"The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War"

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Operation Absolute Agility

0611: The African sun had just risen above the hills surrounding the sprawling city and sent its already dazzling rays streaming into the dusty alleyway. Corporal Hernandez felt the sun on his face and knew that today would, again, be sweltering. He was a squad leader in 2d Platoon, Lima Company and had, along with his men, spent a sleepless night on the perimeter. For the past week his platoon had provided security to the International Relief Organization (IRO) workers who manned one of three food distribution points in the American Sector of Tugala -- the war-torn capital of Orange -- a Central African nation wracked by civil unrest and famine.

The situation in Orange had transfixed the world for nearly two years. Bloody tribal fighting had led first to the utter collapse of the government and economy, and ultimately, to widespread famine. International efforts to quell the violence and support the teetering government had failed, and the country had plunged into chaos. The United States had finally been compelled to intervene. A forward deployed Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) was ordered to assist the efforts of the ineffective Regional Multi-National Force (RMNF) and the host of international humanitarian assistance organizations that struggled to alleviate the suffering. The MEU's arrival had stabilized the situation and allowed the precious relief supplies to finally reach the people who needed them most.

The Food Distribution Point (FDP) manned by 2d Platoon serviced over 5,000 people daily. The Marines had, at first, been shocked at the extent of the suffering, by the constant stream of malnourished men and women, and by the distended bellies and drawn faces of the children. The flow of food and medical supplies had, however, had a dramatic impact. The grim daily death tolls had slowly begun to decrease and the city had begun to recover some sense of normalcy. Within a month the lives of the Marines had assumed a sort of dull routine. Corporal Hernandez removed his helmet and rested his head against the mud wall of the house in which his squad was billeted and waited for his MRE to finish heating; satisfied that he and his fellow Marines were making a difference.

0633: The dust and rumble of a half dozen 5-Tons pulling into the market square caught the attention of Corporal Hernandez. Escorted by Marines, the convoy brought with it the food and medical supplies that meant life or death to the inhabitants of this devastated neighborhood. With it also came word of life beyond the confines of this small corner of

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Orange and useful intelligence concerning the disposition of the opposing factions that wrestled for its control. Today, the convoy commander had disturbing news for the platoon commander, Second Lieutenant Franklin. Members of the OWETA faction, led by the renegade warlord Nedeed, had been observed congregating near the river that divided the capital in half and marked the boundary separating the turf of OWETA from that of its principal rival. Nedeed had long criticized the presence of the RMNF and had frequently targeted its personnel for attack. While he had strenuously denounced the presence of U.S. forces, he had, so far, refrained from targeting American personnel. As starvation became less a concern, however, tensions had begun to rise and there was growing fear that open hostilities would breakout again and that attack of RMNF and MEU personnel was increasingly likely.

Lieutenant Franklin passed the report to his company commander and then gathered his squad leaders together to review the developing situation. 1st Squad was ordered to move about four hundred meters north and man a roadblock at Checkpoint (CP) Charlie. Corporal Hernandez returned to his position, reluctantly disposed of his uneaten MRE, and prepared his Marines to move out. The movement to the road intersection at CP Charlie was uneventful and took less than ten minutes. The squad had manned the post before and was familiar with the routine. Pre-staged barricades were quickly moved into place to secure the street to vehicular traffic and a triple strand of concertina was strung in order to control pedestrian movement. Corporal Sley and his fire team moved a hundred meters north and established an Observation Post (OP) on the roof of a two-story building that afforded excellent fields of view. By 0700, the squad was in position. At that hour, the city was still quiet, and except for the intel report concerning OWETA activity, there was no evidence that this day would be any different from the previous. The Marines of 1st Squad settled in for another long hot day of tedious duty.

0903: By nine o'clock, the normal large crowd, mostly women and children with baskets in hand, had gathered to await passage through the checkpoint. The Marines orders were clear: they were to deny access to anyone carrying a weapon and to be alert for any indications of potential trouble. Their Rules of Engagement (ROE) were unambiguous: anyone observed with an automatic weapon was considered hostile, as was anyone who intentionally threatened Marine personnel. The MEU Commander had made this policy clear in meetings with each of the warlords in the early days of the deployment. His directness had paid dividends and to date, no MEU personnel had been wounded by small arms fire. The factions had kept a low profile in the American sector and had not interfered with those convoys accompanied by Marines. Such was not the case, however, in adjacent sectors, where RMNF personnel had frequently been the target of ambush and sniper fire. The Marines had stayed on their toes.

0915: Corporal Sley reported from his position on the rooftop that the crowd was especially large and included an unusually high proportion of young adult males. He sensed an ominous change in the atmosphere. Less than a mile away, he could see the

vehicles of Nedeed's gang gathered at the far side of the bridge spanning the river that separated the OWETA and Mubasa factions. He passed his suspicions on to his squad leader, "Something big is about to happen." The day promised to be a break from the routine.

0921: Corporal Hernandez promptly relayed Sley's report and concerns to his platoon commander and learned from Lieutenant Franklin that Nedeed's chief rival -- Mubasa -- was moving west toward CP Charlie. Mubasa's intentions seemed clear; his route would bring him directly to CP Charlie and an ultimate collision with Nedeed. 1st Squad's position astride the two MSR's placed them squarely between the rival clans. Lieutenant Franklin directed Hernandez to extend the road block to cover the road entering the intersection from the West and indicated that he and Sergeant Baker's 2d Squad were en route to reinforce. Corporal Hernandez could feel the tension grow. The crowd had become more agitated, aware that Mubasa's men were near and concerned that the vital food distribution might be disrupted. The young men had begun to chant anti-U.S. slogans and to throw rocks at the startled Marines. Corporal Hernandez felt the situation slipping out of control and decided to close the road completely. With great difficulty, the barriers were shifted and the concertina was drawn back across the narrow access point. The crowd erupted in protest and pressed forward.

0931: Overhead, the whirring blades of a low flying IRO UH-1 were heard, but failed to distract the crowd. Their curses and chants, however, were drowned out for an instant by the sound and shock wave of an explosion. The helo had apparently been hit by ground fire, possibly an RPG, and had burst into flames and corkscrewed to the ground several blocks east of the OP. Corporal Sley had observed the crash from his vantage atop the building and saw, to his relief, that at least two survivors had struggled from the flaming wreckage. His relief, however, was short-lived. In the distance, he could see Nedeed's men rushing across the bridge. Sley urgently requested permission to immediately move to the assistance of the downed helo crew.

0935: While Corporal Hernandez considered the feasibility of a rescue attempt, the situation took another serious turn; three vehicles loaded with Mubasa's men and followed closely by a INN film crew arrived on the scene. Brandishing automatic weapons and RPG's, they forced their vehicles through the crowd until the bumper of the lead truck rested against the barricade. With their arrival, the already agitated crowd abandoned all restraint. The occasional rock had now become a constant pelting of well-aimed missiles. One had hit Lance Corporal Johnson in the face. The resulting wound, although not serious, bled profusely and added to the rising alarm. Somehow the sight of the bright red blood streaming down the face of the young Marine fed the crowd's excitement and heightened the panic growing within the squad. What had started out as another routine day of humanitarian assistance was rapidly becoming something else entirely. A Molotov Cocktail crashed into the position injuring no one, but contributed further to the confusion. The Marines of 1st Squad looked from man to man and then stared

questioningly at Corporal Hernandez. He reassuringly returned the gaze of each man, knowing better than any of them that the fate of the squad, of the wounded IRO personnel, and perhaps, of the entire multi-national mission, hung in the balance. In the span of less than three hours he had watched a humanitarian assistance mission turn terribly wrong and move ever closer to outright disaster. Corporal Hernandez was face to face with the grave challenges of *the three block war* and his actions, in the next few minutes, would determine the outcome of the mission and have potentially strategic implications.

The Three Block War

The fictional mission described above -- *Operation Absolute Agility* -- is similar to many that have been conducted around the world in recent years and represents the likely battlefield of the 21st Century. It also represents, in graphic detail, the enormous responsibilities and pressures which will be placed on our young Marine leaders. The rapid diffusion of technology, the growth of a multitude of transnational factors, and the consequences of increasing globalization and economic interdependence, have coalesced to create national security challenges remarkable for their complexity. By 2020, eighty-five percent of the world's inhabitants will be crowded into coastal cities -- cities generally lacking the infrastructure required to support their burgeoning populations. Under these conditions, long simmering ethnic, nationalist, and economic tensions will explode and increase the potential of crises requiring U.S. intervention. Compounding the challenges posed by this growing global instability will be the emergence of an increasingly complex and lethal battlefield. The widespread availability of sophisticated weapons and equipment will "level the playing field" and negate our traditional technological superiority. The lines separating the levels of war, and distinguishing combatant from "non-combatant," will blur, and adversaries, confounded by our "conventional" superiority, will resort to asymmetrical means to redress the imbalance. Further complicating the situation will be the ubiquitous media whose presence will mean that all future conflicts will be acted out before an international audience.

Modern crisis responses are exceedingly complex endeavors. In Bosnia, Haiti, and Somalia the unique challenges of *military operations other-than-war* (MOOTW) were combined with the disparate challenges of mid-intensity conflict. The Corps has described such amorphous conflicts as -- *the three block war* -- contingencies in which Marines may be confronted by the entire spectrum of tactical challenges in the span of a few hours and within the space of three contiguous city blocks. The tragic experience of U.S. forces in Somalia during Operation Restore Hope illustrates well the volatile nature of these contemporary operations. Author Mark Bowden's superb account of "The Battle of Mogadishu," Blackhawk Down, is a riveting, cautionary tale and grim reminder of the unpredictability of so-called operations other-than-war. It is essential reading for all Marines.

The inescapable lesson of Somalia and of other recent operations, whether humanitarian assistance, peace-keeping, or traditional warfighting, is that their outcome may hinge on

decisions made by small unit leaders, and by actions taken at the *lowest* level. The Corps is, by design, a relatively young force. Success or failure will rest, increasingly, with the rifleman and with his ability to make the *right* decision at the *right* time at the point of contact. As with Corporal Hernandez at CP Charlie, today's Marines will often operate far "from the flagpole" without the direct supervision of senior leadership. And, like Corporal Hernandez, they will be asked to deal with a bewildering array of challenges and threats. In order to succeed under such demanding conditions they will require unwavering maturity, judgment, and strength of character. Most importantly, these missions will require them to confidently make well-reasoned and *independent* decisions under extreme stress -- decisions that will likely be subject to the harsh scrutiny of both the media and the court of public opinion. In many cases, the individual Marine will be the most conspicuous symbol of American foreign policy and will potentially influence not only the immediate tactical situation, but the operational and strategic levels as well. His actions, therefore, will directly impact the outcome of the larger operation; and he will become, as the title of this article suggests -- the *Strategic Corporal.*

The Strategic Corporal

Regrettably, the end of the Cold War heralded not the hoped for era of peace, but rather, a troubling age characterized by global disorder, pervasive crisis, and the constant threat of chaos. Since 1990, the Marine Corps has responded to crises at a rate equal to three times that of the Cold War -- on average, once every five weeks. On any given day, up to 29,000 Marines are forward deployed around the world. In far-flung places like Kenya, Indonesia, and Albania, they have stood face-to-face with the perplexing and hostile challenges of the chaotic post Cold War world for which the "rules" have not yet been written. The three block war is not simply a fanciful metaphor for future conflicts -- it is a reality. Like Corporal Hernandez, today's Marines have already encountered its great challenges and they have been asked to exercise an exceptional degree of maturity, restraint, and judgment.

Marines, of course, have always shone most brightly when the stakes were highest. The NCO's that led the bloody assaults on the German machine-gun positions at Belleau Wood intuitively understood the importance of their role. The Marines of 2d Battalion, 28th Marines, who scaled the fireswept heights of Mount Suribachi needed no one to emphasize the necessity of initiative. The Marines of the Chosin Reservoir, of Hue City, and of countless other battles through the years did not wait to be reminded of their individual responsibilities. They behaved as Marines always have, and as we expect today's Marines and those of the future to behave -- with courage, with aggressiveness, and with resolve. The future battlefields on which Marines fight will be increasingly hostile, lethal, and chaotic. Our success will hinge, as it always has, on the leadership of our junior Marines. We must ensure that they are prepared to lead.

How do we prepare Marines for the complex, high-stakes, asymmetrical battlefield of the three block war? How do we develop junior leaders prepared to deal decisively with the

sort of real world challenges confronting Corporal Hernandez? The first step of the process is unchanged. Bold, capable, and intelligent men and women of character are drawn to the Corps, and are recast in the crucible of recruit training, where time honored methods instill deep within them the Corps' enduring ethos. Honor, courage, and commitment become more than mere words. Those precious virtues, in fact, become the defining aspect of each Marine. This emphasis on *character* remains the bedrock upon which everything else is built. The active sustainment of character in every Marine is a fundamental institutional competency -- and for good reason. As often as not, the really tough issues confronting Marines will be *moral* quandaries, and they must have the wherewithal to handle them appropriately. While a visceral appreciation for our core values is essential, it alone will not ensure an individual's success in battle or in the myriad potential contingencies short of combat. Much, much more is required to fully prepare a Marine for the rigor of tomorrow's battlefield.

An institutional commitment to lifelong professional development is the second step on the road to building the *Strategic Corporal*. The realignment of the Recruit Training and Marine Combat Training programs of instruction reveal our reinvigorated focus on individual training. Those programs remain the most important steps in the methodical process of developing capable Marines. Our Formal Schools, unit training and education programs, and individual efforts at professional education build on the solid foundation laid at recruit training and sustain the growth of technical and tactical proficiency and mental and physical toughness. The common thread uniting all training activities is an emphasis on the growth of integrity, courage, initiative, decisiveness, mental agility, and personal accountabilty. These qualities and attributes are fundamental and must be aggressively cultivated within all Marines from the first day of their enlistment to the last.

Leadership, of course, remains the hard currency of the Corps, and its development and sustainment is the third and final step in the creation of the *Strategic Corporal*. For two hundred and twenty-three years, on battlefields strewn across the globe, Marines have set the highest standard of combat leadership. We are inspired by their example and confident that today's Marines and those of tomorrow will rise to the same great heights. The clear lesson of our past is that success in combat, and in the barracks for that matter, rests with our most junior leaders. Over the years, however, a perception has grown that the authority of our NCO's has been eroded. Some believe that we have slowly stripped from them the latitude, the discretion, and the authority necessary to do their job. That perception must be stamped out. The remaining vestiges of the "zero defects mentality" must be exchanged for an environment in which all Marines are afforded the "freedom to fail" and with it, the *opportunity to succeed.* Micro-management must become a thing of the past and supervision -- that double-edged sword -- must be complemented by proactive mentoring. Most importantly, we must aggressively *empower* our NCO's, hold them strictly accountable for their actions, and allow the leadership potential within each of them to flourish. This philosophy, reflected in a recent Navy Times interview as "Power Down," is central to our efforts to sustain the *transformation* that begins with the

first meeting with a Marine recruiter. Every opportunity must be seized to contribute to the growth of character and leadership within every Marine. We must remember that simple fact, and also remember that leaders are judged, ultimately, by the quality of the leadership reflected in their *subordinates*. We must also remember that the *Strategic Corporal* will be, above all else ... a *leader of Marines.*

Conclusion

And what of Corporal Hernandez? While his predicament is certainly challenging, it is not implausible. What did he do? First, he quickly reviewed what he *knew*. He was certain that Lieutenant Franklin and 2d Squad would arrive within a matter of minutes. He knew that the crash site was located within the adjacent RMNF unit's sector and that it manned checkpoints astride Nedeed's route to the downed helo. He knew that any exchange of gunfire with Mubasa's gunmen would likely lead to civilian casualties and jeopardize the success of the humanitarian mission. Second, he considered what he *did not know*. He was uncertain of either Nedeed's or Mubasa's intentions, or of the feasibility of a rescue attempt. Based on these considerations and myriad other tangible and intangible factors, he completed a rapid assessment of the situation -- and *acted*. Corporal Sley was directed to maintain his position atop the building and continue to monitor Nedeed's progress and the status of the casualties. Hernandez then switched frequencies and contacted the Marine liaison with the adjacent RMNF unit and learned that they had already dispatched medical personnel to the helo crash site, but were unaware of Nedeed's movement and would now because of Hernandez's warning reinforce the appropriate checkpoints. By the time that transmission was completed, Lieutenant Franklin had arrived with the additional squad. With them came a neighborhood leader who had previously acted as an interpreter and mediator. Mubasa's men, apparently uncomfortable with the shift in odds, began to slowly withdraw. The mediator, a recognizable and respected figure in the community, was handed a bullhorn and addressed the crowd. Within minutes the situation was diffused: Mubasa's men had departed, the crowd was calmed, and RMNF personnel had reached the crash site. For a few tense minutes though, the fate of both 1st Squad and the overall mission had hung in the balance and on the actions of a young Marine *leader.* As would be expected, our *Strategic Corporal* -- firmly grounded in our ethos, thoroughly schooled and trained, outfitted with the finest equipment obtainable, infinitely agile, and above all else, a *leader* in the tradition of the Marines of old ... made the *right* decision.

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