Interview with MAJ (b)(3)(b)(6)
25 April 2009

Garnet

Garnet (3)(b): My name is (b)(3)(b)(6) with the Combat Studies Institute at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Today I'm interviewing Major (b)(3)(b)(6). Major (b)(3)(b)(6) is currently executive officer (XO) for the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team in Italy. During the 2007-2008 deployment to Afghanistan, he was the operations officer (S3) for 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry, Task Force Rock. Today's date is 25 April 2009. Today we're going to be talking about Contingency Operation (CONOP) Rock Move, which was the operations order. Let's start with some background. Where did you get your commission? Gray

Gray (3)(b): I was on an ROTC scholarship to Penn State. That was my commissioning source. I was stationed at Fort Carson as a lieutenant, at Fort Campbell as a company commander and now I'm here in Vicenza as a field grade officer.

Pg 6
Pg 8
Pg 12

Garnet (3)(b) Where are you from?

Gray (3)(b) I'm from the suburbs of (b)(3)(b)(6)

Garnet (3)(b) I grew up in northwest Pennsylvania, so I'm just curious.

Gray (3)(b): I have family from (b)(3)(b)(6)

Garnet (3)(b) I assume you've done the standard infantry career progression?

Gray (3)(b) Yes.

Garnet (3)(b) When did you go through the Command and General Staff College?

Gray (3)(b) I went through in 2005-2006, graduated in June 2006 and then immediately went to Italy in July.

Garnet (3)(b) Since you guys were initially going to deploy to Iraq, how did you adjust your plans when you found out in February 2007 that you'd be going to Afghanistan instead?

Gray (3)(b) We didn't have a lot of leeway. We tried to change our training but because of the millions of dollars that were already committed to the Joint Maneuver Training Center (JMTC) and the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) here in Europe, we really couldn't change our conditions. We tried to get into the mountainous areas of northern Italy and Austria, but we just couldn't make it happen. I think JMRC did the best they could with switching out the scenarios to train us. I thought it was effective, but obviously it wasn't as good as it could have been had they known all along that we were going to Afghanistan. It's very difficult to replicate the austere, rugged conditions and the amount of area our battalion was going to be responsible for occupying and working in. It's very difficult to replicate that kind of dispersed forward operating base (FOB) or platoon observation post (OP) types of conditions. When you throw in the difficult terrain that required movement by helicopter and the fact that we had to stay on specific roads that were easy to plant improvised explosive devices (IEDs) on and were easy to watch from the high ground, it certainly became very difficult to replicate, if not impossible, in Germany unless you had a year to do so.

Garnet (3)(b): Hohenfels certainly doesn't represent the Nuristan or Kunar terrain very much.

(b)(3)(b)(6)

3 Nov 09
Enclosure (6C) PAGE 1 OF 14

Gray (3)(b) We had a four-kilometer square maneuver box to replicate an area the size of the state of Connecticut. We definitely didn't have the dispersion, but we learned the key lessons of gaining the human terrain and understanding the dynamics of winning over the population. I don't think the lines of effort change much between Iraq and Afghanistan. Security, governance and infrastructure, and then information operations that cover all three at the same time, that didn't change much between Iraq and Afghanistan.

Garnet (3)(b): I assume JMTC and JRMC are pretty similar in their approach to things.

Gray (3)(b) There's JMTC, which is here in Grafenwoehr, and then there's JMRC, which is Hohenfels. JMRC and the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk do closely resemble each other, as does the National Training Center. They're all considered combat training centers, so how they operate is similar.

Garnet (3)(b): When you went to Afghanistan, did you have any type of predeployment op order or campaign plan? Did you have a chance to prepare anything like that?

Gray (3)(b): We got a deployment order but we certainly didn't get a campaign plan. Our brigade gave us 90-day letters, which really didn't come out every 90 days. We got two of them in the 15 months we were there. What they did was to realign battlespace and told us to keep doing what we were doing. It was such a bottom-up-driven environment that it was really hard for the brigade to get ahead of the battalions, just as it was difficult for us to really get ahead of the companies and for the companies to get ahead of the platoons. The platoons were so dispersed and they lived with the population. They really understood the human terrain a lot better than we did and that kind of factored into our targeting process.

Garnet (3)(b): When you got to Afghanistan, did you do your relief in place (RIP) with 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry (1-32)?

Gray (3)(b): Yes. 3rd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division.

Garnet (3)(b): Did you work with (b)(3)(b)(6)?

Gray (3)(b): Yes. He was the battalion S3 that I replaced.

Garnet (3)(b): How well did the RIP go with (b)(3)(b)(6)?

Gray (3)(b) I think it went well. Obviously there are different personalities and different mentalities to deal with. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel (b)(3)(b)(6) was a super smart and competent guy, too, so they were definitely masters of their battlespace. They did a great job getting us to understand what we were getting into. So, I thought we had a good RIP with them. Hawk

Garnet (3)(b): When did you start looking at repositioning your battlespace, moving out of Ranch House and Bella and reestablishing in Wanat?

Gray (3)(b) In all honesty, we got there in May and by July we knew we wanted to move forces to Wanat. Just based on the operational tempo, the availability of Class IV and the rotary-wing assets that were available, though, the heavy lift and the assault and attack aviation elements, they were so scarce that it was very difficult. I don't want to sound caustic towards the brigade headquarters at the time and it's always easy to point the finger at the higher headquarters, but our request to move was not taken seriously and wasn't pursued by the brigade S3 or the brigade commander. Actually, we had asked to put a new combat outpost at Wanat with the rest of Chosen Company from Blessing. This was even before we wanted to

tear down Aranas or Bella. We always knew we wanted to maintain a presence there because it was a village that showed the desire to partner with the US and coalition forces, including the Afghan National Army (ANA).

Garnet (3)(b): When did you start seriously working on implementing that and turning out the functional op order?

Gray (3)(b): In March 2008, the brigade S3, Theta (b)(3)(b)(6), called on the phone to talk to me. Colonel Diamond (b)(3)(b)(6) was in the room, as was the XO and the ops sergeant major. He said, "We really want you to look at moving to Wanat. Come up with a course of action. I'm going to send our brigade engineer rep to go recon and we'll get this thing moving." It was probably a whole four or five weeks before we could actually get the engineer from Bagram out to Blessing. A lot of that was due to weather and the lack of aircraft priorities. That's when we kind of got the official word from brigade to start figuring out how we would move to Wanat. We did more important, deliberate CONOPs in April and May and then really started seriously planning for the Wanat move in June. Because Battle Company was having success in the Korengal and Able Company was having success in the Waterpor, they were really forcing the enemy to walk the seam between Kunar and Nuristan. They were all congregating up around Bella. We saw a significant spike in enemy activity. Bella had been put there to pull a road up to it, which was really how 1-32 laid out their planning. Everything was about getting roads to remote areas. Of course commerce would follow and push the Taliban up into the hills and make them irrelevant. That theory proved itself successful along the Pesh River Road and along the road between Asadabad and Jalalabad, so it was certainly a valid concept. The issue with Bella and Ranch House was that we couldn't drive there. The only way to get there was by helicopter. That's what made it difficult. On 22 August, Aranas, or the Ranch House, got attacked by a significant enemy force. All the guys were heroic. They defended themselves and no one was killed, but there were some key individuals – like the platoon leader, Cypress (b)(3)(b)(6), and Sergeant Romeo (b)(3)(b)(6), who has a Distinguished Service Cross and a Silver Star – who were definitely heroes that helped everyone survive. We realized that the Ranch House wasn't doing a whole lot. The enemy was just going around it and the attacks kept continuing and getting worse as the enemy started congregating in the area. They knew it was our economy of force and we didn't have a lot of persistent presence. So, our first part was to collapse Aranas to Bella and then move Bella to Wanat.

Garnet (3)(b): What was your basic concept of operations and the tasks you wanted to perform as you pulled out of Bella and set up a new combat outpost (COP) at Wanat?

Gray (3)(b): We wanted to use some of the tenets of counterinsurgency doctrine, to live close to or with the population. We also needed to provide them with some form of income for their village. That meant co-locating a base there with them and giving them some opportunity to make money. We also wanted to get the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) projects on the table and approved so they could see some progress and legitimate proof that we wanted to make their lives better. The first thing we had to do was to get local approval from the villagers of Wanat and allow them to have a say in us establishing a base there. Initially it was very contentious, but after two or three trips with the battalion commander, the company commander and the platoon leader going there on a regular basis, we finally got them to agree. We knew it wasn't ideal, though, and that it was kind of a forced thing. They knew we were going to come up, whether they let us or not. Getting that initial approval from the village was our first task and then we had to figure out how we were going to systematically collapse Bella, move key weapons systems and personnel to Wanat, and get the engineer effort on the ground to build force protection and get the base initially established. Able Company had actually done it before. They tore down COP Florida and COP California, which were two little COPs. They tore them down and established Honaker-Miracle and that was really the same concept. We used that concept because we had been very successful with it earlier and figured we'd be successful in Wanat as well.

Garnet (3)(b) 1-32 had worked in Wanat in the fall of 2006. Were you aware of what they had done or what their concept of operations had been? Did you know how things had gone for them?

Gray (3)(b) No. I knew that (b)(3)(b)(6), the company commander, had said the engineer from 1-32 had developed some rapport with the villagers. After the battle was over, when we were going through the houses we actually found a coin from that engineer unit. There were even some scribbled notes with the American engineer captain's name and his unit. Other than that, we didn't have any historical documents that described any success or lack thereof in Wanat. We did know they were trying to build a governance center there. It started up but never came to fruition. Oscar

Garnet (3)(b) How much political coordination or discussion did you have with the provincial and district governors as you put together this operation?

Gray (3)(b) There was a platoon of ANA up there with us, so the ANA commander and Colonel (b)(3)(b)(6) talking to the governor of Kunar and he was aware of what was going on. I don't know if anyone above him was aware of it. I don't know if brigade was talking to anyone at that level, but I know at least the Kunar governor knew were establishing a base there. Diamond

Garnet (3)(b) Just to clarify, brigade was doing most of the political consultation at the provincial governor level?

Gray (3)(b) I don't know that. I was just making an assumption.

Garnet (3)(b) But you weren't?

Gray (3)(b) No, I wasn't. Are you calling Kunar a district or a province?

Garnet (3)(b) Kunar is a province.

Gray (3)(b) Okay. Then the provincial governor, that was all Rock. Colonel (b)(3)(b)(6) and the ANA kandak commander had regular discussions with him. What was difficult was that some people considered Wanat part of Nuristan and some people considered it part of Kunar. The sub-governor at Nangalam, which was Camp Blessing, certainly knew it and was dealing with the Wanat sub-governor. They definitely knew at the local level and I know they were tracking it at the provincial level as well. I don't know about anything above that, though. I don't know what brigade was doing. Diamond

Garnet (3)(b) When did you start putting together a formal operations order?

Gray (3)(b) In June. It came down to the intelligence officer (S2) doing analysis and figuring out the enemy situation based on human intelligence (HUMINT) and what he was gathering from his local sources. He was figuring out what the general tone was, or the atmospherics, and how many fighters were in the area. According to the S2, the number of enemy fighters in the area was rising significantly up around Bella so we knew they were at least that close. That kind of added some priority to us moving down further south. Wanat could be driven to with Humvees, whereas Bella and the Ranch House could not.

Garnet (3)(b) I understand that about three-quarters of the eight-kilometer stretch of road between Blessing and Wanat was in pretty good shape, but the last mile or two were in pretty awful shape. Is that accurate?

Gray (3)(b) I wouldn't say awful. It definitely wasn't as good as the other part of the road, but it was certainly easily traversed by uparmored Humvees. There were a lot of little capillary valleys that fed that main artery and it was very easy for the enemy to watch, to put in a far ambush or put in IEDs with command-wire detonation and sit way back up there. But it was fairly easy for us to get through by vehicle.

Garnet (3)(b) Were you able to take jingle trucks up there?

Gray (3)(b): Yes. We actually contracted local labor with jingle trucks and heavy equipment. They were the ones who were supposed to go up and build the force protection wall. They initially agreed to it but as the enemy situation got worse, the locals continued to back out of going up there on their own unless we would provide security. That added another complexity. Since they kind of reneged on their initial deal to go up there and build force protection, we were forced to put troops on the ground before any kind of stone protection walls were being built. Our initial plan was to get the stone wall built around the initial footprint to serve as good force protection. They just wouldn't go up there without security.

Garnet (3)(b) Was this an Afghan construction company?

Gray (3)(b): Yes.

Garnet (3)(b) Do you know where they were out of?

Gray (3)(b): No. I think it was the same company that was actually building part of the road along the Pesh.

Garnet (3)(b) I think that company was out of Jalalabad. Let's now talk about the components of Rock Move. You've already said that the S2 had given you a pretty solid intelligence summary. How did you develop that into a risk assessment?

Gray (3)(b): We wanted to make sure we still had the three-to-one ratio and obviously having the close air support (CAS) and the close combat attack (CCA) above mitigated the risk, just like it would for every other CONOP. Initially we had a ground assault element from Chosen Company move up and establish security at the site, to secure the helicopter landing zone (HLZ), and then we'd start moving the key weapon systems and personnel from Bella to Wanat by helicopter. They were also under the coverage of the 155s, the 777s at Blessing. Then getting the 120 up there as well as the heavy machine guns on the ground assault Humvees and the TOW system, that was key.

Garnet (3)(b) Did you have any military deception component to the plan?

Gray (3)(b) No. Because we did such extensive coordination with the locals, it would have been ridiculous to try to get them to think we were going somewhere else when we kept telling them we wanted to build a base there.

Garnet (3)(b) You'd already done the land negotiation for a specific piece of land.

Gray (3)(b): Yes. We had the contingency real estate support team (CREST) up there and we had a schematic for how and where we wanted to build. We told the locals and negotiated prices for taking over the land. We did it just like we did it for Honaker-Miracle.

Garnet (3)(b) Without getting into classified territory, can you tell me if you were comfortable with the intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) coverage?

Gray (3)(b) In my 15 months there, I was never comfortable with it. We never had enough. In that terrain, with that high amount of enemy activity, I thought we should have had ISR coverage 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and we never did. I want to make it clear that we never had enough. For this operation, based on being there 15 months and having done many other CONOPs, I think the ISR was adequate for

what we wanted to do. For the initial move, it was fine. It was just two days after that it was.... That became the norm. Get established, get set up with initial fighting positions, but because someone else was doing a higher priority level-two CONOP, nothing would continue to cover that area – and that's exactly what happened. I don't remember off the top of my head. We may have had good ISR at the time, but it still didn't help find the enemy that came up the ravine that they attacked OP Topside from.

Garnet (3)(b) The battalion S2 told me that ISR had been withdrawn on 12 July. The brigade S2, (b)(3)(b)(6), Foxtrot also confirmed that. Did you give any thought or consideration into bringing in the little Raven unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) that you guys had?

Gray (3)(b) No. They were completely ineffective in the entire area of operations (AO). We tried to use them all year and every time we used them, we crashed them. They were ineffective, mostly because of the terrain. Every time we tried to fly them, we'd crash them. Then we'd have to either pay a villager to go recover it or just write it off.

Garnet (3)(b) I know the Raven is particularly vulnerable to updrafts and crosswinds. I can imagine in that terrain, you had all sorts of...

Gray (3)(b) I'm not that familiar with the Raven, but I just assumed it was a line of sight system. As soon as you got a mountain between the operator and the Raven, I don't think it was very effective.

LOG v. Garnet (3)(b) Yes. It's very much a line of sight system. I watched 3rd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division fly one into a pine grove at Fort Polk and that was the end of that Raven. Apparently, they don't fly through pine trees very well, or mountains. How comfortable were you with the logistical approach to getting the COP established there?

LOG engineer and "C"-barriers with Hesco barriers "C"-barriers not "Jersey"

Gray (3)(b) I wasn't very comfortable with it at all. We established an outpost in the Korengal and (b)(3)(b)(6), Chi the company commander, did extremely well in getting the pre-cast Jersey barriers. Within 48 hours, they had concrete, overhead cover fighting positions. Getting the actual Jersey barriers to Wanat and having the heavy equipment to actually move it just wasn't happening. So, I wasn't comfortable at all.

"C"-barriers

Garnet (3)(b) You guys were obviously in the middle of the RIP with 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry (1-26) at this time as well.

Gray (3)(b) Right.

Garnet (3)(b) What was your plan for an endstate for this COP and how were you going to turn it over to the new guys coming in?

"standard" not strand

Gray (3)(b) The new guys were already there RIP'ing with us. In my mind, the turnover conditions were that we would get the triple strand concertina wire up, have dug-in positions with sandbags, limited overhead cover, and we'd also have the contractor get the force protection wall up. No one ever thought it would be more than HESCO barriers, sandbags and concertina wire before we turned it over to 1-26. Because it was nestled right in the village and not in as bad of a fishbowl as Bella was, it would be a much more conducive environment for them to continue to work with the population and get some kind of success with gaining the human terrain, bringing in projects and giving them small work programs. At the same time, they would be maintaining a presence north of Blessing.

Garnet (3)(b) So you liked the idea of having the new position nestled in the town, literally within 50 to 100 yards of the district center? You thought that would enable you to reach the population better?

Gray (3)(b) Certainly. The fact that they finally agreed to it as well was pretty significant; but it also gave us a false sense of security and was a hard lesson learned that I'll remember for the rest of my career and the rest of my life.

Garnet (3)(b) Did you have any kind of feel for the cultural terrain, the differences between the Kunar and Nuristan provinces?

Gray (3)(b) Yes, but it wasn't firsthand. I would talk to the S2 and the platoon leader who worked up there. They weren't as receptive to us as Nangalam. We had provided a lot of income and jobs for the local workers and they were much friendlier and more receptive to coalition forces as a result. In Wanat, they knew we didn't have a persistent presence. They knew that as soon as we left, it was just a matter of who would intimidate them next. When you're threatened with getting your head cut off if you work with the Americans and the Americans aren't there to protect you, why would you want to be friendly to them and help them out? Over the course of our 15 months there, whenever we'd go into remote areas where we knew we weren't going to have a lot of persistent presence, there really wasn't a lot of expectation for people to all of a sudden become super coalition friendly. In my heart, I thought that since we were building a base, they knew we were staying permanently. I figured they'd be much more receptive towards us since with that base would come an opportunity to earn money, infrastructure development and better equipment for their police force. I honestly thought it would be successful.

Garnet (3)(b) Did you brief the company commander in early July?

Gray (3)(b) I don't remember the exact time.

Garnet (3)(b) Did you do a formal operations order brief with him?

Gray (3)(b) No. We would develop the targeting and the concept and then the company commander, who knew the terrain, would do the bottom-up, company-level planning. Based on the fact that he was on the ground and would have done a company leader's recon with his platoon leaders, we just gave him the concept and they developed the specifics for how they wanted to accomplish the mission. We were taking their concept and putting it into ours and that's what we'd brief to the brigade. A lot of it was bottom-up planning which comes from the company on the ground knowing the terrain and doing the on-site leader's recon. Colonel (b)(3)(b)(6) having gone up there, he could obviously validate it. I gave the actual CONOP brief to brigade with the company commander right there next to me to answer any specific questions.

Diamond

Garnet (3)(b) I understand that briefing was done on 6 July?

Gray (3)(b) I don't remember.

Garnet (3)(b) How did that briefing to brigade go?

Gray (3)(b) They were receptive, just like they were for the previous 15 months. When I say receptive, I mean that the CONOP was approved. Any kind of level-one or level-two CONOP had to be approved by General Milley and before him General Votel from the 82nd. It wasn't just brigade. The first CONOP brief would go to brigade. Bayonet 6 would give his thumbs-up and when it was approved, we'd get on the schedule for a briefing to the assistant division commander for operations or the deputy commanding general of the combined joint task force (CJTF) that we were working for. As soon as we got the thumbs-up from Bayonet 6, the J3 of the 101st would get it on the calendar. Obviously we'd also have to get approval from the one-star as well as the aviation brigade commander, who had to approve it from the

aviation standpoint. So, it had to be approved by two brigade commanders and the assistant division commander for operations for the CJTF.

Bde / CJTF never had concern about enemy str RCPA

Garnet (3)(b) Were there any concerns raised at any of those briefings?

Gray (3)(b) I don't remember anything that stood out in this briefing to the DCG(O). There were other briefings when I do remember there being concerns about specific portions of the Corp, but this wasn't one of them. Obviously the weather and the HLZs were the main concerns for us and the aviators. Everything was fixated on whether we could get the aircraft in to do what we needed to do. There wasn't a lot of concern about ~~getting~~ a mass attack. During previous ~~Every little we'd done a~~ CONOP in a contentious area it was the norm to be fixated in HLZs and possible surface to air missiles over the number of ~~just par for the course. There was no concern about the enemy or anything else, other than the air assault portion of it because of weather and brown-out HLZs~~ enemy fighters. Weather and brown-out conditions were always a great concern as well. I think there was one tree that the aviation brigade commander was concerned about. For Corp Rockmove

Garnet (3)(b) The platoon drove up from Blessing on the night of 8 July. Was it normal to do a night occupation?

Gray (3)(b) ~~I don't remember us ever doing a night occupation before~~. ~~A lot~~ Most of our CONOPs were done at night, but I don't remember us establishing a deliberate COP at night on a regular basis. I don't know if that was just the timeline we had to use because of the aviation assets. I don't remember why the occupation happened that night, other than night giving us the tactical advantage because we had night observation devices (NODs).

Garnet (3)(b) With the RIP, this major CONOP going on and the fact that you were bringing in the 1-26 guys to take over what you had created, how were you coordinating and managing it all?

Gray (3)(b) Most of the personnel moves for the RIP happened by Chinook during the day. That was a completely separate operation and the RIP aircraft assault was on autopilot. It didn't take a lot of command and control, aside from the initial RIP plan and telling ~~guys~~ companies how many guys were coming in versus how many were leaving based on key leader and key positions needed for the assault. That wasn't anything that required someone to be sitting in the tactical operations center (TOC) monitoring. It was an everyday occurrence (just like conducting air assault/ground assaults) during the RIP process. During the actual CONOP, like in every other CONOP, the battalion leadership was in the TOC monitoring the radios and watching the UAV, ~~if we had~~ Shadow or any other platform on station. We always had something covering, whether it was a sniper pod from fixed-wing aircraft or a Shadow. We always had the feed coming into the battalion TOC. We monitored the ~~external check~~ execution checklist for the air assault piece, as did brigade. The priority of fire for the 155s from Blessing ~~going to the unit there~~ going into Wanat on the ground, and the guys ~~coming~~ from Bella to Wanat. They were also controlling the CCA ~~down~~ at the company fire support officer, just like every other CONOP, controlling the fixed-wing and rotary-wing attack that were there to escort the heavy Chinooks moving back and forth.

RIP process

Garnet (3)(b) On 12 July were you getting a flow of intelligence events about what was going on in the community of Wanat?

Gray (3)(b) Not at all.

Garnet (3)(b) Would you normally have as the S3 or would that have gone through the S2?

Gray (3)(b) It would go through the S2, but if it was something significant then it would have come back through me saying, "We really need to request additional assets because there's a high volume of enemy fighters reported in a specific area." That didn't happen. During our 15 months there, we'd receive so many reports of heavy fighter concentration and we'd initially use that information to target our CONOPs. We'd look at command and control and logistics nodes because we knew we could never defeat or

destroy them, but we could disrupt them by targeting their command and control and logistics. We'd go in and there'd be a dry hole. There wasn't any indication that was different from any other time from HUMINT sources that a bunch of fighters were in the area. There were no reports or inclination that there was heavy enemy activity. The fact that the workers didn't want to be up there without security from the start was obviously key, but we were dealing with that everywhere else as well. They weren't doing anything in the Korengal without having security and they weren't doing any road construction or anything else in any other remote valley without security. It was really so standard by that point that it didn't cause us to perk our ears up or send additional assets. I don't want to sound caustic towards the brigade because they were trying to get us as many assets as they could, and they had 1st Squadron, 91st Cavalry and every other unit to worry about as well. We requested additional ISR or CAS many times but it just wasn't available. Had we sent a request up for additional helicopters or fixed-wing assets, we probably would have been laughed at because it was being used somewhere else.

Garnet (3)(b): That's just the reality of doing an economy of force mission in Afghanistan.

Gray (3)(b) Exactly, and we were the economy of force battalion, in the economy of force brigade, in the economy of force theater. That's just how it was and what we had to deal with.

Garnet (3)(b) On the morning of 13 July, when did you become aware that they were getting hit with a pretty heavy attack up there?

Gray (3)(b) My notification was very similar to how it had been for previous attacks. I'd either get woken up or someone would come into my office. I shared an office with the XO and the ops sergeant major. It was always, "So-and-so is in a troops in contact (TIC)." All the field grades, the battalion commander and the sergeants major would run in ~~there and~~ clear fire and get an idea ~~for~~ of what was going on. We'd monitor the status of attack aviation or MEDEVAC birds and go through our battle drill. I don't remember the exact time, but that's pretty much how it happened. Someone came in and said, "X Platoon from Chosen is in a TIC at Wanat." Just like the Ranch House and the ambush when Matt Ferrara was killed coming back from Aranas on 9 November, the multiple, multiple TICs that Able had been in in the Pesh, the Waygul and the Waterpor, Destined Company in Suray (*ph*) and Battle Company in the Korengal. It was just the same battle drill.

Garnet (3)(b): When did you start realizing that this was a pretty significant anti-coalition militia (ACM) attack?

Gray (3)(b): It was just based on the initial report from (b)(3)(b)(6), the company commander. The guy was a calm, steady, solid dude, and so to hear him with ~~panic and~~ concern in his voice over the tactical satellite (TACSAT) radio was an indicator. Oscar

Garnet (3)(b) They got Apaches up there within about an hour. Was that a typical response time, or was it faster or slower?

Gray (3)(b): If we were using the mission-ready birds at Jalalabad, it generally took about 45 minutes to get the guys ~~their initial notification~~ pre-to waited, into the cockpits, spun up, in the air and up to our AO. An hour was very good. During deliberate CONOPs, we actually built a forward arming and refueling point (FARP) at Blessing for the purpose of cutting down refueling and rearming time, which they made use of during the actual TIC. An hour was a normal response time and quite reasonable. The only other time it was ever faster was if there were additional missions going on in the AO, even if it was just a routine Pesh resupply mission. We'd just ground the CH47s at Asadabad and the Apaches would be diverted to the TIC. Any time it was faster than 45 minutes or an hour, it was ~~just~~ because we were lucky enough to have the Apaches in the air in our AO with enough fuel, ammunition and crew time to be able to react.

Garnet (3)(b) How effective was the artillery at Wanat? Did you have a good feel for that?

Gray (3)(b) Because the enemy was already so close to the platoon there in the village, artillery wasn't effective for the guys already in the buildings and up against OP Topside, but it was certainly effective for any kind of withdrawal by the enemy forces up and down the valleys. There was high ground ~~just~~ to the northwest ~~that was firing~~. The artillery was effective at hitting those positions and obviously either killing or causing that Chosen received fire from the enemy to withdraw to the other side of the mountain or completely out of the AO. The artillery wasn't very effective for the guys already in the village or up against OP Topside because it was too late. Unless we wanted to destroy the village or hit our own guys, there was nothing we could do. What was more effective was the CCA as well as CAS, but more so the CCA from the Apaches.

Garnet (3)(b) I've seen the gun tapes and all the guys on the ground have just raved about the Apaches. When were you alerted that you needed to haul the tactical command post (TAC) up to Wanat?

Gray (3)(b) About five hours after the initial attack. Colonel (b)(3)(b)(6) Diamond was on the phone with the brigade commander. He poked his head in and said, "I need you to go up there. Take whatever guys with you that you need. Establish a TOC and help out (b)(3)(b)(6) ." (3)(b) had been up for such a long period of time and the concern was that he was smoked and needed some help with basic command and control. He'd been through so much and had been up for so long. Oscar

Garnet (3)(b) You were bringing up a platoon from Bravo and guys from Alpha as well?

Gray (3)(b) Yes. We had guys from Able Company, Battle Company and the Pathfinders from the 101st. You know, hindsight is 20/20. I got up there at night and about an hour after I got on the ground, the Special Forces (SF) commandos came in with an SF team leader. Having a fresh set of eyes up there, knowing where the enemy attacked from and seeing all the satellite imagery, it didn't take a rocket scientist to say, "We need people on this piece of high ground, this piece of high ground and people on this piece of high ground." We wanted to provide overwatch on all the possible areas the enemy could attack from. It was a matter of clearing all the high ground and the houses the enemy attacked from. We used the ANA commandos. There was an abandoned farmhouse ~~up~~ on a higher piece of ground that overlooked the ravine that the enemy infiltrated ~~up into~~ through to hit OP Topside. By placing an element there with a 240B and ~~a~~ Mk19 that we could drive up with a vehicle, they could easily put fire on that withdraw route. We actually used the AC-130 that first night and got a bunch of guys trying to come back in and conduct recovery of their dead, or maybe they were trying to set up for another quick attack. I don't know. Then we had guys come up on the northwestern high ground and Able Company engaged them with their Mk19 and .50 cal. That was a pretty quick and easy clean-up.

Garnet (3)(b) What was your mission when you brought the TAC up? Were you just supposed to do command and control of the elements that were already there and establish local security?

Gray (3)(b) Exactly. We were also still under the impression that we were going to establish ~~that~~ the COP. We brought up fresh command and control as well as additional forces to continue to provide security, so we could get a deliberate construction effort going and make it a more tenable COP.

Garnet (3)(b) Was any consideration given to doing a really aggressive insertion to try and cut off the ACM retreat routes?

Gray (3)(b) No. We were just using the Afghan commandos and occupying the high ground. The enemy was long gone and the locals told us, "The guys who did it are gone. They're already two ridgelines over." There

was no way we would trap the majority of them. It was a matter of catching any guys who were coming back to do casualty evacuation on their own guys or to set up a future counterattack. There was definitely not a significant force left, and we had no reason to think there was any significant force left for us to ambush or catch on the way up.

Garnet (3)(b) How big of a TAC did you bring up there?

Gray (3)(b) The TAC consisted of a radio transmission operator (RTO), two riflemen and me.

Garnet (3)(b) This is kind of like a mini-TAC.

Gray (3)(b) Right. The company commander, his RTO and the fire support officer were there with me as well. It wasn't really a TAC. It was a TAC-minus.

Garnet (3)(b) It sounds like it was a Humvee load of guys.

Gray (3)(b) Exactly.

Garnet (3)(b) So not really a true TAC. On the other hand, we used to run our armored cavalry squadron A TAC pretty much like that – the commander, the S3, the fire support officer and enough guys to keep us from getting in trouble.

Gray (3)(b) Right. There were more assets back at Blessing to maintain situational understanding than actually being on the ground cut off from anything other than a TACSAT. It was actually more beneficial for Colonel (b)(3)(b)(6) to stay at the battalion TOC and continue to fight for assets if needed, continue to monitor and help shape whatever we needed to shape. Having (b)(3), (b)(6) and the ops sergeant major there fighting for assets and talking to aviation were key as well. There wasn't a great need for more to be put on the ground and I didn't want a bunch of dudes. At that point, we were focused on securing what we had, preventing a counterattack and continuing to try and get the local contractors up there to improve our fighting positions, so we'd at least have some type of force protection.

Diamond Red

Garnet (3)(b) My focus is really on the engagement, how we end up moving a platoon up there and how the concept of operations for that was put together. Obviously you weren't involved in the decision to pull out of Wanat. I assume that was done up at the higher level?

Gray (3)(b) To be frank with you, I was pissed off about that. We'd already lost nine great soldiers and paid a price, so why are we going to give up? Brostrom was a good kid. He worked for me in the S3 shop before he became a platoon leader. I definitely have some emotional attachment to the kid. To go through all that and then just leave, in my mind that was fucked up.

Garnet (3)(b) As the S3, did you have any input into that decision to leave?

Gray (3)(b) No. I don't think even Colonel (b)(3)(b)(6) had any input on that decision. I think it was made at the flag officer level.

Diamond

Garnet (3)(b) The CJTF-101 command level?

Gray (3)(b) Yes. Perhaps (b)(2)High I just don't know.

Garnet (3)(b) Did any of these guys at the higher levels actually see the ground or the terrain?

Gray (3)(b) They saw the terrain. General Rodriguez, General Votel and General Milley had all flown over the area many times going up to Bella and doing their normal battlefield circulation. They may not have known that specific little village, but they certainly knew the terrain. They'd been to Bella on many occasions to visit troops. After the incident on 9 November, there were helicopters flying all around the valley, reconning and piecing together what happened on the ambush and how to better template it for future movements up to that area.

Garnet (3)(b) Did any of the senior leadership above you actually put boots on ground?

Gray (3)(b) Colonel (b)(3)(b)(6) Diamond was on the ground there a few times, as was the battalion command sergeant major, the company commander and the platoon leader. I don't think anyone above battalion had been out there, but I'm not sure. I know Colonel (b)(3)(b)(6) Delta had been up to Bella a few times, but I don't know if he actually had boots on the ground at Wanat.

Garnet (3)(b) That's pretty important.

Gray (3)(b) I'm sure it is, but to caveat that statement, I'd like to say that there were so many outlying FOBs and so many air assault raid missions that we did, there was never any higher-level leadership out there and I really didn't see a need for it. This wasn't considered a raid-type operation because we were staying there. We weren't withdrawing. The more risky CONOPs were the air assault raids when we went into remote valleys, establishing overwatch, raiding a village to try and flush out some medium-value target or whoever was there, disrupt them from continuing their campaign against us. We never had that higher-level of leadership out there then, so why would they come in and look at a piece of terrain that the battalion commander and the company commander were on? I don't fault anyone for that. I don't think it was needed.

Garnet (3)(b) When I was in Afghanistan in 2007, I kept getting caught at FOBs that I had gone to for just an overnight visit, and I'd end up spending a week there because there was no way to get out.

Gray (3)(b) Right. That was exactly the situation we were facing as well. When general officers and brigade commanders had to get on opportune air to get around, that kind of paints the picture of not enough assets. I can certainly understand why there weren't more leader recons.

Garnet (3)(b) I was stuck at FOB Naray so long that I thought the squadron commander was going to reactivate my commission and put me to work. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about the operation?

Gray (3)(b) I think the importance piece is what you briefly asked about and that was setting the conditions for a deliberate occupation in a contentious environment. We didn't set the conditions as best we could. That has to be part of the "go" or "no-go" criteria to execute. Because we were successful in establishing Honaker-Miracle, we kind of had that false sense of security. We'd done it before. We had the support of the local population supposedly in writing and we had local contractors scheduled, but we definitely should have had some type of rapid construction just like we did in the Korengal. We should have had ~~Jersey~~ "C-Barriers" barriers that once you airlift them by Chinook or drive them in by a big truck, you get that force protection established immediately. Also, having the persistent ISR assets well after the CONOP is over … part of the reason we were moving it was because of the heavy concentration of enemy that was continuing to build up around Bella. Knowing that they were two smaller valleys up, we should have set the conditions better. That was part engineering effort, part persistent ISR analysis and developing pattern analysis in the area. It was just a huge lesson learned from that tactical standpoint.

Garnet (3)(b) Without getting into too much detail, is there anything you can tell me about the 4 July helicopter attack up at Bella?

Gray (3)(b) That attack certainly fed into the decision to move it. The civilian aircraft that was shot down certainly fed into our decision to move the COP. We couldn't even get to it by ground for a quick reaction force. Besides being dependent on aircraft, the incident on 4 July added to the credibility of moving Bella to Wanat. Obviously the conditions could have been set better.

Garnet (3)(b) How much longer do you have in Italy?

Gray (3)(b) 15 July. I just got my orders last week and I'm headed to Australia to be a G3/5 planner for the 1st Australian Defence Force. Hopefully I'll be out on the next lieutenant colonel list and then my battalion command board will meet in the fall. Hopefully in a year I'll know whether or not I'll be a battalion commander. So, I don't have too much to complain about at this point.

Garnet (3)(b) Excellent. It sounds like things are working out for you.

Gray (3)(b) Thanks. I actually volunteered to stay in the brigade and go back to Afghanistan. I had been the battalion XO, battalion S3 and then now brigade XO, but branch said, "You've had three years and the chief of staff of the Army said only two. You've already had an extra year. So, no, you're not allowed to stay." The brigade commander now is Colonel (b)(3)(b)(6) and he's a phenomenal dude. I'd work for him anytime, anywhere. In my mind, I feel like I have unfinished business, like everyone else from this brigade does. I would gladly go back and continue to work in that environment.

Garnet (3)(b) When you get out here for the Pre-Command Course (PCC), put me down for a beer and a cigar.

Gray (3)(b) Certainly. I would definitely love to partake in that and continue to talk. Talking about this is actually therapeutic. I apologize for not getting back to you sooner, but I'm glad we did get to talk.

Garnet (3)(b) I was never a brigade XO. I spent my time in tactical units, too. I understand about the work load and the training load. Some goofy old historian like me is kind of like a speedbump. I understand you've got more than enough speedbumps that you have to deal with.

Gray (3)(b) I think something the Army is terrible at is capturing information and learning from it. I don't hold you in that regard at all. I think someone like you with a tactical and combat arms background is refreshing and much more effective in getting the key points on paper or on electrons. So, I don't think of you as a speedbump.

Garnet (3)(b) I appreciate that. We're really working on this. It's a very challenging project. When I got this dumped on me, I envisioned it as just a great hero, Alamo-type story, which it certainly is.

Gray (3)(b) It is, but I think it's tragic more so than glorious. Those guys did fight their asses off like every other paratrooper in this brigade did and will continue to do. They certainly deserve the respect and admiration of heroes. I don't know if it was like the Alamo or the "last stand." There are heroics when you don't have to be heroic, and then there are heroics when it's your life if you're not heroic. That kind of puts it in perspective. A guy that runs out and does something heroic when he doesn't have to is a lot different than a guy who does something heroic because if he doesn't, he's going to be killed himself. When I read awards for valor and recommend approval for a Silver Star, a Distinguished Service Cross or a V device, that's kind of the thought process I go through. What were the guy's choices when he did what he did? Obviously, knowing the guy's personality, was it something he was doing because he was seeking glory

or was he doing it truly for his men when he didn't have to do it to save his own skin? Those guys fought for their lives and they'll always be heroes in my mind. I have a bracelet that I wear with the names and I won't forget them for the rest of my life. It was a tough rotation based on the casualties and the fact that I knew a number of them personally, but that's what we signed up to do and in theory we'll be successful.

Garnet (3)(b) We certainly hope so. I try to take the knowledge I have and hopefully create lessons learned in studies that are meaningful and beneficial. I got this assignment primarily because I'd been to Afghanistan with the 10th Mountain Division, but unfortunately I never got to go to Blessing. I got caught in Naray for a week because of weather. I then got caught in Waza Khwa down in the southeast. I got caught for two weeks on two FOBs that I was only supposed to spend overnight trips at. As a result, I lost all my time and I could never get to Blessing. At least I was able to spend time in Nuristan and get a good feel for what the terrain was like.

Gray (3)(b) Yes. It's extremely difficult to do anything except move on the road, which makes you vulnerable.

Garnet (3)(b) I love when the lessons learned guys give out TTPs. They always say, "Make sure you go out by a different route and come back by a different route." I'm like, "Have you not seen Kunar and Nuristan? There are no other routes unless you want to go over a 12,000-foot mountain peak."

Gray (3)(b) Exactly. That's the importance of overwatch and high ground. It's also tied to the availability of rotary-wing and suitable HLZs. You need to know how you're going to be able to resupply guys and protect them from an overwhelming force if they're up there on the high ground by themselves in territory the enemy knows like the back of their hands. Those were the other key planning factors we always had to deal with. Getting on the high ground, just like in the old days, is key, but once you get there you need to be able to protect and resupply yourself.

Garnet (3)(b) Sustainment is very challenging in that environment.

Gray (3)(b) Yes.

Garnet (3)(b) If you think of anything else you'd like to add, do you know how to get a hold of me?

Gray (3)(b) Yes, I do.

Garnet (3)(b) I've talk to a lot of guys at battalion and brigade, but if there's somebody in particular that you think I should get a hold of, please let me know and I'll chase him down.

Gray (3)(b) Okay, I'll do that.

Garnet (3)(b) I've done about 70 interviews but there's always that one person that I didn't think about talking to. Anyway, thank you very much for your time.

Gray (3)(b) You're welcome.

Garnet (3)(b) I appreciate it. I'll be in touch. Take care.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by (b)(3)(b)(6)