

# ALMOST A MILLIONAIRE

**Situation:** Our task force deployed to Kuwait in November 2002 in support of Operation DESERT SPRING. Essentially, we were part of a brigade combat team deployed to deter Iraqi aggression. Despite this deterrence mission, everyone in the brigade knew we would make up part of the invasion force to topple the Iraqi regime once the President made the decision to go to war. I commanded a company during this time and realized the importance of our mission. This environment created a significant sense of purpose among all the Soldiers. As a result, we trained very hard and established tremendous unit cohesion. The company performed well during the first three weeks of the war and achieved its ultimate objective of taking Baghdad.

In mid-April 2003, coalition forces defeated the Hussein regime and controlled Baghdad. Our task force seized territory near what is now known as the "Green Zone" in central Baghdad. We had the responsibility to clear and secure this entire area since the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) identified this zone as its future headquarters. We also had to secure the civilian population west of the Green Zone and on the Karada Peninsula. The transition from general war to stability operations created a chaotic environment throughout the entire city and especially the Green Zone. A mood of lawlessness gripped the populace manifested in the wide-spread looting. Unfortunately, this mood crept into the units in Baghdad.

As the commander of one of the companies, I had to keep the company focused on its security mission. Many Soldiers in the entire division had the feeling the war was over and just wanted to go home. The lack of a clear strategy reinforced the feeling the war was over. To compound this cancerous mood, our company lived in the Green Zone surrounded by the plunder of Saddam Hussein's regime. We discovered numerous opulent houses filled with thousands of brand-new weapons, gallons and gallons of alcohol, illegal narcotics, Iraqi money, and pornography. To deter temptation, I gainfully employed—and probably over tasked—my Soldiers with security patrols, humanitarian relief, checkpoint duties, and maintenance. I thought these missions would keep the Soldiers focused on official duties.

In an effort to transform the Green Zone's road network to make it friendlier to military traffic, the battalion executive officer ordered two senior-NCOs to locate chainsaws to cut down low-hanging branches. In their search, they located a small shed someone had completely surrounded with concrete and mortar. The NCOs busted through the concrete and did not find chainsaws, but instead found neatly sealed boxes each containing four million US dollars. The NCOs properly secured and reported the find—\$275 million dollars in all—to the XO. This discovery burned through the task force like a wild fire and further inflamed some Soldiers' desire to get their hands on what they referred to as "loot."

Wisely, the battalion commander ordered an immediate search of the entire Green Zone to secure anymore of this cash. The task force found two more locations of cash. On a search of their own volition, a group of Soldiers found a fourth location and devised plans on how to keep some of this looted money. These Soldiers were soon discovered the next day when two of them were caught trying to mail some of the money home. The battalion commander initiated an investigation to identify the guilty Soldiers and gain accountability of all the money.

In the ensuing investigation, the battalion XO questioned the three Soldiers caught trying to mail the money. They quickly accused my first sergeant of being part of the plot to steal some of the money. The XO believed the three Soldiers who were not from my company and thought my first sergeant had stolen money along with these three men. When he confronted my first sergeant, the 1SG denied stealing any money. However, he did admit he had witnessed the Soldiers stealing the money from one of the sheds. After further investigation, the XO ascertained that approximately \$800,000 was still missing from one of the opened cases. This revelation convinced the battalion commander and XO that my 1SG had stolen the money as the three Soldiers had claimed. My battalion commander and XO approached me to find out what I knew about the stolen money.

Until my commander approached me, I had only a vague idea of what transpired with the stolen money. I had focused all of my efforts and energy on population security, identifying local leaders, restoring power, helping to run gas stations, and a whole host of other tasks. I was shocked at my first sergeant's involvement and did not believe he could have stolen money. I immediately left the BC and BN XO and questioned my first sergeant alone about the incident. He denied stealing any money whatsoever. I was satisfied and reported my findings to the battalion executive officer the next day. When I reported to the XO the next day, someone had deposited \$800,000 on his desk about thirty minutes prior to me seeing him. This event prompted me to ask to see all the XO's evidence from his investigation.

When I examined the evidence I began to suspect my first sergeant was involved. However, I was the only one who could connect all the pieces because of my knowledge of my first sergeant and his whereabouts. For example, the note that accompanied the returned money was written in green ink on the back of beef enchilada MRE package. I knew my 1SG always wrote in green ink and only ate beef enchilada MREs. Why should I connect the dots for the XO and turn over my right hand man who was always loyal to the company and me?

## REFLECTION...

The evidence that led me to suspect my first sergeant was somewhat circumstantial, but I came to believe he was involved based on the preponderance of evidence. I had strong reason to suspect he took the money, but the money was returned now. Should I just not tell the XO what I know?

Many aspects of the situation began to weigh on my mind. First, why did I really care about this stolen money anyway? Clearly, the money was connected to the gangster Hussein regime and it did not really belong to anyone. I could not help but think of all the goods/money that Soldiers absconded home with from Europe during World War II. Second, someone returned the missing money and it was all accounted for according to the XO. Since all the money was returned, there was no more issue. The battalion commander could still turn in all the money to the CPA and there would be no scandal. Third, as most company commanders believe about their 1SGs, my first sergeant was the best I could ask for and he had performed brilliantly during the Kuwait train-up and in four weeks of combat. He had displayed extreme bravery on the battlefield against all enemies to include BMPs (Boyevaya Mashina Pekhoty-translated 'fighting vehicle of infantry') as well as extreme compassion for U.S. and Iraqi wounded. Every Soldier in the company trusted and respected him. He had always displayed extreme loyalty to me and offered wise counsel on numerous occasions. We had "THE" bond that commanders and first sergeants always want between each other.

Besides these issues, another aspect of this situation influenced me. The brigade and battalion commanders as well as the BN XO had already labeled my first sergeant as guilty. How could my information about my first sergeant's guilt further influence my superiors? If I gave them this information, would they seek serious punishment that could result in dire consequences for my first sergeant?

Ethical Dilemma at the Time of the Incident: I was left with three choices. I could tell the XO what I knew about the evidence and confirm my 1SG's guilt. Or, I could keep the information to myself and hope the XO would never figure it out. Finally, I could reprimand the 1SG myself and try to keep the issue "in-house."

At What Point Did You Say "Enough is Enough"? When And How Did You Take Action? When I knew my First Sergeant had lied to me, I decided I had had enough. Ultimately, I decided to elaborate on the XO's evidence which confirmed the first sergeant stole money. I sensed the command pressure on this issue was intense and I also thought my 1SG lied to me. Since the money was returned, the brigade and battalion commanders did not pursue any legal action against the 1SG. However, I had to reflect the first sergeant's poor judgment on his NCOER which eliminated any chance for his further promotion.

Conflict or Tension of the 7 Army Values? How Did You Resolve Those Conflicts? As with many ethical dilemmas, I held intense loyalty to my subordinate and I had to figure out how to get past those feelings to do the right thing. Honor and duty won out over loyalty. I could not help cover up his actions especially after he violated our loyalty.

Consideration of Other COAs and the 2nd and 3rd Order Effects. If I had failed to report what I knew about my 1SG, then I am sure that he would have continued to progress through the ranks of the US Army. He would have become a command sergeant major and would advise future commanders. I doubt he would have provided quality guidance to future commanders. Because of this incident, my first sergeant retired with full benefits two years after the incident.

How Did You Get the Courage To Do the Harder Right? I was motivated by my 1SG's betrayal and I knew I had to set the example for my company and Soldiers in the unit. I think both of my commanders' dedication to proper ethics gave me some strength as well.