

L200- Crucible Experience

MAJ Ryker Horn

SG18B

Mr. Ames

6 February 2009

Warren G. Bennis and Robert J. Thomas state in their writings, *Crucibles of Leadership*, that a crucible is a transformative experience through which an individual comes to a new or altered sense of identity. They further explain that it is usually associated with a negative event in one's life. Well, my crucible was certainly initiated by a world level negative event, 11 September 2001, but my analysis of my own sense of identity would come much later as I was faced with a possible pending negative event as a result of 11 September 2001, Operation Iraqi Freedom. I was a Battery Commander of an Airborne Artillery Battery in the 82nd Airborne Division and I had just received orders to deploy my unit in support of the Invasion of Iraq, more so I was told to be prepared to conduct an Airborne Assault into Bagdad International Airport. My heart sank, everything I had trained for up to this point was at the forefront, but even more, I was in command of 150 soldiers that I would take into combat, some may not return. Questions, questions. Had I trained my organization to deal with situations in combat, I even questioned whether I was ready to lead them into combat, many more would reveal themselves to me but I knew that it was now real and I had to be a leader of my soldiers, instill confidence in them and that the time for training was over, it was time to go to war. I will describe three things that I focused on during this time, the stress now on my organization, influencing my unit through envisioning, a focus on the future and finally a reflection on my and the leaders in my units leadership in combat.

By all rights this crucible event, rather the deployment and pending start of combat, put a lot of stress on my unit and their families as day in and day out we glued our eyes to the news watching as the political resolve between the U.S and Sadaam Hussein broke down. I knew first off that the stress needed to be controlled. I could not allow it to get out of hand. FM 22-51

outlines that control in the army relates directly to focused thinking and action within the army and a unit. The manual goes on to state that uncontrolled stress on a unit will bring about erratic or harmful behavior that disrupts or interferes with the accomplishment of the unit mission. Overarching, my mission was to prepare for combat, fully deploy all my men and equipment, fight this war and bring everyone home. That is how simple I tried to convey it to my men, but how did I ensure their confidence in me that I will not fail them. Well, by ensuring that they would not allow me to fail. By communicating the plans and orders given to me I gave my unit buy in, what I knew, all of them knew. I contribute these open lines of communication as the single one thing that didn't allow for the stress to get out of control. Not to say that it wasn't stressful, damn sure was, but the leaders of my unit managed it so that we could make clear and concise decisions for the unit.

The open communication not only controlled the stress but it also provided a focus on the future for my unit, a vision on what is to become. Our leadership 111 readings provide insight from two authors, Dr. Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus. Mr. Nanus describes that the right vision attracts commitment and energizes people, creates meaning in one's life, establishes a standard of excellence, and bridges the present and future. All of these provide a description of my unit's future end state. Though, at the time, I didn't know who these two scholars were nor had I read anything from them, I wanted my unit to understand what was to become of our future. I clearly outlined the timeline of events that would occur from deployment all the way to combat. I clearly defined through my operations order the phases that all these actions would take place and furthermore what I expected our unit end state to be, how we would accomplish our mission. Nanus goes on to say that leaders should live the vision through their actions and behaviors and that only through these leaders' actions and behaviors it will foster the followers to a

commitment and sense of urgency for the accomplishment of the vision. I wasn't going to tell my soldiers what to do if I wasn't willing to do it myself; lead by example was my model. In my leadership philosophy I adopted the NCO creed of BE, KNOW, DO. Never do or saying anything to my soldiers unless I was willing to do our say it myself, hence lead by example, especially in combat.

Lastly, I personally reflected on my ability to lead in combat, was I ready? Did I have everything I needed to bring forth the intestinal fortitude that when the bullets and bombs started to rain, would I be able to lead my unit when chaos was all around? I fell back again on my leadership philosophy and the NCO creed, BE, KNOW, DO. Leadership 206 readings reflect on the writings of Peter S. Kindvatter, "Leadership in Combat" from *American Soldiers*. Kindvatter discusses that in combat a leader must be Technically and Tactically proficient, take care of his men, and be willing to share the hardships and dangers. Again, having not read this before now, I took on those very things that he discussed and outlined that I must be an expert artillerymen, know my trade inside and out so that when the hard decision needed to be made I would be the subject matter expert not only in how and when to employ fire support but also airborne operations if we were going to conduct an airborne assault on Bagdad International Airport. I vowed that not only was I going to earn the respect of my men through my competence but that I was also going to do everything in my power to ensure that they were taken care of. By this, I mean that they would be well equipped, trained and rested for the mission at hand. The army is responsible for providing for those needs, but I was responsible for doing everything in my power to ensure those needs were being met. Finally, I had vowed, that with uncertainty of the future conditions that I would endure all the hardship and dangers that my unit faced. I understood that there would be opportunities as the commander to be afforded comforts that may

not be accessible to my soldiers, like showers, hot meals, coffee for example. I vowed that I would be the last to get any of these things, before my entire unit got them first. One thing that always stands out, if my unit got hot chow for a meal, my 1SG and I were always the last to eat. I made sure every soldier ate first before me.

In conclusion, my crucible experience, the realization that I would be and did lead soldiers in combat was life changing. You go through your military career training and preparing for the day when you will have to employ yourself and unit in combat, but when that day comes you have to know, truly know that you have done everything in your power to prepare yourself and your unit for mission accomplishment. If you haven't done everything then you are failing the very soldiers and their families you have sworn to defend and you not need be in this craft. B/2-319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment succeeded in its mission, we crossed the border into Iraq and fought all the way to Bagdad, providing the enemy every opportunity to give his life for his country. How did we accomplish the mission? We did it as one, together.

Works Cited

1. L106: Organizational Stress Reading B. Extracts from Chapter 1 of FM 22-51: Leaders Manual for Combat Stress Control
2. L111: Influencing Organizations through Envisioning. Reading A: Vision: Bradley, Lee M. *The Concept of Providing Focus for the Future*.
3. L206: Developing Leaders in Combat. Reading L206RC. Kindsvatter, Peter S. "Leadership in Combat", *American Soldiers*.