



*This case study summarizes key events and themes from **Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death** by Jim Frederick. The book provides a detailed account of the breakdown in discipline and leadership within 1st Platoon, Bravo Company, 1/502 Infantry, during their deployment in Yusufiyah, Iraq in 2005/06. This summary aims to capture the critical lessons from Frederick's longer work, emphasizing the moral, ethical, and leadership challenges faced by the unit.*



B/1-502 IN

profound moral and ethical responsibilities inherent in officership are crucial to the integrity and effectiveness of military leadership. The catastrophic breakdown of morality and the ethical standards of our Army within 1st Platoon, Bravo Company, 1st / 502nd Infantry “Black Hearts” during their deployment in Yusufiyah, Iraq, from 2005 to 2006, starkly illustrates the dire consequences when leaders at several levels fail to uphold these standards. However, this case study is not just a record of failure, but a valuable lesson that underscores the dire need for leaders and officers to embody and enforce the highest moral and ethical standards. Through this narrative, we are reminded that the role of Army leaders extends beyond tactical or managerial leadership decisions; it is fundamentally about leading Soldiers and units in making the right decisions founded on our nation's Constitution and guiding principles.

IRAQ 2003-2005

The initial success of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq quickly descended into chaos. Administrative changes led to severe policies, including barring Baath Party members from government positions and dissolving the Iraqi military and national police. This action left hundreds of thousands of Iraqis unemployed, worsening an already dire economic situation. The new administrative body in Iraq, criticized for corruption and inefficiency, failed to utilize a \$12 billion budget effectively, with a significant portion unaccounted for. The creation of an interim governing council deepened ethnic and sectarian divides across Iraq's factious political landscape.



As the insurgency intensified, U.S. military strategy shifted to focus on securing key areas and stabilizing Baghdad, the political and symbolic center of Iraq. The initial goal of rapidly defeating insurgent forces gave way to a more complex counterinsurgency mission, which required U.S. forces to protect civilian populations and deny insurgents control over vital areas. Efforts to close the porous Syrian border, a major transit point for foreign fighters and weapons, became a priority, along with securing insurgent strongholds like Fallujah, Ramadi, and the Sunni Triangle. Despite these strategic initiatives, troop numbers were insufficient to hold territory and maintain long-term control. Military analysts and senior defense officials recommended deploying a much larger force—up to several hundred thousand troops—to effectively stabilize the country. However, the U.S. military deployed significantly fewer soldiers, which hampered efforts to control vast areas, stem the insurgency, and protect civilian populations, ultimately leading to a protracted and deadly conflict.



Area of Operations

In the two and a half years since the fall of Saddam Hussein, the rural outskirts of South Baghdad had become one of Iraq's deadliest areas. This region, rich in historical significance as the cradle of civilization, was now marred by relentless violence and bloodshed. After the American invasion, South Baghdad, particularly the "Triangle of Death," saw a rise in insurgent activities. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and other insurgent groups turned the area into a stronghold. By 2004, Sunni insurgents had established a formidable presence, leading to intense conflict with American forces and Iraqi security forces. The violence escalated despite efforts by U.S. Marines and later Army units to establish control. Insurgents frequently ambushed convoys, set up checkpoints to capture and kill Shi'ite travelers, and engaged in brutal acts of violence against anyone perceived as a threat.



In the summer of 2004, Colonel Todd Ebel took command of the 2nd Brigade, “Black Hearts” of the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Initially, Ebel prepared his brigade of 3,400 personnel for a deployment to Iraq focused on convoy security duties on the main supply route from Kuwait to Turkey. However, the mission shifted dramatically in late August 2005 when Ebel received orders to take charge of South Baghdad, a region nestled between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and previously managed by the 48th Infantry Brigade, a Georgia National Guard unit. After visiting the area and assessing the situation firsthand, Ebel briefed his battalion commanders on the severe challenges they would face due to the entrenched presence of insurgent groups, including Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

Ebel's brigade faced the daunting task of reclaiming control of the "Triangle of Death," an area notorious for its insurgent and sectarian violence. With less than six weeks' notice, the brigade prepared to stabilize one of Iraq's most challenging regions by late 2005. Shi'ite militias had infiltrated local police, turning them into death squads and intensifying the violence. The area posed severe risks not only to military forces but also to civilians, journalists, aid workers, and other international personnel, who faced frequent kidnappings and killings amid growing anti-foreigner sentiment. COL Ebel stressed the mission's urgency, telling his commanders, “We've got to get South Baghdad under control.”

SEPTEMBER 2005

On September 29, 2005, the 1st Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment, along with the rest of the brigade, left Fort Campbell, Kentucky, for Kuwait before arriving at Camp Striker in Iraq. Their mission was clear: secure the "Triangle of Death" by restricting insurgent movements and strengthening the Iraqi Army (IA). However, the complex and often conflicting operational demands made the task even more difficult.



Area of Operations “Triangle of Death”



In this environment, LTC Tom Kunk, commander of the First Strike Battalion, played a crucial role. COL Ebel chose Kunk to manage the brigade's eastern sector, known for its dense urban landscape and strong insurgent presence. Ebel saw Kunk as an ideal choice because of his proven experience in combat operations and his ability to manage sensitive local interactions effectively.

Before commissioning as an officer, LTC Kunk enlisted in the Army to pay for college, transitioning from personnel administration to infantry. LTC Kunk was known for his strict standards and dominant presence. His leadership style, marked by overt aggression and obsessive attention to detail, created a command climate of fear and compliance. Subordinate leaders often referred to Kunk's tirades as getting hit by the "Kunk Gun." This atmosphere affected the battalion's morale, creating apprehension and self-doubt. Kunk's tendency to dismiss dissent and alternative viewpoints worsened the toxic environment, stifling feedback and initiative.

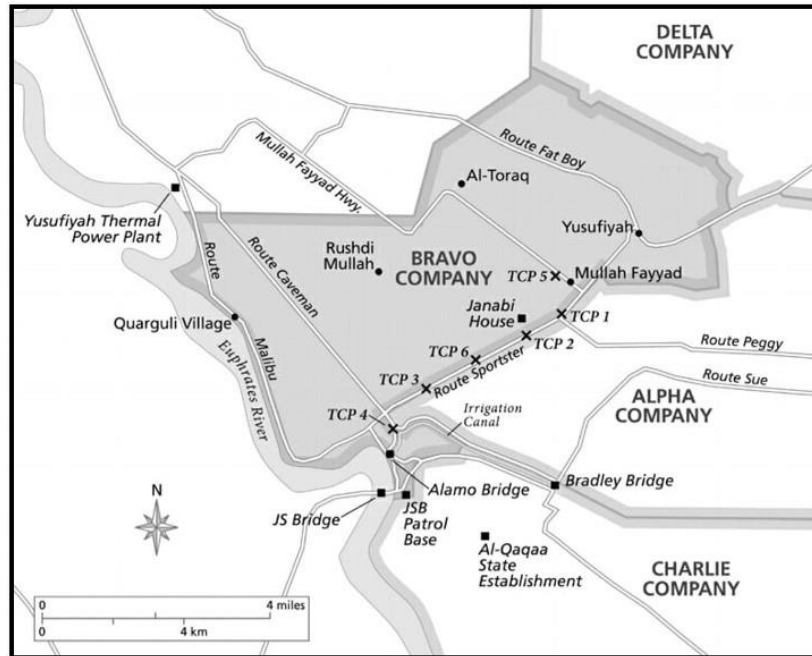


LTC Tom Kunk

LTC Kunk assigned Bravo Company, led by CPT John Goodwin, to secure Yusufiyah and its surrounding areas, a region marked by strategic complexity and intense insurgent activity. Goodwin originally served as an enlisted signal Soldier before attending college and commissioning as an officer. Due to a clerical error, he transitioned from the National Guard to active duty in the Regular Army. Though initially hesitant about taking command, he sought out the opportunity after learning about the deployment while serving on division staff. Due to Bravo company's success at the National Training Center prior to the deployment, LTC Kunk selected CPT Goodwin for what he considered the most challenging area of operations under the battalion's control.



After establishing his headquarters in Yusufiyah, CPT Goodwin deployed his platoons around the city. 1st Platoon occupied the Joint Security Base (JSB), an abandoned water treatment plant. 1LT Ben Britt, leading 1st Platoon, brought a charismatic yet intellectual leadership style. A West Point graduate with rural roots and academic expertise in economics, Britt combined tactical acumen with a humanistic approach. His Soldiers admired him for his presence in the field, sharing every risk and burden with them.



B/1-502 IN Area of Operations

Britt was joined by his platoon sergeant, SSG Phil Miller, a capable NCO who was unexpectedly thrust into the role of platoon sergeant before deployment. Miller was fiercely committed to the welfare of his Soldiers, often requesting supplies and fighting to improve their living conditions. Together, Britt and Miller took on the challenge of transforming the JSB into a functional operations base. The first few weeks were grueling. The JSB, left in disrepair by the previous occupants, was littered with trash, urine bottles, and remnants of MREs. Britt and Miller led their Soldiers in filling sandbags and patching the perimeter walls, working tirelessly from dawn to dusk. Despite their efforts, the absence of essential defensive supplies led to constant requests for more resources, to the point where CPT Goodwin told Miller, "Just make a list, for Christ's sake."

Basic amenities were nonexistent—no electricity, no showers, and no proper sanitation. The platoon relied on MREs and whatever they could grill on a makeshift barbecue, conditions that steadily wore down morale and left Soldiers feeling isolated and neglected. Nearby, about a kilometer to the northwest, the canal crossing formed by an armored vehicle-launched bridge (AVLB), known as "the Alamo," was a critical but vulnerable point. From the outset of their deployment, enemy forces probed this position, testing its defenses and identifying weaknesses. Despite these early signs of insurgent activity, 1st Platoon maintained a routine approach, leaving security measures largely unchanged. The daily grind of filling sandbags and guarding positions became a monotonous cycle, leading to a slow



erosion of vigilance. Over time, the lack of adjustments left the Alamo increasingly exposed, as the enemy grew bolder, taking advantage of openings created by a force that struggled to stay fully alert.

As 1LT Britt juggled fortifying the JSB and maintaining security at the Alamo, the Battalion command team zeroed in on 1st Platoon. LTC Kunk and CSM Edwards quickly labeled the platoon as "slobs" for disregarding uniform standards. They were outraged by Soldiers wearing flip-flops, t-shirts, and walking around without body armor at the JSB. SSG Miller countered that if the battalion provided more resources, the Soldiers wouldn't have to adjust their uniforms to complete the heavy manual labor. Britt and his platoon were soon locked in an unwinnable battle with the Battalion over appearance and priorities.



The Alamo

Inside 1st Platoon, 1LT Britt had to manage a diverse range of personalities. SSG Eric Lauzier, the 3rd Squad Leader, was no-nonsense, shaped by his combat experience, including a hand-to-hand kill in Mosul. He came to Iraq not to make friends, but to inflict damage on the enemy. Alongside him was SGT Tony Yribe, known as Lauzier's "linebacker" and seen as fearless by many. Yribe acted as the unofficial big brother to the platoon. Together, Lauzier and Yribe led 3rd Squad with an iron fist, treating the Iraqis with particular harshness.

In contrast, 1st Squad, led by SSG Travis Nelson and SGT Kenith Casica, had a more approachable and welcoming reputation. Known for their kindness back at Fort Campbell and toward Iraqi civilians, they were often the first to hand out drinks or care packages. The 3rd Squad dubbed them "Haji Huggers," creating a dynamic where the platoon had a "mean squad" and a "nice squad".

Rounding out the platoon was 2nd Squad, led by SSG Chris Payne and SGT John Diem. Diem, though not physically imposing or what many might picture as a hardened combat leader, earned deep respect from his Soldiers. He didn't stand out for his warrior-like appearance, but rather for his steady moral presence. Diem became the squad's moral compass, someone Soldiers trusted and confided in during the most difficult moments of the deployment. His calm, methodical approach to leadership created a sense of stability amid the chaos of combat. Soldiers often sought him out, not just for tactical guidance but for reassurance and advice, knowing that Diem would give them an honest and thoughtful response.

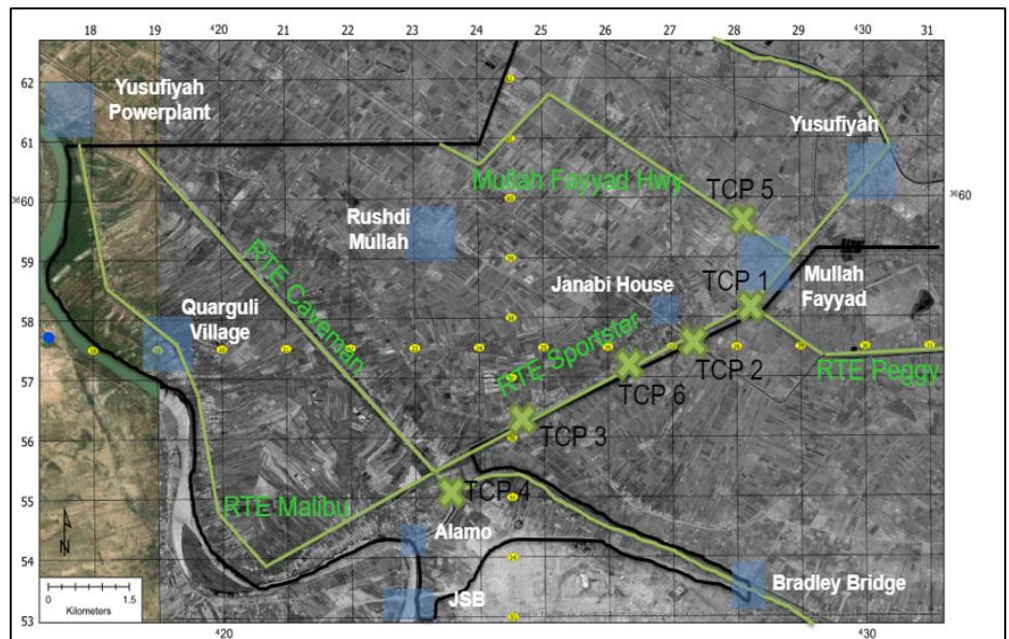


One standout in the platoon was PFC Steven Green, whose disturbing and radical views on race and culture were shaped by his troubled past and magnified by the intense pressures of deployment. Raised in a broken home and with a history of disciplinary issues, Green held overtly racist beliefs, viewing Iraqis as subhuman. His open disdain for Iraqis, expressed through hateful rhetoric and actions, added significant challenges for 1LT Britt, who struggled to maintain cohesion and moral discipline among his increasingly fractious Soldiers. Green's extremist mindset would later play a pivotal role in the war crime that shocked both the unit and the world, further complicating the already fraught command climate.

As 1st Platoon settled into the JSB, insurgents wasted no time launching attacks, underscoring the precariousness of their isolated position. The Alamo in particular came under frequent assault from mortar and rocket fire. Then there was the ever-present threat of IEDs along routes and while on patrol in the streets of Yusufiyah. Small-arms fire was a constant reality, and each mission outside the wire felt more like a struggle for survival than an effort to win hearts and minds. With limited resources, poor living conditions, and the ever-present danger, frustration set in. As the weeks dragged on, the platoon's view of their mission and the Iraqi population began to shift. What had initially been a counterinsurgency mission aimed at securing the local area gradually morphed into a bitter struggle for self-preservation. Many of the Soldiers, worn down by relentless violence and feeling increasingly abandoned by higher command, began to harbor deepening resentment and contempt for the very civilians they had once been sent to protect. This hardening attitude contributed to a breakdown in discipline and a growing sense of hopelessness among the platoon.

NOVEMBER 2005

Route Sportster, a 14-kilometer road linking CPT Goodwin's HQ at Forward Operating Base or FOB Yusufiyah to the JSB, became a growing center of insurgent activity. This route, essential for both legal and illegal movement, had become a superhighway for insurgents heading to Baghdad. LTC Kunk ordered Bravo Company to 'own' the route, a term not recognized as a doctrinal tactical mission task, which created ambiguity in the mission. This lack of clarity likely contributed to confusion in execution, as Soldiers interpreted it to mean establishing Traffic Control Points (TCPs) every 1-2 miles, potentially overlooking other critical tasks or objectives.



Satellite Imagery of B/1-502 IN Area of Operations



What was intended as a temporary mission became a long-term burden. "We thought it was going to be a 72-hour mission," recalled SFC Phil Blaisdell of 3rd Platoon, "but it turned into something permanent, with concertina wire and all." The checkpoints were poorly fortified and severely understaffed, with troops living out of Humvees. Often, there was no more than one squad at each TCP. The constant personnel strain left Bravo Company stretched thin and unable to accomplish much else within their area of operations.

The pressures of combat intensified every interaction with LTC Kunk, turning regular meetings with company leadership into sessions of dread rather than coordination. "His reaction to everything was the same," recalled 1SG Largent of C Company. "Whether it was losing a Soldier or seeing cigarette butts on the FOB, he would explode. His leadership became ineffective." Company commanders began to anticipate who would face the wrath of the "Kunk Gun." CPT Goodwin and CPT Dougherty of C Company bore the brunt of these outbursts, often leaving meetings feeling publicly chastised. "Every time he went up there, it was a public whipping session," said CPT Bordwell of A Company. The battalion's morale suffered under this toxic leadership. Both LTC Kunk and CSM Edwards took on the roles of 'bad cop, bad cop,' leaving no room for the approachable leadership needed in such high-stress environments. The Battalion Command team fostered an atmosphere of insecurity and doubt. CPT Goodwin, in particular, felt isolated, fighting not only the external enemy but what he saw as adversaries within his own battalion. "I had Al Qaeda, the Iraqis, and the battalion to contend with," he remarked.



Traffic Control Point (TCP) 1

This toxic command environment, combined with an impossible mission, led to shortcuts and dishonesty, further deteriorating relationships and trust between the companies and battalion leadership. The static TCP positions frustrated troops, as they contradicted the training focused on mobility and responsiveness. "We're trained to maneuver and fire," said SSG Lauzier. Additionally, reports sent up the chain of command were often distorted to fit the narrative Battalion or Brigade wanted to convey. Official guidance required TCPs to be manned by a squad and two trucks, but they often operated with only 3-4 Soldiers and one vehicle. The C Company Executive Officer explained, "It's not like that one little piece of



information is going to lose the war, but when information keeps getting watered down to tell a story higher command wants, you've got real problems."

The constant pressure and risk took a severe toll on Soldiers, both physically and mentally. "Every morning felt like walking to your death," said PV2 Justin Watt from 3rd Squad, 1st Platoon, describing the dread of IED sweeps. "I hoped the next one would just kill me because I was so tired of this," he confessed, echoing the sentiment of many. This strain reached up the chain of command as well. CPT Goodwin, skipping meals and unable to leave his radio, was found sleeping under a blanket in the tactical operations center (TOC). "His Soldiers had to tell him, 'You look like hell, Sir. Go get some sleep.'" Reflecting later, Goodwin admitted, "I didn't want to go too far away. Even around the corner was too far. It wasn't good. I just couldn't separate myself from it." Ultimately, the operational strain, compounded by poor leadership and inadequate support, left the troops battling not just external threats but internal breakdowns in command and morale.

In mid-November, the battalion introduced a new policy affecting operations at the TCPs, prohibiting warning shots aimed at vehicle engines. In typical aggressive fashion, SSG Lauzier and SGT Yribe instructed their Soldiers to fire warning shots into the dirt if a vehicle approached too quickly. On November 11th, while on patrol with Civil Affairs, SGT Yribe spotted a speeding vehicle that ignored verbal commands to stop. He fired a warning shot, but the bullet ricocheted, striking and nearly killing a teenage boy. A formal investigation concluded it was an accident.

Only six days later, at TCP 3, another vehicle was perceived as a threat due to its speed. SGT Yribe, attempting to control the situation, again fired a warning shot into the dirt. Tragically, the shot ricocheted and fatally wounded a woman in the vehicle, despite efforts from the platoon medic to save her life. Fearing repercussions, SGT Yribe and his squad altered the scene by moving concertina wire to make it appear the vehicle had breached the checkpoint's defenses. SPC Cortez, PFC Watt, and SPC Barker lied in their official sworn statements, deliberately providing false testimony to support the fabricated narrative during the investigation

This manipulation, driven by fear and mistrust, stemmed from the belief that a second accidental shooting by the same Soldier within a week would not be accepted by military investigators. With no reason to doubt the statements, the officer conducting the AR 15-6 investigation found no wrongdoing on SGT Yribe's part. This incident marked a significant ethical decline within the platoon, as Soldiers began to rationalize their actions in the face of mounting desperation.

After reclaiming Route Sportster, LTC Kunk shifted his focus to bolstering community relations and infrastructure across the battalion's area of operations. He developed a strong rapport with local sheiks, earning the nickname "Sheikh of Peace." His strategy hinged on leveraging these local leaders to maintain security, even if it meant turning a blind eye to their shifting loyalties. Using the sheiks' insights, Kunk planned the takeover of Route Caveman, a mile northwest of Sportster. However, many in Bravo Company questioned the operation's value, as Caveman lacked strategic importance and was distant from key population centers or facilities.



By November, Bravo had conducted sporadic patrols of the road, but in early December, it became a focused route clearance mission. Caveman was a minefield—literally. The IEDs were so densely packed that sweeping the road felt like navigating a death trap. In one harrowing sweep, they discovered twenty-six IEDs along just a three-mile stretch.

DECEMBER 2005

LTC Kunk's initiatives, while intended to assert control and establish security, were often passively obeyed by CPT Goodwin and others. To many in Bravo, these decisions lacked tactical and doctrinal soundness, creating a growing sense of disillusionment among the troops. They felt leadership was risking their lives to maintain the mere appearance of security. While one company conducted the dangerous Caveman clearance missions, Bravo rotated back onto a grueling multi-day TCP shift. By early December, Bravo had already suffered several casualties, including one fatality. Both 2nd and 3rd Platoon leaders, as well as the Company 1SG, had been seriously wounded in separate IED attacks. Remarkably, 1st Platoon had not yet experienced a Soldier wounded by the enemy.

1st Squad, led by SSG Nelson and SGT Casica, was assigned to TCP 2—the least fortified and most exposed of the positions. Soldiers slept on cots by the roadside, constantly wearing their body armor and helmets due to the omnipresent threat and minimal cover. Though there was a nearby structure, Soldiers were ordered not to use it. The same lack of supplies and defensive resources that had plagued 1st Platoon at the JSB extended to the TCPs. The static, undermanned positions, with frequent interaction with locals, left the Soldiers feeling uneasy and vulnerable.

On the morning of December 10th, SSG Miller stopped by TCP 2 on his way to the FOB. He noticed that SSG Nelson and SGT Casica had briefly removed their protective gear to get a moment of relief after hours of guard duty, attending to personal hygiene. "Hurry up and get your gear back on if there's an attack," Miller warned. "Will do," they replied. Moments later, a group of local children passed through the TCP, and in typical 1st Squad fashion, SGT Casica handed out candy and pencils before putting his gear back on.

After the children left, a local man known to the Soldiers approached the checkpoint. He had given them information before and was generally friendly. As SGT Casica went over to greet him, the man suddenly drew a pistol, shooting Casica in the neck and SSG Nelson, who was sitting nearby, in the back of the head. Completely caught off guard, PFC Spielman, manning the Humvee's gun turret, immediately opened fire, killing the assailant. Chaos ensued as calls for medical assistance underscored the desperate situation, but tragically, both SSG Nelson and SGT Casica died of their injuries.

Official reports concluded that the deaths were unavoidable given the circumstances. Still, COL Ebel and LTC Kunk blamed the incident on a failure to enforce discipline by 1LT Britt and SSG Miller, arguing that stricter adherence to security protocols—even under relaxed rules of engagement—could have prevented the tragedy. LTC Kunk wanted to relieve SSG Miller of his duties, citing a lack of discipline within the platoon, but 1LT Britt convinced him to give Miller one more chance. The Soldiers of 1st Platoon, however, felt unfairly blamed for the deaths, with no accountability taken by those higher up for the poor conditions at the TCPs. LTC Kunk, CSM Edwards, and CPT Goodwin had driven past TCP 2



dozens of times without addressing the lack of manning and resources that left the position dangerously exposed. After a brief critical incident debrief, the platoon was sent back to the TCPs that same night.

The deaths of SSG Nelson and SGT Casica marked the beginning of a deeper breakdown in the platoon's discipline, motivation, and morale. Many Soldiers began to lose their moral bearings, with cynicism and disdain for Iraqis growing. PFC Steven Green, whose hostility toward the locals had been steadily increasing, started talking openly about burning Iraqis alive. His behavior became so concerning that he was sent to the Combat Stress Team, where he was prescribed medication before being sent back to the unit.



SPC James Barker (left) SGT Kenith Casica (right)



SSG Eric Lauzier (left) SGT Tony Yribe (right)

Many in the platoon attributed the deaths of SSG Nelson and SGT Casica to their "hearts and minds" approach and vowed to abandon any empathy toward Iraqi civilians. In an effort to reallocate leadership within the platoon, 1LT Britt moved SGT Tony Yribe to lead 1st Squad, effectively dissolving the previous balance between the "nice" and "mean" squads. Now, both remaining squads were led by NCOs who labeled all Iraqis as the enemy, further eroding the platoon's moral compass and fueling a growing contempt for the local population.

Two days after a devastating IED attack wounded members of 2nd Platoon, including the platoon leader, 1LT Britt faced the harsh reality of leading a platoon that had now suffered casualties. In a moment of vulnerability, he confided to his team, "I just have a feeling I'm not going to make it back from here." Despite these psychological strains, 1LT Britt's platoon was tasked with clearing Route Caveman alongside an Iron Claw team.

The mission quickly became more complex when a blocked path and a remote-launched RPG, fired from across a canal, damaged their equipment. Though no one was injured, Britt reported the situation to CPT Goodwin, who issued guidance that pushed the limits of legality, morality, and ethics. "Retrieve that RPG mount from across the canal," Goodwin ordered, despite the fact that the area had not been cleared. "I don't care if you have to swim across the canal," he insisted, "but you will get me that tube."



Britt, after brief contemplation, replied, "Yes Sir." As 1LT Britt, SPC Lopez, SGT Diaz, and SGT Yribe set out to retrieve the tube, an IED exploded beneath their feet, its force so massive that Soldiers ten miles away heard the blast. The explosion threw Britt fifty feet into the air and tore Lopez in half. Within moments, their bodies crashed back to Earth, landing in the canal. In the aftermath, as the platoon grappled with the trauma and managed the casualties, SSG Miller, having just lost his platoon leader, told the combat stress team and CPT Goodwin that he believed 1st Platoon had become combat ineffective. "It's one of the most embarrassing things for a leader to say," he admitted. Within a week, four Soldiers from 1st Platoon were dead, including two NCOs and their platoon leader.

Following the deaths of 1LT Britt and SPC Lopez, COL Ebel convened a Critical Incident Debrief at FOB Yusufiyah to address the escalating crisis within Bravo Company. Noting PFC Green's growing distress after a series of fatal incidents, Ebel spoke with him privately for thirty minutes. During the conversation, Green expressed deep hatred for Iraqis and a disturbing desire to "kill them all." Ebel attempted to calm him, emphasizing the ethical standards American Soldiers were expected to uphold. Leaving the meeting, Ebel felt reassured that Green might recover. However, in the weeks that followed, Green's behavior showed little sign of genuine improvement. Although he outwardly complied with directives, there was a persistent tension in his demeanor when challenged on his views, suggesting a deeper moral disengagement that continued to affect the platoon.



SFC Rob Gallagher



SSG Phil Miller

As CPT Goodwin tried to salvage 1st Platoon following the death of LT Britt, he appointed SFC Rob Gallagher as the new Platoon Leader, with SSG Miller remaining as the Platoon Sergeant. Gallagher, who had previously served as 1st platoon PSG before deployment, had a reputation for being overly critical and dismissive. He attempted to enforce discipline through grooming and uniform standards, but his inability to shield the men from the pressure of higher command only deepened the platoon's distrust.



The brigade recognized Bravo Company's struggles, particularly due to their depleted ranks. With the loss of 1LT Britt, the platoon was left morally rudderless. Instead of rotating out entire units, battalion leadership chose to rotate leaders. Reflecting later, COL Ebel admitted, "Perhaps we should have replaced the entire company, but the prevailing thought was that a company gains credibility with the local population through sustained presence." LTC Kunk believed shifting leaders and platoon sergeants would be the catalyst for change, but it became clear that the core issue lay with 1st Platoon. While 2nd and 3rd Platoon performed well under their PSGs, even without lieutenants, 1st Platoon remained an outlier, plagued by deeper issues.

In an effort to stabilize the unit, LTC Kunk and CPT Goodwin assigned 1LT Tim Norton as Platoon Leader, with SFC Gallagher moving back to Platoon Sergeant and SSG Miller reassigned as a squad leader. 1LT Norton, the senior platoon leader in the battalion, approached the role cautiously, aware of the challenges that Bravo Company had faced. He adopted a leadership style focused on empathy and camaraderie. Though initially met with some resistance, Norton's efforts to connect with the platoon began to ease tensions. He joined missions, participated in patrols, and worked to foster a sense of unity.

However, the shift in leadership dynamics introduced new challenges. SFC Gallagher and SSG Miller, accustomed to different responsibilities, struggled to adjust to the changes in the platoon's structure. The situation grew more complicated as differing leadership approaches emerged. Eventually, SSG Miller pursued another opportunity outside the platoon, citing the need for a fresh start.

While some Soldiers warmed to 1LT Norton's approach, his ability to correct the deeper discipline issues remained uncertain. Many of the moral and ethical problems that had taken root under previous leadership had severely damaged the platoon's character, making it unclear if his leadership style would be enough to restore order.

The unrelenting pace of modern warfare added further complexity to maintaining ethical standards. Unlike Soldiers in past conflicts, Bravo Company did not engage in large-scale battles but faced daily enemy contact for months on end. This constant pressure—sharply contrasting with WWII-era policies that limited frontline duty to 80 days—took a heavy psychological toll on 1st Platoon. Isolated and worn down, the platoon's resentment deepened, fostering an "us-against-them" mentality. Aggression escalated, leading to detainee abuse and the formation of a strict internal hierarchy.



1LT Tim Norton

JANUARY 2006

As 1st Platoon, Bravo Company entered January 2006, escalating tensions and strained relationships highlighted the mounting leadership and discipline issues that the new leaders needed to address. CSM Edwards confronted SFC Gallagher over the messy state of the JSB, exacerbated by rain and ongoing construction. CSM Edwards found the conditions unacceptable and berated Gallagher,



accusing him of maintaining lax standards in 1st Platoon. Gallagher, prioritizing his men's rest and well-being over cleanliness, pushed back, leading to a heated exchange that nearly turned physical. This confrontation underscored the ongoing clash between senior leadership's expectations and the harsh realities Soldiers faced on the ground.

Meanwhile, PFC Green's moral disengagement and erratic behavior worsened. His extreme views and lack of discipline culminated in a public confrontation with SFC Gallagher that nearly turned violent. As 1st Platoon continued to struggle with discipline, SFC Gallagher made a potentially life-endangering tactical error while navigating after a mission, which left part of the platoon lost and the rest stranded at the pickup point. Less than a month into his tenure as platoon sergeant, CPT Goodwin and battalion leadership decided to replace SFC Gallagher, deeming him prone to errors in judgment. This change further destabilized Bravo Company's already fragile leadership structure, prolonging their time without cohesive command.

At the company level, leadership remained intact but increasingly ineffective. Rumors began to circulate about CPT Goodwin's deteriorating health and habits in the TOC. Visiting captains urged him to rest, but Goodwin refused, insisting he needed to stay alert in case something happened. Even junior enlisted Soldiers noticed his exhausted, vacant demeanor. LTC Kunk, recognizing the signs of exhaustion, tried to have Goodwin removed from command, but COL Ebel opted to continue working with him, hoping he could still lead.

FEBRUARY 2006

To fill the leadership void, LTC Kunk and CPT Goodwin appointed SFC Jeff Fenlason as the 1st Platoon PSG, replacing SFC Gallagher. Fenlason assumed command with a strict, no-nonsense approach, quickly recognizing the disarray and defiance within the unit. Addressing the platoon, he declared, "There are no more victims in this platoon," and immediately enforced rigorous uniform inspections and regimented routines. The Soldiers resisted his boot camp-style methods, believing their combat experience outweighed his authority. Despite being Ranger-qualified, they saw Fenlason as a bureaucrat with little real tactical experience. Even the platoon medic referred to him as a "tactically incompetent desk jockey." Fenlason, however, dismissed their battlefield credibility, asserting that experience didn't necessarily translate to expertise. This friction deepened the platoon's distrust and animosity.

Fenlason relied on 2nd Squad Leader SSG Chris Payne for insights into the platoon's dynamics. Payne, who served as a bridge between Fenlason and the Soldiers, warned him about SSG Eric Lauzier, 3rd Squad Leader. Payne described Lauzier as unpredictable but effective, though Fenlason's rigid, uncompromising style clashed with Lauzier's values. Tensions grew, with Fenlason seeing Lauzier as a loud bully, while Lauzier viewed Fenlason as out of touch. Even SSG Chaz Allen, who joined 1st Platoon as 1st Squad Leader to replace SSG Miller, faced near mutiny due to his lack of combat experience.



Though Fenlason imposed discipline, his rare involvement in field operations fueled skepticism within the platoon. He delegated patrol and guard duties to squad leaders, believing that was appropriate for Iraq's squad-level fight in 2006. However, his absence from fieldwork only increased his isolation. The Soldiers often said the only thing they could count on Fenlason for was not being around. While 1LT Norton had earned some credibility with the platoon, he couldn't ease the growing discontent between the Soldiers and their new PSG.



SFC Jeff Fenlason

MARCH 2006

In early March, 1LT Norton prepared to depart for his mid-tour leave. His absence, which had been preplanned, coincided with SSG Lauzier's leave, leaving SFC Fenlason in full control of the platoon. As 1st Platoon returned to their TCPs, no significant adjustments were made to compensate for the absence of their two senior leaders. During this time, the platoon's morale, already strained by leadership issues and the grueling TCP mission, deteriorated rapidly. The resentment between many Soldiers and SFC Fenlason, who rarely visited the far-flung TCP positions to enforce standards, grew costly. Isolated and overstretched, the platoon began to spiral. According to SGT Diem, the unit had become "monstrous, and unaware of the severity of their actions."

This moral decline was marked by a growing desensitization to violence. Soldiers began circulating graphic videos of combat kills, showcasing their numbness to the atrocities of war. Some even openly discussed the chaos in Iraq as an opportunity to commit murder without consequence, revealing a complete breakdown in ethical judgment. Dehumanizing Iraqis became a survival mechanism. SGT Yribe expressed that he no longer saw Iraqis as people, but as threats—a sentiment shared by many in the platoon. This dehumanization ran so deep that some Soldiers, overwhelmed by despair, began expressing a desire for death as an escape from their grim reality.



The TCPs were poorly managed and rarely inspected by senior leaders. With key leaders like 1LT Norton and SSG Lauzier on leave, Soldiers were left at TCP 2 without any NCOs or officers to provide oversight. In this leadership vacuum, discipline collapsed. Soldiers like SPC Cortez found themselves in charge of vulnerable positions for days at a time with only a handful of junior Soldiers to pull security. The absence of supervision allowed drinking and drug use to become rampant, especially at TCP 1, which became the hub for substance distribution among the TCPs. Iraqi Army personnel even sold intoxicants to Soldiers like PFC Green, further eroding order and morale within the unit.

The breakdown in discipline reached its peak when a rogue, drunken patrol from TCP 2, led by SPC Cortez, went unnoticed and unpunished. SPC Barker was also part of this unauthorized patrol, which further underscored the erosion of order within the platoon. Their alcohol-fueled actions were just early manifestations of the unit's moral collapse. Despite the severity of the situation, no immediate disciplinary action was taken, allowing the behavior to continue unchecked and further compromising the platoon's standards. The intoxicated fire team mishandled a detainee operation, assaulting captives nearly to the point of fatal injury. Upon returning to TCP 2, they received only a verbal reprimand from SGT Yribe, even after he noticed the smell of alcohol on the Soldiers. This incident typified the reckless and unrestrained behavior of 1st Platoon at this point—operating with little regard for leadership oversight or the moral and ethical principles of their profession.

Bravo Company and 1st Platoon's moral collapse reached its lowest point on March 12, 2006. After an exhausting eighteen-hour shift at TCP 2, and the platoon having been stationed at the TCPs for 21 days without relief, PFC Green, while standing guard in the pre-dawn hours, expressed his intent to "waste a bunch of dudes in a car" and disguise it as self-defense. The prolonged deployment to the remote checkpoints, coupled with the grueling shifts, exacerbated the already deteriorating morale and discipline within the platoon, setting the stage for the events that followed. This disturbing statement occurred amid casual activities like golfing at the TCP, underscoring the ethical breakdown within 1st Platoon.

As the morning progressed, SPC Barker made an even more sinister suggestion: to rape an Iraqi girl. Barker, having already identified a local family with a young girl as their target, detailed a plan that included not only sexual assault but the murder of witnesses, including women and children. After consuming Iraqi whiskey, PFC Green, SPC Cortez, and SPC Spielman agreed to participate, while PFC Bryan Howard, a junior Soldier recently assigned to 1st Platoon, was tasked with standing guard and monitoring the radio. Although not directly involved in planning the crime, Howard, as a relatively inexperienced Soldier, was left alone at the checkpoint to secure the position and maintain communication. His solitary role placed him in a critical position as the events unfolded, responsible for monitoring any potential communications or disruptions while the others carried out the attack.

The execution of their plan on March 12, 2006, marked one of the darkest episodes of the U.S. Army's involvement in the Iraq War. SPC Cortez, PFC Spielman, PFC Green, and SPC Barker, encouraged by alcohol and emboldened by the lack of immediate oversight, left TCP 2 and headed to the residence of the local family, the al-Janabis. Entering the home as though clearing an enemy compound, they gathered the family into one room at gunpoint. The Soldiers then separated 14-year-old Abeer Qassim Hamzah Rashid al-Janabi from her family, proceeded to assault her, and ultimately killed and



burned her body. They also executed her father, Qassim, her mother, Fakhriah, and her baby sister, Hadeel, leaving behind a scene of profound violence and horror.

Returning to their checkpoint, the Soldiers' initial relief morphed into a disturbing celebration of their actions. They not only recounted the atrocities with enthusiasm but also plotted to conceal their crimes, revealing the moral collapse and impunity that had taken hold within the unit. The Soldiers attempted to erase evidence of their wrongdoing, bound by a shared pact of silence.

However, the gravity of their actions soon became apparent when local Iraqis discovered the crime scene, prompting an informal inquiry at the platoon level. When questioned about the murders, PFC Green abruptly confessed but insisted that he had acted alone. The inquiry, limited in scope and lacking the rigor of a formal AR 15-6 investigation, did not escalate beyond the platoon. This informal approach meant that the findings remained within the lower chain of command, reducing oversight and potentially limiting the thoroughness of the fact-finding process. Initially skeptical, SGT Yribe was forced to confront the truth when Green calmly detailed the events of the massacre. Although convinced of Green's guilt, Yribe took no formal disciplinary action and instead told Green, 'I am done with you. You are dead to me. Get yourself out of this Army, or I will get you out myself.' A week later, after a verbal altercation with SFC Fenlason, leadership removed Yribe from the platoon.

In a final, ethically disturbing act, PFC Green callously threw a sick puppy off a roof. This incident led to his referral to the combat stress team, where he was diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder and subsequently discharged from the Army, taking with him the secret of the Janabi family massacre.

APRIL & MAY 2006

In April, SFC Fenlason and 1LT Norton observed what they perceived as notable improvements within 1st Platoon. The platoon was actively participating in multi-day operations in Yusufiyah, demonstrating significant progress in operational effectiveness and discipline. These operations were seen as signs of rehabilitation, with the platoon showing improvements in grooming, uniform standards, and overall attitude. However, despite these perceived improvements, there were underlying issues that cast a shadow on this optimistic outlook. In mid-April, some Soldiers from Charlie Company were caught with Valium, which they had acquired during a brief stint at the TCPs, filling in for Bravo. The local Iraqi Army (IA) personnel, known for their substance abuse issues, seemed to have influenced the behavior of the stationed U.S. Soldiers. This situation came to a head in mid-May when a Soldier from 1st Platoon was found high on Valium, wandering away from his post without his weapon. This incident led SFC Fenlason and CPT Goodwin to order drug tests for the entire platoon, which resulted in three positive tests. This discovery highlighted a serious issue of substance abuse within the platoon, making the leadership second guess their optimism.

JUNE 2006

On June 16th, 1st Platoon had returned to the JSB, with 2nd Platoon manning the TCPs and 3rd Platoon patrolling Yusufiyah. SFC Fenlason, serving as the acting First Sergeant, managed the company, which was severely understaffed due to an unexpected number of passes, mid-tour leaves, and medical issues. Reporting the personnel shortfall to the Battalion S3, SFC Fenlason emphasized the critical



shortage: "When you took out the people that were on leave, the people going on leave, and factored in the passes, the company was going to be short the equivalent of a platoon for three weeks." At the time, 1st Platoon had only 22 of its 34 Soldiers available for operations. Despite these constraints, the company continued its duties, including IED sweeps, patrols, and resupply runs, with no adjustments or accommodations made by battalion leadership for Bravo's diminished combat power.

1st Platoon was spread across three positions. 1LT Norton, along with elements of 2nd and 3rd Squads, was stationed at the JSB. SSG Chaz Allen and 1st Squad were positioned approximately 1.5 kilometers to the north with five other Soldiers. At the Alamo which is between the JSB and TCP 4, was PFC Tucker, PFC Menchaca, and SPC Babineau, guarding the AVLB—a critical point that was undermanned by junior Soldiers, far below the required squad-sized element. Although Menchaca was not originally scheduled to man the Alamo, he volunteered to cover a colleague's shift for a birthday, leading to an extended 24-hour duty in a single Humvee. The night prior, SPC Cortez had taken small-arms and RPG fire at the Alamo, prompting SSG Allen to warn SPC Babineau to remain especially vigilant.

At approximately 20:00 hrs, the relative calm was shattered by a sudden burst of gunfire near the Alamo. When attempts to contact the trio at the Alamo failed, SSG Allen and SPC Cortez, stationed at TCP 4, scanned the area with an M14 scope from the rooftop but saw no signs of the team. Realizing they needed to respond, they loaded into a Humvee, only to find that the battery was dead—likely the result of infrequent use, reflecting lax maintenance. The team then transferred to an M113 armored personnel carrier and headed south.

Hearing the gunfire from the JSB, 1LT Norton quickly assembled an improvised quick reaction force (QRF) led by SSG Lauzier. However, their response to the Alamo was delayed by suspected IEDs, which turned out to be decoys, costing them critical time. The enemy, having probed 1st Platoon's defenses throughout the deployment, appeared to be ready for their response. The use of decoys suggested a level of preparation and understanding of the platoon's tactics, allowing the attackers to exploit vulnerabilities and further delay reinforcements.

Eventually, SPC Cortez's team and SSG Lauzier's squad converged on the AVLB around 20:15 hrs, discovering a grim scene. Brass shell casings were scattered across the area, and large pools of blood indicated the violent nature of the attack. About thirty yards from their location, they found SPC Babineau's body, face down along the canal bank, riddled with gunshot wounds to his body and head. However, there were no signs of PFC Tucker or PFC Menchaca. The scene revealed critical lapses in preparedness. Two M4 rifles were found unattended on the hood of the Humvee, which had its doors left open. Inside the vehicle, all three Soldiers' helmets were discovered, including one with Skittles inside, alongside a PlayStation Portable. The Humvee's turret was locked, preventing it from scanning for threats, and its mounted M240B machine gun was set to safe.

The aftermath was filled with chaos and desperation. In a frantic attempt to locate the missing Soldiers, 1st Platoon aggressively interrogated the locals suspecting that nearby Iraqi Soldiers were either complicit in or aware of the Soldiers' disappearance. As night fell, the search intensified, and frustrations boiled over. Soldiers began using force and issuing threats in their desperate bid to find



Tucker and Menchaca, blurring the lines between ethical conduct and the operational demands of the moment.

CPT Goodwin arrived at the JSB with 3rd Platoon around 21:00 hrs, quickly finding himself overwhelmed by the unfolding crisis. As the search continued, LTC Kunk and CSM Edwards arrived at the JSB and immediately began chastising 1LT Norton and 1st Platoon. “They took over the show and began to abuse 1st Platoon,” Goodwin recalled. “Anytime they had a free moment, they were yelling at Norton about how much 1st Platoon sucked and how worthless they all were. Anything 1st Platoon said was considered a lie, or they chose not to listen.” Despite the deployment of over 8,000 Coalition Soldiers in the search effort, leadership at the JSB remained focused on criticizing 1st Platoon, offering little in the way of support or cohesion. Instead, LTC Kunk and CSM Edwards directed their attention toward the state of the base and the platoon’s previous actions, further demoralizing the already strained unit.

Meanwhile, at FOB Mahmudiyah, PFC Justin Watt was attending medical appointments, detached from the immediate crisis unfolding with 1st Platoon. During his visit, he encountered SGT Yribe, who was also there for a back injury. Their first hint of trouble came when Alpha Company personnel rushed past, gearing up for a response. Realizing something serious had occurred, SGT Yribe sought information and learned of the attack, SPC Babineau’s death, and the capture of PFC Tucker and PFC Menchaca—a fate considered worse than death due to the brutal potential for torture.

Frustrated by the news, SGT Yribe confided in PFC Watt, revealing a dark secret he had been withholding. “It just drives me crazy that all the good men die, and murderers like PFC Green are home,” he said, alluding to events he had kept hidden up to that point.

“Murderers?” Watt asked. Yribe went on to recount how PFC Green had confessed to a crime, and how Yribe had been so convinced of Green’s guilt that he threatened to force him out of the Army. Skeptical that Green could have acted alone, Watt suggested that others must have been involved. Yribe, however, dismissed the idea and urged Watt to drop the subject for their own safety, abdicating any moral responsibility. “The less I know about it—and the less you know about it—the better. Just forget I said anything,” Yribe added.

Watt decided he could not let the secret remain buried. He sought out PFC Howard, who had been at TCP 2 on the day of the murders, and carefully pressed him for information, revealing only what Yribe had disclosed. Believing Watt was already informed, Howard reluctantly confirmed the involvement of SPC Cortez, SPC Barker, PFC Spielman, and PFC Green, as well as his own role in the events. The revelations deeply haunted Watt, particularly the image of the victimized father facing unimaginable violence. Struggling with the moral weight of the crime and his loyalty to his fellow Soldiers, Watt grappled with the ethical imperative to not remain a bystander and uphold the values he believed the Army represented.

Amid the intense search operation for PFC Tucker and PFC Menchaca, two detainees provided critical information leading to the discovery of their bodies. A disturbing insurgent video, later obtained, depicted the mutilated bodies, caked in mud after likely being dragged behind a vehicle, surrounded by men in a grim celebration. Tucker was shown decapitated, his severed head placed grotesquely on his



body, while attempts were made to burn their uniforms. The video captured the insurgents chanting in a mix of celebration and prayer.

Following this gruesome discovery, Bravo Company received a flood of defensive equipment and supplies into their area of operations (AO), as though it had taken a tragedy for these resources to arrive. The battalion also issued a directive stating that “every TCP must always have at least eight men and two vehicles. No exceptions.” However, this mandate came without additional Soldiers to implement the policy.

In the wake of these traumatic events, SFC Fenlason and 1LT Norton struggled to regroup and support their platoon under intense scrutiny and emotional strain. Meanwhile, Watt, consumed by guilt over what he knew about the al Janabi family, realized he could no longer remain silent. He sought out SGT John Diem of 2nd Squad, a Soldier Watt deeply trusted. “There was literally no one in the world I trusted more than Diem. No one had their head screwed on straighter. No one’s moral compass was truer,” Watt later said of him.

After hearing the story, Diem, understanding the gravity of the situation and the potential risk to Watt, knew he couldn’t keep the information to himself. Diem’s decision-making process, as he later described, involved a deep internal conflict. “I thought for four hours... I went immediately on guard, and in that four-hour shift, I dedicated myself to determining what I was going to do.” He ultimately decided the information needed to be shared widely to prevent any single individual from suppressing it. “The more people who knew about it, the more resources were going to be available to us,” he reasoned. Diem concluded that previous leaders had abdicated their moral responsibility to report the crime, but he would not—and he would not allow anyone above him to do so either.

Diem reflected on the profound responsibility he faced in reporting the crimes, describing his decision as deeply aligned with his commitment to the Army’s values. “Honorable service was really not just assuming that the organization was as honorable as you pictured it to be... it was holding yourself to an impossible moral and professional standard and, through striving, attaining as much of that excellence as possible.” In a later interview, Diem discussed how his sense of agency and duty empowered him to act, even when the fear of reprisal was high. “When you spoke to me, an agent of the organization that I served, you might as well have been speaking through me directly into the ear of the chief of staff of the Army—that’s how integrated I felt with the organization.” Diem’s reflection underscored his unwavering commitment to the profession of arms, which ultimately drove him to notify 1LT Norton and SFC Fenlason about the rape and murders.

The subsequent reporting from the platoon up to the brigade level initiated a cascade of inquiries and investigations. Diem’s and Watt’s claims sparked an investigation led by LTC Kunk, who initially expressed skepticism. However, as questioning progressed, the perpetrators confessed to elements of the crime and implicated others. The revelation shook the platoon, which was already grappling with recent losses. The fallout extended beyond the investigations. During a meeting with 1st Platoon, LTC Kunk’s confrontational approach only deepened the rift, with many Soldiers feeling unfairly blamed. The ensuing AR 15-6 investigations, which primarily targeted company-level leadership, elicited mixed reactions within the unit.



SFC Fenlason and 1LT Norton found themselves in a difficult position, balancing their responsibilities to their men while navigating the complexities of the military justice system. Meanwhile, 1st Platoon was relegated to guard duty at FOB Mahmudiyah, removed from front-line combat operations but not from the consequences of the violent acts. The rest of the battalion, along with Bravo's 2nd and 3rd Platoons, continued combat operations around Yusufiyah.

Steven Green, now a civilian living on the East Coast, attended David Babineau's funeral at Arlington National Cemetery before his eventual arrest by the FBI in North Carolina. His co-accused—Cortez, Spielman, and Barker—remained confined to Camp Striker, with limited freedoms, as they awaited the inevitable legal proceedings. The backlash from the rape and murders was severe, deeply damaging relations with local Iraqi governments and inciting outrage among the civilian population. This anger was further manipulated by Al Qaeda, which used the incident for propaganda. A video claiming “vengeance for the dishonor brought upon their sister Abeer” fueled radicalized insurgents who were already placing immense pressure on 1st Platoon in the area of operations.

As the battalion struggled to regain its footing, leadership changes continued. 1LT Norton was reassigned to administrative duties at FOB Mahmudiyah's headquarters and received a letter of reprimand. Despite his efforts to rehabilitate the image of the units, the shadow of earlier events loomed large, coloring interactions and undermining the cohesion and effectiveness of the forces. Ultimately, CPT Goodwin was suspended from command, and his executive officer, Justin Habash, took over the company.

James Barker and Paul Cortez pled guilty to avoid the death penalty. Their confessions played a key role in their convictions, resulting in sentences of 90 and 100 years respectively at Fort Leavenworth's Disciplinary Barracks, with eligibility for parole after 10 years. Jesse Spielman, who faced charges disputing his knowledge of the crime's planning, was found guilty on all counts and initially sentenced to life, later reduced to 90 years, with parole eligibility after 10 years. PFC Bryan Howard, who pled guilty to conspiracy to obstruct justice and being an accessory after the fact, was sentenced to 27 months in prison and released on parole after 17 months for good behavior.

Steven Green was tried in civilian court under the Military Extraterritorial Jurisdiction Act. Despite efforts to dismiss the case and plead guilty in exchange for removing the death penalty, he was convicted on all counts and sentenced to five consecutive life sentences without the possibility of parole. During his hearing, Green issued a public apology: “I helped to destroy a family and end the lives of four of my fellow human beings, and I wish that I could take it back, but I cannot,” he said in a victim impact statement. “As inadequate as this apology is, it is all I can give you.” Green later committed suicide in prison in 2014.

CONCLUSION

The tragic outcomes in Yusufiyah, Iraq, and the subsequent examination of leadership within 1st Platoon, Bravo Company, 1/502, illustrate the severe consequences of moral and ethical failings within the Army. The implications of 1st Strike's failures extended beyond immediate tactical or operational outcomes—they had strategic ramifications that affected the broader military mission and the relationship between the military and the communities it serves. The actions of a few Soldiers in Yusufiyah reverberated worldwide.



This case study serves as both a reflection on these events and a somber reminder of the responsibilities leaders at all levels bear in shaping the ethical environment of their units. Officers, in particular, must recognize their critical role in preventing ethical breaches. They are responsible not only for their actions but for setting the ethical standard for their subordinates. It is insufficient to react to violations after they occur; leadership must proactively prevent such failures through continuous engagement and by leading through example.

The tragic events in Yusufiyah, and the lives lost, were not solely the result of a few bad actors within 1st Strike. They stemmed from a series of flawed decisions and the ethical and moral lapses of leadership. Leaders must learn from the story of 1st Strike and Bravo Company and uphold the ethical principles of the profession of arms to ensure such preventable tragedies are never repeated.



CASE STUDY QUESTIONS

Operating Environment - pages 1 & 2

- a. What contextual issues have the most significant impact on the mission?
- b. Have you developed the expertise to deal with the operational complexity of this mission?
- c. What priorities would you set for your platoon during pre-deployment training?

Culture and Climate - pages 2-7

- a. What is the impact of command climate on unit effectiveness?
- b. How well did Brigade, Battalion, and Company leadership create a shared understanding of the unit's mission and intent?
- c. What is the connection between enforcing standards and mission effectiveness?

Tradeoffs - pages 7-11

- a. What are some possible solutions for securing Route Sportster?
- b. How would you confront your leadership regarding poor tactical decisions and dysfunctional command climate?

Moral Disengagement - pages 11-15

- a. What are the moral implications of issuing orders that Soldiers do not understand, and leaders cannot explain?
- b. How do you maintain a positive command climate under difficult and negative conditions?
- c. What factors contribute to the moral disengagement of 1st Platoon? What actions could you take to prevent their moral disengagement?

Dereliction of Duty - pages 15-19

- a. What factors led to the horrific crime U.S. Soldiers committed? What could have prevented it?
- b. Who is responsible and accountable for the deterioration of discipline and actions at the Alamo?

Conclusion - pages 19-22

- a. What could you have done to lead 1st Platoon more effectively?
- b. What factors inspired Diem and Watt to come forward while others remained silent?
- c. What does this story highlight about our profession and leading in combat?



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