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 Ryan O'Connor

Combat Studies Institute
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Abstract

In this first part of a two-part interview regarding his February 2005 through February 2006 deployment in support of Operation Enduring Freedom-Afghanistan, Major Ryan O'Connor discusses his command of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, part of the 173rd Airborne Brigade. He talks about his company's predeployment training; counterinsurgency operations in Paktika Province and Ghazni Province; and the size and features of his company area of operations. O'Connor calls this year the busiest of his life and likens his experiences to a country-size game of chess. "I kind of knew what they were doing and they knew what I was doing," he explained, "just like on a chess board. With the mountains, the desert and some of the riverbeds, you had these set pathways that you could move about. You had to guess three steps ahead what that guy was going to do, action-reaction-counteraction, and take it on down the line, down the chain and try to trap these guys. That's the first time I bought into that chess analogy like, 'Wow, this *is* like a giant chess game.'"

Interview with MAJ Ryan O'Connor

8 October 2008

LL: This is Laurence Lessard (LL) and I'm continuing my interview with Major Ryan O'Connor (RO) on his experiences during Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Today's date is 8 October 2008 and this is an unclassified interview. When did you find out that you'd be deploying to Afghanistan?

RO: Fairly shortly after we got back from Iraq. The warning order was out there. I'm not sure when the official one came out, but almost as soon as we got off the aircraft we knew in an unofficial way that we'd be going back and we knew we were going to Afghanistan. So 10 or 11 months out, we definitely knew we were going back and we were going to Afghanistan.

LL: When did you pick up your company?

RO: 11 May 2004.

LL: The same battalion – 1st Battalion, 508th?

RO: Yes.

LL: Which company?

RO: Charlie Company. It actually worked out very well. I don't think the timing could've been more perfect because we got back from Iraq, did some reconstitution – not much, very limited. We went on a month of block leave. I want to say on block leave the battalion commander called me and said, "You're going to take Charlie Company in May." Once we got back from block leave, which was all of April, 11 days into May I took that company. We had nine months of trainup, reconstituted, got our equipment, retrained and then deployed, so the timing worked out great.

LL: What did the training and preparation look like for your company?

RO: It was interesting because initially when I took over Charlie Company, we were under European Command (EUCOM) in United States Army Europe (USAREUR) and we were told to be ready for the division ready force (DRF) rotations again come 1 July. My company was first in the chute to be ready for DRF-1 come 1 July. Of course I didn't have my vehicles, I didn't have my mortars, I didn't have any of my machine guns, I didn't have hardly anything. My command post was a shambles. It was interesting. So we started out down that route. We just tried to get ready. We had to do jump refresher, all this kind of stuff to get ready for DRF-1. Eventually sometime in June they said, "Okay, that doesn't make any sense, we already know you're going back to Afghanistan, so stop with the DRF-1 and get ready for Afghanistan." We had to do the majority of our training in Grafenwoehr because in Vicenza there aren't a lot of facilities to do training. Most of our training takes place in Grafenwoehr, Germany. We did all the standard weapons training and qualification on all weapons systems. There was a lot of

physical fitness training because we knew we were going up into the mountains, up to that altitude. We were huge on physical fitness. We had first responder training like getting some more advanced medical training for every soldier in the battalion. Of course we did the mission readiness exercise at Hohenfels, which was excellent, I thought. It also included cultural training, language training, negotiations training. Early on, this was when they had started to insert a huge amount of dealing with local populations and that kind of thing in the mission readiness exercise at Hohenfels, so you did a lot of that. We had one big deployment to Grafenwoehr followed by the big rotation in Hohenfels at the Combat Maneuver Training Center (CMTC). We came back in December and went on block leave and then we did another week and a half in January at Grafenwoehr again, very high-intensity, firing every single weapons system we had with lots of rounds downrange. We got the zero correct, got everything ready, got the muscle memory back and then we deployed in February.

LL: Was there any one piece of it that you, as the company commander, emphasized especially because you thought this is what we're really going to need?

RO: The battalion was good on the commander's focus on shooting and the medical piece. We did have some limited communication with the battalion that was in the area of responsibility (AOR) already. It was very limited but we did have it. We knew we were going to be extended and stretched far, so those pieces were big for the battalion anyway. The thing I would say I tried to hit on very much was the physical fitness. It's hard to train for mountains and altitude without mountains and altitude, so I talked with the battalion commander and he okayed me taking a hit on the normal Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) scores and what gets briefed if I could increase what I'm doing with road marching. We foot-marched all the time. We didn't do the old once-a-week. We didn't do the old, "Okay, we're going to increase so it's twice a week." In July until the time we deployed, we set our foot-marching plan for those months, the whole thing, comprehensive. So we went three or four days in between each to give us enough rest. But then our focus, at the company level, tried to be on foot-marching just to get us used to the weight, because we knew there was going to be a lot of dismounted patrolling up in the mountains and at altitude. It was hard to replicate, obviously, the mountains and the altitude, but that's what we focused on at the company level.

LL: In retrospect, what piece of the predeployment training paid the biggest dividends once you got to Afghanistan?

RO: I was really impressed with the mission readiness exercise at CMTC and just having everyone be exposed to having to do everything. Like with the Iraq thing, now we know you have to be able to do everything. It was a much smaller scale, obviously, but at the mission readiness exercise everyone was exposed to doing everything. A platoon leader couldn't just sit back and do a conventional platoon attack, platoon raid, platoon ambush. No, you had to deal with the villagers; you had to deal with the mullah. You had to engage the mayor and find out why the people are all upset. Everyone got exposed to having to do everything and I think that paid off. For the majority of my trainup time, two of the three platoon leaders hadn't been in Iraq. Actually, one of them switched out, so it got to that all three hadn't been to Iraq. "I'm a platoon leader, why do I have to talk to the mullah and the mayor and all that?" "Well, because they're in your area of operations (AO)." So I think that was the best. The normal Army stuff we

know how to do and we're very good at it. The full-spectrum operations are where it paid off, especially at CMTC.

LL: How was the move into theater this time?

RO: The plan was the standard left-seat / right-seat ride with the battalion that was there. As they were phasing out, we were phasing in. The switch-out was in February. Well, that's in the dead of winter in Afghanistan in the mountains. The area got hit with the biggest snowstorm in 20 years or whatever. The battalion was coming out and they were hurting. The majority of their battalion equipment was en route trying to phase out of theater by ground. Well, it was all stuck out in the snow, in the nether regions. We would tune into some of their battle update briefs (BUBs) on the classified side and almost every BUB that we tuned into, turned into, "Where are the trucks? Where's all the battalion equipment?" The battalion forward operating base (FOB) was at Orgun-E, so we went in through Kyrgyzstan and we were there for two or three days as a battalion. It was very simple and very organized. It was an Air Force base. We went from there to Bagram and stayed there for two or three days. We had some classes and Task Force IED was there giving us some pointers. Task Force IED was new, I believe, at the time, and they were giving us some pointers and classes. We got issued our equipment. Then we flew by helicopter from Bagram to Orgun-E to the battalion FOB. I'm trying to remember exactly why, but from there the pace seemed to accelerate quickly. We did have this plan of a week of left-seat / right-seat rides and I think it came from the fact that the old battalion had gotten so far behind trying to get out because the weather had really messed them up. They were way behind and you have to have the last man out by a certain date or I don't know what happens, the sky falls in. So the next thing I knew, we were only at the battalion FOB for two or three days and my company minus a platoon was flown down to Waza Khwa in southeast Paktika and dropped on what had been about a platoon-plus patrol base, and then the helicopters left. We were there with the company command and control and maybe a platoon-minus from the old unit there to greet us in three feet of snow with three feet of mud under that. Holy cow, now what do we do? Well, not much, because we can't patrol. We can't leave the patrol base because our vehicles get stuck. We just kind of sat there and looked at each other for three days. We did do some limited patrols up to the north of our company patrol base, maybe one or two. They taught us some stuff about maintenance, maintenance tricks and tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) and stuff for the AO. We learned about maintaining the vehicles, the generators there at the little patrol base and fuel stuff. It was very rudimentary. Then they left and there we sat up in the snow. So it started off very organized and methodical, dress-right-dress Big Army, and it just seemed to accelerate, accelerate, accelerate until we got to the battalion FOB and then it was almost instant after that.

LL: Did you take all your company gear with you or did you leave some and pick up others there in theater? How did that work for you?

RO: Between Iraq and Afghanistan, waiting for all our vehicles to come back … I got one vehicle back, I think, and then at some point it was determined that none of our vehicles were going to come back. That's when the Army decided that stuff was going to stay in theater. So eventually I turned that one vehicle back into somebody and I didn't even have any vehicles. Really all we had was what we were carrying as a light infantry company.

LL: Weapons and individual equipment?

RO: Yes, night observation devices, and then a small amount of company equipment like radio equipment, all that kind of stuff. So that's what we took with us. However, when we landed at the company patrol base, we inherited about a platoon's worth of vehicles. I don't think it was 12 vehicles. It was less than 10 vehicles. They called it a company patrol base, a company AO, but it wasn't even a full platoon – and the company commander showed up there two weeks before the changeout. They called it a company AO but it was not by any stretch of the imagination, so we fell in on their 10 or 12 vehicles. I'm not even talking uparmored. That's what we fell in on.

LL: What happened to your other platoon?

RO: Initially they stayed up at the battalion FOB.

LL: Did you ever get them back?

RO: Yes. The initial plan was that every company contributed a platoon to rotate through FOB security. Since my company was going the furthest out and the farthest first, we were the first to leave a platoon there. So we went out with a smaller echelon and got settled. We let the battalion get settled and let them get their feet wet, see what was going on. We let the rotation work out and then we were getting the platoon back. I had a platoon at the battalion FOB. I got down to our company FOB. We called it a FOB but it was a little patrol base, it was ridiculous. But we get down there and I needed a platoon to secure that. That left me a platoon at any one time to patrol, a platoon and a company command post. Having to lay that out for the battalion commander, "Sir, you're telling me to do all these things but I basically am a glorified platoon leader at this time." Eventually I got that platoon back and I got all my forces back. I got attachments, I got everything until I was very much able to patrol where three-plus platoons at any one time were out patrolling. I got support from the operations officer (S3). The S3 got on my side, as did the sergeant major, until the battalion commander finally realized. There was a company that didn't have their own company FOB. They were stationed at the battalion FOB. They lived there, I didn't live there, and we were giving the same amount for force protection. How does that work? Eventually and finally, yes, we got the whole company together. The previous battalion hadn't been running like that. They really had their battalion FOB that they operated out of and this was kind of like a combat outpost. We went in initially, right from the get-go, this was going to be a company AO all the way down here. So eventually I got all my forces.

LL: When you first showed up, you said there was three feet of snow on top of three feet of mud and you're having a tough time walking any place. Were you able to get introduced to any of the local notables at all?

RO: Yes. Waza Khwa itself is a village inside a district. There's the district of Waza Khwa and then of course it's named after the village of Waza Khwa. The mayor and the police chief of Waza Khwa were there. The old company commander introduced us and we had a big dinner, a welcome and all that and it was great. That was about it as far as introductions just because of the weather. We couldn't move and the Afghans couldn't move either. After we'd been there

about two or three weeks, as the snow melted some, our Humvees were still having trouble. I couldn't patrol large areas in my AO, but they with their Hiluxes, Toyota 4Runners and motorcycles could, so some of them started coming in to Waza Khwa to meet me. Some guys from Wor Mamay, the mayor, the district leadership and some of the notable personalities from Wor Mamay came up. We were able to get out, after about two weeks, all the way up to Jani Khel and Dila and meet those mayors. The first night, I met the mayor and police chief of Waza Khwa, within two weeks I had met the mayor and some notable personalities from Wor Mamay and Waza Khwa, and then in under three weeks I had met everyone in my AO for that time. After about four months, I got four districts from another province added to my AO, so then I obviously had to go out and meet those guys.

LL: Physically, how large was your company AO?

RO: It was ridiculously huge. You could not drive from one end of my AO to the other in one period of daylight or one period of nighttime, and certainly in not one period of nighttime. If you started at first break from the southern border, you could not make it to the northern border by dark, and the same east to west. It was ridiculously huge. At the height, I was responsible for 11 different districts in two provinces. So, it was ridiculous. There was nothing wrong with it and it was kind of like I was on the flank of the battalion. I was protecting the battalion's flank. We were Paktika Province. The battalion FOB was in Orgun-E. There was a company in Sharana, which was the provincial capital, so that company commander was dealing with the governor and the provincial governance. From the battalion FOB up in Orgun-E, working east and northeast, there was very much the active crossing of the Pak border and serious kinetic fights back and forth. Waza Khwa, in the middle of the summer, from there you could see probably 40 kilometers in every direction. It was out in the middle of the desert until you hit the mountains, so I could see them coming and going and they could see me coming and going. There was this huge chess game. During the whole year, I'm chasing them around, they're chasing me around and it was very easy to avoid each other. I wasn't trying to avoid them but they were definitely trying to avoid me. I was very much, not an economy of force mission, but it was almost like guarding the flank of the battalion.

LL: Doing a screening mission?

RO: Yes, it was basically like screening that whole AO. Traditionally, Waza Khwa is a huge crossroads. Especially during the Soviet incursion, them coming from the safe haven of Pakistan up into Waza Khwa, they would meet, organize, do like their operational readiness plan in Waza Khwa, and then they would move into the interior along the road. There's only one road in Afghanistan. They would move towards Ghazni, Gardez and Sharana and all those places, conduct their attacks and then move back across. Our company was charged with interdicting those lines. Did we do a good job? Yes, I think we did. We did such a good job that they avoided us very easily and at all costs.

LL: Could you describe the tempo of your company ops through the course of the deployment? Did the tempo and types of operations change through the course or was it pretty much the same kind of thing throughout?

RO: The types changed nonstop and it was all types at all times. Of course everyone is going to say that, but the tempo was nonstop all the time because if you weren't doing some sort of company air assault mission into the mountains because of actionable intel, you were patrolling 150 to 200 kilometers away from your patrol base to go meet the mayor of some district for two days. But then that was in one direction. To go to one of the other district mayors, you had to drive 400 kilometers in the other direction, so now it takes you two and a half days to even get to the district where you're going to meet this guy. We were going back and forth and we drove all over Afghanistan. I must have driven around the world five times or more just in my AO. Also, a lot of that was definitely personality driven by my battalion commander. He knew Afghanistan. When we went into Afghanistan first, he was the commanding general's aide, so he really knows Afghanistan. He is an absolute disciple of full-spectrum operations and all the instruments of power, like economic, governance, military, engagement at all times, so it was nonstop. We would go to, say, Jani Khel District and we'd be meeting with the police chief and the mayor, we'd do some police training, and then higher would call us with actionable intel. Then I would call the platoons and we'd link up en route to some AO, conduct a movement to contact and try to find this guy or do raids or whatever. It was the busiest year of my life without question. It was pretty incredible.

LL: Contact with the enemy. Did you actually end up in active firefights with them or were they pretty good about staying away? Did you do a lot of catching onesies and twosies on actionable intelligence?

RO: We were onesies and twosies in my company. I used to tell the boys that it was because they knew not to mess with us. How much of that was true? I think a large degree of it was true. Every time we rolled out, we definitely put out the picture that you could mess with us if you wanted to, but it's not going to end favorably for you. The times that they did, it didn't end favorably for them. But also I freely admit that a lot of that was a function of terrain. There were some mountains to the south of us. They were actually in Teywarah District. You could sit in those mountains in Teywarah District and see our FOB and watch it. That's 40 kilometers out. They could see us coming and going. They're on foot and they're on motorcycles up in the mountains, and by the time we could get to them, dismount and run up the mountains in our 80 pounds worth of stuff, it was very difficult to maintain contact. It wasn't difficult necessarily to gain contact, but it was difficult to maintain contact, especially with the border right there. Those guys weren't too proud to jump back across the border. It's like playing tag with five-year-olds: everything is "base" right as you're about to tag them.

LL: You couldn't accidently shift your mortars onto the wrong side of the border?

RO: Well, if we were in contact, we could fire and maneuver into Pakistan, and we did, my company did. The legal wording was … everyone says "hot pursuit." It's direct fire if you are still in contact with the enemy. So theoretically, if they break contact and go one ridgeline over, you're not supposed to pursue them. I also know that if I called my battalion commander and said that I'd let the enemy break contact with me, I would probably get fired. Take that for what it's worth. It took me a while and eventually we figured out some techniques and procedures to gain and maintain contact with the enemy. We did a lot of deception, especially once we figured out the terrain and which trails led where. I figured out that I could go to Wor Mamay the only way everyone goes to Wor Mamay from Waza Khwa, and there's this one spot where if you

divert in the mountains where no one can see you, you can turn south and head into Teywarah District. When you figure out stuff like that, then you can make a big show about going out east and going through the pass, then you kind of take a pause, put eyes out on the ridgelines to see if anybody's watching, or make a guess if anybody is or not, and you can turn south, go into Teywarah and conduct operations there, theoretically getting some surprise. You can do it with air as well. The big one was in Teywarah District, which is right on the border. As soon as they saw helicopters, they would jump back across the border. Eventually I figured out, why don't we fly? They would pick us up at my patrol base and we would fly east like we were going to Wor Mamay and then we'd dip down low, head south and turn into Teywarah and you could catch them before they could get back across the border. But Wor Mamay and Teywarah, there were mountains so it was easier to do a lot of deception and go in different directions. You had to make sure you left before the sun set so everyone sees you going in one direction. Then once the sun sets, Afghans can't see you at night. However, we can operate, so then after the sun sets, you wait two to three hours, change direction and go somewhere else, go where you need to go. You can gain some surprise that way. That was in the southeast and south of my AO. Up in the central, north and west, there were no mountains. It was like a table, flat. So it was a lot harder to gain surprise. I hate to say it but generally the contacts there, if they weren't IED contacts, and the majority were, then it was contact on their terms. They were hidden in some sort of ambush site that was hard to detect. But going back to how we were arrayed and how we operated, I know for a fact because I listened to it … on the radio there was a police chief out in Moqor, the Moqor police chief, I remember this guy. He had been fighting the Soviets since he was 12 years old. It was unbelievable. He had radios and he monitored anti-coalition forces on these. He also held a tape recorder up to the radio. The first time I met him, he said he had all these tapes for me, my interpreter listened to them and it was amazing. He was tracking these guys. It was pretty amazing. We had traveled not from our company FOB but from another battalion operation and we went back down to Moqor. He said, "They're out there and they tried to ambush you." I said, "How do you know that?" He said, "I listened to them." He played the tape and my interpreter is telling me that they were just about to ambush us when they saw another platoon coming within supporting distance. We sat there and laughed. It was hilarious because this guy was getting bawled out by his commander for not initiating the ambush. The guy basically threatened to quit because he said, "They had more forces and they had another element coming. I'm not firing on these Americans when they have multiple elements! You come do it if you want to do it and if you think you're good enough to do it!" It was back and forth. Before I went to Afghanistan, you'd always hear of the chess analogy, that warfare is a big chess game. I always kind of blew that off, "Whatever." It really hit me while I was there, though. It was like a gigantic chess game because I kind of knew what they were doing and they knew what I was doing, just like on a chess board. With the mountains, the desert and some of the riverbeds, you had these set pathways that you could move about. You had to guess three steps ahead what that guy was going to do, action-reaction-counteraction, and take it on down the line, down the chain and try to trap these guys. That's the first time I bought into that chess analogy like, "Wow, this *is* like a giant chess game." We also gained some advantage by putting out two border patrol posts in the southeast and the south. They were manned by a platoon-minus at all times with a company at each of Afghan Border Police (ABP). Before, when we tried to action on anybody, they would just head south or southeast and get back across the border. What that allowed us to do was, we would look like we were doing just steady-state, normal operations. They would infill into the AO to link up and meet up, plan ambushes or plant IEDs, do whatever they needed to do, thinking they would see us

come from the company FOB. What we were able to do was coordinate through comms to get these guys out, do some deception movements, but basically still have that net around them. As we got updated intelligence, then we could close the net in. Not to squeeze it so they slipped through, but getting it closer and closer and closer, and we actually started getting some pretty good effects. We actually started to get some guys before they could escape.

LL: Any particularly memorable contacts with the enemy?

RO: Well, a couple. The first contact wasn't a direct fire contact … I told you about the snow and how we couldn't patrol and we couldn't get into Wor Mamay. It's a very mountainous region and it has this pass. As long as the pass was closed, you couldn't get into Wor Mamay from where we were. In fact, you couldn't even get to the pass because the land was so low that our Humvees would just sink. The locals were telling us that it would probably be another two weeks before we could get into Wor Mamay. We left one night because I wanted to get in there to see what was going on, and sure enough we were able to get through there and get through the pass. As you come through the mountains, it opens up into this huge valley where there's this river and the Wor Mamay police station is right there in the middle of that valley. It's the first thing you see. That puts us there two weeks before anyone thinks we can get there. We came up over this mountain and we didn't have any Afghans with us or anything, but sure enough you look down into this valley and there must have been 200 people around this building. They were having a meeting of some sort. There were Hiluxes, Toyota 4Runners, probably 50 motorcycles, and when they saw us that place took off. People were going in every direction, and of course we were new and there was a river we couldn't cross fast enough. Being experienced and knowing what I know now, I wouldn't have fired at them but I would've fired out left and right as warning shots to try to see if I could get anybody to stop running, to freeze, to see who was there. My guess is that it was some element of the Hezb-i-Islami Gulbuddin (HIG), and those guys were gone. Over the next ridgeline, trucks were bumping into one another, motorcycles pushing over each other and they were all gone. We tried to get eyes-on to see who they were and see the types of vehicles, because you're going to see those same vehicles again. We wanted to see who was there. We questioned the mayor and the police chief. They said, "Oh no, that was just some family and friends." There were some personalities there who we met at that time and then as the year went on and we looked back, we realized we'd missed a golden opportunity right there. I don't know how high that went up, but it went up high enough where we would've been heroes had we been able to affect anything. Memorable contacts? We did an out-of-sector battalion operation up into Alpha Company's AO. They were trying to establish a company FOB right on the Pakistan border. Of course, like everything else, and I don't understand why this is, but the FOB was right in the middle of a big valley. So the enemy would come across from Pakistan, they had observation posts in the mountains and they'd mortar the daylights out of the FOB. Any patrols that went into the mountains would get ambushed and then they'd retreat across the border. The Alpha Company commander got hit a couple times like that. We launched a battalion operation where we moved forces in to draw them out across the border, to do their tactics where they hit us and then melt away into the mountains. These were guys wearing uniforms, too. They were operating in eight-man squads, if you will, and were fairly well trained – more so than your average Afghan proxy fighter. We drew them out towards us, but then we air assaulted in ambush positions on the border so they couldn't retreat and we had them trapped in there. We did a movement to contact. It was originally scheduled to be like a four-day operation but we

were there over a week because the contact was nonstop. It was nonstop, it was all day and all night and we completely overwhelmed them. They could not escape to their safe haven. I know during that operation, I fired every weapons system in my company: M4s, 240s, squad automatic weapons (SAWs), 60 millimeter mortars…

LL: Were you firing Javelins?

RO: No, we did not fire Javelins. We did not carry Javelin missiles in Afghanistan. We had the command launch units (CLUs) but we did not have the missiles. There's nothing to shoot them at in Afghanistan. You don't need to shoot a Javelin at a Hilux, so we didn't have Javelin missiles. But we fired 60 millimeter mortars. The battalion 81s fired and we had 105s supporting us from the valley. I fired Apaches, I fired A10s, I fired a Mk82 airburst, .50 cals, Mk19s. Basically it was supposed to be four days but it was a week and a half. That was a very notable one that I can remember. Alpha Company did a lot of air mobile operations because they were at the battalion FOB up at Orgun-E. They even did them down into my AO because we were so far away. They did one down in my AO and took fire and took casualties in the aircraft as it was coming into the landing zone (LZ). The Alpha Company commander said, "No, go anyway." They landed and took more casualties on the LZ. Basically, they became very slow going at that point. As soon as I heard their first contact, I launched what I had at my company patrol base, which wasn't a lot because all my platoons were out. We were doing some governance stuff and I was supposed to meet up with them the next day. It was me, the company command post, like a squad, this ad hoc team and some vehicles. I had two Special Forces sergeants who were with me for other reasons and they jumped in and tagged on. I obviously had my Afghan National Army (ANA) company and I mobilized as many of them as I could, put them in their Ford F-150 Rangers and they jumped in. Their training team jumped in. I had engineers and cooks. Cooks and mechanics manned the towers. I brought the infantry guys out of the towers and we hauled butt down to this AO. Alpha Company wasn't exactly pinned down, but they had kind of culminated and it was very hard for them to maneuver. We made it there in about 35 to 40 minutes. The first sergeant was yelling at me on the radio the whole time, "Sir, you have to slow down!" "We can't slow down!" Anyway, we got there and there was a pretty big firefight there. There were Apaches, rockets, cannon from the Apaches, and finally we got in A10 cannon fire, joint direct attack munitions (JDAMs) from A10s. The JDAMs hit high and because these guys were hiding on the slope, the JDAM hit above. We didn't know. We thought it had taken them out. We got in 25 meters and we were fighting. It was scary, actually. That's one. It was very close to the Pakistani border, so the S3 asked me what I wanted to do. The S3, myself and the Alpha Company commander talking on the radio and there were some other forces out there as well. We basically came to the consensus that let's leave before dark. We were on these mountain ridgelines. You could see forever above the mountains and then there were all these ridges. We wanted to let them see us leave and see if they come in to try to reclaim bodies, see if they could gather weapons and ammunition. We may have missed intel. We wanted to see if they came in to try and police up intel or whatever. Then I would send another platoon down into setting ambush positions for these guys as they came in. By this time, I had called my 2nd Platoon, "Come back, refit very quickly and be prepared to move. I'll meet you at the company FOB and brief you up." That's what we did and we left. They were moving in to go set the ambush where that engagement had happened. They had close air support, AC130 support, and basically the enemy had moved in before they even got set. They were right on top of each other and it was a two-minute firefight. I had five KIAs there like that, in an instant. It was

amazing. I had one IED. My company command post was hit. I was in the lead vehicle. There was a joint tactical air controller (JTAC) vehicle behind me and they called them embedded training teams (ETTs) at the time. I had an ANA company, a sergeant major from the National Guard and two NCOs who were the ETTs for that team from the company. They were awesome. They were in the trail vehicle. My vehicle, the JTAC vehicle and this vehicle all in line following each other in the tracks, and the third vehicle hit the mine and it destroyed the vehicle completely. Two Afghans, an interpreter and an ANA soldier had to be MEDEVAC'd. The Americans were fine, but it was very weird and surreal. I think they had planned to bury the mine but it rained and the mud kicked over. So the first two vehicles that drove over it, I think the mud was so hard and thick that it didn't depress the pressure plate. When the third vehicle went over the mine, it was destroyed by it. It was very surreal. I had the 2nd Platoon leader's vehicle that was destroyed by an IED that was luckily misplaced and there were no injuries. The IED completely demolished the vehicle, though. In November, I had spent the better part of a week chasing this one particular commander, a high-level intel commander. It got to the point where I personally felt like this dude was mocking us, so I was determined to catch him. We stayed out there all week. I was talking about the border post. We were able to come in and not try to move towards him and then let him escape. Slowly, without him really knowing it, we cinched the net in around him. I'm telling the 3rd Platoon leader, Sean Ruffalo (*ph*), the grid that he's at. "Go to this grid, he is there, capture him." This is the third time in like the last two hours that I've told him a grid to go to and you could hear his frustration, "He is not here! … What?! … Well, shoot him!" They were in this gulley and they came around. There were three or four of them and they were trying to get an RPG in operation. A .50 cal took care of them and we ended up chasing the other two all over the mountains. We had one, we called him a sniper but he wasn't. He was some guy who tried to take a shot at the company command post. It sent us all scrambling, though. I think it went up as a sniper shot but it wasn't. We think we caught him, not with his weapon, but we got him and he got transferred up. There was small-scale stuff. There were a lot of hit-and-runs. IEDs really started to pick up in Afghanistan. Like I said, when we first got there, we didn't have uparmored vehicles. My company was rolling around in what we called dune buggies. We were Charlie Rock and we called them the Rock-Vs. The other company had started them. They were very light so they did a lot better in the mud and the sand, so they were good that way. They were all open sided with no roofs, none of that stuff, so you could deploy from them very quickly. There were literal foot races because you would make contact and these guys would go one ridgeline over. It was this race to try to get 60 millimeter fire in behind them to stop them from running, so you could get guys up to the next ridge top to fire down on them. Many times it just turned into literally a foot race to see who could get one ridgeline over. So those vehicles were very good, but once the IEDs started we had to stop using them. Like I said, we started out with 12 and ended up with 63 vehicles when I left. It was a huge difference in the fleet. They were all uparmored.

LL: What about company casualties?

RO: I was so lucky. I had minimal casualties. Actually it was during the one firefight where we went to help out Alpha Company. An Afghan soldier was hit and my medic responded. The Afghan soldier and one of the enemy soldiers had had this point-blank shootout. We did not see him because he was hiding. It was amazing. I walked right by him and never saw him. I'm lucky. Myself, my JTAC and my fire support officer are very lucky that he did not kill us all. But we walked right by him, probably 10 meters away from him and never saw him. They had

taken a bush, these Afghan desert scrub bushes, and they had cut out down under the roots. So a big clump of root had come out and they moved that out and made him get down in that hole, in like a lounge chair seated position, and then put the bush back on top of him. They can shoot and they can toss out grenades like that at the same time. We had not seen that until this time. This was August or September. This Afghan soldier and this enemy had had this point-blank engagement. He'd thrown a grenade and the Afghan soldier was hit. My medic was treating him and something happened. We don't think it was a booby trap. They have the old crappy Soviet-made pineapple grenades, and we saw it all the time on our objectives on enemy soldiers. 5.56 rounds go right through them and break them into pieces but they don't go off. So we think one of those went off and the medic from 3rd Platoon, Seamus Bradley, was hit by this. He got second- and third-degree burns on his face and on his neck, some on his hands. We had a grenade go over the wall at our company patrol base and it took out the hearing on a soldier, but no shrapnel or anything hit him. We were extremely, extremely lucky. I did not have any American casualties or killed. Now the Afghan Army and the Afghan Border Police, I had several. We were very lucky. Like I said, I told the boys it was because they saw us and didn't want to mess with us. In reality, I think, other than a couple of the meeting engagements, generally we saw them coming or they saw us coming so they could avoid us. If they could not avoid us, then we could get them at range. An old AK47 with a bent sight post and a guy who needs glasses but doesn't even know it against a modern M4 in the hands of a paratrooper, it's not even a fair fight. So any sort of those contacts where we saw each other and could engage, we would get them at range. There was another one. We caught an IED. I had a platoon moving down to Teywarah, 1st Platoon, that came around a bend. As soon as they came around the bend, they saw two guys up on the ridgelines on either side as obvious lookouts. They took off running. In the road, there were two guys digging a hole and they take off running. We shouted, "Stop! Stop! Stop!" One guy stops but the other guy doesn't and he gets shot. Obviously once we get them and do the battle damage assessment, they've got the blasting caps and they even have the cash on them where they got paid to plant the IED.

END OF INTERVIEW, Part I

Transcribed by Colette Kiszka