[The Break Point.](#)"

1. Turn away from Al Qaeda and reconcile with the government. If this course of action is chosen, then past criminal actions are absolved, and we will work towards peace.
2. Continue to support Al Qaeda. If this course of action is chosen, then I am left with no choice but to continue fighting.

I reiterated the gravity of the situation. Additionally, I clearly laid out the resolve made by the United States Government and the Government of Iraq to pursue a counter-insurgency strategy and defeat Al Qaeda. Septar read my face trying to discern if I spoke the truth or if this was just another ploy. As the meeting closed, I reminded him that the paratroopers were staying in Zaganiyah. The ball was now in his court. I travelled back to my patrol base to await their decision.

Unfortunately, the Sunni factions in the Diyala River Valley were not ready to concede. Unlike the Anbar tribes, Septar was not yet convinced that the Multi-National Corps Iraq (MNC-I) represented what [Bing West dubs the *strongest tribe*](#). Instead, the leaders of Al Qaeda walked away from that meeting determined to force the Americans to leave their valley.

Ninety-six hours after my dinner, two bongo trucks laden with explosives converged on my sister company's patrol base in Sadah, fifteen kilometers south of Zaganiyah. Ten paratroopers were killed in this assault with another fifteen wounded. The valley was yet to be quelled. After consolidating and reorganizing in the midst of this tragedy, we persevered and continued the clearance. That's the way it is in the Airborne. We buried our dead and drove on. Like our predecessors in World War II, we drew a line in the sand, and we declared that "this was as far as the bastards are going." The clearance continued.

Lessons Learned

I don't have any universal lessons learned to offer as of yet. The purpose of this commentary is simply to add to the overall narrative of the Surge and the intervention into Iraq. I will suggest that you spend some time contemplating the leadership philosophy of Love and Hate. It works.

"Sometimes you bring them the love. Sometimes you bring them the hate." This philosophy explains in simple terms the science of leadership, but the devil is in the details. The art of leadership and the implementation of feasible tactics and strategy cannot be narrowed into a silver bullet sound-bite. I have often relived that dinner, replaying my actions, and yearning for a different outcome. Finally, I put it to rest. I analyzed the situation- I felt the timing was right, I made a decision, and the outcome happened.

It has taken time and space for me to let go of the responsibility for those dead paratroopers. In the end, and somewhere in between, a part of me died as well, but I refuse to my life plagued by the grief and sorrow of that day.

For me, it is time to drive on.

All the way!!!

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[SWJ Magazine](#) and [Small Wars Journal](#) are published by Small Wars Journal LLC.

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