

A CHILD'S CACOPHONY

Situation: I was an Airman assigned to a Special Operations Element (SOE). I spent most of my career as a SOF Enabler and enjoyed working in this environment. As on previous operations, we found ourselves at an undisclosed location prosecuting the Global War on Terrorism. This particular day a team asked me to join them to gain situational awareness on potential landing strips in the area as I was the most familiar with and had accomplished most of the airfield surveys in our area of operations. We took two non-military vehicles and proceeded to one of the airfields a few miles away. I rode in the second vehicle and discussed pros and cons with the Army Master Sergeant in charge of the team. The plan was to look at three specific airfields. We evaluated airfields one and two without incident.

As we drove closer to the third airfield we passed a group of small buildings on each side of the road. We proceeded with caution. Suddenly, accurate gunfire erupted from each side of the street and immediately disabled the first vehicle. Within seconds our vehicle was also disabled. The team leader with a sense of urgency calmly said, "Dismount...take cover". Automatic weapons fire began to shred both vehicles. During the chaos I took cover behind our vehicle while the others ended up on the opposite side of the road from me. I realized I was still in the "kill zone" and had to move. I did not want to get separated from the rest of the team; yet crossing the road under accurate fire seemed like a bad idea. I looked to my left and saw a small house with a green door. I remember taking a deep breath, running for the door, and hitting it with such force it came off the hinges. Unfortunately there was an older man standing behind it. He was rendered unconscious briefly but was otherwise unharmed. I looked around to gain situational awareness and noticed a ladder to the roof.

Once on the roof I got a good view of the situation. The rest of the team was hunkered down returning fire sporadically. I heard a woman screaming at one end of the street. I shouldered my M-4 to get a better look at the situation. Two men restrained the screaming woman. I noticed another man putting some sort of "vest" on a 10 year old child. I saw another man shooting at my team. Without hesitation I zeroed in on him and squeezed the trigger. Click. I immediately performed a malfunctions check. I realized in the midst of the chaos my trigger mechanism had taken a round rendering my rifle useless.

Following my malfunctions check, I saw the 10 year old boy wearing the vest begin to walk down the road toward my team. The woman continued screaming while the men encouraged the child forward. Though my rifle was non-functional, I continued using the recital as a spotting scope. In amazement I watched the child walk down the street through a hail of gunfire. It looked as if he wore a suicide vest. From my team's position they could not see the boy. I keyed my radio to pass the info to the team leader across the street and received no response. I checked my radio and found it too had taken a round rendering it inoperable. Only one person had a shot...me. I drew my pistol...exhaled...aimed and time stood still. A bead of sweat rolled down my left cheek. What should I do?

REFLECTION...

I squeezed the trigger. The child was killed and the bomb was not detonated. Apache helicopters arrived and allowed us enough time to regroup and jump on another helicopter. We evacuated everyone safely with no significant injuries.

This entire situation lasted only a few minutes. I often think about the split second choice of taking a life, the life of a 10 year old child. I ask myself if the child was a bonafide combatant if he and his mother were under duress. As I weigh my own core values, "Would I do things differently?" "If this was an adult would I struggle with this decision?" I would not.

Ethical Dilemma at the time of the event: Our country places high value on human life, particularly that of women and children. Did that value outweigh my loyalty and duty to the team? This value translates into wars in which the United States participates. I had a clear sight picture on the child. Should I take the shot?

Conflict or tension of the 7 Army Values? How did you resolve those conflicts? In a split second I anguished as I balanced the values of loyalty and duty to my teammates with the value of respect for women and children instilled in me by my parents and heritage. I chose the value of my teammates over the life of the child.

Consideration of Other COAs and the 2nd and 3rd order effects: 1) I could do nothing and the men at the end of the street would detonate the vest thus killing my team and the child. 2) I could shoot the men at the end of the street but, to make an effective shot, I would require a rifle. 3) I could shoot the child. This would not keep the explosives on his chest from detonating, but would keep him at a further distance from the team and limit the effectiveness of the bomb if it did detonate. I had no doubt the woman being subdued by the men was the boy's mother. How would she feel? How would insurgents use this incident in information operations against the U.S? What would I say to my own mother?

How did you get the courage to take the "harder right"? Though I feel I made the right decision I do not sleep well many nights. I realize a sound decision that occurred in seconds will perpetuate in my memory forever.