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 LTC Michael Slusher

Combat Studies Institute
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Abstract

Lieutenant Colonel Michael Slusher, a Kansas National Guard soldier, served on an embedded training team (ETT) in various places throughout Afghanistan in 2006 in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. Slusher begins his interview by discussing the treatment of other states' guardsmen in the Wisconsin National Guard's mission, the generic nature of predeployment training, and his willingness to take the most difficult assignments. He explains his role in Operation River Dance, why he viewed it as a failure, and the importance of opium to everything in Afghanistan. Slusher closes the interview by stating that he approaches other cultures with humility and humor, that many of the problems in Afghanistan have to be worked out by the Afghans, and that successes in Afghanistan might not be ready solutions for Iraq.

Interview with LTC Michael Slusher

16 February 2007

LL: My name is Laurence Lessard (LL) and I'm with the Operational Leadership Experiences Project at the Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. I'm interviewing Lieutenant Colonel Mike Slusher (MS) on his experiences during Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Today's date is 16 February 2007 and this is an unclassified interview. Before we begin, if you feel at any time 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 you're not able to answer. Let's start with some background. Where are you from, how did you get interested in the Army and where did you get your commission?

MS: I was born and raised in Leavenworth, Kansas. I had every opportunity to join the Army and I associated with a lot of kids in high school whose parents were career officers or noncommissioned officers passing through Fort Leavenworth. Following that I enlisted in the Marine Corps in the middle of the Vietnam War because they were the only ones who sent me anything. They sent me a letter in the mail asking me to come down and join. At that time I was dating a girl whose father was the chief of staff on Fort Leavenworth. He immediately stopped talking to me and wasn't happy with my decision. He thought I should go into the Army. He said, "Do you understand there is a war going on?" I said, "No, not really." I was busy in high school. So I went in the Marine Corps when I was 17 and spent almost the next five years with their special operations community. When I got out I was a policeman out in California for six years. I came back to the Midwest for some family issues and went to grad school at Kansas University (KU). I joined the Kansas National Guard and stayed with them except for a couple of years I spent with the US Army Reserve and an operational detachment alpha (ODA). I was an infantry officer the whole time. I'm 56 years old now. In 2001 I had been running a research foundation in Topeka, Kansas that did public policy and criminal justice work. I went on active duty with the Army in January 2002. I went to the Pentagon and worked operations (G3) Army. I was hired into the Guard's Active Guard and Reserve (AGR) program as a G3 for the 35th Division – which is just off post here at Fort Leavenworth. I spent three and a half years in the AGR, including a Balkan deployment and a lot of temporary duty (TDY) time. Then I took this Afghan deployment in January '06.

LL: You were one of the few people who went from the Wisconsin Guard to this deployment?

MS: Actually, that's kind of a point of contention. That mission goes back and forth and they argue between United States Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) and National Guard Bureau as to whether that's going to be a Reserve Component (RC) or an Active Component (AC) mission. Thus far, it's stayed a Guard mission, although I hear that the AC would like to pick up the Task Force Phoenix mission. The Guard has used it to finish out their brigade deployments. They wanted to get all of their combat brigades to pass through an Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) or OEF theater. What happens is that a brigade headquarters will get the mission. They will take the command and control (C2) piece and all of the senior pieces they can for their

states. Then they have to go out and get people to take the embedded training team (ETT) missions. The Guard Bureau was then advertising them as brigade and battalion teams of 16 people, with slightly different compositions, and the states would sign up for it thinking they were going to send a team from their state and it would remain intact. As soon as the teams would deploy, they'd find out they'd be broken up as soon as they got into country and redistributed based upon the needs of Task Force Phoenix. There were a lot of hard feelings over that.

LL: When were you given the opportunity to volunteer for this?

MS: It went back and forth. We were supposed to mobilize 17 December. This was the first time Kansas had this particular mission. Rightfully so, the state had a lot of concern over who takes their kids different places. I'm a fairly senior infantry officer in the state, so they basically said it was something they wanted me to do. Was I interested? I said sure. That was in the first part of November. At that point we were getting ready to do an exercise the next spring called Cobra Gold with I Corps. I was on my way to Bangkok, Thailand to one of the meetings on that. When I got there, there were some folks from Singapore I had worked for the previous year and they were looking forward to it because we would be hosting them at Leavenworth. I had to tell them that I wouldn't be there. The December mobilization date got pushed back to 5 January 2007. I'm told that Lieutenant General Russel L. Honore had decided that Camp Shelby, Mississippi had to shut down for Christmas because they had been fairly busy for an extended period of time. We got pushed back three weeks. The problem with that is the 3.5, 4.5 and 5.5 series all arise in country, normally, in January. Because they moved our mobe date into the first part of January, that only left about 20 days to train and then ship. That didn't meet up with any of the FORSCOM guidance on the training requirements, so they slipped the arrival date back to the third week in February so they could spend more time at Camp Shelby.

LL: Can you describe the predeployment training you received at Camp Shelby?

MS: I can describe it and I won't describe it very glowingly. All of these deployments have issues as they're generally based upon the Annex T, training and exercises, of FORSCOM of whatever theater they're going into. They'll set up a series of one-size-fits-all training lanes that indemnifies the US government from being criticized as to whether they prepared the soldier. That's my opinion but I believe that it's commonly shared. As a consequence, you go through a set of training events that may or may not have anything to do with the theater you're going into but are titled "theater specific". For example, as a senior lieutenant colonel (O5) I had to go through, as did everybody else, a lane that made sure we knew had to do the low crawl and three to five-second fireteam rushes. There were no exceptions. Everybody had to do that. There were several cases of things that were similar to that. The issues that were truly essential for everybody to learn, such as learning to use the radio systems in theater, or Blue Force Tracker (BFT) or even spending time in the vehicles, weren't done because they didn't have the equipment sets there to do that. Most of the senior guys made the choice of ensuring the junior folks got through the communications training, the BFT training, the vehicle time and banked on being able to have the opportunity to pick up those skill sets once they arrived in theater. In many cases the schedule drove the training and it was dictated by a higher command. When I came back a year later I figured it would have been resolved but it still hasn't been.

LL: Was there any piece of that Camp Shelby training that was useful?

MS: No. There wasn't enough time spent on the ranges to achieve any competency. The foreign weapon systems were limited and there wasn't enough time spent on them to achieve any competency. I never saw the radio systems or the BFT until I got into theater. The training on the up-armored vehicle was extremely limited. It amounted to simply about a one-mile drive to ensure licensing and didn't go over in any great detail the maintenance of the vehicle or recovery operations. As I came to learn very early on, recovery operations are a part of everyday life over there. The terrain is such that those vehicles wind up getting stuck and damaged. It's a system that requires everybody to pitch in. The manpower levels are low enough that if you don't, things just don't get done. You'd have six vehicles for 16 folks. That's about two folks to a vehicle. You can't put all that on one person to take care of.

LL: Was there any cultural or language training?

MS: There's never going to be enough time to learn any of the ethnic Afghan languages in the US going through a training readiness cycle like that. Dari, which is kind of the Rosetta Stone over there, is pretty complex. It doesn't always have words that are translatable from English into Dari. What you find is that it takes a lot of Dari explanation to get from English to where somebody understands it. As far as cultural awareness, I think that country has had an extensive American presence long enough that the culture is changing or adapting to our presence there. Some of the things we were told were gospel just weren't true. They may have been looked at through the eyes of whatever resource was available. That may have been an émigré who left during the Russian occupation in the 1980s and was now providing language training and cultural orientation. There were some smart cards provided by the Department of Defense (DOD) and they were out of date and were culturally inaccurate. I don't feel bad about that. This is one of those theaters we were dropped into. The map sets weren't in existence and there wasn't a lot of information out there. It wasn't part of our strategic targeting. It kind of came up on the screen as something you had to go do and there was a scarcity of information and a scarcity of maps and everything else. There are parts of the world that we've been to for extended periods of time and have an opportunity to go back to again and the maps still aren't good. Japan is one of those areas. It's just the way it is and you learn to overcome all that stuff. I found that the Afghans like to teach about their country and their culture. It's like anywhere you go. If you ask somebody about something and why you want to know it, they'll generally give you that information. When I deal with people I apologize right up front. I would say, "If I do something to offend you, it's not my intent. It is merely because I may be ignorant about your culture or the issues that we're trying to talk about." That generally opens the door and gets you in.

LL: If the entire issue of predeployment training were placed in your hands, how would you put it together?

MS: We've had some discussion on that. I think the idea of getting the folks who have had the experience to come back and be part of it is the right thing to do. However, you have a problem with the RC in that respect. Generally, anybody that comes back from a deployment with the RC and you want them to stay and work on that, they probably won't be allowed to. The people you want are the same people that their jobs want them back as well. Those are folks that are in

demand by both the Army and the civilian force. As a consequence, you end up with a lot of folks who are probably there because they didn't have a job to go back to to start with. That's not the right clientele. There is a lot of discussion right now on the length of tours. It would seem to me that if there was some way of having more of the folks that actually worked in theater to then come back and work as trainers, that would be helpful. I think there is a way to impact that. Send the Title 32 folks that go on these missions on a two-year tour. They spend a year in theater and then they spend the last year at that training site. That would be doable. The non-AGR, non-technician people are probably going to have to go home. This whole process for the RC is going to become more difficult rather than less despite what we want. It has to do with this policy that's now hitting us – the 12 month plus a month. My understanding of what they're doing, and why I think its going to be so problematic, is that they're going to take the Guard year, the 39 days, and put that in front of the mobe time. Whatever training is not accomplished in that 39 days, spills over into that 12 months and that's how they finish the mobe training. Then their tour begins and then it ends. Whatever leave time they get comes off outside that 12 month window. Having gone through a couple of these rotations before and dealing with the AC validators, or the training support battalion (TSBs), there's been a reluctance for them to certify any training that didn't occur at the mobe site that they didn't supervise. States are going to fight this because they're not going to want to send people to the mobe sites before they absolutely have to because it doesn't make any sense. If they're trying to do the 12 month thing, we'll just allot 14 months. That's the same thing that I wound up with before this policy was in place. Trying to do any of the training at home station and get it validated is going to be a problem. The certifiers aren't going to be able to send folks out to certify those events on a daily basis. If you send them to the mobe station to do their 39 days beforehand, I don't know if we have any issues on Title 10 versus Title 32 status or not. There's a lot of stuff to work through. It's just getting more complicated instead of less. I suspect that almost every state will wind up with some type of training support detachment that will be tasked with providing the training for that first 39 days for those missions. That's what it looks like.

LL: Can you talk about the actual deployment to Afghanistan?

MS: Yes. I'm one of those guys that thinks I'm a lot tougher than I am and I still see myself through 21-year old eyes. As a consequence, when I got into Kabul and Phoenix I said, "Give me the toughest job you have. Send me where it's the worst." I shot out of Phoenix and hit Kandahar. I got in late one day and left early the next. I got a Thuraya, a couple of vehicles and an azimuth. That was it. I still didn't know how to use the radios, I still didn't know how to use the BFT, and they said, "You're going to the desert for two months." I went west across the Helmand River out into the southern part of Helmand Province and started on this Operation River Dance which was the poppy eradication. There was nothing out there. I mean absolutely nothing out there. There were times when we were two days by vehicle to get within medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) range. You had your ETTs out there with the Afghans. At that time, the brigade I was going to didn't own any so we were taking kandaks from corps outside of the area of operations (AOs). You had the border police, the state department (DOS), the South African mercenaries and a bunch of other folks who I didn't know. We were out there trying to plow up these thousands of acres of poppies and provide security operations for the guys who were actually running the tractors. That went on for three or four weeks. Then we went out to a new forward operating base (FOB) they were building. An interesting thing was every time you got one of these new groups of ETTs or kandaks they wanted to change your call sign. They'd

end up with some call sign that gave them some state of identity with their state or some personal identity. They had some very unique call signs. It was secure comms so everybody had a Hollywood call sign. I walked into an established call sign. It was Marshal and the FOB was Tombstone. Whatever. So we're out in the middle of the desert and we're at a FOB that we're trying to stand up. We're about 60 days into it and all we have is a perimeter wall and contract Gurkhas guarding it. There weren't any Afghans out there and we had a brigade's worth of ETTs – about 16 ETTs. We did have another FOB that had been sent up up the Helmand Valley north of the ring road at a place called Sangin. It really wasn't a good location tactically or a good place to be. What we had up there was basically a mud hut and some concertina wire. I define that area north of that river and up the Helmand Valley as Talibanistan. We were at the capitol of Talibanistan. Routinely the mortars would start about 2200 and end about 0100 – just a lot of harassing fire. There would also be some incoming small arms fire as well. It was difficult to get up there because we didn't own the highway up there. It was constantly mined and ambushed, so we'd have to stay off the highway and run out through the desert. Until you really got to know the terrain, you'd have problems identifying what the choke points were. There were certain chokepoints but as long as you avoided them you were okay until you got up close to the FOB where there were some chokepoints into the entrance. Sometimes they would be mined pretty close into the FOB. We had a guest battalion in there until we got our kandaks in out of the Kabul Military Training Center (KMTC). Then we started pushing them up there. It became the main effort after River Dance had stopped. As it turns out this FOB had been put in there by the government. The governor had requested to Hamid Karzai, the president, the establishment of the military presence there so they started to build it up. We spent about two months building up the force protection there and trying to do some improvements for the soldiers we had assigned there. We wound up building a HESCO perimeter around it with wire. We redid the well and put in a septic system so we had some showers, toilets and laundry. We never did wind up with a good situation for the meals. The people up there wound up just cooking out of unitized group rations (UGRs). The op tempo never slowed down. The violence kept getting progressively worse. At one time we had an ODA in the camp, a mech company from the Canadians, an Afghan National Army (ANA) battalion and an ETT battalion supporting that and it was still busy. The Brits came in and we changed hands. I am *not* an Anglophile. I think they're arrogant without cause. When they first came in they were talking about all the great things they were going to do. I remember the guy I was interfacing with saying two things. They had had a suicide attack down on Lashkar Gah before they did the transfer of authority, and so Whitehall had told them they couldn't leave the FOB because a soldier had been killed. This colonel proceeds to tell me how his great grandfather had been at the Battle of Maiwand and it didn't work out real well for them. So I said, "You're here to regain the family honor." He said, "I guess you could say that." I said, "That's going to be real tough to do if you can't get off the base." We progressed to try and build our relationship. We never really got there. We were there in the early spring while the illegal agriculture, the poppy season, was still going on. It hadn't gotten as bad as it did as soon as the poppies were harvested. As soon as that happened then the drug lords weighed in and the Taliban weighed in and it got real tough. That was right around the same time we handed it off to the British. Although one of our soldiers and a Canadian were killed one night up at Sangin, as soon as we handed it off to the British within a week they were taking numerous killed in action (KIAs) and wounded in action (WIAs) pretty bad. I stayed on through there until the end of June and then passed through Kandahar and went over to the 205th Corps that was in Gardez. One of the other fellows getting interviewed was the corps commander at the

203rd and then over at the 205th. I went with him. My stipulation was that I didn't want to go to a headquarters so they sent me downrange. I got into Gardez and went down to Khowst. We were building a FOB there just as we had at Tombstone. In both these cases I was the executive officer (XO) or team chief for that brigade. This was the first chance we had to work with the ANA. The business out at Helmand was just combat operations and keeping things going. When we got down to Khowst, the op tempo had dropped somewhat. We had considerably more rocket attacks, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and suicide bombers than out there but it wasn't the continuous units in the field combat operations. I had a greater chance to interface with the leadership of the brigade and try to do what I thought I was supposed to do with them and try to get that FOB opened up. Eventually we got the FOB opened in November. I put a lot of effort into getting all the units that were out at different locations moved in before the winter hit and closed down the pass that was between us and Gardez. About the same time some other operations came up that took some of our resources and we wound up building another temporary FOB in the pass between Khowst and Gardez. We couldn't get the convoys through there because of the combat activity. That kind of quashed that and we were able to turn most of our efforts towards winterization. In January I got a call that said I was heading back to the states to work with some of the next folks who were coming into theater to give them a heads up on some of the important things they need to know. In the middle of January I started moving up towards Gardez and eventually Kabul. I spent a couple of days there and then got out. The most important thing in my tour was that I managed to spend only a week in Kabul, which was good. I avoided having to take leave. I avoided all the passes. It was just too difficult. If you wanted to take a four day pass, you lost about three weeks in the field and I didn't want to do that. I didn't believe in taking the leave because I thought it was tough enough on my family with one goodbye let alone two. I did have to come back to the states one time because one of my soldiers who had come over with me was killed. I took the body back and was the command representative for the services there. That's pretty much what I did in country. There are other things that are more detailed. For a while I did a pretty good job of writing down most of the things that I did on a daily basis. I'm pretty inquisitive so I'm always interested in why things happen. I spent a lot of time learning the politics of the region and the politics of the country and the Army. I tried to learn some cultural things and I spent a lot of time interfacing with several groups of village elders to learn how things work in those particular areas. Anybody I could talk to I would talk to. There were a lot of little smaller details about my deployment but what you have are the operational details of my deployment.

LL: You said you spent a lot of time in the field with the ANA. How good are they tactically?

MS: The KMTC training program is pretty good although they train very limited military occupational specialties (MOSs). They trained just a handful, and of course one of them was infantry. The problem was there were a lot of kids. The older guys, the guys who'd worked with the Russians and the National Army and who had been around and had done this for 20 years, they understood how to do this stuff. It still has all the things you hear about. It's still tribal. It's still corrupt. It's still political. As a consequence, even though they have pretty good company-level leadership, the soldiers do mob assaults. What will happen is they'll get into contact and everybody will jump out and start running towards it and shooting up all their ammunition. What will happen is that although they may have learned things at KMTC, they get caught up in the op tempo of combat operations and there isn't enough repetitive training done by the ETTs on basic combat skills. They have to have structured requirements to keep the

weapons clean. They do need to go to the range once in a while. You hear all this business about the great Afghan marksmanship. I didn't see any of it. I was fairly confident that if I didn't get hit by an IED, I sure wasn't going to get hit by a rifle over there. I was out there where they were shooting and it wasn't going to come anywhere near me. That was the bad guys who probably did actually work on marksmanship. I think we need to work on a lot more soldier task basic fire and maneuver things down at the platoon level. That will continue to be a major emphasis for a long time to come. You keep getting new guys in the units and they're not scared. They go out and they run right into the fire. It's kind of crazy because the anti-coalition folks will sit in those defensive positions and just let these guys run right up on them. They'll run right up the side of a mountain after them shooting all the way and yelling. They're brave little dudes but that's not the way we want to do business.

LL: How receptive were the Afghan commanders towards you as their mentor?

MS: I think I was pretty effective. The reason being, since I didn't get a lot of culture training leading up to my deployment, I decided I would just figure it out on my own. What I have learned is that there are certain universals in the military, and probably in cultures all together. The first thing is that you have to talk to people. Everybody communicates the same way. There are two styles. You are either friendly or you're threatening. The approach I always used was to joke around with these guys. I used to tell them all kinds of jokes. Pretty soon they started telling me Afghan jokes and we'd talk about their culture. I would show a genuine interest in them. Before I go into a country, I spend a lot of time reading about the history of it. They don't always get that. People come in and they might not be steeped in the history of their country. But if you can talk about the history and they're educated then they'll start telling you the same things. If you can bring up points that they wouldn't expect a foreign national to talk about or have knowledge of, that will give you bonus points. Then they become much more cooperative because you're obviously interested in their nation and probably in them also. I spent most of the time working with the brigade operations officer (S3), XO and commander. I think it was pretty successful but that's because I worked very hard to develop some type of personal relationship. I found it enjoyable as well. I love going into another country and telling jokes through an interpreter. It always creates some interesting situation that's humorous. Most of my stuff isn't offensive. The joke I'd always tell them is, "Did you hear about the three legged dog who came into town. He said, 'I'm here to get the man who shot my paw.'" That doesn't translate into Afghan and that little thing usually takes about a half hour to work through. They'll scratch their heads and then they finally get it. They'll tell one of their jokes and their jokes aren't funny either. So you reach an agreement where I'll laugh at your jokes if you laugh at mine. Once you start doing that, then you can start talking about other things. You can start building a relationship built on trust.

LL: Was there any area in particular that you tried to emphasize with the Afghan officers you were working with or were things more generalized?

MS: I'm confident that they can operate tactically and I'm confident they can't operate logistically. Logistics is a big problem. There are many reasons why. The first is that they can make money off of the resources. Their system dictates that if something gets sent down from higher then it gets taxed at each level. The best of whatever it is winds up at the higher headquarters. Not that that ever happens in our Army. I spent a lot of time pushing logistics

and pushing it with tough love. I told them they had to get it fixed and they had to get what was entitled to them because I wasn't providing it. I wouldn't pay for it and I wasn't going to go get it for them. I'd go with them to get their stuff to make sure they got it but I wouldn't do their work for them. They're not lazy but they're incredibly cunning, and it they can get you to do their job, that's just fine with them.

LL: How were you set up with interpreters?

MS: We had plenty of interpreters but none of them spoke English very well. Interpreters were a real problem. Most of them were young. The ones that were educated were a bit older. There were schools they could go to to become interpreters. They could invest a little bit of money to get one of the better paying jobs in the country. The families would scrape together money, send one of the kids to the interpreter school and then he'd get a job as an interpreter and his money would go back to the family. Because they're young, they're still young, so they kind of interpret things the way they want to interpret them. You constantly have to check on them. I would make sure they understood what I had said. I would ask them to tell me what someone had said or what they were going to say so I could get some feedback. Other guys would throw things into it so they could check what they were saying. They'd throw a name of a city or a person so they could recognize it during the translation. Another reason a lot of the interpreters were young is because being an interpreter over there can be pretty dicey. They'd travel to cities on their own and they'd have to go back to their hometown for leave on their own and they could get shot at. If they get stopped at a checkpoint that the Taliban had set up, those kids would get killed. I remember coming into Kandahar one time from out west and we were coming into the Panjway district. There were a couple of dead dudes laying in the road. We found out that the day before there had been four interpreters kidnapped from near one of the bases in Kandahar. One was killed on the spot, one they hadn't found and those two guys on the ground were the other two they were looking for. Being an interpreter can be dangerous. In some cases these kids take these jobs without telling their parents what they're doing.

LL: Were these interpreters provided by the US Army or were they contractors?

MS: They were on contract provided by DOD. Just before we left the contractor was Titan. They hired all the interpreters and brought them to the FOB to work. Somebody else has picked up that contract since then. The way it would work is that there would be a section of the camp that would be "Terp Town". That's where the interpreters lived and ate. They had their own cook house and their own cook who would provide their meals. That was all part of their contract. The US government had to provide them comparable quarters to what the US soldiers were living in. At one point, before "Terp Town" was finished we had them living next to the ANA. Normally you don't want to do that because there can be a lot of friction between the soldiers and the interpreters, mainly based on pay. We were having them eat at the American dining facility. That was a problem for some of our soldiers. Some of the soldiers thought it was fine and that's what we should do, but some of the others didn't think it was a good idea. Most everyone over there is a fairly big health risk to you because of tuberculosis so getting them into our dining facility around food and in close contact made some folks pretty uncomfortable.

LL: How was the support for the US forces?

MS: I thought it was reasonably good. I didn't have a lot of expectations. We had our vehicles, our ammunition, our communications and both of the FOBs I worked out of we had KBR in there to provide limited maintenance for the facility. KBR also provided some pretty good food at our dining facilities. We also had some Morale Welfare and Recreation (MWR) support in the way of some gym equipment, internet access and Defense Switched Network (DSN). I thought it was reasonably good. I think we fall down on vehicle maintenance. You had to go find an AC unit that has some maintenance shops to get your stuff taken care of or else you're doing it yourself. And if you don't know crap about vehicles, like me, it can be pretty damned challenging especially on some of the more intricate systems. If the air conditioning goes out on that Humvee, that thing is like a pressure cooker in the summertime. It's very uncomfortable. I think we have some problems there. We didn't have all the systems that we needed. We had all the systems we could get. But as the Chief of Staff of the Army explained, Afghanistan is not the main effort. Iraq is the main effort. They were providing what they could to Afghanistan so it wasn't exactly the best or enough of, but it was adequate.

LL: Did you run into any situations where there was some kind of cultural obstacle or misunderstanding that really prevented you from getting done what you wanted to get done?

MS: The best example of that is the brigade operations center. We went into a new structure and I was trying to get this brigade operations center set up along the lines of how a US unit would do it. I couldn't really get buy in from the brigade commander or much work out of the ANA that were assigned there. We worked through this for four weeks. Then we were getting close to doing a dedication for the opening of the base. President Karzai was going to come down and do that. We went through this big long thing of setting up the training room so it would be acceptable. I finally went up to the corps headquarters and looked at their training room, and then I got it. He'd been talking about religious slogans and all these things. He needed help buying those things and I hadn't known what he was talking about until then. We worked through building the stage he had to have and getting a calligrapher to make the religious slogans they had to have. We were talking one day and he said, "I need you to help me on this. I have many competitors." So much of what's done over there is appearance and not necessarily how it performs. Performance is an individual thing and it's almost like an act. For example, is someone a good general? Well, he's a good general in their minds by how he and his surroundings look – his uniform, his awards, his office and how he talks. In a tribal society, you're talking about accoutrements and how you inspire others. We finally got the operation center done but there was an agreement. I told them that I would work on functionality and that they would work on decorating. That's what we did. He had to have curtains, these religious slogans and specific pictures but he didn't give a shit about how it functioned. He would provide the resources so I could get the functionality done and it was happening. His boss came in and it looked like his did, so everything was okay. I was able to get the commander to have an accountability formation every Sunday morning. He'd bring the whole brigade in there and he wanted to talk to them. He'd talk to them about issues that he and I had discussed. Things we needed to do in order to make that base successful. He'd talk about establishing standards for the appearance of soldiers, the operating facilities, driving safety and all the things that have to happen in a garrison situation. He'd get up there and he'd talk to them. He'd cover those issues and others that I was surprised to hear him talk about. He was very eloquent and very inspiring to his soldiers. It was almost like a pep rally but that's what they expected to hear. Afterwards they'd do their pass and review. They loved to march. It was

quite the little ceremony. It looked a little like when Patton was in Tunis and the camel guards were coming across the front. Everybody was happy. That's what mattered.

LL: I've interviewed some people who say that the Afghans are fine tactically but that they have to work on the institutional side of things. Would you agree or disagree?

MS: Yes, I'd agree because it never existed before. Maybe at some point they had an institutional army that provided rules and regulations and all those things, but it's gone now. We've been in the process of developing the institutional side of it, a uniform code of military justice, doctrine, and a training base utilizing the capabilities of the KMTC, which has been around for a long time but hasn't had the capacity to do what needed to get done. We've been in the process of improving it and making it efficient and standard. That stuff has all been created. For the last 15 or 20 years they've been a field army. They haven't had the chance to be a garrison army. They've been in the field operating. They really didn't have the logistics or the national infrastructure to have logistics. They don't have the internal production capabilities to produce their own uniforms. All of the other things that an army moves on today comes to them from outside their country. That says that if it's coming from outside your country, somebody else is providing the logistics tail for quite awhile. They haven't had the need to create it. All they've had to do is provide the bullet-stoppers.

LL: Did you come across any situations where there some tribal or sectarian differences that got in the way of you doing business?

MS: How's this for an example? When I got to the camp at Khowst I looked around and said, "Why is this here?" The contractors building the camp were the first to explain it. They said it was here because of the Zanikel (ph) and the Manizai (ph) tribes. I scheduled a meeting with the tribal elders from both tribes and I asked them how things were between them. They told me that they had been fighting for 80 years over the land where the camp was being set up. They took it to President Karzai and he said he would build a camp for the ANA right here. He said it would create jobs for us and we wouldn't fight over the land any more. So we were right in the middle of one of those tribal feuds. We had to get right into a lot of mediation between them. In our particular case, I tried to provide work for them. I'd have contracts for the different things they could do with the equipment they possessed and the skills they had. We'd buy the products we could from them and we'd do what we could to honor the government's promise to them of bringing some economic prosperity to them. We sat there as the keepers of the peace and as the biggest dog in the herd and it pretty much kept them quiet. However, down the road was the village people of the Bak District and the migrant Koochis (ph), who had had an equally long-standing land dispute. The Kuchis had decided in recent years that they were tired of wandering the desert and they wanted a piece of the Bak District but the villagers didn't want to give it up. Both these tribes had acquired multiple shot rocket launchers, DShK machine guns and explosives. That thing still hadn't been resolved by the time I left. Every couple of months it would flare up and somebody would wind up dead over it. Tribal disputes are alive and well.

LL: Did you even see any of those tribal disputes manifest themselves within the ANA?

MS: There was a propensity, even at the brigade, to try and reshuffle the deck to wind up with tribes in certain headquarters or companies or battalions. I never really saw any open conflict between the tribes within the ANA. You'd hear remarks made about guys, but the same thing happens in the American Army as well.

LL: Were the ANA units you dealt with predominantly from one tribal group or were they completely integrated?

MS: The government of Afghanistan and the Ministry of Defense (MOD) has done a pretty good job of trying to use the army for social engineering. All of the brigades I was in were pretty well mixed. They even seemed to go to a fair amount of trouble to place commanders in that aren't from that location or that tribe. We were firmly in the Pashto area and the commander of our brigade was Tajik. What he did was made sure there were a few Tajiks immediately surrounding him. He knew he was in an area that was not necessarily of his persuasion. I've seen him operate in Pashtun shuras, and at least overtly, they were accepting of the fact because they respected his position as a general in the army and as a representative of the central government. What you would see is that sometimes we'd have to get an interpreter for the Afghans because there are different dialects within Dari and Pashto. If you're not from the right part of the country you won't understand the other people.

LL: How did the Afghans view you and the other soldiers from the US Army?

MS: I think they liked the Americans for the most part. Some of them they didn't, but that's because they made themselves unlikable. In my particular case it was pretty humorous. The ANA leadership in that brigade referred to me as the camp village elder. I was older than them but before they really signed on to things or went in certain directions, they could consult me just like they would an elder within their tribe. I was the older guy that supposedly had some experience and age carries some weight over there. It doesn't mean the oldest guy is always the village elder but generally they give a lot of respect to those folks. At first it was funny but then you could see it was very serious. They really wanted to know what I thought. At one time there was another guy who was the team chief and I was his XO, but the leadership would still come to me to see what the village elder thought than the team chief.

LL: When you first showed up in Afghanistan, were you the first one to hold that position or did you do a handoff?

MS: There were some other people there in each case but the hand off wasn't all that formal. There is a lot of discussion out there on the right seat/left seat thing. It's a pretty good process but in some cases it's flawed. Sometimes it's too long. Sometimes it doesn't require as much time as we want to put into it because it's just not that complex. Always the incoming guy needs to be smart enough to just shut up and watch a little bit so he can absorb what's going on around him. That way when he does ask a question it's not something that he should have figured out on his own. The answer is that I've always picked up something from somebody else, except for that time when I was thrown out in the middle of the desert.

LL: You weren't replacing anybody when you went to the desert.

MS: No. (*Laughter*)

LL: What was the biggest challenge you had to deal with in Afghanistan?

MS: The most difficult thing was dealing with the US. Other combatant US forces always seemed to want to misuse the ANA. I wound up in a fair amount of arguments with the ODA and the combatant ground forces because they wouldn't include the ANA in their planning. They'd cite operational security as the reason why. But they'd always want the ANA to do the dirty work. They'd want to put them out front if they were going somewhere in a convoy. They'd want the ANA to run over the mine with their little Ranger instead of running the risk of running over it with an electronic countermeasures (ECM)-protected up-armored. They wanted the ANA to run up that hill instead of them. Almost always the ANA did not have the air cover or the ground fires that the US operation had. We didn't either. We had what the ANA had. The AC over there would not move unless they had aviation or artillery support. That didn't get shared.

LL: Was there a partnership program between your ANA units and an American or coalition unit?

MS: Yes. We tried to have them matched them up with everything and we tried to have a habitual relationship. Each kandak had a US battalion or company that they would match up with, and if there was an ODA in the area they'd be matched up as well.

LL: Did that relationship work the way it was supposed to?

MS: I don't think it ever worked at all. From my observation, the US used them as an expendable resource and not as a true partner.

LL: Let's go back to River Dance. Can you talk a little more about that?

MS: Narcotics is a big driver in Afghanistan of the internal politics. It's probably *the* reason NATO is there. I think if Afghanistan had not had heroin that NATO wouldn't have come to Afghanistan. I think the Germans, French and British saw it as a way to try and impact their drug problems. The Germans are the lead company for the narcotics, but so much of this is happening down in Helmand and Kandahar where the British and the Canadians wound up being. The Canadians always wind up going where the British go, and sometimes where we go. It's like 90 percent of the world's heroin comes from Afghanistan. Almost 100 percent of what goes into Europe comes from there. They were late in coming because, up to a year ago, we really hadn't pushed much out from Kabul. We certainly had the air base at Kandahar but we didn't have much presence out there. Part of the reason behind that is because the ANA has been slow to build and the numbers haven't been there. Another part of it is because the foreign NATO partners have been slow to respond. It was a big deal with the Brits sending that Para Regiment out there because they hadn't sent that kind of presence before. They didn't come until after the River Dance had already happened. As best as I could sort out how things were happening was that the Department of State owns drug reduction. So the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) was over there and they had to persuade the Afghan government that something needed to be done. It wasn't the first drug demand operation but it may have been the biggest.

They say it was very successful. I think that's just plain B.S. The State Department went about it through a combination of military resources and contracting stuff out. There is a section of DynCorp that works on drug reduction. They subcontract that out to some other folks. South Africa is a big player over there. You'll have South African security working for corporations and building things. You'll also have the South African security folks working within that drug reduction. They have a bunch of people involved and a bunch of border police, the Afghan National Police (ANP) and we had one kandak of ANA. The ANA mission along with the ANP was to provide a security perimeter so the reduction folks could get in. Their plan was to plow up these poppy fields. This ran down south along the river towards the Pakistan border. It was marked up in a series of very large grid squares that they would work. They would report that they had plowed up and destroyed so many hectares per day of the poppy fields. Mohammed Daud was the governor of Lashkar Gah, the capitol of Helmand Province. He used to be a warlord there. The reason why I think this whole thing was B.S. was because you'd see the tractors go out in the morning and they'd plow stuff up. They wouldn't plow too much up. They'd flood the fields. The tractors would get stuck. They'd plant some IEDs and blow up some of the tractors. When they got up into the area that Daud controlled, they just went around his fields in the city of Lashkar Gah. They didn't fire him until he openly took $900,000 from the coalition guys. I don't think that the eradication through River Dance was worth a damn. There's a lot of irony there. This river began to be developed in the '50s and '60s and the Peace Corps came in and helped them. There was a bunch of canals that would give you four or five kilometers on each side of the river that was farmable. The canals would move the water back into there and they'd have the fields in there. They'd have a patch of wheat and a patch of poppies. Some of those poppy fields were 400 acres. While the flowers are blooming, it's a pretty safe place to be because they don't to do anything to get anyone unnecessarily shot that needed to be working in a poppy field. As soon as those fields are harvested, it is a dangerous place to be. All kinds of bad things happen down there. I don't think what we did was very effective. I think the only way to really get rid of them is to spray it. There is a reluctance to that because the Soviets used herbicides over there and the Afghanis think that is bad juju. They say it would destroy some of the wheat fields in the process. They don't raise enough wheat over there amongst those poppies to amount to anything. It's probably a nine to one ratio. I think you need to go in there with a herbicide and spray the poppies and convince the folks not to grow them any more. Why don't we offer an alternative? We were supposed to do that but nobody would fund it. It never got off the ground.

LL: Is a replacement program even economically viable?

MS: One of the first targets that was hit in the bombing of Kabul was the warehouse that the Taliban had with $3 billion of opium paste in it. They didn't blow up any granaries with that much grain in it or anything else. I don't think there's anything that you can replace it with that will have comparable economic benefit. When I was a cop in California, I used to work narcotics. You always get into these discussions about trying to deal with drugs. Do you go after the user, the dealer, the producer or do you jump that and put your money into treatment? Do you go after the producer and try to give him another way to make money? That never works because what happens is if you offer some other alternative or you make it impossible to work in that region, the money is still fluid even if the land isn't. They'll move the money somewhere else, and where you didn't have a production problem before, now you do. I guess I'm always convinced that you go where the money is. You go after the people who hold the

money and you go after the people who finance it. We're trying to do this but the lure and the effect of cash in those quantities gets to just about everybody. Everybody has a price. If you have $1 billion, you can buy almost anyone.

LL: Did you see more resistance based upon economic interest with the poppy fields or was it based more on ideological things with the Taliban?

MS: The Taliban isn't everywhere and they're not the only problem over there. They have a triumvirate of problems. They have the religious fighters that are the Taliban, and that's kind of a cultural thing. And they're, in some cases, a band of thieves. Then you have the criminal thing. The criminal thing is the drug lords but it's also bandits. There are people who just make a living by killing, robbing and intimidating people. Then you have the third group who are the insurgents based on political reasons. They have not solved some important political issues there. This Gulbuddin Hekmatyar thing is political. Al-Ghani is political because he'd still a warlord and his family still has control and sway in a good part of the regional core east area. I think that exists in other parts of the country as well. Before they can come close to fixing the criminal thing they have to come up with some political concessions. If they reach a political agreement, they can probably get a handle on the religious thing. Senator Bill Frist was over there several months ago and he said that it will probably come to a point where they will have to make concessions to bring the Taliban into the government and to bring Hekmatyar into the government. Once they've done that, then they can take a shot at the drug lords. I think the drug lords profit because they put money into the other insurgencies.

LL: So you're saying the people with the drug interest spread money into the other problem areas to keep the attention off of themselves?

MS: Yes. I think that's part of the complexity of it.

LL: Did you have much contact with other US services or coalition forces?

MS: We had Air Force and we had Navy on our compound as part of our team. The Air Force kids were good. We didn't have anybody above a captain and all of the Air Force people integrated very well. We had a bunch of Navy garrison guys who were majors (O4s) and O5s, and they were lazier than shit. They didn't do much more than feather their nest. Their biggest issue was how good the MWR was going to be. They didn't want to spend any time with the Afghans so they spent less than the minimal amount of time with them. As a result the Afghans didn't like them because it was obvious they weren't going to help them and they weren't going to do anything. I don't have much good to say about them at all. Now, that may have just been that team except I had almost the same exact experience at another location with another Navy team. The Navy has some issues over there. They're struggling for relevancy so they're trying to get into installation management but the Reservists they're sending are not the right guys and they're just not cutting it. We had some Marines and they did a good job. My other encounters were with the Air Force and the Navy at other locations were pretty positive.

LL: Were the Marines involved in the training teams or were they working on the garrison side?

MS: We had one ETT down at Bermel that owned that area. Bermel was probably the crappiest place we had. It was always getting rockets and mortars. About a month ago, the anti-coalition folks had massed and about 120 guys attacked the camp. Our guys found out earlier enough and they smacked them down. About 80 or 100 were killed. The Marines were fine down there and the Afghans liked them.

LL: Did you have any other contact with coalition forces aside from the British?

MS: We worked with the Canadians. They've taken a couple of good whacks over there but they've stood their ground. I worked with the Canadians in the Balkans and they were the same where there. They're good fighters. The Australians are good as well. The Romanians got a bad reputation initially because the first folks that were in the area where I worked let the Romanians stay in a group. They kind of came up with their own national caveats about what they would do and wouldn't do. When I wound up getting some of them I told them I would be treating them just like I treat my soldiers. I said some days would be good and some days would be bad. I told them they wouldn't be paired up together but they'd be paired with a US soldier. I told them their national caveats were no good here so what the US soldiers do, they'd do. They were going to live where we lived and eat what we ate. They liked it and they did a great job because they brought skill sets we didn't have in working with the Soviet weapons. They liked the way we treated our soldiers and were very comfortable. I had a good experience with the Romanians. I didn't have a lot of contact with the French. I don't hate the French. There was an incident with them. We had this operation in this area called Kajaki Dam. They sent a French ETT up there to work with the Afghans. This area was a problem area at the time. We sent some Security Force (SECFOR) and another pair of ETTs to go get them out. The guys going up ran into contact and had a big firefight. Coming back out with the French they got into another big firefight and they got chased for about 18 kilometers. All the French vehicles got destroyed and several of the French got killed. One of the kids that was driving one of our Humvees was on the radio. We asked him where the French were. He said, "Yeah. They're running." (*Laughter*) We asked him what he meant and he said that all of their stuff was on fire and they were running to get into his vehicle. He came back down to the camp with nine guys in the Humvee. It was bad because you don't like to see your allies get whipped on like that. It even got worse because we wound up having to buy the bodies back from the locals. That was a very nasty situation.

LL: Did you have any contact with the media?

MS: The higher command effectively kept them away from me. We did have a journalist come and stay with us for a couple of weeks. He was a guy who'd written a couple of books. I brought him to a couple of different things and then sent him on his way. He got to see how things were and was pretty happy with that.

LL: I take it that he really wanted to see the rougher side of what we were doing in Afghanistan?

MS: Probably. It makes for a good story.

LL: Did you ever have to deal with non-government organizations (NGOs) while you were there?

MS: No. Most of those guys worked out of the provincial reconstruction team (PRT). Broadly define what you think NGOs are?

LL: Organizations like Doctors Without Borders or United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) or something like that.

MS: Okay. No. I never worked with anyone like that. I misspoke. The OGAs were at the PRT. There wasn't anybody over there in that part of the country. We did have a guy come down from the UN one time but he was part of the UN observer group. That was about it. I dealt with some civilian contractors who were not KBR but who were some construction people working on building FOBs. I sometimes jokingly describe my time as the CNN tour of shitty places because in plus or minus 24 hours, if it made international news, I was probably there. There was a civilian contractor called the Fluor Company. They worked in Khowst and they were the ones that lost all those people in that Russian helicopter that crashed back in August. It killed 14 people including one guy's entire family. For some reason he thought it was a good idea to fly them in to visit him.

LL: What are the biggest professional lessons learned that you took away from your time in Afghanistan?

MS: Most importantly I learned to trust my instincts. The human body seems to process information quicker than your consciousness does. If something doesn't feel right, it probably isn't. If someone doesn't feel right, they probably aren't. I'm a very firm believer in that and I draw impressions pretty fast. If I'm not comfortable with someone or in some situation, I'm not going to get comfortable because I think there is some danger in there. That's not just in combat. That's in all phases of it. I walked away from this last year firmly convinced in trusting my instincts.

LL: If you could make a recommendation to the military powers that be, what would it be?

MS: I guess it would probably be advice. Don't confuse Iraq and Afghanistan. Afghanistan is successful where Iraq isn't because of the people that are there. If we have success in Afghanistan, it's because the Afghans are different than the Arabs. The Afghans will correct you on that, too. They will tell you they're not Arab. They're not in any way, shape or form. Don't think that whatever is working in Afghanistan will work in Iraq.

LL: If you were given an opportunity to go back to Afghanistan again and do your same job again, would you go?

MS: Yes. I've been on active duty since January 2002, so that's five years. I've been home 18 months in those five years. This is my 31st month on OEF and then I had a whole bunch of TDY in the Pacific Rim on top of that. I owe my family a spring and summer. I haven't been home for any holidays in quite some time. My wife already knows that I'm going to be deployed again next winter. I'm not going to stay around the state headquarters and play around with politics.

I'd rather go somewhere else where stuff is going on and it really means something more that somebody's ego.

LL: How have you dealt with family separation?

MS: It's not a problem. I have a wife that's smarter than I am. I'm kind of big, burley guy's guy but I have an exceptionally attractive wife who makes probably twice as much money as I do and I have four adult children. Three of them have careers established and I have grandkids. My son says, "We don't mind you being gone, Dad, because you like us better anyway when you're a couple of states away." It's a family that has a good attitude about things and that's positive about everything. My wife supports whatever I do. She respects the things I do because they're generally based upon values based in patriotism and loyalty and all of those things that I think are important. My youngest daughter said that she used to worry about me but she doesn't as much any more because she says she knows I'm indestructible. That's fine.

LL: Is there anything else you'd like to add to this interview?

MS: No.

LL: Thank you for your time.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Jennifer Vedder