



Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael R. Weimer addresses Soldiers of 1st Battalion, 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team after their Military Operations in Urban Terrain training at Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM), Washington, April 3, 2024. Weimer toured multiple sites on JBLM to meet with leaders and Soldiers to discuss Army programs and modernization. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Joshua Oh)

Combat Doesn't Care: *How Ready Are You?*

By 17th Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael R. Weimer

During one of several deployments to the Middle East, my team and I were pleased to head to western Iraq. One of our units had recently surged in this area to pursue a high-value individual (HVI), and we were going to join them. We didn't know it then, but this became a defining rotation that changed our lives and etched itself in our unit's history.

After linking in with our sister troop, we were ready to execute a complex night raid on the north side of the Euphrates River near the Syrian border in less than 36 hours. The helicopter (helo) routes for this mission were long and complex. Luckily, the crews had a lot of experience in the area. They knew the terrain, the

casualty evacuation contingencies, and the fire plan we were fortunate to have with this helo package.

We departed from the Mission Support Site (MSS) and began the long first leg to the Marine Corps outpost, where we reset. Here, we moved from an MH-60 Blackhawk to an MH-6 Little Bird for the final leg, which was less than 20 minutes. I still remember sitting on the right side of the Little Bird, trying to stay out of the wind, when my assistant team leader passed back the one-minute call. It was time to get ready. The plan was simple—stick to the fundamentals and execute the basics well.

The Marines didn't go north of the river, and our sister troop hadn't hit any targets in this area, so we

weren't sure what we'd find or what was waiting for us. We dropped to telephone pole height at one minute so the pilots could mask our silhouette and navigate more quickly through the built-up village. Thankfully, the illumination was low, and we had an AC-130 available to support our operation. We knew our helos were usually audio compromised about one minute out, and it was at this moment we realized something was off.

Usually, people run and hide when they hear helicopters, but we saw the opposite below us. Men ran outside with AK-47s, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and chest racks. We immediately began to take fire from a Dushka machine gun that knew exactly where we were—the enemy had night vision, which meant we were close!

I'd taken fire on a helo before, but this was the first time I'd experienced it while sitting on the side of a Little Bird 150 feet off the ground. The incoming rounds were so close the tracers looked like flaming pumpkins zipping toward us. We couldn't land fast enough!

Before we knew it, we were in a steep flare, only to suddenly land hard inside a courtyard that didn't look like the site we'd planned for. My assistant team leader and I ran around the nose of the Little Bird and straight to the front door, placed a charge, and waited for the helo to lift off. After blowing the door and clearing the

compound, we linked up with a team on the roof.

We soon realized we'd landed in the wrong spot in the middle of a foreign fighter haven. The rest of our unit landed 300 meters across the village from us, also in contact. Thankfully, we could all-clear and secure buildings quickly while the helos safely flushed (left) with minor hits to their airframes. We sorted ourselves out and linked up with our other teams. It was apparent it'd be a long night, and the enemy was intent on a fight.

Reports of large groups mobilizing and moving toward us increased. We knew no immediate response force or battle space owner was coming, and we had to exfiltrate (exfil) before daylight, or we'd lose our fires.

We moved as quickly as the tactical situation allowed, running into small teams of fighters who tried to close with us and blow themselves up with suicide vests—another sign a senior HVI was close by. The enemy came around every street corner, and we knew we couldn't let them get close or we might eat a suicide vest.

We finally linked up with the rest of our unit and held up in a series of cleared buildings to assess our situation. AC-130 support was critical, but we struggled to keep up with the couple hundred enemies reportedly moving toward us from the surrounding area. We knew that if we took any casualties, we'd have to fight to the outskirts



(U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Keaton Habeck)

of the village to evacuate them, and we weren't sure how long our luck would last.

We decided to abort the primary compound and start our slow, deliberate movement to the edge of the village to exfil before daybreak. We couldn't confirm if the AC-130 had destroyed the Dushka that fired on us during infiltration (infil), so we needed to move far from the village to reduce their ability to engage us.

After fighting through the village and moving two kilometers from its edge, we called for exfil. We loaded the helos with AC-130 coverage along the access routes to our hasty landing zone.

Within minutes, we crossed the river and returned to the Marine outpost, where we cross-loaded into Blackhawks. By the time we departed the outpost for the MSS, the sun was up, and everyone was jammed into the Blackhawk.

The look on everyone's face was the same—deep reflection on how lucky we were, mixed with anger because we left before finishing the job. Traditionally, you have a warm-up target or two before you have a night like this, and unbeknownst to us, we had more challenging days ahead with heavier consequences.

When we got back to the MSS, we wasted little time. We downloaded our kit, inventoried everything, and immediately resupplied. We were eager to return to the village that night with a larger force and more firepower and planned to stay until we finished the job.

Missions like this are what we trained for, and we wanted to test our resolve as warfighters. We were a disciplined, cohesive fighting force capable of handling complexity because we trained hard at the basics. The time to get in shape or work on our marksmanship skills was over.

The consequences of artificial readiness are the difference between life and death, success and failure, and

winning or losing. Are you ready, or do you need a warm-up target? The enemy doesn't plan on giving you one!

Ready Means Ready

Large-scale combat operations (LSCO) are “extensive joint combat operations in terms of scope and size of forces committed, conducted as a campaign aimed at achieving operational and strategic objectives” (Department of the Army, 2019).

While I have a fair amount of combat experience in counterinsurgency, I have none in LSCO. To be frank, none of our current military leadership has experience in LSCO. While Desert Storm and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 are the closest in recent history, the near-peer factor was still missing.

The differences between the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and our most recent historical large-scale combat operations are drastic. For most of the war on terrorism, many of our primary forward operating bases (FOBs) had one-hour medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) rings, contracted dining facilities, beautiful gyms, Amazon-delivered packages, and motorcycles for sale at AAFES locations.

However, the difference in the cost of life for U.S. servicemembers was also drastic—during the 20 years in Iraq and Afghanistan, we lost 7,054, while the price in WWII

was about 400,000 U.S. servicemembers (*Defense Casualty Analysis System*, n.d.).

What does this mean for today's warfighter? A future near-peer LSCO conflict will cost us dearly. I'm telling you, the undisciplined will pay an even heavier toll, so we must be uncompromising in our preparation.

Our counterinsurgency experiences can relate to our efforts to prepare for a near-peer conflict. Still, the current Russo-Ukrainian war demonstrates that our discipline, will to fight, and relentless pursuit to be



(U.S. Army photo by Nathan Clinebelle)

brilliant at the basics are crucial to ensuring victory.

There is no place to hide on the battlefield with current technology, and the speed at which the cat-and-mouse game continuously adjusts is outpacing our ability to update our doctrine.

The cost of not being genuinely ready when we meet a near-peer enemy is too high to allow only a veneer of readiness. Readiness must be tangible, concrete, and stubborn, driven by disciplined leaders at echelon who understand the consequences of facing a lethal enemy with artificial readiness.

Please understand: I don't wake up wishing for conflict. Instead, I pray for peace but prepare my hands and mind for war. More than 30 years of warfighting experience has taught me that disciplined leadership is the key to actual readiness.

For several formations not focused on their warfighting mission, the path of least resistance is the most traveled. There is no time in battle to become disciplined—it happens before or not at all.

Lacking discipline or the accountability needed to execute simple things (like being fit, cohesive, or preparing your family before deployment) is precisely what the enemy hopes for. Combat doesn't care about your excuses or the lies you're willing to tell yourself—it never has and never will.

Failure to truly be ready comes with severe costs, whether it's another memorial, another regret, or the possibility of an enemy raising your children and grandchildren. How ready are you right now, and what are you doing to make damn sure you and your soldiers are great at the basics? ■

References

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Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael R. Weimer is the 17th Sergeant Major of the Army. He assumed the position on Aug. 4, 2023. As the senior enlisted advisor to the Chief of Staff of the Army, he plays a critical role in shaping policy and providing guidance on all matters related to enlisted Soldiers across the Army.

Weimer enlisted in the Army in 1993 and spent much of his service in Special Forces, where he held leadership positions ranging from weapons sergeant to command sergeant major. He has deployed on numerous combat missions around the world, including Iraq, Afghanistan, and other areas of the Middle East and Africa.

His focus as the Sergeant Major of the Army includes enhancing readiness, modernization, and quality of life for Soldiers and their families.

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