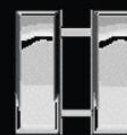


CompanyCommand

Building Combat-Ready Teams



To: Company-Level Leaders
From: Company-Level Leaders

Carrying the Weight of War

With the war in Iraq ended and the war in Afghanistan winding down, we are a profession with more than a decade's worth of combat experiences. To learn all that we can from those wars—as individual leaders and as a profession—it's crucial that we reflect upon them. We need to tell our own stories, listen to others' stories and talk with each other about what they mean. The lessons of our past must inform our future.

This month, we share a story experienced seven years

ago in Iraq. As we engage with this story of one platoon leader during a 30-hour period on May 6–7, 2007, we experience the war from his perspective and likely make connections to our own experiences. War is the toughest, most unforgiving place. Many of us have been there before; some of us are there now; all of us must be prepared to fight and win there in the years to come. May this true story inspire us to work relentlessly to develop cohesive, well-trained teams and agile, resilient leaders.

Army 1st Lt. Matthew Rowe was in downtown Baghdad with half his platoon at approximately 0200 hours on a warm May night. The explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) team that his patrol was securing had just cleared an improvised explosive device (IED) site. It was time to return to his forward operating base (FOB) located on the southern outskirts of Baghdad.

Rowe had two important decisions to make—which route to take back to FOB Liberty and whether to drive “white light” or “blackout.” These were not unusual decisions; he made them almost every mission. Yet tonight, for some reason, they felt unusually significant.

All routes from his location were categorized as “black”—to be used only when absolutely necessary due to the high frequency of IEDs on them. No route appeared any better than the other. Rowe noticed an unusually high number of military-age males milling around on the streets, watching the American Soldiers. He decided to take the same route home that he had taken to get here. It was the most direct route, and it had been safe an hour ago, which was more than he knew about other possible routes. To mitigate the risk, Rowe directed his patrol to drive on the left side of the roadway, which was different from how they had approached the area.

Rowe also decided to have his patrol of up-armored Humvees move with their vehicle headlights on. It was a trade-off. Headlights enable Soldiers to more readily identify threats—pressure plates along the road, infrared-beam generators on posts or trees, and roadside IEDs. Headlights, however, also make it easier for an insurgent triggerman to accurately target a vehicle with a command-detonated IED. Rowe picked his poison. Based on his knowledge of the

threat in the area, he judged the main threat to be infrared-activated IEDs, which are best countered by visual identification. Convoying back, Rowe's truck was second on the order of march.

WHHHHOOOOOMMM!!! A flash to his front.

The lead vehicle's driver screamed over the net. “White 3 is hit! White 3 is hit!” White 3 was Staff Sgt. Virgil (Chance) Martinez, the commander of the lead truck and senior NCO on the mission.

“How bad?” Rowe asked.

“He's unconscious.”

“Is your vehicle still operational?”

“Yes.”

Rowe knew that a nearby small American FOB included an aid station staffed by a physician's assistant (PA). Given the apparent severity of Martinez's injury, however, he decided to continue toward the more extensive medical facilities in the international zone (IZ).

“Keep moving, straight to the IZ,” Rowe ordered.

Whomp-WHHHHOOOOOMMM!!!

Two nearly simultaneous blasts lit the sky in front of Rowe—one about 20 meters to his front, the other about 100 meters out. He heard small-arms fire, and then the louder return fire of his vehicles' gunners.

Rowe's mouth went dry and his stomach got a sinking feeling. He tried to look through the small windows in his up-armored Humvee with his night-vision goggles, but he could see only the green silhouettes of darkened buildings. His platoon was stopped in one of the few places in Baghdad with operating streetlights. He felt like he and his Soldiers were actors on a stage, seen by all yet unable to see into the darkness beyond the spotlights.



Above: A platoon in up-armored Humvees (left) provided security for an explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) team and a recovery team after an improvised explosive device (IED) exploded in Baghdad in 2007. Right: The EOD team detonates an IED embedded in a Baghdad street.



With Rowe's gunners pouring 7.62 mm machine-gun fire into the darkness, the attackers withdrew. The loud firefight stopped, replaced by the low rumble of idling vehicles. After taking a quick drink of water to regain his voice, Rowe called for reports and moved his truck forward to pull security for the now heavily damaged lead truck. The two trucks behind him were unharmed.

As his platoon's mission transitioned to treating casualties, Rowe wasn't sure what he should do: *Stay on the radio and report? Get out on the ground and risk becoming a casualty myself? The section leader is already down. If I go down, the patrol will be led by a young sergeant.* Rowe's driver hurried to the damaged truck to render first aid. Two EOD personnel also rushed forward. They carried the injured gunner into their EOD vehicle and began treating him. The driver was less seriously wounded. Rowe's antenna was damaged, so he typed out reports and a request for a quick reaction force (QRF) using his Blue Force Tracker (BFT). Rowe's driver ran back and reported to his lieutenant.

"Martinez is dead," he said.

"Are you sure?" Rowe asked.

From his turret, Rowe's gunner interjected in disbelief. "He's not dead. He's probably just unconscious," he said. It seemed impossible to believe that this strong and respected leader, Rowe's friend and sidekick on more than 160 missions, could be dead. Rowe's driver ran back to the first truck, checked again and returned.

"He's dead, sir. I know a dead body when I see one."

The QRF arrived from FOB Justice, a joint Iraqi-U.S. base that was only two blocks away. Rowe ordered his rear truck

to come forward and hook a tow strap to the immobilized lead vehicle. Escorted by the QRF, the patrol moved black-out to the nearby FOB.

As soon as the patrol entered the gate at FOB Justice, it was swarmed by Soldiers. People pulled the casualties from the vehicles. They began asking for battle-roster numbers, casualty feeder cards and debriefings. Rowe intended to call his commander and tell him personally what had happened, since all he had been able to do with the BFT was type messages.

Then it hit him. *All of this is crazy. My number-one priority needs to be checking on my guys who are wounded.*

Rowe walked away from the crowd and into the aid station. He first saw Spc. John Jinks, who was lying on a gurney in terrible pain from shrapnel wounds to his lower body. The medics were cutting off his clothes. Rowe took the hand of the 21-year-old father of three and held it. Then he saw Martinez's body lying alone on a gurney nearby. A wave of grief consumed him; he felt like he couldn't breathe. He broke down momentarily, his tears flowing for his fallen brother-in-arms. He watched as medical personnel respectfully placed Martinez into a body bag.

Rowe went to the FOB's command post and called his commander on the phone, explaining to him what had happened. After he hung up, FOB Justice's American commander, Lt. Col. Steve Miska, took him aside and offered him much-appreciated words of consolation.

The FOB's operations (S-3) and intelligence (S-2) officers then began debriefing the platoon leader. Rowe recounted his unit's mission and actions. At one point, when he was explaining his thought processes for selecting the route, the S-3 emotionally interjected, "That's the worst route you could have taken! That's terrible!" As calmly as he could, Rowe explained that although he had considered taking the "terrible" route, he had actually taken the route that the major was recommending. The S-3 calmed down and expressed approval, but the damage was done. Rowe felt defensive, like he was on trial. He trembled inside, furious that field-grades who'd probably never led a combat patrol were scrutinizing his decisions. Rowe didn't need anyone to second-guess his decisions that night; he was taking care of that on his own.

As he exited the debriefing room, Rowe saw the commander of the Iraqi army battalion located on FOB Justice arrive to meet with Miska. Loathing swelled within him. A few days before, the American and Iraqi army troops based together on FOB Justice had gotten into a firefight just blocks outside its gates. After U.S. Soldiers had surrounded several high-ranking Shia insurgent leaders in a nearby mosque, the U.S. unit called on the Iraqi army to enter the mosque (as per their agreement). When the Iraqi soldiers arrived, however, they attacked the flank of the Americans, creating a gap that enabled the militia leaders to escape. In that firefight, U.S. forces had killed several of the FOB Justice-based Iraqi soldiers. Rowe suspected that the Iraqi army battalion on FOB Justice was complicit in the attack on his platoon that night, as payback for the blue-on-green casualties. The three IEDs were emplaced along a well-lighted boulevard within direct observation of an Iraqi army checkpoint.

Rowe gathered his Soldiers outside. They were in shock, chain-smoking even worse than usual. He told them that they could say whatever they wanted, and they did. They seethed with anger at Iraqis. The IEDs had been command-detonated, and there had been many Iraqi men observing them from the moment they had entered the neighborhood.

Rowe's gunner walked back to their truck, reached up to its turret and grabbed a miniature Iraqi flag that had gotten snagged earlier that evening. He held out the flag and lit it on fire. As his Soldiers watched the flag burn with satisfaction, Rowe kept his counsel. He knew he shouldn't con-



The Khadamiya Shrine looms outside the gates of joint Iraqi-U.S. Forward Operating Base Justice in southern Baghdad. The neighborhood has wide boulevards and operational streetlights.

done the activity, but it wasn't time for a philosophical civics lesson. His Soldiers needed to grieve. He appreciated that they were always disciplined on patrol when he needed them to be, and burning a flag wasn't going to harm anybody.

Rowe was informed that a helicopter was inbound to collect Martinez's remains. He had argued earlier that he wanted to carry Martinez's body back to FOB Liberty in a platoon convoy. The body bag could be laid across the back seat of his Humvee. He wanted to stay by his beloved squad leader's side as long as he could and take him home, but he had been overruled. So, before the helicopter arrived, Rowe took his Soldiers into the aid station to pay their final respects. The body bag was still on the gurney, now covered with an American flag. The Soldiers gathered around their fallen leader in silence and prayer.

After the helicopter departed with Martinez's body, Rowe led a convoy back to their FOB. They moved out at dawn along the same street where they had been attacked four hours earlier. With Rowe's three operational trucks, two EOD trucks, two wreckers—one of them carrying the destroyed vehicle—and three other trucks, the convoy had the look and feel of a caisson in a funeral procession.

Iraqi people on the street stopped to watch them go by, and it seemed to Rowe that they understood what he was feeling. It occurred to him how many Iraqis had been killed in the war—how many of their own funeral processions these people had seen—and he felt sympathy for them. For the first time since the attack, his anger began to ease.

Back at FOB Liberty, Rowe was busy all morning reporting on what had happened. He talked with the task-force commander and the other field-grade officers, made Power-

‘Not Bad for a Fat Kid’

Staff Sgt. Virgil (Chance) Martinez gave his life in service to his country on May 6, 2007, in the middle of his second deployment. He had previously deployed to Baqubah, Iraq, during Operation Iraqi Freedom II from 2004–05. His experiences in combat gave him a sincere appreciation for the dangers of his profession and the possibility that he or his Soldiers could become casualties in war.



Staff Sgt. Virgil (Chance) Martinez

Martinez did not relish danger or take undue risks in the performance of his duties; yet he also did not hesitate to perform any mission or carry out any order, despite the grave personal risks. Over the course of his deployments, he encountered small-arms fire while dis-

mounted, IED attacks and mortar fire in his vicinity. As a squad leader of nine soldiers and a father of five children, Martinez wanted nothing more than to ensure the safety of his men while completing each mission. He trained his Soldiers routinely in their tasks, inspected their equipment, held them accountable to the standards of the unit, counseled them, disciplined them, took care of them and treated them with respect.

He treated his Soldiers as if they were his younger brothers or sons. Martinez understood his role as a non-commissioned officer among the officers with whom he served. He was steadfastly loyal, gave his honest and direct opinions, and abided by the decisions of his commanders. He did not embody any archetype for an exemplary soldier. He was humble. He was dependable. He was affable. Oftentimes, he would accomplish something and, with pride, turn to me and say, “Not bad for a fat kid, huh?”

Not bad at all, Staff Sgt. Martinez. —Matthew Rowe

Point storyboards describing the incident that were sent to higher headquarters, and reviewed the battalion’s duty log to fill in the blanks and correct its mistakes.

Just before noon, his battery commander told him that he could join a convoy to visit the injured Soldiers, who were in the IZ. Rowe grabbed toiletries and clothes for both his wounded Soldiers and grabbed a photo album at Jinks’ request. They rolled out at noon to spend the afternoon at the combat support hospital. As Rowe entered the hospital, he passed a lieutenant he recognized as a classmate from West Point. Looking over his shoulder, he watched the lieutenant approach a group of Soldiers gathered in front of the hospital. It was obvious that they had just lost one of their brothers.

Rowe visited with Jinks and was able to pick up the driver injured in the blast, who was able to return to duty. They returned to FOB Liberty in time to eat some chow. It had been more than 24 hours since Rowe had last slept or eaten. He wanted to attend the ramp ceremony at the airfield, where he and others could pay respects as Martinez’s body was loaded on a plane bound for the United States. He was told that the ceremony could occur at any time after 1800, so he stayed awake, waiting.

As the hours lingered, he decided to call his parents. As he told them what had happened, they became very upset. For the first time in his life, he heard his father cry. Hearing his usually stoic father worried literally to tears, Rowe felt sick with guilt, like someone had reached into his gut and was twisting his innards. “I’ll be all right,” he assured his parents, but they all knew it was a promise he couldn’t guarantee.

Rowe drifted to sleep at about 0100, his first sleep in more than 40 hours. An hour later, he was awoken by the alert for

the ramp ceremony. A convoy of 16 trucks, led by his battalion commander and command sergeant major, rushed to the airfield in the middle of the night.

Waiting at the flight line for the aircraft to arrive, Rowe saw another lieutenant there for the same reason. He recognized him from a mission a week earlier in Amariyah, a neighborhood in Baghdad. The lieutenant told Rowe that his Soldier had been killed by a sniper. Rowe recalled that during the mission in Amariyah, a sniper round had barely missed him. *It could just as easily be me here in the casket.* It occurred to him that, in the past 14 hours, he had run into two fellow lieutenants who were going through the same awful experience that he was. *This isn’t some unique tragedy of mine. This is what happens every day in war, and leaders have to deal with it and continue to do their best.*

The Air Force C-130 arrived. The aircraft spit out a load of Soldiers returning from mid-tour leave with their families. Then the plane’s crew reconfigured its interior to carry home Soldiers who would never again visit with their families.

Rowe had selected himself and the Soldiers of Martinez’s squad—those who had been on the fateful mission—to carry his casket onto the aircraft. A sergeant from a unit at the airfield gave them directions on how to carry the casket and what to do. Three caskets were being loaded that night. One did not have any Soldiers from the deceased’s unit there for the ramp ceremony, so Rowe volunteered his detail to carry that casket as well.

Soldiers from both units lined up on the flight line—silent, saluting. First, the other platoon leader and his Soldiers carried their fallen comrade onto the aircraft. Then, the sergeant returned to march Rowe’s team as they carried Martinez. The sergeant did not keep a good cadence, and the pallbearers got out of step, which angered Rowe. He



Then-Capt. Matthew Rowe (center front) and his platoon gather in Baghdad's international zone near the end of their 16-month deployment.

was struck by how cold and wet from condensation the casket handle was in his hands. *This casket must be packed with ice.*

After placing Martinez's casket where the sergeant directed, next to the first casket, Rowe and his Soldiers returned for the third casket. When they returned to the aircraft with the third body, there was no room to place the third casket. They were stuck holding it above the other two. There was no space for the pallbearers to move. Rowe's anger built. *Does this idiot have no idea how important it is to do this right? We're trying to honor these Soldiers, and we're jacking it up!*

Rowe took charge of the situation.

"Right step, march!"

After placing the casket down in an open space, they saluted. Then everyone present marched up around the bay of the aircraft, and a chaplain said a few words. Immediately after the ceremony, Rowe raced back across the FOB, changing his radio's cryptographic fill along the way. He and Third Squad had to be ready to assume the EOD security mission at 0600 hours. They were driving straight to the dining facility to get some breakfast when they received a mission. There was no time to eat. Less than 15 minutes later, Rowe and Third Squad, with its new squad leader, rolled out the gate into Baghdad.

* * *

This article was written by Lt. Col. Pete Kilner of the CompanyCommand forum support team, based on his interview of then-1st Lt. Matthew Rowe on May 24, 2007, at FOB Liberty, Baghdad. After his deployment, Rowe finished his tour

in Germany and an additional tour in the Republic of Korea before leaving military service. Currently, he works at Honeywell Aerospace as program manager for the F-22 and F-35 fighters.

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