



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 Warren Sponsler



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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 Warren Sponsler, at the time Headquarters and Headquarters Company commander for Task Force 1-64 Armor; Captain James Mazurek, then the task force (battalion) maintenance officer; and Captain Anderson Puckett, formerly the Task Force 1-64 Armor logistics officer, 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 Warren Sponsler

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RC: My name is 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.

WS: My name is Major Warren Sponsler (WS). At the time, I was the Task Force 1-64 Armor Headquarters and Headquarters Company (HHC) commander and I was a captain.

JM: My name is Jim Mazurek (JM) and at the time of the thunder runs I was a captain and the task force (battalion) maintenance officer (BMO). Currently I'm out of the Army.

AP: My name is Anderson Puckett (AP). At the time of the thunder runs I was a captain and the logistics officer (S4) for Task Force 1-64 Armor. I'm currently out of the Army also.

RC: What did it take to keep the task force fueled, supplied and maintained? During the drive to Baghdad and the thunder runs, were there any special problems that you encountered in terms of supply, logistics and maintenance?

AP: I think it took a lot of flexibility more than anything. We developed and rehearsed fueling plans and all of those changed day by day. We relied pretty heavily on external assets that we embedded from the forward support battalion (FSB) to keep our fuelers fueled.

WS: I think a lot of it was also preparation prior to the execution of the mission. We spent a lot of time configuring loads, establishing methods and rehearsing in order to be able to get things done. We also took a lot of external assets with us from the FSB which we normally wouldn't have had, and that assisted greatly in maintaining flexibility and not being reliant on a long train behind us to be able to execute.

AP: We basically split them up amongst the combat battalions so we had our own little package from the FSB. Each battalion did.

RC: How did you run your logistics packages (LOGPACs)?

AP: We kept the LOGPAC staged south of the city and when we secured the area downtown in the parliamentary district, all the LOGPACs were consolidated at the brigade level and we brought up fuel and ammo with Bradley escorts into the city and then took them back out of the city that night.

RC: Can you also talk about LOGPAC operations on the drive to Baghdad?

AP: We set up refuel points and did them service station style as we were moving. That seemed to work well and it was the fastest way to do it.

WS: The challenge was trying to keep up as the rest of the task force was maintaining momentum moving forward. That's where we relied on our internal assets and the additional assets we got from the FSB. There were a couple times when we actually had to catch up with the task force to keep them fueled. Fuel was our biggest challenge and trying to keep it forward. As far as other logistical assets, food and water were obviously a concern. Once we started to get established, we were kind of waiting around to get water, but it never got to the point that it was a dire concern and we had people completely running out of water. It was certainly a challenge to organize those refuel operations and, in the field trains, we would kind of split the organization in order to make sure we were covering down on those assets.

AP: Typically that falls on the support platoon leader but we split it up between the HHC commander, the support platoon leader and myself. We would take whatever assets we needed and just split it up so we were doing things as efficiently as possible so we could continue to move. The challenge with the non-fuel and ammo logistics was that our cargo trucks were packed full with ammo and/or other living supplies. At that time, we were keeping the smaller cargo trucks - like the deuce-and-a-halves - available for prisoner transport and medical transport, so we underestimated the need for that cargo space.

JM: If I remember, we also used some of those big cargos and packed them full of Class IX repair parts. Not so much during the thunder runs but on the initial move into Iraq.

RC: During the movement up to Baghdad, was force protection an issue at all?

WS: I don't think it was a huge issue. We had split the task force into two different serials. On the long trip we did around to the western side, force protection wasn't a big concern. I think once we got over the border and realized that we really weren't running into anything, we kind of took that as the race was on. We were passing other combat units that were supposed to be providing security for us but we made an assessment of what was going on and just kept moving.

AP: The only time I really thought it was a concern was in the individual fights. When we were in Najaf, I remember taking a LOGPAC around to the individual company sites. We just weren't configured for that kind of an environment. We were configured for a linear fight where there was a safe zone and behind that were the trains, and this just wasn't the case in Najaf or in Baghdad.

WS: That was definitely a concern when we were in Najaf as well as beyond. As we were sitting there in all our unarmored vehicles with loads of ammo in the back and fuel, I remember thinking that should something catastrophic happen it would be really catastrophic. I think it really is a testament to the success of the task force forward that we didn't have to deal with a lot of that in the trains, at least in our task force.

RC: Did the vehicles themselves, especially the combat vehicles, suffer any particular problems in terms of vehicle wear either on the march to Baghdad or during the fighting in Baghdad?

JM: When we were still in Kuwait, we'd come up with somewhat of a unique task organization. We consolidated all our M88 recovery vehicles with the maintenance with the idea that I would

have the flexibility as the BMO to use one of our own to recover a vehicle rather than borrow one from another company. We just barely crossed the border into Iraq when I blew two engines on my M88s and lost those, so that was a challenge. Once we actually got up there and were moving around and were in actual contact, the biggest stuff was on the track road wheels and some of the road arms. From the minute we hit our first contact in Najaf all the way through redeployment, the biggest Class IX issue was getting enough track and road wheels. Initially it was mostly on the Abrams, but by the time we were doing stability operations it was really the M113s. The mortar tracks were basically immobile, and at that point we were pretty much reduced to cannibalizing whatever was down to try to make sure we could keep up our medic tracks. Some of our tactical operations center (TOC) vehicles were in pretty dire straits as well.

WS: One of the other vehicles that did not meet the standard was the deuce-and-a-half. At home station at Fort Stewart, Georgia, we had already gotten our light medium tactical vehicles (LMTVs), but when we went over we drew these old deuce-and-a-halves from the Army prepositioned stocks draw fleet and they were completely inadequate. They were breaking down mechanically because they were so old and offroad mobility was horrible. We ended up leaving quite a few of them behind as we lost them en route.

AP: They were underpowered and not able to deal with loose sand under any kind of a load. In a lot of cases, that caused our column to separate.

WS: We became very good at recovery operations.

RC: What were the rates of ammunition expenditure like for the thunder runs? Was this rate anticipated beforehand or did it cause some problems?

AP: Our expenditure was extreme for small arms. Before we invaded, we expected to use more main gun ammunition, but the small arms consumption was amazing, specifically the 7.62 from the coax machine guns. It was amazing. We were able to keep up with it, but I think had there been much after the second thunder run we would have tested the limits of our small arms stores at upper echelons of supply. I don't know that for a fact but it just seemed to me that we were getting tight.

RC: Were there any recurring weapons or fire control problems that you encountered?

WS: I know we had a few lost turret hydraulics but I don't remember any systemic issues.

JM: On the first thunder run, we had a tank that we weren't able to get back up fully mission capable for the second thunder run. I wouldn't consider that systemic, though. The gun tube got caught on an abutment and got spun around. We weren't able to fix that in time, not with the parts we had available.

RC: What was the spare parts situation like for the march to Baghdad? Did you have enough for the operation or did you have to resort to cannibalization a lot?

JM: When we left Kuwait, we brought a fair amount of parts. We filled up a couple of our big cargo trucks with as much as we could order in the lead up. We pretty much went through a lot of that during the march. Once we were in contact and continuing to move and operate, there really wasn't any Class IX resupply coming in behind us, and for a significant portion of the time cannibalization was the only way we were able to keep the task force ready to go. I don't know whether it was a blessing or a curse, but in the first fight in Najaf, one of the Alpha Company tanks got stuck to the point where we couldn't get it out. We were hoping to get a float tank but that never materialized. The good piece of that, though, was that we were able to use that tank to keep another six or seven tanks running. Between the thunder run to the airport and the one into Baghdad, that day in between there was a Bravo Company tank that we were able to get 15 road wheels off of. We were even trying to take the gun tube off that one.

WS: We took a lot of Class IX parts forward. It was far and above what would be the normal parts load list (PLL) that we'd be taking. I think Chief G did a great job in figuring out what to take, but there was just no way to anticipate the fact that we would not receive any Class IX resupply for the duration all the way. It was very frustrating because we had anticipated that we were going to have some of these issues - especially some of those wear items - but we never anticipated never receiving any higher echelon support. The assumption was that once we secured the airport and Baghdad, we were going to start having the opportunity for some resupply, but there was none to speak of. Even above the combat vehicles we definitely did cannibalization to keep things rolling. If you came across a dead vehicle en route, you'd usually take a look at it to make sure there wasn't something on it that you could use. At the same time, if you left something behind the assumption was that you'd never see it again, that it would be cannibalized by units following behind you.

AP: Most of that is that we were underestimating the wear on the routine wear parts. Not internally or externally but just as a whole. I think the Class IX supply in theater underestimated that too. We had a hard time, even in Kuwait, getting access to routine wear parts like road arms, sprockets and small armored vehicle track.

WS: I remember coming back to Arifjan or Doha and seeing pallets and pallets of that stuff.

AP: I think it had come in late.

WS: That certainly was a frustration we had in keeping things rolling forward. The other thing is that we don't ever train to that level where you're putting that kind of wear on the vehicles. We'd go to the National Training Center (NTC) for two weeks and that's kind of rough and then you go to the field for a few weeks, but you're just not putting the miles on like you are in combat. I don't know that we had planned on truly what the actual wear is when you put that many miles on one of those combat vehicles.

RC: Did the nature of the fighting during the thunder runs pose any special challenges for battle damage assessment and repair?

JM: There was the Charlie 12 tank that caught on fire and had to be left. We eventually went out and recovered that but it had to stay out there for a while. The majority of the attacks were small arms and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and for me back in the task force unit

maintenance collection point (UMCP) it wasn't that much of a challenge because almost every vehicle except for that one was able to drive back or get towed back to my location and my mechanics were able to look at it. It really wasn't a case of us having to go forward. I think we did that maybe a handful of times in and around Najaf to look at stuff, but it wasn't standard for us to do that. It was a lot more of them bringing their stuff to us.

AP: I don't know if it was by design but I think we were probably forced to go this way after the M88s broke down. We put a lot of energy and emphasis into self-recovery. Like Warren was saying, for both track and wheeled vehicles we became very good at self-recovery, and that's not how we were training at NTC or even in Kuwait. We were training to send the M88s forward to get the vehicle. This was different.

WS: I think the crews got very good too at taking care of their own stuff. In no other place was the emphasis on crew-level maintenance like it was there. The guys realized that their vehicles were their homes, their transportation and their security, and if they lost that thing it wasn't, "Oh, I guess I'm not training today"; it was, "I'm going to get left behind" or, "I'm really going to be stuck."

RC: Were the extension racks that were put on the vehicles effective?

AP: Absolutely. We could not have done anything without them. We just could not have stored the days of supply, water and food and PLL to keep the fleet moving if we didn't have the racks. We just didn't have the storage. We just couldn't have done it.

RC: Was there an unanticipated protective value from those extension racks during the actual thunder runs?

AP: In a couple cases, yes. There were risks with them too. It made the Bradley much wider than the drivers and track commanders were used to, so it was a maneuver challenge. There was some pre-detonation RPG value in several cases I know of.

RC: For the HHC commander, what was your greatest challenge?

WS: My greatest challenge during the movement north was just keeping everything together. With the sheer numbers of vehicles and numbers of soldiers that are in that organization and in the fuel trains themselves, the command and control definitely becomes challenging. You don't have nearly the numbers of radios that would certainly help. We spent a lot of time on people getting lost in the move and people would not know the unit was moving. All kinds of other stuff would happen, especially at nighttime. It was probably the longest day of my life moving around Karbala. It was definitely difficult. We had a couple vehicle collisions. We had a couple vehicles fall in the ditches, and without any communications in these five or six vehicle serials it takes a lot of time and energy to keep everybody together and keep everybody moving. We did a couple unorthodox things in the way we organized the field trains for movement to try and intersperse those vehicles around that had radios and move in these separate serials instead of in one big long train, and that certainly helped. The cross-country mobility, like we discussed before, was certainly an issue. From a supply standpoint, we've already talked about that. I think we met that requirement pretty well. I don't think there was ever a time as a task force

that we weren't able to execute what we had to do based on a supply issue. Certainly another one of the biggest concerns I had was the protection of the field trains when we realized that this was not going to be a linear type fight, especially when we were moving around Karbala. We were tucked up right behind the task force by necessity and it got to the point where we had to pass through a tank company. They basically established a blocking position to protect those elements but, like I said before, if things had gone differently, and they certainly could have, it could have gotten really bad really quick based on the amount of protection we had. We did everything we could. We had extra .50 cal mounts and extra weapons systems all over the place, but the command and control was the biggest challenge even in that too.

RC: How about for battalion maintenance?

JM: During the actual movement, a lot of what Warren just said also applied to the UMCP. The lack of radios combined with having a lot of those deuce-and-a-halves as well. On that same long movement, we had two collisions and a trailer full of PLL parts that ended up on its side in the middle of the night. We were trying to recover that stuff and my motor sergeant, my chief and I were the only three guys who had radios. That was certainly a challenge. The Class IX situation was also a problem once we went through the parts we had stockpiled beforehand. There were a significant number of times where a mechanic was able to identify a problem and he'd just look at me and say, "Hey, sir. I could fix it if we had the parts, but there's nothing I can do right now." That's when we started scouring the net to find out if there was maybe a tank somewhere that we could take parts from. I would say far and away the parts situation was probably the biggest challenge maintenance wise.

RC: What about for the S4?

AP: My biggest challenge was adapting to this environment. We had soft vehicles and we were just not built for this. In the thunder run, we converted several 113s and in my vehicle we put the sergeant major, an extra medic, myself and the chaplain just to try and get some command and control for logistics forward because the 577 was unwieldy and almost useless. You couldn't mount a weapon on it and it was a high profile target. We had to figure out a way to use the 113s and to get into the fight so we could provide support from the front. It was a challenge because we were using a lot of unorthodox methods, like Warren said. There were times when I'd take fuelers and ammo trucks with me, leave the rest of the support platoon with the support platoon leader in the field trains, and do mini LOGPACs. It was just unorthodox. We had to adapt to the environment and it was pretty challenging.

WS: I thought everybody did a really good job. I remember passing LOGPACs. A standard procedure we'd do is to pass LOGPACs from one company to the next. Things like that that were developed out there on the fly really served the unit well.

RC: Are there any final insights, lessons learned or suggestions?

WS: In that environment, flexibility is the biggest thing and you need to learn how to identify what the issue is, what the problems are and adapt your organization and functions to meet those problems. We certainly did a lot of things that were not by any stretch of the imagination

doctrinal, but it was meeting the requirement at the given time with what we had that was important. It's a testament to the task force and what those who made it up were able to do.

AP: I think as a unit or an institution, the Army should not be afraid to be flexible. The Army should not be afraid to use satellite phones. We were kind of afraid to get out of the box and out of the training mold until we just had to, and then we became very good at it. In those situations, you have to not be afraid to spend money on some racks or get a few satellite phones so you can call in a medical evacuation 200 miles away. It took us a little while to get there, and I think that's critical.

JM: I would add that when we were going over there, my mechanics on some levels were very unprepared for the idea that they might actually have to fight. They were used to going to the NTC or to the field at Fort Stewart where, if you weren't fixing tanks, Bradleys or Humvees, you were listening to music or hanging out in your truck. It was a little bit of a shock to them when you told them, "Hey guys. We're not off limits back here. You need to be seriously pulling security and maintaining your weapons." Once they got over that and swallowed that pill, they did a great job. I think that needs to be indoctrinated into everybody. It certainly seems like in future conflicts, that's going to be the rule rather than the exception.



END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Jennifer Vedder