

Opinion

LEAVENWORTH TIMES.com

He made the only decision he could

First lieutenant Clint Lorange has been incarcerated in the Disciplinary Barracks at Fort Leavenworth since August 2013.

Since I do not have access to court transcripts, my views are based on public records and are informed by having commanded an infantry rifle company in Vietnam.

Often I could not see and had to trust the judgment of my soldiers. I had to make instantaneous decisions about how to respond to an enemy-initiated firefight or whether to execute an ambush when we detected movement on a trail. Decisions have to be made in seconds. There is no time for discussion.

There are too many details of Lorange's charges that just don't smell right.

On Oct. 23, 1983, an explosive-laden truck crashed through a barrier at the Beirut International Airport. In a split second, 241 Americans died in a horrendous explosion. One of the Marine sentries was killed when the truck demolished the guard shack. The other sentry attempted to chamber a round but was unable to do so before the explosion. He was severely wounded. The Marines were operating under rules of engagement that prohibited them from having a round in the chamber.

On April 22, 2008, two Marines stood guard at the Joint Security Station in Ramadi, Iraq. At 7:45 a.m. a truck carry-



Rich Kiper

TIMES COLUMNIST

ing 2,000 pounds of explosives careened through the barricaded roadway. The two Marines opened fire.

The truck stopped and then exploded, killing both Marines. Thirty-five were wounded. Six seconds had elapsed. A review of the incident concluded that everyone in the building would have been killed had not the two guards immediately opened fire. Both were posthumously awarded the Navy Cross.

In April 2012, a motorcycle-borne improvised explosive device (IED) killed six Afghans and three Americans. On June 6, a motorcycle IED killed 22 Afghans in Kandahar. An official report stated "that in Kandahar and Helmand, locals associated with (international organizations) were primary targets of ... attacks from insurgents on motorcycles."

I was an analyst at the Army Counter-Insurgency Center during that time. Our focus was on Kandahar Province and neighboring Helmand Province.

On July 2, 2012, a motorcycle with three riders sped toward a U.S. Army patrol in Zahri District,

Kandahar Province, Afghanistan. One soldier notified 1st. Lt. Lorange and requested permission to shoot. Under the rules of engagement, the soldier fired at the approaching motorcycle. Lorange also ordered soldiers in a gun truck to fire on the motorcycle. Lorange could not see the scene and was relying on reports from his soldiers. Two American paratroopers stated that an Afghan force with the Americans also fired at the motorcycle. Two of the riders were killed and one ran away. The above events occurred in approximately 10 seconds.

Lorange was convicted of murder and attempted murder and sentenced to 20 years.

According to the U.S. commander of forces in Afghanistan, Zahri District was one of the 10 most violent districts among the 405 districts in the country.

Lorange replaced a platoon leader who had been wounded by an IED. One month after the July shooting, the previous platoon leader wrote to investigators that "we would not let a motorcycle into close proximity of our element due to current tactics, techniques and procedures of enemy forces."

Whether there was an IED attached to the motorcycle moving toward Lorange's platoon is unknown. Local Afghans quickly removed it from the scene and it was never located.

Investigators did find

bomb residue on the hands of the two dead riders. Their fingerprints and DNA were found on bomb components. These were not innocent civilians.

Oddly, the soldiers who actually saw and killed the two were not charged with murder. Instead, they were granted immunity and ordered to testify against Lorange who gave the order to shoot, but was not within visual distance of the scene.

Lorange had been the platoon leader for three days before this event. Some sources state that the enlisted soldiers thought Lorange was too aggressive. Being aggressive is innate in an infantry commander.

Something is missing in this story. It is incomprehensible that a nine-officer court-martial panel would second-guess Lorange for ordering his men to fire on an approaching motorcycle.

Lorange had seconds to make a decision. Had he ordered his men to stand down, and had the motorcycle carried an IED that killed some of his men, would he have been charged with dereliction of duty?

One thing that was pounded into my head over and over again in Ranger school was to make a decision.

Lorange made a decision.

He made the only one he could make in that situation.

Rich Kiper is a Leavenworth Times columnist.