



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

# Interview with MAJ Andrew Hilmes



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## **Abstract**

In April 2003, the 3rd Infantry Division's 2nd Brigade Combat Team (BCT) reached the approaches of Baghdad, Iraq, after a record-breaking march from the Kuwaiti border. To test the strength of Iraqi defenses in the capital, 2nd BCT conducted an armored reconnaissance in force into the city on 5 April. An intense firefight ensued which pitted American armor against Iraqi soldiers, paramilitary units and suicide attackers. The armored column completed its mission and withdrew from the city. The presence of American tanks in Baghdad, however, was denied by the Iraqi regime and the press. On 7 April, then, the entire 2nd BCT returned to the streets of Baghdad and secured key government facilities and strongpoints along the route into the capital. Despite strong resistance, the BCT held its positions, conducted resupply and remained overnight – an action that demonstrated the ability of US armor to move anywhere in the city and helped trigger the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime. In the process, the 2nd BCT – commanded by Colonel David Perkins – also demonstrated the ability of armored forces to operate in an urban environment and generated a series of changes in training and doctrine that reflected its experiences. The following three-person interview with Major Larry Burris, at the time commander of Charlie Company, 3-15 Infantry; Major Andrew Hilmes, then the commander of Alpha Company, Task Force 1-64 Armor; and Captain Douglas Baker, formerly the executive officer of Alpha Company, 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 MAJ Andrew Hilmes

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RC: I'm Dr. Robert Cameron (RC) and today I have the honor of speaking with veterans of the April 2003 thunder runs into Baghdad. Gentlemen, please state your name and current rank, followed by your rank and duty assignment at the time of the thunder runs.

LB: Major Larry Burris (LB). At the time of the thunder runs I was a captain and commander of Charlie Company, 3-15 Infantry.

AH: Major Andy Hilmes (AH), a captain at the time and commander of Alpha Company, Wild Bunch, 1-64 Armor.

DB: Captain Douglas Baker (DB). At the time I was a lieutenant and an executive officer (XO), Wild Bunch 5.

RC: How were combined arms principles instilled within the company? Did you do any special training?

AH: I think probably the best thing we did that was we had the benefit of deploying early. We were in theater for six months prior to combat operations and we task organized almost immediately. Larry's company sent a mech infantry platoon to my company and I cross-attached a tank platoon to his. So we had the benefit of training with those platoons that we were going to use for actual combat operations six months prior to crossing the line of departure (LD). We had a great training plan. We did section double exercises at the very beginning and progressed all the way up to collective platoon training, live fire training and then we moved over into company lanes, company sticks, task force exercises, task force live fire, and then eventually full-up brigade operations with the entire brigade combat team maneuvering at once for over a week. That ran the gamut of maneuver training all the way up to brigade live fire, day and night. The team was set that entire time, so from September 2002 until March 2003 when we found ourselves in combat, I had the same fire support officer, I had the same forward observers in my infantry platoon, the same medics from Headquarters and Headquarters Company and the same infantry soldiers from Larry's company. It couldn't have worked any better because we were a bonded team and we knew what our individual and collective strengths and weaknesses were.

RC: Did you do much training in urban operations?

LB: We did. We deployed in September. We went through the gunnery and then the training that Andy just specifically addressed, but we didn't start urban ops training until late January - and that was primarily my guys who did that. What we did was we started from individual quick-fire techniques and then we progressed through buddy team all through the company team live fire day and night in an urban ops environment. We incorporated the engineers into the enter-and-clear-a-room training. We used demolitions with the engineers; we used the

battalion mortars from 3-15. We also employed snipers, tanks and Bradleys, and that was the culminating training event for that. We spent about seven to 10 days out on that range focused specifically on urban operations training and integrating the full company team into that. The training complex didn't exist when we went out there. My parent battalion, 3-15, built this out of trailers that were out in the desert that some of the range folks, I think, had been living in, and they stacked trailers. There were probably 15 buildings, some big multiple storied, all open windows. Unlike here in the States when you go through an urban ops live fire, you're generally shooting in an entire house or some kind of building where the rounds are not going to go through the building, and you have people who are able to get up on top and walk through the catwalk to see what's going on. This wasn't the case. These walls were plywood and insulation, so whatever effect was going to occur in the real urban environment was going to occur there. As an example, when a tank fires its main gun, a building like that becomes structurally unsound if it's near the tank. So we got to integrate, which we later employed in Baghdad, things like putting dismounted squads on tanks to move through the city. We had dismounted squads working right next to tanks that were firing main gun rounds so they were comfortable operating with the vehicles like that.

RC: During the actual thunder runs, can you give some examples as to how the combined arms principles in urban operations capabilities were utilized?

LB: During the thunder runs, within the company team, you knew each person personally. But we also had worked with the same fire supporters. Andy, you had the Air Force enlisted tactical air controllers (ETACs) with you. In addition to Andy's tank platoon and our organic fire support observers, I had a Marine air and naval gunfire liaison company (ANGLICO) team that was with us that was able to integrate close air support, if required, prior to going on any mission. We would always request armed reconnaissance along the routes. I think more at the task force level, they were able to integrate the whole combined arms team together.

AH: I guess one of my most vivid memories in the middle of that operation was hearing what I thought was enemy gunfire extremely close to my tank and probably 50 meters off my flank in the big open field that we were receiving fire from, from dismounts. But it wasn't like anything I had heard before. It was a very distinct sound. I'm like, "Holy crap, that's really close. Are they training an air defense artillery gun on us?" We had seen a lot of enemy air defense guns being used in direct fire mode up to this point, and I'm like, "This isn't good." I heard a noise and then as I looked over I saw in probably about a two- to three-second delay, the effects of whatever this weapon was. That's when I realized it was an Air Force A-10 that our air liaison officer had called in. This was danger close, but there was never a doubt in my mind that they were lasing in on it correctly. It was an incredible morale enhancer to see that but it was also extremely effective against the enemy. I think that was the result of our team having trained together. We were very comfortable firing in close proximity to one another. Because in the military operations on urban terrain (MOU) environment, everything is so constrained and there's no such thing as standoff. It was a close-in night fight from the moment we LD'd until the moment we did forward passage of lines with 1st Brigade at Baghdad International Airport. You did not have time to clear fires in a very lockstep manner. I was positioned behind my lead platoon, which was my Red Platoon, and standard talk on the company net was, "Hey, Red 4, Black 6, I'm firing right off your left rear." "Roger, got it." And that "was it. Then the same thing within the company. Larry's company, Charlie Mech, was right behind me. "Hey Rock 6, Wild

Bunch 6, we bypassed at least 15 dismounts on our right side approximately 75 meters out. Be prepared." "Roger, I got it." We handed off targets like that from one company to the next because there was no way, as the lead company, that we could even handle the volume of targets we had. In order to conserve ammunition, we had to discern, okay, what is truly a threat? A threat may not be an enemy soldier with a weapon. You may have to decide, okay, this guy's actually getting ready to fire a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) at me. If it's just small arms, maybe I'm not worried about that because I can't afford the ammunition, so maybe that's something I have to hand off to the guys behind us. I know Larry will probably end up handing off a lot to the tank company, Cobra, behind him. So, you know, it was definitely a combined arms fight but a lot of it, I think, was enhanced by the relationships and the trust that was built up over the preceding six months.

LB: I think we were all comfortable with working with all the different weapons systems platforms. We understood what they're capable of and what the effects of the weapons systems were. I was very comfortable with a tank firing behind me or in front of me or another Bradley or dismounted guys operating in close proximity to me.

DB: Twenty-five millimeter on the Bradley, we definitely learned to respect that for overpasses and taller structures. It was tremendously effective.

AH: Twenty-five millimeter high explosive (HE) was incredible, especially against bunkers and trench lines.

RC: One quick follow-up question. The familiarity that you and your soldiers had with the weapons systems, working closely together – was that a lot better than anything you had experienced in other units you had served with before the war?

LB: Absolutely. I think it's a function of when we went to Kuwait. For me, that was the first time we were able to do a full, according to the 23-1, Bradley gunnery. We were pretty much unrestricted on training resources and so we were able to do a full six, seven and eight. We did all the dismounted tables. We did realistic Tables 11 and 12. So the more we shot, the more comfortable we got with our weapons systems and the more proficient we got. I think it's a function of the time and the amount of training resources we had.

AH: Well, what's funny about it is, Udairi Range in Kuwait is not a fancy range. It's very rudimentary. It's just a big, open desert that American and Kuwaiti soldiers are allowed to fire into. So it's not very restrictive. They do have a range control there but these ranges we ran were not fancy. It was master gunners going to Camp Doha and signing for lifters from the training and support center (TASC) warehouse there and then going out into the desert and walking the turf with fellow master gunners, company commanders and first sergeants. They would say, "Okay, this is how we're going to set up the range." So the company commanders and the company master gunners were putting together their own training packages. The targetry, again, was not fancy. We had to go downrange a lot and fix it from time to time, but it resulted in some of the most effective training a lot of us had had. I think it was just that Udairi Range, while it operated safely, was not nearly as restrictive of an environment to train in as it is at home station. Like in the United States where you have very distinct range fans and their range control organizations aren't as willing to give you very much latitude when it comes to

firing over soldiers' heads and doing combined dismount and maneuver platform training. So that was definitely a plus for us.

RC: I'd like to turn to battle command now. From the company command perspective, what were some of the biggest challenges in terms of commanding your company in the thunder runs?

LB: I think the largest challenge was telling the guys we were going to do it. That may sound simple but it's the most heavily defended city in the world and you have to go back and say, "Hey, tomorrow morning, six hours, we're going to go do that - and oh by the way there's nobody else going with us. But we're going to make this happen." I think once you were able to do that, the guys just fell back on their training. It was very easy. As you move along, I could hear Andy giving reports to Lieutenant Colonel Eric Schwartz and then listening to my guys and it didn't matter. It was just like any other operation where you were getting spot reports: "Engaged two 'PCs,'" or whatever it is. So you're getting constant feedback and you're able to see what's going on around you, but also able to visualize what is occurring in your company at large and then be able to describe that to Lieutenant Colonel Schwartz so he could then visualize what was going on during the operation. I don't think it was any greater challenge. The challenge was, this is what we're going to do, and then everybody said, okay, we're going to do it. Then we fell back into just like any other training event or any other operation we'd done before.

AH: I think our biggest challenge during execution - and Doug and I had a good relationship with this and a good system - but the biggest challenge in terms of battle command during execution was managing your company net and your reporting systems on the battalion task force net, so you, yourself, were not overwhelmed and were conveying good information, both up and down. Down to your subordinates and up to your commander. The general rule of thumb was that I did not talk on the task force net unless I had something that I personally wanted to inform Lieutenant Colonel Schwartz, Rogue 6, of. I let Doug do all the reporting. I don't know how he did it - you need to tell them about your systems - but Doug was getting volumes of contact reports from the platoon leaders and the platoon sergeants on the company net. Somehow he was wrapping that up into nice, tidy reports so he wasn't cluttering the task force net - very crisp reports on the task force net. "Rogue 6, Wild Bunch 5, engage and destroy 1 BMP, 24 dismounts, vicinity of this grid, continuing to develop the situation. Out." Very concise reporting that allowed me to focus on the company net and manage those platoon leaders and those platoon sergeants so I could fully understand what was happening and then give them guidance based on that. What's sort of funny about that is with two nets screaming in my ears at the same time, I could not sense the battle as much as I probably should have. Several times during the fight, my loader, then PFC Chris Tucker, every now and then he would start shoving me down in the turret. I'm like, "What are you doing?" He's like, "Sir, didn't you hear that? Didn't you hear that?" It was bullets and RPGs whizzing over our heads at very close ranges. I thought he was crazy because I couldn't hear this. As soon as he would do it, I would immediately get back up. I remember looking in front of me, at the tank in front of me, and Sergeant First Class Ronald Gaines, the platoon sergeant in that tank, was leaning out of his hatch. He's kind of a short guy, he's depressed over his .50 cal, and he's firing it manually and adjusting it underneath with the slip wrench, and I'm thinking, "Well, it can't be that bad because Gaines is fully exposed in his turret, he's firing at the enemy, he's taking it to them and,

damn it, if a platoon sergeant can do that and he's not afraid, as a company commander, I sure as hell better be up there." When it was all over, weeks later when we finally had time to talk about it, some of the guys from the platoons behind me were telling me that, "Hey sir, you know, you really inspired us by hanging up out of your hatch and firing. If a company commander is hanging it all out, then we need to be doing the same thing." I was like, "Well, shit, I was watching Sergeant First Class Gaines and I figured if it wasn't that bad then I could certainly hang." Then Gaines came back and told me, "Actually, sir, I saw you and I thought if the company commander's doing this, then I better be out too." So to me that's a pretty significant aspect of battle command because courage goes two ways, and your soldiers look to you for courage. That said, I think if any commander or leader tells you they don't get courage from their soldiers - watching their own soldiers do the hard stuff - then they're probably lying, because I got every bit as much of my confidence in combat from my own soldiers as they did from me. But I want to hear, too, about how you managed all that battle damage assessment (BDA).

DB: It's really simple. I had 100-mile-an-hour tape around my tank commander's cupola, I had tagged the multi-purpose bunker and a little gingerbread cutout for crunchies, and I'd just tick them off as they called it in. I used common sense to make sure 1st Platoon and 2nd Platoon weren't mixing up their BDAs and just reported it up. The task force net, once you jumped on, you only had a couple seconds to give your contact report and you had to make sure it was clear and concise. Lieutenant Colonel Schwartz was always calm, inspired confidence and it was just like training. Captain Hilmes was just amazing. I remember in the company, he sent up a report, "Roger, got it, okay, move on." He was just calm. We didn't realize how bad it was until after.

AH: Presence on the FM radio net, command presence, is invaluable. It's worth its weight in gold. We were talking to Lieutenant Colonel Schwartz about this last night. When things got the hairiest, for me anyway, was when Staff Sergeant Stevon Booker was shot and killed two tanks in front of me, as I called up the situation to Lieutenant Colonel Schwartz to let him know that we had a casualty and we were evaluating it to find out the extent of his injuries. Right as I was calling that report up, my infantry platoon got hit. The platoon sergeant's Bradley had an RPG that entered the engine compartment and detonated, injuring the driver. The driver thought he was on fire; and as the Bradley came screeching to a halt, the Bradley driver popped his clamshell and dove out onto the highway because he thought he was on fire. The soldier also had a broken leg so he was immobile. I'm trying to tell Lieutenant Colonel Schwartz this on the net that we had a fatality, and at the same time on my company net I hear the infantry platoon sergeant screaming that he's dead in the water, he can't move, he needs us to stop and close up the gap that was starting to happen between where he was and the rest of the company that was continuing to move. For a couple seconds, I thought to myself, "Oh crap, I'm losing control of my company. I've possibly got a fatality." I began to feel pretty unsettled. As I called that up to Rogue 6, his reply was exactly what I needed at that moment in time, and it was, "This is Rogue 6. Roger, I got it. You have all the time you need. You figure out what you need to do and call me back. Rogue 6 out." Right then and there, I knew everything was going to be okay. I guess I was really worried. We had already had a long halt of 45 minutes or more as we had that Charlie Company tank that had caught on fire. We had taken a real pounding just sitting there on the highway as the enemy repositioned and started to counterattack us. The enemy's fire was really picking up and it was really getting bad. So I knew when we had to evacuate

Staff Sergeant Booker, I knew the last thing Lieutenant Colonel Schwartz probably wanted to do was stop the column from moving. We really couldn't afford to sit on that highway exposed like that for very much longer. So, to me, again, to emphasize battle command, presence on the net, Lieutenant Colonel Schwartz with those few words to me reaffirmed that everything was going to be okay and we were able to make a pretty bad situation that much better. I think we were able to get Staff Sergeant Booker off his tank and into the medic track probably within five minutes and continue the fight without taking any more casualties.

RC: I'd like to shift to a little different aspect of battle command – Blue Force Tracker. If you had it, did you use it and how effective was it in terms of tracking and commanding your company?

LB: Well, I think, first, you have to understand that we had a limited number of Blue Force Tracker systems. We got fielded with them pretty late and we only got two. There was one in my track and then there was one in my XO's track. So in terms of commanding and controlling the company, I don't think it added to our ability to command the company. What it did do was enable us to gain situational awareness of what was around us, if there were other friendly units around us. An example was when we left Objective Rams, we went north and established a screen just south of Karbala. We were told to go to a certain location or area to tie in with another unit. Well, you could see from Blue Force Tracker that that unit was not there, so it enabled you to gain situational awareness of where other units were on the battlefield. I think had it been fully fielded, it would have been completely feasible to assist in not necessarily command but control of the organization. You'd be able to disseminate orders and graphics. And then training, I think after we got it fielded initially, we did disseminate some spot reports using Blue Force Tracker and we even tried graphics. But once again, that was only to the company commander and the XO level because there just weren't enough of the systems there.

AH: On the first thunder run on 5 April, it actually prevented a fratricide incident from happening. Shortly after Staff Sergeant Booker was hit and right after we got him medical attention, we began to move again. Right before we got hit, I was trying to tell my lead platoon leader that we need to start thinking about forward passage of lines with 1st Brigade at the airport. We had already had the system, we knew the frequencies they were on and that lead platoon leader was going to take one of his radios and drop down to their net and raise them. So with all the commotion with Staff Sergeant Booker, we had kind of lost focus on that. We began to move again; and before I could get him to start raising that friendly unit, all of a sudden the lead platoon leader calls out very excitedly, "I've got tanks 3,000 meters, preparing to engage." My first thought was, "Oh crap, here's enemy armor and we're going to have a knife fight getting out of it, trying to get off the highway." I figured they had probably been repositioning on us during those two short halts and that this was it. Then something dawned in my mind. I don't know why but I thought, "You know what? We were just starting to talk about forward passages of lines. We need to check that. He said 3,000 meters and it's about three clicks to the airport." So very quickly I dropped down my hatch and looked at my Blue Force Tracker screen. Sitting exactly three kilometers in front of us were tanks attached to Task Force 2-7 Infantry. So I immediately called, "Red 1, you need to identify, we have friendlies at that approximate grid." Probably a half-second later, I hear Lieutenant Ball, "Roger, they're friendly. Roger, they're friendly." So, in that case, Blue Force Tracker paid huge dividends and enabled us to do forward passage of lines without shooting friendlies.

RC: What lessons learned or insights would you want to pass on to an armor or mech infantry company commander or company XO today? What would you tell them to help benefit them and make them a better commander?

LB: I think traditionally we do not like to send heavy armored vehicle forces into urban areas. We've been very averse to that. I would say, though, that you can do that. An example is when they went into Fallujah. You could open a line of communication to then allow dismounted forces to come in, but you do not want to attack into an urban area only with armored, mechanized forces. It's completely feasible for them to open a corridor and allow you to clear outwards with infantry and other forces, but I would not be averse to using armored forces in an urban area. But you have to recognize that they have to be protected. Though they have great firepower and armored protection, they still have to be integrated with all the other battlefield operating systems or warfighting functions in order to be effective.

AH: I think, too, preparing to fight in an urban environment - 90 percent of our engagements were small arms engagements. They weren't main gun. The main gun was not the weapon of choice in this kind of fight. So probably our biggest payoff for our entire combat experience in Iraq, and especially on 5 and 7 April, was our emphasis on small arms gunnery and marksmanship. All our soldiers were qualified on their M4 carbines and we actually had a lot of soldiers engaging from the top of their tank with their M4s. The loader's 240 weapon system is often neglected in gunnery, but we had taken the time to actually get the loaders proficient on it and they were pretty successful with their 240s throughout the major combat operations. We also benefited from doing very detailed maintenance and pre-combat inspections prior to crossing into Iraq. I can't emphasize enough how much that paid off. I think about it all the time. We started out with 30 tanks and 14 Bradleys in the task force among the line companies, and we arrived in Baghdad with 29 tanks and 14 Bradleys after a trek of 350 miles at least. That's pretty significant having done that in only two weeks and that was all because leaders enforced very strict maintenance standards. We did very detailed services and really thought long and hard about our combat loads - what was truly needed on that vehicle and how to attach stuff correctly. A lot of our vehicles sort of did look like gypsy wagons as they moved across the berm, but every bit of that gear was needed. We had fairly robust small arms repair kits, small arms repair parts, Class IX parts that we needed all on hand to handle problems that might arise. It really paid off. I don't think we would have brought all that combat power all the way north had we not had the ability to do that. To me, that was the biggest thing we did prior to crossing the LD that yielded the most dividends. The only thing I wish we had done more of was crowd control training. I wish we had trained on checkpoint operations prior to going into Iraq.



END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Colette Kiszka