

I will always be haunted by the events that happened on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June 2004. I was the Commander of an infantry rifle company from the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in an austere firebase operating in Zabol Province, Afghanistan. That day I learned more about myself, my men, and human nature than I could have ever thought possible. The debris from a 60mm illumination round struck a small child in a small village outside of Qalat and killed him. Previously, I approved the target prior to the village's cordon and search. In the next seventy-two hours I learned what a crucible experience was, as I was forced to go beyond myself as a leader, and take my organization through this crisis.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of June 2004, at approximately 0035, one round of 60mm illumination was fired from Firebase Lagman, my company's firebase, at TGT KC4340, a creek bed to the town's north. The illumination round purpose was to prevent an unobserved departure of Taliban forces through the creek bed running north and south from the village. Two days prior to this operation, an Improvised Explosive Detonation (IED) struck my convoy outside of this village and three Soldiers were injured. We had intelligence that the IED trigger man was inside a specific compound within the village.

This mission was a joint operation with local Afghan forces and my company was providing the outer cordon for the operation. Once the cordon was established, we fired the illumination round to the north of the village as a signal to the Afghanistan government forces, National Directorate of Security, Police, and Afghanistan Military Forces, to begin the search. The illumination round detonated over the village. The round's fuse and fins struck Basio Ahmed, an eight month old baby, on the abdomen.

The baby died. The child was asleep on the outside of his compound when the incident occurred. The father, Muhammad Naeem, witnessed the event and brought the child to our firebase for treatment. The target overlay matched the target list worksheet, and shows a separation of 800 meters from the town's most northern portion. Company B, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 35th Infantry senior line Medic examined the child and determined the cause of death was that of a blunt object projectile to the abdomen as a result of an illumination round fuse and fin impact.

My company had been in contact with the enemy numerous times prior to this and experienced firefights, IEDs, and indirect attacks. The death of an innocent child had quite an impact upon all of us. Immediately after we discovered what happened, my mortar section and Fire Support Officer took the death pretty hard. I first went over to my mortar team that had fired the mission and talked to them about what had happened. One of my Soldiers was in tears and blamed himself for the incident. Incidentally, this Soldier had a son born six months prior to the deployment. I talked to him indicating that he had done a job and that the responsibility for the accident was mine as the Commander. I told him that he and his buddies did not have a say in the matter. It was very difficult to explain to an eighteen year old Soldier why this happened and even harder to try to convince him that he was not to blame.

My Fire Support Officer was a young Lieutenant on his first deployment and was also extremely shaken up by the event. He plotted the target and was blaming himself for the incident. I sat him down and the two of us conducted a quick After Action Review of the event and re-ran the data. It turned out that the target was in fact accurately plotted 800 meters north of the village, but unfortunately, the maps that we were using did not

accurately account for the Village's growth. Once again, I indicated to him that the responsibility was mine alone, the situation was tragic, but he should not let this eat him up. I reminded him of his role as the leader of both the Fires cell and the mortars and the importance of keeping our team intact.

I have replayed this event almost daily in my mind for the past five years. My leadership style has been significantly changed. First of all, my belief in the sanctity of life is much stronger and I have a deeper appreciation for war's impact a civilian population. When I had to look that father in the eye and explain to him what happened...I felt the world was falling down on top of me. My Battalion Commander visited me shortly after this event and helped me get through this tragedy. I learned from him that even leaders sometimes need to talk. I learned the strength of empathy in those seventy-two hours...from my boss, from my Soldiers, and from Ahmed's family. I will take that lesson with me forever.

I learned how important it is for an organization to come together after a traumatic event and move forward. I brought the company in that night and told them what happened and was amazed at the level of support they gave each other. I cannot adequately describe in words how a bunch of professional, steely-eyed killers can transform into caring and supportive team players when they sense that some of their own are having problems, in this case the mortar section. My company grew from this experience and became better Soldiers and Men.

My understanding of humanity was changed that day. I saw that the same young men who can rush into a cave with grenades and kill Taliban fighters without hesitation, could shed tears over a two year old boy. I learned that my Soldiers were not machines

and that I had to make sure that I understood them on all levels. Luckily for me, I spent quite a bit of time with my mortar section and knew their values, beliefs, and more importantly, understood how it all would affect them....a term that I think has been referred to as Emotional Intelligence.

In regards to how this has influenced me as an organization leader; well, it has emphasized a couple of key points that we have discussed over the last couple of months. First of all, I learned the importance of a leader's reaction to a critical incident during an organizational crisis. I believe that a leader must take responsibility for everything that happens to his unit...good or bad. I learned that the unit has to be a learning organization. I put into place measures to ensure that the SDZ for any illumination rounds were placed 1500 meters away from any population center, and informed my higher headquarters about the map discrepancies.

I learned that an organizational leader must take the time to conduct "azimuth checks" with his subordinates in order to find out how they are doing after a traumatic incident. Most Soldiers will talk to their leaders if there is a positive climate prior to any event. Lastly, I learned the advantages of having an environment where leaders from all levels take care of each other. This is a critical component of developing a good organizational climate.

The 24<sup>th</sup> of June is always a day of reflection for me and it always will be. I have seen a lot of things in my short thirty-five years, but this one affected me deeply. It changed me as a person, a Soldier, and a leader.