

TO SHOOT OR NOT TO SHOOT

Situation: In May 2007, my wingman and I were on a routine patrol over Southern Baghdad in our AH-64Ds when a dynamic re-tasking request was received over the radio. We changed radio frequencies to contact the supported unit. BULLDOG 07, in the vicinity of Salman Pak, identified suspected weapons traffickers moving weapons from the East side of the Tigris River to the west via boat. The BULLDOG element had identified three males loading packages onto the boat with a Raven Unmanned Aerial System. BULLDOG sent the grid to the boat, followed by clearance of fires for us, the attack weapons team, to engage upon positive identification. At approximately four kilometers from the grid, I positively identified the boat with three local national males on board. According to the rules of engagement (ROE), I had established positive identification through communications relay with BULLDOG, and his establishment of hostile intent transferred to me. He again reaffirmed clearance to fire. My front seat gunner had a positive track on the boat and requested to "spin up" a hellfire missile for launch. I looked through the screen in the back seat, and denied my gunner's request—no sense wasting a hellfire on a wooden boat. We would press in for a gun engagement. At approximately one kilometer range we "actioned" the gun. The three men looked up at us as we bore down on them with a look that I will never forget. They looked genuinely surprised that we shot at them and, from the looks on their faces, they obviously feared for their lives. But, something about their reactions and expressions made me feel that something was not right. I stood down the gunner. As the Air Mission Commander, I had ultimate authority to engage the target. Not seeing any evidence of direct fire weapons systems, I decided we would do a low pass of the target to confirm or deny the existence of the suspected weapons they were purportedly trafficking. As we approached, the three men landed the boat on the far side of the river. They quickly moved to a vehicle and sped off. We followed the vehicle with our optics, noting where it stopped. I led the flight back to the boat. We did several low passes over it, identifying several large burlap bags in the keel. Around the same time, the BULLDOG platoon arrived on the West side of the river and provided over-watch of the area. They again cleared us for fire on the boat. There was no chance of getting any dismounted or mounted element across the river to investigate. Should I shoot?

REFLECTION...

I decided since the boat was over-watched by a significant amount of combat power, I would land the aircraft, dismount the gunner, and investigate the boat. I instructed my wingman to conduct area security on the far side of the river around my aircraft. This was risky business, as I was totally vulnerable in my \$35 million aircraft sitting on the riverbank. The gunner dismounted amid blowing tumbleweeds. He ran to the boat, stood on the bow and flipped up the burlap sacks. He then returned to the aircraft, strapped in, and connected his comms harness... "Fish, Sir. That's all there is, a bunch of damned fish." I returned to base and was de-briefed. At my unit I was greeted with a mix of reactions for my decision at the river. Some considered my actions careless and risky. Others considered my actions appropriate and just. As is always the case, the flight recorder was on and captured all that had occurred that day. The commander used the actions and decisions of the river incident in subsequent discussions, pointing out both the pros and cons of my actions.

Ethical Dilemma at the Time of the Incident: The dilemma I faced was whether or not to pull the trigger and kill the men on the boat, destroy the suspected cargo, and their means of transporting the suspected cargo.

Rules / Laws that Apply: The ROE are one set of rules that apply during combat operations. During this event we were all briefed on the ROE and were working within those parameters.

Conflict or Tension of the 7 Army Values? How Did You Resolve Those Conflicts? To say I thought through the seven Army values during this incident would not be a true statement. But I know these values are so engrained within me that the decisions I make, especially in battle, are like second nature...they just happen. I don't want to sound like I make right decisions all the time. I'm only human. I do know the values instilled in me from my up-bringing, my training, and my life experiences have brought me thus far in life; and, I'm still living life like everyone else, I learn something every day! As I see it, there are values instilled within me that helped guide my decisions at the river. The fact the Army has an acronym, LDRSHIP, that describes some of the everyday actions of U.S. service members is helpful and serves as guidelines for Soldiers to live by. Upon reflection of the day at the river, I believe that Duty, Selfless Service, Honor, and Personal Courage stand out as the guiding values.

Duty: I did my duty to know the whole situation and make the right decision based on the facts. As the Air Mission Commander, it is my responsibility for the accomplishment of the mission and I want to ensure it is done right.

Selfless Service: It must also be known that I, and many of the Soldiers I serve with, am not in the military for the glory and the fame – whatever the reason, I would venture to say that most of our reasons to serve resonate deeper than personal glory.

Honor: There is no honor in killing, only in defeating our enemies. The way I saw it, if we had engaged the boat, we would have killed innocents whose families would have possibility joined the insurgency, or at the very least aided them as retribution. Even if we had only engaged the boat, we might have destroyed their livelihood. This would be far from honorable in my eyes.

Personal Courage: You either have it or you don't...my experience tells me there is very little middle ground on this. I used calculated lunacy in my decision to land my aircraft on the riverbank. As I think about it, I guess I needed to get some closure for the suspected weapons trafficking incident. I knew I had over watch from the far side and from my wingman; but, the "unknown" is a very real threat in Iraq. The boat could have been rigged to explode. There could have been an ambush close by. To take the risk to land and investigate was placing mine, and others', lives at stake. I needed to know that I made the right decision.

How Did You Get the Courage To Do the Harder Right? Ultimately, I was the one who had to live with my decision that day. Did I make the right decision not to engage a boat and kill three men who were suspected of trafficking weapons? Did I make the right decision to land and investigate the boat? Had matters turned out worse I guess I would not be here to answer the question, but as it turned out, I did not kill three innocent men that day, my \$35 million dollar aircraft was not sabotaged, and not a Soldier was harmed. The way I see it, I made the right decision and I can sleep well at night with this knowledge.