
Attack on Abu Ghraib: Warrior Police in an Iraq Theater Internment Facility

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The 306th Military Police Battalion (Internment/Resettlement) operated the Abu Ghraib Internment Facility (AGIF) in Iraq from January to November 2005. The insurgent attack on the facility on 2 April 2005 was a testament to the quality of our Warrior Police and provided key lessons learned for future detainee missions. The intricacy, length, and intensity of the attack and the number of attackers made this one of the most sophisticated assaults ever on a coalition facility within Iraq. More than 60 insurgents conducted this well-planned and well-coordinated attack using improvised explosive devices (IEDs), truck bombs, indirect fire, and a small-unit assault that signaled a new era in insurgency attacks.

Background

Forward Operating Base (FOB) Abu Ghraib, which included and was dominated by the AGIF, was located on the southwestern outskirts of Baghdad about 8 miles west of the Baghdad International Airport. The FOB (which was shut down along with all its facilities during the summer of 2006) was a rough square about a kilometer on each side with cement walls around the entire base. Outside the FOB were a four-lane highway along the south side, two-lane highways along the north and west sides, and a dirt road along the east side. The city of Abu Ghraib was just several hundred meters outside the north and west walls of the FOB and was known to be heavily infested with insurgents.

At the time of the attack, there were Soldiers, Marines, Airmen, and civilians based at the FOB. Almost half of these were assigned to the 306th Military Police Battalion. Other units included part of a military intelligence battalion, a field hospital unit, a rear-area operations center (RAOC) unit for base support operations, and a Marine rifle company task-organized under the RAOC for external base defense. The Marines manned the towers on the perimeter of the FOB and the FOB access gates, while Soldiers from the 306th Military Police Battalion occupied the interior detention facility towers and performed roving patrols. The detainee population included Sunnis, Shiites, and a small number of non-Iraqi foreign nationals. They were housed primarily within Camp Redemption inside air-conditioned tents surrounded by multiple layers of chain-link fence, concertina wire, and guard towers. Until 2 April 2005, most enemy activity in

the area consisted of indirect-fire attacks on the AGIF once or twice per week, weekly IED ambushes against coalition forces (CF) convoys passing through the area, and an occasional vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attack on either a passing convoy or a fixed CF site.

The Attack

The overall attack on the AGIF began several hours before the first indirect-fire and small-arms rounds hit the base itself. At about 1630 hours there was an IED attack against a passing CF convoy about 4 kilometers northeast of the AGIF. This was the first of a multitude of ambushes and roadblocks on the routes leading to the AGIF in an apparent attempt to isolate the FOB. The primary route that reinforcing CF units would take from the airport to the AGIF was hit with four IED ambushes, four small-arms attacks, three VBIED assaults, and two indirect-fire strikes. Antitank mines were also placed at a key intersection. Other routes to the AGIF received lesser enemy attention but were nonetheless blocked against reinforcing CF units. The enemy apparently believed that the AGIF was isolated, and they initiated their main attack on the FOB around dusk, at 1915 hours.

The attack started with heavy mortar and rocket attacks. An estimated 78 rounds struck the base throughout the assault. An attack with small-arms fire was then initiated from the south. Several minutes later, small-arms fire started coming from the northwest. At about 1935 hours, the enemy tried to suppress base defenses in the area of Tower 4 on the southeast corner of the base with small-arms

fire, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and hand grenades. In the midst of this action, a fuel truck was used for an attempted suicide attack against the tower. The truck was detonated about 75 meters short of the tower and the FOB wall, resulting in several casualties. Following that attack, the enemy launched a small-unit ground attack against the area around Tower 4. This ground attack by a reinforced squad was beaten back with Marine rifle and machine gun fire and hand grenades.

Shortly after the attack against Tower 4, hundreds of detainees within Camp Redemption began to riot. They armed themselves with improvised weapons, including clubs and slingshots. Several lit fires, threw rocks at perimeter lights, and caused other disruptions to cover attempts to create holes in the facility fences. Soldiers of the battalion were faced with a huge rioting detainee population to their front and an intense insurgent attack to their rear. Soldiers manning the Camp Redemption bunkers nearest Tower 4 were receiving weapons fire from one side and rocks and other projectiles from the other side. One military police Soldier had been caught in the middle of Camp Redemption when the initial attack began, forcing him to dive alone into a nearby bunker. In the midst of the incoming rounds, he observed a group of detainees trying to cut through the compound fence in order to escape. The Soldier began firing less than lethal (LTL) shotgun rounds at the detainees to drive them back. After his last LTL round was fired, he drew his pistol and kept the group at bay until his fellow Soldiers could reinforce him.

Simultaneous with this effort, the battalion was able to move a platoon-size element from one end of the FOB to the other to reinforce Camp Redemption. This movement under fire was done using the battalion's organic high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles. Upon arrival, this force bolstered the perimeter defense of Camp Redemption with emphasis on the southern end, which faced Tower 4. Two military police teams moved to the vehicle gate adjacent to Tower 4 and helped the Marines repel an enemy ground assault.

The battalion's higher headquarters, the 18th Military Police Brigade, had been trying to push reinforcements to the AGIF throughout the entire fight. Elements of the 306th Military Police Battalion's sister unit, the 503d Military Police Battalion, had been fighting tenaciously to push through on the routes to the AGIF but were unable to pass. The

brigade commander requested helicopter support and directed the Soldiers of the 503d to prepare in case they were needed for a possible air assault into the AGIF.

At about 2000 hours, with the enemy's indirect and small-arms fire continuing, a diversionary attack was launched on Tower 9, across the FOB from Tower 4. Marines around Tower 9 took heavy small-arms and RPG fire and the enemy got close enough to launch a barrage of hand grenades over the FOB walls. The Marine gunners of crew-served weapons in Tower 9 observed a vehicle racing toward their position. They struck the vehicle with withering machine gun fire, causing the enemy suicide truck to explode a couple hundred meters from their position. By 2020 hours, the battalion had sufficient reinforcements at Camp Redemption to quell the rioting detainees. With the external attack continuing, several military police Soldiers were moved out to the towers to reinforce the Marines there.

The overall attack began to ebb at about 2050 hours. Emergency accountability procedures for detainees were implemented and a fence line check was begun. Sporadic small-arms and indirect fire continued for about an hour. Full accountability of all detainees was achieved. Only three confirmed enemy bodies were found around the FOB perimeter. However, later information from the local morgues, hospitals, and mosques indicated that the enemy sustained dozens of killed and many wounded in action. Eighteen unexploded rounds were found within the FOB. An ice truck located about 20 meters from the Camp Redemption command post received a direct hit of indirect fire and was completely destroyed. The day after the attack, two abandoned VBIEDs were discovered on the road leading up to Tower 4.

The enemy attack on the AGIF was a resounding defeat for the insurgents. While impressive in its organization and preparation, it failed to cause large numbers of U.S. casualties, help any detainees escape, or accomplish any degradation to the battalion's detainee mission. While the insurgents tried their usual tactic of claiming success for the attack in the media, they also failed in this. The world's media was distracted by the death of Pope John Paul II on the same day.

Lessons Learned

An event of this magnitude was bound to spawn numerous lessons learned. Perhaps one of the most

important for the battalion was not to underestimate the enemy. It is easy to fall into a feeling of superiority when fighting an enemy with such comparatively limited resources. The insurgent effort was obviously well planned and certainly involved an abundance of reconnaissance. We must always remember that we could face the full force of the enemy and have to deal with a worst-case scenario at any time.

The military police are often called “the force of choice” because of their ability to judiciously apply the rules of engagement and the rules for the use of force across the full spectrum of operations. The 2 April 2005 attack presented some intense challenges to this standard. Like most confinement facilities, we restricted weapons inside areas where detainees could reach them. However, since the AGIF was not in a rear area but rather in the middle of the insurgency, we had to be able to arm Soldiers quickly with their lethal weapons. The military police Soldiers were tested, trying to quell rioting detainees with LTL means while also defending themselves from insurgents attacking from the outside. One of the most critical points during the attack was when the interior riot was escalating and the fate of the outside attack was uncertain. A point developed when detainees inside the facility were effectively changing their status from unarmed detainees to becoming part of the armed combatant group attacking the facility. They seemed to be trying to coordinate their efforts inside the facility with the actions of the insurgents attacking from the outside. The detainees’ efforts hampered our ability to fight the insurgents. After issuing repeated warnings and using large numbers of LTL munitions, we prepared to use deadly force in case detainees attempted a mass escape during a possible insurgent penetration of the FOB perimeter.

The enforcement of standards and discipline was paramount to the battalion’s success. The battalion’s Soldiers were expected to maintain the warrior mindset at all times and were always prepared for battle. This mental preparation enabled them to rapidly respond to any situation. Even though standards and discipline were not always popular, we found that they were important in our responses to enemy attack and detainee disturbances.

Adaptive leadership with flexible plans proved to be very effective in this engagement. The basic battle drills we had trained were employed, with leaders using their own judgment to fill the gaps. Soldiers reported to their unit assembly areas with full battle gear and were ready to move into action. Leaders were aware of the battalion’s priorities during a crisis and initiated action to independently achieve these as quickly as possible. It is not possible to create a detailed plan to cover every contingency, but adaptive Soldiers and leaders who are well grounded in the basics can quickly adjust to any situation.

Personal leadership by many of the senior leaders was also critical to the battalion’s success. Orchestrating 500 military police Soldiers and controlling large numbers of detainees in the midst of a simultaneous riot and external attack required personal leadership from the front. While the battalion commander and command sergeant major were rallying Soldiers at Camp Redemption, the battalion operations officer was coordinating with the FOB’s base defense center and the 18th Military Police Brigade, as well as moving reinforcements to Camp Redemption and to FOB defensive positions. Company commanders moved to their assigned areas of responsibility, and first sergeants surged their Soldiers forward. Platoon leaders, platoon sergeants, and squad leaders led their Soldiers toward contact with the insurgents. All this was done despite oppressive enemy fire, testifying to the need for personal leadership.

In the end, the success of any engagement depends on a unit’s Soldiers. The Soldiers of the 306th Military Police Battalion rose to the challenge and proved themselves worthy of the title Warrior Police. Countless Soldiers in the battalion overcame the natural fear of coming under an intense enemy attack and accomplished their duties. There were numerous combat action badges awarded for this attack and two Soldiers of the battalion were decorated for valor. The battalion’s motto of “Serve with Honor” shines even greater from their efforts.