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 Fred Tanner

Combat Studies Institute
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

Abstract

In this interview Major Fred Tanner discusses his experiences in support of OEF and with General McKiernan. Major Tanner explains his responsibility as General McKiernan's military assistant and the different things he encountered while serving in that capacity. Major Tanner also describes the difference in RC-East from the time he got there until the time he left. Major Tanner concludes his interview by talking about the fact that everybody has a boss and is accountable to someone.

Interview with MAJ Fred Tanner

4 March 2010

JV: Good afternoon, my name is Jenn Vedder (JV) and I'm with the Operational Leadership Experiences Project at the Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Today we're located at the Command and General Staff College at Fort Belvoir, Virginia and I'm interviewing Major Fred Tanner (FT) on his experiences during Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Today's date is 4 March 2010 and this is an unclassified interview. Before we begin, if you feel at any time that we're entering classified territory, please couch your response in terms that avoid revealing any classified information, and if classification requirements prevent you from responding, simply say that you're not able to answer. We'll start with some basics, what branch are you?

FT: Infantry.

JV: How many years have you been in the military?

FT: Just past 13 years.

JV: What made you choose infantry?

FT: I figured if you're going to join the Army, join the Army.

JV: Have you always been infantry then?

FT: Yes.

JV: Did you go through ROTC?

FT: I did. I was an ROTC graduate from a small SUNY school, which stands for State University of New York.

JV: Which one?

FT: Brockport. Have you heard of it? That's very rare.

JV: Many of my friends went to SUNY schools. So, we're going to focus on your deployment to OEF, and why don't we start with when you found out you'd be deploying.

FT: Actually I volunteered. I was assigned here at Fort Myer, Virginia with the Old Guard. I had just returned from Africa. I was serving as the battalion commander that day; I was the S3, but serving as the battalion commander that day. The regimental commander called the battalion commanders into his office and said "Hey, you have to give up a captain (O3) or a major (O4), and he's leaving for Afghanistan in three weeks." It was an individual augmentee tasker. I looked down at it and it send to serve on General Nicholson's staff. General Nicholson, I assumed was formerly Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Nicholson out of Fort Lewis who I've worked for, so I said, "Hey sir, I'll volunteer." Big chuckles all around, "Right, Fred, you just got back." And I said, "No, sir." He said to think about it overnight. I found General Nicholson on Army

Knowledge Online (AKO) and asked if he was going to Afghanistan, he said "Yeah, send me the best guy you've got." I said "I'm sending you the best guy I know sir." So I found out in September of 2008 and deployed in October of 2008.

JV: Were you assigned to a specific unit or just the General's staff?

FT: We were in Regional Command - South (RC-South), which at that time, and still is, a NATO command. As part of that, there were no Americans. It was Dutch, British, Canadian and Australians. We were kind of the initial US plug into southern Afghanistan.

JV: Was General Nicholson going over to take charge?

FT: General Nicholson, they had created a new position called Deputy Commander for Stability, and he was assuming that position. He was going to be the first Deputy Commander for Stability.

JV: He's a one-star?

FT: He's a one-star.

JV: What was going to be your job title when you left?

FT: My initial job title was going to be -- the way North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ranks are, they have an SO1 which stands for Staff Officer 1 which is normally a lieutenant colonel, an staff officer 2 (SO2) is a major. I was going to be the SO1 in charge of governance, which I am totally unprepared and ill-suited for.

JV: Explain a little bit about how this staff works. When I think staff, I think personnel officer (S1), intelligence officer (S2), you know a battalion or brigade staff. Is this similar to that?

FT: No, the Regional Command (RC) is essentially the division level. For instance, in RC-East where the US has always been, you'll have a US division and the division staff there. When I arrived there, it was the 101st, right now it's the 82nd. An RC level command is considered a division. Essentially I was plugging into a division level staff. To complicate things even further, because of the nature of the conflict, Secretary Gates had convinced the other nations that we could benefit from a civil-military coordination cell, where essentially you took some of these civilian agencies -- the Department of State, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the British, Canadian, and Dutch equivalents of those organizations -- and put them in a cell in order to gain synergy and unity of effort. This SO1 governance position was part of this civil-military coordination cell, which was not there until we arrived.

JV: And which the general was going to be the --

FT: One of the staff sections that would report to that General or the Deputy Commander of Stabilization would be the civil-military coordination cell.

JV: That's complicated.

FT: It sure was; it was a great eye-opener for me.

JV: You were going over there to do this governance position, what did that entail? What did you think it entailed before you left?

FT: I really didn't have a good grasp on what it did. Essentially I didn't know if I was going to be providing information, and I just fact-finding to provide information to the boss, am I doing analysis? What it evolved to was ensuring that there was unity of effort amongst both the military and civilian efforts going among all the countries in Afghanistan. Ensuring that everybody has a mentor, in terms of governance and collating all the reports that everyone is submitting.

JV: Were the Afghans involved in this at all?

FT: No, the Afghans were not part of the cell. It has evolved to that now with the Afghan Hands program that you may have heard about, but initially no. As far as I know, it still isn't but there is now a plan to incorporate that into this. All that said, I didn't do any of that. [Laughter] That was the plan, then we arrived there and I quickly got pulled in to be General Nicholson's military assistant. Instead of working for him in a cell, now I'm working as his outer office.

JV: Like an aide?

FT: Yes. In the US construct or task organization, you'll have an aide who travels with the General, then you'll have an executive assistant (EA) that stays back and is his own personal Chief of Staff. The military construct they call it an MA, a military assistant, and I was his military assistant; I had the duties of both.

JV: Had you done anything like that before?

FT: No.

JV: What was that job going to entail?

FT: That one I was much more well-suited for. That is making the General's train run on time, to over-simplify.

JV: Right place, right time, right people.

FT: Occasionally, he'll give you his vision of how an event that he's specifically going to be involved in [should go], as opposed to something broad operationally, you're translating his guidance into action.

JV: You said you'd just gotten back from the Horn of Africa; did you have any kind of training in this three weeks you had to get ready to go?

FT: We did a two week exercise in Germany; that's where you meet all the other nations.

JV: You went from where to go to Germany?

FT: Fort Myer to Germany and back to Fort Myer. Then Fort Myer to Fort Benning, Georgia; and at Benning you're getting your gear, shots, that kind of stuff.

JV: So that two weeks of training in Germany, you met everybody there. Was General Nicholson there?

FT: Yes, and that's the first time I actually saw General Nicholson, was in Germany.

JV: When did you head over to Afghanistan?

FT: 23 October 2008.

JV: Did you arrive right into Afghanistan?

FT: Yes.

JV: When you got there, what was your first thought? You hadn't been in that theater before.

FT: Correct. I was playing catch-up. Getting there I'm still thinking that I'm SO1 governance. It's not until we hit the ground and we realize that there's a US national support element in Kandahar, which is where we were stationed, which is supposed to provide all the US support but it's really immature.

JV: Even in 2008?

FT: Kandahar Air Field itself is not immature, but the US presence, we were providing some mentors and trainers through what they called Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan (CSTC-A) but in terms of operational units, now there are 20,000 Marines in the Stryker brigade, but there was none of that [then]. There was no organic what we would call modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) units in the south. You had this hodgepodge of stuff. There wasn't any real support in terms of if the general wanted to go somewhere -- keep in mind, this is a new general that the NATO staff didn't have previously, either -- there isn't anything established for him. Yeah, there's an office space for him and there are a couple of laptops and that's about the extent of it.

JV: So you all are trying to figure out how you're going to fit in to this grand scheme?

FT: Right. The rumor mill is running, Bush is still President, but the rumor mill is running that the Americans are coming into the south, Iraq is going to wind down regardless of who wins [the election], the surge is already culminated in Iraq, Afghanistan is "The Good War" and is going to start seeing these resources. General Nicholson coming to the south is the opening overture of an increased US presence in the south.

JV: No pressure.

FT: For him. [Laughter]

JV: After you got on the ground, you said you were in Kandahar; was there a specific forward operating base (FOB)?

FT: No, Kandahar Air Field is the equivalent of Bagram in the east, or Balad in Iraq. It's huge.

JV: Many different units?

FT: Yes. At that time, predominantly NATO, not US.

JV: How was that as far as showing up and trying to get integrated? You said you had some office space. How long were you there when you realized you weren't going to be the SO1?

FT: I think it was Day One or Day Two. I literally had my feet up on the desk and was reading the Brits' plan for Helmut. I was familiarizing myself with all of the other countries' plans. A guy comes in the office and says, "Hey, the general needs you to take this meeting, blah blah blah" and it was a meeting of all the other general's military assistants. Maybe two days.

JV: You just happened to be sitting at the desk?

FT: No, then I got a new desk. I moved to a new office. Initially, it was that the guy he had picked to be his aide was still in graduate school and he had to graduate, so I was only going to hold the job until December. I was just going to be this bridge from November to December, and once we became comfortable with each other, he just kept me.

JV: He had a little history with you, too?

FT: Yeah, and he knew who I was. I was a rare find for him, because the rest of the plug were just individual guys that either volunteered or were told. Initially I was the only guy he knew previously.

JV: That helps a little bit.

FT: I wouldn't have volunteered had it not been him, because he was an awesome battalion commander. I was tired of being at the Old Guard and I wanted to go back to Army stuff.

JV: Things just lined up. When you went over, did you take much equipment, or were things already there?

FT: No, we grew in place. There wasn't much there in terms of equipment. Some of the stuff was provided; NATO uses a different computer operating system, so some of the stuff you have to get through the higher NATO logistics structure, but the US stuff initially was beg, borrow or steal.

JV: Were you able to do that with vehicles? How did you get around?

FT: Yeah. I'm pretty good in those nebulous environments where action just needs to occur, so that's why I was better fitted for that job than governance.

JV: No handoff or anything?

FT: No, there was nobody to hand to us.

JV: What was the mission? What were you guys tasked with doing?

FT: The general looked at it that he had two functions: one was to gather unity of effort in terms of stabilization efforts for southern Afghanistan. I'm enabling him; my mission is to enable him to do his mission. The second mission I think he probably took on as a responsibility was preparing for the influx of US forces. Bush at the end of his term approved an additional 17,000

troops. This is not the 30,000, and people have forgotten that. Those 17,000 all came to the south. [The general] was aware of the plans in the Pentagon that more could be coming, so we were looking at basing. There was a huge concern among the Allies that it's going to be seen as the Americans having to come and save the day. He invested an enormous amount of personal time and energy in making sure everybody was comfortable with the arrival of US forces. Forget about not just the basing and the logistics in terms of who's going to go where, a lot of that is set in the political conditions. Who is going to have primacy for what, etc. We have commander's emergency response program (CERP) funds, the ability to drive up the price of gravel because the Americans are spending all this money; it was incredibly complex, things I never thought about. It was very impressive to see him do all that.

JV: Where did you fit into the grand scheme of that? Why don't you tell me what a typical day would be like for you.

FT: A typical day we would do what they called prayers but what we called a battlefield update brief (BUB). There's a whole other vernacular with NATO that you have to adapt to. I'd say, "Where is everybody?" "Everybody's at prayers." I was thinking do we stop because it's Muslim time to pray? I was confused; it's just what they called it, morning prayers. So, 7:00 am battlefield update brief, which essentially was the night previous operations. If somebody had done something that night kinetically and there were potential consequences that had to be managed, that would take the morning.

JV: The General sits in on that and you were there too?

FT: Correct. I would sit in there and take notes. If taskers come out, the general asks a question or the tells the staff he wants more information on one thing in particular, I'd say I would follow up with so-and-so because he needs to answer "X." That would take us from 0700 to 0800. It would depend on what we had going on; a lot of days he was taking office calls. From 0800 to 1100 or so he'd be in the office. That would either be people on the staff briefing him on future plans, mostly external elements. You have to keep in mind, the word is out to the US military that southern Afghanistan is getting more, so there's a huge amount of both military interest and political interest. There were a lot of VIPs coming into southern Afghanistan; a lot of media.

JV: VIPs from where? The US or everywhere?

FT: The US. You get a lot of VIPs, period, multiply it by four because you have Dutch, Canadian and British. They have VIPs and you have to accommodate that, with the renewed interest, and especially post US election. McCain loses and now the democrats want to know what's going on with Afghanistan, Obama's already said that we need to stop putting resources into Iraq and we need to go to Afghanistan; so there's a huge amount of political interest in terms of people coming in. In order to get an American perspective, you really do have to speak to an American. At this point, the Canadians and the Dutch have already said, "Hey, we're leaving in 2011," and, "We're leaving in 2012," respectively. With that, they paint a different picture than we would paint as US.

JV: We haven't set that date.

FT: No, we have not. It's a question of whether or not we're going to get more resources. It becomes part of the strategic communication; "Hey, we need more resources and this is why"

when we're talking to the US. If you talk to a Dutch guy, whose country is already said, "Hey, we're leaving, the battle is over. We don't need more resources." It's very important for [the general] to be able to communicate to our policy makers, be that a politician, or a think tank. Think tanks are another group of people coming over and wanting to know what's going on in southern Afghanistan.

JV: Were you privy to any of those meetings?

FT: Oh, sure; every one of them.

JV: What was the most memorable one?

FT: The most memorable one to me would be, we had been beating the drum for a while in terms of "This is why we need more people, this is how bad it is," etc., and General McKiernan comes down. The quote -- this wasn't to me but to General Nicholson -- was "We may have done too good of a job explaining how bad it is over here." Two weeks later, it's announced that General McKiernan is going to be replaced by General McChrystal. I think McKiernan had been given the word. That was the most memorable. He said it very professionally, he wasn't angry, but now I can look back and reflect that he had just gotten the word. The message was that we may had done a little bit too good a job explaining how challenging it is over here.

JV: Did you have any soldiers working for you?

FT: I had three Navy guys working directly for me. One was the General's driver, one was our admin clerk, and one was supposed to be his personal security officer.

JV: How was that? Any problems with that?

FT: They were great guys, great Americans who volunteered for the mission; not well-suited. The guy that's supposed to be his personal security officer had never done it.

JV: Square peg in a round hole.

FT: When all of these determinations are being made, Afghanistan was still on the way back burner. Now it'd be a lot different.

JV: You would think for a personal security detachment, they'd pick maybe infantry or military police (MP).

FT: Yeah, there's a branch of the Army that does that, but he said he didn't want it.

JV: You got along well?

FT: Oh yeah, no issues. Initially I could rely upon an E4 Army more than I could rely upon a captain in some other nation's military.

JV: There's that element of the known.

FT: Familiarity, exactly.

JV: You mentioned that the General had a driver; when you guys drove around, was it just your vehicle?

FT: No, mostly we flew. If we were going to go off the FOB or off Kandahar, it was a flight. That would be in terms of making the General's train run on time.

JV: Getting back to your day, 0800 to 1100 you had office calls?

FT: Sorry, yes. He's doing VIP meetings. At 1100, I got him big into the gym. 1100 to 1300 was gym and lunch. 1300 he would start fielding additional office calls or travel. If we were in the office that day, people were coming to him, people may be briefing for his approval in terms of contingency operations (CONOPs), CONOPs approval for that night or the next night. Or we'd go visit a unit. Initially it was get out and understand. He had been a brigade commander in the east, but like the rest of us, no one had really operated in the south. The first couple of months was get out and gain situational awareness and understanding of what things were like.

JV: Did you feel pretty safe traveling?

FT: No. Here was the shocking thing to me. At this point I had been to Iraq, I had been to Africa. In Iraq, granted I was there at the start of the insurgency, but I always felt there was the potential to make contact, but I never could say without a doubt if I go here, we're going to have it. In Afghanistan, you could say "If we go here, we are going to be shot at." There were areas where we had absolutely no presence, that we had ceded control to the Taliban. To me that was shocking, I had no idea; I think a lot of people didn't know that. I was also surprised to learn the size of the other nations' contingents. When you think the country of Canada is in a singular province, you have this vision of the entire Canadian army only having to worry about one province. But the entire Canadian army is 6,000. [Laughter] I should say, their entire deployed army is 6,000. Bottom line, it was six or seven thousand soldiers.

JV: They can't cover the area.

FT: Right, in terms of military. What was impressive in looking at the Allies was this. If you're going to a provincial reconstruction team (PRT) for the United States, the guy that's working rule of law or prisons and the police is probably an infantry guy or maybe an MP. He's probably in the National Guard and back home if you're very lucky he's a prison guard. You go to a Canadian PRT and their guy that's working prisons is from their Bureau of Prisons and it's 12 guys. It's more holistic than the US. The military effort doesn't match the US, but in terms of the whole of government application, I was very impressed in seeing that with the Dutch, the British and the Canadians. Their PRTs were far more robust in terms of capabilities.

JV: There's really no way that we could really do that.

FT: Right. We don't have the human capacity. That was an eye-opener for me. At the time each province in Afghanistan belonged to a different nation. Helmand belonged to the Brits, Kandahar belonged to the Canadians, Oruzgan belonged to the Dutch. The RC-South headquarters in theory was supposed to unify and synchronize the entire south, but you really had Canadians in Kandahar reporting back to Ottawa and taking direction from Ottawa. You had Brits in Helmand reporting back to London and taking direction from London, and the same with the Dutch in The Hague. It wasn't really until the influx of US forces that RC-South became a

fighting headquarters, if you will, when they had actual control of assets. It was a huge eye-opener for me. We'd get a reporter, who'd say, "We want to see action," and it made it very simple. "Okay, we go there," and sure enough; almost without fail.

JV: You did some traveling; what time would your day end usually?

FT: Maybe 2100 or 2200. It was really hard to tell; if there were operations going on that night, a lot of times one of the Special Operations Forces (SOF) guys would show up with a folder in his hand and a hurried look on his face because some time-sensitive target just came up and he needs to brief. I would say between 2100 and 2200 every night.

JV: Did you do any overnight traveling?

FT: Oh yeah. You'd have to plan accordingly. Some of the places we'd go would only take us at night. In terms of him gaining situational awareness, it wasn't just visiting our allies; it was visiting everybody that was working in that battlespace.

JV: How was your logistical support, living conditions, that kind of thing?

FT: I was appalled. Here I am in 2008; I'm thinking we're six years into this thing; you've got to be living pretty large.

JV: You're not living on some outpost in the middle of nowhere.

FT: Yeah. I'm going to the largest airfield in Afghanistan, and it was unbelievable. You had guys living in tents still. I told people I lived better in Iraq by February 2004 than I was --

JV: At Kandahar Airfield in 2008.

FT: Yeah. It improved a lot while I was there, I'll give it that, but initially. Here was the other thing, because I fell under NATO, there wasn't Kellogg Brown and Root (KBR). The chow was -- they'd go lowest bidder like our Army. The other thing is the Allies don't do year-long tours. So there's not as much emphasis put on life support, because it's a six-month gig for them.

JV: Were their conditions just as bad as yours?

FT: Oh yeah. But they were living in it for shorter, and they have more rest and relaxation (R&R).

JV: You can put up with something for six months as opposed to a year. The food wasn't so great either.

FT: Don't get me wrong, people have endured far worse. [Laughter] But in terms of expectation, my expectation was much higher.

JV: Did you have your own place to live? Were you in a tent?

FT: I was in modular housing, and this is a great measure of American involvement. Initially I had a room to myself, a fairly big room. No internet; none of the goodies that we're used to. Then I got one roommate. Then we went up to four to a room. Then we went up to six to a

room; still in the same room. When I left, we were up to eight in a room. With the influx of US -- you could see it.

JV: People were coming faster than the infrastructure was building up.

FT: Right. Basically the infrastructure was bunk beds. I'm sure it's gotten a little bit better now. Before I left they opened up a NATO barracks, and because I was working for NATO command I could move into NATO barracks.

JV: Did you move in?

FT: Oh yes. I went back down to two to a room.

JV: In that new place did you have internet and phone access?

FT: No. They had just built it. I'm fairly certain they have it now, but that was the bright shiny object that was dangled out in front of me and it just kept getting pushed back.

JV: You were on a pretty small team, working for the general; did you suffer any casualties?

FT: No. In a sense, we suffered casualties any time any American was killed. That was something that he took very seriously. I wouldn't say we went to every memorial service because there were times we just couldn't do it, but just about everyone. Any time an American was killed or wounded, we were notified. That said, while none of them were part of my team, I went to a memorial service in Afghanistan and it turned out the soldier used to be my executive officer (XO). He was a Special Forces (SF) guy, there was a memorial for I don't know if it was 3rd Special Forces Group (SFG) or 7th SFG; I get there and get the program and it's John Tinsely, and John Tinsley had been my XO at the Old Guard. I didn't lose anybody in the team, but it's a smaller Army than you think.

JV: How do you come back from that? You know you still have a mission to do and you want to continue with what you have to do, but you've got all these thoughts in your head. How do you stay focused?

FT: I would say it's pretty easy over there to stay focused, at least for me it was. Idle hands are the devil's workshop. You set aside a memorial time and there's a little time to mourn, but it doesn't stop. I had a much more difficult time when a soldier was killed here in a motorcycle accident. To me, that was much harder to process than someone dying in action. I don't know if that's just me. I had a lot more time to think about it. When a soldier dies here you're dealing with the family and it's fresh to them. They're in shock and that can be really hard to do. Over there, and I don't mean to sound cold when I say this, but the Army drives on.

JV: You alluded to this a little bit, did you have much media involvement? Did you have to handle the media before they got to the general?

FT: Tons of media.

JV: Do you have any experiences you want to talk about, good or bad.

FT: I would tell you they were all good. I joke that if this infantry thing doesn't work out for me I'm going to become a public affairs officer (PAO). [Laughter] There was a genuine interest in the story of Afghanistan, so we got a lot of media and they were all very professional and they were all pretty reasonable. It made for some funny stories. I think he won a Pulitzer Prize; a very well-known New York Times reporter just itching, very dogged in his determination to get in a fight and I said, "Okay, we're going out with the general and walk a patrol." He automatically assumes it's going to be gunships, lock down, the whole thing. He was basing it all off of Iraq, and that was kind of funny. All these reporters had experience in Iraq and I saw this with the think tanks, I saw it with the reporters, I saw it with politicians: everybody's first inclination is to draw on their experiences in Iraq. I did the same thing. But that's just not how it was. So, we show up at the helicopter to get on, and the reporter asked me, "Where's everybody else?" It was me, the general, and the reporter. I said, "This is it." [Laughter] "The platoon that we're linking up with is already there." He got this look on his face, and I said "Hey, be careful what you ask for." This was one of those days where I knew we would make contact. Sure enough, an hour and a half later we make contact and Dexter is in the fetal position. An experience like that, no matter how aggressive a reporter is, afterwards there is a shared hardship and a bond there. I didn't have any issue with any of the press that was there. I had some issue with something the press wrote about, particularly in the other nations. There was a huge United Kingdom (UK) element that does not want to be involved in Afghanistan, and as soon as General Nicholson showed up, there was all kinds of false reporting in the UK, and we would get this stuff from the staff there, saying that the Americans are there and they want the Brits to go home. It really was the first time that I was personally involved and I could say without any shadow of doubt that that stuff had not happened. Because it's written, people take it as [fact]. The Brits view media totally different than we do. Some of their mainstream media is almost like The National Enquirer. But it's read and viewed as the truth. That was another eye-opener in terms of the international experience.

JV: Along those same lines, how was the communication back home? You said you didn't have internet in your hooch.

FT: No.

JV: Were you able to speak to your family at all?

FT: I was single, I am single. None of that ever bothered me. I never had an issue with any of that.

JV: Did you take rest and relaxation (R&R) while you were there?

FT: I did. I took R&R to France. My next assignment is going to be Germany. I like Europe so much that I decided I need to go do a tour there.

JV: Do you have any memorable stories from this assignment? Being with the General; out doing something that you would want to share?

FT: The media and the gunfight, that was definitely up there in terms of interesting moments. There's almost too many to list. The first time we went to the Embassy; seeing the whole changeover. One; the political changeover from Bush. Being in Afghanistan when President Bush passed to President Obama was very interesting. The second was when McKiernan was

replaced by McChrystal. When that all occurs, I could see the momentum building. We started with these six guys that just volunteered to come over with General Nicholson; by the time we left there's 20,000 additional US service members in the south and they're trying to debate how many McChrystal should ask for, twenty or thirty or forty thousand. Just that year to be on the ground in that place in that timeframe and watching that all unfold was cool.

JV: It sounds like a great experience.

FT: It was. I'd say, of the three deployments, I never would have thought that this one would have been as rewarding as it was.

JV: When you left, did you all come back together with General Nicholson? How did that work?

FT: No. We all came back different times, because you had some guys that were only doing six months because they were called up out of the Individual Ready Reserves (IRR) or Reserves or National Guard. We had one guy who retired and had to; he had reached the mandatory age, he was too old. The Navy guys did different length tours at the time; I think a lot of that has changed. I wound up coming back with the general, but not everybody did.

JV: You were there for 12 months and then you came back? Now was there some sort of handover?

FT: Yeah. He was replaced by another American general officer, Brigadier General Hodges. They changed his position. That NATO construct rotates. When we were there, the two-star in charge of RC-South was a Dutch guy. Now it's a British guy. What they call flags to post, meaning the national identify of each given post, will rotate. Now there's an American in charge of operations. The US General that replaced Nicholson didn't have the same duties and responsibilities.

JV: Because we took the lead at that point?

FT: Right, we took a lead in ops as opposed to stability.

JV: When did you redeploy?

FT: It was late September, early October of 2009.

JV: How did that go? Any problems?

FT: No, it was great. We came through London and did some out briefing there, so I didn't have to go through the whole Kuwait mess. [Laughter] There was one other time we came back here to talk to people on [Capitol] Hill here in Washington, DC, and we came back with McKiernan on his jet. There were a couple of rock star experiences that I'll probably never get to repeat. No issues with any of that. It was one of those things where it was strange. It's always so surreal; every time I've come back to the United States it feels weird being back.

JV: How long does that last? Does it take a while to get over it?

FT: I'd say maybe a week or so.

JV: Does everything seem very big?

FT: And clean. [Laughter] Smells good. In Kandahar there's an open cesspool, we call it the Poo Pond. If you were there; it is not something you forget. Honestly it's the first thing I remember when I got off the plane, saying "What's that smell?" They said, "Oh yeah, that's the Poo Pond. Wait until summertime." My barracks was literally the closest you can get to it. There may have been one building that was closer. I remember I would push out these mass e-mails and I included the Google Earth shot of Kandahar Airfield saying "Here's the arrow to the Poo Pond, and here's my house."

JV: That's awful.

FT: If we had time I'd pull it up for you right now to give you a true appreciation.

JV: Because you travelled with such a small group, did they do any of the reintegration that I'm sure you've been through after your Iraq deployment.

FT: I don't think we did it for Iraq, I think that was still fairly new. I found it ironic I did it for Africa, which was not a stressful or traumatic experience at all.

JV: Nothing this time?

FT: No. Part of that is me being an individual augmentee, coming back to the Old Guard. The Old Guard knew I was going back to school. I'm also pretty responsible, I'm not the 19 year old kid who's just been away from home, so I was given some leeway.

JV: You went through the medical checks and all that.

FT: Oh yeah. I took the surveys I had to take, but there wasn't a detailed reintegration plan for Fred Tanner.

JV: If you could think of one lesson that you learned on this deployment that you think you will carry with you, what would that lesson be.

FT: That's a good question. The problem is narrowing it in terms of scope, only picking one. I'm trying to think of the most significant. I had this vision that generals were these omnipotent creatures; and they do have a lot of power. The lesson learned is that everybody has a boss. Everybody answers to somebody. I learned that there are limits in everything that we try to do. The general would want to do something, and I'd think he could do that, but we'd need to brief the Ambassador. So, we'd brief the Ambassador and he'd say do it, but we didn't brief Holbrook and Holbrook was the Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) [a position created by the Obama administration that the US ambassador in Afghanistan had to report to]. The lesson learned was that no matter what your rank is, you never get to act independently or unilaterally. That was my take away. And that's not necessarily a bad thing, but it was surprising, eye-opening. At my level previously, as a company commander, within my company I could pretty much do whatever I wanted. [Laughter] It's kind of counter-intuitive that the more senior you get, the less opportunity you have, or the more consensus-building you have to do. That was the take away; you spend a lot of time building consensus.

JV: Do you have any closing observations you'd like to make?

FT: No.

JV: Thank you very much for your time.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Jenna Fike