



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 CSM (Ret.) William Barnello Jr.



Combat Studies Institute
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

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 Command Sergeant Major (Ret.) William Barnello Jr. - at the time the command sergeant major 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 CSM (Ret.) William Barnello Jr.

21 April 2007



RC: My name is Dr. Robert Cameron (RC) and today I have the honor of speaking with Command Sergeant Major (Ret.) William Barnello Jr. (WB). He was the command sergeant major for Task Force 1-64 Armor during the thunder runs in April 2003. What was your responsibility during the thunder runs?

WB: I think the responsibility of the task force command sergeant major during combat operations is one that was never really well defined. You kind of have to find that on your own. You have a hard time figuring out where it is you're supposed to be. We don't doctrinally tell the command sergeant major of a task force where to position himself or where his responsibilities lie during the operation. As a first sergeant, it's pretty well defined. You're responsible for the logistics, administrative functions, rearming and resupplying of the company team. At the task force level, the sergeant major really isn't responsible for those details. You just kind of oversee it. The way I saw myself was as another set of eyes and ears, a sensory node for the commander and inasmuch I tried to position myself where I could best fill that role. During the thunder runs I put myself in the armored personnel carrier (APC) of the lead company team first sergeant's vehicle. I was in there with him. In the first thunder run that was with Alpha Company - the Wild Bunch - and First Sergeant Hayes. I didn't have an armored vehicle to ride in. I had a Humvee, and when we went heavy that vehicle wasn't really going to do me any justice on a combat maneuver like that. I packed a little ditty bag and threw some stuff in there that I thought I'd need. I grabbed as much ammunition as I could bring with me, my M16, and jumped in the vehicle with the first sergeant that morning before we started out.

RC: Did you play any role in the planning of the thunder runs?

WB: Again, it was almost the same mentality with the planning process. I had planning responsibilities along with the task force logistics officer (S4). We looked at some of the logistical issues like rearming and resupply and where the medics were going to be, but it was more of an advisory role. I would watch the staff as they formulated the plan and use all my experience from all the years I had been doing armored maneuver to see if anyone was forgetting anything, missing something or doing something just a little bit odd. Nine times out of 10, I would impart my advice to that staff officer or that staff NCO who was planning that particular phase of the operation. I might whisper in their ear or bring them off to the side and say something to them. "Are we forgetting about the scouts? Are we forgetting that we have an emergency standby refueler at the combat trains command post (CTCP). We may not have to move assets from the field trains just yet." That kind of thing. As a special staff NCO to the commander, I just floated around during the planning process and would pull him off to the side sometimes or talk to the task force executive officer (XO) and say, "I think we're moving in the right direction." Or, "Has anybody thought about this?" Most of the time, the Desert Rogue staff was a really tight group. Everybody felt their self worth and it was really something to watch for me as we formed that team, as we all started to become a group of brothers that listened to each other. Nobody was disregarded. Everybody seemed to be almost handpicked

for their positions and they rose to the occasion. For example, the folks who worked in the intelligence section (S2) did a good job and when they spoke everybody listened because they had really important things to say. We knew that Captain Farrell and his team in the S2 shop really dug deep, got the right information for us, went beyond what the brigade S2 was giving us and even went further than that. They started making connections and doing their own analysis. Their staff work and their analysis was really important to the task force. The commander made everybody feel like their opinion counted. Lieutenant Colonel Eric Schwartz was just really good at bringing out the best in people and he had a really calm demeanor. Likewise that transitioned to me too. When I did take the time to say something, everybody knew it must be important. I didn't always have a lot to say during the planning process, but when I did people would listen to what I had to say. In that, everybody gained their power base in the task force from the commander and everybody was given the leeway to have something to say and feel the self worth or the freedom to express their opinion. On the off chance that somebody had something to say that was a little bit out there, they still wargamed that. Even if something sounded farfetched at the time, we were conducting some pretty farfetched operations. Going up to the brigade tactical operations center (TOC) and getting told that the next day we were going to attack into Baghdad, it was like, "What?" That's been replayed a lot but that's pretty much how it happened. When Lieutenant Colonel Schwartz and the XO came back from that encounter at the brigade TOC, it was like, "Gather round boys. I've got something to tell you guys. No shit, we're going to attack into Baghdad tomorrow." Everybody was like, "You're kidding!" "No, I'm not." It was a very accelerated, condensed planning process but the task force was ready for that. We were well positioned. Maintenance wise we were in pretty good shape as well. I think Colonel David Perkins - Spartan 6 - picked us for a reason. It wasn't happenstance that he picked the Desert Rogues to be the first armored task force to attack into Baghdad. Planning was a continual process, something we were always doing. Trying to put together that piece of it to get ready to go into Baghdad was a pretty condensed and pretty intense phase of the operation. It was definitely something for me to stand back and watch unfold. It was neat to look around and watch everybody just do their job.

RC: Was the camaraderie and esprit de corps that you reference in the staff something that emerged before you crossed the berm into Iraq?

WB: I was a member of that team and was brought there through the Army system of reassignment, just like everybody else. Before we crossed the berm from Camp New York and went into the desert to get prepped to move, there was this huge Army around us moving, 101st Airborne vehicles and units I'd never seen before. Previously when we were at Camp Pennsylvania we were out in the desert by ourselves and the team was coming together. I watched the camaraderie and esprit de corps develop and it was something special. I've learned from my years in other units and the old adage in the Army about, "The best unit you've ever been in is the one you just left and the worst unit you've ever been in is the one you're in right now." There are special things about some units and I can think back to some units I've been in before and ask what it was that made them so special. Was it the place? No. Was it the equipment? No. Was it the motto of the unit? It wasn't even so much the leaders. It was the people who made up that organization. There was something very special about this group of men who formed the Desert Rogue task force. Not only the organic units but the units we got in that made us a task force. Charlie Company, 3-15 Infantry. They just fit in so easily. We hated to lose our brothers in Bravo Company to 1-15 as part of 3rd Brigade, but we got a great infantry

company team in return. When the Dogs - Delta Company from the 10th Engineers - came to join us, it just all came together so great. I went around to each company while we were out there in the desert. I didn't mean to distract from their preparations but I thought it important to sit all the NCOs down. I got them all in a little huddle in the desert and almost tailored the conversation to each one of them individually and let them know how important they were going to be in the next couple of days, weeks and months - not knowing how long this was going to last. Being a veteran of Desert Shield/Desert Storm, it didn't last that long. But they needed to know that there were going to be heroes amongst them. In my mind, they were already heroes. There were men in that formation. You couldn't pick them out and say, "Yeah, that guy is going to be a hero someday." Or, "This guy is going to be a burden on the unit." It doesn't work that way. People rise to an occasion. More importantly, I wanted to let them know how special they were and the unit they were in was something they were going to talk about for the rest of their lives. They didn't realize it and I didn't realize it in Desert Storm, but I realize it today. Maybe it's something that comes with age or something that comes with experience, but I could feel it. It was something Lieutenant Colonel Schwartz and I talked about all the time. There was something very special about that unit. Something that would make the hair on the back of your neck stand up a little bit and make your skin tingle when you were around these guys. You watched them play, and they played hard and they didn't bitch very much, but when they did you knew it was healthy for them to do that. When things went wrong, you felt like your gut was being ripped out of you because you felt bad for them. You didn't want to let them down - them being the soldiers of that task force. They gave their all to that unit. No matter how hard it got, when you told them to do it, they did it and they did it again and again and again. I wanted to let them know that they needed to take a few minutes to reflect or just look around them. I wanted them to remember the faces, the leaders in front of them, the guys on their left and right, their peers and their subordinates. When their subordinates looked at them during the next few days of combat, they needed to see somebody who had an answer and something to say to them, not a thousand-meter stare and fear. That wasn't going to help. They were their soldiers' heroes already. When they spoke, their soldiers stopped talking. It was imminent. It was in the air. We were going to cross the border into Iraq, attack a foreign army and nobody knew what to expect, especially those young PFCs and young specialists. Everybody was excited and everybody was all pumped up and acting like they were 12 feet tall and bulletproof but they were scared. When they were scared and they didn't know what to do, they needed to look into a young sergeant's eyes - who was just as scared as they were - but not see fear. How do you get that across to somebody? You need to let them know how special they are. You need to let them know that the unit they're in and the circumstances they find themselves in are a very special thing. Not a lot of people get to experience that. If you embrace it, if you can see it, you can leverage it and make it into something. That's what made this unit so great. It was the esprit de corps and the soldiers who made up the task force. I can't go a day - and I've been retired for some years now - without thinking about a lot of them, some of them every day. It's just because they're part of me and always will be. It's an intangible in combat that you can't train for. It won't exist in any training environment that you ever try to recreate because it's just not there. The fear of donning your protective mask because there are actual chemicals in the air can't be replicated in training. You've never put your protective mask on so fast in your life as in a combat situation when that alarm goes off. You've been trained to know that when that alarm goes off, there's something in the air. If you don't get your mask on and clear it properly, you're going to die. In training you're not going to die. You may get a little CS and it might make you uncomfortable, but

you're not going to die. That existed in this task force. They were intangibles that you can't describe but they were there. It's leadership, brotherhood and camaraderie. It's not so much a fear of danger to yourself, of not wanting to get injured or die yourself; more of not wanting to let your brothers down. You don't want to drop your guard and have one of your brothers get hurt or killed because you didn't do your job. That's that foxhole mentality of watching your sector and getting each other's backs. "I won't let you down if you don't let me down." You have to really trust that person who's sharing that foxhole with you. You can multiply and compound that as many times as you want to. Whether it's inside of a tank turret, a crew member who doesn't want to let a fellow crew member down, or a tank crew that doesn't want to let another wing tank down, or a tank platoon who doesn't want to let the platoon on their left down. You can just keep moving that. How far does it go? Where does it stop? It didn't stop in the Desert Rogues until it got to the top. Even those young privates understood how far that went and how much it really meant to us. We were the lead task force in the brigade combat team that was attacking into Baghdad and we weren't going to let anybody down. It may get to the level where it's obscured and the members of the task force don't really understand what the mission of the brigade is inside the division, inside the corps, but it's there. We knew how important it was that we did our job. It was the esprit de corps, camaraderie and the brotherhood in that unit that got us there, and we had fantastic equipment. We came to accept that we had the best equipment in the world and that it would give us a supreme advantage over the enemy, but even that will only take you so far. If you don't know how to leverage the human spirit - the American fighting man's spirit - the best equipment in the world can't do much for you.

RC: On that same note, how did the soldiers respond to the news of the first thunder run and what was their response when they learned they were going into Baghdad a second time on 7 April?

WB: Earlier I alluded to the fact that everyone was almost in shock. We had just made some pretty historic movement out of Kuwait, up to Karbala and through Objective Rams by An Najaf. There was also some pretty intense combat up to that point, some stuff that we weren't really expecting. It had seasoned the men and had given them their baptism by fire, so to speak. It wasn't going to be a shock anymore of, "What do I do now?" We train on gunnery ranges to report and we get these training scenarios that really don't prepare us for combat when you're looking through the sights of your tank or down the sight post of an M16 at another human body. There is a moment of hesitation the first time it happens. "Is this really happening? Am I going to pull the trigger? Am I actually going to shoot a tank round at that vehicle?" We'd already gone through that as a task force, and I think the baptism by fire taking place got everybody pretty much resolute to the fact that we were in combat. When the word of the first thunder run came, it wasn't so much a shock of, "Really? Are we actually going to go?" Up to this point we'd been told that those who were in theater, along with the joint forces from the Marines and the Brits, were all going to surround Baghdad. We were getting some of that news. Then we heard there was going to be this big siege of the city. But when the colonel came back from the brigade TOC and we found out that we were going to attack into Baghdad, there was a little bit of, "Are you serious?" "Yes." 1st Brigade went in and took the airfield. There was a big fight to do that and we heard it all going on the day before. Some of our intel was telling us what was going on with that and how big of a fight 1st Brigade had had to get into Baghdad International Airport (BIAP). To find out that we were going to go up the highway, go into the

front door of the airfield and meet up with 1st Brigade was a little bit of a shock. I thought there were a lot of Republican Guard soldiers out there. "Are you sure this is a good thing to do?" It wasn't that we doubted our leadership or the plan; it was just a bit of a shock. Everybody prepared for that as best they knew how. They got vehicles ready and made sure we had ammunition and fuel, that maintenance was complete and that we talked to the soldiers. As you walked around in my shoes, it was refreshing to see young tank commanders sitting their crews down and talking through the mission - what we actually trained for. Now, instead of the loader falling asleep, the gunner piddling with something and the driver eating his MRE, everybody was on the edge of their seats asking questions and giving advice in their own way through feedback. "You know, we really haven't checked the track in a couple days. I think we better walk the track." All the hard work we did in training was paying off. These kids - they were like my children - were all growing up and becoming men right in front of my eyes and doing exactly what they were trained to do. That initial shock that we were going to attack into Baghdad didn't create a whole lot of excitement. It created an urgency to prepare. We had just made a huge movement and we weren't really ready for that. The short period of time we had to get ready caused a lot of activity at the leadership level with the colonel and his staff. They were trying to wargame this thing as much as they could and then not wanting to waste too much time. Don't get me wrong. It's not wasting time to plan, but you need to get the commanders out of there and back to their units so they can start imparting their command on their units. The staff has to have time to get ready. The whole two-thirds, one-thirds thing really became a driving force. You need to get them out of there and back to their units. Not just the commanders and combat crews but the staff has to have time to do that too. They have to get ready. It was a little bit of a wakeup call after being awake for three days. It just heightened our awareness to get ready to go again.

RC: What was the ammunition and fuel status of the task force like? Were there any problems in keeping it maintained prior to and during the thunder runs?

WB: Not prior to. I can remember briefly and sporadically some issues we'd have with the tanks outrunning the fuel and having to plan for that. That almost becomes tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) that you plan for. Then there are things you start to remember about the last mission, they become lessons learned and you're careful not to repeat mistakes. It's a well known fact that the tanks will outrun their fuel if you don't plan for that. Ammunition became more of an issue for cross-leveling because certain tanks would experience problems with weapons systems. For instance, maybe a lead tank's .50 cal would go out or start malfunctioning. They'd have a ton of .50 cal on board - and this actually happened in Wild Bunch with Sergeant First Class Ronald Gaines in the lead tank. He was rocking and rolling and he was running out of .50 cal rather quickly. One of his lead tanks with Staff Sergeant Stevon Booker had malfunctioned its .50 cal. On the fly they did some cross-leveling and Booker gave all his .50 cal up to his platoon sergeant. In return, he got as much ammunition for their M4s as they could because he had basically replaced his commander's weapons station .50 cal with an M4 and was firing it from the shoulder out of the cupola. He was very quickly running out of ammunition. The loader was sitting there loading magazines as fast as he could for his tank commander. A lot of the fighting was close-in. Tank rounds had their place in that operation but not a lot. There wasn't a lot of opportunity to use the main gun to engage vehicles. There were a lot of dismounts around us. I remember like it was yesterday all of those dismounts running around and the strain it was having on our small arms. I think we tried to total that at the end

and color codes just don't do it justice. We probably went from green to amber moments into our fight and we were pretty much green moving into the fight. The support platoon did a fantastic job in keeping the task force resupplied. You can only carry so much ammo, though, and tanks aren't really designed to carry enough small arms ammunition that we were encountering the opportunity to use during the thunder run. They carried a lot of small arms ammunition. I think they carry 16,000 rounds in the coax ammo box and we had tanks that went right through that. They were firing an enormous amount of small arms. When it went out over the task force net that Staff Sergeant Booker had been injured, I remember listening to the volume of fire increase. They didn't say he was fatally injured and probably wasn't going to make it, but when the task force found out that one of their brothers had been shot and that we were medically evacuating him, the volume of fire coming out of Wild Bunch and repeated up and down that column was incredible. It was almost surreal how much they fought, how hard they fought and the amount of ammunition that was being expended. It was *a lot*.

RC: Had these soldiers had any experience with these kinds of close-in engagements with as many targets, in some cases almost simultaneously?

WB: Not to that extent. We had opportunity for dismount contact and engagements in Objective Rams and that was like our baptism by fire. I remember listening to the radio chatter over the task force net as I sat in my Humvee. I had a Humvee that had a weapons station on it. I was up in the .50 cal and we were doing those field expedient methods of maintaining contact and being on your weapons station. I'm up in the cupola of a soft-shell Humvee, on a .50 cal with a pork chop (hand mike) strapped to my chin strap here and here trying to listen to the command net and the administration and logistics (A&L) net simultaneously, trying to maintain my situational awareness. I needed to know where the CTCF was, where the medics were. At one point the medics had gotten leaped out in front of the whole task force at Objective Rams. I know I talked about trying to keep situational awareness and this was all leading towards what the men felt like with that significant amount of dismount contact they were having. It was baptism by fire on Rams with dismount contact. It was small and it was more or less some paratrooper units that had been positioned there. They thought they had some intel that the 82nd Airborne or somebody was coming into Objective Rams south of An Najaf, but it was actually us who rolled through there. The tank crews reacted well to that. Initially there was some hesitation on their part. I remember some radio transmissions going back and forth about there being dismounts all over the place with rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and AK47s. They were low crawling towards the tanks and the soldiers wanted to know what to do. Here's this training mentality of reporting back to Charlie 92 (the tower) and it helped to get us started, but there were also some very calm radio transmissions from the task force commander down to the company teams. One I remember very specifically. The commander said, "Yes, that's the enemy and you need to engage them and kill them. That's the enemy. Go ahead and do your thing." There wasn't any yelling or screaming; it was just, "Hey, this is really happening." During the first thunder run, I remember more people running around than I'd ever seen on a battlefield. Not to say that I've seen a lot of battlefields, but I've seen a few. They were just all over the place, behind bridge abutments, in ditches, behind bushes and in holes. The task force operations officer (S3), Major Mike Donovan, came across the net once and said, "Hey, they're playing dead. If they're lying on the ground, be prepared to shoot at them if they get back up." You got really good in a matter of minutes being able to tell whether or not somebody on the ground was dead or just laying there pretending to be dead. Somebody who is dead is lying in a

very unnatural position. They're twisted and contorted and a lot of times they're looking at the sky. Enemy soldiers who are playing dead lie on their bellies, in a straight line, in a ditch with their hands covering their face. Most of them would have their weapons by their sides; the others would be concealing their weapons by lying on them. They're not dead. They're waiting for you to drive by and then they're going to pop up, grab their weapon and try and shoot at you from behind. When Major Donovan realized that was happening – and others may have realized it too but they hadn't put it out on the radio – it rippled through the many radio channels that a task force has, all the way down to platoon. When that started being echoed, people started realizing it and when Staff Sergeant Booker got shot, the volume of fire that ensued after that was almost indescribable. You can imagine a tank or a tank platoon with their coaxes on full auto just going full out firing at targets of opportunity in their sector as we combat columned down the road. Multiply that with numerous tank platoons, an infantry mech platoon and some of the most courageous combat engineers that I've ever seen in my life. They were draped all over APCs. They weren't in combat vehicles that have turrets and weapons stations. These are combat engineers who were draped out the hatches of 113s. The volume of fire was incredible; there were dismounts all over the place. I was an armored task force command sergeant major who carried a nine millimeter 99 percent of the time. I picked up an M16 when we started going into combat. As much as we want to carry our nine millimeter in our holster during training and be comfortable, it really doesn't do a whole lot for you in a combat situation. Now everybody wants an M16 or an M4, you want a shotgun or you're picking up abandoned AK47s because they're good weapons and there are boxes of ammunition there. I had one of those on the top of an APC when we went into Baghdad the second time. That was a lesson learned. I knew I was going to start running out of ammunition. I can only have so many magazines loaded and I don't have a magazine loader down on the floor of the APC reloading my magazines for me. I certainly don't have time to stop and do that either. You need to take advantage of what's available to you. The small arms ammo became a bigger issue for all of us as we prepared for the second thunder run into Baghdad because we went through enormous amounts of small arms ammunition. We had a day break in between, so where the support platoon went and got all of our ammunition from or where we garnered it all from I couldn't tell you. But I do know that everybody went into the second day with more ammunition than they would normally carry. People were loading boxes. You almost had to caution people. "I know you want to carry more ammunition, but taking a box of .50 cal and using it as a sandbag on the top of the vehicle is probably not a good idea. It could take a round and start cooking off." You don't think about that, though. You just see a big box and figure you can just put a sandbag on it, but that's probably not a good place for the ammo to be. You want to keep that down inside. Maybe even put it in those racks we had on the outside of the vehicles, which turned out not to be such a good idea either.

RC: What are the racks you're referring too? Were they the extension racks you got put on the vehicles?

WB: Yes. We went through a lot of pain and heartache getting those things made and mounted on the vehicles. I think there were some plusses and minuses to those. As we were in a combat column or moving from Kuwait into Iraq, no crew had enough places to store all the stuff they were given. When we're in a training environment, we have stuff hanging all over the inside of our vehicles that you really don't want in combat. You want to put that on the outside. That goes even further for the Bradleys. They have dismounts inside there and they all carry gear.

Trying to solve that became almost a logistical nightmare. Everybody had to repack their bags and we took things out of our B-bags and gave them to the supply sergeant to carry for us in his truck. "This is what you need. Put this in your A-bag or your rucksack and just keep that." There are also other pieces of equipment we have to carry. We have OE-254s (antennae) on some vehicles just in case we need them. We also had extra ammunition. Where were we supposed to put all that stuff? The racks came in handy for that. In a combat situation, when, oh by the way, you're not the only one shooting bullets, they're shooting back - all that stuff in the racks is getting shot. During the first thunder run, I remember Sergeant First Class Gaines coming over the radio saying how much fire he was receiving on an overpass. This was the third overpass we had gone under, the first two were hairy to me and he didn't say anything about those two. He didn't compare those two to this one. He just came over the radio and said, "Hey, I'm getting a lot of fire at this third overpass." We were getting closer and closer to the airport. The amount of soldiers running around and firing back at us was increasing. They had built a defensive perimeter at the entrance to the airport where 1st Brigade had set up and it was like the meeting of the two armies there. The hair on the back of my neck stood up and I was very uncomfortable. There was a civilian photographer embedded with us in the vehicle and I looked at First Sergeant Hayes and said we needed to button up. I was trying to give him some hand and arm signals because the volume of fire and the noise made it hard to communicate unless you were coming over the intercom. We communicated with each other that we needed to button up and we got it done just moments before an RPG hit the side of the vehicle. Smoke filled the inside of the vehicle because I couldn't get the hatch to close. I was holding onto the chain that you actually use to open the hatch that releases the pins. I was using it to try and slam the hatch shut. I had it down to maybe an inch or so when the RPG hit the side of the cupola that was mounted on the APC. The smoke cleared and everybody was checking each other to make sure they were okay. I really wasn't sure what had happened. I didn't know if we had taken a direct hit from another tank or what. It wasn't too long after we popped the hatch open that we saw that the side of the vehicle had been hit by an RPG almost right where I was standing. Thank God Sergeant First Class Gaines had at least said something that made me want to duck. The RPG destroyed everything that was on the outside of the vehicle. There was an OE-254 bag that the first sergeant carried that was destroyed. I remember being really irritated that my ditty bag with all my stuff in it that I had brought with me - a change of socks, an MRE, a couple bottles of water, my shaving kit - was destroyed. I was livid. There were little chunks of MRE all over the place. I was finding little pieces of toothpaste everywhere. They had destroyed my bag and I was actually using that bag to prop my hand on. I tell you that because the side of the first sergeant's vehicle that carries all this company stuff - the white board for the commander, the terrain model kit, some tent material so they could put up a little shelter - all of it was blown to pieces. You can take that and multiply it throughout the task force on every vehicle. When we pulled into the airport and I got off the APC and started walking around and talking to folks to see how they were doing, sides of Bradleys were on fire because the hydraulic fluid and petroleum products that they were carrying in those racks had been engaged and shot at. RPGs had hit the side of that and exploded stuff. Bags were on fire. We had vehicles literally burning as we pulled onto the tarmac of the airfield, and it wasn't because the vehicles were burning; it was all the stuff that was being carried in these racks. The racks were great to help us combat configure our vehicles and get a load plan that was going to be able to work during combat, but we didn't think about what would happen when we got shot at. All that stuff was taking fire. It was good in one respect because it was exploding RPGs before they got to the skin of the vehicle, but we lost a lot of equipment.

Vehicles had to stop during combat, get out and take five-gallon jugs of water and put fires out on the side of their vehicles because their vehicles were burning. It's a little unnerving to be in the middle of a combat situation, there are flames all over you and it's not because your vehicle is on fire. It's because all of the gear you're carrying just got soaked in diesel because your diesel cans exploded and now they're on fire. To some degree or another, that was repeated throughout the task force. Would it have been repeated without these racks? Surely, to some extent. We carry stuff on our bustle racks. If you've ever seen a Bradley on maneuvers, they find places to hang stuff. The engineers could even get more stuff on there. You give an engineer 15 minutes to hang stuff on the side of a vehicle and they'll come up with the most extravagant net system that you've ever seen in your life and everything is packed in there. All the people are inside the vehicle and they'll clear the top of the vehicle off so they have fields of fire. The vehicles look like some caravan going down the road. So, the racks helped in a lot of ways and I think they were very useful and helpful in moving the task force, but when you know you're going into combat you need to figure out what to carry and what not to carry in there. Stuff that will be detrimental to you, like petroleum products and diesel - things that will catch on fire and not really absorb the impact of an RPG - that needs to be downloaded and left behind. We learned that after the first thunder run. On the second one, we didn't have nearly the same problem. We knew that if we left stuff behind, it eventually would catch up with us again. It's other people's responsibility in a combat situation to get fuel and hydraulic fluid to you. All you have to do is report it. "Hey, I'm low on this," and we'll get it to you. You don't necessarily need to carry it with you. Our supply system works.

RC: You talked about your efforts to maintain situational awareness at Objective Rams and some of the difficulties you were encountering. How challenging was it to maintain situational awareness during the thunder runs?

WB: Every day has its own challenges. As humans and soldiers, we're conditioned to learn from things that didn't work so well the day before. Situational awareness or the lack thereof is certainly one of those things that you try to learn from and do things differently to maintain your situational awareness. During the thunder runs, the folks around me - my driver and the first sergeant - had started to incorporate little techniques to increase our situational awareness, but every mission is unique. Everything creates its own peculiarities and there would go the learning process all over again. These combat columns we were forming and going down the road in were something we didn't train for. It's not in our gunnery tables, or at the time it wasn't. We didn't train to get all our vehicles on the road and go into some kind of modified herringbone formation. We do that when we convoy someplace, we stagger our gun tubes and the last tank has his gun tube over the back, but not as a combat formation as how we were going to fight. We learned to fight in other formations in the open desert so this was different and it was hard to maintain situational awareness on where everybody was. Your mind tells you that you're in a convoy column and everybody is in front of you, so just don't shoot to the front. What you don't realize is that things happen in those formations. Roads turn, the lead tank takes a 90-degree turn and doesn't come on the radio and tell anyone what he's done. I need to now shift my fires off the right front because now he's turning into it. That kind of situational awareness on those thunder runs became very difficult. You were screaming at people on the radio because you couldn't tell if they were reorienting the guns or if they were aware that the lead company had made a turn or was having to turn around. Were they aware that the lead vehicles were now facing back at them and are maybe not really caring too much

about armored fighting vehicle identification (AFVID) at the time to realize that that's one of Alpha Company's tanks that's now coming back at them? You have to really be alert to that kind of stuff. It's close quarters. Even if the road is starting to bend just a little bit, it's still possible that they will come into your fields of fire. Not only for small arms bullets but if you're shooting a sabot round and one of the discarded sabots is flying off, you're so close to each other that one of those things could kill somebody. They'll penetrate a light-skinned vehicle. They fly off, discard and the penetrator goes forward. Maybe your sights are aimed at where the penetrator is going, but do you know where those things are going? I don't think anybody knows that, but you have to be cognizant of that because your vehicles are very close and they're turned a little bit in front of you. Your gun tube is right over your right front fender but the tank in front of you is very close to the front of your gun tube. Hitting him in the back of the head with one of the discarded sabots would not be good. Now, we never had anything like that happen, but that's the kind of situational awareness you needed. Thank God we didn't have a lot of people dismounting and getting on the ground. There were times when that kind of stuff happened. People had to get down and we had a Charlie Company tank get hit. The XO's running back there with jugs of water, but that came over the radio so everybody knew we had people on the ground. You didn't mistake one of your own for an enemy soldier on the ground. You have to really keep yourself aware and you learn more and more and more every day in those situations.

RC: Do you have any guidance or insights that you would pass along to another armored task force command sergeant major?

WB: I don't think there's a whole lot in our doctrine that tells an armored task force sergeant major where to be or where to position himself. There's nothing that says what his job is during the planning process or in the execution phase. You don't have a vehicle that's going to allow you to go forward with your task force, but that doesn't mean you don't go forward. You need to figure out how it is that you're going to do that. If you feel comfortable loading for a tank, then do that. I didn't. I'm going to leave loading the tank to the guy who's really good at loading a tank. I can pick up a sabot round or a high explosive anti-tank (HEAT) round as well as anyone, but that's not all the loader does and everybody knows that, so that wasn't a good spot for me to be in. Being on the battalion commander's tank or being on the S3's tank was not a good idea either. You need to get to an armored vehicle - whether it's a Bradley, an M88 or a 113 with one of your first sergeants. You need to be forward and lead with the rest of the leaders of the task force. Staying in back with the field trains or the CTCP is not where you belong. You're a leader and it's important for your men to see you up there leading from the front just like the rest of the leaders in the task force. You couldn't have kept me from the fight. I had a need to be there and I think all armored task force sergeant majors in a combat situation want to be there, so figure out where it is you're going to be. Without the benefit of doctrine or a written procedure or plan on where the task force sergeant major should go, you have to feel that. You get that from communicating with your commander. Where do you want me? Where do you think I could best provide a second set of eyes and ears for you? Is it in the middle of the column? Well, that's where he is. He isn't in the lead. He kind of positions himself in the middle of the task force. Do you need me up front or behind you? Where do you want me to be? In the first thunder run, I was with the lead first sergeant. In the second one - because we had learned from the first one - we configured a combat vehicle for myself, the S4 and the personnel office (S1) to all fight from an APC. We went forward together as a mini-CTCP because those were all

the leaders from the CTCP who went forward in that 113, and it worked really well for us. But we had to design that vehicle and take it out of hide from somewhere else because that vehicle didn't exist at the time. If I had any advice for an armored task force command sergeant major, it would probably be to define yourself without the benefit of doctrine telling you what your job is in a combat situation. You have to take what you know of your task force, what you know about your commander, what you know about the abilities and inabilities of the men who fight in your unit, and then position yourself in the best place to do the most good. I guess that's almost common sense, but common sense is really hard to find sometimes in a combat environment. You almost have to stop and look for it.

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

WB: I appreciate the opportunity to come and talk to you. I could sit and talk about this forever. Having the opportunity to have a reunion with my Desert Rogue brothers is probably something I will want to repeat over and over again in my life. Having a vivid enough memory to be able to sit down, talk and record it so somebody else can learn from it and we can maybe even save the life of one more tank commander in a combat situation, that's priceless to me. I would give anything to have Staff Sergeant Booker with us today, and he's not. I think about him all the time. He was a very unique person. I guess if the good Lord was looking for an armored crewman to help him out in heaven, then he picked the best armored crewman he could find. He was just a very unique individual. He could stand toe to toe with the best of them, but at the same time could bring a smile to your face and a little warmth to your heart in the oddest of situations. I had a very unique relationship with him. He was one of those guys who wasn't afraid to talk or joke around with the battalion sergeant major, and we had plenty of opportunities to do that. I just wish he was here with us today. I know he's in a better place and I think about him often. I know the brothers here all miss him too.



END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Jennifer Vedder