

Sample

Chapter 2 - Mission Critical: Preventing an Assassination Attempt on the Vice President of the United States

Over the course of my deployments, as mentioned in the Introduction, I was involved in two missions with momentous geopolitical implications. One, which is covered later in the book, involved rescuing a future U.S. President. The one described in this chapter centered on preventing the assassination of the serving Vice President.

Early in my deployment to Afghanistan, after I had been there for a bit more than two months, I was a captain in the 82nd Airborne division conducting operations across two provinces. One of my primary duties was what they call PSD (personal security detail), which I had learned from the guys from Black Hawk Down in Somalia. I had brought them in to train my guys before we went to Afghanistan; these were former Delta operators.

It was the best three days of training I've ever had in my life. We learned how to move using gun trucks or SUVs with VIPs. When you have a VIP, just like you move a certain way in combat, there's a particular way you move; with VIPs, you move with an emphasis on security, because you have to get out of there if it's a fight. Your whole TTP (tactics, techniques and procedures) changes when you're moving with a VIP, from the way you go through roundabouts to just about everything else.

We had become very well known for having this training. One day, at about 1700, I got a phone call on an unsecured local phone, a cell phone. The caller, my S3 (Battalion Operations Officer) said, "Hey, the boss needs you in his office. Right now." I'm thinking, "Who the heck screwed up? Who has done what?" The tactical operations center was not too far. I get up there and I go to the boss's office and he said, "Me and you and the S3 are going to go up to the JTF in division headquarters and meet with the G3. Vice President Cheney is here."

He added, "He's got to get to a meeting in Kabul with President Karzai." He told us that all the helicopters were grounded because of weather, so we were going to have to move them by ground. I said, "You're kidding me, right?"

As it turned out, he wasn't kidding. The visit was all over Yahoo News, which, at the time, was a big provider of the latest news. So, everybody knows he's in country. That's the first thing we thought of. There were rumors of this meeting having to happen.

While we were at the JTF, we held what was my first meeting with the Secret Service. I'd gone through all these training procedures focused on working with other government agencies as well as PSD training. That said, you never know until you actually sit down and start planning what it's like to work with another department. You think about every movie you've ever watched about the Secret Service and how they operate. They make them out to be these super-efficient, high-speed organization guys dressed in suits.

The picture I've got in my mind is I'm going to be dealing with these very tactically sound people who know everything about what's going on. They're going to tell me what we're going to do, how we're going to do it, and I'm just there to act in a supporting role. As it turned out, we got up there and I quickly figured out that wasn't necessarily the reality. I start talking to the G3 and they're telling me, "Hey, you're going to go in there and you're going to plan the operation for the Secret Service." Within maybe five minutes of talking to these guys, I realized they didn't know what to do in this environment. They were out of their element. They were used to protecting their VIPs in an urban environment, but this was different.

Years later, I would equate it to having this epiphany of why I'm not seeing what's in the movies. It's like seeing what looks like this beautiful garden in the distance and then, when you get closer, finding that it's actually strewn with weeds—it didn't live up to your image of what you would encounter. I quickly realized that I was probably the most knowledgeable person in the planning process with regard to what was needed for this operation.

It comes back to when you're in charge, be in charge and act like you belong. I had to quickly understand the mission and what we needed to do. They started asking me

questions and one particular question they asked me was, "What are the rules of engagement if we are approached by a vehicle?" I said, "Well, I understand what the rules of engagement are for being in Afghanistan." And I went down the rules of engagement, hostile intent, etc. Then, I said, "I have to believe that because we have the Vice President of the United States here, you guys have a different set of rules of engagement." Their answer to me was, "We don't know." That's when I knew we were in real trouble.

I said to myself, "I have to take control of this." So, I began to plan, and I said, "OK, we're going to move with X number of vehicles, we're going to take this route." I received significant assistance in the process from my battalion commander, Jim Leary. He was there to help to make sure that we did this right. He had given the all-hands-on-deck order for this operation. So, we planned the whole thing out. We're going to push out a lead element ahead of the convoy to clear out as much as we can.

I said, "Here's the deal. We're going to move with this long convoy; we're going to have up-armored SUVs and up-armored gun trucks. They're going to hit the up-armored SUVs." I paused for a moment and then asked, "So, can we take the Vice President of the United States and put him in an up-armored gun truck?"

They said we could. They bought into the idea of taking him that way and so the plan was that we would put him in a gun truck. The takeaway from this story is that with strong planning, both threats and disasters can be prevented before they ever occur. When a plan is truly effective, the outside world often never knows what was avoided—because the event never happens in the first place. A good plan can prevent a lot of bad stuff from happening.

One thing I learned, as a young lieutenant, was to never travel the same route twice. This is wisdom that goes all the way back to the days of fighting Indian tribes like the Sioux or Commanche. Don't come in the same way that you will go back out. There are vignettes I've read about how, in Afghanistan, the Mujahadeen used to watch the Russians come in and out the same way every day. One of the worst ambushes they ever handed them occurred when they waited until one day the Russians were completely tired and used the same route.

As it happened, we were building this new gate, and it had never been used before. Every time we went out, we'd go out the north gate, or we'd go out the south gate. I told my boss, "Let's use this east gate that we've never been out before." The idea was that they would never expect us to come out of that gate. So, we go through all the planning, get everything prepped, and we're going to leave at 10 or 11 o'clock. We're working, just going back and forth to get the planning done. I get on a secure line with my platoon leader. I'm telling him what's going on, because he has the same reaction I had about it. When I tell him what we're about to do, he said, "You have to be kidding me, it's all over Yahoo News. This is a suicide mission." I told him I hoped not, but either way it was sure to be an extremely stressful mission.

The news of the VP's visit was everywhere by that time. Everybody knows that it's going on. It was a huge, huge deal. We're working through the process and finally, at some point, we had everything about 95% to 98% ready. My boss says, "Hey, go get some rest. I need you to get some sleep." I literally had only been asleep about two hours when there was a knock on my door—this is the part about how being a leader never stops, no matter what the mission is. I answered the door and found out that the mother of one of my platoon sergeants had passed away.

We were getting the Red Cross message in the middle of the night. Your job as a leader is you have to get up and go tell one of your senior leaders that he just lost his mom. So, it's not just that we are providing security for the Vice President. I've also got to tell one of my guys his mom has passed and, by the way, you've got to pack your bags and get on an airplane to go home. Then, I've got to figure out how we replace him for the mission the next day. After notifying SFC Fullerton, I got back to bed and literally slept only three or four hours the whole night.

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The rest of this chapter, and the complete book, *From the Battlefield to the Boardroom: How Leaders Decide, Execute, and Win Under Pressure*, by Shawn Dalrymple, will be available upon publication, currently scheduled for Fall 2026.