

# **My Crucible Experience**

**The Transformation of Bravo Company 1-77 Armor**

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As an Army Officer for the last 14 years, I have experienced many unique leadership challenges, especially after the events of 9-11. However, it was my experience as a Company Commander during Operation Iraqi Freedom II (OIF II) that greatly influenced the way I view and practice leadership today and in the future. My crucible experience started at Grafenwoer, Germany during the Brigade Combat Team's train-up for OIF II. Its ramifications, however, would extend to the mission in Iraq.

During the end of the training, I was told by my Battalion Commander (BN CDR) that the Brigade decided to deploy only one M1A1 Tank Company to Iraq for operational reasons. He further said that my company was chosen because it the best performing Tank Company in the Brigade. What I was confused about was the deployment part of his statement. I already knew that we were deploying. However, my BN CDR further mentioned that they wanted to parcel my three Tank Platoons across four Task Forces. He said that they would replace my tank platoons with an infantry platoon and an engineer platoon from within the BDE, and an Anti-Tank (AT) platoon from a National Guard Battalion operationally controlled (OPCON) to the Brigade. Internally, I was furious. There was no convincing me that an Engineer platoon, especially an AT platoon could conduct the COIN type operations being conducted in Iraq.

To make matters worse, I would not receive the infantry platoon until we initially arrived in Kuwait and the other two platoons until battalion's arrival at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Paliwoda. Complicating matters was that my new company team was to conduct a relief in place with a fully manned Mechanized Infantry Company in a complex sector of distinctly varied terrain. To me, this task organization change prior to deployment and the Relief in Place (RIP) was unprecedented. Nothing in my military or civilian training could have ever prepared me for these events. What this situation forced me to do was break the paradigm in my head that only Combat Soldiers (Infantry, Armor, Field Artillery) could adapt and fight COIN operations in Iraq. What this situation did to me was take me out of my comfort zone. I had to adapt to the capabilities of my company. I had to be innovative in the way I could quickly train this new

team. Last of all, I needed to understand where they all came from. In sum, I had to transform my team of Engineers, National Guardsmen, and Infantrymen into full-spectrum warriors through organizational change, and organizational learning. I also had to manage the organizational and combat stresses that the change and mission put on the new team. This crucible event changed the way I approached leadership and management at both the direct and organizational levels. In many ways, my crucible experience during OIF II changed my leadership style and forced me to be more of adaptable, innovative, and sympathetic.

The first challenge I had as the Company Commander was leading the organizational change of Bravo Company from a Tank Company to a Modular Company Team. At first, I believed that the Contemporary Operating Environment (COE) of Balad would make it difficult for me to effectively build my new team quickly. On the other hand, it was the COE, the threat in Balad that instilled the sense of urgency in my Team to follow my vision and command philosophy. Instead of viewing the Team's capabilities as weaknesses (compared to the Bradley Tank Company we replaced) my vision helped them see the benefits of the diverse expertise they brought to the company and our mission. I basically aligned their expertise and capabilities to certain combat missions the battalion needed assistance with. Not only did my team conduct offensive operations such as Cordon and Searches and Raids, but they conducted Counter-IED (Engineer PLT), Counter-Mortar (Infantry PLT), and Reconnaissance missions (NG Anti-Tank PLT). The Engineers and the National Guardsman also played a vital role in the Team's and Battalion's reconstruction efforts throughout Balad. As a result, they were beneficial to the Team's growing stability operation missions. My First Sergeant (1SG) and Executive Officer (XO) were critical in reinforcing my vision and highlighting the short-term wins gained by the team's effort during company and platoon operations. They got me the buy-in I needed from the Senior Non-Commissioned Officers and Platoon Leaders of the company. Additionally, they helped me establish and anchor our "TEAM / me" culture, which put the emphasis on working together as a team rather than individuals. The most important lesson I learned from conducting

organizational change is that leaders must be able to adapt and understand the capabilities of his/her organization to execute change. I had to gain some of the expertise of the Engineers, Infantryman, and AT soldiers to effectively transform them into a Team of full spectrum warriors.

The second challenge was ensuring that the Team developed into a learning organization. This was critical as the environment and enemy TTPs constantly evolved in our Area of Operations (AO). I institutionalized weekly training meetings, provided time for platoon training, and established a Company Intelligence Support Team (CoIST) to ensure platoons understood and were prepared for the complex threat in each of their AOs. I continued to conduct weekly company training / patrol meetings to ensure platoons received the latest enemy IED & Mortar TTPs from my CoIST and facilitated crosstalk between the platoon leadership on new TTPs (both enemy & friendly) they picked up during their missions. I rotated each platoon out of the patrol schedule so that they could completely focus on training and get some needed crew rest. During their training rotation, they learned how to counter-act emerging enemy TTPs, and retrain on core training tasks such as reflexive fire and Close Quarters Combat. My CoIST was made up of the Fire Support Officer (FSO), FSNCO, and NBC NCO. They provided input both up and down the chain of command to ensure critical intelligence was disseminated throughout the battalion. The bottom-line was the company adopted new techniques and procedures that got the job done more efficiently or effectively. I learned that effective learning organizations need to be innovative, have open communications, and work together as a group to facilitate change and combat complacency, which tends to naturally seep into organizations in time.

The last, but most difficult challenge I faced with the new team was controlling combat stress. The extreme heat, the constant combat patrols, IEDs, Mortar/Rocket attacks, the sub-standard living arrangements, are just some of the stressors my Team had to deal with on a daily basis. To alleviate the high level of stress the mission brought on the company, direct leadership was needed. I required special involvement from all leaders within the Team to

combat stress. My 1SG and I ensured that the platoon leadership were always available and approachable to their soldiers. We constantly made known of our open door policy to the Team to ensure soldiers knew that they could approach us both on any issue or concern. I felt I was most effective in combating stress in the Team through personally talking with each soldier as much I could. It was amazing the things I found out that they were afraid to tell their 1<sup>st</sup> line supervisor. If they refused my assistance, we would get them whatever help they wanted, whether it be the Chaplain, Combat Stress Teams, or maybe just a day or two of rest. Open lines of communication between leaders and subordinates was the most powerful countermeasure in confronting combat stress. Also, to combat stress successfully, you must first and foremost have leaders that genuinely have and show empathy for their soldiers.

The 12 months of command of Team Regulator in OIF II has so far, been the defining experience of my life. The lessons I learned from that experience continues to grow as present situations help me reflect back to that crucible experience. The most important lesson that this crucible experience taught me was not to be afraid of change. It taught me how to manage change in the most extreme conditions and that fostering a learning organization can only facilitate change. I learned that managing and leading change under most conditions is stressful, but under enemy contact, can become deadly. So, it is essential to implement some sort of stress control program within your organization. All of these lessons have changed the way I have and will lead in the future. They have reverberated into my leadership style and philosophy and will have a continued impact on me and how I operate.