

MY CRUCIBLE EXPERIENCE: LEADERSHIP THROUGH FIRE OIF 07-09

MAJ Thérèse L. Obidinski

L200: Leadership Applied Crucible Essay

ILE AY 12-01, SG 24E, Mr. John Ukleya

January 9, 2012

*We are about to embark on a great campaign. This will be the decisive campaign. Your children, one day, will open their books in school and study our contributions. There's no place I'd rather be than with you during the most decisive period of time.*¹

--MG Jeffrey Hammond, 4th ID Commanding General

As I boarded the plane to Iraq with the 4th Infantry Division Headquarters, I felt sad about leaving my 4-year-old daughter for 15 months. When the commanding general shook my hand his grip encouraged confidence and I knew I was where I was needed. Little did I know how soon that confidence would be tested. According to professors Warren G. Bennis and Robert J. Thomas, a crucible is “a transformative experience through which an individual comes to a new or an altered sense of identity” and usually requires the skills “to conquer adversity and emerge stronger and more committed than ever.”² My leadership ability was tested when placed in charge of the Multi-National Division Baghdad (MND-B) G7 Information Operations key leader engagement cell. My crucible experience required me to quickly react and to lead my team in developing a plan on short suspense after a suicide bombing at the most holy mosque in Baghdad. Upon reflection, I better learned the importance of building relationships, gaining and maintaining situational awareness (SA) and situational understanding (SU), and the integration of organizational power and influence on a leader's ability to affect an organization's operations.

Building relationships within the Division staff and on the streets of Baghdad were crucial if our operations were to be successful. While responsible for developing and synchronizing the Division's general officer and key leader engagements, I quickly learned that our task was to close the information gaps between realities on the ground and perceptions among the Baghdad populace amidst a complex counter-insurgency environment. As a newly promoted Major in theater, who never served on Division level staff, I was tested by immediate tasks. I knew I could not accomplish my mission without the help of others within my cell and

across the Division staff. I built relationships with other military officers and noncommissioned officers. I circulated throughout the headquarters to participate in planning working groups, to greet people and coordinate requirements, and dined with our civilian cultural advisors, contractors, and military personnel. I travelled with our Commanding General (CG) to conduct tribal engagements, which allowed me to see firsthand effects of our planning and enabled our staff to see the benefits of building personal relationships with Iraqi leaders to enhance future planning. Over time, the Division staff observed my contributions to planning meetings, briefings, ability to learn from others, and effectively plan and integrate our engagement operations.

As organizational leaders, we must be able to gain and maintain situational awareness (SA) and situational understanding (SU) to empower the commander's ability to make timely decisions through accurately framing the problem set, analyzing the operating environment, and communicating clear guidance and intent. From 2008 through early 2009, the division's successful Spring campaign to deny insurgents and criminal groups the ability to launch attacks from Sadr City into the green zone provided greater SA.³ Our work intensified to influence the populace of security, civil capacity, and quality of life gains achieved through the partnership among coalition forces, Iraqi security forces, and the Government of Iraq. We influenced the division to realize a better SU "... that we were fighting a war of perceptions in the Baghdad theater of public opinion at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels."⁴ My participation with the CG's tribal engagements better enhanced our SA and SU of the operating environment and provided immediate feedback for future planning. The G7 placed me in charge of our robust engagement cell in late December 2008 when our engagement chief and the deputy, both Lieutenant Colonels, departed theater.⁵ My crucible experience commenced with a literal bang.

In early January 2009, a suicide bomber detonated, killed, and wounded many Shiite pilgrims at a checkpoint near the Khadimiyah shrine as they were preparing for the Islamic holy day of Ashura.⁶ Within minutes of intelligence reporting of this event, the G7 rapidly approached my desk. With the two Lieutenant Colonels gone, he ordered me to produce an engagement plan for our commanding general, higher Corps headquarters, and for officials within the Baghdad Army's operation center within an hour and a half. After quickly assessing the information and clarifying the guidance from my G7, I knew I had to gather my team and provide my own guidance for the formulation of a workable plan.

I realized that my ability to integrate organizational power and influence over my team required me to leverage a leadership style consisting of both compliance or position power and personal power or commitment from my team. I first assembled the other military planner, a Major and my noncommissioned officer to briefly explain the situation. I asked them for their cooperation to gather information from the liaison teams and the unit working in the Khadimiyah area and to assess what unit actions were taking place. Next, I assembled my civilian cultural advisors, human terrain team, and policy advisor and advised them of the gravity of the suicide bombing near the shrine. This was not a training exercise. This was the real deal. I needed their help to develop an engagement plan with the top five leaders within the Khadimiyah area to include the Iraqi Army leader in the area and Iraqi government spokesman. I tasked them to list in priority of engagement from Division level down with proposed talking points within 1 hour. Through the rational influence technique, using collaboration, persuasion, and integration of soft power of personal appeals, I formed an ad-hoc crisis-working group. Soliciting their input and feedback, I collaborated with our civilian cultural advisors and policy advisor from State to discuss ideas regarding leaders and messages that we wanted to spread through the populace.

Once the cultural team lead was in control of her section, I left the group to focus on other areas of the plan. Upon reflection, I had gained commitment from my civilian counterparts using my personal power from the relationships I had built when I arrived in theater and through my own participation in the planning process. As our tentative plan came together, I checked the progress of tasks that I gave to my peer and my noncommissioned officer. I was flexing position-power or compliance through hard influence technique as I pressured them to work faster to get vital unit information. There was some visible stress and rebuttal in their remarks; but I firmly told them that this was critical and I needed them to do it now. I ordered my noncommissioned officer to call the brigade again. Forty minutes later, I assembled our team to review the refined plan. When I presented the plan to our G7, he was visibly pleased. We completed this critical task in one hour. We sent it forward through the chain of command. I then gathered my entire team, conducted an after action review, thanked them for their cooperation, and praised their good work.

My crucible experience taught me the importance of building relationships, gaining and maintaining situational awareness (SA) and situational understanding (SU), and the integration of organizational power and influence on a leader's ability to affect an organization's operations. I had enjoyed a variety of leadership positions within the Army; however, my deployment experience was the true test of my ability. We developed a workable plan so quickly, because we formed a cohesive team and understood the operational environment. I could not have achieved or evolved as a leader without the cooperation of others. The experience I gained in Iraq, has made me more committed than ever to be a successful organizational leader.

¹ Victor O'Brien. "4ID Commander Bids Farewell." *The Ivy Leaves: Official Publication of the National 4th Infantry (Ivy) Division Association, Vol LXXXX No 2*, (Dec 2007): 4. <http://a-1-8.org/Docs/Leaves/dec07/dec2007.pdf> (accessed December 15, 2011).

² Warren G. Bennis and Robert J. Thomas, "Crucibles of Leadership." *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 80 Issue 9, (September 2002): 40. *Business Source Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 15, 2011).

³ Therese Obidinski, "Operationalizing Information Engagement." *IOSphere: The Professional Journal of Joint Information Operations*, (Winter 2010): 18. http://www.au.af.mil/info-ops/iosphere/10winter/iosphere_win10_obidinski.pdf (accessed December 21, 2011).

⁴ Ibid. 18

⁵ Our G7 noted that from our 2007 deployment, "our engagement cell grew from one Major to a twelve-man cell with an expansion that also included a political advisor, cultural advisor, Cultural/Political Assessment Cell (CPAC), several IO contractors, and Engagement Coordinators for all the BCT S7 sections to assist with the ever-growing demand for engagement support." In late December 2008, our engagement chief departed theater for a conference and the deputy departed on emergency leave. Frank Zimmerman. "Attack, Attack, Attack Information Operations: Multi-national Division Baghdad (4th Infantry Division) December 2007 to February 2009" *IOSphere: The Professional Journal of Joint Information Operations*, (Winter 2010): 11. http://www.au.af.mil/info-ops/iosphere/10winter/iosphere_win10_zimmerman.pdf (accessed December 21, 2011).

⁶ Ashura occurs on the 10th day of Muharram in the Islamic calendar. It is a day of mourning for Shia Muslims to commemorate the martyrdom of Husyan Ibn Ali, the grandson of Mohammed at the Battle of Karbala on 10 Muharram in the year October 10, 680 AD. Jean-Marc Pierre, Edward Hutchinson, and Hassan Abdulrazak. "THE SHI'A REMEMBRANCE OF MUHARRAM: An Explanation of the Days of Ashura and Arba'een." *Military Review*, (March 2007): 61-69. http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20070430_art012.pdf (accessed December 28, 2011).