



Combat Leader Interview. 1LT Schuyler Williamson, Armor. 1st Platoon, C Company, 1-5 CAV (1st Cav Div, FT Hood). Deployed to Iraq 19 October 2006—7 January 2008 where he led a "Hunter-Killer" PLT that contained two tanks and two Bradleys along with two dismounted squads of infantry. The enemy he faced in western Baghdad consisted mainly of Al Queda and other Sunni extremists. He saw the full gamut of COIN operations starting with no control and the enemy winning to ending with control and training a police force to replace them.

1. What was your toughest leadership challenge during the deployment?

There were two challenges that I can say were extremely tough for me to address during my deployment: relieving my platoon sergeant and dealing with casualties.

Relieving my platoon sergeant. Throughout my college years I heard, "Anything you don't know, your platoon sergeant will teach you." This was not the case for me. My platoon sergeant came to Iraq with the idea that we were going to hide for fifteen months and all come back alive. When I told him that we were not going to do that, he said I was going to get my Soldiers killed. It was tough to hear that from the man who was suppose to be teaching me my job, but I knew I was right. There was no way I could accomplish the commander's intent with him acting this way. Eventually, I went to the CSM and explained the situation. It did not take long before moves were made, and my platoon sergeant was gone. To this day, it was one of the toughest things I have done in the Army, but I know it was the right answer.

Dealing with a casualty. As a leader, you have never really encountered pain until you witness one of your Soldiers being a casualty. My platoon came back from Iraq with six guys awarded the Purple Heart and probably two or three others who deserved one, but never sought out medical treatment for their "minor wounds." On one occasion, my platoon was attacked by an IED that detonated under a HMMWV, resulting in four serious casualties. The worst of those four was my medic, whose foot was mostly cut off from shrapnel that penetrated the vehicle. My platoon, to include myself, took this particular attack very rough. We all loved this Soldier and were angry that he was suffering as much as he did. It was tough to tell the guys he was going to be OK and that we needed to move on. I didn't want to believe that myself, but I knew I had to tell the guys that so we would be ready for the evening patrol. Losing a Soldier is never expected when you start a deployment, but it is something that many of us have to deal with. Being the leader, it will be your responsibility to keep the men focused on the mission at hand and not allow them to dwell on their feelings of sadness or anger which could lead to mistakes that could cost them their careers.

2. What was the most important training you executed before or during combat? What else would you train or what would you do differently?

The most important training I executed before and during my deployment to Iraq with my platoon was completing various tasks using live ammunition. There is no substitute for the increase in stress that a Soldier gets from using live rounds. Whether the feeling of operating with live rounds be from our tracked vehicles in gunnery or in a shoot house with our M4s, the feeling is invaluable. In combat, your Soldiers will have stress levels that they have never had before in their lives, but will still have to make the right decisions and continue to operate effectively. Make your Soldiers operate as much as possible under these conditions in training so that you know who you can trust to lead when the time comes in combat, where the consequences are Soldiers' lives.

If I could have done anything differently, I would have done more of the above, but with more squad-leader-led tasks. Most of the engagements in Iraq that I experienced were handled at the squad level because of the terrain. Let your squad leaders be in charge during the training process so they can operate without you in combat.

3. Topic: Relationship with NCOs. Any advice for platoon leaders?

I got along great with my NCOs. My advice to anyone beginning their job as a platoon leader would be to approach their platoon with the attitude that the platoon is a team and they are just a part of it. Soldiers love being a team, especially when the leader of that team makes them an essential element in it. I tried to include all of my NCOs into the planning process by giving them intent and allowing them to develop their own actions on the objective. Of course, I required a back brief of their plans before execution, but they were still responsible. If they were way off from my intent I would adjust their plans, but I found this rarely the case. If you do things with your NCOs in this manner, they will have more ownership of the operation and your platoon as a whole because they are important to the team. Seek out and include their input into your plans and you will earn your NCOs respect as a leader.

4. What best prepared you for leadership challenges in Iraq?

I think playing baseball at the Academy was what best prepared me for the challenges in Iraq. No where else other than the playing field was I continuously challenged with adversity like I was in Iraq. Adversity will be at every turn in Iraq, and you will have multiple chances to quit on yourself and your team. Playing baseball gave me the skills I needed to keep driving on with the mission and be the positive reinforcement my Soldiers needed to continue. Another aspect of baseball that aided with my preparedness was the teamwork skills I developed. I mentioned above how I approached my platoon with a "team" concept. I consider my platoon to be one of the best teams I have ever been a part of, and I think that playing baseball had a huge part in me being able to create that.

5. What role did you play when your platoon was in contact? Can you give an example?

The role I played when my platoon was in contact was command and control by maneuvering squads and sections. I was real big on letting the squad and section leaders maneuver their units once I gave them the task and purpose I wanted them to execute. I believed it was the most efficient way for our platoon to operate. As a platoon leader, you have more to worry about than moving teams or individual vehicles around on the battlefield. For example, the situation may arise where you need additional forces in an engagement and it is your job to call for them. Don't be the leader that micromanages his platoon by getting into every aspect of the execution phase. Trust your NCOs to execute your intent.

An example of this would be my react-to-contact SOPs for securing our combat outpost during an attack. When an attack took place, I would stay in the command post to run the radio or the C2 aspect. My squad and section leaders would be individually in charge of defending from the roof or moving their vehicles around on the battlefield to fight off the attack. My role was to help the squad leaders maintain situational awareness, decide where to commit the reserves I had, or ask for more support.

6. What will you best remember in 50 years? Why?

I will never forget the look I received from my wife when I returned from Iraq after the fifteen months of fighting. On the parade field, where all the families run out to join their Soldiers for the first time, one of my Soldiers stopped me with his father. He quickly admitted that his father didn't speak English, but said that he wanted to introduce him to me anyways. My Soldier introduced me, and his crying father gave me a big hug. Immediately afterwards, my Soldier gave me a hug and said he would fight with me anywhere and at anytime. This alone was extremely rewarding, but the look I received from my wife when I turned around was priceless. I could tell that she was so proud of me and knew all the hard work was worth it. I already knew that my unit was successful in Iraq, but this experience on the parade field gave me the personal closure I needed to move on and be happy.

