



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 CPT Joseph Linn



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## **Abstract**

In April 2003, the 3rd Infantry Division's 2nd Brigade Combat Team (BCT) reached the approaches of Baghdad, Iraq, after a record-breaking march from the Kuwaiti border. To test the strength of Iraqi defenses in the capital, 2nd BCT conducted an armored reconnaissance in force into the city on 5 April. An intense firefight ensued which pitted American armor against Iraqi soldiers, paramilitary units and suicide attackers. The armored column completed its mission and withdrew from the city. The presence of American tanks in Baghdad, however, was denied by the Iraqi regime and the press. On 7 April, then, the entire 2nd BCT returned to the streets of Baghdad and secured key government facilities and strongpoints along the route into the capital. Despite strong resistance, the BCT held its positions, conducted resupply and remained overnight - an action that demonstrated the ability of US armor to move anywhere in the city and helped trigger the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime. In the process, the 2nd BCT - commanded by Colonel David Perkins - also demonstrated the ability of armored forces to operate in an urban environment and generated a series of changes in training and doctrine that reflected its experiences. The following interview with Captain Joseph Linn - at the time the personnel officer (S1) for Task Force 1-64 Armor - was one of many conducted at Fort Knox by the Armor Branch historian, the purpose being to help comprehend what happened in the streets of Baghdad, capture participants' insights, and ensure that the lessons learned are available to the doctrine writer, the trainer and the combat developer.

# Interview with CPT Joseph Linn

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RC: My name is Dr. Robert Cameron (RC) and today I have the honor of speaking with Captain Joe Linn (JL), the personnel officer (S1) for Task Force 1-64 Armor during the thunder runs conducted into Baghdad in April 2003. Can you tell me a little bit about your planning role in the thunder runs?

JL: Sure. I was the S1 so I was responsible for personnel strength and medical evacuation (MEDEVAC). Those were the two primary things I was concerned with. I had to report personnel strength to the commander as well as figuring out how we were going to conduct MEDEVAC procedures. The thunder runs evolved. When we first started talking about them, they started in early April when we just sent two tank companies south to see what was down there. We got into a little bit of a fight and we realized that this was going to be bigger than what we thought. When we did the second one, we took quite a few vehicles with us. We took support, mechanics and medics, and that was sort of a turkey shoot. We went down there and what was left of the Medina Division was down there. There wasn't much left of them because the Air Force had decimated them pretty quickly. The ones that were there who wanted to fight were all facing the wrong direction because they thought we were coming from the south but we had doubled back and come from the north from the intersection of Highways 1 and 8. That second one, although a much larger operation, was really a movement to destroy vehicles and return back to a task force assembly area. When we received the order to do what I would consider the first real thunder run into Baghdad, a lot of us looked at each other a little confused because we hadn't really conducted urban operations with armored vehicles before. None of us had really done it; we'd only just talked about it. I remember Lieutenant Colonel Eric Schwartz first said, "We want to see digital imagery." That was a big help to all of us, having that digital imagery. From an S1 perspective, we had this many units going with this many people and I just had to report back to higher. From a MEDEVAC standpoint, though, we knew we were going to have some huge concerns because we knew we were going into the lion's den and we weren't sure what to bring from a medical standpoint, and even once we brought them where we would evac to. The general mission concept was to go from that task force assembly area at the intersection of Highways 1 and 8, up Highway 8 and all the way into where 1st Brigade had occupied the airport. It was a recon by fire. We wanted to see what was there and what we might be up against if we brought a larger force. We needed to decide where we were going to MEDEVAC from. Were we going to MEDEVAC back down to our area? Were we just going to run through and evac at the airport? The general consensus was that we wouldn't stop and we wouldn't go back but we'd go forward only and bring our wounded and/or KIAs to the airport, which is exactly what we did. I don't want to say it worked pretty well, because while that whole operation went well considering what we were up against, we had no idea what we were going into. One of the things we learned very quickly was that it didn't matter what our vehicles had on them. For instance, our medical vehicles had the standard Geneva Conventions cross on them. That made no difference to the Iraqi enemy, though. They would actually pick on those vehicles as much if not more than the tanks. They learned quickly too. What they learned was that a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) won't do much to the front of a tank but they might be able to hit the rear of the tank, which they did that day. They also figured out that

they could hit personnel carriers or other lighter-skinned vehicles easily from a bridge. We took a lot of 113s with us and brigade took a 577. The logistics officer (S4) and I kicked around the idea of bringing our 577 with us but we just said, "That's not going to work." We had to be able to relay communications. We had our map and antenna up at our tactical assembly area so we were able to talk to the airport. We knew if we moved that vehicle, the antenna would have to come down and we wouldn't be able to talk anymore so there went our nine line capability pretty quickly. If we couldn't call in a nine line, there were going to be real problems. We agreed that the 577 was not the optimal vehicle to bring on the thunder run and was not something we wanted to do. When the thunder run commenced on the 5th - and of course we did take quite a few casualties, to include Sergeant First Class Stevon Booker who was KIA - everything was evacuated at the airport. I'm sure a lot of the folks there remember it being very chaotic. Myself and Captain Anderson Puckett, the S4, called in most of those MEDEVACs and we thought they went pretty well considering the circumstances. The soldiers who executed them did so as well as they could considering the circumstances. So when we found out we were going to go back in on the 7th, we decided that the medic vehicles may not be the best conventional wisdom wise considering what we were getting ourselves into. We knew this one wasn't going to be a recon by fire. We knew that the next objective was to go into the city and have a little campout in there. We didn't know how long we were going to stay but we knew it was going to be for a certain period of time to make a statement to the Iraqi government. The S4 and I agreed that the vehicles we had been provided were not adequate for that kind of mission, neither the soft-skinned Humvee, the 577 or the 1025 - which we had to have a .50 cal mounted on. So we decided to take the two best medic tracks we had and outfit them as combat vehicles. We had one that was basically a logistics command and control vehicle and one that was essentially an evacuation vehicle. I was the track commander, there was a medic driver, and we had the physician assistant, the doc and the medical platoon leader on it. We basically christened that as an evac vehicle. We didn't want to call it an ambulance for obvious reasons with the Geneva Conventions and all that. We knew we were going to fight. There were no two ways about it. The Iraqis were getting very slick. They were putting down mines and they were adapting their tactics and techniques against us. They were waiting for the tanks to go forward and trying to shoot us in the back. They were lying down pretending to be casualties and then they'd get up and try and shoot you in the back. We saw a lot of that. We knew it was going to be a fight all the way into the city so that was a big adjustment for us - going away from the very conventional ambulance structure and going to the idea that every 113 that didn't have a very specific mission was an ambulance or an evac vehicle. I have to tell you that it worked really well. I don't know what international laws we violated but I know we kept our guys alive. We laid down suppressive fire from those vehicles at a pretty high rate and were fighting against a pretty dug in and dedicated enemy who were using RPGs and small arms against us at a pretty high rate. This was especially true when we got into the Green Zone and the Saber Arches. They were very well dug in and did not want to leave. We weren't fighting the Republican Guard anymore. We were fighting more of a political Ba'athist type of enemy who were running around in black pajamas. We saw a lot of that. They were coming at us in trucks and various other vehicles. We were able to not necessarily evac people but we were able to clean up. We had one guy who was hit by a sniper in the arm and we were able to take the doc to him and feel relatively safe about it. We were taking a lot of indirect fire from 82 millimeter mortars and it gave us a certain degree of freedom of movement and security - knowing we were in armored vehicles - and that we could move our medics and docs around without getting too badly shot up. I would say that's exactly what we learned. The idea of ambulances

in an urban environment has to be of something other than a conventional ambulance. It can't be a front line ambulance (FLA) or a 113. Well, it could be, but it has to be something you can effectively fight from - otherwise you're going to get a lot of people killed.

RC: Was anybody on the staff familiar with some of the experiences of the Russians in Grozny and the problems they had in keeping their logistics and medical vehicles safe?

JL: Yes. We talked a little bit about Grozny and, in hindsight, I wish we had studied that a little more. I think we were lucky that the enemy was extremely disorganized and very poorly trained in using their weapons. As were we, they were terrified of the environment they were in. But we were very well trained and were able to put down suppressive fire very well against them. If I could stress one reason as to why the thunder runs worked, it would be because of the amount of suppressive fire we were able to inflict on the enemy and cause absolute chaos to any kind of command and control that they had. It's that simple. We had very accurate suppressive fires from every vehicle in the convoy, which made it possible for us to execute that mission without taking tremendous casualties and losing our own command and control. I don't know enough about Grozny. I wish I did. I know it was a disaster and that the Russians went in and were chewed to pieces in an armored column similar to ours. I don't know what their command and control capability was, but I do know that our command and control capability and suppressive fire combined saved us. It kept us alive, kept us together, made it a successful mission and we were able to achieve our objectives.

RC: Where were you located during the thunder runs?

JL: On the 5th, which was the one that was the recon, the S4, the chaplain and I decided to stay at the 577 so we had the ability to call MEDEVAC. We didn't like that. It wasn't what we wanted to do but we agreed that that would be the logical thing to do because, basically, we were it. There wasn't anybody else who could effectively relay nine lines to brigade or division if we left. At that point it was very last minute and we were still following the conventional wisdom of, "This vehicle goes, it has this purpose and it does this." On the 3rd I went in my 1025 Humvee that had a .50 cal mounted on it, which I'd sort of acquired throughout the whole process. Looking back, that nearly got me killed a couple times on that particular run. Not so much from the enemy but more from debris. I had a 152 round go off right behind my vehicle, which certainly could have killed me or my driver. That gave me the ability to move with the convoy and then call on the radio as I needed to because I did have a radio, which was very helpful. On the 7th, when we did the big thunder run into the city to secure what is now the Green Zone, that's when the S4 and I had gotten together and said, "We cannot stay here. This is not going to work effectively, especially if we're going in to stay." At that point, we would have been in a very bad radio situation. At least on the way to the airport the ground was flat and we could communicate effectively, but now we were talking about going into a city where buildings would interfere with the radio and it was a further distance. So we agreed on building our combat medic tracks, so to speak, on the 6th. We spent the whole day configuring these tracks to fight. We put radios and weapons on them, loaded them the right way and put sandbags around the top of them. That's where I was on the 7th.

RC: To back up a little bit, when the battalion left and first invaded Iraq, were you over strength at all?

JL: Yes. We were over strength in personnel. We picked up a whole bunch of National Guard fillers and had a bunch of guys from Fort Irwin, California, the National Training Center (NTC). They were from the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. We literally picked them up that night before we crossed. We were well over strength. We were probably about 110 percent or 125 percent. I was up all night redoing and doing numbers and changing everything because I had to adjust all of these numbers for brigade. It was a pretty interesting experience having all these people all of a sudden. We were hauling guys in trucks and putting them anywhere we could.

RC: That was my next question. Where did you put all these new guys?

JL: That made for a very interesting load plan. Obviously the load plan was already set. The Headquarters and Headquarters Company (HHC) had a good amount of trucks and we tried to use as many of them as we could. Unfortunately, the minute we crossed the border we lost a lot of vehicles. The engineers definitely suffered the most. I'm sure if you interview Dave Hibner he'll tell you he just had a nightmare of problems with all those vehicles. Our cooks' trucks were breaking down and we were breaking trailers. To be honest with you, once we crossed the border and were going, I don't know where a lot of those guys went. We were shoving them wherever we could put them, in Bradleys or whatever. We couldn't really put them in tanks. We had platoon elements going two different ways. We had the heavy metal going up one side of the desert, rock and roll going the other side, and basically all those guys went with the rock and roll element. We stuck them wherever we could.

RC: Were there any personnel shortfalls among the units and crews that participated in the thunder runs? If there were, how were they addressed?

JL: We were never short personnel. That was never a problem. As an S1, that was the first time I was ever able to say, "We're at 100 percent. The crews are good." The first sergeants and the company commanders were able to pick and choose who they wanted for loaders, drivers and gunners. Whatever they wanted they had. That was good because they had enough other things to worry about.

RC: During the second thunder run on 7 April, you went forward. Were you personally involved in combat?

JL: Absolutely.

RC: Was that a standard function for a staff officer?

JL: No, not at all. Myself, the S4, the chaplain and the medical platoon leader knew, based on our experience on the 5th, that we'd be successful through suppressive fire. We knew the enemy was just going to keep coming at us over and over again. We knew they weren't just going to go after the tanks. We got slick ourselves when we started dispersing tanks throughout the column but still there are so many 113s and only so many tanks, and tanks can only engage and destroy so many targets at once. There were also a lot of dismounts. We had a .50 cal mounted on my vehicle. I know I changed boxes at least three or four times from the time we left the tactical assembly area and made it into what is now the Green Zone. I think when all was said and done, I had gone through 500 to 800 rounds of .50 cal in my vehicle alone. That

doesn't include the small arms from the guys in the back who were dismounting. I was also engaging targets with my nine millimeter at close range.

RC: What's your recommendation to staff officers?

JL: If you're a staff officer, you'd better know how to fight. You'd better know your weapons and you'd better know what you're doing. If you wear armor on your collar, you're a warrior and you'd better know what you're doing. That's just my personal philosophy on it. I was going to support the task force any way I could and it wasn't just sitting there reporting personnel strength, because that's not good enough.

RC: What awards did the task force or individual soldiers receive for their parts in the thunder runs?

JL: Individual awards were a big thing for me. I spent hours and hours going over awards, fixing awards, changing awards, getting the write-ups and doing some myself. There were a lot of Bronze Stars written, a lot of Army Commendation Medals with Valor and some Bronze Stars with Valor devices as well. Command Sergeant Major William Barnello and Lieutenant Colonel Schwartz did a good job of telling the company commanders, "Look, we're talking about Bronze Stars here. We're not talking about NTC. This is the real deal. Make sure you give these guys the awards they really deserve but also that we're not setting a precedent where we're inflating our mission and what we did here." We did send out a fair number of Bronze Stars. I think all the company commanders received Silver Stars. As far as unit awards, I know there were some awarded but I can't remember what they are off the top of my head. We got whatever campaign awards that were given out to the battalions that served there.

RC: Are there any other comments or insights you'd like to make?

JL: Over the last four years I've watched the news and I'm still in the Reserve so I pay attention to what's going on, and it's clear to me that our logistics elements are not just logistics elements. When I wrote my after-action review, I stressed that every soldier needs to know how to use their weapon very well. Going to the range twice a year isn't enough. Beyond that, our soldiers need to know how to fight off their vehicles and feel comfortable fighting from their vehicles. Our vehicles need to be better armored - and I know they're getting better now - but we're going to continue to fight in the city so let's make sure we're building vehicles that are built to fight in the city and are made to withstand an RPG or small arms fire. The other thing is that we really need to make sure that we know what we're doing with our MEDEVAC and that we're really paying attention to that. We need to train and retrain on how to do it right. You can train soldiers all day how to fight, but if they don't know how to evac and they're not versed in that, the minute their buddy gets shot they're going to freak out and they're not going to know what to do. They will forget all about the mission and everything that's around them. But if they know what to do when their buddy gets shot, everything from combat lifesaver all the way to level IV - "I know I need to get my buddy to this point" - then the rest takes over, and that needs to be a fluid operation. I would say that if we do MEDEVAC operations well in the future, we will be successful in urban combat.



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END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Jennifer Vedder

