

KICK IN THE DOOR

Situation: While serving as an Infantry Company Commander in Baghdad, my company conducted an air assault raid in support of another battalion. After landing, we were to clear a small part of a village and capture a mortar team and their equipment. I was working alone because my battalion had been split to the four winds. My fellow company commanders and I suspected it was due to our Battalion Commander's low standing with Brigade. LTC Peretti performed abysmally at the training center five months prior and also had a bad habit of taking sides against his company commanders whenever things got bad. Things were about to get bad.

The battalion for which we were to work had seen some pretty rough time including their previous commander's death in an improvised explosive device (IED) blast weeks prior. Additionally, the enemy mortar fire had been getting more and more accurate. The success of our mission would hopefully change that. While conducting a rehearsal on a scaled mock-up of the objective, LTC Hammock walked up and watched with interest. Each squad leader and team leader addressed his portion of the mission to include the buildings for which he was responsible. After the rehearsal, LTC Hammock asked me how my men would enter the buildings. I explained that we had trained to follow a process: test and open the door by hand, kick open, shoot open with a shotgun, or breach with explosives. Upon hearing my explanation, he frowned and asked how I was going to replace the door. After proposing that I would pay \$40 for the door, \$80 for the door and labor, or even take a new door with me, he indicated that I was not thinking about second and third order effects of my aggressive actions. He asserted that kicking in the door would create more enemies in the local area (which was already very hostile) and that we should instead knock on each door and request that everyone to come out of the house. I immediately thought of how his method would endanger my Soldiers by alerting any possible enemy on the premises. After the initial disagreement LTC Hammock asked me to brief him on my plan again that evening, two hours before the aircraft were to arrive.

At the later meeting, I offered that I would move directly behind the lead team and tell them to knock only if I felt assured that it was totally safe. I would not allow my men to lose the initiative in such a dangerous situation. It completely floored me when LTC Hammock scowled at me and said, "The worst thing you can do is bring all your Soldiers home alive, and create more enemies for the next unit to deal with!" I was speechless. He equated kicking in the door of a mortar cell leader as being an unnecessary hostile act that would turn more of the populous against us. I staunchly disagreed knowing, as he did, that the last time his unit ventured into that neighborhood, they had lost a Bradley Fighting Vehicle to a deep buried IED. All my training and personal conviction demanded that I find a way to accomplish the mission and take care of my troops. When I reiterated that I would not surrender the element of surprise by knocking on the door, he told me, "You'll do it my way, or I'll pull you from the mission." I considered calling his bluff and informing my parent battalion, but I felt that LTC Peretti would not have supported me, and I would have ultimately lost the argument or even my job. What would you do with only two hours until take off, feeling hemmed in and running scant on options?

REFLECTION...

We sat there in the dead silence of the conference room for about sixty seconds. We glared at each other as I mulled over my options. I broke the silence in an agreeable tone and simply said, "Okay. We'll do it." Intending for the LTC Hammock to think that I would have my men knock on the door. He seemed pleased and dismissed me after a few more comments. I returned to my men who were waiting on the pickup zone and announced, "No change...we are executing the mission as planned."

We landed on the objective in the middle of the night, kicked in the doors and secured the area with no shots fired. Initially we had no success finding either the cell leader or the equipment. Shortly before sunrise, half of my force returned via helicopters to the FOB and the other half stayed behind out of sight on the objective. Within four hours over ten people trickled back on to the objective. Among them we apprehended the cell leader. Intelligence received from another detainee led us to an additional house where we apprehended a national level high value individual.

Although my Soldiers kicked in the door to get into the house, LTC Hammock never asked. He did not request an after action review to be done with his staff, so I did it on my own. He did not even stop by to say thanks to my platoon leaders or congratulate his Soldiers on a job well done. I took his silence as an admission that he knew he had overstepped his bounds.

Ethical dilemma at the Time of the Incident: I was balancing obeying LTC Hammock's order with maintaining the well being of my Soldiers. The order, I felt, was based on a skewed sense of "winning hearts and minds," and though probably legal, I did not view it as morally correct. Based on all the intelligence leading us to this objective, there was no reason to let our guard down or to doubt that given the opportunity the enemy would fight.

Conflict or Tension of the Army Values: The whole gambit of Army Values was on the table: loyalty to my men and to my parent brigade; duty to obey my superior; respecting what could have been LTC Hammock's more seasoned and experienced view of the issue; not tarnishing the honor my company, battalion, and brigade; maintaining integrity by doing what I said I would and by following my convictions; and having the personal courage to do the right thing.

Consider other COAs and the 2nd and 3rd Order Effects: Was there a definite right or wrong in this scenario? I felt vindicated by the outcome of the mission, but it could have just as easily turned out quite differently. If my men had been forced to use explosives to breach the door and someone inside had been hurt or killed, I would have been responsible and liable to LTC Hammock for failure to obey a lawful order, dereliction of duty and possibly other transgressions of the UCMJ.

How did you get the courage to do the harder right? Did I do what was right? I have shared this story with friends and have taught this scenario to students as a case study in the challenges of command. I do this because I feel it highlights the tension of having to choose between what seems to be two wrongs – the lesser of two evils. Had he asked me after the fact, I would have gladly told LTC Hammock that we kicked the doors in. What if my men knew about LTC Hammock's order would have set a new standard for disobedience in my company? What does that say about my integrity?