



Crisis of Command: Excerpt

Book coming out September 9th

I took the opportunity as the trucks started offloading all the logistics, to walk around the platoon position. As an executive officer who surveyed platoon positions in Ramadi, I had developed a skill at seeing what the platoon leadership didn't want you to see. It was clear all the Soldiers at the position had the thousand-mile stare and needed sleep. None of them wore blouses, and all their tee shirts were disgusting. The gym was made of dirt, ammo cans, and tires. I could tell they had all shaved for our arrival, because they still had tan lines from where their beards protected against the sun previously. This implied standards slipped when leaders left, but Soldiers of the platoon were cognizant enough to put on a fake front when visitors arrived. I concluded that the Soldiers on this base didn't come from the same planet as the creatures on Bagram who kept their weapons in trash bags. These were the warriors from my planet. I loved everything about them.

After a tour of the position from the platoon commander, I walked up to one of the security posts, and asked the young soldier to tell me about his post. He stood up and pointed to a clear ridge line about a kilometer away from the position. "That's Pakistan sir" he said as he pointed. "See the black spot two fingers from the big bush? That's the mortar firing positions the Taliban uses to shoot at us. It's super frustrating sir, because we aren't allowed to shoot back across the border." I wanted to tell him that he always had the right to self-defense, but the situation was complicated. Self-defense typically relates to a personal firearm. The mortar firing position was outside of his rifle's effective range. He could range it with machine guns, rockets, or mortars, but at that distance it was harder to claim self-defense. Plus, despite the self-defense angle, if he created an international incident, it probably wouldn't end well for the young enlisted Soldier. So I said nothing. I fist bumped the young Soldier and walked back to my truck.

I sat in my truck still waiting on the logistical download and contemplated the obvious problems with this platoon's position. The position was created on a main infiltration line used by the Taliban crossing into Afghanistan from Pakistan. But American politicians weren't willing to enter Pakistan to wage war against our enemies. When the attacks of 9-11 happened, George Bush stated that America would make no distinction between the terrorists and the countries who harbored terrorists. Yet even the dirty Army specialist on post three understood the Taliban's home base was western Pakistan. I knew from my CIED research, that Miramshaw Pakistan, which was right across the border, translated to city of matches. Miramshaw was known for the large match factory in the center of town. Potassium chlorate is the main resource used to make matches. In my AO at that time, all we had were homemade IEDs utilizing potassium chlorate as the explosive. My entire purpose as a CIED team leader was "getting left of the boom." In other words, through analytics and action, disrupting supply routes preventing IEDs from ever getting emplaced in the AO. But it was infuriating, because we knew exactly where the IEDs came from, but we weren't willing to do anything about it.

The more time I spent in Afghanistan, I was also struck by the Taliban's organization. They were clearly a conventional force. They lacked American's version of morals. But American's Just War Theory has always been fundamentally flawed. You don't need to be Just to win a war. You just need conviction to do what it takes to win. While our theories of justice were different, our wartime methods were very similar. The Americans used Kuwaiti bases to facilitate logistics, the Taliban used western Pakistan. It was funny to think about a Muslim man my age flying into the Peshwar Pakistan airport, with the same ambiguous guidance as me, ultimately being shuffled into the same part of Pakitka Afghanistan as me.

I never received clarity during my entire deployment if the Taliban were considered a terrorist threat by our government. I thought it was relevant since I was deployed under the banner of the global war on terrorism. By definition a terrorist is a non-state actor. Did we make the Taliban terrorists when we drove them out of Afghanistan? I understood the need to have a military response on Al Qaeda, a true terrorist organization per the definition, but what were we doing at this point? If the purpose of the mission in Afghanistan evolved, was this platoon's mission tied to the new operational and strategic goals?

The platoon outpost position was a product of a local battalion commander trying to limit the Taliban's freedom of movement at a level of aggression not congruent with the operational design of the current wartime plans. For a historical example, there were many parallels from the American War in Afghanistan to the German War in World War I. The Germans went into World War I using the Schlieffen plan. The Schlieffen plan was a German war design addressing fighting war against the French and Russians on a two front war simultaneously. There were many reasons the plan failed. I concluded something seemingly obvious yet not often discussed: Germany lost as soon as they executed a plan fighting a war on two fronts. If the German politicians had any sense, they would have secured Russia or France as an ally, and if unable, taken measures to prevent battle at all costs. What nation would be stupid enough to build a plan requiring a two-front war? World War I was completely preventable by the Germans. It was always painful listening to military academics describe something as simple as the Schlieffen plan's failures. Military academics always started the problem assuming the geo-political conditions were unavoidable. We never discussed how generals should better advise politicians on diplomatic/wartime initial plans. Instead, the tactical military problem clouded our ability to identify the seam between politics and military where all wars are won or lost. The academics

offered a myriad of marginally interesting but mostly irrelevant details for Germany's failures: "The plan failed because of modified plans... what about train capability... or how about Belgium... don't forget about Russia's response time." It often appeared that academics heightened education prevented clarity of thought. As soon as I understood the German's initial plan was a two front war, I had a hard time paying attention to the details.

But there was another obscure reason the Schlieffen plan failed. I independently studied the opening gambit of World War I through a series of YouTube videos. Everyone knows in a game of chess, much of the game is largely decided on the opening. The Germans attempted quickly defeating the French before turning their attention to the Russians. Striking first, the Germans quickly enveloped the French, but German General Kluck penetrated faster and beyond his adjacent units. The German military leadership, worried about a disheveled front, ordered a retreat to regain order of their line. The lost tempo and retreat by the Germans ultimately resulted in stagnation, trench warfare, and played a role in the disintegration of the Schlieffen plan. Shortly after the stagnation in France, the Germans spread their forces thousands of miles apart addressing Russian troops on the eastern front. The war was lost from the very beginning. Comparatively, the Americans failed the opening gambit of their Afghanistan war for similar reasons. They had an opportunity to kill Osama Bin Laden early in the war with Task Force 58. But they failed enveloping the Tora Bora region due to the same misplaced restraint. General Mattis commanded Task Force 58 during the missed opportunity. But the restraint emplaced on Task Force 58 came from Rumsfeld's misguided love affection for special forces. Following the failed opening gambit in Afghanistan, the Americans then started a war on a second front in Iraq.

The two front approach had obvious problems. But both the Americans, Germans, and military academics across the globe failed grasping the balance between centralized and

decentralized control at the appropriate moments in warfare. It appeared political/military balance seemed out of reach in the modern nation-state warfare model. Consequently, unsuccessful opening war gambits forced operational design changes mid-war. The operational design of the German Army in World War I morphed into a plan of attrition against the French. But the battle of Verdun historically exemplified how changing operational plans don't always account for pre-existing thinking styles of mid-level military commanders. At Verdun, German commanders from the battalion level and up sought battle with one goal in mind: kill the enemy. The German soldier's aggressive behavior was an effective tool when the war time strategy required quick tempo. But it worked against the Germans when the new approach required restraint. Perhaps similarities are not surprising since the American military had such a love fascination with studying the German military. It always bothered me Americans fixated on a military who hadn't won a war in centuries. The Germans consistently lost wars because they couldn't link tactical aggression with operational design. How could our leaders not see the parallel? Was the same thing happening in Afghanistan? Did our operational plan morph into something requiring a war of attrition? If so, was this platoon position on the border of Pakistan overly aggressive in the same manner as the Germans at Verdun? Should we be exercising more restraint? And where the fuck were the American Generals for that matter? Had any of them ever stepped foot in this platoon outpost. And if they had, why didn't they ask the same questions?