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Absent-minded without leave?

Luis Carlos Montalván Special to the Star-Telegram

Many of us in the U.S. armed forces are shaking our heads at the recent British naval incident. How these sailors and marines can even remotely be considered heroes is beyond sensible understanding. I cannot help but find the circumstances behind the international incident analogous to an incident that involved a combat patrol that I led along the Syrian-Iraqi border in November 2003 while assigned to the 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment.

In the middle of the night at about 0400, I halted our combat patrol, which was tasked with area reconnaissance and security along the strategically important international border. At that time, coalition forces were concerned about unlawful transnational movement — smuggling and the movement of Saddam loyalists and foreign fighters.

Upon halting and establishing communications with our higher headquarters, we came under intense fire from the Syrian side of the border. After the initial shock of being engaged by what I quickly determined to be a significant Syrian force, my section sergeant and I ordered our machine-gunners to return fire.

As the maelstrom of bullets whirled around and near us, I continued to assess the situation. After observing Syrian tanks, trucks and infantry continuing to fire and maneuver against our comparatively small and outgunned element, I ordered my men to follow me and break contact. We moved a few kilometers away to consolidate and reorganize and so that I could radio our command about the engagement and the situation.

During the engagement several thoughts crossed my mind:

How will this incident be perceived, given that Syria is an enemy of the United States?

Will my decisions escalate poor relations between two sworn enemies?

Will attacking and taking the offense, given my enemies' numerical and fire superiority, get my men killed or kill the enemy?

Regardless of the outcome of the engagement, how will our actions be perceived by America, Syria and our enemies?

I can imagine that similar thoughts went through Royal Marine Lt. Felix Carman's mind when Iranian gunboats "popped up on his radar screen." What I cannot understand is how in broad daylight he and his element were situationally so unaware that they were quickly overwhelmed and surrounded.

Carman fired no warning shots, nor did he take any action other than to surrender. Why? How was he surprised, overwhelmed and captured so quickly?

My soldiers and I were awarded medals for valor because, while executing our mission, we stood our ground on our side of the border and returned fire against an overwhelming enemy force. Moreover, by not attacking offensively and breaking contact when we did, we exercised restraint and good judgment in a situation that had potentially international repercussions.

The British force surrendered because they were unaware, overwhelmed and poorly led.

The two incidents offer the difference between professionalism and courage and incompetence and cowardice.

I very much doubt that U.S. sailors and marines would think that Carman could live up to those who are truly "semper fidelis."

To some of us, this folly has seemingly only further emboldened rogue nations and extremist elements who continue to challenge our efforts at stabilizing Iraq and the region.

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