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A project of the Combat Studies Institute, the Operational Leadership Experiences interview collection archives firsthand, multi-service accounts from military personnel who planned, participated in and supported operations in the Global War on Terrorism.

# Interview with MAJ Robert Dixon



**Combat Studies Institute**  
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

## Abstract

Part of a 10-man advisor support team assigned to the 7th Iraqi Army Battalion and located principally at the Kirkush Military Training Base and the nearby town of Balad Ruz from March through November 2004, Major Robert Dixon was tasked with a wide range of training, coaching, teaching and mentoring responsibilities. He and his fellow AST members focused on everything from reflexive fire drills and convoy live fires to medical care and cordon and searches, leading up to being deployed in support of Operation Baton Rouge in Samarra – and in this interview he discusses the full range of his experiences. Dixon talks about the availability of interpreters, the general absence of definitive guidance on what to teach and how to teach it, the “very austere environment” they all operated in, and also some of the philosophical differences present within his team itself: “I leaned more towards wanting the Iraqis to do it more,” he said. “There was another view out there, though, that said we didn’t have time to let the Iraqis do it so *we* had to take charge.” Among the most difficult challenges his team faced was the desertion of a “significant number of Iraqi soldiers” from the 7th Battalion after one of its companies was hit by an improvised explosive device and suffered casualties. “They just walked out the gate and didn’t come back,” Dixon recalled. “That right there was a big difference. The battalion leadership wasn’t doing anything to stop it either. To me, it goes back to these philosophical questions. Do you step in and intervene? Who’s in charge of this battalion? You try to talk to the leadership and tell them they can’t desert but the leadership is like, ‘What do we do? The soldiers leave. We can’t stop them.’” In spite of this, though, Dixon said there was a high degree of trust between the Iraqi soldiers and their American advisors, leading him to “never be concerned” about his own safety, “even while we were out in Samarra.” Even so, he added, he wouldn’t want to go back to Iraq and be an advisor again.

# Interview with MAJ Robert Dixon

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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 Robert Dixon (RD) on his experiences in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). With me as well is Bob Ramsey (BR), also of CSI, who will also be asking questions. Today's date is 4 October 2006 and this is an unclassified interview. Before we begin, if you feel at any time 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. Could you start by giving us a brief sketch of your military career up to this point: how did you get commissioned, what units have you served with, what deployments have you been on?

RD: I went to what's now North Georgia College and State University in Dahlonega, Georgia. I was commissioned in the infantry and served in the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division as a platoon leader and then as a scout platoon leader. After that I went to the infantry Captains Career Course and then Fort Knox. I was a company commander at Fort Knox. I was then stationed in Hohenfels, Germany, where I worked for a year on the staff and then was a company team maneuver observer-controller (OC) for two years. I branch transferred to armor with help from Colonel Michael Bills, who now commands 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR). That's when I volunteered to go downrange with nine other members from my OC team. We were the precursor to the military training teams (MTTs) and the special police training teams (SPTTs). We were called an advisor support team (AST) and we went down when Major General Paul Eaton was in charge of the program. That June was when Lieutenant General David Petraeus took over. Our group fell up under Brigadier General James Schwitters who was in charge of the Coalition Military Assistance Training Team (CMATT). So at the end of March 2004, we found ourselves at the Kirkush Military Training Base (KMTB) on the Iranian border in between Balad Ruz and Mandalay waiting to receive our Iraqis.

JM: Your deployment was from March through November 2004?

RD: That's correct.

JM: Can you talk a little bit about how you went about preparing yourself and maybe also how the Army prepared you for this training mission?

RD: We had an advantage over a lot of people who were downrange at that time working in this environment. We were working in the CMATT and there was also the Coalition Police Assistance Training Team (CPATT), and they both work for Multinational Security Transition Command-Iraq (MNSTC-I). MNSTC-I was led by General Eaton and then General Petraeus took it. Now Lieutenant General Martin Dempsey is in charge of it. Being OCs we knew what was going on in theater so we knew how to train our team based on what was going on in theater. We knew what to focus on. Lieutenant Colonel Jim Lechner was the team officer in

charge (OIC) and he took charge of our group of senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs), E7s and E8s, and senior company grade officers who had all been in company command and were just waiting to make major. We knew we had to focus on medical skills, and not just combat lifesaver but some of the more advanced skills. Things like the Israeli tourniquet – the one arm tourniquet, some of the cutting edge things. We did a lot of reflexive fire drills and convoy live fires. We were responsible for setting our own program up. There was a group that went down with us from our sister OC team, but we weren't pulled together and we didn't train on the same program. Major Pete Fedak set his program up the way he deemed necessary and we did our program the way we saw fit. We did some language training. At the time we had an Iraqi-German through Central Texas College who came in and gave us one or two days of classes. He taught us how to say basic things. What you found out, though, was that when you got into Iraq, the language is significantly different than if you're learning, say, Egyptian-Arabic. The dialect is different and the words used are different. So we did some language, some medical and a lot of shooting.

JM: What was your duty position for this team?

RD: We had an OIC, then-Major Lechner, and he was in charge of everything. Then we had two captains and basically one was operations and one was logistics. We oversaw the six NCOs we had. I had three and Captain Bill Adler had three of them. My primary was operations and my alternate was logistics, but we kind of did everything and helped out the NCOs. The NCOs were the bread and butter because they were going to be the company advisors. When we got downrange it changed a little bit, though, but you have to adapt to what your environment is and you have to be flexible.

BR: What were you expecting to find when you left?

RD: We were looking at the 10-meter target: getting into country, getting our Iraqi battalion and training them. We knew we could go operational with them. We knew that. If you looked at our orders it said no less than 174 and no more than 365. They were open-ended orders but we were told we were going to be down there for six months. We figured we'd be training them up and maybe doing a month of operations with them and then we would go back to Germany. We were really focused on the training aspect of it. To stand up a battalion is a pretty audacious task in itself, at least what we're used to in the American mindset. I had been a trainer and an OC and I had had a training company, so I knew what kind of basic training it took just to produce an individual: the individual training aspect of it was nine weeks alone. When we got into country we quickly realized that once we got our [inaudible] we were going to have eight weeks to train them up. They would go on leave, come back and then we're operational; we're conducting combat operations. We were in a relatively quiet area. There were a couple soldiers who were killed in Balad Ruz due to improvised explosive devices (IEDs) but for the most part, Forward Operating Base (FOB) Caldwell – the American half, or KMTB – didn't get mortared on a daily basis. The entry control point (ECP) wasn't getting attacked. It was a pretty benign environment all in all. It was still a combat environment but it wasn't like what it would be like when we got to Samarra.

JM: Can you talk us through the process of first meeting your Iraqi soldiers and the rapport building you went through with them?

RD: When we got to KMTB, we were there for a couple weeks working on training support plans. We were trying to develop all these classes on what we were going to teach them, focusing on the fire team and squad level. We were trying to identify the tasks we were going to focus on because we knew we had limited time. The cadre came in first – they had been trained at a school in Jordan – and by cadre I mean senior NCOs and officers. We received our initial shipment of company commanders and above and the battalion staff and we started doing cadre integration. We started teaching them the classes we had developed. What's interesting about that was how ill-prepared the system was for this. We had no interpreters at the time. We had to identify who in the battalion could speak English, and thankfully a number of soldiers could speak English. There were a lot of volunteers in their army, a lot of college educated volunteers, who could speak English pretty well. Without interpreters, though, we had to rely on the cadre to come up and help facilitate the class; and what that does in that environment is that they become the powerbrokers in the battalion. You have to be really careful about that but we had no other choice. We had a couple weeks of cadre integration and then we received our squad leaders and platoon sergeants who were going to an NCO school at KMTB. The cadre would, in turn, teach the squad leaders, platoon sergeants and first sergeants those same classes we taught the officers. We weren't doing rote learning, but it was a series of classes being taught over and over again and hopefully they identify with or at least learn some of the objectives we're trying to get across to them. Then they can teach the privates when they arrive. They started coming in June and that's when we started our eight-week basic training, trying to train the battalion. We went through the classes again. We probably went through three or four iterations of these classes teaching them what to do and the focus, again, was fire team and squad level. We taught convoy operations and we did a whole lot of shooting. We went from basic individual marksmanship to reflexive fire. We did medical training and cordon and search. We did some comms but not much because we didn't have a whole lot of radios. We did some driver training and physical training as well. We just kept teaching them over and over again those training tasks until they graduated. The first four weeks were based on the individual level and the last four weeks were based on collective fire team and squad training. We graduated them at the end of July, and as soon as they got back from leave we were going operational. We didn't have a whole lot of time to stand up the battalion.

BR: Did you have any program of instruction (POI) to go by?

RD: Nothing other than what we developed.

BR: Did you get any guidance for the development of the POI you used?

RD: There was some guidance but it was pretty much up to us. Our left and right limits were wide open.

BR: So you took what you thought were your critical skills and focused on those. Some teams felt that since they were doing basic training stuff, they needed to act like drill sergeants: that soldiers need to be broken down before they could be built up. What was the philosophy you used when you were doing your basic training? Secondly, I assume they fired AK47s. Were there any problems with marksmanship?

RD: The answer to the first part of your question is that there was a philosophical difference on the approach. I leaned more towards wanting the Iraqis to do it more. There was another view out there, though, that said we didn't have time to let the Iraqis do it so *we* had to take charge. That was a big difference right there. It really came down to the individual leader's technique and how the company advisors facilitated the training.

BR: Did they all work out okay?

RD: They did. There were just different approaches to it. One guy may just look at his company and say, "I have to involve the company leadership more. If I take charge, they're going to continually look at me to advance their training and they can't do that. At some point we're leaving this country and they're still going to be here, so they have to accept some kind of ownership of this." On the other hand, there were some who flat out led the company. There's an argument for both. Due to the short timeframe, I would say you probably needed to be more involved - and we were. We had set the training program up and we were directing them on where to go, but you're really caught between a rock and a hard place there, and in two months you're going to be doing operations with somebody. When we would do basic rifle marksmanship with the AKs, we took them out and did a lot of bore sighting with the weapons: the RPKs, the PKCs - the squad machine guns - and the AK47s. But we weren't necessarily fixated on them qualifying on those. We went through it and we taught them, but we were more concerned with their ability to do reflexive fire and manipulate the trigger housing. On the AK the trigger housing is on the right side of the weapon, and to go from safe to semiautomatic you have to go all the way down to the bottom. It can be pretty tricky. We did a lot of reflexive fire with AK47s. We ourselves also tore them down, broke them apart, put them back together and cleaned them so we knew what they were going to encounter. A lot of these guys already had military experience so they knew how to fire the weapons. At the time in our battalion we had a lot of former Peshmerga, Shi'a, Sunnis and a former Republican Guard platoon leader who was one of the company commanders, so we had guys with experience. They had at least seen a weapon at one point. Whether they ever had any rounds for them or not, I don't know. You heard all kinds of stories about that depending on what kind of unit they had been in. Anyway, they could shoot the weapons, they could do reflexive fire without shooting each other and they could hit the target. That's what we were looking for.

JM: With respect to guidance, did you get anything formal from CMATT or MNSTC-I once you got into country?

RD: I would say it was a little austere. I don't know what was going on at the strategic level. We got into Kuwait and a few days later we flew into Baghdad. We rode a bus to the palace, which is now the embassy, and we showed up in the C3 for MNSTC-I and they were like, "Who are you? What are you doing here?" "We're a training team and we have orders. Here you go." There was a disconnect somewhere, but in the American way of doing things it was quickly organized and we were sent off. We went to Camp Taji for five days, then we went to KMTB, and about a month later was when we received our battalion. The appearance was that they just weren't expecting us at that time.

BR: Did you fall in on facilities or equipment you needed to establish the battalion or did you have to scrounge for all that stuff?

RD: We had to scrounge for a lot of that stuff, and we brought a lot of stuff with us. We brought 10 take along with troops (TAT) boxes. We brought our own computers, night observation devices (NODs), nine millimeters and M16s. So we had a lot of stuff that we brought with us. There was not a lot of stuff provided. Once we got to KMTB we kind of sorted ourselves out. The 30<sup>th</sup> Brigade out of North Carolina had their headquarters at KMTB at what they called FOB Caldwell. When they would run supplies to Logistics Support Area (LSA) Anaconda, we would jump in there with them and go establish accounts. We had to use the unit identification code from our parent organization back at Hohenfels to set these accounts up, so there were some things you would think would already be established for us but they weren't. We had no vehicles, and the vehicles we did receive came from the Iraqi Army. We didn't receive our up-armored Humvees until October. The follow-on AST that relieved us had it a little bit better than we did, but we were kind of scrounging.

JM: Did you ever have an opportunity to have any interaction with Major Fedak's team? Did you guys get to compare notes or anything like that?

RD: Initially, no, because we were so focused on the task at hand. As we got deeper into the deployment we did have some interaction, though. We did some comparisons on what we were doing and how we were training.

JM: Was there any formal opportunity for information sharing or lessons learned? It sounds like there was an informal network you had.

RD: There was a brigade AST and their OIC, who was a lieutenant colonel, kind of pulled us in on a nightly basis and we would go through an informal command and staff. Not really going through any after-action review (AAR) process but rather just discussing what was going on. I guess through that process there was some note comparing. For the most part, though, there wasn't a formal process to compare notes and go through lessons learned. Everything was a hurdle down there so you were kind of bowing your neck and running through everything you encountered. It was a very austere environment.

JM: Can you talk to us about the major cultural differences you encountered, either on a one-on-one basis or between the Iraqi and US military cultures in general?

RD: They don't think the same way we do, and I think we all knew that. It was perhaps less so in our experience due to the compressed timeframe we were operating in. We were initially focused on the training aspect of it and we had a full battalion. We had 800-plus soldiers and they were there through the initial training. The first time we encountered a big difference was when we prepared to deploy to Samarra. Our first company had set up a hasty traffic control point (TCP) on Main Supply Route (MSR) Tampa. They were hit with a vehicle-borne IED (VBIED) and over the course of several days we lost a significant number of soldiers from the battalion to desertion. They just walked out the gate and didn't come back. That right there was a big difference. The battalion leadership wasn't doing anything to stop it either. To me, it goes back to these philosophical questions. Do you step in and intervene? Who's in charge of this battalion? You try to talk to the leadership and tell them they can't desert but the leadership is like, "What do we do? The soldiers leave. We can't stop them." From things I've read, the way they operated under Saddam, they could stop that stuff by beating the soldiers up or killing

them. Now, this whole idea of democracy is so new to them, they don't know what it is. How does that translate into what we're doing? The tools they were able to use to control situations like this in the past, they didn't know how to use them in the current environment. Every battalion dealt with it, it didn't matter. You see it in the news today: units from one area are just not willing to deploy to another area for whatever reason. They just won't do it; and then even if the leadership does agree to do it, half the battalion doesn't go. They desert or whatever.

BR: I guess it goes back to institutional and cultural differences. You indicated that the first time you had a problem was when they got hit with the VBIED and a lot of them went home. That, however, may have just been the first time you were aware of it because their motivations and their understanding of expectations within their culture and within their institutions may not mesh so well with ours. The interesting part of that to me is that you have the American side there working to build up these battalions, but is there a similar Iraqi chain of command that's overseeing or watching or giving instructions to these independent battalions, or are they truly independent?

RD: During this timeframe we also had the transfer of sovereignty, but I don't know of any Iraqi battalions or brigades that owned their own battlespace - and we had an Iraqi brigade commander. I think we had a division commander too and they would come out and talk to the soldiers. I remember a meeting we had at FOB Brassfield-Mora when they were working through some of the courses of action. They weren't doing a military decision making process (MDMP); they were just giving a brief to the Iraqis. Colonel Randy Dragon was there, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade commander of the Iraqi Army was there, and the commander of the 5<sup>th</sup> Division of the Iraqi Army was there as well. They were briefing them on going into Samarra. The Iraqi leadership kept saying, no, no, they wanted to go in and talk to the people in Samarra, and at that point the discussion just went downhill. Colonel Dragon wasn't going to hear any of that. There were cultural differences to be sure, but there was a level of trust that was built up in our battalion. It was just my small AST and the Iraqi battalion, and I was never concerned even while we were out in Samarra. There was a trust that existed in our battalion and I knew they would defend the FOB. Going up to them and talking to them - the cultural differences there - I didn't see a whole lot of that. We weren't a region-centric battalion either. We had guys from Kurdistan, Basra, Baghdad, all over the place.

BR: What was your battalion's designation?

JM: 7<sup>th</sup> Motorized Infantry Battalion; the 7<sup>th</sup> Iraqi Army Battalion.

BR: When you got to Samarra, how would you characterize the number, quality and distribution of interpreters?

RD: We took five interpreters to Samarra, and when the VBIED hit two of them quit. Then we got another one. Interpreters were always coming and going and I don't know who was in charge of getting them, maybe Titan. At that point, we basically would just go up and talk to the leadership. We knew some words and we had already dealt with them for six months so you could talk to one another. My counterpart, the operations officer (S3), could speak English so we'd just sit there and talk to one another. We had three interpreters while we were in Samarra for Operation Baton Rouge.

BR: Did most of your NCOs who worked with the companies have Iraqi soldiers in the companies who they could use as interpreters also or was it pretty much just the Iraqi officers who spoke English?

RD: Some of the NCOs understood English, but the problem with using them is that there develops a power base and then they start telling everybody what to do. You had to be real careful about that.

BR: But if you don't have them, you're pretty much deaf.

RD: You are.

BR: You don't know what's going on around you.

RD: The company advisors could talk to the company commanders and understand each other pretty well. Most of the Iraqi company commanders understood English.

JM: When you got alerted that you were going to be going to Samarra to participate in what became Operation Baton Rouge, what were some of the events surrounding that? How were you going to be employed during this operation and how many guys did you actually have with you when you got there?

RD: Bill Adler - the other captain - he and I were actually down in the Green Zone and were doing recons in Numaniyah and Al Kut because that's where we thought we were going. You have to understand the timeframe we were operating in as well. Fallujah had happened in April '04. There had been a Shi'a uprising around the same time. The 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division had been extended to secure south of Baghdad. In August they're dealing with the Shi'a and Moqtada al-Sadr again in Sadr City and Najaf and Karbala, and the 1<sup>st</sup> CAV was really involved in that. All of that, I assume, triggered a move for our battalion to go south. I wasn't seeing the strategic level; I just knew what we had to do at our battalion. So we were doing our recons down in Numaniyah and when we got back to the Green Zone, there was an email from Major Lechner that said we needed to come back right now. So I came back and he went to the Green Zone; and in the course of 72 hours things changed and we were going to be headed to Samarra. I believe the move of our battalion was held at the four-star level. They sent our battalion to Samarra. 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division had decided to go back in and take Samarra back, because it was basically a no-go city. To that point, they weren't going inside except to do raids and what they called the mousetraps.

JM: Yeah, the Cajun Mousetraps. I think there were three of those.

RD: Right. So they ordered us to go to Samarra and our first company drove in a convoy to get there. I went to Tikrit as a liaison officer (LNO) to the brigade. I don't know why: we didn't have any comms and we couldn't talk to each other. The day the main body departed was the day that company got hit by the VBIED, which triggered the large desertion. I think we deployed with about 600 soldiers. The main body and the first company brought all the battalion vehicles up and one company was left behind at KMTB. They were going to be flown in by Chinook a couple days later.

JM: So it wasn't just from that one company that got hit by the VBIED? The desertion was battalion wide?

RD: Yes. When the soldiers got hit by the VBIED they were ground evacuated to Brassfield-Mora - both Americans and Iraqis - but the company commander came back that night and started spreading the rumor that the Iraqis had been ignored at the medical facility and that the Americans had gotten treatment first. That wasn't the case at all. They were treated equally. Some of the Iraqis were flown to Baghdad, some to LSA Anaconda and some to Camp Speicher and they were all receiving treatment just like the Americans. They were well taken care of. What was interesting was that, after they were hit by the VBIED and were being ground evacuated, they got hit by a complex ambush again and this shut down Tampa for awhile. I think this was the straw that broke the camel's back.

BR: What were the actual losses from that VBIED?

RD: One Iraqi soldier was killed.

BR: How many wounded?

RD: Seven.

BR: Any advisors?

RD: One advisor. Sergeant Perez was injured and he didn't even know it initially. He had shrapnel embedded in him and it had to be dug out. What was interesting was that this guy was dressed in an Iraqi Police uniform and had a police ID. He had gotten through the initial check, went into the search area and that's where he set it off.

JM: What was going to be the role of your Iraqi battalion in Operation Baton Rouge?

RD: They had an objective, and it was the first Iraqi battalion to have their own objective in any large-scale operation like this. They had to take some sort of industrial complex on the northern part of Samarra and they were adjacent to a company from 1-18 Infantry. It was situated adjacent to the spiral minaret, which they went up in the next day, and then they seized that objective. They stayed in the city a couple days, came out, and they then started reducing forces and there were three checkpoints around the city. Our battalion manned those three checkpoints with quarter CAV. That's what we did until we left. The battalion stayed in the city through the elections, and after the elections they went back to KMTB. We had already left by that time. We did a handover with the guys from the 98<sup>th</sup> Training Support Division (TSD) from the New England area who came in and replaced us.

JM: Did you remain up in Tikrit while this was going on?

RD: No. The day after the VBIED hit, I went down to FOB 7 and was with the battalion.

BR: Where did the guys come from again who replaced you?

RD: They were from the 98<sup>th</sup> TSD. They were Reserves. We knew these guys were coming; and at this point we were over our six-month mark and so we were kind of getting antsy about what was going to happen. When they got into Kuwait, they got volunteers to split between my battalion and Major Fedak's, which was in Fallujah. Who's going to take *their* place? The 98<sup>th</sup> guys were there for a week, we did a left seat/right seat ride and then they took over.

JM: How would you evaluate the performance of your unit in Baton Rouge?

RD: They did great. The soldiers who stayed took the objective and did a great job. They did what they were supposed to do. There wasn't a significant amount of resistance, but you don't know that going in. They stood and fought.

JM: Did that have any positive effects afterwards? Did it help with morale? Were there any second or third order effects from their solid performance in Baton Rouge?

RD: I didn't see any. We were just doing operations day in and day out. They were saddling up and going out the gate. There were some things that were happening. Even after the city was taken back, the car bombs were still going off, grenade attacks were still happening and small arms fire was still occurring. Our FOB was Uday or Qusay Hussein's former hunting getaway and there were three houses: one big one that was the lodge and two other houses that sat up on this dyke. They had drained the pond and we stayed in the houses that were up on the dyke. The interpreters had one and we had one. All the doors and windows were ripped out of this thing so it was basically a shell of a house. One morning about 0500 we look out the window on the Samarra bypass and see a truck coming down the road - and the thing just explodes. The day before an Iraqi Police patrol was out there and they had set up a checkpoint. I don't know if they had put an IED in the ground or what but I do know that this truck exploded. We were sitting there watching and our Iraqi quick reaction force (QRF) leaves the FOB, goes up there, takes the wounded, drives them into Samarra to the hospital and drops them off. There were times when we couldn't get the QRF to do anything and then there were times, on their own, when they just went and did stuff. What made them do that? I didn't understand why that situation was different from others that had occurred.

JM: Do you understand it better now?

RD: I still don't. We didn't have a lot of injured. We had a grenade attack. A company commander and his personal security detachment were driving around from checkpoint to checkpoint and got hit by a grenade. One of them got peppered and some windows got blown out of the truck but it didn't do anything to soften their resolve. It didn't scare them away. Another thing that was happening was that, even while we were conducting these missions, the companies would still go on leave. Every week a company was rotating to go on leave. Well, they didn't want us to take them to Tikrit to the bus station; they wanted to leave the FOB in civilian clothes. But when they did that, people were sitting there watching them and you would always have somebody not come back from leave and turn up dead. The family would come down to the FOB and want to talk to the battalion commander. How do you deal with that situation? They don't want an armed escort to the bus station, but when they leave the FOB they get killed. I don't know. I assume it's only gotten worse.

JM: You were telling us before we started the interview that you had several different Iraqi battalion commanders. Can you expand on that?

RD: Our first battalion commander went through the whole training phase with us, deployed to Samarra with us, and then a couple nights before Baton Rouge he left with the intelligence officer (S2). They deserted.

BR: So it wasn't just the soldiers who left. It was the leadership too?

RD: Some of them, yes.

JM: Was this in response to the VBIED attack?

RD: I don't know.

JM: It was around that same time?

RD: It was.

BR: What was his background?

RD: He was a Sunni from Mosul and I think he was a Special Forces officer. He told us he was guarding the airport during the initial invasion. I don't know if he was at the airport when 3<sup>rd</sup> ID showed up, but that's what he told us. We then got another battalion commander after that and he stayed with us through Baton Rouge and while we were doing all the missions. He did a pretty good job. We left with the second one in charge.

BR: What was his background?

RD: I don't know. He was a very firm individual. He would take your counsel but he would do as he saw fit. We thought he was a very strong battalion commander; we were impressed with him. Unfortunately he got killed coming home from leave, and we were told this by our replacements. I don't know anything about the third battalion commander. The unit that replaced us told us a story about the second battalion commander. After Baton Rouge, we were all caught in the same routine more or less. We would leave the FOB at the same time every morning and drive to the checkpoint. We probably had to drive 15 kilometers. We had to get on MSR Tampa and drive north to the northern part of the bypass. We'd then get on an alternate supply route (ASR) to go across the Tigris River into Samarra. We'd go through a small village, go across the dyke, past Patrol Base Razor and into Samarra. We'd take a left, go past the school and the old casino and go up to M2, the checkpoint. Well, we'd do the same thing every day and night; and over the course of time, insurgents or whoever decided they were going to hit them at the first village before they crossed the Tigris River. They got hit with a complex ambush, IED, small arms fire, and the Iraqi battalion commander got pissed off with that and he went back in and cordoned the whole village to find out who did it. I believe it had killed several Iraqis. Like I said, we weren't there at the time and this is through email that we learned about this. He had a strong command presence.

BR: He was the one who was accidentally killed?

RD: Yes.

JM: Did you ever have any instances where you knew or suspected that your unit had been infiltrated by bad guys or anything like that?

RD: No. There was a level of trust there. I could sleep well at night when we were at the FOB. We didn't trust the workers coming onto the FOB, though. We were just waiting for one of the water trucks that came onto the FOB every day to blow up at the ECP. That was our biggest concern.

JM: How do you account for that trust level? Did you just get lucky? Were there some strategies you employed?

RD: There was a platoon from 2-108 Infantry, which is a New York National Guard battalion, and these guys were good. Their battalion fell up under 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 1<sup>st</sup> ID and they were there for force protection on FOB 7. They were there and had guys down at the ECP. They had guys who were manning positions around the FOB with the Iraqis and the Iraqis were also pulling force protection. There was about a week where 2-108 left and it was just the Iraqis. We were still doing missions during this time period so you have two advisors who are gone, one at Landstuhl getting operated on, so we were down to seven advisors. We would just rotate between us just driving around. Our FOB was right across the street from Brassfield-Mora but they're not adjacent to one another. From one of the guard towers at Brassfield-Mora, you could see the southern boundary of FOB 7. Those guys could come out and help us if need be. They were always shooting mortars from the west side of our FOB somewhere. A white truck would pull up and just shoot a couple rounds into Brassfield-Mora. We would try to go out and talk to the village elder and ask what was going on. He kept saying that this truck just showed up and starting shooting and that he had no control over it. We would run some patrols around the outside of the FOB. They would shoot mortars, especially at night. The Iraqis would shoot back and just fire everywhere out of the FOB; they didn't know what they were shooting at. Some said they were shooting at the truck; some nights there were dogs walking around and they claimed Ali Baba was out there or whatever. We always had to run up there and get them to stop. The biggest concern was whether the Iraqis were inspecting close enough down at the ECP.

BR: What you described concerning the focus at the fire team and squad level, how would you describe how well those small unit leaders were able to maintain the standard on what you trained them to do? It's probably a lot different than what we would expect from our NCOs.

RD: It's a lot lower than what we expect from our NCOs.

BR: Did they just occupy the position?

RD: Well, they didn't go up and do range cards or identify the left and right limits.

BR: Or tell the soldiers to stop shooting. So basically they just occupied the position?

RD: They did. They were up there and some of them would go to sleep. Sometimes you'd go to a guard tower and nobody was in it. It was kind of haphazard. We did our best.

BR: Oh no. It's not a reflection on you. It's just, what's the reasonable standard to get to in the time you had with the folks you had and how close did they get to it?

RD: When you're living in the moment it's hard to tell. This would be another cultural difference: where you expect an American unit to be versus where you think an Iraqi unit should be. I never read T.E. Lawrence or *The Arab Mind*, I'm from Georgia, and you have your own perceptions of how you think things should be. Well, things aren't going to be that way. You're dealing with a person whose mindset is completely different from yours. They did well, though. I would sit on my bunk and look out of our shell of a house. I would look at these fuel convoys coming from somewhere up in Turkey, I don't know. They were so long and they were coming at night. You could hear them coming before they get there. There were like 70 trucks escorted by just a few Humvees and you're thinking, "If they can't stop this, we're going to win this thing one way or another." Our battalion did relatively well.

BR: Looking back on it, are there things you wished you'd known then that you didn't know? If you had to do it all over, what are some things you might do differently?

RD: I think we did the best we could under the circumstances. You wish you had interpreters from the get go so you didn't have to lean on the Iraqi Army and the cadre. Maybe when the VBIED hit we should have gone up and somehow settled them down so we didn't have that mass exodus that occurred, but our AST was spread out all over the place. I'm in Tikrit. The main body was just coming in and the battalion was in three different locations. I guess we could have pulled them together and talked to them.

BR: Like you mentioned earlier, just like your battalion gets reduced in strength so does your advisor team due to other things – administrative, injuries.

RD: We had two guys get Purple Hearts, but only one had to get evacuated out of the country.

BR: The other way to think about it is, is there anything you knew that turned out not to be so? Were there expectations or beliefs that were put aside after you got there and saw everything in action?

RD: I went in with an open mind because I didn't know what to expect. I'm an armor officer. All my experiences up to that point had been with platoons and companies and I was surrounded by Americans. We went out as this 10-man AST and we were doing things we didn't think we'd ever do. We were much better off than the people who came in and replaced us, though. These Reserve personnel who were coming in had the old PVS5 night vision equipment. They only had one set and we couldn't leave them our NODs.

BR: But the Iraqis didn't have any of that?

RD: They were starting to get NODs. I can't remember if we had 25 or 30 sets. They were getting equipment: knee pads, arm pads; they all had weapons and flak vests. Anyway, we just

went into it with a very open mind. You just wish when you get into a situation like that that the structure is established, but it's not.

BR: Then it's a matter of how you adjust.

RD: Yeah. You have to do what you have to do to accomplish the mission. That's what we did.

JM: During your tenure there, MNSTC-I went from being run by Major General Eaton to being run by Lieutenant General Petraeus. Did you notice any tangible differences at your level between the two guys and their policies, their intent?

RD: A guy named Lieutenant Colonel Rodney Symons came in as the brigade AST, and prior to him coming in we had two Reserve lieutenant colonels. The first one got relieved and was sent to Kuwait. The second one who came in was pulled from division to be the brigade AST and he did a pretty good job. When Lieutenant Colonel Symons came in, though, that's when I saw a noticeable difference. That's when we started getting equipment. That's when we started getting answers to questions we had. We weren't in this void of information anymore. He was very proactive.

JM: When was this?

RD: It was at the end of July. This was later on.

BR: It takes a while for those things to get set up. The only thing that happens without thinking is what's on a bumper sticker.

RD: Exactly. It may have been coincidence too, but he seemed to be very proactive in the things we were doing.

JM: You did a lot of teaching, coaching and mentoring. Is there anything you yourself learned that you could pass on? Are you a different officer today because of your experiences? Are there things you'll take with you during the continued course of your professional development?

RD: I know that information flow was very important one way or another. Our group dynamic in our AST probably wasn't the best. There was a philosophical approach laid out by our OIC and he followed that to a "t" - and I disagreed with it. First of all, he didn't lay it out for us. He wasn't dealing with privates; he was dealing with people who'd been around the Army a long time. Whether you disagree or agree with it, at least tell us. I know we were in a time-constrained environment, but I still think if you talk to people and give them enough information they can accept things a lot better. I probably learned more from that group of advisors than I did from the actual mission. All in all it was a good mission that we did. I'm glad it's getting standardized now. These guys need to go down with the tools to operate with in that environment. I think we did the best we could. We did the training we deemed necessary, we just had a compressed timeline.

BR: That was probably the hardest challenge of all.

RD: In fact, the guys who took over the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion who were stood up by the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry and 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Divisions – I don't know how they were trained to do it. I don't know if they got a letter and then a couple weeks later they were in country doing this thing or what. At the time it may have seemed like a pretty good idea, but as the insurgency took hold it was a different thing you were operating up under.

JM: You said you and your OIC had different philosophical approaches. Would you be willing to explain what his was and what yours would have been if you had been in charge?

RD: I would have more or less let the battalion train themselves. But on the other hand, you look at it and you would see that they just couldn't do it.

BR: Particularly in the short term.

RD: Exactly. But I'm looking through colored lenses here because I'm an American. You get into a cultural difference that way. Maybe my OIC was a lot smarter than I am and he saw that and knew we needed to take over. But he never spelled it out to us, though. He never confided in our group to tell us, to let us know what his commander's intent was.

BR: The other team that went from Hohenfels was from the same OC group, correct? Was your team that way too or was it a hodgepodge of folks?

RD: We were all from the same group. On an OC team, you cover down on a battalion and we were from the Grizzly OC team. Major Lechner was the deputy OC for the team. He was the 02 so he covered down on the executive officer (XO) and the logistics portion of it. Captain Adler was the 08 on the team and they cover down on the task force logistics (S4) and personnel (S1). I was the Grizzly 13 so I was the infantry company OC and I had two of my NCOs who went with me on the AST. There was a scout platoon OC who went and a couple other company OCs who went. We were all from the same OC team.

BR: Were you all volunteers?

RD: Yes. There were more people who volunteered for the mission than could go. When this initially came up, the ops group had to fill a requirement and there were two different approaches that could have been followed. You could take volunteers from across the ops group, or you could keep it confined to two different teams because these guys have worked together and they know each other – and that's what they decided on. Through casual conversation we knew some of the guys from the Timberwolf team: Major Fedak, Major Chris Clay and Major Mike Sullivan. We didn't really interact with them until we got down on the ground for the deployment, though.

JM: Are there any other aspects about this experience that we didn't touch on that you'd like to talk about?

RD: During this whole experience, I tried to stay with the facts as I saw them on the ground. I'm sure they would differ depending on who you talk to, but that's at least how I saw it. Would I

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want to go back and do it again? No. I know I'm going back downrange but I want to be with a unit. I don't want to be a MTT or SPTT guy.

BR: Just because it's hard, it doesn't fit the box? You've done it; it's someone else's turn?

RD: Any deployment is hard. But I figured out that if I had wanted to operate as a small team, I would have gone Special Forces. That's just not my mindset. There are some guys who are able to operate in that environment.

BR: That's not an unusual reaction, by the way.

RD: When we were down there, we'd go out with the Iraqi Army with only one Humvee and two Americans in it and the rest were all Iraqis. Not every team operated that way, but we did. By doing that, you're pretty isolated. Personally I don't think that's the way to operate and I had a disagreement with that. That was another philosophical difference I had with the OIC.

BR: It's a balance and tension between force protection and being able to share and develop rapport.

RD: Exactly.

BR: Results wise over the time you were there, other than the VBIED, did it seem to work in that environment at that time?

RD: It did, but again I don't know if it was just luck or what. Luck is definitely part of it. To be honest with you, the one time Captain Adler and I got hit the hardest we were with an American convoy down in Salman Pak doing recons to Numaniyah. Who knows? We were in a fight for about an hour and a half down there, and this was before we even went to Samarra. We were in an area somehow that had a complete comms blackout except for the Thuraya satellite phone. We had all the Blue Force Tracker you could want but it didn't work. All in all, I look back on it as a very good experience. It's not like riding around on your tank, in a Bradley or a Stryker vehicle. There were things, though, that would make you want to pull your hair out. Some things you can't figure out, some things you're in awe of.

BR: You guys were thrown in cold in terms of training, at least compared to what guys are getting now. Transition in country is now a little smoother, a little longer.

RD: It is. In fact, before I left Hohenfels we sent another group to do the SPTT mission. They went through a month's train up of very standardized training, so what we came up with and what they're going through now is a lot different.



END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Jennifer Vedder, 10 October 2006