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The "Rakkasans"

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### Abstract

This paper explains the different experiences and the similarities I experienced as a First Sergeant in Crusher & Hatchet Company, 1-187<sup>TH</sup> Infantry Regiment. Both companies presented completely different experiences but they were equally satisfying. My rifle company was a company known for its rough around the edges attitude and for its ability to eliminate any opposing threat. My headquarters company was known for its ability to figure things out and apply a logical and methodical approach to everything. These two companies were completely different in nature, but equal in their abilities to accomplish any given task.

### The "Rakkasans" Hatchet & Crusher Companies

My experience as a First Sergeant for both an Infantry rifle company and a infantry battalion Headquarters company was exceptional. I consider myself extremely fortunate for having had the opportunity to be the First Sergeant for these two companies. During my tenure as the First Sergeant in both of these companies, I began to notice complete dissimilarities in almost every aspect of an Infantry company. Both companies were superb and both companies had their issues that often drove me near the point of losing your temper. Neither company was better than the other was, but both were completely different in many ways. I will try to share my views or observations of the differences and similarities of these two units.

Serving as both the Crusher Company and Hatchet Company First Sergeant gave me the opportunity to train two separate companies for combat. I faced several obstacles in Crusher Company that I thought initially would not be an issue. Crusher Company recently returned from combat only a few months prior and was very relaxed and still celebrating their return from long 12 plus months in Iraq. Initial fitness test given to the company were less than impressive and NCOs were still in a recovery mindset. The first guidance given to me by the battalion commander was to prepare this unit for combat and expect to redeploy to Iraq within a year. I assured the Soldiers and senior leaders in the company that I was grateful to be in their company, but I also told them that from this point forward our focus would be on the upcoming deployment, rather than the company's or individuals previous accomplishments. My initial assessment of this company was that they all knew the skills necessary to complete most missions, but that they were out of shape and lacked the desire to improve or have someone telling them that they needed to improve. The new hard-charging commander did not help matters. Although full of good

intentions, this young commander concentrated more on being a good small unit leader than on being a good company commander. These challenges were present throughout my stay as First Sergeant but in the end they did not cripple the company. This company built a reputation based on mission accomplishment and aggressiveness. The Soldiers and NCOs in this company were a pleasure to work with and remain in my thoughts to this day. It was a distinct pleasure to watch this company operate in Iraq and equally as devastating to see some of the company's Soldiers injured or killed.

On the other hand, Hatchet Company was an extremely different experience for me as first sergeant. My initial assessment of this headquarters company was that it could operate with little guidance; it had an experienced common-sense commander, but still needed work in some ignored areas. Most of the NCOs were competent and very experienced in their respective MOS. However, some of the NCOs were out of shape and visibly over weight. This did not exclude platoon sergeants. Headquarters Company is unique in the fact that all of the platoon sergeants are specialty platoon sergeants, which in most cases means they are the best and most experienced in the battalion at what they do. This also means that correctly annotating unsatisfactory performance and direct supervision is necessary. For the most part, my platoon sergeants were experienced and did get the job done. However, some were lacking in the trait I respect most in leaders; humility. Without this trait, I believe a leader can no longer learn or realize his mistakes. This was the case for a small percent of my leaders. Regardless of the circumstances, they believed they could do no wrong. This type of attitude was contagious in one platoon, which resulted in some young Soldiers lacking the humility trait as well. This platoon's overall performance was not one to complain about but it could have been far better if they were able to see their mistakes and then discover that there was room for improvement. -

The one similarity between both companies was the benefit of having competent, comical, and experienced executive officers. Having this type of person in the position of executive officer can greatly assist both the first sergeant and the commander. This was the case in both companies. Crusher Company needed this type of executive officer due to the change of command and change of first sergeant all in a month's period. I believe this change of the commander and first sergeant in the same month put extreme stress on the company and without the stability of the executive officer, circumstances could have been much worse. The XO had led one of the rifle platoons during the unit's previous deployment and was the backbone of the company during that time. Due to the differences between the previous chain of command and the current one, it was fortuitous to have an experienced executive officer among the senior leaders. This type of person was present in Headquarters Company as well. He had been a platoon leader during the battalion's most recent deployment and he was absolutely willing to do everything in his power to get the job done. This trait is indispensable in a company executive officer and is absolutely essential in a headquarters company XO. Even more so than in a rifle company. The entire battalion relies on Headquarters Company and is often looking to its leaders to set standards and provide guidance. With twice as many Soldiers as a rifle company, this adds up to twice the amount of equipment and makes it essential to have a competent and proactive executive officer. Another obstacle in Headquarters Companies is the fact that a portion of the Soldiers in the company are officers in the rank of Lieutenant, Captain, or Major. On some occasions these individuals can be a chore to deal with and even more so if you do not have an effective executive officer. In my experience with both companies' executive officers, I found that: all in the battalion liked them; they knew their jobs; and what they did not know they were not afraid to ask (humble). Both were willing to take

advice and apply it when necessary. I do believe that both of these officers will have successful commands in the future and will be appreciated by their first sergeants.

Deploying Headquarters Company to Operation Iraqi Freedom was a pleasure and a great learning experience. There are many things to learn during a deployment to Iraq that cannot be learned in any other manner. Equipment that is not organic to your unit, taskings that are unique to your forward operating base and the daily challenge of keeping Soldiers alive are all learning experiences you cannot replicate back at home station. The Battalion Commander decided before the deployment that I would take on the additional task of Forward Operation Base Mayor. This title held no clear definition and its duties and scope grew daily based on the battalion chain of command's needs. In addition to the duties of Forward Operating Base Major, my Company Commander took on the duties as the Base Commander. These duties also required the oversight of the First Sergeant in that the primary focus of the Base Commander was force protection. I considered myself lucky in the fact that my commander was very experienced and knowledgeable in all of these areas. The workload of being dual-hatted headquarters company first sergeant, and the Forward Operating Base Mayor increased my knowledge as an NCO greatly. All new work on the FOB started and ended with the FOB Mayor and the Base Commander (HHC Commander & 1SG). As the Mayor and FOB Commander we oversaw: all money spent, all new contracts, force protection improvements, relocation of equipment, and eventually the relinquishing of equipment to the Iraqi army. These additional duties, combined with the normal daily duties and scope of the HHC 1SG and Commander kept me busy at all times.

Balancing the duties of FOB Mayor duties and HHC First Sergeant was difficult at first, but became manageable as time went on. It was a welcome relief to join a patrol in sector with one of my three maneuver platoons. The Battalion Scouts, Battalion Mortars, and the Battalion

Personal Security Detachment (PSD) all fell under the command of Headquarters. Scouts and Mortars were unique in the respect that their sector encompassed the battalion's complete sector. They each had the freedom to maneuver throughout the Area of Operation for what would normally turn out to be an eight to ten hour patrol. The Platoon Leader for each of these platoons could be counted on to complete any mission with little guidance. So, my role during the majority of these patrols was simply serving as a second set of eyes and to aid and assist when asked or should casualty play occur. Every patrol off the FOB would turn out to be a learning experience regardless of how uneventful it was. Dealing with the local police force was one task that each platoon conducted on every mission. Supervising the Iraqi army and emplaced police force was always on the list of things to do when going on patrol. The same story came out of their mouth on almost every patrol; the lack of money and resources to complete a task and promises of how they would do something much better next time. The fear of retaliation for enforcing the laws and rules imposed by their own army and the fear to wear the police uniform or have their face visible while enforcing their laws were all common excuses for their failure of daily tasks. Dealing with insurgents was like chasing ghosts. The Iraqi people feigned ignorance when it came to ambushes, mortars shot from behind their home, and IEDs emplaced just a safe distance away from their home. I commend my Soldiers for dealing fairly with these people on a daily basis and for keeping a calm head under enemy fire. My Soldiers would find themselves surviving an IED one day and then have to return the next day into the same neighborhood to win the hearts and minds of the civilian populace. My Soldiers, weather in Crusher or Hatchet Company performed their duties exceptionally during Operation Iraqi Freedom. They were not perfect, but they were damn close; and I am proud today to have been a part of their ranks.