



Soldiers of Foxtrot Battery, 202nd ADA, interact with Iraqi civilians during momentary lulls in combat operations. At far right, Sgt. Maj. James Ross of 4-5 ADA was in the lead Humvee when a Foxtrot patrol was ambushed by Iraqi insurgents.

AMBUSH at HOLY WEEK

An ADA Sergeant Major Spends Longest Hours of His Life Trapped in Iraqi Ambush

by Sgt. Maj. James Ross

We depart Camp Blackjack, Baghdad International Airport, at 0530 hours. The patrol consists of 28 Soldiers from 2nd Platoon, Foxtrot Battery, 202nd Air Defense Artillery. The Illinois Army National Guard unit is deployed to Iraq to support my battalion, the 4th Battalion, 5th Air Defense Artillery, 1st Cavalry Division.

We are mounted in eight M114 "Up-Armor" Humvees. Each Humvee has three- or four-man crews and a crew-served weapon mounted in its rotating turret. The crew-served weapons are a mix of M240B Machine Guns (7.62mm), M249 Machine Guns (5.56mm Link) and MK-19 Grenade Launchers. The platoon is armed with M16A2 Rifles (5.56mm), M-9mm Pistols, M203 Grenade Launchers, and M4 Machine Guns (5.56mm). I have a 9mm strapped in my leg holster and a M16A2 Rifle.

It is Easter Sunday, but our main concern is that Easter falls right in the middle of an Islamic holy week. My air defense battalion is responsible for the approximately 300 kilometers of battle space surrounding Baghdad International Airport. Shi'a Muslims are inundating our zone of operations as they head south to Ramadi to visit a hallowed shrine. We are pretty sure insurgents are using the pilgrimage through Baghdad to infiltrate our zone.

As a senior noncommissioned leader, I am not obligated to go out on patrol. Because I like to be near the Soldiers, I pick different patrols at random and go out into the "zone" with them. I always try to make the platoon leader and the platoon sergeant feel at ease. I promise them that I will be "going along for the ride" and tell them not to worry about me trying to take charge. I am riding in the lead Humvee with a squad leader, driver and gunner.

At 0545 hours we pick up "J," our translator, at the Titan Company Headquarters. Everyone calls him J because his Arabic Name is too tough to pronounce.

We leave Entry Control Point (ECP) 7 at the southeast corner of the airport. We drive about a mile and turned north on an expressway that serves as military supply route (MSR). The route is one of the main supply routes leading into Baghdad. It carries the military and civilian convoys that carry supplies to coalition forces throughout Iraq. The route runs south all the way to Kuwait and northeast through Fallujah, about 30 kilometers from Baghdad, which makes it a popular road for insurgents.

The countryside along the MSR is primarily rural. Farmers live in the villages to our left and right. We head north on the MSR about eight kilometers, and we come across a large crater that has been blown in the road. The crater is about four-feet deep and stretches almost all the way across the right two lanes of the three-lane highway. Someone has blown an improvised explosive device. A civilian car is broken down in the crater. Obviously, the car's driver didn't see the crater and drove right into it.

The patrol positions its vehicles around the area and investigates the scene. We find the firing wire and the detonating device in the weeds east of the crater. A small irrigation pipe runs under all six lanes of the MSR. It's apparent that the main charge was stuffed in the pipe under the highway and detonated. A sergeant, a specialist and I follow the firing wire back to its point of origin. The three of us jump over a five-foot wide concrete culvert that holds about three-feet of water. About 30 meters further, the wire ends at the corner of a yard, about 200 meters northeast of the crater.

We contact the patrol leader, 1st Lt. Tracy W. Doubler, on our handheld radio and tell him what we found. He directs the Humvees off the MSR and moves them east onto a dirt road that flanks a small dirt road. Then the patrol leader, a platoon leader and a platoon sergeant move



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to the culvert to develop a plan of action. The platoon stays on the far side of the culvert. Since the sergeant, specialist and I don't want to jump back over the culvert, we stay on our side of the culvert.

An Iraqi farmer who lives in a nearby village comes up to us and tells our interpreter that for the last few weeks men have been showing up in the area and threatening the residents if anyone speaks of their activities. He says the men are very intimidating and basically have all of the locals scared. He says the all the insurgents have guns and threaten to kill anyone who talks.

We thank the man for the information, and Lieutenant Doubler decides to search the house. He tells the three of us to stand fast because the platoon is going to move its vehicles into position to conduct the cordon and search. He says he will bring the vehicles around the culvert so that we won't have to jump over again. The patrol leader also plans to question the residents of the houses to determine if their stories match the neighbors' stories.

The patrol leader and platoon leaders head back toward the Humvees while the three of us wait on the far side of the culvert. Before they reach the Humvees, we are ambushed by insurgents firing small-arms from about 400 meters away on the west side of the MSR. The platoon members rush to their Humvees and begin returning fire.

For the three of us trapped behind the culvert between the insurgents and the platoon, there are few options. As bullets fly all around us, we move backwards about 20 feet and take up prone fighting positions. The specialist tries to jump back over the culvert, but doesn't make it across and ends up waist deep in water. The patrol leader yells for him to start shooting with his M203 Grenade Launcher. Because the water is waist deep and the culvert walls are angled, the specialist can't get out of the culvert. He gives up trying, locks and loads his grenade launcher and starts firing controlled bursts about every 30 seconds while standing waist deep in water.

The specialist directs the grenade rounds into a ridgeline about 400 meters to the west where we believe the ambush is coming from. After about two minutes the sergeant and I grow tired of dodging bullets, which are zinging by so close that you can hear them snap. I looked at the sergeant and tell him that we need to get the *\$^%# outta here. We get on our feet and jump over the culvert. I help pull the specialist out of the culvert. Rounds are flying all around us, and we have no choice but to run for it. I yell to them, "Run for the vehicles."

We are completely exposed and in the open, so we run fast as we can toward the vehicles. Weighted down by our gear, we aren't able to run as fast as we'd like. It's a 150-meter sprint to the Humvees with no cover. I really don't like our chances. As we dash for the vehicles, bullets whiz by our heads and kick up dirt around us. It's a miracle none of us are hit.

We somehow make it to the vehicles safely. The specialist tells me later that, when I got to our Humvee, my eyes were so big with fright that they were filling up my

Eye Safety System goggles. It's surreal. I can't believe I am standing there without a scratch. Using the vehicles for cover, we fire back at the ambushers with all of our small arms and crew-served weapons. The platoon sergeant notifies the battalion command post that we were almost "black" on ammo and to have a resupply waiting at ECP 7.

Once the attackers stop firing, and we are convinced that the area is reasonably clear, the patrol leader has a team search the house and question the residents. The platoon forms a 360-degree perimeter to ensure we are safe. During the search, we start to receive mortar fire. The first round explodes about 300 meters to our east. The second round falls about 200 meters away and causes a very large explosion, probably by hitting a house or a car. The mortar fire is starting to get too close for comfort, and the lieutenant gives the order to line up on the MSR and return to ECP 7 for ammunition resupply. Simultaneously, the mortar crew adjusts fire and mortar rounds start landing all around us. It's obvious we need to get out of the area because we are sitting ducks. The patrol leader gets on the radio and tells everyone that we are moving back to ECP 7.

As we are pulling into ECP 7, we notice a convoy leaving Baghdad International. It consists of 20 fuel tankers and a couple of five-ton gun trucks. A sergeant in the lead vehicle tells us the convoy is headed away from the ambush site.

First Sergeant Paul Peterson of Foxtrot Battery meets us with the ammo at ECP 7, and resupply takes only about 10 minutes. We head back out towards the MSR and, almost immediately, we see black smoke coming from the northwest. As far as we can tell, the column of smoke is rising from the same general direction as the ambush site. I'm hoping that the smoke isn't due to an ambush of the fuel convoy.

...a textbook ambush waiting to happen...

As we travel one kilometer further, it becomes obvious that the convoy we saw leaving ECP 7 is under attack. The sergeant who told us the convoy was headed away from the ambush apparently had his directions mixed up. An ugly scenario unfolds in front of our eyes. The convoy had been attacked within the previous 10 minutes. Two fuel trucks had been completely destroyed and are blocking the three lanes of the northbound MSR. The convoy personnel—about 50 of them—are up ahead about 400 meters and are being attacked from both sides of the street. They are in big trouble. The only way we can get to them is by taking a dirt trail on the right side of the MSR. It's a textbook ambush waiting to happen and everyone knows it. We also know that we either run the gauntlet or the personnel in the convoy gets hammered.

I grab the radio hand-mike and notify the platoon to expect to get hit as soon as we pull off the MSR onto the



dirt road. The dirt road branches northeast about 200 meters and then turns back towards the highway. Running parallel to the dirt road is an eight-foot high patch of grass and reeds that mask the enemy location. I don't know how I know they are in there, but by looking at the burning fuel trucks, I can just envision insurgents waiting to spring an ambush. With our Humvee in the lead, we pull onto the dirt trail and, just as expected, we get ambushed. A rocket-propelled grenade streaks out of the weeds and misses by less than a foot. Rounds are flying everywhere. They are firing at us, and we are firing back. If one of the rocket-propelled grenades hits our Humvee, it will be a disaster. The entire platoon will be trapped on the dirt trail in the middle of the kill box.

We make it around the turn and, with the platoon in full throttle, we move back onto the MSR and position ourselves around the disabled fuel trucks. The convoy has taken many casualties, and one soldier with a head wound is in critical condition. Most of the other wounded are suffering from gunshot wounds to their extremities. Our medic immediately starts to consolidate the wounded and sets up a triage. Doubler gets on the radio and calls in a dust-off request. He's told that a medivac helicopter is on its way.

The platoon immediately takes charge of the scene and lets loose with all its weapons systems. On the radio, I call battalion and ask for air and armor support. The battalion commander, Lt. Col. Todd Morrow, tells me he's sending everything he has our way.

Small arms fire is flying at us from both sides of the highway and, periodically, mortar rounds are landing within 200 meters to our front. Two Apache Helicopters arrived and provide air cover for an inbound medivac Blackhawk. A Soldier tosses a red smoke grenade so the medevac knows where to land. The medevac picks up the wounded and is gone in three minutes max. The Apaches roll in and use their main guns to strafe the ridgeline. Everyone is cheering. Suddenly ground fire hits the tail of one of the Apaches, and the Apache plummets to the ground and explodes. The whole incident lasts about three seconds, and it's a horrible and helpless moment as we witness the deaths of two pilots who bravely gave their lives to protect us.

The Soldiers from the convoy are not very organized, and most of them are not even shooting back. Peterson and I move down the line of fuel trucks, yelling and screaming at the drivers and assistant drivers to get off their butts and get the fuel trucks turned around so that we can get them out of the kill zone. Many of the fuel trucks have blown-out tires, so we direct the drivers to start changing tires as we provide cover.

The Bradleys dispatched by battalion arrive and lay down covering fire. Some Bradleys cover the Apache crash site. MPs arrive and go to the crash site. It takes about 30 minutes for the convoy personnel to change tires and get their vehicles turned around. Again, my Humvee takes the lead and escorts them back to ECP 7. Foxtrot Battery's 3rd Platoon rolls out from Camp Blackjack to meet us

and assist in the movement back to ECP 7.

Once we arrive at ECP 7 we get the convoy personnel staged on the west side of the Hesco barriers. Suddenly, we come under attack again. Small-arms fire zips toward us from a house about 500 meters north of ECP 7. The platoon lines up all its crew-served weapons along the barriers and, with the tower guards along the western wall joining in, light up the house. The 4-5 ADA Bradley Linebackers at ECP 7 let loose with their 25mms. Once the house and the insurgents inside are destroyed, the convoy personnel get back in their vehicles and head home towards Camp Victory.

It is now about 1400 hours, and Doubler tells me that I don't need to go back out with the platoon. He says that I have seen enough action for one day. The platoon still has six more hours to go on their patrol. Although it's one of the hardest things I've ever done, I get back in the Humvee and complete the patrol with 2nd Platoon. It was one of the longest 12 hours of my life.

In June 2004, all members of the patrol receive Army Commendation Medals with "V" devices and Doubler receives a Bronze Star with "V" device. In my professional estimate, if not for our actions, it is very likely that all of the personnel in that convoy would have been killed or wounded.

Sergeant Major James Ross is assigned to 4th Battalion, 5th Air Defense Artillery, 1st Cavalry Division, Fort Hood, Texas. His first-person account won a "Stories From the Field" contest sponsored by Gameindustry.com. It is reprinted here with their kind permission.

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