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# Joe Gifford in Tal Afar, Iraq (A)

*Sir, I don't think going in is a good idea!*
— Sergeant First Class Rich Collins

Second Lieutenant Joe Gifford could still smell the chemicals minutes after he exited the large, two-story house in Tal Afar, Iraq in early September 2005. A scout platoon leader and newly appointed half-troop commander in the U.S. Army's 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, the 23-year-old Gifford was leading 50 U.S. and Iraqi Army soldiers on a mission to clear and secure buildings. This meant entering buildings not controlled by the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq, searching them, capturing or killing any insurgents operating inside, and then ensuring that, once cleared, the buildings did not again fall into enemy hands.

The house that Gifford and his men had just entered was different from any they had encountered before. The air was rife with caustic chemicals. It burned their eyes and throats and made breathing difficult. A few soldiers, who had gone deeper into the house, found huge drums of chemicals with blue wires running to the ceiling. The soldiers quickly realized they were inside an enormous bomb and began running out of the house, forcing those trying to enter back into the street.

The next few minutes were anxious and chaotic. Gifford and his non-commissioned officers (NCOs) physically grabbed and pushed soldiers back into the platoon's Bradley Fighting Vehicles. These were armored vehicles that Gifford hoped might protect the soldiers from the explosion he felt was imminent. Some soldiers struggled to deal with coughing fits and tears from the chemicals.

As Gifford pushed the last man into the Bradley, he started wondering why the building had not blown up. Maybe the triggerman had fallen asleep. Maybe the detonator, which was probably attached to a cell phone or two-way radio, had failed. Maybe this triggerman wanted to watch the American and Iraqi soldiers scurry around before blowing up the building. Regardless of what was going on, Gifford and his men were extremely lucky to be alive.

As the ramp on the Bradley closed, Gifford could not stop thinking about three Iraqi civilians he met just moments earlier. He and his men had seen them in the house next door to the one with the bomb. As they cleared this house, they found inside an elderly Iraqi woman and two toddlers. Gifford and his men left them in peace before moving on to the house rigged with explosives. Everything had happened so quickly, but as he pieced together these bits of information, Gifford realized the three Iraqis would surely die if the device detonated.

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Professor Joseph Badaracco, Richard Burgess Jr. (MBA 2011), Robert Carpio III (MBA 2011), and William Wheeler (MBA 2011) prepared this case. Certain details have been disguised. HBS cases are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management.

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But he was less sure about their innocence. How could the old woman not know about the bomb next door? More fundamentally, why was she still in Tal Afar? The U.S.-led coalition had ordered all civilians to evacuate the town and had publicized this order heavily. And even if she was innocent, should he risk his life and those of his soldiers by returning to the house to try and save them? In fact, he couldn't even communicate with them because he did not have an interpreter, and his Iraqi soldiers only understood basic commands.

All Gifford knew for sure was that the decision belonged to him, and he had to make it immediately.

## The Invasion of Iraq

In March 2003, more than two years before Gifford and his unit found themselves in Tal Afar, a multinational force (MNF) led by the United States invaded Iraq with the purpose of removing Saddam Hussein from power and establishing a representative government in his place. Military planners identified Baghdad, the largest city in Iraq and the economic and geographical center of the country, as strategic. They believed that controlling Baghdad was tantamount to controlling the country, so they bypassed the other large population centers in order to move quickly toward Iraq's capital city. On the way, patches of fighting broke out between the invading force and Iraqi forces consisting of regular army soldiers and *fedayeen*[1] fighters, but they were no match for the technologically superior MNF.

Baghdad officially capitulated on April 14, 2003. At this time, CNN and other news outlets broadcast video of American soldiers and Marines entering Baghdad and Iraqis tearing down statues of Saddam Hussein, who was in hiding. On May 1, 2003, U.S. President George W. Bush gave a speech to mark the end of major combat operations in Iraq under a banner reading, "Mission Accomplished," on the deck of the *USS Abraham Lincoln*.

Meanwhile, the newly created Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), headed by L. Paul Bremer, assumed political control of Iraq while the MNF assumed responsibility for securing the country. With the conventional war finished, it appeared that the MNF and CPA could focus their efforts on rebuilding the country, which had deteriorated under Saddam Hussein's rule. With Saddam's Baath political party effectively outlawed, Bremer's focus was on working with what he and his team felt was a functioning Iraqi bureaucracy that maintained responsibility for the day-to-day operations of the Iraqi government. It remains unclear, however, whether the CPA and the new Iraqi governing body were initially equipped to handle such a complex and important task.

## The Insurgency

Because of the ethnic and sectarian divisions across Iraq, Saddam Hussein had ruled the country with an iron fist. Removing Saddam from power and disbanding the Baath party created a power vacuum that the CPA, MNF, and new Iraqi government struggled to fill. The failure to secure population centers during the initial invasion exacerbated the problem. While the southern part of Iraq remained relatively calm, conditions began to deteriorate in the central and northern regions, where U.S. troops were primarily responsible for security.

[1] *Fedayeen* fighters were paramilitary forces allied with Saddam Hussein.



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In July 2003, U.S. commanders reported the emergence of a shadowy insurgency composed of former members of the Iraqi army and secret police. The MNF responded harshly to their guerilla-style attacks, which consisted largely of ambushes and rudimentary improvised explosive devices (IEDs), though these devices eventually became more sophisticated.[2] Security conditions worsened as engagements between the U.S. and insurgent groups became more frequent. Iraqi civilians were often caught in the crossfire or wrongly detained by U.S. troops. In addition, anti-Western foreign fighters from Saudi Arabia, Syria, and North Africa began pouring into the country to attack MNF troops. Chief among them was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian-born militant with ties to Al Qaeda.

Over the next 18 months, the growing number and severity of insurgent attacks began to undermine the ability of the MNF to secure the country in the eyes of Iraqi civilians. The growing army of foreign fighters conducted increasingly audacious and sophisticated attacks against the MNF forces. As a result, losses began to mount. Almost 1,400 American soldiers died in hostile fire incidents between July 2003 and August 2005. Figures on the number of Iraqi deaths during this time were highly controversial and varied widely. A comprehensive study of media reports between March 2003 and March 2005 placed the number of civilian deaths just below 25,000. That report attributed 37% of those deaths to the actions of the U.S.-led coalition, and the remaining 63% to other factors within the country, including the anti-occupation forces and insurgents and the criminal factions. The proportion of deaths caused by anti-occupation forces and criminal factions had risen steadily during the time period that was analyzed.[3]

## Joe Gifford

### *The Early Years*

Joe Gifford grew up in the Washington, DC area, where his mother worked as an attorney and his father taught at a local public high school. Before becoming a teacher, Gifford's father served two tours in Vietnam as a field artillery officer and had a 24-year career in the Army. Joe's older brother attended the United States Military Academy (USMA) at West Point, New York. He graduated in 1988 and then served as an Army officer. Although Gifford felt no overt pressure to join the Army, nearly every male in his extended family had served in the U.S. armed forces.

Gifford earned good grades in high school while serving in various leadership positions on campus. He truly excelled in athletics. He played varsity football, basketball, and baseball, was elected captain of several teams, and also swam competitively. He credited his success in athletics to the fierce competitive spirit his parents instilled in him. Gifford recalled:

> My parents wouldn't console me when I lost as a kid. They felt that it was important that I learned to give it my all—that's a man's duty, you know. Winning was important and that really helped build my competitive spirit. Failure just wasn't an option.

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[2] The term *guerrilla* referred to Spanish civilians who helped to expel French forces commanded by Napoleon Bonaparte from the Iberian Peninsula in 1813. By disrupting French supply lines and communications, the guerrillas were able to help the Spanish Army gain the upper hand against a more powerful opponent. Guerilla tactics had been successfully used by smaller, less well-equipped forces attempting to expel foreign occupiers for centuries, dating back to the Roman republic.

[3] Iraq Body Count, "A Dossier of Civilian Casualties," Iraq Body Count website, http://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/reference/pdf/a_dossier_of_civilian_casualties_2003-2005.pdf , accessed November 19, 2010.



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In fact, Gifford had little tolerance for his own failures. In a district championship football game during his senior year, his team was losing by 16 points at half time. Gifford, the team captain, believed that the lead was surmountable and tried to rally his team on the sidelines, in the locker room, and in the huddles. He wanted them to pick up their heads and fight on to victory. But, despite his best efforts, he simply couldn't motivate his teammates. They continued to play passionless football and ultimately lost the game. Gifford was devastated—not by the loss, but by his inability to inspire and lead his team.

Gifford was also influenced by some of his parents' relationships. Just after the Vietnam War and before Joe was born, his family sponsored a Cambodian refugee, opening their home to him. Joe thought this reflected the bond his father had developed with the people of Southeast Asia during his time in Vietnam. Joe also developed a strong relationship with his African-American godparents (his godfather had served with Joe's father in Vietnam). The stories of their experiences during the American civil rights movement and their fight for equality stuck with him, and he often recalled their discussions about, as his godparents called it, the importance of "looking out for the minority."

When he was 17, Gifford applied to and was accepted at West Point. This wasn't simply a college decision but a commitment to serve in the U.S. Army for at least five years after graduation. Gifford later said:

> I felt like I was good fit for the military. I didn't have the eyesight to fly and I didn't want to be on a ship, so the Army seemed like the logical choice. Ultimately, I made the decision to join the Army because I figured that if I didn't accomplish anything else in life, at least I would have spent some time serving something higher than myself.

## West Point

West Point had been the Army's preeminent leader development institution since it was founded by President Thomas Jefferson in 1802. West Point trained more than 4,000 cadets each year from across the U.S. and from allied countries across the globe, and it aimed to develop "commissioned leaders of character, dedicated to the values of Duty, Honor, Country." West Point graduates joined one of 16 different career fields (branches) as commissioned officers with the rank of second lieutenant. A second lieutenant's primary duty position was as a platoon leader, responsible for everything that the roughly 30 soldiers under his or her command did or failed to do. Those soldiers ranged in rank from private to sergeant first class, and in age from 18 to 40. (See **Exhibits 1, 2, 3a, and 3b** for the West Point mission and the Army's rank and company-level organizational structure.)

Gifford entered West Point in June 2000, 14 months before the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and roughly three years before the U.S. invasion of Iraq. As a result, most of the military training that Gifford and his classmates received was a holdover from the years of the Cold War, focused on fighting traditional, open-field battles against a conventional enemy force. Although much of the tactical training Gifford received was less relevant to current conflicts, he found West Point's relentless focus on leadership development to be invaluable. According to Gifford:

> West Point taught me a lot about leadership, decision making, and the importance of persuasion. We were routinely presented with ambiguous problems and were subsequently asked by professors and other Academy leaders, "What are you going to do now, Cadet?" Because the people you're in charge of are oftentimes also your classmates—and really don't want to do what it is you're asking them to do—you



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> couldn't rely on rank or position to get the job done. And because you are held accountable for the consequences of your decisions, you quickly learn how to evaluate the pros and cons of each alternative and ultimately select the option that you determine is the right thing to do.

Perhaps this sentiment was best embodied in Gifford's role as a Cadet Regimental Commander during his senior year. This was one of the top 10 student leadership positions, with responsibility for leading approximately 1,000 cadets, including the 250 members of one's own class. Gifford remembered being exasperated when the school's student leadership cadre would inform him that "general cleanliness standards have gone down throughout the regiment" or "cadets are spending too much time on their computers" or "cadets are spending way too much time eating in the dining hall." Yet Gifford later realized that correcting "deficiencies" like these helped him hone his planning, creativity, and persuasiveness—skills that would prove useful throughout his career.

Gifford took full advantage of West Point's many developmental opportunities and excelled in his four years there. In addition to learning about leadership and decision-making, Gifford also developed a strong sense of discipline, a strong work ethic, and the ability to "stay on top of things." By his senior year, Gifford qualified as an honor graduate by ranking in the top 5% of his class in each of the Academy's key developmental areas: academic performance, military proficiency, and physical fitness. He elected to serve as a cavalry officer in the Armor Corps and chose Fort Carson, Colorado as his first duty station, where he would join the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment (3rd ACR).[4]

As Gifford prepared for graduation, he reflected on all he had learned about the art and science of leadership. He recognized that while some situations could be handled with more standardized courses of action, others would require a more nuanced approach. This would mean drawing on the Army Values and Soldier's Creed, as well as his own values and experiences, to arrive at decisions for particular situations. (See **Exhibit 4** for the Army Values and Soldier's Creed.)

On May 29, 2004, Gifford and the other 931 cadets in his graduating class swore an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States and were commissioned as officers in the U.S. Army. Gifford felt tremendous pride as his father pinned a Second Lieutenant bar on each shoulder of his dress uniform during the commissioning ceremony. The gold bars signified to Gifford and the world that he was an officer in the U.S. Army and a leader of soldiers. His family took quiet pride in his decision to continue their long tradition of service and silently prayed that God would keep him safe in the years ahead.

## The End of Formal Training

Before he could formally join the 3rd ACR, Gifford had to complete an officer basic training course at Fort Knox, Kentucky. For Gifford, this meant learning how to maneuver a platoon of Abrams Main Battle Tanks and deploy their firepower effectively in combat situations (see **Exhibit 5a**)**.** But, like his training at West Point, this training did not cover the urban warfare tactics being used on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan at the time. Instead, the newly minted lieutenants learned maneuver tactics for traditional, open-field tank battles.

[4] The Armor Corps is the Army branch that includes tank and cavalry units.



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Gifford had hoped to attend Army Ranger School after his officer basic course,[5] but when he learned that his unit would be deployed to Iraq in February 2005, he realized that he was more excited about the opportunity to lead a platoon in combat than about attending Ranger School, and he moved to Fort Carson almost immediately after his training concluded in Kentucky.

## Gifford Joins the 3rd ACR

### *Gifford's Initial Interactions with His Platoon*

Gifford's first few months with his platoon—4th Platoon, Crazyhorse Troop—proved to be much more challenging than he had imagined. His initial platoon meeting in early January 2005 went about as poorly as possible. Gifford's friend, a 2003 West Point graduate and senior platoon leader in the troop, introduced him to his new platoon sergeant, Sergeant First Class (SFC) Hamilton. After making the introduction, the platoon leader mentioned in passing that Gifford had attended West Point. Taking a moment to absorb what he had just heard, SFC Hamilton responded in front of the entire platoon, "Great, I hate West Pointers." Gifford, unsure what to make of his platoon sergeant's comment, simply brushed it off and moved on.

Gifford quickly realized that the sergeants and soldiers in his platoon idolized SFC Hamilton. Earlier in his career, Hamilton was selected for Special Forces training and would have become a Green Beret if family problems had not arisen. Nevertheless, his near-success won him the adulation of his soldiers.

In contrast, Gifford was one of only three men in his 16-soldier platoon without combat experience. The bulk of his platoon had deployed with the 3rd ACR during its most recent tour in Iraq, from early 2003 to early 2004. This meant that Gifford would be leading men who had spent more months in war than he had spent as an Army officer.

Gifford received little initial guidance or support from his immediate superior, the Crazyhorse Troop Commander. A new platoon leader's first meeting with his or her commander was very important, and training dedicated significant time to discussing the purpose of this meeting and strategies for making it successful. However, when Gifford met his commander, it appeared that the commander was unprepared for the meeting. He appeared aloof and disconnected from the troop and offered Gifford little in the way of priorities or constructive advice. Gifford left his commander's office confused and disheartened.

As a result, Gifford decided to rely on his leadership training and made an early decision, in his words, to "lead through his sergeants and corporals." He involved this small team of NCOs in the planning and deliberation before operations. He solicited their input and listened to them carefully, but kept it clear that he was the final decision-maker. All orders were disseminated to his platoon through his subordinate leaders, which meant that Gifford had little direct interaction with his lower-ranking soldiers. With the exception of the platoon physical fitness sessions, Gifford rarely addressed his platoon as a whole. He wanted to reserve platoon addresses for very rare occasions so that, when he talked, "the platoon knew it was something important."

Even though Gifford had a plan for training and interacting with his soldiers, he knew that he had a lot to learn from them. For instance, his officer training had focused only on the M1A2 Abrams

[5] The U.S. Army Ranger School is the Army's premier leadership course, a grueling 9-week, small-unit leadership evaluation exercise in which students plan and execute light infantry operations while enduring extreme food and sleep deprivation.



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Tank, but a cavalry troop had both tanks and Bradley Fighting Vehicles (see **Exhibit 5b**). To learn about the Bradley, Gifford spent most Mondays in the motorpool[6] with his soldiers who maintained those vehicles. "It's not easy work maintaining those Bradleys," Gifford recalled, "but my soldiers were experts on their equipment, and I learned a lot from them."

## *Developing a Counterinsurgency Mindset*

Gifford's biggest challenge in the months before the deployment was not just gaining the respect of his men, but doing so while trying to convince them that the tactics they used in their first deployment to Iraq would not lead to success in this deployment. In its first deployment, the 3rd ACR had employed conventional and often heavy-handed tactics to establish and maintain security in the Al-Anbar province. At times, the unit had not used rigorous identification procedures before firing on suspected insurgents. Moreover, they had primarily conducted mounted maneuvers and shows of force, parading through Iraq's clogged urban centers in armored vehicles, to display U.S. military superiority and discourage Iraqis from joining the insurgency. There was little, if any, positive interaction between the Americans and Iraqi civilians, and the shows of force yielded no significant tactical or operational benefits.

In fact, the insurgency did not fully materialize until after the 3rd ACR left Iraq in March 2004. That was when accounts of conflict between insurgents and U.S. troops in cities like Mosul and Fallujah began moving through Army ranks. The stories convinced the new 3rd ACR Commander, Colonel (COL) H. R. McMaster, that his unit would need to gain civilian support while eliminating insurgent activity. (See **Exhibit 6** for a 3rd ACR organizational chart.)

McMaster brought solid credentials to his position. In 1991, he had achieved distinction on the battlefield as a cavalry troop commander during Operation Desert Storm. In 1999, McMaster earned a PhD in military history from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He penned a scalding account of the individuals and factors that led the U.S. to war with Vietnam and was a vociferous proponent of counterinsurgency operations in Iraq at a time when most of his peers still favored conventional tactics for suppressing the insurgency. (**Exhibit 7** briefly describes counterinsurgency strategy and its relevance in Iraq in 2005.)

COL McMaster met with officers across the regiment to communicate his vision of counterinsurgency strategy, and charged them with implementing it in their units and incorporating it into their pre-deployment training. For Gifford, this meant training his platoon in personnel and vehicle search techniques, rather than taking them to the range to shoot tank rounds at static targets. It also meant training in military operations in urban environments, which included conducting foot patrols that would enable his soldiers to interact positively with the local people. Basically, Gifford had to train his combat veterans for a new kind of warfare.

When the day to depart for Iraq finally came, in February 2005, hundreds of parents, husbands, wives, and children spent the last few hours with their soldiers inside a gym on Fort Carson. Gifford noticed how young some of the soldiers and their spouses looked and just how diverse the group was. His platoon had a soldier from Ghana, two from Puerto Rico, one from the Dominican Republic, one from Panama, and soldiers of every racial background and faith, from all across the United States. Kisses were given, tears shed, and goodbyes expressed as the soldiers left their families to

[6] A *motorpool* was a large concrete pad, as large as 8–12 acres, where tactical military vehicles were parked overnight and could also be serviced and repaired.



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board the chartered planes that would ferry them to Kuwait. There they would spend three weeks preparing for onward movement into Iraq.

As Gifford looked around at the families of the men under his command, he realized that he was not totally clear about his unit's broader goal in Iraq. But he did understand his key responsibilities: bringing his soldiers home alive to their loved ones, and leading them in the accomplishment of the missions they were given. He knew that fulfilling both responsibilities depended on successful implementation of counterinsurgency strategy—although he still wasn't confident that he and his men were tactically ready for the challenge.

## The Deployment

### *The 3rd ACR in Kuwait*

Gifford and his men spent a month in Kuwait before the regiment pushed into Iraq. For most units, the days in Kuwait were lazy ones, filled with bureaucratic requirements designed with a "hurry up and wait" mentality. Many officers were comfortable with the down time and let their soldiers sleep in, read, play practical jokes, and spend hours on their personal computers or game players, knowing that their soldiers would be spending an extremely taxing year in combat. But some officers felt that this approach contributed to the "first hundred days" phenomenon, which meant that units experienced a disproportionate number of their casualties in the first 100 days of actual combat.

Gifford shared this concern and used the time in Kuwait to continue training his platoon. He felt that foot patrols would be extremely important in Iraq as a way of interacting with the local population, and he focused much of his unit's training in Kuwait on building individual and team capabilities in conducting dismounted operations. Despite Gifford's commitment to the training, however, some of his NCOs carried it out begrudgingly, making it obvious that they felt they were wasting time.

One day, Gifford suggested to SFC Hamilton that the platoon go on a challenging, dismounted patrol across an expansive part of the compound. Dismounted foot marches like the one Gifford suggested were typically conducted over 12–18 miles, with soldiers wearing rucksacks weighing roughly 50 pounds. Gifford felt that a demanding march would increase confidence, build skills, and develop unit cohesion. Without hesitation, SFC Hamilton said curtly, "What? Do you want to make the deployment worse?" To avoid a dispute with his NCO, Gifford abandoned his plan, brushed off the sergeant's comment, and returned to his copy of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* by T. E. Lawrence.[7] Gifford hoped that the counterinsurgency training his platoon had conducted over the previous three months would get them through their first 100 days unscathed.

### *The 3rd ACR in Iraq – March 2005*

When Gifford's unit arrived in Iraq, it was stationed at a large base on the outskirts of Baghdad. For the first two months, the unit's mission was to conduct vehicle patrols along main highways in order to ensure freedom of maneuver for Iraqi civilians and military patrols. Despite the unit's

[7] *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is an autobiographical account of Lawrence's experiences as a British Army officer stationed in Southwest Asia during World War I. Lawrence's mission was to assist the Arabian people in a revolt against the Ottoman Empire, which controlled a large portion of present-day Saudi Arabia. Lawrence's book can be read as a study of the psychology of a nation fighting to rid its homeland of a foreign occupier.



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remote location, the reality of war was ever-present: IED's claimed the lives of five soldiers in other platoons in Gifford's squadron.

During this time, Gifford earned a reputation among his men as a hard-working, dedicated leader with the ability to make intelligent, quick, and tactically sound decisions in difficult circumstances. As one of Gifford's NCOs, Sergeant Wilson, put it:

> One month in Iraq feels like six in the States. But seriously, in those first couple of months, Lieutenant Gifford really became our leader. There was one time when I was pulling guard duty with one of the privates and Lieutenant Gifford asked why NCOs were pulling duty. I told him that the patrols were really taking a toll on the guys, so I had relieved one of the soldiers so he could get some rest. After hearing that, Lieutenant Gifford relieved the one other private on duty and pulled the rest of that six-hour shift with me. Most officers wouldn't do something like that.

### *Change of Mission*

In July 2005, the 3rd ACR was ordered to Ninewah province in northwestern Iraq to quell a dramatic increase in violence, reportedly caused by an influx of foreign fighters on their way to Tal Afar and Mosul. Tal Afar, with its 200,000 inhabitants, was strategically located along the main road connecting Syria with Mosul, the most populous city in northern Iraq. (See **Exhibit 8** for a map of Iraq.) Gifford's troops were stationed outside Sinjar, a quiet town located 20 miles from the Syrian border. Their mission was to interdict the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq. In recent weeks, the 3rd ACR had suffered more casualties, and the attacks were more complex than the ones they experienced in Baghdad just months earlier.

When his unit moved to Tal Afar in August 2005, Gifford was named half-troop commander and placed in charge of half the soldiers in his troop. SFC Hamilton was also replaced as Lieutenant Gifford's right-hand man. His new platoon sergeant was SFC Rich Collins, a highly proficient scout and combat veteran of Operation Desert Storm 14 years earlier. Collins was a welcome change for Gifford. He was a well-respected, quiet leader who relished the platoon sergeant's responsibility for "taking care of soldiers," in Gifford's words.

Gifford quickly found he had much to learn about his new role as half-troop commander, and he turned to Lieutenant William Stevens, who was in charge of the other half-troop, for help. Stevens was a 37-year-old, former Special Forces NCO turned cavalry officer. He and Gifford, with guidance and input from the Troop Commander, planned all of the troop's missions. Stevens's expertise and counsel helped Gifford develop and become more comfortable with his own capabilities and expanded responsibilities.

## Operation Restoring Rights

In August, the 3rd ACR began preparing to conduct a large-scale operation against the insurgent stronghold in Tal Afar. Engineers surrounded the city with an earthen berm, and all civilian non-combatants were instructed to evacuate the city and move to temporary accommodations provided by military support units. The strategy was to clear Tal Afar of insurgents and reestablish security by placing more Iraqi and American forces inside the city, thereby enabling civilians to return safely. The approach eventually became the doctrine "clear, hold, build."



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Gifford's unit was called in from Sinjar to participate in the offensive. His soldiers knew that they were preparing to enter a hostile environment where their lives would be on the line. The day before their arrival in Tal Afar, a soldier in an adjacent unit was killed by a sniper at an intersection surrounded by tall apartment buildings and shops. When they arrived, Gifford and the other officers in his troop conducted a leaders' reconnaissance patrol to familiarize themselves with the city. Gifford later recounted:

> At the end of the patrol, we conducted a security halt at the same intersection where the soldier had been killed the day before. When our tanks were backing up to leave the compound, Lieutenant David Morse, one of my good friends and a fellow platoon leader . . . was shot in the head by a sniper. We rushed him back to a secure location and called in a MEDEVAC,[8] but we lost him. I helped pull him out of the tank. It was a tough start to the operation.

Lieutenant Morse's death palpably changed the platoon's attitude. Soldiers felt that the unit was in over its head and believed their enemy was utterly formidable. Gifford knew the soldiers were scared, and he felt that "everyone was looking for leadership. Everyone was looking for someone to stand up and give direction."

After a memorial ceremony for Lieutenant Morse, Gifford and his soldiers took to the streets of Tal Afar. This was the first time they had conducted urban maneuvers as a platoon in Iraq. Because of a shortage of interpreters, Gifford could not communicate with the Iraqis he encountered on these early maneuvers. He later said:

> My unit was given a section of the city to clear. There was a surprisingly large number of civilians who chose to remain in the city because they did not want to uproot and live in a makeshift camp. I didn't really blame them, but this made it difficult to be aggressive during the clearing operations. Over the next few days, we got in several gun fights and got hit by several IEDs, but we didn't sustain any casualties. In fact, it was quieter than we expected. We believed that we had the insurgents on their heels.

Gifford and his men were ordered by radio from neighborhood to neighborhood, based on intelligence analyzed by headquarters. The purpose of these maneuvers was to apprehend high-value individuals (HVIs)—Iraqis and foreigners involved with the insurgency. Gifford and his men had been conducting the mission for a week after Lieutenant Morse's death and had not yet developed a solid understanding of their complex operating environment. (See **Exhibit 9** for aerial imagery of the neighborhood in which Gifford's unit was operating.)

It was during this mission that Gifford and his team encountered the old woman and the two toddlers.

## What to Do about the Three Iraqis?

When Gifford finally got back into his Bradley and put on his combat vehicle helmet (which let him communicate with the other leaders in the troop) he heard his platoon sergeant, SFC Collins, notifying his superiors about the house rigged with explosives and requesting that an Explosive

[8] MEDEVAC is short for "medical evacuation" and refers to an emergency evacuation of the sick or wounded.



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Ordnance Disposal (EOD) unit be dispatched immediately to deal with the bomb. After Gifford heard this, he said, "We have to go get those people. We can't wait."

SFC Collins departed from his normally reserved manner and responded aggressively, "Sir, there is no way that Iraqi did not know that the house next door was rigged with explosives. I don't think going in is a good idea!"

There was no time for deliberation. Lieutenant Gifford knew that the order he gave next could determine who would live and die that day. He knew where his platoon sergeant stood on the issue, but he was fully aware that the overall responsibility for the decision lay squarely upon his shoulders. He needed to make a decision and do it without delay. (See **Exhibit 10** for a timeline of events.)



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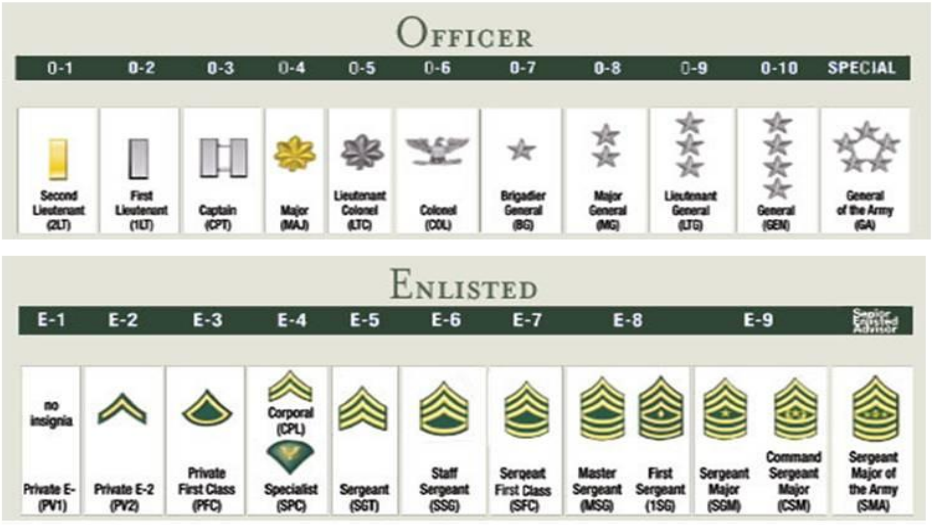
**Exhibit 1** Mission of the United States Military Academy

To educate, train, and inspire the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate is a commissioned leader of character committed to the values of Duty, Honor, Country and prepared for a career of professional excellence and service to the Nation as an officer in the United States Army.

Source: United States Military Academy, "Mission," http://www.usma.edu/mission.asp, accessed January 2011.

**Exhibit 2** Army Rank Structure




**Commissioned officers** (Second Lieutenant through General) derive authority directly from a sovereign power (in the U.S., this power lies with the President of the United States) and, as such, hold a commission charging them with the duties and responsibilities of a specific office or position. Commissioned officers are typically the only persons, in a military environment, able to act as the commanding officer of a military unit.

A **non-commissioned officer** (NCO; Corporal through Command Sergeant Major) is an enlisted military member holding a position of some degree of authority typically obtained by promotion from within the non-officer ranks. NCOs usually receive some leadership training, but their function is to serve as supervisors within their area of trade specialty and, at lower NCO grades, they are not generally considered management specialists. Senior NCOs serve as advisors and managers from the duty section level to the highest levels of the military establishment.

Source: Graphic from U.S. Army website, http://www.army.mil, accessed January 2011; text from 10 U.S.C. § 101, US Congress [1], 2009-01-05.



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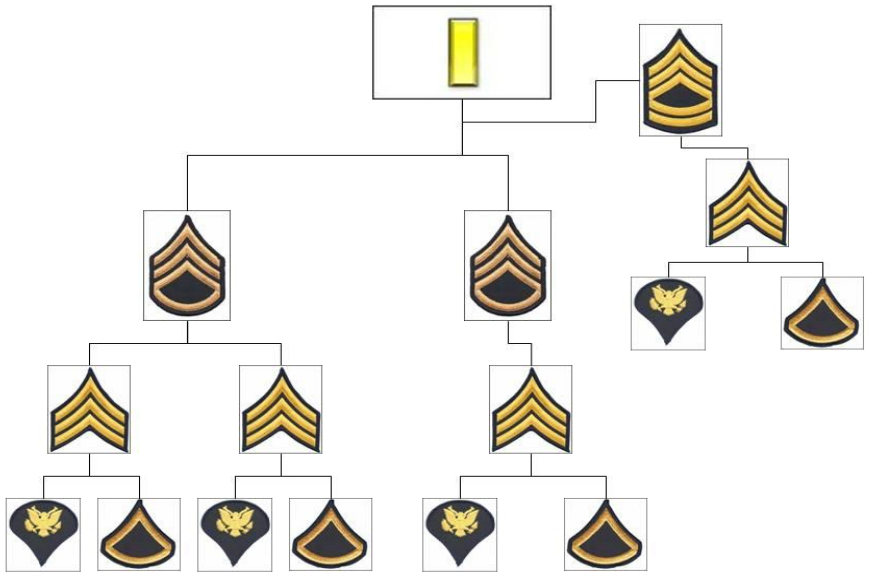
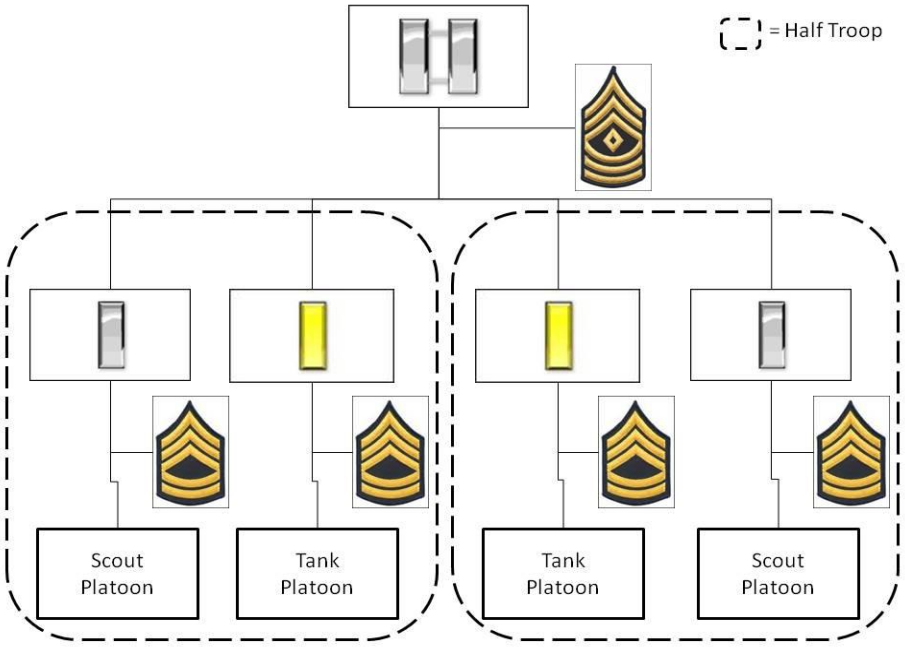
**Exhibit 3a** Typical Tank Platoon Rank Structure



Source: Robert Carpio III.

**Exhibit 3b** Typical Cavalry Troop Rank Structure




Source: Robert Carpio III.



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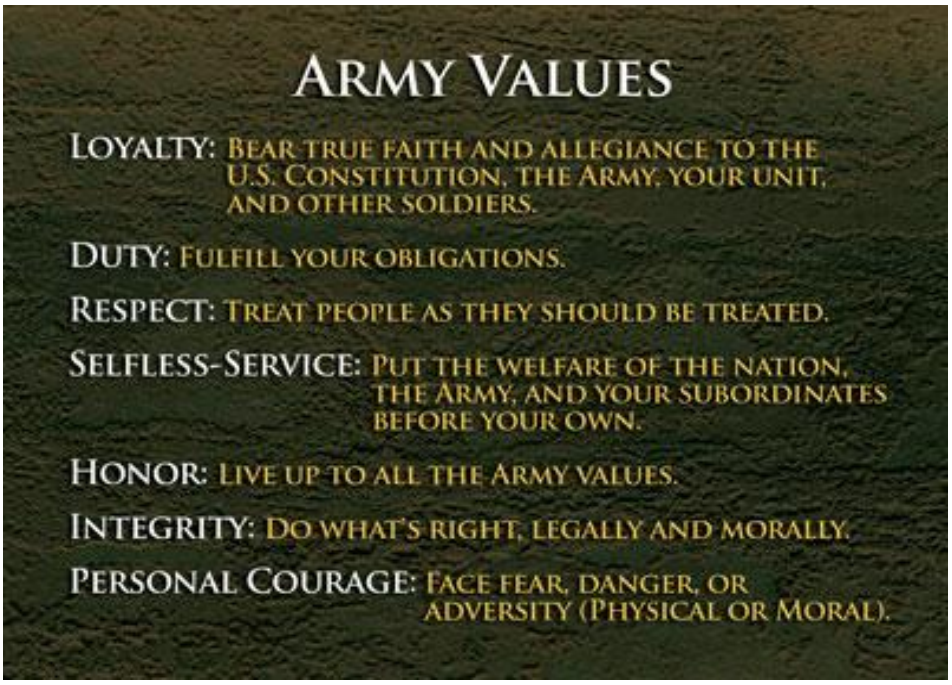
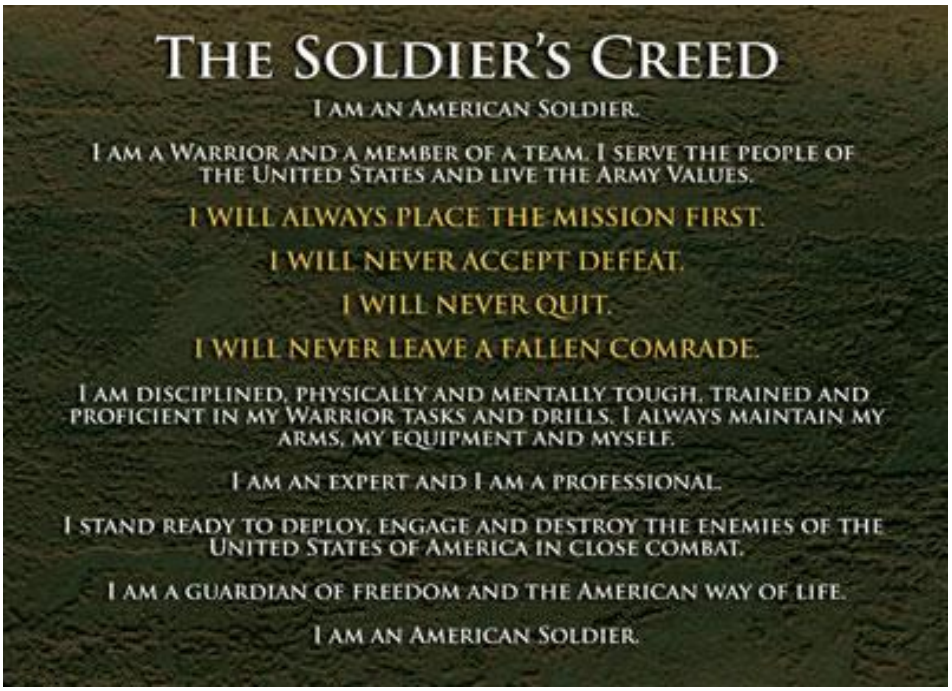
**Exhibit 4** The Army Values and Soldier's Creed




Source: U.S. Army, "Training and Equipping Soldiers," http://www.army.mil/aps/05/training.html, accessed January 2011.



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**Exhibit 5a** Abrams Main Battle Tank

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mounted_Soldier_System_%28MSS%29.jpg, accessed January 2011.

**Exhibit 5b** Bradley Fighting Vehicle

Source: Global Security, "M2 and M3 Bradley Fighting Vehicle Systems" http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/ground/m2-pics.htm, accessed January 2011.



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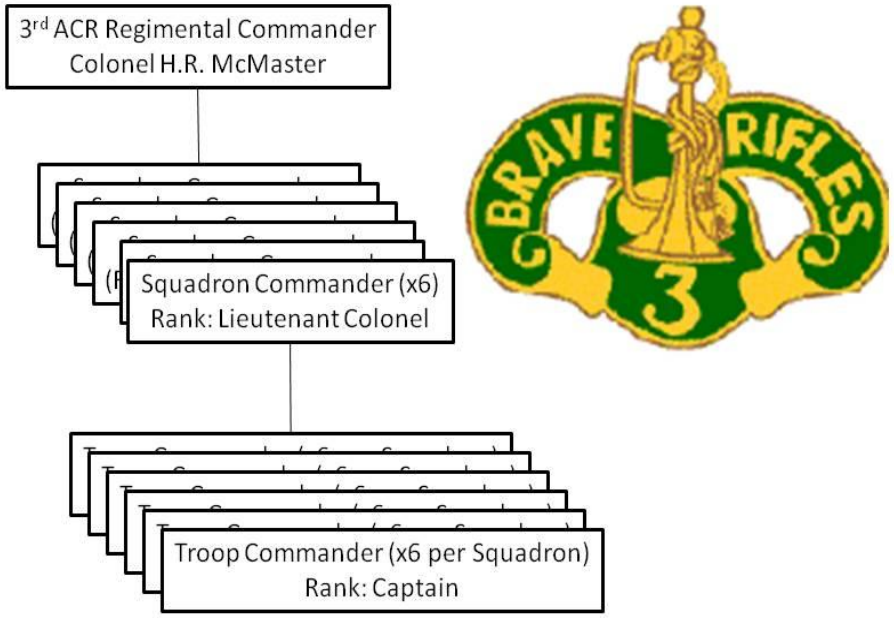
**Exhibit 6** 3rd ACR Organizational Chart




Source: Drawing by Robert Carpio III. Image of 3rd ACR unit crest from http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/agency/army/3acr.htm, accessed January 2011.



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**Exhibit 7** Counterinsurgency Strategy and Its Relevance to Iraq in 2005

While the insurgency operating within Iraq consisted of factions representing a variety of tribes, religious sects, and ideologies, the majority of these groups had a shared interest: expelling the MNF. Over the previous 30 months, these groups had successfully driven a wedge between the Iraqi population and MNF troops. Recognizing that the insurgency was continuing to grow in capability and sophistication despite the MNF's overwhelming technological advantages, and realizing that a sizeable and growing portion of the Iraqi population now resented a foreign presence in Iraq, MNF leaders began to embrace counterinsurgency operations in late 2005 in an attempt to turn the tide in the war.[9]

The strategy focused on clearing insurgents from urban centers and providing long-term security for the populated areas so that Iraqi civilians could safely go about their daily routines unobstructed by kidnappings, bombings, or other fear-inspiring tactics employed by insurgent groups. MNF leaders believed that this strategy of increased presence and interaction with the population would increase information flow between Iraqi civilians and security forces. Further, intelligence provided by Iraqi civilians would enable security forces to conduct "pinpoint raids" to capture or kill insurgents without inflicting collateral harm to members of the civilian population.[10]

To implement this strategy, U.S. Army General George Casey, then commander of the MNF, established the Counterinsurgency Academy in Taji, Iraq in November 2005. Before they could lead their units in combat operations, commanders at all levels were required to attend this school, where they were informed of the change of mission and were taught tactics, techniques, and procedures that would enable them to effectively partner with Iraqi Army and police units as well as civilian leadership at the village, city, provincial, and national levels. In addition, commanders were ordered to take measures to attempt to eliminate collateral harm to noncombatants and to preserve civilian lives and dignity to the greatest extent possible. This change of strategy provided an opportunity for the MNF to regain the confidence of the civilian population and the moral and strategic upper hand in the war. These principles would later be codified into doctrine by *Field Manual 3-24: Counterinsurgency*, published in December 2006.[11]

Source: Compiled by casewriters.

[9] Project on Defense Alternatives, *Vicious Circle: The Dynamics of Occupation and Resistance in Iraq*, http://www.comw.org/pda/0505rm10.html#1, accessed December 2010.

[10] George W. Bush, "President's Address to the Nation- January 2007," http://georgewbushwhitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/01/20070110-7.html, accessed December 2010.

[11] Thomas E. Ricks, "U.S. Counterinsurgency Academy Giving Officers a New Mind-Set," *Washington Post*, February 21, 2006, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/20/AR2006022001303.html, accessed December 2010.



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**Exhibit 8** Map of Iraq


Source: "Map of Iraq," http://www.mideastweb.org/miraq.htm, accessed January 2011.



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**Exhibit 9** Aerial Imagery of Tal Afar, Iraq


Source: Joe Gifford.



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**Exhibit 10** Timeline of Major Events

**June 2000 –** Gifford enters West Point. During his first two summers at the Academy, he receives basic training in individual military skills to include land navigation, rifle marksmanship, and first aid.

**September 2001 –** Terrorists fly two commercial aircraft into the towers of the World Trade Center in New York City and one into the US Pentagon in Washington, D.C. Another hi-jacked plane, believed to be headed for the White House, crashes in a Pennsylvania field.

**March 2003 –** The United States invades Iraq. The 3rd ACR is one of the first Army units on the ground.

**August 2003 –** Gifford is selected to serve as a Cadet Regimental Commander during his senior year at West Point, a top-10 leadership position within the Corps of Cadets. Gifford chooses to serve in the Armor Branch upon graduation.

**May 2004 –** Gifford graduates from West Point along with 931 classmates and is commissioned a Second Lieutenant in the United States Army.

**July 2004 –** Gifford begins training at the U.S. Army Armor School at Fort Knox, KY.

**December 2004 –** Gifford graduates from the Armor Officer Basic Course and moves to Fort Carson, CO where he joins the 3rd ACR as a tank platoon leader.

**February 2005 –** Gifford arrives in Kuwait where he spends 1 month preparing for onward movement into Iraq.

**March 2005 –** Gifford and the rest of the 3rd ACR arrive in Iraq, stationed initially on the outskirts of Baghdad.

**July 2005 –** Gifford's troop is ordered to move to Ninewah province in northern Iraq with the mission to interdict foreign insurgents coming to Iraq from Syria. Gifford's platoon is stationed in Sinjar, a small town located 20 miles east of the Syrian border.

**August 2005 –** Operation Restoring Rights begins in Tal Afar, approximately 30 miles east of Sinjar. Gifford's unit is ordered to Tal Afar from Sinjar to participate in the operation. Gifford is named half-troop commander. Shortly after the unit's arrival in Tal Afar, Lieutenant Morse, a platoon leader in Gifford's unit, is killed by sniper fire.

**September 2005 –** A week after Morse's death, Gifford's men (both US and Iraqi) successfully escape the blast radius of a house rigged with explosives, leaving Gifford to decide what to do about the three Iraqis occupying a house next door to the giant bomb.

Source: Richard Burgess Jr. and Robert Carpio III.



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