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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 MAJ David Hibner



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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 Major David Hibner – at the time a captain and commander of Delta Company, 10th Engineers – and Captain Evan Schwimmer – then a lieutenant and the executive officer for Delta Company, 10th Engineers – was one of many conducted at Fort Knox by the Armor Branch historian, the purpose being to help comprehend what happened in the streets of Baghdad, capture participants' insights, and ensure that the lessons learned are available to the doctrine writer, the trainer and the combat developer.

Interview with MAJ David Hibner

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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. Please state your name and current rank, followed by your rank and duty assignment at the time of the thunder runs.

ES: My name is Evan Schwimmer (ES). I'm currently a captain. At the time of the thunder runs I was a lieutenant and executive officer of Delta Company, 10th Engineers.

DH: My name is David Hibner (DH). I'm currently a major. At the time of the thunder runs I was a captain and the commander of Delta Company, 10th Engineers.

RC: What was the composition of your engineer unit at the start of the thunder runs?

DH: It differed between the 5th and the 7th of April. On the 5th we went forward with a platoon-plus. We had pulled some extra machine guns from 2nd Platoon and went forward with 1st Platoon. On the 7th we went forward initially with one platoon that was task organized to do a covert breach. Since we were going ahead of the task force, before the main body, the organization for the 7th was Delta Company-minus with the mechanized infantry platoon from Alpha Company, 1-64 Armor. We had a scout section and we had 2nd Platoon from Delta Company, 10th Engineers move forward to do the breach. After the conduct of the breach, the task organization changed. The infantry platoon went back to Alpha once the brigade caught up with us at the breach site and the scouts fell back to the combat trains. 2nd Platoon stayed to reduce the remainder of the minefield and 1st Platoon went forward with me and the rest of the task force on the 7th.

ES: Prior to the mission and even during the mission, we also had a headquarters section and what was left of an obstacle platoon consisting of armored earthmovers, bridge-laying tanks - armored vehicle launched bridges (AVLBs). They all remained behind in the headquarters area as the thunder runs were being conducted.

RC: Let's talk about the minefield you had to clear before the operation on 5 April. Can you talk about the challenge that posed and the method you used to clear it?

DH: Sure. Just to clarify, it was on the 7th of April that we breached the minefield. When we went in on the 5th, we were surprised to find that there were no minefields and no major obstacles. Once we had gone through and did a lot of damage on the 5th, they started to build up their defenses around the city. That's when they started emplacing these big minefields on the highways. The minefield was about 200 meters wide and about 550 meters deep. It consisted of Italian-made mines that had built-in anti-handling devices. They were anti-seismic and were magnetically initiated mines. They were pretty nasty mines to deal with. We had breached those mines before in Najaf, before we got to Baghdad, so luckily we were familiar with them. We had experienced the fact that, for whatever reason, the Iraqis were not using the anti-

handling devices, at least in the minefield we breached in Najaf. The real challenge was how to get through the minefield. The minefield was discovered after the mission planning started for the second thunder run. It wasn't until about 2100 on 6 April that the minefield was even discovered. So they made the report to us and immediately there was a frenzy of planning about how to reduce the minefield. It was beyond the forward line of troops. The brigade commander, Colonel David Perkins, had made it clear that he didn't want to change the plan or the starting point (SP) time, and he wanted 1-64 to come up with a way to reduce the obstacle without changing the major plan for the brigade. That posed a lot of different challenges for us from an execution and planning standpoint. There were a lot of different ideas being thrown around within the task force and I was fielding a lot of calls from the engineers up at brigade. We were throwing a lot of ideas on the table to reduce this minefield in a way that made sense. It was getting pretty late by this time. I think it was about 2300 or so. Lieutenant Colonel Eric Schwartz approached me and said, "You're the one who's going to reduce this minefield. I need you to make the call and tell me how we're going to do this." I went with a method that wasn't favored doctrinally but one that I thought made sense tactically, which was to do a covert breach. Lieutenant Colonel Schwartz was very decisive and said right away, "That's what we're going to do. That's it." He said, "I want you to plan on doing that covert breach. I'll field all the calls from brigade and everywhere else. You just start planning for this mission and tell me what you need." I asked him for an infantry platoon and I asked for some scouts with the long range advanced scout surveillance system (LRAS) so we could see, and told him I'd go forward with one engineer platoon to do the breach. Initially, the challenging part was that a mechanized unit really can't do a covert breach. We're all in tracks and we're heavy and noisy. The idea, though, was to go forward with as small of a footprint as possible so if there was a chance we could go up unnoticed, that's what we wanted to do. In fact, we were successful in doing that. We found the leading edge of the minefield undetected, put the infantry platoon at the leading edge to provide overwatching fires and put the scouts into various different observation positions. Once we were set, 2nd Platoon went forward to do the breach. The method they used was the same method we'd used in Najaf. They used the lasso technique, which meant they took two-inch nylon engineer tape and formed it into lassos and then a sapper would go forward on the ground, throw the lasso over the mine and then run the lasso back about 60 meters away from the mine. They'd then pull the mine to disable any anti-handling devices, so if it was booby trapped it would blow up and no one would get injured. We were rotating sappers forward to do that. We left the line of departure (LD) to go into the breach at 0300, and at around 0415 we were only about 25 percent complete - and the brigade was going to be leaving the LD at 0500. So at best we had until about 0520 to have the minefield completely reduced and have a lane open for the rest of the brigade. I talked to my platoon leader and he was out on the ground too checking on his guys, making sure things were going as quickly as they could, but they just weren't going fast enough. Finally I made the call - which was very un-doctrinal - to stop using the lassos and just start picking up the mines, because we didn't have the luxury of time. It was pretty dangerous to do that so it was a hard call to make, but it was based on our experience in Najaf with not having a lot of booby traps, and I was out on the ground for that one too. I went out and handled the mines myself. I thought there was an acceptable level of risk given the importance of the mission and the magnitude of the attack that was about to take place: to actually go into the city and position ourselves there. So I told the platoon leader to just start sending guys out and picking the mines up. Lieutenant Shaddock (ph) was the platoon leader on the ground, he went and talked to his guys and they started executing. They transitioned at that point from the lasso technique to really no technique at all

and just were picking up the mines. It was pretty risky and pretty dangerous but it worked and they reduced the remainder of the minefield and marked it. As they were finishing marking the lane, I was sending 2nd Platoon back and it was exactly 0500 when we finished. At that point, we got attacked by two technical vehicles with Iraqi infantry in the back. I'm sure they were positioned to overwatch the minefield. I'm not sure at what point they discovered we were there. I think it was probably just daybreak. As the sun was coming up, they saw the lane in the minefield and were probably pretty surprised to see it. It was nice to know that everything went well. Once we had gotten out there, we were quiet and shut everything down. We were just out there sneaking around trying to reduce this minefield. Anyway, we were attacked and the infantry platoon leader was actually Sergeant First Class Timothy Terpak. He was the platoon sergeant who became the platoon leader, and they easily destroyed the vehicles that were attacking the minefield. That was the finishing of the entire operation. About five or 10 minutes later, the rest of the brigade caught up with us. 1st Platoon was brought up with the rest of the task force; and once Alpha 1-64 and Charlie Mech went through, I came in with 1st Platoon and we continued with Charlie Tank behind us. That was the task force formation and we continued the rest of the way into Baghdad from there, on the 7th.

RC: Was there any kind of concealment of the mines on the part of the Iraqis?

DH: Yes. It was really strange and we'd never seen anything like this before. Most of the mines were laid on a highway. They'd actually taken the time to put dirt on the highway, and some of the mines were partially buried in the dirt and some were just sitting on dirt piles. They were somehow using dirt to try and obscure the mines or to make us think they were booby traps. They took all this time to bring all this dirt and other things to cover the mines but they didn't bother to turn on the anti-handling devices. If the idea was to confuse us, it worked because when we first saw them we were like, "I don't understand what that is." We were extremely cautious at first with the lasso technique because we thought that for sure these things were going to be booby trapped, either conventionally or unconventionally, and we were going to have a hard time getting through. As it turned out, they had just used this dirt technique to try and confuse us, but it wasn't very effective. Once we started getting into the minefield, we realized what it was and just continued to breach the minefield without any problems.

ES: One thing to note is one of the pieces of equipment we had in our company. We had a mine-clearing device called a mine-clearing line charge (MCLC). What it consists of is a long rope along which high explosive is placed. It's launched by a rocket laid out front and clears a lane. It's about 2,000 pounds of explosives. It has quite a bang when it goes off. Major Hibner made a difficult decision not to take those pieces of equipment with us for a couple reasons. One was that the mines were double-impulse mines, which means that if we had launched the MCLC we could have potentially shifted some mines with a single blast of the MCLC, but they wouldn't have actually been set off, just sensitized. That would have made the removal of the mines significantly more difficult. We also didn't want to be hindered during the course of the thunder run through the city with large explosives in trailers in the backs of our vehicles. That could have had serious implications for the rest of the convoy.

DH: That's a good point. That was one of the primary reasons why the covert breach was such an attractive option. Our experiences in Najaf and on the first thunder run were that we were going to get shot at *a lot*. I think we had been lucky in the fact that we were hauling 2,000

pounds of explosives behind our tracks, getting hit by machine gun fire and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and not having an RPG hit one of the trailers. If that had happened, there would have been a 2,000-pound compacted explosion within 60 meters of several vehicles.

RC: Let me clarify something. On the first thunder run, you were running down with 2,000 pounds of...?

DH: No. In Najaf we did. Najaf was where we felt really lucky. Most of the tires on the trailers that pulled the MCLCs were flat. There were bullet holes in boxes, we were looking at these trailers and they were like Swiss cheese. There were two Humvees that went forward, our engineer trailers and our MCLC trailers, and all the tires got shot out. It was Najaf that was the eye-opening experience. There were plenty of RPGs flying around but none of them hit any of the trailers. That was kind of a wakeup call. It would have been pretty catastrophic if an RPG had hit a MCLC box, and that influenced us when we were going into Baghdad. We felt if we could accomplish the engineer specific missions without taking the MCLCs forward, that seemed like an option that made more sense to me. I know there are people who would wholeheartedly disagree with me but I was the commander on the ground, I was the one making the decisions and those are the ones I went with. On the second thunder run, we got hit by a couple RPGs and there could have been some very catastrophic losses as a result of having 2,000 pounds detonate right behind one of our vehicles.

ES: Although it didn't necessarily apply to the thunder run itself, our experience in Najaf was very educational. It wasn't a positive one in that we had to go through a lot, but it did have a silver lining in that we learned a significant amount about the enemy's capabilities, what sort of contact we could expect and what sort of equipment we should be using on our side.

DH: After Najaf, we stopped taking Humvees forward; and unless there was a critical reason to do so, we stopped taking trailers forward too. We went through Najaf in a sandstorm and as our trailers were getting their tires shot out from underneath them, our 113s were struggling to drag tire-less trailers. We were having a lot of trouble getting through some of the sandy spots and some of the more difficult terrain going into Najaf. From that point on, if it wasn't armored we didn't take it forward.

RC: I'd like to shift focus to the actual thunder runs themselves. What was the contribution of the engineers to the task force columns on both the 5th and the 7th of April?

DH: I think you need to go back to Najaf again and the lessons we learned there. Major Donovan was our operations officer (S3) and was in the vicinity of the engineer company the whole time. He began to realize that we were pretty lethal unit. You have a track with about six sappers in the troop hatch, all of them with either a machine gun, a 203, an M16 or a M14, and we deliver a lot of firepower too with our Mk-19s and our .50 cal's. We were able to deliver a lot of firepower in a lot of different directions all at the same time. We could provide a lot of 360-degree small arms coverage that, frankly, if you're in a Bradley or a tank you can't get. You're just shooting in the direction that the turret is pointing. For the engineers, though, I could have two guys shooting to the left, two guys shooting to the right, one guy shooting to either side of the front and then I could have two guys scanning rooftops all at the same time. We were taking fire from the rooftops in Najaf and I remember having a bullet land five inches from my right

shoulder. You could hear them coming from everywhere but it was really hard, though, to pinpoint where the fire was coming from because we were in a sandstorm. Then when I saw that bullet land and leave a pockmark in the underside of my troop hatch, it clearly had come from a high angle and that's when we started shifting our fires to the rooftops. Providing suppressive fires to the rooftops made a huge difference in getting rid of some of the heavy small arms fire we were under as we went through Najaf. We always had sappers positioned on either side so if we had vehicles approaching from the flanks we could be very quick in reacting to and eliminating those threats. I think Major Donovan was the one who said, "Hey, these guys are very useful in reducing targets and high angle fires." We could shoot straight up in the air if we wanted to. You can't do that on a tank or Bradley unless you're doing it with a nine millimeter or an M16, yet I had tracks filled with guys who could do that with their machine guns and their rifles. I think that was the big point where Major Donovan and Lieutenant Colonel Schwartz decided that they wanted us going forward on all these missions. One of the primary tasks given to me as part of each of these missions was to provide high angle fires for the task force, because we could do it over a pretty long distance inside the column. We were positioned in the middle of the task force so we could provide a lot of the high angle coverage that's really hard to provide using any other technique for the task force. That was one of the primary things we were able to provide for both of the thunder runs. On the second thunder run - after our experience on the first one, realizing this wasn't an easy business - we took volunteers from the rest of the company, guys who wouldn't normally go forward, especially if they were 240 gunners or 249 gunners. We'd just cram them into my vehicle or another vehicle where we had space just to get more firepower forward. I think we were very effective at reducing a lot of these small targets. We weren't fighting tanks; we were fighting crunchies. There were a lot of these guys running around on the ground on your flanks on both sides; and a lot of times, the most effective way to eliminate those targets was with a whole bunch of guys with machine guns and rifles taking aimed shots from the 113s. I think we provided a lot of benefit to the task force in reducing and eliminating the high angle threats as well as the guys poking their heads out of these little spider holes that just lined the streets of Baghdad. I think we provided a lot of benefit on both thunder runs doing those kinds of missions.

RC: Was that kind of usage standard according to doctrine for your engineer company or was this something that was a deviation?

DH: No, this was pretty standard. You adjust to the environment, and since we were always in these two-sided ambushes everywhere we went, it was logical to do it that way. We were always on these roads - whether we were going into Najaf or Baghdad - where we were getting fired on from both sides and it was really chaotic. That part was a little different; but in the sense of being integrated and being forward with the task force the whole time, we had trained that way in Kuwait and it's doctrinal to fight that way, so that wasn't really a deviation. The deviations we made were the decisions about the kinds of equipment we'd go forward with, the task organization we'd go forward with and what kinds of adjustments we had to make because of the enemy. It comes pretty naturally when you're out there. You don't have to be ordered to provide angle fires when people are shooting at you from the tops of buildings. Those were the kinds of adjustments we made, but it was pretty doctrinal for the engineer company to move forward with the task force.

ES: Combat engineers wear two hats. We have specialized missions and equipment and we can execute very specific tasks that a typical company can't do. The other hat we wear - and the thing I think we really brought to the table during those two thunder runs - concerns our actions as infantry. We brought to that thunder run the abilities and benefits of light infantry within an armored context. Had we not been there, they would have just had that straight armored column and that would have been limited without the benefits the engineers provided.

DH: Doctrinally speaking, too, the secondary mission of the combat engineers is to fight as infantry. We had trained that way with Charlie 3-15 - the mechanized company that was with the task force - the whole time we were in Kuwait. We would cross-train each other and do things like that. We were definitely trained and ready to do those kinds of missions. By the time we had gotten to that point, we had done so many live fires and maneuvers that everybody was quite comfortable in those situations, or as comfortable as you can be. We were comfortable with the idea of executing these missions and I think we did a pretty good job of it.

RC: Are there any lessons learned or insights from your thunder run experiences?

DH: There are a couple. We were changing the way we did suppressive fires based on the areas we were in inside the city. I remember one particular event when we were on the second thunder run. We were approaching a gas station and I heard on the net one of my platoon sergeants saying, "Hey, there's a gas station up here. We need to lay off the suppressive fires a little bit." My temptation was to say, "No. Continue to suppress, fire at and eliminate targets." But I didn't. Sure enough, we slowed down our fire and the next thing that came out of that gas station was an RPG and it nailed one of my tracks. It was an ugly situation and the last thing you want to see happen, but it was almost predictable. As soon as we let up on our suppressive fires, you could see - there were these bunkers everywhere and there was one right there by the gas station; and as soon as we gave them a chance to poke their heads up and acquire a target, they nailed us. I think one of the lessons learned was that if you can provide accurate, suppressive, aimed fire then you should continue to do that for as long as you can, especially in the type of situation we were in during the thunder runs where everybody was just trying to kill each other as fast as they could. Another lesson learned was that you really have to be careful about letting your guard down. When we got into the city on the second go-around, the actual fight to get into the city wasn't as bad as the fight on the 5th. Once we got into the city on the 7th, there was this lull in the battle - a quiet before the storm - so we got out of our vehicles, started clearing bunkers and buildings that were all around us. We weren't having any real contact or anything. I wouldn't say we started to relax, but we didn't have guys in fighting positions in their vehicles the whole time. When the first mortar landed, I was kind of walking around, checking out an area next to a building we had just cleared. Then the mortars started coming down like crazy after that, big time, and I also had a guy get shot by a sniper. It all happened at once. The mortar round landed and I went back to my vehicle and then got a report that one of my guys had been shot. It was kind of a lucky shot because they got him between the small arms protective insert (SAPI) plates. It went into his chest and out his back. At that point, we were dealing with a pretty serious casualty but we weren't in the position to do casualty evacuation. Every casualty we took was a pretty big deal because it was no easy trip to get back out of the city. You really have to keep your guard up and make sure you're aware of the situation around you. That sniper fire and mortar fire continued to haunt us for about three hours, maybe longer.

ES: I learned a couple things as well. One of them we discussed earlier: choosing from your arsenal of tools and applying those tools to the situation, not necessarily sticking to the doctrine. The doctrine is there as a guide but being able to identify the needs and the mission and being able to put those two together is very important, and ultimately it leads to the success or failure of the mission. Another thing that I learned - and this is more applicable to the preparation for the thunder runs - was the advantage that technology offered us in being able to plan. With satellite imagery, maps and that kind of thing we were able to orient the commanders and the platoons on what they were looking for as far as landmarks, freeways, roads and intersections, as well as structures and bridges and things like that. Being able to have that information readily available and pull it together so the people who were actually executing these missions could know what they were getting into before they got there, I think that had measurable effects.

RC: Thank you very much, gentlemen.



END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Jennifer Vedder