



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 Michael Mineni



**Combat Studies Institute**  
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

### **Abstract**

Major Michael Mineni served as an operations officer for Multinational Force-Northwest and as the liaison officer to the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq in Irbil Province in the Mosul area from January 2005 through January 2006 in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. In this interview, he talks about switching from being a troop commander in the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment to a corps-level staff officer, the waste of the individual predeployment tasks and the lack of negotiation training, how the State Department needs to develop an expeditionary capability, and how he had to handle all aspects of the election preparations. Mineni also discusses the magnificent interpreter he was assigned, the difficulties of voter registration without an accurate census, how he regrets not engaging with the media more to help with election-related issues, and how paying attention in high school civics class was the best preparation for dealing with another country's elections. He closes the interview by stating that he disagrees with placing responsibility for leadership development on the individual and that there is no program design for Army leader development.

# Interview with MAJ Michael Mineni

10 July 2008



MD: My name is Major Marty Deckard (MD) and I'm with the Operational Leadership Experiences Project at the Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. I'm interviewing Major Michael Mineni (MM) on his experiences during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Today's date is 10 July 2008 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. Can you start by giving some background information on yourself?

MM: I grew up in northern California and for high school I moved to southern California and enlisted in the Army after high school. I served for 10 years as an enlisted soldier and then received my commission through Officer Candidate School in 1997.

MD: When did you find out you were deploying to Iraq?

MM: I found out in June 2004.

MD: How much time did you have from then until you finally deployed?

MM: I deployed on 1 January 2005, so we had about six or seven months. To be fair, there was some warning ahead of time but the actual order didn't come until June.

MD: Did you deploy as an individual augmentee or as part of a unit?

MM: Initially I deployed with a unit, but when I came out of troop command I was moved to Mosul to be part of another unit as an individual.

MD: In what capacity were you working at the time you were notified and was that the job you filled in country?

MM: I was a troop commander for the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR). When I deployed, I changed command and did a different job.

MD: Were you selected for that new job or did you volunteer?

MM: It was a little bit of both. I volunteered to do whatever the unit needed me to do, whether it was to stay at the National Training Center (NTC) and be an observer-controller (OC) or to deploy. They chose for me to deploy, so I volunteered to go but I didn't choose the job I ended up with.

MD: What was some of the predeployment training and preparation you went through as an individual and as a unit?

MM: We had a corps-level list of tasks that we had to complete. I had 384 soldiers as a headquarters troop commander to try and prepare to deploy. Not only did I have a scout and mortar platoon to prepare, but I also had mechanics, cooks and administrative clerks. Getting all of them ready to deploy was difficult at best. I'll caveat that by saying we were at NTC and serving as the opposing force (OPFOR). We didn't think we were going to deploy. To compound our problem, I had to change my "actors," if you will, into soldiers and killers prior to deploying. There was a whole culture change and a mentality shift we had to go through. It was a very complex problem, but my first sergeant and I did fairly well at making the change. A lot of other troop commanders didn't have as many problems as I did because I had so many different types of soldiers (MOSs) under my command.

MD: Were there any challenges given the fact that you were the OPFOR at NTC and rotations were still coming through? Did you have enough of the training resources on Fort Irwin available to you and your company?

MM: Yes. General Cone did an excellent job, as did his predecessor, General Thurman, at allowing my regimental commander, Colonel, now Brigadier General, Pete Bayer, to do what needed to get done. We were allocated enough land and training time. As a matter of fact, we went through a full blue force rotation with 4th Brigade from Fort Riley. My soldiers got everything a regular combat brigade would get going through an NTC rotation. They did a great job. It was tough because we were the training force but now we were deploying. It was no easy task but the Army did a fabulous job. We had the best of both worlds. We played Iraqi citizens and insurgents as the OPFOR, and then were on the other side of the fence as BLUFOR winning the hearts and minds and fighting insurgents.

MD: Looking back on it, was there any piece of the predeployment training that you wished you'd more of because it proved pretty valuable once you got into country?

MM: Yes and no. All of the individual tasks that the corps put out had to be done but they really seemed like a waste of my time. The convoy live-fire was really good. We were at the NTC so we had access to some great resources. As a result, the convoy live-fires went really well. I did some live shoot-house training with my scouts and mortars and that was very good. We did individual training as well. If a soldier can't put his weapon into action, he has no business deploying. That stuff should be done by the units all the time. There were other tasks to train on as well, but it comes down to the fact that if you can't perform those tasks, you shouldn't be deploying. We qualified with our weapons back with our units. What we hadn't done was reflexive fire. Reflexive fire is a great tool for soldiers. We didn't even go out and qualify or get into bunkers. Some of the tasks they had us do didn't make sense.

MD: Were there any tasks you went through that would have been time better spent doing something else?

MM: Of all of the individual tasks they gave us ... and don't get me wrong, it was great to have all this time to go out and train, but as a commander I had just one hour of negotiation training.

I don't think my soldiers got any at all. If that's not a shortfall, I can't tell you what is. At a minimum, everyone should have had one hour of that training. Time would have been better spent working on negotiations and understanding culture and relationships, working those kinds of scenarios with the soldiers who were going to be doing that every day out in the field.

MD: How much training did you get on language and culture?

MM: They had some folks come in and we had an entire day dedicated to that, but still, one day dedicated to a thousand years of culture? Come on. I can't complain, though. They were a fabulous group of folks. They had all the right people come in and talk to us. They even had people from Iraq who lived in San Diego and were part of Titan come and talk to us about culture. We had one full day at the post theater where we went over culture and a few other things. But we probably could have had a few more days in there that could have been better served spending time on negotiations and culture rather than some of the individual tasks we had to go through.

MD: How much freedom did you have as a company commander to plan and resource the training and how much of it was dictated from the regiment?

MM: There was a schedule and we were fighting for resources at NTC but we had specific windows of time, and what I did within that window of time was up to me. My boss, now Colonel Jim Blackburn, brought together all of his troop commanders and said, "Guys, here's the deal. I've told you what you need to get done. Here's your time to do it. I'll come out and check. Let me know where you're going to be." We had to backbrief him and he was out at every training event. He came to convoy live-fires. He'd go through with his vehicle. As a matter of fact, the operations officer (S3) and executive officer (XO) as part of the headquarters troop had to go through with their sections and do it as well. We didn't have any problems with them, and usually the field grades are the worst violators of getting training done because they say they're too busy doing other things. I had freedom to do whatever I needed to do as long as it was within his guidance.

MD: Given that you were the OPFOR at NTC, were there any pieces of equipment that weren't on your modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) that you wished you'd had during your trainup?

MM: Yes and no. Everything we had was Army equipment except for OPFOR surrogate vehicles (OSVs) and OPFOR surrogate tanks (OSTs). Our Humvees were regular Humvees. There was a lot of rapid equipment fielding (REF) and rapid fielding initiative (RFI) individual equipment that we didn't have. I didn't have the requisite number of sniper rifles that I was supposed to. I didn't have M24s. I didn't have enough M16s to have one for every guy or gal. I didn't have enough nine millimeters to give the guys who really needed them because we were an OPFOR organization. We sort of had what we needed to deploy and we drew a lot of equipment once we got to Iraq. We didn't get to train with everything we should have had, but I was satisfied. Everybody had a weapon. It may not have been the right combination but if you break it down to platoon level, I could rotate weapons so at least they were familiar. Maybe the nine mil they trained on wasn't the nine mil they were going to shoot, and that was my problem with the M16. They all qualified with their assigned weapon, but it wasn't until the end that I

got a shipment of M16A4s in at the last minute. They weren't the M4s I had hoped for. It was very late but we made it happen and it turned out okay.

MD: How much equipment did you take with you and how much did you fall in on?

MM: I remember we took a lot of trucks, some Humvees, our mobile kitchen trailers (MKTs) and all of our heavy equipment transporters (HETs) and heavy expanded mobility tactical trucks (HEMTTs). We took everything we could take that was not table of distribution and allowances (TDA) assigned for the OPFOR unit. Most of our Humvees went as did all of our mortar tracks. None of the tanks went because they were shared and they were old ancient M551s. All of our support platoon equipment went as well. However, we did fall in on a lot of other equipment once we got there.

MD: Did you have any issues moving into theater?

MM: I personally didn't have any problems. When we hit Kuwait International Airport and got off the plane, the entire planeload went one way and I got my bags and went to Doha. I stayed there for five days and then flew on to Mosul.

MD: While you were at Doha waiting to move to Mosul, did you receive any individual training?

MM: No. I was told to come out for a manifest call at 0800, but when I got there they said they didn't have any flights for me and to come back at 1600. I came back at 1600 and there was still no flight. After three days of this, I went in and said, "How do I get out of here? I do not want to stay in Doha." There were people who were happy just to sit on their cots and wait for a flight, but that wasn't me. They told me I needed some kind of letter signed by someone saying that I was needed right away. I asked them if they had a computer I could use and so I simply typed up the memorandum, signed it myself, and I was out of there within hours. There were guys who were stuck at Doha for two or three weeks and they really didn't mind. I did. I wanted to get to my unit whether they liked it or not.

MD: What job did you hold while you were in Iraq?

MM: I worked in combined staff operations (C3) as an operations officer for Multinational Force-Northwest (MNF-NW), but what I really did was go around and fix things. My boss jokingly called me "The Cleaner." I would go fix the things that other people couldn't get right. After doing that for about four months, someone chose me to be the lead elections planner for all of MNF-NW. As a captain, I was representing MNF-NW to Nineveh and Dahuk Provinces and kind of babysat Irbil Province where the Koreans were. I also represented MNF-NW down in Baghdad at every elections meeting or electoral events. I was sitting around tables with lieutenant colonels. There was only one other major besides me as a captain, and they were all looking at me saying, "Where's your boss?" I was like, "I am the boss." I felt outclassed because I was so junior to everybody. I was responsible for voter registration in all of northern Iraq with the help of combat brigades and such. I handled registration, the elections, the constitution, the referendum and then the actual vote for the current government.

MD: At what point during your trainup and movement over did you find out where you would be serving and what you would be doing?

MM: Before military transition teams (MiTTs) were cool, they had the Iraqi Security Force (ISF) teams. They were essentially the same thing except there weren't 12 guys. I was told I was going to be doing that. Then I was told I was going to working in the future operations cell. I didn't really know for sure until I got there. As a matter of fact, the first week I was there I didn't know where I was going to wind up until the C3 grabbed me and said, "You're going to work for me." I said, "Okay, sir."

MD: Did you have a chance to talk to the MNF-NW staff prior to your deployment to get any information?

MM: No. I actually got there after the unit had done its relief in place (RIP) and there wasn't an election planner. There wasn't anyone to talk to, so I didn't have any formal transition. There was a RIP for the unit but not for me. I was just an extra guy and they had to find a place to put me. That's how I was able to float around and do some different things.

MD: Given that, how much time did you spend digging in the weeds to figure out what the situation was on the ground and what you were supposed to be doing?

MM: I spent a lot of time trying to figure out what I was going to be doing. My background is in social science so I'm a people person, but I've never built a country from the ground, up. As a soldier, I don't feel I should vote. It's not my place. I will follow whoever is elected. I shouldn't have a vote to put somebody in office because I swore an oath to support whoever sits in that office. That's just my personal opinion. One thing is for sure, though. I wish I had paid attention in my high school civics and government classes. I was in a position where I had to negotiate with the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq (IECI) on national-level stuff for an entire province of 1.3 million people. Let's register 1.3 million voters. How do you go about doing that? I had no idea. Their last census was done in the 1970s. That doesn't really help me. A lot of people have died since then. A lot of people have been born since then as well. I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to go about doing this so they feel that it's fair, transparent and representative. I look back at our country and what our Founding Fathers did. Look how long it took us to do it, and there we were wanting to do it in a year. It was tough. This is where my issues with the Department of State come in. They need to step up and do their job. I know we say that when the Department of State or any other agency can't do something, the Army will. I understand that and I have no problem doing it. I did it for a year. But we had a regional embassy office in Mosul that just wrote cables all the time. We needed more than that from them. The Department of State needs some kind of expeditionary capability and I know they're working on it. If you're going to put money into something, it's my opinion that they need to put it into a Department of State expeditionary capability. That will allow us, at some point when security is at a certain level where the Department of State can do their job, we can move on and do something else. It was a tough year for me.

MD: Once things settled down and you started to get a feel for how things were operating and what you were supposed to be doing, can you describe what a typical day was like for you?

MM: I'll give you two examples of what my day could be like. When I was the elections guy, I'd wake up in the morning and go brief the commanding general (CG) at the battle update brief (BUB) on where we stood that day on whatever I was working on. After that, I'd go out and either meet with someone or do whatever I was doing with IECI. They were located very close to us so I could get there quickly. I was very mobile and I could get anywhere in the city quickly if I needed to. I had a lot of resources. I was thrown a lot of things to make the elections happen. During voter registration, we had election materials get delivered and I had to help the Iraqis plan for this to happen. If you didn't help them, they would say, "*Insha' Allah*, the election materials will just show up and it will be like magic." As Americans, we know that won't happen unless you plan for it. A typical day, I would get a frantic call from an IECI representative speaking in broken English saying, "We have election materials at this place and we don't know what to do with them." I'd ask him where he was and then I'd go right over and put out the fire. I'd take care of it and make sure everything was okay. They'd be very thankful and we'd move on from there. Sometimes I'd get a call at 0200 and someone would say, "We're canceling the elections. This is not right." I had a whole team of UN guys, IECI folks, greensuiters and Department of State guys that I was helping to get around and focus our efforts, so I'd get them all together and we'd go over and sit for a few hours to talk him out of canceling the registration or the election because he thought his neighbor was angry or whatever. It was just a painful process. So a typical day would start with that BUB and then I'd go off to check polling or registration sites. I even helped them develop their own phone center since they had no way for people to call up and ask questions. We helped them establish a cell phone bank and hired a bunch of people to answer the phones. They didn't have any concept of how to generate this kind of thing.

MD: You mentioned working with other governmental agencies. Did you have any contact with non-governmental organizations?

MM: I don't remember. IECI was an electoral commission but I don't know what their status was. They were the one organization I worked heavily with. The rest were local contractors that they had hired to help move their stuff.

MD: Out of all the governmental agencies you worked with, which were the best ones to work with and which were a little more difficult to work with?

MM: The UN team I had, led by Roger and his three security detail folks, was the easiest to work with. They were all former military guys or had worked with the military before, and Roger was a weapons inspector who had worked with the UN for a while. The Department of State was probably the next easiest to work with. I primarily worked with Jerome Holman (ph) and he was great, but the problem was the cables. They were on the forward operating base (FOB) and they basically write their cables based off what I tell them or what stories they get from someone else. I was out with the Iraqis every day. I knew what was going on. I was watching it happen. However, their cable may say something different. Now you've got a high-level Department of State guy talking to a high-level general officer and they're beating each other up because their guys were saying something different than I was. My boss would say, "My guy is with them. He knows what's actually going on. Where's your guy?" The hardest people to work with were from IECI and that was because of the language and cultural barrier. We were trying to pass a newly-drafted constitution. It was very hard. How long did it take the

United States to do it? Like 13 years? The IECI were the most difficult to work with because I had IECI in Baghdad and a local IECI team as well. They were the hardest to work with. With the Department of State, it was mainly because of the message traffic. I would say something and they would say something else. It didn't happen all of the time, but when it did it automatically bubbled to the top.

MD: Can you describe the makeup of the IECI? Were they primarily Iraqi or international?

MM: It was international. There were a lot of Australians and a lot of British. There were some French as well. Everybody was trying to remain transparent to ensure it was the Iraqis' process, but you can only do that to a point. To be honest, you have to have your hands in it and be hands-on. You have to teach, coach and mentor them just like we do at NTC. Sometimes you have to put your hands on a captain and say, "Let's go over here. This is what you really need to do." Everybody was so afraid of the appearance of being too involved. There were a lot of Iraqis involved as well. Most of the international folks were in Baghdad but in Mosul, where I was, we had all Iraqis.

MD: How were you set up for interpreter support?

MM: Jeff Houston was with the 401st Civil Affairs Battalion and he had an interpreter that belonged to his battalion commander, but we kind of stole him. I was probably set with the best interpreter I've ever met in my life. He was from St. Louis who volunteered to go back to Iraq. He had been involved in the first Gulf War as a rebel trying to help during the whole overthrow. He was a Shi'ite and his name was Allen. He knew the language and knew when people were lying just by their facial expressions. He was from the Baghdad region but when he was 18 he went to the States after the Gulf War. He drove a cab in St. Louis and when OIF kicked off, he said he wanted to go back. His parents were still there, so he signed up with Titan and went back as an interpreter. He knew everything about everything. We believed him when he told us people were lying. He was my only interpreter so if something happened to him, it would have been bad. I could have gotten a new one but he was great.

MD: Given that you had limited negotiation and cultural training, your interpreter was beneficial in bridging that cultural gap?

MM: That's probably a fair statement. The problem was that as an American, I could very easily make a mistake that he couldn't bridge the gap for. I had one day of negotiation training to cover 2,000 years of culture. That doesn't work very well. He can bridge some of it, but there are mistakes you can make that are hard to overcome. Based on some of his comments to me, I'm sure I made some of those mistakes. I wish I had read Daniel Goleman's books on emotional intelligence before I went. That is a great piece of read for the US Army. If you can understand that, you can understand just about anything.

MD: When you were outside the wire, what elements did you roll out with?

MM: It was just me and a staff sergeant. There was a staff sergeant and a captain running the elections for northern Iraq. That's pretty funny. We had a lot of oversight, don't get me wrong, but we were the ones out doing it every day. He and I would work our trips outside the wire

around the personal security detachment's (PSD) schedule. I had a couple of vehicles that were kind of ours but kind of not ours, so sometimes we'd have to hitch rides. We'd jump in a Stryker if the brigade was headed out. It seemed to work because everybody was going everywhere all the time and we could always get in with somebody who was heading somewhere to do something. I also had access to the CG's helicopter, so I could pretty much get where I needed to go. Planning and supervision were my roles. The 1-25 SBCT, 172nd SBCT and 3rd ACR were the combat formations that owned the battlespace and executed daily operations.

MD: As far as election issues were concerned, which groups of Iraqis were you predominantly dealing with outside the wire?

MM: I never asked. I didn't care what group they were. My interpreter could tell you. My biggest push to everyone was that I didn't care what your ethnicity was and I never asked. That didn't matter. What mattered was that we were trying to work together. As far as the population of Mosul is concerned, it's really a melting pot. They have every single ethnic group and religion, from Kurds to Shi'a to Sunnis to Christians. They're all up there.

MD: Did you ever run into any situation where there was some kind of tribal or sectarian animosity in working through these election issues?

MM: Yes. It was primarily the Kurds against everyone else. We'd go out to polling sites where there were claims, and I can't confirm or deny this, but it was said that the Kurds were not letting people vote because they were Sunni or Shi'a. The Kurds would say the same things about them.

MD: Who were you dealing with as far as the Iraqis were concerned? Were they sheiks or civic leaders?

MM: The generals would deal with the governor or the governor's liaison officer (LNO). I was at all of these things in the background listening and paying attention so I could go back to the IECI and do a better job of State-Defense coordination within the Province of Nineveh to make sure that the message they're saying is the same one the governor is putting out. I didn't really deal with sheiks at all. We had different events that I would go to where I would interact with some of the folks, but I was primarily the IECI guy. I advised them logistically and operationally. I helped them get the polling sites up, get the word out and where the posters needed to be put up.

MD: How much interaction did you have with the subordinate battalions in planning the elections?

MM: I dealt with the brigade. At first it was 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry Division and then it was the 172nd out of Alaska and a portion of the 3rd ACR. I worked with General Brown's brigade from the 25th Infantry Division then Colonel Shields' brigade and Colonel H.R. McMaster. I dealt with their election planners. I can rattle off names because it was an earth-shattering, very emotional event because it was something we'd never done before. When I found out I was going to Iraq, I figured I'd be slinging an M4 getting rid of insurgents or terrorists, not planning

elections. Instead I was helping to build a new country, one vote at a time. I never thought I'd be hitting the campaign trail.

MD: Were you required to attend a lot of meetings?

MM: Yes. We had video teleconferences weekly. We had meetings requiring me to fly to Baghdad for three or four days at a time to go through electoral conferences and talk to IECI. I had local meetings for whatever was going on with the civil affairs guys. I had meetings constantly. Some of them were self-generated because I needed to meet with folks. During these election periods, I would live with the IECI. I'd go back to the FOB for food and to sleep for one or two nights a week, but I primarily stayed out with them to make sure things went well and that they didn't have any issues.

MD: Given that it was just you and an NCO, how difficult was it to prepare for all of these briefings and meetings?

MM: It was pretty painful. A lot of times I would go in unprepared. Sometimes I'd go in to brief the general unprepared because of events that had occurred the night before. The IECI is not a very aggressive organization and that's a cultural issue as well, so sometimes there was just a lack of progress and that's what I had to report to the general. He didn't like that very much and it made me look unprepared, but it wasn't a problem. My NCO would help me prepare, but between the brigade and myself we developed some self-populating products that were easier to update. If I typed into one cell, it would not only update the Excel slide but it would also update the PowerPoint color chart for that block. It was a very mathematically challenging way to do it, but once the form was built it was very easy and we had to do it because there were only two of us. There was also an entire plans section with two majors who were very helpful in guiding me as a young captain to plan the elections. I could bounce things off them and they served more as mentors than bosses. They were two very smart guys: Major Russ Switzer and Chris Faber).

MD: Since you had to attend a lot of meetings and prepare for them all, how easy or difficult was it to establish a semi-fixed battle rhythm?

MM: Our battle rhythm was as good as it could get. Every other Sunday I got a couple of hours in the morning to get some laundry done and have some me-time. I could sleep in a little bit and maybe watch 15 or 20 minutes of a videotaped TV show, but that was about it. When I was in the planning phase, I had a battle rhythm. I knew I had to write an operations order for an event. If I was doing registration, I knew where I had to be every day because that's what was going on. In the interim periods, my battle rhythm was whatever they needed it to be. The UN gave me the nickname, "Captain Democracy." They'd call me and be frantic about something and want me there right away to help them. It was hard because everything was based on their needs. It didn't bother me, though. When the actual elections occurred or when we did voter registration, we developed a kind of battle rhythm. I'd get in at 0700 and I wouldn't leave until the day was done, whatever time that was. It wasn't bad. I knew guys who had it a lot worse.

MD: Out of the three major projects you worked - voter registration, the referendum on the constitution and the elections - which was the most difficult?

MM: I think all the issues really go back to culture. Voter registration was difficult because I don't think they understood how to do it. There was no census and no data on folks. People would come get their food at the food distribution center and they'd be asked to update their records. They'd ask who died and if they'd had any new kids. I think what happened was that they wouldn't take the dead people off their list, because they were still getting their food, and they would add all of their new children. We never really had a good estimation of who was in the area, but 1.3 million is what we estimated. That was part of the voter registration issue. I could never quite get my hands on what was going on. I'd have to ask the IECI guys to go out to the polling or registration sites and they wouldn't go, so I would go by myself but nobody wanted to talk to me and their books weren't up to par. They simply had a bad system for voter registration. As far as the referendum was concerned, I don't think we had one single violent event in northern Iraq. We may have had one during the elections but none during the referendum. We had a pretty good voter turnout as well. I think we had around 740,000 people vote out of 1.3 million. The hardest part of that were the games the insurgents played before the actual elections. They executed folks and played a heavy hand, telling people if they went to vote their families would be hurt. The Iraqis did the elections on their own and acted as the lead security folks. We were out, well away from things as the outer security element, and we let them conduct the vote on their own with their Iraqi Army folks helping the IECI out. They had their police force out as well. They did all the local security and we did the outer cordon, making sure no outsiders were able to influence them. I think we just had one event occur. The Iraqi Army folks had an entire capability in northern Iraq where they had a sustainment unit with all these trucks. It was a great asset and we told the IECI that their army would help them move all of their materials with their people, because we had to maintain the chain of custody. The IECI was a little leery of the new Iraqi Army and police force, though, so there was some clashing there based on trust issues and culture as well. But when it was all said and done, we had close to 800,000 people come out to vote out of 1.3 million. That's a lot of people that came out to vote for their new country and new government.

MD: Which of those three areas did you enjoy working the most?

MM: I liked them all. I think the elections part was the most challenging. The referendum was tough because Nineveh seems to be the swing province. It's the melting pot of Iraq. Everybody up there had their thumbs on the elections team and wanted to know what was going on, but I couldn't tell them. I didn't know. I wasn't out with them. They didn't want any US uniforms near them. They wanted to do it on their own. They are hungry for their freedom. They want their freedom but they don't quite know how to get it or achieve it, and I think that's probably frustrating in some regards. They wanted to be able to have their kids play soccer on the field at the end of the street. They wanted to be able to walk to the market and back. They wanted to be able to do those things but they just didn't know how. That was probably frustrating to them.

MD: Given that the elections were such a historic event, how much contact did you have with the media during that time?

MM: I only had a little bit of contact with the media. One of the *Los Angeles Times* reporters was constantly bugging me, but I probably avoided the media more than I should have. I had opportunities or could have found opportunities to engage the media, but I didn't. Reflecting back on things now, I know the media isn't a bad thing. It's part of the information operations

(IO) campaign and I should have been out to tell the story. The problem was that I didn't think it was my place to talk to the media. The Iraqis needed to talk to the media. I needed to get them involved with the media. It matters what the local guy on the street reads in his newspaper, not what I'm saying to the *Los Angeles Times*. I'm sure what I tell the *Los Angeles Times* matters somewhat, but I don't know if it's the right audience. I should have done more to get the IECI media opportunities to tell the people what they're doing for them. We had an IO cell that did do some of that because we had a guy who did radio and television interviews, but I could have done more to spotlight that. That was one of my weaknesses.

MD: Was there any kind of system in place for you to reach back to the Department of State guys, either on the FOB or in the States, to resolve some of the questions or issues you had?

MM: I misspoke earlier. Major Jeff Houston was on my team as well. He was a civil affairs guy and part of our elections team, but I led it. I could go to the civil affairs guys and ask them questions when I needed to. I had the opportunity to ask questions to the Department of State but I never got any answers. I don't know if the guy working there really knew much more than I did. He was a young guy and he would ask me questions. He was stuck on the FOB but I was out with the Iraqis. If I came to him with a question, he didn't necessarily have the answer. The Department of State folks had all volunteered to go to Iraq, but I don't think he had the experience, background or time to really answer some of the questions I had. I didn't really know who I could even call back in the States to ask questions to. I knew there were certain three-letter organizations I could ask questions of, but I didn't understand the whole interagency thing until I got here. The point is, maybe the job I had should have been filled by a field grade officer who was a Command and General Staff College (CGSC) graduate. Now that I've been here at school, I've gained that knowledge. Now I know who I could have called to get the answers I needed. As a young captain just out of troop command, though, I didn't have any idea who to call.

MD: Why did the Department of State guys stay on the FOB? Was that a matter of personal preference or a Department of State policy that they couldn't leave?

MM: It wasn't a personal preference. There were some things going on that I can't discuss as well as some other things that became policy issues later on, but that was an internal matter that I don't want to speculate on because I don't really know. There were some things that were happening that didn't allow them to go off the FOB after a certain point. They could and could not go off the FOB at different times based on some security contract issues and change-outs and some other things.

MD: Did the UN team and personnel you dealt with go off the FOB?

MM: Yes. They had their own trucks. They were armored vehicles and I'd sandwich them in our convoys to make sure we took care of them. The UN guy wasn't armed but his security detail was.

MD: How much contact did you have with personnel from sister services while you were deployed?

MM: The first MiTT I worked with was Marines. I worked with a lot of folks from our sister services, but primarily the Marines. I worked with a Navy guy for a little bit who was on the staff. There was also an Air Force guy who did crime scene investigation stuff for the Army in the tactical operations center (TOC). The Marines brought up folks from different units to help with election security. Some commando brigades they had down south came up north to help, so I worked with them quite a bit.

MD: Was this your first time working in a joint headquarters?

MM: We weren't really joint, to be honest with you. We were MNF-NW and there were other agencies in there, but I don't know if we were joint. It was the first time I'd ever worked at that level headquarters. I'd never been above a squadron or a battalion in my life until I got there.

MD: How difficult was it to put yourself into that organization and figure out how it operated?

MM: I still probably couldn't tell you how it operated. I learned quite a bit. It was like a division-level headquarters with one brigade of US soldiers, all these Iraqi units and other people here and there. I knew we had a meeting in the morning and stuff went in and out of the TOC to the battle command center. I knew there were staff meetings, the chief of staff went around and did certain things and all the decisions to be made went to the boss. As a young captain, though, never having worked at that level before, it was very difficult, but that's going to happen. You just have to figure it out. Once I got placed in the planning cell, I just figured out what I had to do and got focused on that. I eventually had some time as the year went on to sit back and see where I fit into the big overall plan. There was a steep learning curve, but by the end I was a better officer for having done it.

MD: You mentioned the Australians and British who were on the IECI staff down south. Aside from them, how much interaction with coalition forces did you have?

MM: I dealt with coalition forces a lot because I was always down at Multinational Corps-Iraq (MNC-I) working with Colonel Stevenson who was the elections planner. He helped me out a lot. He was on my side and never talked down to me. When I'd go to meetings, they'd ask my take on something and I'd always tell them like it was. Someone made the comment once, "Don't ask, Mick, because he's going to tell you. If you don't want to know, don't ask him because he's going to tell you the truth and he's going to tell you like it is." That's how I got the "Captain Democracy" nickname. Anyway, I had a lot of contact with other coalition forces. We'd go around the table at our meetings and there was MND-Baghdad, the Polish, the Australians, the British and then me in northwest. There were also some of the regular Army units working the Baghdad area. I had a lot of interaction with them about once a month. It wasn't a daily thing.

MD: Let's transition to family support and family readiness. How did you deal with family separation?

MM: It was tough, but since I was out and about I could have found a way to call home every day if I wanted to. I was out enough and was going to enough places where if I had the money and the gumption, I could grab a phone and make a phone call. I had the opportunities to call

home, and sometimes I chose to and sometimes I didn't. It was tough. My daughter and son were very little and leaving them was difficult. You deal with it as best you can every day.

MD: How was the support your family received back at Fort Irwin while you were deployed?

MM: It was really good. As a matter of fact, it was almost over the top. They built this family center out in Barstow and another one on post. This one organization brought these trucks of free groceries and clothes. If any of the wives needed anything, they got it immediately. They took trips and did lots of things. My wife had no complaints.

MD: What was your most memorable time in Iraq?

MM: I have so many good memories. Storing election materials and driving through the most deadly traffic circle in northern Iraq seven times in one day was an interesting one. I did more than just plan the elections, since the elections didn't last all year. My first four months were operationally focused doing plans and other things, but the biggest thing I did was the elections. The best advice I can pass on to other people is to pay attention in your high school civics class and pay attention in any governance class you take. There will be another election in Iraq at some point and we're probably still going to be there. If we're not, then I'm wrong and it doesn't matter, but it will matter somewhere else in the future. Until the Department of State has an expeditionary capability, we are going to have to do it. We need to figure out a way to fix it. My most memorable experience is that I thought I was going over to kill insurgents and be a troop commander, but then I was told I was going to be the elections planner for northern Iraq and for many watershed electoral events in 2005.

MD: When did you finally leave Iraq?

MM: I got home on 6 January 2006.

MD: Were you replaced by another staff element or individual?

MM: Yes and no. Jeff Houston stayed but I left. He took over my position and had another guy from civil affairs come over to pick up the lead for electoral events. So, yes, I was replaced by two majors. One was already there and the other came over from the civil affairs battalion.

MD: Since they were already on the ground, I assume the transfer of authority (TOA) was pretty painless?

MM: Yes. Since Jeff was there, he already had everything I had. I took my set of computers and gave them to the new major. We sat down one day and went through all of the files. I showed him my filing system. I went through the same thing with Jeff because he had the same set of files. It was pretty easy for us since half of the team was already on the ground.

MD: Was there a formal process in place to capture lessons learned from voter registration and the elections that somebody could use later on?

MM: We did after-action reviews (AARs). We were the OPFOR so heaven forbid we didn't do an AAR after everything we did. However, we didn't do a good job of consolidating all of them. While we were over there, we were interviewed by some guys for an oral history kind of thing and when we got back to the States they came to visit and finish it up. It's available on the internet. We did the formal AAR process where we captured the good, the bad and the sustains, but I don't know if Jeff passed it on to anyone else. I didn't have any transition with anyone. Our plans team did, but the guy who replaced me stayed on so you'd have to ask him if he kept it. Consolidating all of those individual events into one big AAR to pass onto others probably wasn't done.

MD: What were the biggest professional lessons you learned during your time in Iraq?

MM: I complained for the entire year I was there about why I was doing what I was doing. It wasn't my job. I joined the Army to break things. I didn't join the Army to build a country. Little did I know about this certain Department of Defense directive that said if no one else can do something, the military can. I didn't know that so, again, putting a major in that position would have helped. I learned that the Army needs to do a better job of training our entire force on Phase IV operations. If we say we can do something, we need to have the requisite expertise within the service to do the job we've said we could do. From the secretary on down, they need to say, "Here's the plan to develop leaders that can accomplish the directive that we've said we'd accomplish." I learned that although the Army is adaptive and can make things happen, that isn't the answer. The answer is to prepare, to own the expertise, and have the capability necessary to apply it to the problem.

MD: If you could make one or two recommendations to senior Army leaders based on what you learned in Iraq and what you've learned here at CGSC, what would they be?

MM: I think it goes back to that directive. If we're going to say we can do what someone else says they can't, we really need to prepare for that and own those capabilities. We only have so many civil affairs units in the Army, so Regular Army guys are going to have to step up. Well, we need to figure out a way to develop leaders who can do that. I'm here at CGSC now and I've looked at the leader development program, and what I can't find is a program design. I just see that we put the onus on the leader to self-develop himself as a lifelong learning process. I disagree with that. The Army's paradigm is that we can make anyone a leader. If that's the case, they have the responsibility to develop me if I'm the "anyone" they're going to make a leader. Putting the onus on me isn't the answer, but I haven't seen any kind of program design because I don't think it's out there. Also, the Department of State needs an expeditionary capability and they're developing that now. They have to figure out a way to get it done and implement it. That way, we can focus on security and we can coordinate plans. When it's time to hand things over, we can look to transitions. We're doing it here at school and it seems like common sense. Until then, we have to train all our leaders on how to do these governance tasks. When was the last time you had a civics class? I don't teach my soldiers civics. Half of them probably couldn't read you the Preamble to the Constitution. (That's a joke). That's not a bad thing. It just shows that there's a lack of capability in the Army and we're not targeting it. Do we want to spend our time training on that or do we want to train on the M4? I'll tell you what, I thought I was going to be carrying an M4 around and I wasted a lot of time carrying that M4 in training, because when I got to Iraq I was working on elections. I know we're doing the best with what we have

and we're transforming and doing a lot of things, but it's difficult at best to go into a situation with no training and have to make things happen. The problem is that people have said to me, "You did very well. Your results were great." My response to that is, "Yes, but I was backpedaling. I didn't have the tools in my kit bag, nor did I understand where to go, who to talk to or how to ask the questions." Either the Army needs to build more civil affairs units, train more people, increase the Department of State's capabilities or train more Regular Army combat arms guys to do the job we're being asked to do. I think leader development and the school system is the way to target that by adding more hours of leadership and relationship training as well as negotiation training to the curriculum, because we're not going to get it anywhere else. Units aren't going to go out and do negotiation training. They're going to shoot their weapons, drive their vehicles and do land navigation. They're going to do soldier skills and they very well should. However, they can put these curriculum changes into the non-commissioned officer education system (NCOES) and the officer education system (OES) schools. They can give our leaders more leadership training, because it's all about leadership. If you understand relationships, you can pretty much work anywhere. They need to target leader development, make it a formal program and drive on with it.

MD: If you had the chance to volunteer to go back to Iraq and work on the next round of elections, would you volunteer to go?

MM: Knowing what I know now, it would really depend on whether the Department of State and other organizations had the expeditionary capability that I've mentioned. Knowing the way I am, though, I would go. I wouldn't want to see another young captain get thrown into the situation I was thrown into. It's a whole new ballgame in Iraq now, so if I went over there now, there would be another steep learning curve. I would certainly consider volunteering to go over to do elections again because it would help the overall cause. We're trying to get them to have a self-sustaining government and embrace democracy so, yes, I would go. It would just be tough knowing I would be stuck holding the bag again. It's not degrading to the Department of State or any other organization, it's just a personal feeling I have. I felt I was stuck holding the bag.

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

MM: No, I think that's it.

MD: Thank you very much for your time.



END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Jennifer Vedder