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Interview with MAJ Michael Monti



Combat Studies Institute
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

Abstract

From August 2004 through March 2005, Major Michael Monti served as operations officer for 1st Battalion, 23rd Marines (part of the 1st Marine Division) which was responsible for an Al Anbar Province area along the Euphrates River spanning from the Iraqi city of Hit in the south to Hadithah in the north. During his unit's deployment, missions included main supply route and infrastructure security, training Iraqi National Guard (ING) soldiers and taking measures to rid the area of insurgent activity – and all with forces that were too few “to be engaged like we could have or should have been.” In fact, Monti said, the January 2005 elections were a telling indicator of just who was really in control when only two individuals voted in his battalion's area of operations. “My instincts tell me,” he explained, “that the people probably wanted to vote, maybe they believed in the vote, but they weren't going to vote because the insurgents and imams had ownership of the populated areas 23 hours a day. You either own a place 24/7,” Monti observed, “or you don't own it. The enemy owned it and he was smart enough to keep a low signature and to not cause trouble while we were executing in the cities.” In this interview, he also discusses the up-armored vehicle issue, the current “warrior culture” that's being built in the Marine Corps and the outstanding performance of Marine reservists in Iraq.

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Interview with MAJ Michael Monti

3 November 2005



JM: My name is John McCool [JM] and I'm with the Operational Leadership Experiences Project at the Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. I'm interviewing Major Michael Monti [MM] on his experiences during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. Today's date is 3 November 2005 and this is an unclassified interview. Before we begin, sir, I want to say that if at any time you feel we're entering classified territory, please couch your response in terms that avoid revealing any classified information. And if classification requirements prevent you from responding, simply say you're not able to answer. Okay sir, could you please start by telling me what unit you served with during your OIF deployment?

MM: 1st Battalion, 23rd Marines, 1st Marine Division.

JM: Also the time period of the deployment and your duty position?

MM: Predeployment training went from 15 May to 1 August 2004 at 29 Palms, California, aboard the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center (MCAGCC). I was in Iraq 15 August 2004 to 15 March 2005 as a part of OIF II-2. I was originally a part of the Inspector-Instructor Staff charged with training and maintaining readiness for a Reserve infantry battalion from Texas - 1/23. Upon activation, I integrated into the reserve battalion's T/O and became their operations officer - S3.

JM: Okay, could you describe the circumstances surrounding your deployment order? When was it received and were there any special preparations you made prior to deploying?

MM: Rather unique situation. I was the Active Duty cadre that trained a Reserve infantry battalion out of the state of Texas, and once we got the word to activate and start predeployment training, I integrated in as the battalion's operations officer - they shuffled around the staff. We received word that we would activate and deploy in early March, 2004.

JM: Did you have an idea then of what your mission was going to be?

MM: Yes, we knew that we would replace 2/7 as a part of the 7th Regimental Combat Team in Al Anbar Province. We knew that we would be executing sustainment and stability operations (SASO) as trained by the 1st Marine Division. We were skilled and trained well enough to remain flexible and quickly figure out the unknowns once we arrived in theater. We were prepared.

JM: And could you describe the AO [Area of Operations]?

MM: The AO shifted. Originally, it was from Baghdadi as our northern boundary with 1/8 to our north. The AO extended south to city of Hit where another infantry battalion was on our southern boundary in Ramadi - 2/5. Movement of our higher headquarters, 7th Regiment, from

Al Asad, to go and execute as a part of Operation Phantom Fury (Fallujah) who took 1/8 with them from our northern boundary. As a result, our AO shifted northward to take over for 1/8's departure. Our northern boundary extended up to Hadithah Dam, and out west where we tied in with elements of 1st LAR in the vicinity of Rutbah. When RCT-7 departed, the 31st MEU (Marine Expeditionary Unit) headquarters came in off float and assumed regimental command at Al Asad; their BLT - 1/3 - attached to RCT-7 for Operation Phantom Fury. Hence, it was a Task Force LAR and 1/23 under the command of 31st MEU (November 2004 - January 2005). After Phantom Fury, in January 2005, we did the elections with the 31st MEU, in addition to 1/3 who attached back to the 31st MEU. Additionally, to close our deployment, the 31st MEU departed and RCT-7 took back over command and executed some surge operations in our AO with elements from Task Force LAR. Even when 7th Regiment returned and replaced the 31st MEU, we maintained our AO as 1/8 did not come back north; they prepped to go home, so we kept Hadithah to Hit and we executed some counterinsurgency operations - River Blitz and River Bridge - under 7th Regiment. 1-3, of course, cut back to 31st MEU and they got back on their vessels to go home. LAR remained out to the west on the Syrian border. Task organization-wise, from the day we got in theater, we cut a rifle company, Alpha, out to LAR to work with them and inherited Delta Company LAR from 1st LAR to augment our three companies, Weapons, Bravo and Charlie. However, when Fallujah was executed, we detached Bravo Company to Task Force LAR who employed their forces on the western portions of Fallujah. Bravo Company executed missions as a part of Task Force LAR in February and March 2005 while we retained control of Delta Company LAR.

JM: Did you arrive into Kuwait and then you went up to Al Asad?

MM: Arrived in Kuwait via commercial flights, and took C-130s for an hour flight into Al Asad. We relieved 2/7 and were originally headquartered out of Al Asad. In October, we repositioned our Headquarters element to Hadithah Dam with the departure of 1/8. We put the main COC [Combat Operations Center] in Hadithah and a Bravo command element down in Hit.

JM: Was there a formal handoff, a right-seat, left-seat that you did?

MM: Absolutely.

JM: Can you talk about that a little bit?

MM: We replaced 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines.

JM: Had the Marines been there all along?

MM: I believe that 2/7 relieved an element from the 82nd [Airborne Division] The turnover was very good. There was a four-week long, left-seat, right-seat period with 2-7. Just a really tight plan. As we phased our companies in, we executed a staggered battle handover and training plan with our 2/7 peers. The plan was not date oriented, but based on being mission-capable and ready oriented. There weren't dates that mandated when the final handshake would occur between the incoming company commander and the outgoing commander. It was when he was ready to assume and transition into full-time operations. And, by the way, combat operations continued throughout the turnover period, so it was really a seamless transition. I was

impressed it worked so well and think it is a credit to the preparation of 2/7 to receive and prepare us for the AO.

JM: What were some of the major problems they told you to watch out for, some of the lessons learned that were imparted?

MM: Really dynamic AO, a lot of layers to it. Not real kinetic, but encompassed full-spectrum operations and SASO. The majority of our mission and focus was spent on route security. The two primary routes were Route Uranium and Route Bronze that extend our AO. MSR [Main Supply Route] was of utmost importance with the Fallujah operation and the constant flow of supplies moving south to build "iron mountains." A continuous stream of resupply convoys passed through our AO. Local dignitaries, city councils and religious figures, their up-to-date link analysis with suspected bad guys: pretty much from the bomb maker and the money providers down to the guys who were putting them out there. In our initial AO configuration, we stayed out of the City of Hit – a large metropolitan of about 150,000. I can't say that we got in there and had much influence. We slowly realized that Hit was a staging point or a passing point for insurgents going to the southern portions of Iraq. We eventually began executing in the populated areas – Hit, Baghdadi, Haqliniyah, Hadithah – and affecting the battle rhythm of the insurgents. Our primary job through the buildup and execution of Fallujah was route security, patrols and cordons and knocks to interrupt enemy activity. Humanitarian operations and the training of the local ING [Iraqi National Guard] battalion were ongoing missions.

JM: In terms of your assessment of the enemy, how dangerous an area was this? What was the nature of the enemies you faced?

MM: I can only speak for this AO. My opinion, my perception, was that when we originally got in there, this was not a very active/kinetic AO. Mainly IEDs [Improvised Explosive Devices] and mines; there were no small arms engagements that were direct. I think the well-trained and hardened enemy was transiting through and preparing for Fallujah. When Fallujah started to build up, it was a very deliberate plan and I think that some of the enemy pushed northward and settled in Ramadi and our AO, or back towards the Syrian border and 1st LAR's AO. With the buildup and execution of Fallujah, there was a spike in enemy activity in our AO – small arms fire and increasing in IEDs and mines that were better prepared and employed. There were actually two or three points where there were pretty good ambushes set upon us. I think they were augmented by some guys who knew what they were doing or had at least trained on it. There were always rumors of [Abu Musab al-] Zarqawi hunkered down in our area. I don't know if that was true or not. There were three or four bigger engagements in our AO after our arrival, however, not nearly as kinetic as Ramadi or Fallujah.

JM: What was the cultural terrain in this area and what kind of interaction did you have with the locals there? Was this a primarily a Shi'ite area or Sunni?

MM: Sunni region. I think the tell-all was the elections. We did the elections under the 31st MEU with a lot of preparation. The keystone event of our deployment. There were four election sites and we only had two people vote all the way from Hit to Hadithah. The greater Hadithah area is probably 150,000 people, Hit another maybe 150,000. Only two persons voting out of what

could have been upwards of 300,000 eligible voters: I think that was the tell-all. I think that's indicative of who owned the area.

JM: So you're saying two individuals voted, that's it?

MM: Yes. I'm saying out of 200,000-plus – how many were of voting age, I have no idea – two voted. That was very indicative of who controlled the Euphrates River cities.

JM: Did you sense that there was any overt pressure on people not to vote or was there just a general sense of opposition? Were they being intimidated into not voting?

MM: Probably a little of both combined with ignorance of the voting process. I think that it was fear, opposition, and a lack of interest and education. My instincts tell me that the people probably wanted to vote, maybe they believed in the vote, but they weren't going to vote because the insurgents and imams had ownership of the populated areas 23 hours a day. We would go in daily for an hour or two to execute patrols and humanitarian assistance and that was the only time that we owned and influenced the population centers. You either own a place 24/7 or you don't own it. The enemy owned it and he was smart enough to keep a low signature and to not cause trouble while we were executing in the cities. The religious leaders and enemy controlled the population. Our relief – 3/25 – was the unit that hit the mine in the Hadithah area lost several KIA. I believe 3/25 ended up losing 49 during their deployment. So you really saw a spike of activity here. Following our departure, more attention was paid to the Euphrates city areas.

JM: The enemy you faced, were they an adaptive enemy? Did they adapt to you and become more effective or were you able to force them to adapt?

MM: We did not have the forces to be engaged like we could have or should have in Hadithah, Hit and Baghdadi. Due to the size of our AO and amount of maneuver elements, we maintained a sporadic presence in the populated areas. Contact was limited and sporadic. As stated above, during and after Operation Phantom Fury, activity increased and became better prepared and trained. Seemed to be a smarter and increased size of the enemy element.

JM: Can you say how large your force was?

MM: At one time, as the battalion operations officer, the most I could put in to operate offensively or patrolling were one or two elements of four vehicles. Everything else was going towards keeping these routes secure, conducting humanitarian missions, patrolling, resupply, etc. On a daily basis, I had about 14 four-vehicles with which to execute our mission. I don't remember the count, but we had approximately 300 incidents with IEDs and mines in our AO during seven months, all the while maintaining around the clock route security.

JM: We're there any other important technologies or techniques that were employed that you think were particularly effective?

MM: Off the top of my head, I think that the most important thing we did was we kept the training program going throughout the deployment. The first thing is that, going in, there

wasn't going to be a five- or six-day rotation with one day off. These Marines are incredible. Seven days a week. Twelve to 18-hour days, maybe 12 to 24-hour days, and also a long preparatory phase before each mission, followed by a long after-action, analyzing everything they did regardless of contact, no contact. Basic training, immediate action drills and what to do for a suspected IED, hit IED, suspected enemy activity, and just working on the basics, like patrolling. I think that was a great benefit to us. Technology: Iridium phones. Communications were impressive for an AO that spanned about 80 miles, and we had one retrans site about midway and kept one TAC [Tactical Command Post] with a TAC 2 as a backup. It was amazing how well it worked and we always had the Iridiums as a backup to call. Communication was incredible.

JM: Was there anything that you thought was notably lacking as far as technology or equipment?

MM: More Iridium phones. We had Dragon Eye UAVs [Unmanned Aerial Vehicles], a big moneymaker. A lot of them went down, but we managed to keep one or two up. I would have liked to have had more UAV support. I can't complain: the air support was incredible too. Whatever the wing had at Al Asad, they were always there to support with fixed wing or rotary wing. More up-armored vehicles. We had a fleet of 150-plus vehicles and I think anywhere from eight to 12 were up-armored vehicles. Not nearly enough. All vehicles should be armored.

JM: Without getting too much into sources and methods of intelligence gathering, how would you assess the quality of the intelligence you saw during your deployment?

MM: I think it was decent. I don't think it was real hard to come by. It's amazing how quickly they will tell on those they're working with or for. The process is really very simple. You detain suspects, you bring them in. We had an exploitation team under a very competent lieutenant and we just built link analysis from integration and getting out among the local populace. We did cordon and knocks weekly to go and round up bad guys and to maintain sources to build our links and make analysis. Most disappointing to me, I think, was of all the cordon and knocks we did - hundreds - I think we got one guy and he got like three years of [jail] time. But everyone else, pretty much, was questioned and was of no value or did a couple weeks and was put right back into the population. You've got 10 percent are hardened fighters and they're bad around the clock. You've got 10 percent that want a better Iraq. And then you have an 80 percent fence-sitter population - maybe not that big, but they can go either way and they can be thrown five dollars to go do something that contributes to the enemy or do something to help us out.

JM: Did you get a sense of what might convince some of that 80 percent to come over to the coalition side?

MM: Without a doubt, it's a secure environment. If you secure the area and they feel safe, these people will work for democracy or work for a better life at least - maybe not a Western ideal, but a peaceful Iraq. I don't know so much about capitalism and democracy and all that, and I don't know if that's for us to say. But as far as having a peaceful country and living their lives and raising their kids, a very family-oriented people - they want that. But if you can't secure the area - one hardened insurgent will control a hundred people with threats and violence. What

sticks out most to me is that after these conventional surges, there were murders immediately afterwards. It was nothing more than people keeping tabs on who was talking to the Americans, and then going in and doing what they thought had to be done. The last major operation that we did there, I think the week after we left, after we'd handed over the helm to 3/25, there were 20 murders at one of the stadiums, and I'm sure the victims were those they considered sympathizers to the Americans. The Iraqi people want a peaceful country; they want to live their lives. I think the gap there is not being able to secure, lacking the footprint to do that. But the second piece is: when will they be ready to take it over and run it themselves and secure it themselves?

JM: Yeah, let's kind of transition into that. You mentioned that if you'd had a much larger force, you could have provided a safer and more secure environment. Obviously, the U.S. Marines are not going to be there forever. There's the standing up of local people to do your job so you can punch your ticket home. Were you involved in training Iraqi security forces?

MM: Absolutely. I'm glad you asked that because that was probably one of the most frustrating aspects of this deployment. The Iraqi infantry battalion working for us, on paper, going in, you think: "Well, I've got a thousand-man force. Good to go. I've just doubled in effectiveness." That was absolutely not the case. Totally inept. They didn't want to train. We couldn't get a hundred people together on a good day. And the second piece of that was that the ING battalion was infiltrated by the enemy.

JM: Really?

MM: Without a doubt, it was a collection source. So what we had was something that was only in writing, nothing that could be relied on. No fault of the battalion commander because he, I think, sided with the Americans and wanted to make this work and understood how it should work. The ING soldiers come into work and they change clothes in the parking lot. They live in the populated areas. We had source reporting that they were actually able to work – or able to show up in uniform and be present – because they were giving a percentage of their check to a contact on the bad side. It was also to keep them and their families alive. We had murders of different ING soldiers. We had a Freedom Guard element attached to us on a few occasions who did a better job because they were from different locations, so they weren't local. Very important. But even they ran and dissipated with the kickoff of Fallujah. They didn't show back up. There was a CIA element that worked in our area a couple times that was incredible.

JM: Central Intelligence Agency?

MM: Absolutely. A unit run by them. And I don't know a lot of specifics about that, but they were good. They operated in our AO a few times. So, from what I've been told, since we left, things have picked up a lot. Maybe we were just the foundation. There was a lot of emphasis put on training and equipping them and supporting them. We did everything we could, but I can't say that anything viable was ever stood up in our time there. We did get to the point when they would go on operations: they would be present and would somewhat execute and did execute in the urban operations, but only if we were there with them. That's the first step. Actually, that's probably the second step. The first step was getting them ready, which we did. We ran some basic training camps up north and down south, eight-week deals. We prepped

them to get ready for the elections, so they could stand security during those events, which they did. And the second step was to have them go out on operations, which they did a handful of times. It was nothing that was too demanding, but they did it. The third step is obviously to multiply the numbers and to build up guys that are trained. The fourth step is independent operations, and I don't remember what General [David] Petraeus said the last count was at. But it was definitely in its infancy while we were there, but it was not due to a lack of attention or desire on our behalf to make it happen. We just couldn't secure the area the soldier lived in, so we couldn't expect him to show up and perform as a soldier.

JM: You can't provide them an armed escort home and stand guard all night.

MM: Exactly. And the funny thing is that there were a couple times where I was tasked with escorting or driving local workers from Al Asad, which had a very robust civilian work force, and getting them to the AO.

JM: To the extent that you were able, what kind of methodology did you use to train these guys? Was it the same methodology you'd use to train American soldiers, but just adapted?

MM: Absolutely. How to clean a rifle, how to shoot a rifle, basic marksmanship, machine gunnery, patrolling, hygiene, wearing your uniform correctly - real basic stuff, but basic stuff is enough to do the job. The indicators we got were that the people will support their military force if it's capable and can keep them secure, but it can't, so they don't give their support yet. I think a bigger problem will be how to logistically support the Iraqi soldier.

JM: Were there any particularly significant or perhaps memorable combat operations that you were a part of or planned?

MM: To me, this was not a kinetic AO. Could it potentially have been a kinetic AO? It was after we left, I think. That's all of what I've dragged off Fox News. I haven't seen the SIPRNET [Secure Internet Protocol Router Network]. I think that was probably for two reasons. First, we didn't have the forces to put the pressure on. Even when we did multiply in forces - because we did get some attachments and did go on some operations - it really was not a large outcome. So it was probably not a kinetic environment because maybe he was smart and knew that he needed to lay low at certain points. The insurgency, it just kind of seeps out to the west or down south, wherever the Americans go in heavy. Because what I saw was when a combination of forces surged on an area, it just kind of squeezed out the enemy to other positions where he could lay low. I recall four or five instances where a fight broke out.

JM: So they're laying low and just not doing anything particularly bad at the time.

MM: He's not bad unless he's in the act. Most of the detainees were released after interrogation and two weeks of detainment.

JM: Who do you blame for the measly two weeks of hard time? Who are you turning these guys over to who, then, were just turn-styling these guys out?

MM: If there's nothing there for them to go on, then you can't detain the guy. He's not going to admit to you that he committed an act or that he's involved in something bad. He'll tell you about somebody else, but how many of those are lies? How many of those are tribal?

JM: The settling of scores?

MM: Exactly, but it took like two months for us to clue in that this had nothing to do with the civil councils. There's a tribal aspect to this that's not even an insurgency. It's just revenge and factions of people who belong to different tribes and seeing that piece. It's a smuggler's AO.

JM: So kind of benefiting from the general chaos of the situation?

MM: I think so.

JM: Not necessarily ideologically driven, but motivated by money or motivated by just opportunity?

MM: And also just, "I don't like him. This guy's bad." That house down there is hoarding and doing bad things. Maybe there's something that happened. Their sense of history is incredible.

JM: I'm sure you were on the lookout for people, but were you ever specifically tasked with hunting down high-value targets?

MM: Oh, absolutely. We nabbed a few. We had our AO top ten list; we got a couple on it.

JM: Did you get anybody famous?

MM: No. I can say that the big guy, Zarqawi, was rumored to be roaming around, and there were some attempts to see if he was there, not done by us. So maybe he was roaming around in our AO.

JM: Throughout your time in theater there, did you ever have any interactions or did you ever work with any international forces?

MM: In Hadithah, we had an Azerbaijani company attached to us. I think before we got into theater, the Azerbaijanis were allowed to patrol and work in the city of Hadithah. However, when we took over, all they were allowed to do, by their country, was to secure Hadithah Dam. And that was no small task. It was around the clock and it was a huge infrastructure, but that was all they did. Very competent, very professional, very trustworthy soldiers. They did a great job. No Brits, no French -

JM: No Australians?

MM: No Australians. Iraqi National Guard had a few good experiences with them, most of them negative. Freedom Guard Element, Iraqi Army, seems they got progressively better with each.

JM: What about with sister services?

MM: We had a Navy EOD [Explosive Ordnance Disposal] team attached to us for awhile. They did a lot. That was definitely a technology or a piece of gear that was lacking out there. There were only a couple EOD teams and they were housed at Al Asad – long travel time to get out and then get back. So that Navy EOD team living out with us was a force multiplier. Army had PSYOPS [Psychological Operations] and we worked with them a lot. They were a very competent bunch. They did a great job. Two separate SF [Special Forces] teams. Enjoyable to work with. It's kind of bizarre: you read that their primary mission is training indigenous forces, but all they did over there – I say all – but what they did over there was raids, cordon and knocks. We gelled our link analysis with them and had very open communications. We'd team up and support one another in doing combined operations, in addition to force recon, Marine Corps type. They were important to us because of our limited manpower, just setting the cordon in or being a QRF [Quick Reaction Force] or working in combined operations.

JM: So how would you assess the joint-ness aspect of your time over there?

MM: I think there was absolutely no issue with it. Army, Marines and Navy work together in a heartbeat. I think we weren't exposed to it much, small little teams, but they meshed in well. It went real well. Also had a riverine element, but it was Marine and they worked up in the northern sector, patrolling and securing the waters up north. Euphrates was a real interesting aspect of the AO and the flow there, it's pretty much unimpeded. This entire eastern side, no American presence: so why hoard or train anywhere else? We went over there a few times and things did ignite. There was one real large firefight. Our LAR company down in Hit on the east side. Actually, there were two, because one of their companies really went kinetic. One of them, I think the LAR element, killed a bunch of enemy on the east side of the Euphrates River adjacent to the City of Hit. The whole east side was untouched, virgin terrain.

JM: Did the Euphrates run right through the middle of your AO?

MM: Yes.

JM: Were there any particular challenges considering that element of the terrain?

MM: The east side was relatively untouched. We did some real good shutdown operations on routes in, but you're dealing with a nomad people who aren't in the Western mindset of a road in and out, in a car. Everything there is a route. Everything. We shut down Hit once and we were just amazed at things at night, the stream of headlights, all different places, roving out, leaving, because we were about to go in there. Very deliberate operations that are professionally done by the Marines and well planned and coordinated but could not possibly address the multitude of routes out by the enemy, and varying harboring sites to go to. The east side was not addressed because we did not have the forces to maintain a footprint on that side of the river.

JM: Was the lack of sufficient forces something that you guys complained about up the food chain?

MM: No, we're not going to complain. We executed the mission and I think we did a great job, and I know that our higher headquarters gave us everything that they could. They supported us; they bent over backwards to do it. The manpower issue doesn't even rate complaining about. Do I think it's an issue? I can only speak between Hadithah and Hit. Should a battalion be handling that area? That's a lot of people and a lot of population pockets. Is the answer to put and live amongst the populace? I don't know. I don't know how all that would gel with the people. I don't know if the Vietnam argument ties in too well with Iraq, but there are some parameters that may be similar - like the CAP employed in villages.

JM: Can you talk a little about your soldier's performance? To the extent that they were able to help the people, did they take satisfaction in that?

MM: I'm an extremely critical person. Hard on myself, always hard on the Marines that I was in charge of. I was thoroughly impressed with their work ethic. The majority of Marines have a very hard exterior but a very kind heart. They understood the mission, the commander's intent: protect Marines, make Iraq a safer place, and try to weed out insurgents. And they attacked all three of those parameters wholeheartedly. They want to help the people; they're very kind to the people. The control they displayed with a rifle and whether or not to use it, that was incredible.

JM: You didn't have any strategic corporals?

MM: No. I cannot think of any instance where something happened that should not have happened, and we had our fair share of escalation of forces - shooting at checkpoints - and 90 percent of those were due to ignorance of the population and what to do. We did a lot of humanitarian assistance type missions, I think one a week. I think there was over \$8 million dollars pumped into this area.

JM: What was the nature of those missions?

MM: Infrastructure, which was great - water flow and food. But there's another dynamic that ties into that. You got \$8 million dollars being pumped into projects, and there had to be over 200 projects. Now you've got one, maybe two, maneuver elements available on any given day securing them - and that's if you tighten up and make people go longer on the road. How do you track and check on 200-plus projects and \$8 million dollars worth of money? How do you obligate that local contractor to do the work he's got to do? How do you know where that money's going? How do you know you're not getting a one-for-three special? He's taking a third, he's putting a third into three projects - because it was a lot of money - and then a considerable piece, the other third, may have been going to the enemy. That was extremely frustrating. I had no hard data, there's nothing but intuition and instinct, but it tells me that a lot of that \$8 million dollars was going into the fight against us. Big issue. Very frustrating aspect for me, that and the ING. The Iraqi forces and the money pumping into that AO. Not the amount of money, but our inability to ensure that it was being put to proper use. Some of it was but probably not all of it.

JM: Could that have been better managed with just more forces there to keep an eye on the contractors?

MM: I don't know what the answer is, because you got to know and you could see that some of the money was going towards those projects - and you got to provide hospital care and water for the locals, that's step number one. And I believe that was happening to a certain degree. What you do with the fat factor? You pump more people in there or you let Americans do the job, which is the wrong answer, because it's only good if Iraqis do it themselves. I totally buy into that. Does he need Big Brother watching him? Does he need to be held to a higher standard? Yes, but associated with that is the manpower, and then you have the visibility of Marines executing in there and controlling him. So it's a Catch-22.

JM: Are there any changes, looking back, that you would make to Marine Corps doctrine?

MM: I think I would implement a wholehearted CAP Program and get in and be in the cities.

JM: What is that?

MM: CAP - Combined Action Program. Executing and living in the populated areas around the clock. Stop employing in and out of large FOBs. Being seen as a friendly cop, but maintaining a signature. And they may have already started doing that, I don't know. I don't know what 3/25 did when we left and I think maybe 1/5's there now. I've got to believe that the Iraqi military has gotten better and just putting them out and holding them accountable and having them execute jointly with us or by themselves. But I think Marines are well prepared and they'll execute CAP if allowed to. A reliance on vehicles - I think your reliance on vehicles goes down the closer in proximity you are to the towns. We were executing out of Hit and Hadithah, an 80-mile stretch coming in and out. Some of these areas were just totally untouched.

JM: You said that 3rd Battalion, 25th Marines took over for you guys?

MM: Yes. Another Reserve unit. Very surprising. I don't know what that says. I like to think it says that they think we're just as capable as an Active Duty unit. I will say that I was thoroughly impressed with the Reserve Marine, from E-5 and down; even some of the staff NCOs [Non-Commissioned Officers] were incredible, just as good as their Active Duty peers. Maybe better. Maybe more well rounded because these are guys who are a little older, a little more educated, have a civilian occupation. They performed magnificently. And we replaced 2/7. That's the varsity, 7th Marine Regiment. And we went in and I submit to you that we did the job just as well as they did. We held our own.

JM: What are your feelings - beyond the capability of the Reserve and Guard components - of this heavy Guard and Reserve presence in OIF? Is this something that can be sustained?

MM: I like that question. I can't speak on the Guard. I've heard a lot about the Guard. I don't know that the Guard or the Army Reserves are necessarily synonymous with the Marines. That's biased. The Marine Reserves did an incredible job. I think the majority of them, involuntarily, have done one rotation. Of the nine Reserve battalions, all nine have been. We were the eighth to go; 3/25 was the ninth to go. The others participated in OIF I. I personally think that they rate one, and if this thing goes on five-plus years, they rate a second deployment. That's what you sign up for; you're a volunteer. At the same time, the operational tempo is incredible right now. It's about seven months in, seven months out for Active Duty

battalions, but here's the nugget to take from that. We have built a warrior culture. It's incredible. And retention's good in the Marine Corps. These guys are staying in and reenlisting in the Marine Corps, so this is a good thing.

JM: Everybody who wants combat experience is going to be able to get it, I would think.

MM: Yes, they can get it, and just because you never get shot at or shoot your weapon, that doesn't mean you didn't get combat experience. The fear factor is there. The interesting thing with that is: what do you do now with an E-4 who is 21 years old and has three combat deployments? How do you transition him back to a peacetime environment when and if this goes away? The other piece is that you take this while you got it. I think if we're going to reap all the benefits of hardening these Marines and making them that much better from this experience, if there is something next. But, you know, maybe there's another 10-year gap like after [Operation] DESERT STORM. So what we've done is built another warrior culture. I'd like to think that GWOT [Global War on Terrorism] continues and we go somewhere else and keep pushing the fight, or we stay in Iraq for as long as it takes to get it right, to make it right. So I think it's a benefit and the Active Duty forces, nobody will do more than three rotations and the majority did one or two. Nobody's doing a fourth involuntarily, then they're going to rotate out and will come back, but still they'll continue to fight. But Marine Corps and Army, I don't think they have limited their manning power and there are no plans to do so. So I think Active Duty should get it while they can - it's their profession. And I think the Reserves, we shouldn't be relying on them. From what I understand, the Army's relying on theirs a little bit more, because they put certain trades in the Reserves that the Active doesn't have. We don't have that problem. Our guys are just helping fill in the plugs. And I know from my standpoint, they're doing a great job. I was extremely concerned going in with a Reserve unit. One weekend a month, 12 times a year with two weeks in there, but they made up for it with their desire to be there and serve their country. The mission over there is simple math; it's hard work, around the clock.

JM: Is there anything that you took from your experience that you feel has made you a better leader, or contributed to your professional development in a positive way?

MM: This is the first time I've executed. I'd been in 12 years and this is the first time that I ever did a real world op. I wasn't in for DESERT STORM, wasn't involved in the Haiti refugee operation, Somalia, Bosnia, none of that. First time ever. I have not done Afghanistan, yet. So I want to get back there, or to Afghanistan, I want to be involved in the Global War on Terrorism. You are at your best when you're doing the real thing. You stay sharp and you feel better as a Marine, and there was never an urgency to get out of there. I finally earned my money. And maybe that's what they do: they pay you well in case this pops up and it may never pop up in 20 or 30 years. But after 12 years, I finally got to say, "I earned my paycheck this year." It was good for me personally. I missed OIF I. I was shattered. I had rotated out of an Active Duty infantry battalion from 29 Palms, and I knew OIF was going to happen. When I went to Inspector-Instructor duty with the Reserve battalion in Texas, we were getting the activation notice and the TPDF [Time-Phased Force Deployment] got shuffled up through the SECDEF's [Secretary of Defense] decision, and I was thinking: "You know, maybe this isn't the right line of work for me. It's been 12 years and maybe I'll just go on and try something else." And then when we got the mobilization order, I was ecstatic. I just wanted to do my part and I think that

defines, in a large part, the reservists. Out of the non-obligated guys, I think there were only three or four that decided not to activate with us, and a considerable portion of the 1,100-man battalion were not obligated, but they wanted to go. They were so distraught that we didn't go to OIF I. The reservists, they want that first one. A second one, I don't know. If they wait a few years and let those guys cycle out and a new bunch comes in, absolutely. But for me, I hope this isn't it.

JM: Do you have any indication that you might be going back?

MM: I don't know. I'll do whatever I can to get back to Iraq or Afghanistan. If it's on a higher-level staff and that's what it takes to get over there, then absolutely. I don't think they'll let me execute with a regiment or a battalion. I'm too senior.

JM: Are there any other issues that we didn't bring up like you'd like to talk about?

MM: We could talk about this for days. Some of it's just opinion-based; there are no hard numbers. It was a rewarding experience and I think the Marines did a great job. Higher headquarters bent over backwards to support us. Marine doctrine is as conducive as it can be to what's going on there. I don't know if the Iraqis buy into democracy or capitalism. That doesn't matter. But they do buy into a peaceful country, so whether you're against the war or for the war, it's a positive either way. This is something that has to be addressed. The whole region's a hotbed and there are people that want to harm us, so there's always going to be a reason to be there. They want a peaceful country. They want a better Iraq for their families. There was never any issue of why we were there. You're motivated.

JM: Okay, this will conclude the interview then.

MM: Thanks.

JM: Thanks for your time, and thanks for your service too.



END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Jennifer Vedder, 8 February 2006