

Full Speech of William T. Johnson '99 to Suffolk Rotary on March 4, 2009

In January, I was invited to the Suffolk Rotary Club to give a presentation on my experiences as an Officer in the US Army while deployed to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. I was surprised and honored by the reaction that my words caused among those who were present. It is my hope that people can understand that just because I was able to bring my experiences to public attention by way of my writing, that this in no way makes this a story about me. It is my additional hope that I am a transparent conveyer of the collective experiences of, at the least my 350 soldier battalion, and at the most the varied emotional and physical difficulties a member of the US Armed Forces faces while deployed.

Excerpts from the speech to the Suffolk Rotary.

I was assigned to the 1st Battalion of the 76th Field Artillery, known as the "Patriots", in a reference to 1776. I served as the Executive officer for the Forward Support Battery, a company of 86 soldiers made up of cooks, fuel handlers, an ammunition distribution section, and mechanics.

Our sole purpose in life was to support two firing batteries of 16 "Paladin" self-propelled artillery pieces, keeping them fueled and repaired so that they could do their morbid job without hindrance.

The Patriot battalion sprang to life after 17 years and 4 months of being inactive and was reactivated on the 24th of June 2004. In only six months, we were to deploy to Iraq.

When it comes to urban warfare, collateral damage can be a problem, especially when you are attempting to win the hearts and minds of a population. As a result, it is desirable to use a more delicate touch in such situations. Unfortunately, a 155mm Howitzer shell fired from a Paladin does not have a very light touch, and while we were ordered to still take our Paladins overseas, we did not anticipate using them in the mission we had been assigned.

Our mission, as it became clear, was to form 12 gun-truck platoons from the 350 soldier all male combat arms battalion. We would inherit 48 up-armored HMMWVs once we arrived in theater, and would serve as a security detail to members of the US Embassy, driving them all over the country to meet with Iraqi leaders and Iraqi Ministers in order to advise them on the best governmental practices to apply in a fledgling democracy.

Our preparation for this specific mission consisted of two weeks of on the job training with the unit we were replacing in theater. This is what we call a "right seat ride" since very simply, the incoming soldiers would theoretically ride along with the current unit and absorb as much as possible before the experienced and outgoing soldiers slowly removed themselves from the missions. Though this may sound insufficient, the rapid transition is a testament to the flexibility of our soldiers to adapt to a changing environment and the preparedness that other types of training create. It is only possible because the soldiers in our Army are professionals and they take their jobs very seriously.

I was not assigned as a gun-truck platoon leader immediately. I had many other Transportation and support related responsibilities, mostly because I was the only Transportation officer in the Battalion and one of only three non-field artillery officers out of 23 total Lieutenants.

In any organization, those of similar levels of responsibility tend to befriend each other easily, and this was absolutely the case with the Lieutenants of the 1-76FA Battalion. We all became close friends and worked in support of each other in almost all cases. Fortunately, all of my peers and fellow officers were impressive enough

to warrant anyone's respect outside of what they were already sacrificing as citizens.

Our great soldiers and non-commissioned officers are too many to credit for all they did, but the vast majority took their jobs very seriously, and deserve the same respect for their dedication to duty, love for their country, and their personal sacrifice. As in any combat situation, soldiers, being the highest concentration of the units, as well as the most exposed to the dangers of the job by the nature of their responsibilities, will suffer the highest rate of casualties.

The daily routine for the Battalion, was this: by 0800, almost all platoons had drawn and installed weapons from the arms rooms, loaded ammunition, preformed radio checks with the BN HQ, received the daily intelligence brief, conducted an internal convoy brief concerning the route, timeline and potential dangers, met up with and were in the process of delivering a convoy brief to their passengers and were preparing for final departure permission from the BN HQ. This was a tedious process that took place daily, but one to which we all quickly became accustomed.

For the typical gun-truck platoon, there was a Lieutenant who served as the platoon leader, a senior NCO who served as the platoon sergeant, four drivers, four hatch gunners, and two additional truck commanders, for a total of 12 soldiers. The drivers were sharp soldiers who could figure out what the truck commander wanted to happen without having to hear it said. They knew their way through every road in our area of operation. The hatch gunners each had a machine gun mounted to their turret on top of the HMMWV. They also had in their hand an M16, which could be more easily maneuvered than the entire turret. The hatch gunner had the responsibility of being the eyes and ears of the truck crew, as the HMMWV with all its armor offers very little in the way of visibility. The gunner also had to direct traffic. He would wave to Iraqi drivers to stop or go on with his hands, and would quickly escalate to pointing his weapon at the driver if he felt threatened by their encroachment. Vehicle-bourn explosives were a common occurrence and were very effective at killing soldiers. As a result, we rarely let anyone close to us, and the few times an Iraqi driver wasn't paying attention, that driver was lucky to still be alive after the gunner would put several M16 rounds through the hood of the car. The next step in such a case would have been to shoot the driver if he failed to heed the warnings of the gunner. Many cars ended up with bullet holes in the hood, and it was unfortunate when a driver who wasn't paying attention lost his life. In one case, the brakes on a car following a convoy failed to function and the driver was shot before he was able to stop. The environment of this particular war zone does not allow a person to second guess the decision to protect yourself.

The gun-truck platoon would typically carry out a mission in the morning and one or two missions in the afternoon. It was very much a 9-5 routine because we were at the mercy of the working hours of the embassy and the Iraqi ministers. We carried out this schedule every single day of the 365 days we were in Iraq, the only exceptions being the day the constitution was released.

The platoon leader, a lieutenant, would sit in the front passenger seat of the HMMWV, which is where anyone with authority sits in a military vehicle. Leaders do not drive, nor do they sit in the back seat, when they are leading the convoy. The radios and navigation computers are located to the immediate left of the platoon leader on the center consol, and create a very cramped environment when wearing body armor, helmet, and carrying a weapon. It can become claustrophobic.

The uniform of a soldier serving in Iraq or Afghanistan consists of the issued pants and jacket and boots, but is combined with body armor for the torso, armor for the shoulders, protective eyewear, earplugs, a ballistic helmet, and a personal weapon. I carried both an M16 and a 9mm piston strapped to my leg.

The armor and ammunition alone weighed close to 50 pounds, so it is certainly not for the weak to have to work 12 hours a day in 135

degree heat with that amount of gear on. At the worst, the wind felt much like a hair dryer blown in your face, at night, the temperature dropped to 100 degrees. The winters were much milder, with quite pleasant temperatures, feeling similar to early fall in Virginia. The bottom line is that we were always sweating, and we always smelled horrific. There was no helping it, no matter the extent of your efforts.

Six months into our deployment, we were beginning to feel confident. We had suffered no injuries, no losses; there had been little excitement for us, in spite of the ongoing violence in the country and the deaths of service members that were occurring daily. Part of our saving grace was the up-armored HMMWV that we rode in. These 11,000 pound trucks are the workhorse of our efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Each of our trucks drove about 15,000 miles in the course of that year, and it is amazing to think that not one ever broke down due to maintenance. That is a testament to the efforts of the maintenance soldiers who worked tirelessly to keep us on the road. One of many good examples is the night the mechanics pulled a blown engine at 7PM, only to have a new one installed and the truck ready for missions the following morning at 6AM. Having one truck down for a mechanical failure meant that three soldiers were driving the most dangerous roads in the world in a replacement truck that had a less than adequate level of armor. There is no end for my respect for the work these skilled mechanics performed, both in repairing, and in fabricating the devices that evolved out of our war-time needs.

Most people will imagine that the only kind of death that occurs in a combat environment is a result of enemy contact. Unfortunately, my battalion experienced what is referred to as a "non-combat fatality" when a Lieutenant negligently discharged a weapon and it killed a soldier. This resulted in a hardening of my already immovable rules regarding weapons and I became nothing short of a jerk when it came to enforcement and inspection of weapons status. My rules were simple:

- 1) Every soldier should know the status of his or her weapon at all times: Loaded, unloaded, on safe, on fire. This is a natural rule and one that is drilled into everyone.
- 2) NEVER point a weapon, loaded or unloaded, at anything you do not intend to kill, What comes out of the business end of that weapon will do just that. The weapon does not differentiate between enemy and friend because that is your job.

It was because of this event that Alpha Battery 4th Platoon no longer had a platoon leader. The Battalion Commander called on me and presented his request that I step in and take the place of the now incarcerated former leader. "I'm glad you said yes", the Battalion Commander told me after I accepted, "because you didn't really have an option, you realize". He had a sense of humor that I could appreciate.

Alpha 4th Platoon was a great group of soldiers. They had always suffered at the hands of their incompetent platoon leader, so it was very easy to step in and see all that had been done incorrectly with them, and they literally flourished into a high-functioning unit once led correctly. These were great soldiers who, because of a leader that did not know how to use them, allowed their frustrations to go unchecked and their potential unrealized. For 8 weeks, I was honored to be their platoon leader until the arrival of 1LT Kevin Smith, who was equally capable and went on to serve as a great leader of these soldiers.

It was also at the six month mark that we suffered our first combat loss. Bravo Battery's 4th platoon was on a routine mission, traveling up an on-ramp to a well-traveled highway, when the lead truck suddenly was engulfed in a fireball. The HMMWV continued to roll on its own momentum, but it quickly turned to the left and struck the guard rail where it stopped. The remaining trucks stopped quickly. The second truck sped ahead to secure the top of the ramp, while the third truck pulled alongside the damaged HMMWV. The platoon leader called battalion Headquarters with the initial report, requesting a med-evac. As the truck caught fire and began to burn a Non-Commissioned Officer from the third truck ran to the vehicle and was able to see that there was no

helping PFC Wallace, SPC Fischer, and SGT Drier who were trapped inside. In a final fire-ball, the anti-tank shoulder-fired rocket they were carrying blew up in the truck and nothing could be done but to wait out the fire.

Recovery assets were sent to the scene, and they picked up the remains of the destroyed truck, which still contained the bodies of the three American soldiers. The truck was escorted back to the Green Zone, and ultimately to a location where the remains could be removed. Word of such an event spreads very quickly, and it was moving in the way the remains of these three young men, still entombed in the burnt wreckage, were saluted by the guards as they passed the gates to the green zone, and how every convoy and soldier operating in the area stopped what they were doing and did likewise. This is not an easy job, and everyone who performs it is well aware of the risks.

The remainder of the platoon was left in shambles. The platoon leader was transferred to another unit, and the soldiers all sent home on leave. Upon their return, there were immediate problems. Several of them no longer felt this job was worth doing, and came very close to refusing to continue to perform it.

Soon after I had handed over Alpha 4th platoon to 1LT Smith, the Battalion Commander, LTC Daniel Pinnell, who I came to respect greatly for his intelligence, his eloquence in public speaking and his knowledge of military history, approached me with another request.

He said he needed someone to set this platoon back on the right path, to give them a positive outlook and to get them back on the road. His responsibility was to provide the embassy with 12 gun-truck platoons every day, and he wanted me to make that happen. Once again, I took charge as a platoon leader.

This was not an easy task at first. The soldiers were cynical, and close to insubordinate. They even did not respond well to me as an outsider at first. It did not take long, however, before we began to form as a team, and they could see that they were cared about, cared for, and that I was there with them, every day, and that I had confidence in our mission, even if on the inside, I was just as scared as the rest of them.

But we became a great platoon, in my opinion, and our quick transition was almost hard to imagine in light of our starting point. Soon, we were given increasingly difficult missions and greater responsibility, and I attribute our success entirely to the abilities of those soldiers, who only needed to get that sense of confidence put back into them. They were a great bunch and I was almost reluctant to hand them over to a new Lieutenant who I was not too keen on, but who the soldiers promised me they would "set straight". Such was my relationship with them, and such was their level of confidence when I finally turned them over.

It was not until December, when we were less than a month from re-deployment, that 1LT Kevin Smith was killed by a roadside bomb. This was yet another in a string of significant losses, in that the battalion as a unit was very close to each other personally. The specific type of bomb that hit Kevin is a devastating device because no amount of armor can protect the occupants of a vehicle from its destructive potential. So on a roadside in Iraq, buried in the dirt, this device detonated sending four searing hot slugs of metal through the door of the HMMWV and then through the torso of 1LT Kevin Smith, killing him. No one in the truck escaped injury. Two of the soldiers will never be able to serve the Army again. The driver SPC Mattis was injured in the arm, and SPC Krebs, the gunner, lost the majority of his calf. A new Lieutenant riding in the back seat lost part of his foot, and a Captain riding in the back seat suffered shrapnel wounds in his arm.

I was assigned the unenviable task of going through Kevin's belongings and packing them so they could be mailed to his family back in the states. Needless to say, it was extremely difficult to pack away Kevin's stuff, among it letters from his family and fiancée' that expressed their love for him and their desire for him to be safe.

There is also the story of SPC Carrasquillo who died heroically, if that is any consolation, when a car bomb exploded next to his convoy. SPC Carrasquillo's story is especially moving because of the selflessness of his actions. When a car laden with explosives sped toward his convoy, SPC Carrasquillo engaged the driver of the car, firing almost 30 rounds into the driver before the vehicle exploded in an enormous blast that killed many civilians nearby. SPC Carrasquillo could have easily ducked down and avoided the blast, but his actions caused the detonation to take place several yards from the HMMWV instead of ramming into the truck containing his friends and fellow soldiers, no doubt saving the other soldier's lives, while sacrificing his own.

With even less time remaining we suffered two additional lives lost, when SPC Ryan Walker and SGT Lopez were killed. SPC Walker was a medic who aside from having the intellectual potential of a doctor was one of the most caring and giving people I, or anyone who you ask, knew. Sadly, it was in the display of these traits that he was killed, when, running to give aid to SGT Lopez who had been injured by enemy contact, he triggered a bomb that took his life.

The 1-76FA lost a total of 8 members of our 350 man battalion. Each of these soldiers had a memorial service preformed in their honor, where friends stood and gave their thoughts on the personal loss. At each of these events, there were many tears shed. These were not just soldiers, they were friends. This was a team, and their loss was felt deeply. And it was felt all the way up the ranks. At each service, the Division commander, the Brigade commander, and many other Battalion commanders took the time, and the risk to come honor these fallen soldiers. This is commendable, and this is what makes a person proud to be part of an organization like the US Army. This is not lip service being paid for political reasons, since nobody sees these ceremonies but us. It is a sign of great concern for the soldier, and it is representative of how much concern there is for each and every person who wears the uniform by every other person who wears the uniform.

These events were significant in our year in Baghdad, but it was not all bad. There were moments of hilarity interspersed with the work. It was difficult not to find humor in our situation, in spite of its seriousness. There were times when bombs went off nearly missing us that we laughed about afterwards. We drove a HMMWV into an occupied portable latrine, to its occupant's great displeasure. We played a great number of practical jokes, told every joke known to man, tried to recall the lyrics to songs and sang them to the tune of our solitary guitar. It was a great time, of which I learned a great deal about myself as anyone would. I made great friends, I was in excellent physical condition, and I read more books than I thought possible. We watched Kelly's Hero's, starring Clint Eastwood, and wondered if maybe there was an Iraqi bank filled with gold somewhere we could rob and then escape to the Mediterranean. There were a thousand joyous moments, but it is a disservice to fail to mention those of us who did not make it back.

There is something special about the level of closeness achieved by young men in tough situations such as we were that cannot be re-created by any synthetic means.

There is no way to know how history will view the political or social outcome of the current conflicts in which the US Army is utilized, but there is no doubt in my mind that it should be a hard decision for anyone with the authority to deploy the Army knowing that the organization is an impersonal tool for the accomplishment of difficult tasks around the world, and to also realize that to the citizen-soldiers that make up that tool, we are people with dreams and lives that can be easily taken and destroyed by its use or misuse.

I can confidently tell myself that when asked, we did our job, we preformed it proudly, and we would have never done any less. To the members of my unit, and all members of the uniformed services, that alone is honorable enough for a lifetime.