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Interview with MAJ Ryan O'Connor

Combat Studies Institute

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Abstract

In this second part of a two-part interview, Major Ryan O'Connor continues discussing his 2005-2006 deployment in support of Operation Enduring Freedom-Afghanistan as the commander of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment. He talks about his unit's use of interpreters, the conduct of counterinsurgency operations in Paktika and Ghazni Provinces, operating along the Pakistan border, as well as his experiences with Afghan National Army and Afghan Border Police units. O'Connor also talks about working with the Marines for air support, with other government agencies on multiple joint operations, how he was forced by circumstances to run his company like a battalion, and how the family support group began to fall apart once they arrived in country.

Interview with MAJ Ryan O'Connor

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[*The following is Part II of the interview with Major Ryan O'Connor (RO) regarding his 2005-2006 deployment in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, conducted by Laurence Lessard (LL) of the Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas*.]

LL: How were you set up for interpreter support?

RO: Again, I didn't feel the pain. We were very lucky. Right from the get-go, because we were operating so far away from the battalion, I had operational funds that were, I believe, more significant than the other companies. We also had designated through however the interpreter budget was managed, 13 interpreters for my company, so that allowed us to set up a leave rotation for them. Every platoon had interpreters. I would say that well into 90 percent of any patrol that left had an interpreter. I always had an interpreter. We were sending our interpreters on leave, but the interpreters at my company were getting paid a lot more than other interpreters around the country just because of where we were and the living conditions down there. This wasn't a battalion FOB. We didn't have showers for the first six months we were there. But that was not battalion-wide. That was specifically targeted to my company because of where we were. We were very fortunate.

LL: Were they able to help you navigate some of the tribal and ethnic minefields that were laid out there in your AO?

RO: Some were and some weren't. There was a definite, clear division, and not just in terms of brain power and intelligence. Obviously you get smarter guys and you get the guys who are not as smart. I'm talking that there were some guys who were younger and they had come from Bagram, Kandahar and Kabul. They had the knowledge, they knew how to speak the languages and they knew there was good money to be made, so they came and were able to get hired on by us. Some of those were very good and the others … it was more like the difference between an interpreter and a translator. It was more like they were translators. Then the other half we had who were truly interpreters, truly guys who lived out in the tribal regions in other areas of the country. These were guys who had fought the Russians and guys I trusted. There were some interpreters who, okay, we're paying them to do this job. Then there were guys I trusted. All our interpreters down at the company level carried weapons. In my humble opinion, as an American, I didn't feel it was fair to ask them to do those things unarmed. I know other companies didn't operate that way. In fact, I know battalions and other units had rules with the Afghans not being armed and other kinds of things. But all my guys carried weapons. There were guys I entrusted implicitly. So I'd say that the three primary ones I used in my company command post were all very good at that. "Hey sir, he's just saying this because of this," or, "Sir, that's a lie." You still have to filter that based on their prejudices, but the three primary ones I used were very good at that. Now the other 10, you would get mixed results with. I was the one primarily dealing with the governor if he came down, for example, or the mayors, police chiefs and all that. It was very important for me to have the interpreters who could do

that. I had three who I can remember distinctly were very good at that and then mixed results with the other 10.

LL: What kind of relationship did your company have with the Afghan police and the Afghan Army?

RO: The Afghan Army, we had an excellent relationship with. They were not particularly happy about being down where they were. We were way out. We were in the wilderness as far as *they* were concerned, so that tells you how far out in the middle of nowhere we were. When the Afghan National Army company showed up, they were like, “Are we still in Afghanistan? What country are we in?” That tells you how far removed from civilization we were. It was amazing. But we got along with those guys great.

LL: Were they co-located?

RO: Oh, yes. Our patrol based butted up against the town of Waza Khwa. It was in the town. It was right along what used to be the old police station. The police station and the mayor’s office combined and moved to a different compound on the other side of town. So that leads me to the next phase and how we got along with the police. We just kind of HESCO’d that in with a little walk-in gate to our FOB. We tried to have a guard there but it was too much manpower, so we secured it eventually. But you could open it if you needed to and get in there or out, but basically we were together, on the same FOB, patrol base, with that company. Every first sergeant I had for that company, and I went through three, they were all strong. My first two were so strong that they got kidnapped by battalion where one was made into the brigade sergeant major and one was made into the division sergeant major. Those first sergeants were excellent. It was almost like they understood what an NCO is supposed to do. It was amazing to watch those guys. I loved my first sergeants. The first company commander we got was completely weak, but he was at least weak enough that the first sergeant could control him, he would just talk to me and that was fine. Then we got two more company commanders and they were both good. The squads were awesome. First of all, when Afghans get into a fight, our first order of business was to prevent them from charging directly uphill and into the enemy, at no matter what range or what weapons system. These guys know how to fight. They don’t know how to fight our style, but they know to fight, they know how to fight and all they want to do is fight. So in the 20 seconds of a direct fire contact, they’re awesome and you have to try to rein them in. But pulling security all night in an open patrol base out in the middle of the desert is a different story. Explaining to observation posts on top of the ridgeline that their job is to actually pull security, not to make chai and sleep, that’s a different story. It was frustrating at times, but not anything that was out of control as far as I was concerned. Obviously, squad leader sergeant, team leader sergeant, American sergeant at times wanted to just kill people and rip their hair out with frustration. But we got along great with the Afghan National Army, especially that company. I wasn’t really afraid of anything out in Afghanistan. There was nothing that was going to out-gun me or out-maneuver me. So for my security, I had what I called the stormtroopers. They were a squad from the ANA company in a Ford Ranger F-150 that was painted desert and had the four-wheel drive. That was my security for the company command post. But those dudes loved it. They would fight amongst themselves for who was company command post security. It was a real honor for them and they loved it. I loved those guys and every time we stopped, they would pile out, establish the perimeter and they were set.

Now that perimeter really only lasted about 20 to 30 minutes, tops, and then I'd have to send the fire support NCO out, "Go get these guys! Turn the chai tea kettles off and have them pull security." But they were awesome and they loved it. Every patrol we went on, every single patrol that rolled out of any base had Afghans with it. I had the Afghan National Army company with me and then I had two companies of ABP, one at each patrol base. I delegated each of those companies to one of the platoons, 3rd Platoon and 1st Platoon, that were down there. But even so, at each of those border patrol points, there was also a squad from the ANA. So at any one time there was a squad there, a squad at an outpost, a second squad at an outpost, and any patrol that was moving around the battlefield had an ANA patrol with it as well. It got to the point where in those two southern districts, any patrol had an ANA squad, minimum, and some element of police from that district they were operating in. Then you combine that with the two districts on the border, they had a minimum of an ABP squad with them as well. So they had three different Afghan government forces with them at all times. I think we did very well with that. There was never an American force out there by themselves trying to interact with the Afghan people. It was always the Afghans themselves. The interpreter would listen and make sure they were saying the right thing. We'd coach them and mentor them before we went out on patrol, make sure they understood what the grand plan was. "You don't ask for bribes and here's why we're doing this. We're one country." Now, the police was a different story. The joke in my company was that the first phase of every operation was a cordon and search of the police station to, by gunpoint, pull out the police and make them go on the operation with us. Once they saw us heading towards the police station, you could watch them literally, like enemy insurgents, escape and evade. "Oh crap, here come the Americans! They're going to make us drive out into the hinterlands, possibly get ambushed, go drive around out in the desert," that kind of thing. Now, it wasn't all of them. I joke. The police chief in Waza Khwa was a known terrorist. That's just the way it was down there. The Teywarah police chief was a known terrorist and was related to our number-one priority target. He was his nephew. The police, yes, they were a member of the central government's forces, with these Americans, so police in name only, really. That's not to say that's a bad thing. We had to make baby steps. The provincial governor used to say … because that was one of the grievances, "The police chief down there is Nakh Mohammed's (*ph*) nephew." The governor would tell the Afghans, "Yes, I got it. Do *you* want to be the sheriff?" "Well, no." The Taliban were still very active in that AO. The last battalion had tried to insert somebody designated by the central government to go down there, and within a week he had been beheaded and the police station burned down. Well, that didn't work too well. To a certain extent, it was keeping your enemies closer. But we had to have an Afghan face. The police chief in Waza Khwa, this guy had fought the Russians and was famous in the area. Everyone knew this guy. He had been a famous muj' commander under, again, our number-one priority target, who was hiding out in Pakistan. He had been one of his sub-commanders. We went on operations with this guy. I remember one time we got intel from higher and it was supported by local intel that three guys we were looking for were in this compound. We got up there in the mountains and we didn't want to kick in the door; we wanted to see if we could see them, be very precise, get the right guys and not scare the whole family and all that. As 1st Platoon with some mortars pulled up and started to deploy, they saw the guys and they ran into the compound. As they were running, the platoon leader deployed out the 60s and started putting illume up so we could see him. It was in the middle of the night. Well, it was funny. After this whole operation, they had taken the police chief from Waza Khwa. He came back and started lecturing me on tactics. "This young platoon leader doesn't know what he's doing. He's firing mortars and you let them escape. We

could've just killed them." "I know that's how you guys used to roll in the muj', but we try not to do that kind of stuff nowadays." The guy knew what he was doing, but we had evidence that he was playing both sides. Was he talking with them? Yes. Did we see that as normal? Yes. You have to talk to the enemy as far as Afghans are concerned. They had to talk to the enemy because we weren't always around. Was he conspiring with them? Who knows? I know in other areas, like Wor Mamay and Teywarah, they were actively conspiring. During the day, they were our best buds. The police force in Wor Mamay was my most professional force. They were squared away. When you went there, they were on guard, they were in uniform, their weapons were clean, but that's because they were the same muj' unit, or the sons of the muj' unit, that had fought during the Russian incursion for this same commander. The police chief was just kind of a puppet guy. They really worked for this other personality in the AO. At night, though, they were active terrorists working on targeting us and the Afghans. So, they were my most professional police force, but they were also the enemy. During the day, they looked good, they were awesome, they were on it, but at night I was hunting them down. The further north and west I got in my AO, it was just pretty absurd. I don't want to sound flippant, but we would kind of go through the procedures and it was all for show. The police force was very hard. Like I said, my AO was so big that you couldn't be there at all times, all days. So the two and three days you're not there, the Taliban is there, or others are there influencing them. How do you combat that? In Moqor, that police chief I was telling you about earlier, he had his own 81 millimeter mortar. We let him keep it. In the year I was there, he was ambushed nine times and survived them all. There was no optics on the mortar. It was in the middle of his police station. He would call in on his Thuraya phone and they would answer. He taught them to manipulate the bipod. He'd say, "Right three turns, down three turns," or whatever, and they'd do it and then he'd say, "Fire!" They had their ammo laid out just like a mortar crew. I asked him, "How do you do that?" He showed me one time and I told him, "You can keep that, you are squared away." He was awesome. Anytime something happened, he would call us and ask us to come. Of course it took us, on the best of days in the middle of the day during the summer, five hours to get to his police station – and that's driving way faster than I should have and basically not being all that safe. It would take us five hours to get there. It was very hard and it was frustrating for him. He was a very good guy trying to do the right thing. I told him I was kind of in charge of this AO now, but it falls under another battalion, trying to explain that to him, and he's like, "What? You're the American. Of course you're in charge." That's not really how it works. ANA? Awesome. ABP? A young force coming up, not as good as ANA but better than the police. The police I would classify as last. They were just a victim of circumstance. The only people they really answer to is that police chief in that village, who may or may not be influenced by, related to or bought off by whoever.

LL: What was the single biggest challenge you had to deal with as the company commander out there?

RO: Distance and the area itself. The result was a good result in that my AO was contiguous, so this platoon leader had two districts, this one had three and this one had five, or whatever it was. They were responsible for everything. So, it was good in that sense. It filtered all the way down to the squad leaders who were in charge of the police force in this district. Of course I'm very biased and I'm very proud of those guys, but you go to district X or whatever, "Who's in charge of this police force?" "Oh, sir, that's Sergeant So-and-So and his squad," and you watch him and you're like "Wow!" When you start getting NCOs who are doing small-unit tactics,

which is what police training in Afghanistan is, it's awesome to watch that. But distance – me as the company commander responsible for that AO, getting back and forth. Distance relates to everything. If there's some sort of security issue or some sort of ambush or IED, it takes me X amount of time or my forces X amount of time to get there and affect something. By then, the people have given up and gone back to their houses or the witnesses have left. The big thing is that we were trying to further the influence of the central government. There were places in my AO where they didn't know they lived in Afghanistan. They didn't know they were Afghans. "What country are you in?" "I don't know." "What are the countries around here?" "There's Pakistan for sure and then I think there's Afghanistan, right?" "Yes, which country are you in?" "I'm not in either. I'm right here." "No man, you're in Afghanistan." So we were trying to further the central government, but how do you get the governor out to Teywarah? I loved the provincial governor. This guy was awesome. The first couple times we brought him out in a helicopter because that was the safest, securest and fastest way to get him out there. But then it dawned on us that that kind of makes him a puppet. Afghans aren't stupid. They would see that as being any guy the Americans put into a helicopter. Then we started doing a very deliberate convoy from Sharana to Teywarah. Holy cow! That takes forever. That takes over a day if you're hauling. Then we would do very elaborate things where we'd travel for security and he would be inside our convoy. Then one terrain feature back, we'd clear it and then we'd let him go forward on his own, so it would look like he had come in by himself and we had just run into him. "Oh, the governor is here! Hey, Mr. Governor!" So, distance was everything. MEDEVAC? There were many times in my AO where my MEDEVAC was faster if it came from a different regional command (RC). I was in RC-East but it was faster to come from Kandahar in RC-South. There were times in some of my districts, like Moqor over in the west in Ghazni Province, where it was easier, faster and safer to resupply in Qalat with 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry, which was in the 173rd in RC-South. I would just call them and say, "Can I come get resupply?" "Sure." Distance was huge. Terrain, the mountains – again, all they needed to do was to get one ridgeline over and it's almost over, they're gone. We were arguing the other day in our Command and General Staff College class. The Air Force was giving me the old standard line about, "You just tell me what effects you need. You don't need to tell me which platform." They were giving me the old question, "What does it matter to you if it's an A10 or a B1?" I was trying to explain, "Dude, it does matter and here's why. When you make contact with these guys and they run over the next ridgeline, nothing's going to stop them. They don't know anything about high-altitude bombers. But when that A10 comes in and does a barrel roll and they hear it, they immediately go to ground because they're scared to death of it. That gives us time to catch up to the next ridgeline, to be able to catch up to them and engage." "Oh, I never thought about that." So sometimes it does matter what platform when you're dealing with distance, terrain and weather, of course. Again, the next winter we started to grind to a halt because you spend more time recovering your vehicles. It's a two steps forward, one step back kind of thing. There were times you'd be on patrol and you'd spend an hour recovering your vehicles out of the mud, "All right, let's go!" You'd get 500 meters down the trail and you'd have three more vehicles sunk. "Oh, my God, we're never going to get there!" It was terrain and weather.

LL: Did you have a chance to work with other services while you were there?

RO: Yes. The whole year I had a JTAC team, just based on how far away we were.

LL: Were they the same people the whole time?

RO: No. I had two JTAC teams that rotated, but they were my guys. Sergeant Rodriguez on one team and Sergeant Mellon (*ph*) as the lead JTACs. They were the two teams and they were our organic teams. But those guys went back and then we got another team for another quarter of the time, and then the fourth and final team I finally fired. I said I didn't want them down there and I sent them back. I told the executive officer (XO) I didn't want them and so they left. When we first got in there, we had Marine Corps rotary-wing, lift and attack helicopters. I don't know what the whole command relationship and all that stuff was, but the MH53s did our lift and we had Cobras in support.

LL: How was it working with them as far as the air support?

RO: It was awesome. Especially the MH53s, those guys did whatever you wanted. It was very strange to us because you know the deal, when you get on an Army helicopter the first thing you do is ask the crew chief, "Can I put this on here?" Finally they said, "Dude, you don't have to ask. Just do whatever you need to do and we're going to fly out." I have pictures with stuff stacked to the ceiling and nothing's tied down because there's not enough straps. There were guys piled in there and they did whatever we wanted. Especially in the early days, it was hard to get air down to my company patrol base where we were. It was not on any of the ring routes. There were no ring routes out there. My company XO went direct a couple times, they would come and it was awesome. Then the Cobras as well, those guys were instantly responsive. They were as low and slow as they could possibly go and it was awesome. They were very effective, obviously. That'll put the fear of God in you, when a Cobra comes over the ridgeline. So we had Air Force, Marines and we actually did have Navy. One time we had a Navy tech show up and help us with some new equipment that we didn't know how to work correctly. It had been fielded and we didn't have any training on it. But that was an Afghan-wide program when they went to every unit in Afghanistan. Then we had a lot of other government agency work, obviously, because we were on the border there.

LL: How easy was it working with the other government agency (OGA) guys?

RO: I know up in the battalion tactical operations center (TOC), there was tension and strife. They had a main base there on the same FOB as the battalion. In the battalion TOC, there was a system, a framework of us working together. We were very much linked. They had a spot on the BUB and all this stuff. But I know there was tension. I know the intelligence officer got along great with them, but conventional commander and conventional XO, there was some pain. At my level, I loved them. I got along great with them. But it was personality driven. All the guys who came down to my area, every single one of them called me ahead of time and said, "I'm coming down." "Great, here's my vehicle makeup." When you have that mutual communication and respect, my personal experience was awesome. So we cleared a space for them in the FOB, we got our cooks ready, got my mechanics ready, everything. We helped them out with their vehicles, chow, all that stuff, and we did multiple joint operations together. They had Afghan forces as well and we did multiple successful joint operations together. I loved it. I got along great with those guys. To hear some of my other company commanders, it did not go well at all.

LL: Other coalition forces like the British, Dutch, French or anybody else?

RO: We had British fixed-wing air a couple times. Tornadoes, which were pretty amazing. One time they came on station as we were chasing a specific target. We hadn't found anything, we hadn't found anything. They asked us, "Well, what do you want us to do now?" "Check his escape routes down by Pakistan. Head south and see if he's moving around down there. We're still waiting for him to pop up." So they're down there and at that point we come in direct fire contact, close range, instantly. I called them, "We're in direct fire contact." Those guys were awesome. "Roger, we'll be there in 30 seconds." Fifteen seconds later, you could see them. These guys, it looked like they stood still in the air. They pulled this 180-degree turn and they came back. You could see them, they were below the ridgelines. It was amazing! They were coming right back and they came back so fast that I was still trying to get hold of my lead element to let them know, "They're coming back!" They came over from behind and they hit so fast that he said he thought they had dropped a bomb too close to him. He thought it was an RPG or something. *Boom!* They were awesome. I loved those guys. They did really well. That reminds me, we had some Navy fixed-wing air as well in support.

LL: Being out in the middle of the sticks, did you have any media contact?

RO: No. There was a rogue *60 Minutes* element that was out roaming around Afghanistan and we were warned to be on the lookout for them, but we never saw them.

LL: Did you have to deal with contractors on this deployment?

RO: Yes.

LL: Was it a good experience or a bad one?

RO: It was great from where I was. Now again, I was the king of my kingdom down there. When we fell in on it, it was maybe a platoon-plus patrol base. When I left, it was capable of being a forward staging base for a brigade-size element. That's what we built in a year. At the height, I had five or six civilian contractors living down there with me working on construction of the FOB. We put in a paved pickup zone / landing zone with fuel capabilities. We built barracks for the company. We lived in Afghan buildings for the first nine months I was there. Oh, I forgot the Norwegians. We had a Norwegian special operations task group come down and were tactically controlled (TACON'd) to my AO. They were on my patrol base. We built them a little separate section. They are very, very, very special forces, super secret squirrel, so to make them feel comfortable, we put them off in their own little AO, which they loved. We built them a TOC and a couple barracks. They had showers, generation, electricity, all that stuff. I actually ended up with a reservist engineer first sergeant and his specialty was building FOBs. He actually came down and was attached to my company to build this monstrosity FOB. At one point, at the height, we had five or six civilian contractors who were down there living. Some of that was, they weren't supposed to be down there, some pay issues, the company kind of knew, kind of didn't know they were down there. It wavered back and forth so that's why you got the fluctuation.

LL: When did you deploy back to the States?

RO: I was there from February 2005 through February 2006.

LL: Did you get replaced by another company?

RO: Well, I actually changed out in December. I changed command down there. I went on block leave, which took a month, and when I came back I never returned to the FOB. I went to Bagram and did the redeployment for the battalion from there, and then we left from there. But yes, the company was replaced.

LL: So did you have a handoff at the battalion level?

RO: It worked a lot more like we had planned for it on the way in. There was much more of a left-seat / right-seat ride. As far as the company went, I designed the plan for the company as part of the battalion plan and then the new commander executed it. Since I was at Bagram, when those guys came into Bagram, the logistics officer was up there, the support platoon, the administrative and logistics operations center (ALOC), but the battalion commander – especially the company commander going into my AO – really wanted to talk to me, so I definitely had a bunch of sit-downs for the couple days they were there about the AO.

LL: Big professional lessons learned from your time in Afghanistan?

RO: Again, flexibility. I believe in my platoon leaders to begin with, but watching those dudes operating down there was amazing. Squad leaders, platoon sergeants – those guys were incredible. One mistake I know I made, and it came to light as we were going after an IED cell that popped up in the north of our AO, we knew the AO they were striking in but we could not catch them. We thought we were going to interdict them on their way in and out of the AO to do their IEDs but we could not figure out what was going on. One of the Afghans who came down who was working with the OGA guys, finally I just asked him. I showed him my map and said, “What do you think about this?” Here’s another guy who’d been fighting the Russians. He was like, “Oh, no, sir, they don’t travel north-south.” Our whole AO was set up north-south. Sharana, the provincial district, was north of me, and the battalion FOB and everything was north of me – and the main supply route, even kind of for the Afghans, was north-south. He said that was not how they looked at it; they looked at it east-west. They’re on foot, they’re on motorcycles, and the old provincial capital, before the Taliban, used to be out here in the west, not up in Sharana. After he told me that, I was like, “Well, maybe….” I went back and did, sure enough, the old-fashioned modified combined obstacle overlay (MCOO), which I hadn’t done when I first got there because I got the handoff from the company commander and we knew our AO and patrolled it. So I did it and it was clear as day. It showed the main routes, the drift lines, the rat lines, ridgelines and everything, they actually kind of traveled east-west more than north-south. “Holy crap, I missed that.” Once we started targeting and looking at the AO that way, we ended up catching this IED cell. On my part, that was almost the most basic step and we breezed over it because it was Afghanistan: desert here, mountains in the south, got it. But it was a lot more than that, especially with the border. That was a lesson learned. There are some basic steps that seem conventional but they apply in every situation. The first thing you do is terrain analysis. That’s a big thing I learned. Another thing, stretching the company to its limits, just when you think you’re going to break the company, it’s possible to stretch them ever further. The amount of AO we had, the amount of operations we

had going on, building that FOB, doing all this stuff, I ran that company like a battalion. I had this little mini battalion staff, and who was manning it? Sergeants, staff sergeants, specialists, PFCs, mechanics, cooks, mortars – I had five mortar systems: a 120, two 81s and two 60s. Coalition forces integrated, ANA, ABP, police, government stuff, fires, effects, we were doing information operations and civil affairs, so we had to set up and run the company command post and our operations in the same manner that a battalion would. Light comms package guys were also my landing zone / pickup zone command and control team. Guys who had been used to doing strategic-level stuff in this communications trailer their whole careers … and they volunteered for it. First sergeant supervised them a little but they were good to go. I had a FOB manager, a FOB mayor. So, if you want to and you push them, coach and mentor them, you can stretch the company farther than you initially think you can go. We started out where one platoon is guarding at the battalion FOB, one platoon is guarding here and one platoon and the company commander are out patrolling. We ended up with each platoon split into two sections that could patrol and all these other assets, doing multiple things at once.

LL: How did family separation and the family readiness group (FRG) work for you this time?

RO: The true insurgency. (*Laughter*) That was a joke between me and the first sergeant. I shouldn't say that since our wives were in charge of the insurgency. I'm biased but I think I had a very good plan for the FRG. Right from the start, this company, I don't want to say it had some issues but there was some pent-up anger and frustration among the wives coming back from Iraq. I knew about it ahead of time. Charlie Company sustained the preponderance of the casualties from the battalion in Iraq. There were also some notification issues, really some fiascos – not all of them, but there were still a couple that were remaining in the company. There were some wives that were very angry at the whole system, and the majority of them were 19 years old and just mad at the Army. So, I was prepared for that. I teamed up with my wife and made sure she wanted to be the leader first, and she said yes. Then I got the first sergeant and his wife on board. The first meeting we ever had, I introduced myself, introduced the plan for trainup and the inclusion of the FRG, and then asked people what their concerns and issues were. Of course, all the hands go up, but that was the purpose. There was this huge venting and I took pages of notes. Over time, I really feel like I converted them, got a good 90 percent of them on board, and in my own naïve, biased view, we were one happy Charlie Company family going towards the deployment. It was great, until we got to Afghanistan and there was no communication where I was. The only communication I had was the tactical satellite (TACSAT) radio back to the battalion, which was on the brigade command net. That was it. There was no internet, no phones. Hell, FM radio only worked so far and then I was having to talk to platoon leaders on the brigade command TACSAT net. My contact with battalion was limited to about twice a day, unless we were in contact. That went on for four months. There was some pain and frustration in the rear with that. We finally got it worked out, though, and got this light comms package in, and things went well from there. There were some personalities in the FRG that felt they should play a more prominent role, and since they weren't their prominent role would be to subvert the efforts of the rest of the group. In my opinion, those personalities worked at decaying that 90 percent rate we had and re-converting some of the percentage back until we ended up with about a 50-50 support rate, if that makes sense. During the trainup, during our deployment to Graf and Hohenfels, company parties and get-togethers, a family environment … you know, Vicenza, this is a small post, so if you're not deployed training, you're on post right there. There's no reason not to have a family

environment, so I thought we did really well. But once the soldiers were removed, it seemed to implode on itself. The battalion commander knew about things and was asking me what was going on with certain things, but it wasn't going so far that it was causing major external problems. That said, to me as the company commander and to the FRG leader, it was very, very frustrating. What we could have done better, I'm not sure. The FRG is not a real system; it's a volunteer system. It's an official term but the organization itself is not an official organization. It's a real idea but it's not a real thing, because you can't tell someone, "You are the FRG leader," or, "You're in the FRG." Just by you being a spouse, technically you're in the FRG, but I can't force you to participate and I certainly can't force you to participate intelligently. In terms of separation, I can name two soldiers with young wives who looked like they were on their way to getting divorced by the time we got back. It was very sad because these were young, 19-year-olds, high school sweethearts. The wives were initially like, "Wow, the Army's awesome. There are all these other wives we get to hang out with and participate with? Cool." But then the separation, husbands out doing stuff that they probably don't share too much with their wives, it gets stressful, and there were definitely examples of that, unfortunately.

LL: Is there anything else about your deployment to Afghanistan that you'd like to add to this interview?

RO: No, I don't think so.

LL: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW, Part II

Transcribed by Colette Kiszka