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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 SFC Ronald Gaines



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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 dual interview with Captain Ryan Kuo – at the time a platoon leader in Alpha Company, Task Force 1-64 Armor – and Sergeant First Class Ronald Gaines – then the platoon sergeant for 1st Platoon, 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 SFC Ronald Gaines

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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.

RK: My name is Captain Ryan Kuo (RK) and I was at Fort Stewart, Georgia, with Alpha Company, 1-64 Armor.

RG: I'm Sergeant First Class Ronald Gaines (RG) and I was also with Alpha Company, 1-64 Armor. I was 1st Platoon's platoon sergeant.

RC: What kinds of experience with mounted urban combat did you have before the thunder runs?

RK: I'd say zero. This was my first assignment in the Army as a platoon leader and I hadn't previously had any other deployments.

RG: I'd say that was about the size of it.

RC: What were the rules of engagement (ROE) and did they make sense given the nature of the fighting you actually experienced during the thunder runs?

RK: What I understood as the ROE was that they were pretty open and flexible for us. Anything we deemed as a threat we had open rules to engage. As time went on obviously they changed, but during the thunder runs everything we saw as a threat we took the appropriate actions on.

RC: How did you distinguish between hostile threats and non-combatants?

RG: It would depend on the situation. Early on during the fighting we encountered people in uniforms, but as things developed they were out of uniform and at that point it became difficult for us to distinguish. Fortunately for us, we were in tanks and could take a little more time to confirm targets. If a target or an individual had a weapon, we didn't need to necessarily engage them at that second; we could wait and confirm who he was. But on the thunder runs, if he had a weapon or was in a uniform, we could engage straight away.

RK: There were a lot of handoffs going on between the units as well. There was a lot of discussion on the radio as to whether a person was a hostile or not. We were handing off information to each other as we were driving down the roads. There was a lot of care taken by the entire battalion to make sure we didn't engage targets that shouldn't have been engaged.

RG: Exactly.

RC: Was it anticipated, especially on the first thunder run, that there would be a fair amount of civilian traffic and a civilian presence?

RK: The plan as it was written was to attack early in the morning just to avoid that specific issue. It was supposed to go off around 0630 so when we got on the road, everybody was asleep. Even the guys in the foxholes were asleep. The problem started as it got later in the day when more traffic started to come onto the roads. At that point, though, the firefight had grown so big that people who shouldn't have been there started staying away. Even if vehicles were there, most of the time they weren't good vehicles.

RC: Was your platoon at full strength at the start of each thunder run? If not, what kind of accommodations did you make to fight your platoon at reduced strength?

RK: I was at a three-tank slant three. I had three tanks, four men per, and we just adjusted our formation and the personnel within the platoon. To tell the truth, the only tank that was manned all the way to Baghdad didn't make it all the way to Baghdad. Parts of it did - but it lived on in memory. It was lost in Najaf.

RG: Since it was my tank that was lost, I took my junior tank commander and his gunner and put them on my crew, which gave me myself, my gunner, another tank commander and another gunner. That way, if we had to switch or had to change out, we had seasoned and competent people in the tank. It actually turned out to be one of the best crews I've ever had.

RK: My platoon was slant four for both missions. I was at full strength. I had all my guys and didn't really have much of an issue in terms of maintenance at that point.

RG: We lost my two-tank on the second thunder run but he came back, so at that point it was just myself and the lieutenant on 7 April.

RC: Where was your platoon in relation to the rest of the company during each thunder run?

RG: My platoon led both of them. On the 5th and the 7th we led the battalion and the brigade.

RK: I brought up the rear. I brought up the back end with the 113s, the medics and the executive officer (XO) was behind us. I was the third platoon in the order of march.

RC: So you guys were the lead and the rear. What sorts of special challenges did you have? I'm assuming for the lead platoon that you were in charge of navigation of the task force. I'm assuming you had a separate set of responsibilities for bringing up the rear.

RK: The column was kept very tight on purpose so we didn't get cut up in the middle of the city. We kept it so tight that it was almost like we were in the same area. There was maybe a 400-meter difference between the front tank and the rear vehicle.

RG: He's only talking within the company. He pulled up the rear of the company and had train security.

RK: Well, I had train security but we only brought the two 113s with us. There really wasn't a whole lot back there. From my standpoint, 1st Platoon would go through an area and stir up the whole hornet's nest, then we'd come up behind and get right in the middle of the nest. I didn't really see much of a difference between the locations of the two platoons in the fight that we saw. I know Bobby Ball, who was the 1st Platoon leader, had some issues with navigating. The maps we'd received initially were just the 1:100,000 maps. We also got some satellite imagery as well, but halfway through there was some confusion because there was an area called the "spaghetti junction" and we weren't sure which onramp to go on. We figured, "It's a city. We'll just follow the signs to the airport." So he was just going to do that, but there was so much smoke from all the firing that was going on in the area that it was hard to see the signs. He did make one turn but he corrected it relatively quickly.

RG: We got the op order late at night and there was only one legible map of Baghdad. My platoon leader, Lieutenant Ball, took that map and he was the lead tank for the mission. The problem was that the map was so bad that you couldn't tell what onramps went where. We didn't really know what the route was. We knew the route going up, but once we got into that spaghetti junction area we couldn't tell which part of the ramp we needed to take. At that point we figured just to follow the signs.

RK: It was just like driving in Chicago or any other big city. You get confused on how to get to the airport and which road to take.

RC: The only problem with getting confused in that environment is that bad things can happen - much worse than getting lost driving in Chicago.

RK: True, and there was one tank that did make that turn and missed the fact that we all turned around, made a big U-turn at some point and kept on going. He got into a circle and got into his own little firefight before he corrected himself and came back into the fold. It does cause issues, but the problem was that, in our eyes, we weren't prepared to go into the city. It was a shock to everybody to get the order to go into the city for both the thunder runs.

RG: Prior to that, they had said there will be no tanks in Baghdad. We were told that if we ever had to go in there, it would only be for a rescue mission or something like that. So, it was a surprise the night we got the op order. We were also surprised at the order of march and that we were the only unit going in. We took a look at everything, decided to use a staggered formation and to stay on the right side of the road in the proper lane instead of splitting it. We didn't know if, when we got to the center of the city, we could have reconfigured the convoy or if they'd split up. It was a good thing we did it this way because we would have been in trouble once we got to the spaghetti junction.

RK: There were these big concrete barriers as well, so even the tanks would have had difficulty crossing over from one side of the road to the other. Plus, we also weren't sure what the traffic was going to be like. If we had faced a lot of oncoming traffic, it would have been very easy to have it get bunched up and block one side of the road, and then you have a whole column of vehicles that are just sitting there. That wouldn't have been good so we just stayed to one side of the road. Land navigation is tough in the city especially when you don't have any satellite imagery - or if the satellite imagery you have, like the one Bobby got, was old. Some of the

construction that was going on and some of the things that were wrong with the roads weren't even on the map.

RC: How much of the column's navigation was dependent on that lead platoon leader?

RK: The whole column. All of it.

RC: So the lead platoon chooses the route and everything else is pretty much follow-the-leader?

RK: Yes. We all knew the route, but the problem was that we only had those 1:100,000 maps. Our route was literally an inch long on the map. That's no way to navigate inside an urban environment.

RG: The commander only had one map and he gave it to my platoon leader to navigate off of. The commander was behind me so he was pretty close anyway, but the map didn't show what was on the ground.

RC: Between the poor map - wrong scale, perhaps - the limited satellite imagery and whether or not there were visibility issues, how disorienting was this as you proceeded on either of the thunder runs.

RK: It wasn't that bad.

RG: It was good until we got to a certain point - the big junction. At that point, we had destroyed a lot of vehicles, they were burning and there was a lot of smoke. We actually had to take a quick stop. We called up and said, "Hey, I don't know which ramp to take." It was hard to see. It was hard to keep your head outside the hatch too because we were getting shot at. Other than that, it was good because we could see where we were going and could continue on. It was just that one junction.

RK: It was a relatively smooth movement. Bobby found out he was on the wrong track almost immediately and he got us corrected, turned around and back to where we needed to go. The second thunder run went even smoother. We'd already done it. We'd already gone on that route; it was just that we made a big right turn to go to downtown at that point. Once you get on that big famous road between the airport and the Green Zone, then it's just a straight shot right downtown.

RG: It was an easy fix. Once we got on the ramp and were going up, we saw the ramp we should have been on. It's just like being on the regular freeway and seeing the exit you should have taken. In a tank it's easy to fix, though. Left turn, run over the barrier and continue on. That's basically what happened. As soon as we crested it, we knew it was the wrong one.

RC: Were signs still up?

RG: Signs were still up. My driver was reading how far we were from the airport, but if you know the spaghetti junction in Louisville, this one was five times as bad. We could see certain signs but a lot of them were obscured by smoke. At that point, we had shot a couple of BMPs

underneath the underpass and they were smoking everything out. It was hard to see until we got through the smoke. There were a bunch of ramps coming in at one time.

RK: That one area had all these ramps coming in, there was the smoke, and the onramp was underneath a bunch of the other overpasses, so all that smoke was collecting in that area as well. Visibility was an issue. I even thought about popping smoke at one point. Underneath that underpass that would have been a big mistake, though, so I'm glad I didn't do that.

RC: Did you find it difficult to retain formation and prevent individual vehicles from becoming separated at any time?

RK: The only time we really had an issue was when Charlie Company's tank caught on fire and we kind of got spread out a little bit. They stopped and we kept going a little bit before they notified us that we were supposed to stop. For the most part, we were very good at keeping other vehicles that weren't part of the column, outside of the column. When they did get close, they usually weren't close for very long.

RC: Were you surprised by the intensity and close-range nature of the fighting during the thunder runs?

RG: We kind of talked about that before. We didn't know what it was going to be like. We'd had other contacts and other battles that we had fought and we discussed what it may be like prior to going in. We thought we'd be looking at a bunch of guys sitting on the side of the road, and that's pretty much what it was. I was surprised at how close it was. The answer would be, yes, it was close. Any time you were going for a sidearm or a carbine from the top of your tank, or you were shooting guys from as far away as me to you or double that distance, that's pretty close. That's not what tankers are normally used to.

RK: Or you're manually inputting the range for your coax, dropping it down to 100 meters. The intensity of it was expected. We were going into Baghdad, so most of us knew that it was going to be something of a high-intensity firefight, but we weren't anticipating it to be as close as it was. A lot of the highway was in a big bowl. So, for anybody to really get at us, they had to get into that bowl too. You had enemy all on the high ground and they weren't more than 50 meters away at times. Some of those buses unloaded guys at 20 meters. One guy tried to touch my tank at one point, and I wasn't too happy with that.

RG: Not only did you have the fighters and the local militia, but you also had the guys who were just shooting from their balconies and their houses. It was even hard to see where the faraway shots, which were pinging off your tank, were coming from. They were coming from the apartments, buildings and rooftops along with all the other guys on the roads, the overpasses, the bunkers, the underpasses and the foxholes.

RC: How did you balance your time between managing the platoon, fighting the tanks and your own personal defense in some cases?

RK: Our company was very good. We had trained for six months in Kuwait prior to the invasion. We were tight. We didn't really need to have a lot of radio traffic and there wasn't a

lot during the entire run. From a platoon leader standpoint, I didn't really have to manage two separate radios for most of the run because there was only one radio that was going full speed and that was the platoon net - and even the platoon net was pretty quiet at that point because everybody was busy fighting their tank. It was very easy from my standpoint to do that because I didn't have to navigate anywhere. I could just tell my driver to follow that tank in front of him. It was easy for me to fight my tank because all I was doing was engaging targets and telling my gunner where to slew the turret. I'm sure Bobby had a much more complicated set of tasks that he had to do. For this fight, as big as it was, it was tactically one of the simpler ones we had done. We were following a straight route and following the leader, so it was very easy to lead my platoon and fight my tank at the same time. Fighting my tank was really just slewing the turret, and that's not the hardest thing that a platoon leader has to do.

RG: My platoon leader had the additional burden of navigation, so his gunner fought a lot of the tank. The radio traffic from the platoon was also light. It was mostly contact reports and that stuff was sent to me. The platoon leader took care of the platoon net and I took care of the company net, that way we weren't double-tapping each other. We each managed our own net and our own fight. What was easy for me was that I had two tank commanders on my tank and I also had a driver who was a gunner. My two-tank commander's gunner was driving so he was calling out contacts. I gave my gunner free reign of the turret, for coax not for main gun. I looked over to my left where the other tank commander was and I said, "Hey, Bill. You're a tank commander too. You can light up whatever you want to light up." It was really easy.

RK: You have to think about it from the standpoint that we had six months of a dedicated trainup in Kuwait. It wasn't like training in the States. We were literally out there every day training for six months straight. When we moved into Iraq, we'd gotten into several fights, done several movements, so our whole company was extremely tight and very proficient at that point. Going into that fight was almost like what we'd practiced for all season long. We'd done all these practice games and this was like our Super Bowl.

RG: We'd already done the hard stuff and were ready to knock this out. As a matter of fact, that's exactly what the comments were when we got the op order. "Let's get this over with."

RK: The op order was short, too.

RC: What about when it came to fire discipline and coordinating fires as the column was moving through the streets. What kinds of problems did you have?

RG: Our fire discipline was awesome. The amount of civilian traffic that was on the road in the beginning was light and, as the day began to go on, more civilian traffic got on. We were extra careful, and at one point I called my three-tank commander and said, "Watch out, you've got something." He was already braking triggers and letting civilians go. You could kind of see it. I know you talked about the bus on the side. If it didn't look right, we would take an extra second to look at it; and more often than not they would open up on you. Whether it was an ambulance, a school bus, a tour bus, a cop car or a fire truck, they pretty much used all of those vehicles to engage us. Our fire discipline was good. We talked about the oncoming traffic coming down the road; and if we couldn't really tell if a vehicle was civilian or not - and if then you could see them as they were going past your flank moving weaponry or something like that

- you would call back to the platoon behind you. More often than not, the guy behind you would light them up. It was easy.

RK: I think the biggest challenge from my standpoint was getting some of my guys to take some of those danger shots. We were in a tank and if they (*inaudible*) your back a little bit - you have a guy off your right rear, you can't get at him and you need your wingman to take him out - normally you wouldn't shoot that close to another vehicle, especially your own vehicle, but every once in a while you had to do that. You'd just tell the guy in front of you to get down and then take that shot. I really had to train my guys to do that. I had to convince them to do it. "I want you to take that shot. If I get hit a little bit, I don't care. I'll be inside the tank and I'll be all right."

RG: We joked about that prior to, that if you heard your call sign and the word "Duck!" you needed to get down. My lieutenant was right in front of me and we were all shooting at the same stuff all around us. He had some guys approaching him on his right flank and the shot was right over his right shoulder. I knew where I was, I knew where my weapons system was pointing and I started shooting. I remember him looking back over his shoulder. I sent a radio transmission, telling him it was me and he said, "Keep it coming." We shot really close. We did stuff you would never do in training.

RK: It was almost stuff they train you not to do to a certain extent, but in those situations you have to do it and you have to take those risks. That's part of being in combat. You take certain tactical risks in order to accomplish what you're trying to do. We got a lot of looks when we talked about this when we got back, especially in the Career Course. I definitely got some looks about it but it was something that needed to happen at that point.

RG: Even after those battles, my lieutenant would bring back a handful of the petals that were from a sabot petal or an impact petal that discard off the rounds. He'd pull quite a few out of his bustle rack. It was close but it was a risk you had to take, and we knew it going in. We stayed close to keep the convoy tight, the security up and keep vehicles from penetrating the convoy.

RC: How much of those close-proximity methods need to be incorporated into training?

RK: I think it's all about weapon orientation. It's just like when you go to the range with an M4 or an M16. You need to know where your muzzle is pointed at all times. I think people rely too heavily on these rules. They get too wrapped up around the fact that your weapon is on safe. Yes, those are good safety measures to have, but when you rely on those things you almost become lazy. "Oh, my weapon is on safe. It doesn't matter where I point it." When we trained in Kuwait, we knew this was going to go for real, so when we went on maneuvers and started moving around, we made sure we knew where every weapon on every vehicle was pointed, where the weapon orientations were. That helps when you get to the point when you're actually going to fire. Knowing where the shot is and knowing you're good, that you've got your bore sighting done. You know you have the skill because you've done the training to be able to do it. You know you can take the shot in a safe manner yet, according to what you've been trained, it's considered unsafe.

RG: He led most of the stuff up to Baghdad. We were on the way to Najaf or somewhere and I was listening to his radio transmission, I was engaging, and where I was engaging he was starting to turn in because I was tailing the column. He started making a right turn and I'm shooting that way. I can't see him but I know he's going that way, so I had to brake triggers to let him come across until I came around and could continue to take the shot.

RC: I understand that one of you had some experience with mine plows.

RG: That was me.

RC: Did these work very well in the city? What did you use them for?

RG: I used the mine plow for everything. I really didn't want the plow platoon. The commander said we were going to have a mine plow platoon and everybody laughed at me because I knew I was going to get it. I've had a lot of experience with mine plows so when we got them we used them for everything. We got the lead up front for the simple fact of having mine plows just in case there was stuff to push out of the way. Some of the barriers on the second thunder run on the 7th we had to breach with a mine plow. On the 5th, there was a complex obstacle overwatched by 200 Fedayeen or whoever they were - I didn't bother to ask their names - on the left and right and we used the plow to bust through that as well. We used them not only in breaching operations but also in route clearance. We were called forward again on somebody else's attack when they needed a plow to clear their route. I went and cleared it. After we got into Baghdad, we used the plow in the built-up areas to move vehicles and big concrete planters that fit perfect between the skids. We moved them around and made our own defensive positions and obstacles.

RC: Thank you for your time, gentlemen. I appreciate your comments and insights.



END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Jennifer Vedder