

UNCLASSIFIED



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 LTC Ricky Nussio



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 Lieutenant Colonel Ricky Nussio - at the time a major and executive officer of 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 LTC Ricky Nussio

21 April 2007



RC: This is Dr. Robert Cameron (RC) and today I have the honor to speak with Lieutenant Colonel Ricky Nussio (RN), the executive officer (XO) for Task Force 1-64 Armor during the thunder runs conducted into Baghdad in April 2003. What was your rank and principal responsibilities as XO?

RN: At the time I was a major and was the XO of 1-64 Armor which was formed as a task force in that we had two tank companies, a mechanized infantry company and an engineer company as part of 2nd Brigade Combat Team with the 3rd Infantry Division. My principal duty as the XO was the second in command, primarily to oversee the staff – personnel (S1) through supply (S4) – any of the special attachments we had, such as the Air Force liaison officer, civil affairs, psychological operations, trying to integrate different members of the task force into a combined arms tactical plan. I was also responsible for overseeing the logistics and administration of the battalion as well as serving as the second in command in the absence of the commander, Lieutenant Colonel Eric Schwartz.

RC: During the actual thunder runs, what was your specific role?

RN: The way things actually matured as we moved north from approximately 21 March, we found that each of the field grade officers in the task force – myself, Major Mike Donovan, who was the operations officer (S3), and Lieutenant Colonel Schwartz – would travel with one of the companies or company teams. The way it worked out was Lieutenant Colonel Schwartz normally moved with the lead element, which was Team Wild Bunch, Alpha Company. Major Donovan, in his tank, moved with Charlie Company, which was known as Team Rock, the infantry company. I moved in an M113A3 with Charlie Company, our tank pure element, for a majority of the fights we actually got into once we got past Objective Rams. It almost became a standard operating procedure (SOP) because it seemed like the right idea. Our normal task force formation was leading with Alpha Company, which was a tank heavy team, followed by an infantry team in case the first contact team, Wild Bunch, could basically establish a base of fire, then Charlie Company, as a tank company, could, as the third element in the order of march, basically swing around with freedom to maneuver and assault any objective. Then Team Rock, which was infantry, could basically go clear any objective. At least that was our overall plan. It didn't always obviously work out that way, but that's how our movement formation, generally speaking, went. It was beneficial to have me near the end of the task force because part of my responsibility was to maintain communications with brigade while we were on the move. I was principally on the brigade net as well as the task force radio net. Lieutenant Colonel Schwartz was giving direction to the company commanders and myself, reporting to either Colonel David Perkins or the brigade tactical command post (TAC), giving unit locations, combat situation reports and passing other necessary radio traffic. So it was beneficial for me to be near the rear just in terms of communications range as well.

RC: Was the location of the various staff officers something that was an SOP developed before you crossed the berm into Iraq?

RN: In the planning leading up to this, we looked a lot at command and control – who was going to be positioned where. Generally speaking, Lieutenant Colonel Schwartz made the decision ahead of time that we would move similar to that. Major Donovan would move primarily with the infantry, Lieutenant Colonel Schwartz would move with the lead element and I would be with kind of the rest of the task force in terms of order of march. As it developed into a combat environment, we started to not take as many wheeled vehicles forward with us as possible because of the amount of small arms fire – rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) – that we were receiving. By the time we did the thunder run on the 5th, we made the decision that no more wheeled vehicles would go forward with us. We had a tendency to move only in armored vehicles, just plainly for survivability and protection purposes. My movement with Charlie Company, again, it just happened that way. It was almost like, as we were moving and making plans, the decision became, “Kind of like we did it yesterday.” I don’t want to say it became an established SOP, because that sounds like it was in writing, but it basically became, “This is the way we did it yesterday, let’s do the same thing,” and it seemed to be working.

RC: Did you have a particular command platform that you used? Did you modify it at all?

RN: Initially my position was supposed to be in the task force tactical operations center (TOC) in the 577s, and I was in a 1025 Humvee. Before the war in moving out, I had made an arrangement to, when we drew equipment out of the Army prepositioned stocks (APS) fleet out of Qatar, the brigade actually had some additional armored vehicles that they had apportioned out. I took an M113A3 armored personnel carrier, very similar to what they used in Vietnam, just modified – stronger engine, better power train, external fuel tanks, with a lot more room inside – as the base vehicle. Then we modified in that I put a QEAM antennae, which is a quick erect antenna mast, which gives you increased range. I took my radios out of my Humvee and made a modified command and control platform. It was basically a task force TAC, if you will, that I would move ahead of the TOC to establish communications, maintain communications with the task force as we’re moving forward, to provide an additional command and control platform. As well, for additional protection, we had the standard .50 caliber mounted on it, but we added some of the armored cavalry shields to it, bell turret for the commander’s cupola, and I had the maintenance personnel put on the side machine gunner’s shield that I mounted an M240B machine gun in just for close-in personal protection. The majority of the time I rode in the crew compartment. I’m talking on the radios. Captain Molfino, who was the task force plans officer, as the assistant S3, was the tank commander and Sergeant Lee was actually a 35B military intel specialist – he was the driver. The thought there is with me as the XO, the planner, Captain Molfino and Sergeant Lee, a military intelligence NCO, at any one time we had the necessary personnel to plan the next 24 to 72 hours for the task force on the move, while the rest of the TOC could be moving, monitoring the current battle and monitoring the current fight. It was really an added capability that came out of our understanding that if we were going to move, we were going to move far and we were going to move fast, and we’d have to have the ability to plan our move. One of the benefits to the vehicle itself is it had these additional blast shields installed that actually slid back and forth so you could reach compartments behind them. In addition to storing crew equipment behind there and additional supplies – ammunition, whatever we had – I was able to post maps. Many of the different products we had made available to us by the engineers were on the side walls, so I had an entire joint graphics map of basically all of Iraq up for looking at the big picture. I also had some of the special maps we had produced that had routes, graphic control measures and significant things

on them that at any one time I could look left, look right, get a situation update on what was supposed to be the plan, as well as my individual map book that I kept up on top of the vehicle with my GPS for navigational purposes. I thought in the end that it was a very functional platform. There were several times, especially during the duststorm that we ran into around 25 March, that we were able to get the commander, myself, the S3 and some of the key personnel in the task force together in a closed compartment. We turned lights on, had radio communications with brigade and did plannings, discussions, whatever we needed to do to prepare for the next mission upcoming without having to go back into the TOC, although we did establish the full TOC on a number of occasions. This is a way to do it on a move. As well, on several occasions, An Najaf specifically as well as inside Baghdad itself, I had to move the task force commander from place to place. He could ride inside a vehicle that was not soft-skinned and protected from fire as well.

RC: In planning for the thunder runs, was the military decision-making process (MDMP) followed or did the task force follow an abbreviated process?

RN: The interesting thing about the planning for the thunder runs, and I was talking to the Maneuver Captain's Career Course yesterday, partially about this. The best way I can describe it is that the base plan itself that we received from division through brigade was basically followed from berm to Baghdad. All the objectives that they outlined we secured in one form or another, just on a different timetable. We actually did not move as fast as we thought we were going to through the whole sequencing of the operation. In some cases, we moved a lot faster than we thought we would. In other cases, we did basically a tactical pause to allow shaping fires or other forces to move around. But the thunder runs themselves sprung out of these objectives that were circled. What I would probably consider to be the first thunder run that was done was from Objective Saints, on 4 April, where we attacked south through Mahmudiyah, along Route 8, which is directly south of Objective Saints. Our mission that day was to go and basically seize the 2nd Brigade headquarters of the Medina Division, which was in a town roughly 30 kilometers south of Objective Saints. We attacked straight down Highway 8 in a task force column utilizing both sides of the road. I can only make the analogy that it was like the Great Marianas Turkey Shoot - vehicles on both sides of the road just being engaged by the lead elements and some of the flank and rear elements of the task force. We moved in almost like a dual-combat column using both sides of the road, attacking south. There was a little bit of a slowdown in Mahmudiyah just because the road narrowed. Then once it spread back out into this two-lane highway, we were able to pick up some speed. The only casualties we suffered that day was actually a loader on Charlie Company commander's tank, who, in a secondary explosion, when he ducked down as the loader, he held onto the M240 and unfortunately his thumb got clipped by a piece of shrapnel and he was evacuated out of theater. The task force commander actually got hit by a piece of shrapnel that day as well, but it didn't penetrate his skin; it just struck him up in the shoulder. The proximity of these vehicles to the road and the fact that they were engaged by a lead elements caused some problems in that, as the length of this column went by - because we were stretched probably about three to four kilometers in total length. We were trying to maintain some distance between vehicles of at least 20 to 50 meters. There were these secondary explosions of everything from ammunition trucks to armored personnel carriers to tanks where ammunition was cooking off and exploding right next to armored vehicles causing quite a problem. The destruction that day was so utterly complete and there are several great pictures we have of just these rolling columns of

smoke as the task force is going down. We did not go to our objective that day because it was getting later in the afternoon and Colonel Perkins, who was traveling with us, just decided that based on our fuel levels, the fact that we're probably going to go into an urban fight approaching darkness and that we had been not necessarily in a task force engagement but had engaged individually so many vehicles, he thought it'd be best if we went back to Objective Saints that night and then came back the next day. As it turned out, we ended up doing what ended up being what's more commonly referred to as the thunder run on 5 April into Baghdad. But the interesting thing about it is that we never planned to do this but it made sense because we were in a secure environment on Objective Saints, just based on the terrain and what we had secured. It was *the* critical highway interchange around Baghdad. You controlled everything coming up from the south and you controlled anything coming out of Baghdad, so it was a very secure environment to be in. From that, I know 4-64 conducted a thunder run out to, I believe it was the 10th Brigade of the Medina Division, but actually they don't have 10 brigades; they only have three. But it was called the 10th Brigade, I believe, of the Medina Division, out to the southeast of Mahmudiyah. They performed a similar thunder run like that where we would just send the entire task force down one of these major highways. The Republican Guards had chosen to hide a lot of their vehicles in palm groves and urban areas. From the looks of it, I would definitely say that some of the equipment was deliberately hidden and it also looked like some of the equipment was probably deliberately abandoned. It seemed almost like it became an individual company-level decision as to whether they were going to hide the equipment to either come back later, whether they were going to stay and fight, or whether they just disbanded as a unit and ran. It seemed like almost an individual company-level decision, like there was no leadership left at the senior levels in the Iraqi Army - senior level being maybe brigade or division level. That's completely my observation. I don't think that's any intelligence assessment, but just my feel of what I saw on the battlefield because it was definitely apparent that some of this equipment was just abandoned on site just by the way they left, and other equipment was definitely deliberately hidden. We came across an entire motorized rifle company of BMPs that was deliberately hidden and fully stocked with ammunition, fuel and everything. I can only imagine that they thought about either coming back later or had decided to abandon the equipment, but it was definitely hidden from air attack and from observation and definitely spread out out of their motor pools. I think probably had we continued to attack down to the 2nd Brigade headquarters of the Medina Division, we probably would have found a lot of empty buildings. That may have also led to Colonel Perkins' decisionmaking as well. Just based on the number of vehicles he saw, he probably intuitively figured we're just going to go down there and rummage through a bunch of empty offices. So we turned around. That evening, we talked about lessons learned and I think that's where Captain Molfino - and I give credit to him because he's a Harley rider. I think that's when he might have first coined the term "thunder run" and it just kind of stuck after that. So I guess in summary, the thunder runs were born out of the operational- and tactical-level planning in that we secured these major division-level objectives. Then because - and I don't know if it was considered a next sub-phase of the plan, whether we were waiting on the follow-on forces to come up, the light infantry to actually assault into the city - but here you had a mechanized infantry division, basically two and a half, almost three brigades poised outside of the city at Objective Saints and Objective Lions, which was the Baghdad International Airport - 1st Brigade. We had seized Objective Saints as part of 2nd Brigade, and then 3rd Brigade coming around the north, so you had this decision to make. What are you going to do now that you're there? The decision was made to basically conduct

these, for lack of a better term, armored raids down the major highways and that's what eventually led us to April 5 and the thunder run.

RC: During the thunder runs, what kind of command and control and communications challenges did these operations pose and how did you deal with them?

RN: For the most part, we were just limited to range. We were somewhat concerned about the urban clutter and the interference sometimes you get when operating in urban environments, but that never really seemed to be much of a problem. I think overall, the single channel ground-to-air radio system (SINCGARS) performed very well. The SINCGARS radio was the major piece of communication that we had. It had decent enough range. We had enough long range antennas and enough power amplifiers that you could communicate over the distances we were operating, generally speaking. With the one exception being the night of 2 and 3 April where the brigade kind of broke up around Karbala because of a couple vehicles getting stuck. We had one task force that continued to link up with 3rd Brigade. We had our task force and 1-9 Field Artillery that attacked through Karbala, and then we also had two task forces and the forward support battalion (FSB) that had to come around the southwest side of Karbala. That was probably the one time I can exactly remember where, during a tactical fight, we were so strung out that we just outranged each other. We were doing a lot of passing of information. I know that since I was in the middle, I could hear brigade and I could hear the task forces to our south, specifically 4-64, 3-15 and 2-6 FSB, but they could not hear brigade. So we, on the fly, just basically started relaying information and set up, I don't want to call them retrans stations but that's essentially what we were. It's just that we were a manual retrans station. Whatever brigade said, I passed onto them; whatever they said, I passed onto brigade. But then eventually everybody just dropped off the net so we just went to the plan. The one thing we did have that really helped was Force XXI Battle Command, Brigade-and-Below (FBCB2) on the command platforms, specifically at the battalion commander, battalion S3 and brigade commander levels. Because I think instead of having to always constantly call up and ask, "What's your 6?" which is "What's your location?" It's just a quick codeword in the military for, "What is your location?" So instead of having to continually send up a grid or a graphic control measure of where you are, a staff officer, a brigade commander or the brigade XO could look down at the FBCB2 screen and get an instant picture of where everybody was from a Blue Force perspective. We were all new to FBCB2 so I don't think we were fully trained and ready to use it. There were some limitations and I don't think we had enough for all our logistics elements, but it provided that instant snapshot that is probably about 50 percent of your communications to higher headquarters on what is your frontline trace. It was good that you had it in company command vehicles, in company-level XO vehicles, as well as some of the key vehicles in the task force - scout platoons, the task force commander, S3. Unfortunately I didn't have it in my 113A3 and that would have been a great thing to have. But we had a limited number of platforms and when they installed them, we had some fairly specific directives from higher headquarters in terms of which vehicles they wanted it installed in so there'd be some commonality - and it made sense. Once they were installed, it was a contractual issue. It would have been better had we been able to move them, but in the end it was not a showstopper. I had a map book and was able to maintain situational awareness, for the most part, of where everybody was. I didn't feel any significant limitations. The thunder runs, because we were so concentrated and in a column formation, generally speaking, moving along roads with not a lot of interference, we never really had a problem with communications. We did on the north side of Baghdad on 5 April

lose some communications with our task force, but we were still able to communicate with brigade and, again, because of FBCB2, they could tell whether we were moving or whether we were stationary. I don't think we were limited by communications. I know specifically in my vehicle, on 7 April, we decided we needed more communications because we were going to stay in Baghdad, we weren't going to leave, so we brought along the Marine Corps air and naval gunfire liaison company (ANGLICO), Gunnery Sergeant Brown and Gunnery Sergeant Dees. One of them rode in my vehicle and he brought along UHF, HF radios, VHF, as well as a tactical satellite (TACSAT), in addition to what I already had, which was FM communications in my vehicle, so we were able to communicate with close air support, which he provided on 7 April. So communications wise, I thought we were okay, generally speaking.

RC: Concerning FBCB2 usage, were there any reliability issues with the systems themselves during the thunder runs?

RN: I don't remember. Again, my personal use of FBCB2 was somewhat limited because all the time while we were on the move, I never had access to it. So it was basically secondhand information that I got from the S3 or the commander in terms of what they were able to do. I know I spoke with one of the other task force XO's who was inside a M577 that had FBCB2. He just found himself standing out of the hatch most of the time looking around and then he'd duck down to look at FBCB2. From the commander's perspective, one of the things that many of them complained about was the placement of the screen. From just a human ergonomics standpoint, it was in the way based on the fighting compartment that you were in. I know some of them didn't mind it, though. I think also, body size had something to do with it. Soldiers are interesting creatures as to what they do. Some of them actually liked the dim switch because you could almost use it like an interior dome light in the vehicle. You could illuminate the inside of your vehicle, find something at night and then turn it back down. It was a little bit of a problem, I know, for the scout platoon leader because they developed almost like a blanket or a shield that they could lay over it that would block the light out because they're in a vehicle that has windshields and side windows. They found that that glowing screen caused them somewhat of a light discipline problem. So those were some of the practical limitations of it. From a command and control standpoint, I know that many of the units were getting familiar with the system and how to use it. The keypad was not a practical solution to send text messages. You just didn't have time to type in a message; it was not functionally fast enough. So from that standpoint, there was somewhat limited usage. Again, I did not use FBCB2 during this, so it's probably a better question to ask to some of the other individuals. I can only relay my information. But the one anecdote I have to tell is that when we were doing one of the thunder runs - and I'm not sure if it was on 5 or 7 April - one of the Marine elements that had FBCB2 that was still about two and a half days out of Baghdad, sent us this hoo-ah message, something like, "You guys keep going, you're doing great!" kind of thing, because with the free text message you could write almost anything. That was a morale boost to know that the Marines were out there watching us.

RC: Within the task force, how were graphics distributed?

RN: We had the plan, as I said, from berm to Baghdad, and we had enough time that those graphics were distributed out. How the individuals chose to record those graphics, in some cases we produced a task force map that was, again, berm to Baghdad with every graphics

control measure on it that was used for navigational purposes. When you got in close, I'm not really sure what other tank commanders or company commanders chose to do, but what I did with my map book is that I drew directly on the map what the graphics were - the base graphics. I used that. I joked around and said that was my FBCB2. I know some of the commanders experimented with actually putting graphics directly on the FBCB2 and doing an overlay, but it would probably be better to talk to them about that because my knowledge of how they utilized FBCB2 and graphics is not as good. I know the brigade did send some down, an FBCB2, but I think it stopped at task force. The problem with sending graphics on FBCB2 in this fight was that the brigade had FBCB2, the battalion had FBCB2, but only to the leadership level. Now you had to get these graphics down to the platoon leaders and the other tank commanders, but once the company commander got these graphics, he would have to go back to analog mode and transcribe them over to a map, so it was almost harder. Oftentimes the battalion level, and specifically our task force TOC, if they downloaded these graphics, they would go ahead and actually transcribe them to an overlay, 1:50,000, that could be sent out hard copy to the companies. We were half analog and half digital.

RC: Was there any significant impact on task force operations following the missile hit on the brigade TOC during the second thunder run?

RN: That was 7 April, shortly after we had destroyed the statue at the parade field. My recollection of that - and it's always great to play armchair quarterback - but when we attacked into Baghdad on 7 April, there was the initial fight to get in there. We attacked up the highway, breached the minefield, fought through several of the interchanges, and then hit the main interchange that headed us east into the palace and what's now known as the Green Zone of Baghdad that we initially secured. Then we turned into the parade fields and secured the key interchanges in and around that area, and then 4-64 secured the presidential palace. We secured the parade fields, the Al-Rashid Hotel and some of the other government buildings. When we secured that area, there was the traditional lull in securing objective and maybe a little shortsighted on our part, but there was that lull. The one thing that's always beat into you time and time again is to prepare for the counterattack, because it's coming. I know we maintained security; it's not that we dropped our guard. But what happened is that the timing of that counterattack, just by pure coincidence, coupled with the missile hit, a resupply convoy coming up from the south getting fired up, and coupled with the fact that at this point, the center of the task force, specifically around the TAC and the command vehicles, started getting adjusted mortar fire from light mortars, probably 60 or 81 millimeter, in our area. That forced us to move and shift and we're getting multiple contact reports from Team Rock and Team Wild Bunch - and these were not coordinated attacks but just civilian vehicles. In some cases, military vehicles, multiple dismounted soldiers attacking. At the same time, 4-64 was reporting heavy contact along some of the bridges. I think that, coupled with the fact that we had heard the brigade TOC had been hit, made us wonder if we just haven't jumped in the middle of a hornet's nest here. All these things going on at once, I think, really grabbed our attention that we're in a pretty significant fight here. It went on through the rest of the afternoon, into the evening and into the next day as well on 8 April. That just made us collectively as a unit somewhat on edge that okay, when is this going to end? Enough is enough. How many more? Civilian vehicles against an armored vehicle is unnerving because of the tenacity and dedication of somebody to conduct that attack. The phrase we had come up with was, "Stupid but determined." When you have a determined enemy, regardless of how stupid his actions may

be, that's a dangerous thing. If you drop your guard for a minute, a dismounted soldier can destroy an armored vehicle very easily. So security had to be maintained. There were continuous and sporadic engagements over the next really two to three days that we faced. So the timing of the missile attack was coincidentally just another thing that I think made us realize that we were in a pretty significant fight here.

RC: Before the thunder runs, what knowledge of the threat did the task force have and was there useful intelligence that was pushed down from the brigade level?

RN: The number one thing we were briefed on, the threat prior to crossing the berm in mid-March, was that there was some early contact made by intelligence personnel that indicated that some of the key units in the Republican Guard may capitulate. All the company-level commanders and the leadership were trained on how to administer capitulation documents and had the authority to basically accept a unit's surrender. So I think in the backs of our minds, it was maybe this was going to be a race to Baghdad: to get up there, secure the city, provide stability and a presence so we could accept the surrender of all these forces. We weren't really sure what kind of a fight we were going to get into but we did have a full complement of ammunition to handle whatever. In the end, we ended up using a lot more small arms - machine guns - than we did main gun rounds, although we did fire enough main gun to force resupply. The best way to describe it is that it was really almost an unknown threat situation. We had templated where the significant units were, which is one of the reasons we had initial objectives against many of these headquarters elements. I think probably the thought process from the division level was, if nothing else, secure the equipment, secure the facilities, seize the elements of military power and we'll work the rest of it from there. I think that it wasn't necessarily tied to the enemy as defending around this area here, because we had all the intelligence reports coming down about intersections and interchanges that were heavily defended and what you'd have to do to fight through them. Very rarely did we receive from brigade, "There is a tank company dug in on Hill 123456. It's now called Objective Blue. Go attack and seize Objective Blue." We never received that kind of intelligence from higher. It was mainly oriented towards highways, bridges, key interchanges and then actual military headquarters locations or governmental organizations as well. Those were our primary objectives. The best way to describe it is that it was a movement to contact most of the time.

RC: What was the task force's vehicle status like when the warning order for the first thunder run was received?

RN: By that time - and I'll say for the thunder run on 5 April, in this case - we were down to shoot, move and communicate. I would venture to say that probably a majority of the vehicles, by the technical manual, the -10, would probably have been deadlined because they had a deadline fault on them. But from a move, shoot and communicate standpoint, I know we had lost A14 to three broken road wheels and a bent compensating idler arm on Objective Rams. We were probably, out of 30 tanks, down to around 26, if I remember correctly. I'd have to go back and check my notes. I know we had a couple tanks down for some maintenance issues that I believe we had crossed the line of departure with 26 tanks, to include the commander's and the S3's tanks. The reason it was 26 tanks out of 30 was we had sent Bravo Company over to 1-15 Infantry and we had received Bradleys instead. We had, at that time, I'm almost certain, a full complement of Bradleys as well, so we had 14 Bradleys. In addition, each tank company had a

BFIST, the Bradley Fighting Vehicle outfitted to transport forward observers. That was a nice little addition because it was an extra 25 millimeter, which was a completely devastating weapon in an urban environment against soft-skinned targets. We could not have had a better complement to the Abrams than the Bradley Fighting Vehicle. The Abrams provided the shock, firepower and the protection, while the Bradley complemented all those attributes. It was a great team to work together there. For the most part, there were no other significant losses to any vehicles. First sergeant 113s, the air liaison officer vehicle, the task force commander's tank – and there's a great example of what I mean by deadlined vehicle. At that point, the task force commander had already had one of his road wheels sheared off and they had hung a road arm for a while, got a new road wheel, a new replacement for it, but some of the tanks were missing critical components like road wheels. They had been sheared off or broken, and through battlefield damage assessment and repair, the crews and the maintenance personnel had fixed the vehicle. It's not to say that we were ragged and falling apart; it's just that from a "line them up in the motor pool and let's do a technical inspection on them" aspect, we would have failed horribly. But from shoot, move and communicate, we were definitely somewhere, up to 95 percent, in terms of all armored vehicles that crossed the line. Significant to note on the thunder run, the only two vehicles we lost on 5 April were to direct fire. They were not to maintenance failures. We lost C12 to RPG fire and we lost a Bradley that was recovered. We did not leave that one. The tank we could not put out the fire on so we abandoned it in the city and it was subsequently destroyed by air attack. That was the only vehicle that was actually a true combat loss. The other Bradley was hit by an RPG, knocked out but was recovered by another Bradley that towed it to the airport in contact.

RC: Did the intensity of combat during the thunder runs change the vehicular status a bit?

RN: Well, we had the combat losses, and as well we had another significant damage to a vehicle from one of the tank turrets. Actually it was the gun tube striking a concrete bridge abutment which bent the gun tube and damaged some of the turret components itself. What we were able to do is from another unit, take a gun tube out of another tank and put it on this tank. It wasn't up for the fight on 7 April, though. When we went back into Baghdad on 7 April, we were down another tank in the task force because of a bent gun tube. We lost another tank to RPG fire on the 7 April attack but that vehicle was recovered as well. They replaced a fuel cell in it and that tank actually eventually joined us, I think, on 8 or 9 April back up in Baghdad again. All our vehicles were struck by small arms fire, RPG fire, that damaged the vehicles but in almost all cases, except for C12, that was the only vehicle that was knocked out by enemy fire. Colonel Perkins made the decision to abandon the vehicle. Then corps decided to destroy in an air attack versus sending another unit in to do a recovery mission on it.

RC: You mentioned a number of vehicles suffered from broken road wheels. What caused that and how prevalent was it?

RN: I think part of it was the terrain that initially the task force covered from the berm of Kuwait and Iraq, all the way up to Objective Rams. It was everything from extremely rocky, tough, undulating terrain to very loose sand, to traveling on paved roads. The heat of the vehicles coupled with the terrain, coupled with the stress placed on the vehicles caused some systems failures at some points. Maybe it was a manufacturing weakness of that particular part or maybe it was a stress fault that had occurred over time. Just by the sheer use, we instantly

put about 350 kilometers, if my numbers are correct, on the vehicles within the first 36 hours. So it was an enormous stress on a vehicle. I think what catches our attention is, interestingly enough, the vehicles that were hit were the task force commander's and the task force S3's, so I think it made us more aware. But there were other vehicles that lost some of these parts. The damage to A14 was probably a combination of the fact that it was a plow tank and had a mine plow on it. They were maneuvering over difficult terrain and then actually went into a hole. When they slid into a hole is where they sheared off, just by sheer weight, the first three road wheel arms that could not take the pressure and just snapped off, and as well, bent the compensating idler arm on the front. CW3 Roger Guillemette, who was the motor officer for the battalion, our battalion maintenance tech, basically said, "We would spend about 24 to 36 hours, a lot of PLL to repair this vehicle." He said, "Sir, my assessment is that I don't even know then if I can guarantee that it will run properly. My recommendation is that we cannibalize the vehicle, take what we need off it and continue to move." So since we were stationary at Objective Rams, we started to cannibalize the vehicle. By that time, we had lost a couple engines, some of our PLL that we were carrying north with us had started to diminish; and just based on road wheels that were losing part of the rubber and track wear and some of these things, we started to get concerned about parts. So we started to cannibalize the tank for everything it was worth. We took a pack and put an engine and transmission that had gone bad, put them together and put them inside the tank. We left it as whole as possible, but if it was bolted on that vehicle it came off. Then I recovered the vehicle to the maintenance collection point at the division rear and left it on a heavy equipment transporter (HET) in a parking lot with a couple broken down engineer vehicles and a Kiowa Warrior that had crashed. I signed a signature card to some division property book officer and drove away, and that was the story of A14. I think Sergeant First Class Ronald Gaines is still mad at me about using his tank for parts, but we had to do what we had to do.

RC: Was maintenance accountability maintained throughout that, especially during the period of more intense combat operations? Or was accountability checked before you crossed the berm into Iraq and then afterwards when the heavy fighting had subsided?

RN: Well, everybody was concerned because nobody wanted their equipment to fail in combat. I think we had everybody's attention of how important maintenance was. Getting people to do proper maintenance on their vehicle was not an issue. Making sure they did a complete maintenance check on the vehicle was maybe still a problem. Some crews worrying only about fire control and forgetting about track maintenance; some crews worrying about track maintenance but not really thinking about communications. So you had to make sure that the completeness was there. I know for myself, personally, as we moved out of Camp New York into one of our initial staging areas, I heard just kind of a "ting" in my fan tower, which is the fan that cools the engine for an M113A3. It just didn't sound right so I brought the maintenance tech over and he listened to it and, sure enough, the fan tower was starting to go bad so they replaced it out. I use that story because that's what everybody was doing. They were listening, they were thinking, they were concerned because everybody wanted their equipment to work. When we started moving north, again, the concern was always shoot, move and communicate. If I can accomplish those, then I really don't have to worry about whether everything functions exactly like it should. Because again, some of the vehicles started to take combat damage. They had things torn off or broken that performed a function, but maybe not a necessary function. So maintenance accountability was more in terms of shoot, move and communicate. When guys

could not shoot, move or communicate, that's when they'd call up saying they had a problem. But for the most part, I think the crews did a very good job of maintaining their vehicles – blowing out V-packs when they're supposed to, checking their fluid levels – I don't ever recall losing a vehicle to what I would consider a crew-induced error. Such as they didn't have enough turbo shaft in the engine because of how much they were using and they blew an engine. I mean, we had engine failures but some of those, the indications might have been to some type of fault on the engine itself through use, through potentially a bad seal or maybe something got ingested in the engine. Or a vehicle accident. We had a heavy expanded mobility tactical truck (HEMTT) that overturned on a narrow road. Our vehicle losses to crew-induced maintenance faults were probably minimal. They were either accidents or combat losses.

RC: Were there any problems with spare parts supplies?

RN: Roger Guillemette, I called him Chief G. He recommended very early on that based on the distances we were going to be moving, he said, "Don't plan on getting any supplies." Talking about what we were going to do to mitigate that was to carry our own PLL. Start stocking up as much as you possibly can, which is kind of counter to the Army's supply system of order it, it's in the pipeline and it comes. But we made the decision to leave our mine rollers at Camp New York and use the associated lowboys that came with them and put additional V-packs, spare PLL and extra packaged PLL products on all our HEMTTs and all our vehicles. Everybody carried additional spare parts as well. Most of the tanks had two or three road wheels bolted on, additional track block. There was a lot of PLL distributed throughout the task force of extra parts that the crews could have access to. Chief G also brought a lot of the common items that, based on his experiences, he knew would probably fail. So we brought our own. Plus, he was in contact with the other maintenance techs and the brigade. Chief Acevedo and Chief Vincenze (ph) over in 3-15 and 4-64 equally traded parts with other units in the division. So if they needed something, they knew they could call somebody else. We did receive some parts, but as far as the routine maintenance procedures that we always practiced, they were not followed as our doctrine says they should be.

RC: How difficult was it to keep the task force supplied during the march to Baghdad during the thunder runs with things like fuel, ammunition, water? Were there any special measures adopted to ease some of these supply concerns?

RN: Very early on, when we were in Kuwait, still at Camp Pennsylvania when we first arrived – in fact, I believe we'd been training for maybe 30 to 45 days – many of the company commanders had brought up their concerns about when we're talking about our "go to war" packing list, what it was going to be, specifically on the vehicles in terms of soldier bags, additional ammunition and water supplies. It was very, very clear that there were some mismatches in terms of what the expectation was of what we were going to carry and what we could actually put on the vehicles. Lieutenant Colonel Schwartz directed me to get enough service ammunition and what they wanted to carry, MREs and water and all crew equipment to fully load a tank and a Bradley. We loaded a tank and a Bradley in October with everything they were supposed to carry, and it was impossible. The back of the Bradley – there was literally no room whatsoever for soldiers and you just couldn't do it. So we started looking at extension racks for what could be put on the vehicles and what could be strapped to the outside. The idea was developed to mount additional racks and cages, as we called them, to the

outsides of the vehicles. The Bradleys got side racks on the skirts and the M1s got a bustle rack extension that extended out about 12 to 18 inches. It provided enough room to put on additional PLL bags, baggage and life support things. We had to carry eight days of water, which is a very bulky item to store. We had the commercially-available clear plastic bottles that came in cardboard cases that were put on every vehicle, and those had a tendency to take up a lot of room. But in all this planning, we developed these racks that were eventually contracted out to a British contractor who hired a Syrian welder to do the work on American vehicles. They actually worked out so well that the rest of the brigade purchased them as well and they made them for all the vehicles in 2nd Brigade. I know some of the other vehicles in the division got them too. That really, really multiplied what we could carry in terms of additional crew supplies. The task force, in the planning for this, there was one supreme success of this operation that I think still goes unknown to this day, and that was the fuel planning. I'm not sure who was ultimately responsible for it but the fuel planning for this operation was a phenomenal success. We had 11 5,000-gallon fuel tankers assigned pretty much to every task force. The tractor trailers and the cabs would do these continuous turns all the time of pushing fuel forward from a pipeline that was established from the berm up through Tallil Airfield over to As Samawah up into Objective Rams, north to Objective Peach, and they just kept this continuous supply line of fuel. We never had to stop the task force because somebody was going to run out of gas; it just never happened. We had enough small arms packages stored and pushed forward to us that we never ran out of small arms. There were some ammunition shortages in terms of the multi-purpose anti-tank (MPAT) round that was newly issued to us for the 120s, but I was never really made aware of any one unit that went without in terms of ammunition. There were shortages from time to time, crews cross leveled but nobody ever ran out of ammunition. It seemed like that was always something that was continually pushed forward and supplied to appropriate amounts. I credit most of that to Captain Anderson Puckett, the task force S4, who was the supreme logistics planner. He had a phenomenal plan of support for the task force. I give all credit to him, even though as the XO I'm kind of responsible for that area. I knew I could always count on Captain Puckett to have the supplies there where they needed to be. Each battalion-sized element had a forward support company dedicated directly to us and they provided outstanding support in terms of the fuel they pushed forward to us.

RC: After the actual fighting during the thunder runs, did that put any kind of undue strain on supplies, particularly ammunition?

RN: A lot of small arms usage, primarily coax on the tanks. I know that was a concern. It seemed to me like .50 caliber was used somewhat sporadically, primarily because once you fired 100 rounds, it's a difficult weapon to load especially while you're in contact. But there was never really a strain put on small arms to the point of where, like I said, somebody was in danger of going actually zero balance and not having any. I know at times folks would get concerned. I fired 2,500 rounds of 240 on one particular day and just basically that evening, stocked up and got more. We carried about 4,000 rounds on the vehicle. Because of the fight, I don't want to say pause, but because we oftentimes returned to a secure location or the trains caught up with us at our location, we were able to resupply at least once every 24 hours. Even when we were in some stationary positions and more or less in continuous contact, like in the vicinity of An Najaf, we were able to push forward, pull tanks off the line, maybe get a plus-up

of small arms ammunition, get some more main gun and then move back up. I don't think that was necessarily ever a problem.

RC: You mentioned you fired off 2,500 rounds with the 240. Is that normal experience for a task force XO?

RN: Well, I think part of that is proximity to where I was located. It's probably not normal but I don't think the operation we were on was normal either. Part of the nature of the fight, because when we attacked into the city on 5 April and attacked up the major highway, Highway 8 that comes up through the south of Baghdad and then turns towards the airport, the column got stretched out. All those side streets and at the major freeway interchanges that were defended, once you punched through and the lead element was through that interchange, you still had those side roads. There were vehicles that were driving up, transporting actual soldiers in green Iraqi uniforms or, in some cases, civilian-dressed fighters coming at you in civilian vehicles. Generally speaking, a warning burst at a vehicle coming towards you down the street was enough to turn away somebody who didn't have ill intentions. If they continued to come at you and if you spotted a weapon or you saw somebody in a green uniform, then you engaged them, or the vehicle. In some cases, these vehicles were close enough to see uniforms and identify them as legitimate targets even though they might have been in civilian vehicles - and in one case a garbage truck, actually. So, no, it was probably not normal. But Colonel Perkins has the famed incident of his 113 commander, Captain John Ives, who was the assistant intel officer for the brigade and who was engaging some dismounts who were close to the vehicle. He was changing ammunition on his .50 cal and actually threw an empty can at one them. Colonel Perkins was close enough that he pulled out his nine millimeter and shot a fighter. Not normal for a brigade commander to use his nine millimeter in combat. So I think that kind of experience is resident with many of the folks who went on these thunder runs, of the continuous contact. Even though the lead element, Team Wild Bunch, punched through many of these intersections, all the elements along the way the entire length of the column - even Lieutenant Shane Williams, who was the Charlie Company XO, whose mission was to be the trail vehicle in the battalion task force and have his turret over the rear to provide rear guard, he was even engaging vehicles that were coming to chase him from the rear. So it was almost like a very big long porcupine, if you will, going down the road on 5 and 7 April.

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

RN: I had my outbrief yesterday with General Williams and this is something I talked to the Career Course captains about, trying to get across as a theme. The strength of the thunder run and the strength of everything we did in Iraq were built off the Army institution of Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC). What I was talking to the Captain's Career Course about yesterday was the MDMP, all the doctrine and everything you learn in a schoolhouse is what is able to educate a military officer into the planning process that he takes forward with him into combat, and then gets to deal with the changing conditions and environment he's going to operate in and to be able execute combined arms operations in whatever environment he finds himself in. That's really the strength of our institution, because our battalion did some what I consider very unusual and incredible military operations. I think the reason we were able to do that is the summer before that battalion completely changed out - new battalion commander, new XO, new command sergeant major, new S3, almost all new company commanders, many

of the first sergeants were new, a lot of tank commanders came in and out, brand new platoon leaders. We came into an environment of where we started training at the individual level and went all the way up to brigade combat team level live fires in less than a 90-day period. The only way we were able to do that is because of the strength of our training system that we've all grown up into and had all studied in all the formal schools, so we spoke a common language. We were able to put together a unit that was functional and started to operate on its own based on the foundation that had been laid years and years before in all the schools that these professional commissioned and noncommissioned officers had attended. The beauty and value of that is we still have it but we can't ignore it, regardless of the fight we happen to be in, in Iraq or Afghanistan right now. We have to stick to our combined arms mentality and plan to execute those types of operations, because it's those types of operations that, in the end, will be the significant threats we face that we have no choice but to win. We cannot lose those operations. So my parting comment is that the doctrine and the schoolhouse are what built the foundation of what we were able to accomplish on 5 and 7 April that lead to, in my opinion, ultimate success in OIF I.



END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Colette Kiszka