

# CPT Erik Peterson

In the following story you will see several of the Army Values come to life as a Company Commander faces the dilemma of putting his Soldiers at risk in order to save the life of an Iraqi child.

CPT Erik Peterson had been the commander of C/2-12 CAV for 18 months when his unit was selected to establish the first company-level patrol base (later made into a JSS) in Baghdad in January, 2007. You likely saw his name many news reports at that time—his unit was the vanguard of GEN Petraeus' strategy to live and work among the Iraqi people. The site selected for the JSS was in the heart of northern Ghazalia, which for months had been a battlefield of sectarian violence. On January 9th, his company seized a large, abandoned building, and in less than three days of 24/7 operations, his Soldiers—with great support from the 299th FSB—established the defense of the patrol base, putting up Hesco barriers, Alaska barriers, fighting positions, ECPs, etc. On the fourth day, the Mahdi Army attacked the patrol base in force, and the Soldiers of WildCard company were ready, repelling the assault.

That night, conditions were terrible. Machinegun and mortar fire continued throughout the area. It was raining cats and dogs. The motor pool had become a lake, and Soldiers sank to their ankles in mud. The generator at the patrol base broke down, so there was no electricity. The radios were not working. Peterson and his Soldiers were exhausted. With the walls up and the attack repelled, they hoped that the pace would slow enough to get some rest that night.

Out of the darkness and rain, however, a frantic man and his wife approached the guards at the base's entry control point. In the man's arms was a three-year old girl who was struggling to breathe. The company medic evaluated the child and diagnosed an allergic reaction of some type. Her windpipe was swelling, and the medic gave her 30 minutes to live unless she got to a hospital.

CPT Peterson told the family to go immediately to the nearest hospital, which was in nearby Shulla. The couple's faces revealed their heartbreak and terror. They couldn't go to Shulla, they said through the company's interpreter. They were Sunni, and the Shulla hospital was controlled by the Shia. If they went there, they said, they will all die; at a minimum, the man would be killed. The couple asked if the Americans could instead transport them to the closest Sunni hospital, in Mansour, which was a considerable distance across Baghdad.

CPT Peterson weighed his options. He saw three.

One, he could refuse to transport them anywhere. After all, he had only one platoon that wasn't already committed to a mission (force protection, etc), his Soldiers were already stretched to their physical and emotional limits, and it wasn't their job to be an ambulance service... although he realized that there wasn't any ambulance service available to the family. The last thing his unit needed was to take casualties on an "unnecessary" mission.

Two, he could transport the family to the nearest hospital, even if it was controlled by the Shia militia. They could hope for good will from the Shia, and the shorter distance would pose less threat to his own Soldiers.

Three, he could scramble his Soldiers to conduct a much longer convoy, across unfamiliar roads, to get the child to the hospital in Mansour where she could receive care and her family would be safe.

CPT Peterson quickly weighed his options in his mind. "Do I let this girl die? Take the family to a Shia hospital? Or have one of my relatively green platoons travel over IED-infested roads to Mansour." He faced what he calls the ever-present "fine balance between protecting civilians and protecting my Soldiers."

The commander loved his Soldiers, that's for sure, but he also knew that his Soldiers loved being Soldiers and loved doing what Soldiers do—that is, accepting personal risk to protect the innocent and make the world better than it would be otherwise. As he saw it, he and his troops hadn't left their families for a 15-month deployment for no reason—they were there to make a difference.

"Saddle up, we're going to Mansour," he ordered. His men sprung into action. For the first time, the American officer saw a glimmer of hope in the faces of the distraught Iraqi parents. As it turned out, the convoys to and from the hospital went without incident, and the girl survived and recovered fully.

In the ensuing months, sectarian violence decreased sharply in Wildcard Company's sector.

First and foremost we see CPT Peterson demonstrate Respect for the life of the Iraqi child. He could have easily turned the parent's away and wrote it off as an "Iraqi problem," but from his experience he knew he would have probably condemned the child and possibly the family to death. He also had to weigh the risk to his men and demonstrated his personal courage as he set his fear aside and did what he thought was the right thing to do. CPT Peterson acted in the absence of orders from his superiors as he based his decision on an inner sense of what was morally right. In the long run, the efforts of CPT Peterson and his men, while exposing themselves to danger that night, may very well have reduced their risks as the violence reportedly decreased in that area.

## **Questions To Discuss With Your Soldiers...**

How would you describe to your civilian friends "Army Values"? Why is it important for Army Leaders to uphold Army Values? To what extent do you, as a soldier, uphold Army Values?

CPT Peterson demonstrates that sometimes a leader has to take a chance and act to do the right thing. What chances was CPT Peterson taking in his actions? Given these chances, what made his actions morally praiseworthy?

Consider leaders that you admire. Would you describe their decisions and actions as "following rules," "calculating consequences," "following virtuous characteristics," or some combination

thereof? How do they decide which approach is best for any given situation? How can this guide your own actions?

If you were one of CPT Peterson's soldiers, how would you react to his decision to help the Iraqi child? Would you react with enthusiasm? Would you grumblingly accept that you just have to follow orders? How would you feel about the situation?

