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 Trahan

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Abstract

In this first of two interviews regarding his Global War on Terrorism experiences, Major Gregory Trahan discusses his command of Bravo Company, 3rd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division in Afghanistan beginning in January 2003. Initially given responsibility for securing the battalion headquarters at Khowst, Trahan's company also would on occasion provide elements to assist their sister company (Charlie) in the conduct of missions outside the firebase. He discusses the force protection patrols they did linked to FOB Salerno security, his liaisons with local Afghan commanders, the medical civic action projects done in nearby villages, as well as his work with interpreters – including one instance in particular involving the disarming of an impromptu Afghan militia wherein his interpreter "made an already difficult situation a little more difficult." Trahan, in addition, talks about his move to FOB Shkin in March 2003 and the ethnic/cultural challenges that resulted; the reception he and his men got from Afghan civilians; the challenges of getting "timely, accurate intelligence" on the Taliban and al-Qaeda forces they were tasked with killing or capturing; as well as, and finally, the circumstances surrounding his leaving theater early: namely the 25 April 2003 firefight in which he was shot five times, emergency evacuated from the battlefield and sent ultimately to rehabilitate at Walter Reed Army Medical Center where, after a great deal of physical therapy and seven separate surgeries, he was able to assume command of a new company – this time the 82nd Airborne Division's Headquarters Company – in August 2003, and later take that company to Iraq.

Interview with MAJ Gregory Trahan

5 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 Major Gregory Trahan (GT) on his experiences during Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Today's date is 5 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 personal background. Where are you from, how did you get interested in the Army and where did you get your commission?

GT: I'm from Houston, Texas, and I enlisted in the Army in 1987. I needed more structure at that time in my life and the Army provided it. Somewhere during that initial enlistment, though, it became a career for me. After my second enlistment, I competed for and was awarded a Green-to-Gold Scholarship. I went to school at Methodist College in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and that's where I received my commission.

LL: Let's start with your rifle company command. What unit was it and where were you stationed?

GT: I was assigned Bravo Company, 3rd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment in the 82nd Airborne Division. I had served as the battalion assistant operations officer (S3) for a little less than a year and then I took command of Bravo Company in November 2001. The division immediately began preparing for a deployment somewhere since we were right in the wake of 9/11. Around June 2002, a contingent was taken out of the 82nd to go to Afghanistan. We thought it was going to be us, but in the end it wasn't. From November until June we had been preparing for Afghanistan but, unfortunately, another brigade went. We in turn relieved that brigade – which was 3rd Brigade; we were 1st Brigade – in Afghanistan in January 2003.

LL: Can you describe some of the predeployment training you were doing after 9/11?

GT: Sure. All our training was small-unit tasks concentrated at the squad and platoon levels. We worked on marksmanship and fired all our weapons many times. We cross-trained individuals and conducted some additional medical training. We sent guys downtown so they could get some trauma experience. We also focused a hell of a lot on physical training (PT). We really didn't have any definitive word that we were going and we didn't know if or when we'd be called. We just knew that eventually we would be, so we just started preparing. We also did a little cultural awareness training. Lester Grau came and talked to us. He's the author of *The Bear Went Over The Mountain* about the Soviet experience in Afghanistan.

LL: Were you given very definite guidance from above on what areas to concentrate on in your training or was it more a matter of just, "Get ready," and you had to figure it out?

GT: As I stated, the preparation was very focused in just those areas I mentioned. We knew that because of the terrain we had to be physically fit. There's always an emphasis in the 82nd on being physically fit, but that was ratcheted up even more. The same thing with marksmanship. We just had the opportunity to fire more and qualify more, longer ranges, stress shooting. There was a battalion plan which was synchronized with the brigade plan and I had some flexibility on how it was conducted, but as a company commander you're really just executing someone else's plan. The way you execute it is the flavor you put on it. I didn't have a problem with the training plan that was laid out. I thought it prepared soldiers well for what we were about to do.

LL: How would you rate the predeployment training you had and was there any you didn't find useful?

GT: Initially we were all over the map because we didn't know when and we didn't know where. After 3rd Brigade left, we started to mesh with them through email and video teleconferences at the brigade level, getting a good flavor for what they were doing. That's when we were really able to focus our training. Before we left, my soldiers wanted to know if we were going there for humanitarian assistance or were we going there to, in the soldiers' vernacular, kill people. It seemed like we were trying to wrestle with that as leaders because we wanted to be able to tell the soldiers exactly what they were going to do. We definitely thought we were going there to kill or capture remnants of the Taliban or al-Qaeda. After coming out of Afghanistan, I realized we should have had a better understanding of the fractured nature of their society. They are so impoverished. I also wish we had trained some way at the company level to generate our own intelligence. What we found when we were working there is that we were all spread out in different company areas. You'd get intelligence from the brigade, from Combined Task Force (CTF) 82 and from Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) 180, but it wasn't focused on anything we could take actually action on in our area. It was just general things. So I wish that before we had gone, someone had taken me aside and explained to me that I would be responsible for conducting patrols in a particular area and that I would have to do my own intelligence gathering and link diagrams to figure out people and understand who was coming and going, establish relationships. I didn't know any of that was important or that I would have to do that. We just focused on the basic blocking and tackling. If I had to do it all over again, we would have figured out a way to train company commanders and platoon leaders and maybe even squad leaders on how to collect intelligence when you're doing full-spectrum operations. As far as what training we conducted that was good, I would say the battle drills at squad and platoon levels. They got sick of doing it over and over but you can lose a skill if you don't use it, so I thought that the focus the battalion provided us in those areas of marksmanship, medical, battle drills, PT and weapons proficiency was excellent.

LL: Can you talk more about the cultural training you received?

GT: Yes. The cultural training was just a slide presentation that broke down the different ethnic groups and the different tribes in Afghanistan. It didn't leave any kind of impression on me, though, of how that would impact on my mission or what we were trying to do over there. The best part of the cultural training we received was when Lester Grau came in and described how the mujahideen had fought against the Russians, and that kind of put things into perspective for me. We weren't fighting amateurs. The enemy knew how to coordinate, maneuver, fire and

strike at places of their choosing as well as escape afterwards. It was important that we had our basics down and didn't underestimate the enemy.

LL: Do you wish you'd had more cultural training and that its importance had been emphasized more?

GT: Yes. I don't know how we could have gotten any more, though, other than doing some reading on our own and immersing ourselves in the culture and history of the people. Maybe instead of just showing a pie chart of all the different clans and ethnicities in Afghanistan, we could have learned about the background of each and how they relate to each other. Instead of just saying that Pashtos and Tajiks don't get along, we could have learned why they don't get along. What are the intricacies of their ethnicities and their backgrounds and how does that relate to me?

LL: When did you find out that you and the rest of the brigade were going to Afghanistan?

GT: Late summer, fall of 2002.

LL: When did you deploy and how did you get there?

GT: The first part of the battalion left in December 2002 and the rest of the battalion left after the New Year. We left directly from Pope Air Force Base in North Carolina on a civilian contracted aircraft and went to Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany. We then transloaded from the civilian airliner to a C-17. From Germany, we flew directly into Kandahar.

LL: Where did you end up operating in Afghanistan?

GT: Initially our 3rd Brigade was spread out on the eastern sector of Afghanistan and the Pakistan border. They were positioned in company-sized forward operating bases (FOBs). My company was given the mission to secure the battalion headquarters element in Khowst. We flew into Kandahar the first week in January and collected all our equipment, parceled it out and then flew by CH47 over two or three days to Khowst near the Pak border. I relieved a company from 1st Battalion, 504th. They were charged with the security of the Khowst firebase, which was called FOB Salerno. My sister company, Charlie Company, had the mission of actioning on any intelligence that the battalion collected. We provided the internal security and occasionally I would provide a platoon or go with that other company to conduct missions outside our firebase in the Khowst region.

LL: How would you characterize most of the operations you did outside of your firebase?

GT: The ones that my company did, specifically tied to the security of FOB Salerno, were force protection patrols. I had guys in guard towers all around. To our north was a very mountainous area so I always sent guys around just to make sure no one was setting up an ambush or getting ready to launch rockets onto the firebase. To the south was Khowst proper. We were always sending presence patrols into the city just to keep guys off our wire. There were also Afghan militia in the area and their loyalties were kind of suspect. Although the local commander of the Afghan militia proclaimed he was there for US safety, we weren't sure if he or any of his

soldiers were communicating information back to whomever for whatever purpose. A lot of what I did was liaise with the local Afghan commander. I'd check his checkpoints, patrol between his locations to keep the communication up between us. As I said, that other company would conduct cordon and searches or investigations of possible cache sites throughout the region, and either my company headquarters, my company mortars or another platoon from my company would be task organized with that company to conduct whatever mission. So, I would be in a supporting role or conducting a mission in support of Charlie Company. The primary one we did was cordon and searches of a village. Inevitably someone had intelligence that a particular area was being used for illicit purposes. Perhaps people there were assisting anti-coalition militia (ACM) – former Taliban or al-Qaeda operatives. A particular urban area would be identified and we'd have to go search it. The other mission started with some commander – battalion, brigade or whatever – who was flying around and saw a cave somewhere and decided it needed to be searched, regardless if there was any intelligence actually tied to the cave. So, on occasion, we found ourselves being helicoptered somewhere and we'd have to walk up a mountain to go look at this cave only to find that it was only filled with goat crap. Those were the two main missions we did. Oh, there was one more. We would also do medical civic action projects (MEDCAPs). This is where the doctor would go out and tend to acute illnesses in a particular village. Those were intelligence gathering missions as well.

LL: How were you set up for translators in dealing with locals on these presence patrols and MEDCAPs?

GT: We had a pool of interpreters that lived in the vicinity of FOB Salerno. We had an outer cordon and an inner cordon. They lived right between them, had a little shack. They also did some labor around the camp. Anytime we needed to go on a patrol, we'd roll out the gate and literally say, "Come here." They'd get in the truck or the helicopter and go away with us.

LL: How good were they?

GT: They were all right. I do remember a particular instance when one interpreter got emotionally tied to a particular situation I was in. I had been completely taken off FOB security and was cross-attached to 2nd Battalion, 504th because they needed another rifle company for Operation Valiant Strike. I had this particular interpreter with me the whole time as we searched through this bazaar. This bazaar had a stand-up militia that had decided they would protect this market area. They had AK47s, which were not uncommon at all, and some British Enfield rifles. Well, in the process of searching this bazaar, I talked to the leader of the militia through my interpreter. The leader said he had plenty of weapons and wanted us to take them away because he thought they were too dangerous. He wanted to get rid of them. So this guy leads us to this basement where there were all kinds of mines, mortars and ammunition, but they were obviously in very bad condition. They had been buried and were rusting. My soldiers were quite frankly afraid to go down there because they thought that if one of them went off, we'd all be toast. After this guy turned over all this stuff, two truckloads, I radioed back to the battalion commander and said we'd finished up, cataloged all the stuff and were going to take it away to destroy it. He asked if we'd also taken away militia's AK47s – and they also had a machine gun that was near the market. I told him no, I hadn't done that because the leader had said their rifles were for protection, as was the machine gun – which was in bad condition anyway and I didn't perceive it to be a threat. The guy who was running the local militia said

that there were guys coming across the border from Pakistan into their little province there, where these Afghan people lived who'd probably known each other all their lives. This leader – who was probably the oldest guy there – had just taken it upon himself to start up this militia. Well, after I told all this to the battalion commander, he said to take all their weapons anyway. I told him they had already turned over at least a ton of equipment and munitions but he said he didn't care. He said they shouldn't have had that stuff to begin with and so we were ordered to take everything from them. I said, "Roger, sir." I'd explained the situation, he'd made a command decision, and there was nothing more I could do at that point. So I explained this to the interpreter and he got upset because the militia's weapons were for personal protection. The policy we had established previously was that if people declared their weapons, we'd let them keep them. Well, I didn't have the time or the patience to explain to the interpreter why I had to follow orders and he got a little flustered. I'm not sure how he related this information to the militia leader, but the leader called all his guards together, said to gather up all their weapons, and they proceeded to give them all to our security force. Then he went into the bazaar and told everybody to go home, that they could no longer be protected. He also told them that in all likelihood, when the enemy came back tonight, they would all be in big danger. They literally closed up the market, people went home; and I have to think that on that day we created not necessarily enemies but people who were now at least more favorable to the enemy than they were to us. That interpreter made an already difficult situation a little more difficult.

LL: Were you ever in doubt as to how accurate or how colored the translations were that the interpreters were giving?

GT: Just on that one occasion I just talked about. Otherwise, the missions we went on were almost set pieces, and as long as I saw that the population was doing what I wanted, I didn't have a problem with them.

LL: Did you ever run into any situations where there were some kinds of tribal or sectarian animosities that you had to deal with?

GT: Not really, except for when I was moved from FOB Salerno out to FOB Shkin in early March 2003, even closer to the Pakistan border but further south. We had an Afghan militia force that we were working with. I don't remember the tribe they were from but I believe they were Tajiks. The area we were working in was called Waziristan and they hate each other. What I found was that the Tajiks who were on the militia were quick to point out what the Waziris were doing wrong. We'd get these reports through the interpreters and the Special Forces (SF) unit that was running the militia and they'd say, "Hey, the militia is saying that this guy is doing this in this particular area," and we'd go there and there'd be no evidence of anything. So we had to balance what the militia was saying, understanding that they had an axe to grind. We were able to work around it, though. There was some institutional knowledge at the firebase from guys who had been there a while. They knew the lay of the land, so we were able to get through that.

LL: What was Afghanistan like in January?

GT: It was really cold and windy. There was an operation when we got caught out in snow at high altitudes. The companies ended up having to be rotated out of the area because it was just

bitter cold. I think we got there at the tail end of the winter season in January because it seemed to start warming up once March hit. We only had a couple months of bad weather but the winds were pretty brutal during that time.

LL: Was the climate and terrain what you expected or was it even more extreme than you thought?

GT: We were kind of used to the cold weather. Despite it being in the south, North Carolina can get cold. The altitude was what got us. We'd been briefed about it and the rugged terrain but there's no way you can truly understand it unless you go there and see the changes in elevation and the lack of road infrastructure. You could look at a map and see you need to travel only five kilometers, but it's five kilometers with a change in elevation of about 1,000 meters. It brings you to fatigue very quickly. On top of that, you're carrying a lot of stuff as well if you're operating in open terrain. It was good that we focused on physical fitness. It paid big dividends for us.

LL: What kind of reception did you get from the Afghan locals?

GT: They were generally ambivalent towards us. These are very poor, destitute people and they were obviously inconvenienced when we conducted our searches. They were obliging but cold. Going in and telling them to bring all their people together, separating the men from the women and children, and then to go through their homes to look for the enemy or weapons is very disrupting. That had the potential to ruffle some feathers. We tried to mitigate that by going in with a doctor so he could treat any problems while we were there or offering some kind of humanitarian assistance. In general, though, they were cold to lukewarm to our presence.

LL: What was your biggest challenge?

GT: Intelligence. If we were there to kill or capture remnants of the Taliban regime and al-Qaeda, then the biggest challenge was getting timely, accurate intelligence. The reports that came from higher inevitably said that they thought there was an area where guys were coming back and forth across the border. Well, guys don't just do that. They're funded in some way, they get equipment somehow, they have to eat. In other words, it's a system. How are we going to attack that system? I don't think we ever got answers to those questions and that's simply because it was so new to us at that time.

LL: When did you go back to the States?

GT: I was actually in a firefight on 25 April 2003, and I was shot several times. I was initially driven off the battlefield to a casualty collection point where my first sergeant put some bandages on me. I was then driven back to our firebase at Shkin, and from there transloaded onto a helicopter back to Salerno. I had my first of several surgeries there and then I was put on a C-130 and sent to Bagram. At Bagram I had another one or two surgeries, spent the night. From there, I was sent to Landstuhl, Germany. I spent a week and a half there for some more surgeries and then, after that, I was evacuated back to Walter Reed Army Medical Center. I got there on the first of May 2003.

LL: Can you provide some more detail about this firefight you were in?

GT: Sure. On 25 April I had just finished conducting an operations update with my subordinate leaders at Shkin Firebase. There was nothing unusual. We didn't have any intelligence to suggest there was any unusual threat. I had security patrols that were out enforcing the curfew and some force protection patrols. We may have had a big operation planned for sometime in the next 72 hours but there was nothing really big going on that day. I went back to my hooch and was reading a book. One of the tactical operations center (TOC) officers came in and said they had a report, so I went to the TOC and asked what was going on. There was a report from the CIA that said there were 10 to 12 guys dressed in black coming across the Pak border into Afghanistan. The spot they identified on the map was a spot where we had habitually found rocket caches and we'd been fired on from that location many times, so I immediately put together a patrol. I had a section of vehicles in sector already that was doing a patrol. I took another section of vehicles from within the compound and about 50 militiamen from the Afghans. I had about a platoon of US soldiers and about 50 Afghan soldiers and we headed to the area where the CIA guys had told us that these guys were crossing the border. En route, my battalion executive officer (XO) called me and said he had AH64s on station. Whenever we got resupplies, it was done with the CH47s; and whenever the CH47s flew, AH64s would provide escort. While they were doing the resupply to my firebase, the XO cut those '64s to me so I could use them in the search we were doing. So, I had my fire support officer (FSO) designate a square with the centerpoint being where we thought these guys were coming across, and we put the Apaches in a circular pattern doing racetracks around that square to see if they could see anything. In the meantime, I took my contingent and we went to the homes that were around that area. Our thinking was that if these guys came across, they probably went into some of these homes that we suspected were either coerced into providing support for them or were providing willing support. We started searching these homes and no one had seen anything unusual. The Apaches were searching but then it came time for them to go off station. My FSO was in contact with them but they hadn't seen anything either. From the time we left until the time we searched these few homes, about an hour and a half had passed – and I was ready to pack it in, thinking this was all a dry well. Since I had such a large force out there, though, I figured we'd better go check this area where we had been receiving rocket fire from. It was on some hilly terrain but we could get vehicles up there. So I took a section of vehicles and some Afghan militia with us – two vehicles. We went up this trail, got out of our vehicles, and immediately started spreading out and conducting an impromptu search of the area. The platoon leader who was with me started to go a little south of where I wanted him to go but we were no more than 50 to 100 meters apart and we could see each other. Plus, I had my own little security element with me. I went to the specific are where we had found caches before. Lo and behold, when we got there, we found a camp that had been set up. There were canteens all over the place. There were burlap sacks that these guys were using for either camouflage or sleeping bags, and there were rockets already set up ready to be fired onto our firebase. There were at least three rockets with another cache of another five or 10 with firing points set up. Immediately I told my FSO who was with me to come over and look at what I'd found. Right then, that's when we started taking machine gun fire. It seemed that we were completely encircled by it and I had no idea where it was coming from. So I ran back to where we had gotten off the trucks and saw that my section leader, Staff Sergeant Brown, had been shot in the left knee and my FSO, Mike Dolan, and a radio transmission operator (RTO) were pulling him back towards the truck. The platoon I was traveling with was in a line formation facing to the

east and they could see three guys dressed in battle dress uniforms (BDUs). I thought, "Oh crap." I immediately thought that this Afghan militia force that had traveled with us, and who dressed in BDUs, had somehow maneuvered between us and this cache site and that my guys were firing on them. The firing has stopped now and I got on the radio to call the CIA. I asked where the Afghan guys were. I couldn't get a clear answer from them about what was going on. The next thing I know, the fire kicks up again and it's not just small arms firing at us; it was now heavy machine gun fire. All my doubt was erased at this point about it being the Afghan militia because they don't have heavy machine guns, not like this anyway. I still couldn't see where the fire was coming from, though, because the terrain was so rugged. I moved forward about 15 feet from where the security element was. In the process of moving forward, I was shot in the arm. I immediately went down and tried to pinpoint where these guys were. Around that time, some guys popped up from behind a hillside about 50 meters away from me, and they threw hand grenades and fired AK47s at me. I was hit twice in the right leg and once in the left leg. One bullet also went into my helmet, grazed my head and then lodged on the outside. I crawled back to where my FSO was, designated on the map roughly where our guys were set and, having a feel for the terrain, told him to call for fire for effect on the location I pointed to. I told him to also make sure he identified our location. I had two 105s back at the firebase. We start immediately getting suppressive fire from the firebase and then I start identifying who else was hit – consolidating and reorganizing basically – and also making reports back to the firebase. In the process of doing that, I see that Staff Sergeant Brown was hit in the left leg, some others had taken some shrapnel from hand grenades, and to my right Airman Ray Losano – my tactical air controller from the Air Force – had been shot in the face by an AK47. He went down and the platoon sergeant got him in the truck to start doing first aid on him. Indirect fire is still coming in and my guys are still trying to pinpoint where the enemy fighters are, because at this point the only people who've been hit are us. This platoon sergeant takes the wounded back to a designated casualty collection point. By this time, the first sergeant had heard the report so he's already come forward from the firebase with an ambulance and the doctor – a surgeon. As I understand it, they dropped off those guys there. On their way back, either their truck was stopped or broke down so they got into an Afghan HiLux truck, which is nothing more than a Toyota. It's not uparmored or anything. So there's a platoon sergeant, a couple security guys and the Afghan militia, and they're coming back up. Well, in the process of coming back up, they got ambushed with RPGs, hand grenades and AK47s. In that ambush, the squad automatic weapon (SAW) gunner, Private Jerod Dennis, was shot in the right leg. It hit his femoral artery and he died within minutes. The first sergeant wound up collecting those guys. Meanwhile, on top of the hilltop where I was, we finally got consolidated and reorganized. We lost contact with the enemy. They'd gone down into an area where we couldn't get at them. Incidentally, on the other side of the border were these border security points that were manned by the Pakistanis. While we were firing at the enemy that was shooting at us, I think the Pakistanis thought we were shooting at them – and *they* started firing into our formation. Given the fact that I had two casualties on the top of the hill and this ambush in the rear of me, I said, "Okay, we're going to get out of here." So we get accountability of everyone, get everyone on trucks, pull back to the causality collection point, and that's where I met up with the first sergeant. At that point, I'm beginning to lose consciousness from the loss of blood, and that's when I'm strapped to a litter and eventually taken out of country by way of FOB Salerno, Bagram and then on to Landstuhl.

LL: When did the rest of your unit come back?

GT: It wasn't until August 2003.

LL: So you were in the US waiting for them to come back. Did you pick up the company again?

GT: After I made it to Walter Reed and went through physical therapy and seven surgeries, it was already August 2003. While I was at the hospital, my battalion commander called and told me that he had to relieve me of command. Not because I did anything bad, although there were lessons learned from that firefight, but because the company just can't exist without a company commander. Dave Buffaloe was chosen to take charge of the company and I would be a brigade planner when I returned. As luck would have it, though, another company came open – Headquarters and Headquarters Company (HHC), 82nd Airborne Division – and so I went and took that command in August 2003. We did command inventories and then in September 2003 I left for Iraq with the division headquarters.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Jennifer Vedder