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 Gregory Escobar

Combat Studies Institute
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

Abstract

MAJ Greg Escobar served as operations officer (S3) and transition team chief in Kunar and Paktika Provinces, Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). In this July 2012 interview, MAJ Escobar discusses the significant challenges of working on a transition team, the level of proficiency of the two groups of Afghans he worked with, and his prognosis of the US mission in Afghanistan. MAJ Escobar concludes his interview with the observation, "We have been extremely successful along the border killing terrorists, and I think we can continue being successful doing that. I think it would take a significant amount of time to train a capable force to continue doing that mission in that area, at least on the Afghan side. I think it's doable."

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24 July 2012

JF: My name is Jenna Fike (JF) and I'm with the Operational Leadership Experiences (OLE) Project at the Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. I'm interviewing MAJ Greg Escobar (GE) on his experiences during Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Today's date is 24 July 2012 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. Before we talk about your deployment, could you give a brief history of your background in the Army?

GE: I've been on Active Duty for 11 years. I commissioned in 2001 as an Infantry officer. I attended the Infantry Officer Basic Course (IOBC), spent a couple of years at Fort Benning, Georgia, and my first duty assignment after that was a heavy assignment at Fort Carson, Colorado. That was with 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division (ID). I had one deployment there to Iraq as a platoon leader. My next assignment after that was the Career Course as a captain at Fort Benning again. Following that, I had my light Infantry time at Fort Riley, Kansas, was a company commander; had a deployment to Iraq. Shortly after that I did some more light Infantry time in Washington, DC, which was a nice assignment. Following that, I was with another light Infantry brigade out Fort Campbell, Kentucky and had a deployment to Afghanistan, which brings me to current date at the Command and General Staff College (CGSC).

JF: When you joined the Army, with all the branches, why did you decide on Infantry?

GE: I decided on Infantry because I felt I could be with Soldiers, I could -- I hate to say this -- I could shoot things, blow things up, continue to be physically active for as long as possible.

JF: A lot of people say it just like that. Has it lived up to the expectations, has it been what you thought it was going to be?

GE: Absolutely.

JF: Okay. Thanks for explaining that. Before the recording came on, we decided that we're going to go ahead and talk about your most recent deployment to Afghanistan. How did you find out that you'd be going on that deployment?

GE: I came out of my second command in Washington, DC and I was coming up on 24 months of dwell time. I did want to be in DC anymore, so I volunteered for a deployment, the next thing smoking, as soon as I could possibly deploy, and I went to Afghanistan.

JF: What was your duty position for this deployment?

GE: Duty position, the first half of it I was an operations officer (S3) for a transition team training Afghan Police in Kunar Province, and the second half I was a transition team chief training Afghan Army in Paktika, Afghanistan.

JF: So police and army. What did pre-deployment training look like for this?

GE: In my opinion, pre-deployment training was a bit lacking. The things we focused on were language training and cultural awareness training. Although very important, the language that we were trained on was not the language for the area that we were deploying into, so it was a waste of time. Cultural training, a lot of the cultural trainers, although they had a background from Afghanistan, it had been some years since they had been there. The female cultural awareness trainer left Afghanistan when she was three or four years old and spent the remainder of time in California. The stories from a child in Afghanistan are probably very different from the experience as an adult.

JF: And also from several years ago at this point.

GE: Absolutely. My assumption is that she does not remember what happened while she was in Afghanistan, and was probably telling second or third hand experiences from relatives.

JF: Sure. What language were you being trained in?

GE: We were trained in Dari, which is in my opinion what the United States is pushing on the country as a national language, which is why we were taught it versus what the people along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border are speaking, which is multiple languages, primarily Pashtu.

JF: Other than more directed language training and possibly more relevant or recent cultural training, what else do you think should have been focused on during this pre-deployment training? What would have been helpful for your specific mission?

EG: Cultural training, and I don't know that you can do any more than get a good interpreter or translator, and that's all the cultural training you need. It's more interpersonal skills and communication skills that make that effective. Regardless of what you do or what you say, it's going to go through an intermediary, and that intermediary is the one that defines if you're culturally acceptable or not acceptable. We waste a lot of time on cultural training, when the things that actually come out of our mouths are not coming out of our mouths, they're coming out of the translators and interpreters. I would focus on, if anything, Middle Eastern negotiation skills. At one point I looked at that maybe we needed to look at it like the training model recruiters use. To teach the skills of asking open-ended questions would probably be more advantageous than teaching the simple things that you can get from watching a lot of the Lawrence of Arabia movies that typically get pushed around during these training sessions.

JF: [Laughs] So it's more interpersonal skills and not necessarily specific to the country.

GE: Absolutely. The other push would be to -- at least in my situation, I got to the unit approximately a month and a half prior to deployment, so it was an accelerated training period. You've got to build those skills with the actual unit that you're going to be working with prior to deployment. That's probably more important.

JF: Okay. For the first half, where in Afghanistan did you serve?

GE: The first half I was in Kunar Province, the town's name was Asadabad, at the intersection of the Kunar Valley and the Pesh Valley, a couple of miles from Korengal.

JF: What were your duties as the operations officer with transition team working with the police?

GE: My duties were to pull in Department of Justice police trainers, assess what the training level of the police was, and try to develop a plan so that we could help improve their capabilities.

JF: Not being a Military Police (MP) officer yourself, were there some challenges involved --

GE: Absolutely.

JF: How did you overcome some of these challenges, not being the subject matter expert?

GE: I overcame those by pulling in as many law enforcement professionals as possible. When we originally arrived there we had none, and it was, "Hey, go out there and figure it out." "Wait a minute; I've never been a police officer. I can guess what this should look like and what the Afghan police contribution should look like for enforcing the rule of law, but I have never experienced it." Immediately we grabbed two law enforcement -- well, not immediately. We started working the force request to get law enforcement personnel down to our team so we could train, or really assess and then train.

JF: Now, since you brought it up, I was about to ask about the assessment portion. What was the assessment? How proficient were the Afghan police you guys were advising?

GE: What we could assess was the systems at the headquarters. We couldn't necessarily assess performance in the field. That had a lot to do with force protection requirements and our ability to secure ourselves out with the police. That's a whole other issue. The things we looked at were personnel numbers. We looked at how many guys they had on the books, how many guys were getting paid, how many guys were getting paid daily, and then we looked at training. How many guys have shot their weapons in so many different months? How many guys have had handcuff training? Things like little small metrics that would translate into effective policing while patrolling.

JF: So anything quantifiable.

GE: Anything quantifiable.

JF: What was the general assessment?

GE: Relatively low, and the transition over to training then -- one of the biggest barriers we had whenever we started implemented training was that we had to train hands-on. You couldn't necessarily give them manuals or books because of the low literacy rates. To distribute, give homework, preparation for class, and then start to teach them hands-on, practical exercises was extremely difficult because they couldn't do any prep work prior to classes.

JF: Everything had to be explained and shown.

GE: Yes, absolutely.

JF: It sounds like it was very frustrating. Well, you looked at all these various systems; once you did that, what did you all feel was the first thing that needed to be addressed?

GE: The first thing that needed to be addressed that we felt we could really control immediately was the equipping of the force. It was pulling, through US channels, vehicles, weapons, body-armor, helmets, those types of things. Those are the things we felt we could affect. The slower thing that was just a slow, painstaking process is teaching people how to read and getting literacy instructors down there. That's just a slow, arduous process and by the time you get them to a reading level, it's time for you to leave and pass on to the next guy, who maybe doesn't think it's as important.

JF: You were talking about equipping; this was 2010 and 2011, what were the supply issues or funding issues? Did this equipping have to be done through the Afghan supply system?

GE: Yes, it had to be done through the Afghan supply system, but in order for it to work successfully, we had to parallel the systems. Any time that they'd send in forms or requests, we sent it through US channels and ask, "Hey, did you send your forms?" and it would be a yes or a no. Many times the process for sending forms was, the form has been completed, "Now we're going to hand it to a taxicab driver who's going to drive it down to the headquarters in Kabul." The amount of times that forms would get to where they needed to go and to the right person was slim to none. It turned into, "Alright, I have a copy of the form you sent, I'm now scanning it and emailing it to my counterpart who is mentoring your boss," so that weeks later if that form doesn't show up, that form is being handed over to keep the process jumpstarted. It was really the only way I found effective, unfortunately.

JF: I'm almost afraid to ask this question, but how much progress were you able to make in even a small area before you got moved to your next assignment?

GE: None. You spend more time figuring out what you don't know.

JF: That being the case, this is frustrating, you have so many issues, you feel like you can get nothing done -- how do you keep plugging away at it under these circumstances with so little reward?

GE: You're only there a year, then you come back and you hope that the next time you go there it's a different mission. Or else you beat your head against the wall because it's the same problem over and over. I'm trying to think of the things we were successful at.

JF: Even just minor ones.

GE: Minor thing that we felt we were successful in was that we were able to get law enforcement personnel on our team. We were able to get experienced professionals that could really give a decent assessment, and hand that off to the next team that replaced us so that there was some sort of continuity going from one team to the next.

JF: Having said this and talked about some of the frustrations of the systems, what about the Afghans? How receptive were they to training and learning what you guys were trying to impart?

GE: Initially, we started giving classes and they were not very receptive. Some of it had to do with age disparities. There were 40 and 50-year-old men unwilling to accept instruction from late 20s and early 30s Soldiers that didn't have police experience. That was a barrier. Then we

had to translate it to, "Clearly classes aren't working, we're not going to have classes anymore. We're going to now do some seminars." They were then a little more receptive when we did seminars and brought in the police professionals. The things they were receptive to were map-reading classes and paramilitary type training.

JF: The fun stuff.

GE: Yeah, the fun stuff that we knew extremely well. They were receptive to that because they could translate it into, "Hey, we can now talk to other patrols out in sector and we know what we're talking about."

JF: Was there an understanding of why this training was so important, and what it was we were trying to accomplish in the bigger picture in Afghanistan?

GE: From the Afghan perspective? I don't think so. Really I think that has a lot to do with just understanding the American concept of rule of law. The American rule of law system versus the Afghan jurga system is very different. For us to say, "Hey, we really want to get to have 30 to 40 public trials a month," was not --

JF: They don't do any public trials at all?

GE: They do, but it was very rare; it was definitely the exception.

JF: A lot of closed-door stuff.

GE: A lot of closed-door stuff, a lot of back-door deals, a lot of tribal leader handshaking.

JF: That's a fundamental difference in approach that's going to be hard to overcome. Is there anything else that happened in this first half of your deployment before you switched missions that you want to talk about?

GE: No.

JF: How did getting moved to a different area and a different position come up?

GE: We got moved down south during the brigade relief in place (RIP). We had augmented a separate brigade than we actually belonged to. Whenever our brigade deployed, I was with 4th Brigade,101st Airborne Division, and they were the only brigade in the division that had been augmented with 40 additional field-grade officers to do the training mission. Once we arrived in theater, the division commander, GEN Campbell of the 101st, decided, "I'm not going to keep all those field-grades in one specific area," where we had developed somewhat of a relationship, "I'm now going to disperse them over all of the provinces in Regional Command - East (RC-East)." They sent two to this brigade, two to that brigade, three to that brigade, they dispersed us that way. We returned back to 4th Brigade whenever the brigade RIP'd out and the new brigade came in with the same augmentees.

JF: You said you went do --

GE: Paktika.

JF: Paktika. And now you were advising an Army unit?

GE: An Army unit.

JF: So that's at least a little bit more along your --

GE: A little more familiar.

JF: Again, what happened when you got there? Did you do an assessment?

GE: We spent the first 30 days just assessing and figuring out where the unit was at and what their training level was. They had an Infantry platoon that was working with them, an Infantry platoon working with an Afghan battalion headquarters.

JF: An Afghan infantry platoon?

GE: A US Infantry platoon working with an Afghan infantry battalion. It was offset, and there was definitely some experience issues with the platoon leader versus the 40-year-old battalion commander.

JF: You've alluded to this a couple of times now, Afghanistan is very age-conscious.

GE: Absolutely.

JF: Their culture very much places a lot of credibility on age, and if you're significantly younger than the person you're dealing with, they may not necessarily listen to you. In 2010 and 2011, it seems like this should have been known.

GE: Yep.

JF: And yet they still put a platoon leader in there.

GE: There was still a platoon leader in there. That had a lot to do with what the priorities were in the country. The priorities on the Afghan-Pakistan border at the time didn't necessarily have anything to do with improving Afghan security forces. They had to do with securing the border and interdicting terrorists coming across the border.

JF: I think we want to be careful in that area. Did your arrival in this area help with the age difference issue?

GE: It definitely made it better, but probably not optimal. There still could have been some improvement, and I think the issue I had was that I was a major, and the battalion commander was a lieutenant colonel. That was a disparity there; it might not necessarily have been age.

JF: A rank disparity. At the end of the assessment period, what was the overall assessment this time?

GE: Overall assessment of the unit, there was a huge amount of racism in the unit. There were a lot of inter-tribal issues. There were a lot of issues.

JF: That being the case, what did you feel it was most beneficial to focus on?

GE: I tried to focus on logistics systems, and then I tried to work on getting the right leadership in the right positions. The battalion commander that I fell in on had just been charged with raping one of his soldiers. That was the first step, identifying who the replacement was going to be, and why that leader was still in place at that time.

JF: Were you able to actually accomplish that?

GE: He was replaced a week after I departed, so I was able to accomplish that. But then the guy who replaced him was killed by his own men in January of this year.

JF: So there were a lot of issues.

GE: Yeah, a lot of issues. A lot of it had to do with probably a little too much change a little too soon. In American eyes, it was probably not quick enough [Laughs] but in Afghanistan, as quickly as they move, it was way too fast, clearly. The guy we put in charge spoke pretty good English, had been to a couple of American schools.

JF: This is the one that was just killed recently?

GE: Yes.

JF: Do you think that there is a lack of understanding of all of the different factors that we're dealing with here?

GE: Absolutely. It's hard to relate to all of the hardships that the people in the area are dealing with on a daily basis. It's extremely hard for us to really understand the things that they're dealing with. I don't know how to fix it. I mean, during our RIP the police unit that we were working with ended up killing a captain that we had brought down from Special Operations.

JF: A US captain?

GE: Yes, US.

JF: So the police unit that you had been advising, when you RIP'd out, they killed a US officer?

GE: Yes, during the RIP to make a statement.

JF: Oh, it wasn't an accidental shooting!

GE: Oh no, it wasn't accidental.

JF: They did this on purpose to speak out against the Americans. I'm not sure there's really any way to overcome that.

GE: I would agree.

JF: This is a tough one, a tough issue. It doesn't sound as if you have a lot of optimism about our operations in Afghanistan right now.

GE: Not on the border, absolutely not.

JF: That's a sticky issue for a variety of reasons.

GE: Well, at some point, I could see us being successful there, but until the Afghan government can positively affect the people there, we're wasting our time. We're buying time for the Afghan government, and until that happens which I think will probably be at least another 10 to 15 years before the Afghan government can even build roads and significantly help the people in the area, nothing we do is going to help.

JF: It sounds like what you're saying is that the people in this area have such a --

GE: The people in the area don't believe they're in Afghanistan.

JF: Because they're just not being taken care of by their government?

GE: Yes. They speak multiple different languages.

JF: There's no unity under a flag.

GE: No. There's no national pride.

JF: That's an ongoing issue, and not just in that area, that Afghanistan in many ways isn't a country, it's a collection of different tribes. That's not something that can be changed quickly.

GE: In that area, it was Waziri. The country that they would be, if any, is Waziristan, which is not recognized by either Pakistan or Afghanistan, or anybody in the world.

JF: These are huge geopolitical issues that they're asking an Army major to deal with. What are you going to be able to do?

GE: I can't affect that. The best I can do is make sure that Afghan units have enough ammunition, have enough fuel, have enough vehicles to patrol if the leadership was willing to get on the side of the mission. For the most part the thing that they're interested in is preserving their lives so that they can provide for their families, wherever they are inside the country.

JF: Until you can ensure that, the rest of it is meaningless. That must have been extremely frustrating.

GE: It was.

JF: I'm not sure you can even answer this question --

GE: I'll try.

JF: You've alluded to a couple of different things about how to accomplish any kind of a mission. In MAJ Escobar's personal opinion, where do we start making things better? What do we start doing better to try to accomplish this mission in Afghanistan?

GE: Which mission?

JF: Pick one, the one that you were doing, whether it was training the police or training the army. How can we do the missions that you were doing? Where do we start to try to do that better on the Army side? Leaving aside the Afghan government trying to make life better for the people.

GE: We have been extremely successful along the border killing terrorists, and I think we can continue being successful doing that. I think it would take a significant amount of time to train a capable force to continue doing that mission in that area, at least on the Afghan side. I think it's doable.

JF: It sounds like you're saying focus our efforts a little bit more.

GE: Yes.

JF: Find one area that we can do and do that well, and maybe leave the rest of it for other times or other people.

GE: Absolutely.

JF: That's fair. Is there any other observation or lesson learned that came out of this deployment that we haven't talked about?

GE: No, I don't think so.

JF: Okay. Thank you very much for your time today, and thank you for your service.

GE: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Jenna Fike