

“What the Hell Just Happened?”

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In the early hours of OPERATION Iraqi Freedom (OIF), a rifle company came face to face with their first “suicide bomber,” or so they believed.

This company was part of the same Battalion and Regiment that had just gone through An Nasiriyah in the middle of the night after Jessica Lynch was captured. Tensions were high as every officer and Staff NCO informed their troops that the loyalists to Saddam Hussein were using car bombs and suicide bombers to slow the Coalition Forces in reaching Baghdad.

The Marine units of this regiment all witnessed or experienced the suicide car bombers seeking to run through the Marine check-points. The death and destruction was all over the roads. The Marines saw, smelled and heard death all around them. They reaffirmed, to a man, their essential training ethos, “God, Country, Corps!” It was a solemn duty to protect each other.

As this company moved into a town closer to Baghdad, their vehicles maneuvered to create a picket on one side of the road as other units from the regiment drove through their positions. The picket was set up on either the left or right side of the road, allowing the Marines to shoot only in the direction of the enemy as they traveled past their fellow Marines. This technique secured both sides of the road as units moved through these small towns and villages.

On one occasion, shortly after seeing the aftermath of a failed suicide car bomb attempt, a rifle platoon in two armored vehicles dismounted and picketed one side of the street. There was sporadic small arms fire coming from down the street.

Then they saw a woman come out of a building carrying something heavy in her arms. The Marines could not see what she was carrying, as she was wearing a full Burkha. They yelled in Arabic for her to stop, but she kept walking. As she slowly makes her way closer to the marine checkpoint, Sergeant Rob Sarra, who was in charge, figures that if they can’t stop her, she will approach the vehicles and blow herself up. He is not alone in his thoughts, nearly every Marine of his platoon is wondering what they should do. Sergeant Sarra has her in the cross-hairs. She has not stopped and is still approaching the vehicles. The Sergeant decides in his mind, “This suicide bomber is not going to take us out.” He pulls the trigger. As soon as he does, the rest of the platoon fires as well with 12–14 weapons. She falls to the ground dead.

The Marines go up to see what she is carrying. She is clearly dead, but she was not carrying a bomb. She was carrying dishes. The Sergeant immediately says, “*What the hell just happened?* This woman got killed by my actions.” He was crying, hysterically. When he wrote in his journal that night, he wrote that he wasn’t going to tell anyone about this, including his mother. No one has to know that he killed innocent women. But little did he know it would work itself back up to the surface when he came home.

The rest of the story: For the next few days Sergeant Sarra became despondent and is not engaged with his men. He felt that he has violated the Rules of Armed Conflict, as well as violating his own moral conscious by killing a woman. After a short time, the Marine Corps had to pull him off the line, then out of the war. He is receiving counseling for post-traumatic stress and emotional problems due to this incident.

Questions for Discussion

1. Did the Sergeant do the right thing?
 - a. How do we resolve the fact that he did the right thing, but he is no longer able to be a combat Marine?
 - b. Did the leadership have the right ROE?
 - c. Should he have been prepared better?
 - d. What could the leadership have done to better prepare him?
2. How much of the “moral” responsibility do you put on the woman in the Burkha, and how much on SGT Sarra?