

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

JOHN W.VAN DE LOOP.

Mentor and Advisor, Army National Guard, Operation Enduring Freedom

2008

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Van De Loop, John W., (b. 1960). Oral History Interview, 2008.

Approximate length: 1 hour, 3 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

This oral history interview with John W. Van De Loop, a Wisconsin native, describes his deployment with the 76th Infantry Brigade, Indiana National Guard, to (Gardez) Afghanistan from 2004 to 2005 as a lieutenant colonel working with an Embedded Training Team to advise and mentor the Afghan National Army (ANA). Van De Loop discusses his mission mentoring and advising the ANA from 2004-2005 and assisting the element build a base and grow from a twenty-six soldier unit to a 4000 soldier unit with structure and organization. His unit helped organize a shoe drive for Afghan children and helped procure and distribute donated goods from the United States to local villages as part of their on-going mission to win hearts and minds. He outlines advising and mentoring the ANA, Taliban activity in the area, daily life while deployed, recreation, morale and combat situation involving IEDs, small arms fire and rockers. Van De Loop discusses the differences between being down range versus a more established centralized location such as Camp Phoenix in Kabul and reflects on the importance of having a mission while deployed. Discusses media coverage of Afghanistan and how it has been overshadowed by coverage of Iraq. Near the end of the interview he provides descriptions of memorable events in the Afghan countryside and living conditions of the local people. He describes his deployment as an overall positive experience. Other: Provincial Reconstruction Team, mentions KBR and contractors, United Arab Emirate troops, Regional Command East, Afghanistan, Faces in the Sand.

Biographical Sketch:

Van De Loop (b.1960) signed up for the Wisconsin National Guard in September 1980 and has served as a finance officer. He deployed with the 76th Infantry Brigade, Indiana National Guard, to (Gardez) Afghanistan from 2004 to 2005 as a lieutenant colonel working with an Embedded Training Team to train the Afghan National Army (ANA).

Archivist's Note:

Transcriptions are a reflection of the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. Transcripts may not have been transcribed from the original recording medium. It is strongly suggested that researchers engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript, if possible.

Timestamps reflect the entire length of the interview, which was filmed in two parts.

Interviewed by Bill Brewster, 2008.

Transcribed by Ellen Brooks, 2016.

Reviewed by Rachelle Halaska, 2017.

Abstract written by Rachelle Halaska, 2017.

Interview Transcription

[Beginning of Interview]

[Part I]

Brewster: John can you start with your—give us your name and rank?

Van De Loop: My name is John Van De Loop. I'm a colonel in the Wisconsin Army National Guard.

Brewster: And could we discuss the reasons that you joined the military, briefly.

Van De Loop: Well, my dad was a career National Guardsman, he had twenty-four years and retired as a first sergeant. And once he retired I went in, I guess that was gonna be the natural progression of things.

Brewster: Sure, sure. And what is your current status then?

Van De Loop: I'm full time. I work at the United States Property and Fiscal Office for Wisconsin, I'm the director of Resource Management for the Army Guard.

Brewster: Mmk, all right. And how long have you been in?

Van De Loop: It'll be twenty-eight years in September.

Brewster: Twenty-eight years. That's great. Um, now, what were the circumstances for your deployment to Afghanistan?

Van De Loop: The Wisconsin Guard received a tasking from National Guard Bureau to help fill out a deploying unit out of Indiana, the 76th Infantry Brigade. Um, they had a mission to go to Afghanistan to—basically initially to stand up the school house for the Afghan National Army, if you will, up in Kabul. Along with that, they were gonna have embedded training teams, ETTs, that were gonna be the main effort as far as training the new Afghan Army. That's how it started.

Brewster: What year was that?

Van De Loop: That was 2004. I gotta think back, it's been almost three years now, or over—yeah, three years since I've been back anyway. So that was April 2004. We deployed—mobilized in June of 2004. Went to Indiana to Camp Atterbury for our train up. And then we were in country on the first of August. In that time, that mission set we originally had from June to the time we deployed on the first of August, changed a couple times to the point where no longer were we gonna be just in Kabul training at a school house. They decided to take our Embedded Training Teams and put us out in four regional commands throughout the country and stand-up what would be Division size elements—they call 'em Corps over there—but, you had regional command east, west, north and south and we were in East. And then our mission was to, uh, advise and mentor a Corps-level staff as they stood up that element. So.

Brewster: What—can you talk then a bit about your preparation for deployment?

Van De Loop: Oh, yeah. You mean at Atterbury?

Brewster: Yeah, yeah.

Van De Loop: Yeah, that was the—that's the typical—you know, they run you through what they call in the Army warrior tasks but it's your basic soldier tasks. They test you on everything to make sure you're still proficient with your weapons and your protective masks and we had some training in how to identify IEDs and such. That was startin' to come at that time. The basic Army things that some of us maybe, over the years—the old-timers—didn't always practice. We had to relearn some of that and get certified in it, so.

Brewster: So then other than the IED training there wasn't anything really specific to the deployment to Afghanistan?

Van De Loop: Oh, we had—no, we maybe had an hour of cultural awareness training which amounted to some films. Uh, we were given some printed media as far as some Dari language books and some pamphlets on the culture, things like that. But nothing real specific to what we were going to be doing over there. So.

Brewster: Did that seem strange?

Van De Loop: No, no.

Brewster: No? Not surprised.

Van De Loop: You know, our team, as they set us up—our Embedded Training Team—um, because we're gonna be at the Corps level they were looking for folks, our team Chief was an O6 and at the time I was a lieutenant colonel O5. So his team—you know, he took over as S1 rep, a personal rep which was me, a S4, logistics, we had a 3—S3 operations guy, we even had a S2 intel guy. That was kinda the core team, and then we had some support personnel, medics and drivers and things like that. PAO. So, we knew we were going over to do what we were trained as far as our specialty goes. Um, so that didn't really mean too much, other than when the IED training. 'Cause that was, like I said, that was just startin' to kinda ramp up at that time. We found that pretty interesting 'cause they actually took us out on routes and you had to walk—not in vehicle but—and try and identify how they make these bombs and such. And, is that one or is just debris. That kinda thing, so. Um, and as it was that really didn't come into play until two months before we left country, to come back home, so.

[00:05:40]

Brewster: Um, I guess you've kinda—you've touched pretty much on the specific mission responsibilities—

Van De Loop: Mm-hm.

Brewster: Is there—did that play out once you got there--

Van De Loop: Well [laughs]--

Brewster: —and how was that—change, I guess—

Van De Loop: Well, you know, so when we got there we knew we were gonna be not in Kabul. Camp Phoenix, the base camp if you will, for the task force, Task Force Phoenix, in Kabul, we kinda marshaled there for a couple weeks before we get the go ahead to go down the range. What kinda changed in those couple weeks while we were in Kabul waiting to go down range was our leadership from the 76th Infantry Brigade said that timing-wise it's gonna be once you do get down range it's gonna be some time before the actual troops get down there that you can mentor and advise. Just be prepared, you know, you're gonna be infantry men for sixty, ninety days. So, you know, do what you have to do. So our first element that went down range, it was three, four of us—four Americans, we hopped into two Ford Ranger pick-ups and it took us about seven hours to go fifty-five miles, down to Gardez. And we went to the—we found our, um, FOB, our F-O-B where we were gonna be located at, which happened to be the same place where the Special Forces, where they planned Operation Anaconda in Gardez right there. I mean, we met a lot of those folks there. And they also had a provincial reconstruction team there as well they were standing up. Everything was—but everything was rudiment—everything was pretty basic at that point.

But for our team that went down, there was four of us and when we got there, there was twenty-six Afghan soldiers. And that's who we had to work with. Not an officer in the bunch. Um, so, when we got there we—you know, the second night down—and I'm just trying to illustrate why one of the things that we didn't plan on doing—second night down one of the Afghan soldiers came with one of our interpreters, rappin' on our hut door and he had a radio and you could just hear all this chatter, in Dari or Pashtu, I'm not sure what it was but a lotta chatter. And the interpreter said they're getting attacked out in where they're gonna be building this new base camp. We had some contractor personnel, a small cell that were gonna begin to build this base camp, kind of out in the middle of the desert. Which was about two clicks straight away from us. So three of us got out battle rattle on and we grabbed the thirteen ANA that we had, 'cause there's thirteen out there--

Brewster: ANA?

Van De Loop: ANA, the Afghan National Army soldiers, we call 'em just the ANA guys. Um, three of us, one guy stayed back, but three of us got battle rattled up, jumped in our pick-ups, it's like eleven o'clock at night, and we drive out there with our night vision goggles. And we don't know where we're going, it's like it's two clicks straight but try to get there it's one of these deals [hand gesture]. Tracers flyin', dismount the vehicle about 500 yards out and we start runnin' towards where the tracers are comin' from and the Afghans were in extremely good shape. We found that out as we went through the year. I mean, they were ahead of us and they were

goin'. They were gonna go—just pure warriors. And we're stayin' up behind 'em and we end up pushin' the attackers, the enemy, we pushed 'em back up into the mountains. There's some low mountains that came down into the valley right there. And we ended up pushin' 'em back and got the situation stabilized but as I'm running through this desert at nighttime with my night vision goggles on, trying to control these Afghan soldiers, I'm thinking, "I'm a finance officer." [laughs] But, you know, like they say, you know, a Marine's a Marine, well, a soldier, you know, you're supposed to know your soldier task. I guess that kinda links back to the train up at Atterbury, you know. That's why they teach ya that. So it came in handy.

[00:10:06]

So we did our first sixty days or so down range. We did a lot of patrolling, um, downtown Gardez. Just to get the visibility and get the lay of the land and, uh, just a lotta infantry things. We would get attacked that—that initial few months we'd get rocket attacks quite often at the F-O-B. After a couple months we had some Marines comes in and live with us at our F-O-B as well. As part of the PRT—Provincial Reconstruction Team. And we were out one day—we were out one day, out towards this area where we were building this base camp, there was two of us out in a pick-up. And all of a sudden, rounds started landing within, you know, a hundred yards of us and we couldn't figure out what was goin' on so we started beating back to the F-O-B. And as it turned out, unbeknownst to us the F-O-B had gotten rocketed.

The Marines decided to return mortar fire where they thought—they were doing triangulation, trying to figure out where it was coming from, not—they didn't have eyes on the ground out there. They didn't know they had US out there. So here we [laughing], we get back and I went back to that base and went to my boss, the O6, and I said, "That wasn't good, let's go talk to the Marines." [laughs] So contending with the Taliban and our own forces. But, eh.

Brewster: Well I was gonna—I mean, one of my later questions was actually about your—whether you were in combat situations or not—

Van De Loop: Yeah, that was--

Brewster: —pretty much [laughs]--

Van De Loop: That was—those first sixty days, that was pretty much our only real troop contact was those first couple—those first few nights. We had one other time where we came under attack when we were out there and we could chase 'em—the enemy—but man, those guys, you'd think, you look at the sand and barren place with some hills and things like that and they'd disappear like that. So. Other than that, from that point on it was, when the moon was bright we could count on getting rocketed. Because they could do their aiming and, you know, they never hit anything. So. Yeah.

Brewster: Can you talk about that—your relationship further with then the Afghan Military, that you were with and maybe how that changed—

Van De Loop: Yeah, uh, as that started—when the first soldiers, when the first Afghan soldiers showed up it started out with a garrison element. So they had what would equivalent to a colonel with installation management element, if you will, that came down ahead of everybody else. They were not our mission to mentor but because we were there we were responsible for 'em, we started mentoring them as well. And that was from the basics, like, from my standpoint they had no personnel accountability system, they didn't know how to track who was on the ground, who was mission ready, who was out on leave—and they go on leave a lot. So we worked with 'em, the garrison element. I had a personnel officer that I worked with. He was—uh, he was not in his element, let's put it that—he was kinda tough to work with. The hardest thing about working with those folks is all the translation that has to be done. And it's just, you talk, the interpreter speaks, they speak, the interpreter speaks, so everything has to go through that every time. Now sprinkle in there that something you're saying the interpreter is trying to figure out so a lot of times they're saying, "Do you mean—" and you have to say, "I know I mean this." So a typical day there mentoring, especially with that garrison at that time, we'd go over at nine o'clock, you know, by eleven, eleven thirty—two, two and a half hours—you had about all you could take. And then, you know, we went back to our F-O-B and did our business. So, and that went on until late September when the core, the major general and his staff, showed up. And then we started formally doing our mentoring, advising and setting up their staff.

[00:14:45]

Now, all along, while this is happening, they show up on site, out in the middle of this desert where they're gonna build this sixty-five million dollar base for this core element. And sixty-five million sounds like you'd get a really nice base out of it but the construction methods and such, someone's making some money over there. But anyway, this—these initial elements showed up and they had nowhere to stay. So the higher headquarters up in Kabul sends the money down and we start building these b huts, these wooden huts that they would live in, temporarily, until this big base was constructed. So we had issues with lodging, we had issues with toilets. Um, just a lotta things that we take for granted, that just second nature to us, and we had to walk that Army through all those things.

Yeah. Sanitation was huge. Sanitation was huge. Trying to get them to be clean. Yeah, yeah. I mean, I could tell you some stories about their--they had, you know, they pretty much wherever they need to go they go. So we thought, "Okay." We hired some contractors to build some pit toilets. And these contractors built these pit toilets, I watched them dig the holes and they, by hand, dug a hole probably--each one of these pit toilets maybe fifteen to twenty feet deep. I mean, so it's quite the hole. Um, they filled 'em up like that. They never—they used—it was bad. We tried the Vietnam-style ones with the burn barrel ones underneath. That didn't work either 'cause they use bottle water so much for everything, for clean-up

when they're done, they would put the water down so when you put the diesel in and try to burn it, it wouldn't burn. You know, and tryin' to teach them how to do that it was—it was not good. So when that base camp finally—just before we left that base camp was just about done and they had their-style toilets built in the floor and such.

Brewster: Just a hole in the floor?

Van De Loop: Yeah, pretty much. It was tiled, tiled around, you know. But that's pretty much how they did it. It was—yeah. We struggled a lot with sanitation with those guys.

Brewster: Did you feel like you made any progress?

Van De Loop: Uh, no. [laughs] No. No, we'd inspect their—we built 'em a temporary kitchen, and, you know, a kitchen built out of brick and mud and such. And they'd have these big four or five fire holes, basically, with these big pots 'cause every meal they had was rice with raisins and carrots and chicken. I mean, that was every meal. And then they had fr—they had wonderful fresh fruit with it. But to go back and watch 'em cook this chicken, and when it came in, and it comes in on the backs of trucks in the open and there's flies and dust and dirt. Meh. We figured, after all of had our first bout of whatever you want to call it with our stomachs we were pretty much good after that. And we really enjoyed their food after that. So you just had to get past, forgetting how they did it [laughs]. Yeah.

Brewster: From a military stand point, did you feel like you made progress then with them? And their conduct?

Van De Loop: Yeah. We did. Um, I can speak from my lane, from the time I left—or from the time I got there and when I left they were conducting their own pay-ops, because we—the first ten months we did their pay-ops for 'em. Um, and they were conducting their own with us over their shoulder but they were doing well with it. They had total personnel accountability. They were enforcing discipline where they weren't before. And they had that military feel about 'em. I mean, you could go over to that camp in the morning and there was formations and there was busyness, there was, you know—you'd go and we'd inspect the barracks and things were dress right, dress. They were starting to take pride in becoming that Army. By the time we left—I mean, we started what I said with twenty-six Afghan soldiers and by the time we left they were up around 4,000 at that post. So. They grew quite a bit in that year. And their leadership, their major general and their brigadier generals and their colonels on their staff were no slouches either. They knew their stuff. They really did. And they wanted to look good in the eyes of the Americans as well. But, um, yeah. We'd go out and conduct ops with 'em. You know, we'd do cordon searches, we'd go out to a small village and the key was that they were the lead and they would conduct it and we were kinda with 'em. But definitely we—they would plan the operations back at the base, you know, we'd help 'em along and all military planning that goes into those kinda ops and then we'd go out and watch 'em execute. And pretty successful, you know, they'd find a lotta hidden caches of weapons and bombs and such, rockets and

things like that. So, we did a lot of those with them. Pretty pleased with how they were conducting 'em. Yeah.

[00:20:36]

Brewster: And how about the Afghan civilians? Did you have much contact with them?

Van De Loop: We had a lot of contact with them. One of our goals at RC East was to win the hearts and minds.

Brewster: RC East is?

Van De Loop: Regional Command East. That was over in Gardez. We went down there and Colonel Nells, our team chief, said, "You know, whatever else we do, we're gonna get people to like us here," because, you know, the hearts and minds thing, which I don't know if that term's en vogue anymore or not but we really tried to work on it. We set up a network with our folks back at home that we had—well, we gave out tons of shoes, coats, scarfs, mittens, all winter long. It was one of the worst winters on record by the way, for them. But what we would do is, school supplies. We'd go—we'd mentor our folks in the Army in the mornings and in the afternoons, we'd take care of—'cause we're responsible as well for our own military and taking care of all of our own pay issues and all that kinda business. But probably twice a week we'd get the maps out and we'd find a little mountain village out there that looked remote and we'd get our security forces, 'cause after a few months we did have security forces finally with us, get a couple up-armored Humvees to put on the front and back of our little convoy of Rangers, Ford Rangers, and we'd go to these little villages and get the village elder to come out and we'd have a little discussion with him and then he'd get all the children to come out and then we'd do a shoe drop or, you know, shoes was the big thing. It really hit us was that first—one of our first visits out to a small village after the snow fell and all these kids came out, there had to be fifty kids out, and there wasn't a shoe on any one of 'em. And they're standing out there in this mud and snow and cold and we just felt so bad.

So that kinda became our push. And it worked. We—I said we got rocketed all along, but after a few months of that the rockets became less. They didn't end but it wasn't so intense as it had been. See the Taliban would come in and they would pay the locals to go up in the hills and set these rockets up. And they'd get a certain amount of money just for setting the rockets up and if they killed an American then they were promised a whole lotta money. Well, we go out and spread this good will and win the hearts and minds and we think, "Okay, maybe they'll think twice about going and setting up a rocket on us." We liked to think that's how it worked and that's what caused us to be less of a target for them, I guess. But we did a lot of that. Just forgot where I was gonna go with that as far as—

Brewster: Visiting of the locals and the shoe drop and—

Van De Loop: Yeah, yeah, um. It was going well for the majority of the time and I can't remember exactly when but while we were there the news hit about someone in Iraq desecrating a Koran. Um, and it was like—when that happened we went out the next day and it was like everything we did before that was for naught. Because we could drive through the streets and we'd get spit at or stones thrown at us, or, you know. It's like, "Okay, we gotta start over." And we did, we kept at it. Um, until the very end, I mean, we had—like I said, we did tons of shoes and school supplies and things like that. So. We interacted a lot with them. And that's how my—we went to this one village on the western side of Gardez, was bounded by some mountains and there was a little mountain village up there we found. I think it was Shr-Khan, Shia-Khan [??], something like that. And we got up there to this little village and they actually had a little soccer field up there where—we've always wondered boy—'cause we'd played soccer with them a few times, a bad kick and you're going a long way to find that ball down that hill. But yeah, we'd go up there and we'd set up a perimeter around the village and then, you know, we could relax a little bit. And interact with the kids and the elders. Never the women, the women never came out. But always the kids.

[00:25:03]

And that's where I met my little Nazamina, the little girl that kinda took a liking to me. She came up and the first time she came up, she couldn'ta been seven, eight years old, but only about yai tall. Um, and the wind was so brutal that her cheeks were just blistered from being dry. So the next time we went up I brought some—I had my wife send me some lotion and took some lotion up there. I showed her how to put it on and you know, she loved that. And pretty soon I think we probably visited her five, six times. Every time we'd go she'd come and find me and it was funny because she'd always want me to pick her up and hold her. And walk around and carry her and none of the kids ever did that anywhere we went. So pretty sweet little girl, pretty sweet little girl. She asked—matter of fact, when we went up on our last visit and had the interpreter talkin' with her and I said, "Tell her I'm leavin'." And she actually started crying and she buried her head in my neck and I kinda wonder how she's doin' now. But the people are great people, just wonderful people, they really are.

Brewster: I've heard that, regarding children, they are very child-oriented as a culture.

Van De Loop: Mm-hm, they are. More—child-oriented especially if you're a boy. I mean, it's that male society. And you feel bad because I think about Nazamina and she's seven, eight years old and she's probably in that eleven, twelve range now and she might be getting married next year. You know, and they're still doing that. That I don't like. It's not as bad up in Kabul, Kabul's a little bit more forward, forward-thinking along those lines where the girls are in school and they're being treated equal to the boys and they don't have to cover their faces once they get to a certain age. But out in the country side there's still that old mindset where, you know, it's a male dominated society. But they do—they treat the kids very well. Yeah. Yeah.

Brewster: Um, again, you've touched already somewhat on the Taliban and—can you give any more insight or thought about the enemy and again, and your contact with them—

Van De Loop: Well—

Brewster: I'm fascinated with—

Van De Loop: We had that initial contact. And then we were told that depending on the winter that it would fall off because they don't like to conduct their ops in the wintertime, for obvious reasons. The snow on the mountains where they can go run and hide gets get quite deep and it's hard to traverse, so. Um. From November through March, you know, other than like I say, the occasional rockets, nothing. And then starting in that April timeframe when the snow started melting and they started filtering back, the rocket attacks picked up and then with the advent of the IEDs becoming so popular at that time in Iraq they started pickin' it up on over there. And all the sudden our convoys back and forth to Kabul got a little bit more dicey, because, you know, we had a few of our convoys IEDed. No casualties but, thank god, but so that part picked up.

We—the only other time that we were aware of their presence, like real close by, is we went downtown one day and the streets and the people—the streets were littered with and people had in their hands flyers that the Taliban came down and said basically gave 'em to 'em and in Dari or Pashtu said, "We see you cavorting with the Americans. You're gonna die." You know, that kinda thing. So, other than that, not a real—right there in Gardez proper we didn't have a lot of issues other than what I've already talked about. Um, now Colonel Nells as the team chief - part of what an ETT does is when you're unit conducts ops, like I talked about the cordon and searches, you go with 'em to observe, mentor and advise. We had a br—what would be equal to one of our brigade combat teams in the ANA, led by a brigadier general. He actually—after we left he got killed over in Pakistan. He would go out on missions with his brigade, and sometimes Colonel Nells or our S3 would go along on those. So they would have a little bit more stories along those lines because they did engage on occasion. Um, but nothing right in our immediate area right there. You know, fifteen, twenty clicks around us where they were doing their ops they came up on things, but, no.

[00:29:57]

Brewster: And yet—so you had to—I mean, you said the Taliban were paying the villagers to send up the rockets and fire them but there was a conscience, I guess, effort on your part—I mean you had to disassociate that activity by the villagers, I mean, you guys never went out trying to find the villagers that were launching—

Van De Loop: No, no.

Brewster: —those rockets. You were—

Van De Loop: No.

Brewster: —the Taliban were the ones who were—

Van De Loop: Right, right. I mean, you know, that economy over there was so poor that to them, if the Taliban is gonna pay them the equivalent to fifty bucks, I mean, that's big money for them. That's huge money for them. They would do it. Their heart, I don't think was in it after we got to know them very well, so that—you know, a lot of times too we'd go up and find the rocket launch points and they were just pretty crude affairs. I mean, piles of rocks and you could see where the—you could get down and imagine where the rocket laid. And you could see, yeah, it's kinda pointin' our direction but sometimes you could see where the burn mark was the back and it was purposely turned away from us, so. Yeah.

Crew: This would be a good time to—

[Break in Recording]

[Part II]

Crew: And we're back. And you're good Brad?

Brewster: Okay, John. Now, so when you deployed you really didn't know the other officers you were deploying with because you got attached?

Van De Loop: Well, it was—the mission came to the Guard and they asked for volunteers, pretty much put that team together. And the mission set came down—they did want combat arms folks because of the nature of the training that was gonna happen. But as it turned out the volunteers they got were, you know, me being a finance officer, we had a dental assistant as our driver, Colonel Nells was an infantry officer, we just had a mish-mash of folks that had different specialties that put this team together. I'd say of the team that came together I knew probably half of them from previous experiences. So we had some sort of basis of understanding as we went into this. And then of course you get to know them a lot better once we get there. Our team of thirteen, when we got to Camp Atterbury and I mentioned before that that mission had changed, now we're gonna have to put—we're gonna have to make teams for these four regional commands we knew we were gonna have to give up some of our team, we couldn't go as a Wisconsin unit, if you will. As a Wisconsin ETT. So we ended up—one of our guys, Major Schlub, he did stay up at the Kabul Military Training Center which was a school house up at Kabul. We had two of our guys go down to Kandahar on RC South. And then the rest of us went to Gardez and RC East. So, we were split up.

We called our F-O-B Badger Forward. I painted it—I did a big sign, I painted a Bucky Badger—or I painted the badger emblem on it and it was red and white and black and I had the, you know, Gardez to Madison six thousand some odd miles on there. Our motto was "Make it Happen," had that on there. We had that on the front of our building the whole time we were there so, that's up at the Museum up at—I brought that home. That's a big 'ol piece of plywood with Plexiglas on top of it. Um, yeah.

Brewster: And did you—I mean, had good relationships with all the officers and—

Van De Loop: Yeah, I mean—

Brewster: —functioned well when you got there?

Van De Loop: Um, yeah. I mean, you don't--anytime you throw, you may have—like I say, I may have known about half of them but anytime you're thrown into that you gotta do some workin' through some issues. We all have our quirks and idiosyncrasies. And for the most part we worked through 'em and we got the job done. I mean, we made the best of it while we were there. The--we tried to—we worked hard, I'm just thinking about our schedule. Take a week for example, Fridays, of course, was their prayer day so Friday was our day—we decided, after this took about six, seven months then we finally went to the bosses, "You know what, they're off on Fridays, why don't we be off on Fridays?" At least a down day to do our wash and things like that. So we ended up doing that. Well, pretty soon we got the 82nd Air Borne and the Marines and guys and we built a volleyball court so pretty soon we're having volleyball tournaments in our F-O-B there. And you know, just stuff like that, just to make it—we built a deck off the back of our b hut so we could go out back there and smoke our pipes and cigars and you know. And talk B.S. You know, we made the best of it.

[00:34:53]

We took, um, we—our front of our b hut, we got a contractor to come in and with bricks we made a patio out in front of our b hut. We went down to the local lumber yard and bought two big poles, painted 'em white. On one pole we had the American and state flag flying—Wisconsin state flag. And the other shorter pole we had the Wisconsin—the flying 'W' flag flying and the Harley Davidson flag flying. Well that first Wisconsin flag that I took over there, that flew out there and got—well it was quite dirty and gettin' a little bit torn. But that was the one then that we all signed. We took that down. Major General Wilkening, the Adjutant General at the time came and visited us and we presented it to him to give to Coach Alvarez. And that was before they were going to the Rose Bowl; I believe that was the Rose Bowl. And we want—as a good luck thing for him. And my understanding is it's still down in Coach Alvarez's office down here. So. But that was pretty special for us to get that back to him. So I mean, we tried to make it homey there and, you know. The bazars were nice. We always had, uh, we had bazars every other week that the locals came in and sold, where I bought a lot of the artifacts I brought home. The dresses and all that kinda thing. So yeah we made the best, it was a pretty good team.

Brewster: Yeah, I mean, again I guess you've touched on recreation there and that's—

Van De Loop: Yeah.

Brewster: --what you did for your downtime.

Van De Loop: Yeah, we had a--at our F-O-B, and I think about exercise, we first tried when we got there--'cause our F-O-B was a HESCO affair, those big HESCO barriers for parts of it, and parts of it were an old mud wall. I don't know, I forget what they're called, qalat. Kinda of all mish-mashed together, so if you look at like a pie, the Special Forces guys were one little slice of it, then we were in a little slice and the provincial reconstruction team was behind us. And we had connecting gates so we tried to make a little running thing around there. I think we figured out you had to run it like sixteen times or something to get two miles. That was too much, so. We ended up—before we got there the Special Forces closed down the road right in front of it and they made all the traffic coming from Pakistan—'cause we were only thirty miles away from Pakistan—they made all the traffic, the truck traffic from the east go out into the middle of this desert and work their way around us. They didn't want it all comin' past our F-O-B. So we had guards on the end of this two mile stretch of road. So, boss and I, we'd go out every morning about five o'clock, grab our coffee cup and we'd walk four miles, briskly you know, always armed. But that was our exercise anyway. And that worked pretty well.

The morale, MWR type things, Morale, Welfare and Recreation—what we did was when the Army Corps of Engineers had to send a cell down because they were overseeing the construction of this base camp out in the desert. And we brokered a deal with them—they wanted to live inside our F-O-B because they liked the security we could provide. And also with them was the contractor personnel from this company that was building this. So, you know, you had Brits and American civilians that were gonna be living here. They said, "We're gonna bring in satellite television. We're gonna do this and that. And if you let us stay here we'll make sure you get the feeds." So because of our relationship with them, we got Armed Forces Network. They ran a feed over to us, and any time that we could catch the Super Bowl and start catchin' the races and things like that. So that was a pretty big boon because our Sec-4 guys, our security force guys were from the Indiana unit and they would rotate those guys in and out with us every couple months. Thirty, about thirty folks. And those guys worked hard. I mean, other than providing our security around our F-O-B they patrolled twice a day, they did a lot of stuff on their own as well. You know, they'd come in at the end of a long day of that and you'd go over to our little room that we set up that had the TV in there, they'd be sittin' there and [laughing] they've got their machine guns and their M-4s and they're laying there just passed out because they're so tired. But, you know, that's what it was for. You know, catch a little TV and snooze, so. Yeah, yeah.

[00:39:36]

Brewster: What—how was the interservice activity? I mean—'cause you have—you say you have Marines there, I mean--

Van De Loop: Yeah.

Brewster: —they're the ones who dropped mortars on you, that one time.

Van De Loop: Yeah, yup.

Brewster: You have Special Forces, I presume there must be some Air Force people there.

Van De Loop We had, um, the Special Force guys were—depending on who was there at the time we didn't have a lot of contact with them other than our Intel guy was occasionally invited to go over and catch one of their secret briefs. They pretty much wanted to be on their own, you know. They—even though they're us, you know, you see 'em, they've got beards, they have no name tags, they might be wearing uniform pants but their—everything else is dressed locally, if you will. And they have their mules and their horses and things like that. So we didn't have a lot of interaction with them. The provincial reconstruction team was headed by a regular Army O-5. He had—his team was multi-service, he had Air Force and Navy and Marines and Army that helped him with his mission. And then when we would get the Marines and the 82nd elements down, that was their security force for the provincial reconstruction team. That was who was protecting them as they went on to their—did their thing. So we developed a—we shared a mess hall after a few months, after they finally got one stood up. We share a mess hall so we got to interact then with a lot of the Marines and such. And, you know, we all pitched in with running the mess hall and those kinds of things. So, uh, we'd occasionally have a—every day we'd have a Battle Update Brief, a BUB, one in the morning, one in the afternoon, for the RCag Mission, the Regional Command Mission. And eventually we started inviting to the evening BUBs everybody in the FOB, to make sure we all knew what we were all doing. And that worked well. Yeah.

So we did interact with them, and a buncha old guys. You gotta understand, two of our ETT Team, average age was probably about forty-one. We had a volleyball tournament [laughing] and the 82nd just hates us. Here comes all these strapping young troopers out there, you know, and their just gonna kick our butts. And we got the picture and the trophy to show, so [laughs]. Yeah, yeah. A bunch of old National Guard guys beat 'em. That was good, that was good.

Brewster: Are there some stories or things that we haven't covered so far that really stand out for ya? Unique activities or—

Van De Loop: I was gonna run through my—you know, I wrote that article for my local paper—

Brewster: Sure.

Van De Loop: —and I think I gave copies for Gayle for the—. But I kinda did that to force me to capture what we were doing. So I tried to start a diary, that lasted about a month and a half and I just, you know. But startin' to write this article in October, every week for the paper—or every two weeks whatever it turned out to be, was a nice way to capture what we were doing. I was gonna read through all those before I did this to see, I wonder what I'm forgettin' here, um. No. We had—one of the things we liked about being down in Gardez, we weren't under that flag pole of Taskforce Phoenix up in Kabul. So we were somewhat autonomous. We had to answer to the brigadier general up there, but for the most part we could do our

thing and because we were standing it up, it was new ground and who's gonna say we're wrong doing what we're doing, we're blazing new ground there so. We liked it from that standpoint. What we didn't like when we'd go up to Kabul, 'cause we'd have to go up to Kabul to turn in—eventually we figured out we needed to take our laundry up there and make runs to go pick up the payrolls for the Afghans, things like that. So, you know, once a week, once every week and a half we'd run a convoy up to Kabul and back. When you get up to Camp Phoenix up there in Kabul and the task force that is behind those walls up there was just—they were goin' cabin-fever, stir-crazy. Because they're behind the walls up there and not gettin' around and doing thing. And they had a mission but their mission was there, where we got to see the countryside, interact with the people and all that.

One of the—what I'm leading to here is, uh, it was at Easter, we got a call that we had to shut down all of our Comms because we had casualties and when they do that they shut down all phones, internet, everything because they want the casualty notification process to work so someone's not emailing or picking up a phone callin', "Hey, did you hear?" And the word gets back to the family before the word officially gets back to the family. As it turned out, four of the guys, four of the ops guys, the operations guys from the headquarters up in Kabul thought, You know, we should probably be looking at a new training range out here for the Afghans. And we're going a little nuts here, why don't we go out and see if we can't scout a training range, or rifle range for 'em. Four of 'em hop in a Ranger, I think we had some Toyota SUVs as well. They hopped in their vehicle and out they went.

[00:45:12]

Well, I think everyone's heard how heavily mined Afghanistan is. Well that winter, with all the precipitation they had in the mountains, um, the wadi that spring were at times torrential but always had water in 'em. And what was happening was, mines and things from the mountain were washing down. And, you know, a wadi that may have been okay in the fall, when it was dry, or the winter, when it was froze, now had water flowing through it. Well as it turned out, they drove over an anti-tank mine that washed down and it took them out just like that [snaps fingers]. You know, four of them. But I always wonder, had they had more of a mission where they could get out and weren't so stir-crazy would they not have gone out that day. You know. Terrible, terrible loss. But that was for the brigade, that was the only loses we had. Um, in the time we were there. There were some other—other areas that had a couple injuries and things like that but for the most part that was, yeah. And it happened right on Easter. So.

Brewster: How did you feel about the support from the Homefront?

Van De Loop: Back here?

Brewster: Yeah, yeah, from when you were over there, how did you--

Van De Loop: Oh, it was marvelous. It was--once we had the email options and we had satellite phones finally where we could talk pretty much daily, you know, shoot off an email or once we pick up a satellite phone and talk to somebody that improved morale over there a lot. And then once we figured out that we needed to go up to Kabul and pick our mail up, like I say, once a week, and get it down to the guys, that improved morale a lot. And then we started—when we started this shoe drive business, I mean that took—any one of us could call back or send a letter or email back to our families or friends and a month later we'd go up with a Ford Ranger to pick up mail and oops, we needed to probably have three Ford Rangers because we had boxes upon boxes of donated goods. I mean it was—that support was just wonderful. And there'd be boxes and boxes of goods for the Afghan people but then there would also be goody boxes for us. I mean, I can probably count on both hands the number of times I ate in the dining facility down at the F-O-B in Gardez, just because we had so much stuff. Food items sent to us from back here. Yeah, the support was good.

Um, I came back and I did—a lot of us were asked to go do community briefs and go talk to church groups and things like that. And a lady in Wisconsin Rapids called and said would I come speak to her woman's group. And I did, it was pretty much how I would do it, I would take—what I did on my summer vacation. I would take a laptop and a projector and a PowerPoint and I put the pictures up and talked to the pictures. I thought that was more interesting than me just droning on, maybe like I'm doing here but I had the pictures and I could talk to them and they could see what I was talking about. And, you know, my point of telling you about them is, I want—they were anti-war family. Far left on the political spectrum. But to a person they appreciate, they voice, they appreciate what we did, they know we are doing our job. Did they agree with why we were there, no. But they supported it. And I thought, boy, that's a pretty good message. Knowing what I know how they are. So I was kinda glad to hear that. That's truly—I think take all the politics out, I think the people pretty much support what we were doing.

Brewster: Sure, well, so along those lines, I'm curious with—when Rumsfeld came out with that statement about going to war with the Army you have not the Army that you may want. Something to that affect—

Van De Loop: I don't remember that.

Brewster: That was in '04 I think—

Van De Loop: Oh.

Brewster: He made that statement when he was over in Iraq.

Van De Loop: Oh.

Brewster: And so I mean, from your standpoint, you felt like—from the military support end of it you had what you needed—

Van De Loop: Oh, absolutely.

Brewster: —and you think that they provided as much as they could—

Van De Loop: Absolutely.

Brewster: --for your mission, to accomplish your mission.

Van De Loop: Yeah, yeah. I do. I do.

[00:49:54]

I know you're editing this, so I mean, there's some things I can and can't talk about because I'm wearing this.

Brewster: Absolutely, absolutely.

Van De Loop: My allegiance is to the government, the president--

Brewster: Absolutely.

Van De Loop: --and I might have my own thoughts as Civilian John, that I really can't say. But for the most part, absolutely. We had what we needed to do our job. Was I—we all kinda, when we got there we all, you know—Ford Rangers? Where's our up-armored Humvees? But, you know, at that time the threat level—that was okay for the threat level at the time. You know, and as things progressed, and the threat level went like this, well the up-armored Humvees and all the things we needed came with it. You know, so, half way through we're turning in Rangers and we're getting up-armored Humvees. So, you know.

Brewster: It was provided.

Van De Loop: Absolutely. KBR, I mean, the DOD contracts with KBR over in Afghanistan for all the support services. I mean, lotta people gained weight, especially those that weren't down range and were stuck up in Kabul because the dining facilities were so good. I mean, they did the things—we had what we needed to fight the fight but we also—we had what we needed to make it bearable while we were there. So, you know, we were taken care of. Yeah.

Brewster: Well then how about the role of the media? And accuracy of the coverage from your end of it, again? Did you feel--

Van De Loop: I always have felt Afghanistan is getting slighted. I mean, that was where it started, in 2001. And then we invade Iraq and Afghanistan drops off the map. And I still believe that, I still think that get short shifted over there in the media. That they forget what's going on over there, that we don't really, you know—do the American people really know all the good we've done in Afghanistan with these provincial reconstruction teams. You know, rebuilding the countryside. Is it where it needs to be, no. But they're making some pretty good strides; building schools, putting in wells and pumps, infrastructure roads, they're still workin' on

electrical grids and things like that. There's too much reliance on generators and such, even in Afghanistan, but you don't see that in the media. You just don't. And to this day, you know, I listen to NPR a lot and NPR does, I think, a fair job of it. When they do it. You know, but a lot of times it's Iraq, Iraq, Iraq. I mean, and that was—I guess if Iraq was the main effort so be it. But.

Brewster: Well, I guess that's—listening to NPR, they're covering the recent attacks by the Taliban—

Van De Loop: Mm-hm. Absolutely.

Brewster: —capturing the village. How do you reflect on that and think about—you know, you were there four years ago and now, is that to be expected? Is that—

Van De Loop: You know, I see a lot of it going on. I listen—what I hear and see in the media, it's all in that Helmand and Kandahar, [alternative spelling, Qandahar] you know, south and southwest of where we were at. And, you know, I wonder what's happened since that, here we put out these core level commands, trained 'em up to provide that security in those regions and it's—and I hear the Taliban's moving in and taking over villages again. How is that happening? I don't know, I don't know. I'd like to think that if that's truly the case then we need to be probably directing some more over there. And you know, that should be our effort. 'Cause I think they still think Bin Laden's over in the hills there somewhere. And if he's still the main target I'd like to see us—we need to finish the job there. We really do. And I think we will. I think we will.

Brewster: Is there anything else you'd like to add or thoughts that you have?

Van De Loop: No, there's just little anecdotes here and there that popped into my head as we went through this. But—

Brewster: You could share--you wanna share a few--

Van De Loop: You know, we had—you know, the things you'd see in the countryside going back and forth to Kabul. Just beautiful country. We got—we had—in the mid-winter the pass we had to drive through had several avalanches. So our main resupply for those three weeks was when the Chinooks came in and provided supplies for the PRT, they also included stuff for us 'cause we couldn't get through the pass. And we went up to—we went up to assess what was going on. And we worked with our contractor to get some equipment up there and help try to clear it. We get up there for an assessment one time and here's this line of Afghan people coming up the hill and they're carrying a casket. And they were bringing someone back to bury in Gardez that had died away from the city. And they were gettin' 'em up over the mountain, right over the avalanche. I mean, just sights like that you see. One day we're standing there and four guys come up with AK-47s and mishmash of odd looking uniforms and here was a squad of Afghan National Police. And we took pictures with them up in the pass, they were doin' the same thing, they were tryin' to figure out what they needed to do to help the situation. Just things you'd see.

[00:55:20]

Lotsa camels, lotsa the nomads. They would—the folks that would farm in the north and northeast part of the country would travel down to the southern part of the country for the winter and then traverse back through in the spring. So, got to see a lotta that. Lotta goat herders and—yeah. We had a—we had a—I can't think of—United Arab Emirates. They had soldiers on the ground. And they would occasionally come in and wanna stay by us for a couple weeks and reset then go back out and conduct the operations. Well when they would come in, you know, they would invite a couple of us over for their feast, and that was the true—you'd walk in the room and it's the mats all laid out, you take your shoes off, you go and you sit there and out comes the goats that were standing in the back of the truck in the morning, were now on the floor in front of ya with just food scattered all about on these mats. And just wonderful food. You know, they're passin' around the big hunks of meat and eatin' with your fingers and, yeah. That was a pretty good experience, pretty good experience.

I didn't get offered any of the parts, but. 'Cause they apparently offer the eyeballs and some of the other parts as the specialty for their honored guest. But, yeah, I don't know how I woulda reacted had I got one of those, but. But it was still—we liked it when they came in because it provided another little diversion for us, if you will. Yeah.

Brewster: Do you go through any adjustment coming home? Was—did you find it—

Van De Loop: Well, I don't think I did but if you ask my wife [laughs]. I thought I was good to go after about a week and she says no, it was more like a year or more. Yeah, she said I wasn't the same for about a year. I don't know. You look at things different. You really do. You come back here and you look at our road system and our communication systems and the commerce and everything you just have at your fingertips. And it's night and day over there from what they have. And they're so appreciative of what you have here and you're just like, oh, you know. You hear people complaining about having to sit in traffic for a couple minutes or whatever and think, you know, try it over there once. Try over there being—we watched a guy one time blocking traffic, we came up on him, here was a trucker had his transmission out of his truck on the highway, and this was in the morning. And we're thinkin', "What are you gonna do?" He was workin' on it. We came back through later in the day, headin' back, and he was just finishing up putting it back in his truck. Yeah, I mean, that's the kinda—they don't have the twenty-four hour towing service. They don't have pick-up the phone and call, we'll get it fixed. You're just appreciative of what you have. See these truckers, you come down the road in the wintertime and you see flames in the cab and as you come up on 'em they have a tin bowl and they have something burning in it—I don't know what's burning, oil or something, but providing heat for the cabin, plus trying to keep the windshield clean. Yeah. Just things like that.

Garbage collection. You'd go down in Gardez and you'd have either side of the street are these big canals if you will, and people just go and throw their garbage

out in this canal. It just piles up and, you know, they might come and clean it up once a month. You know, butcher shops on every corner and you saw where they were butchering 'em. We would drive into Gardez from our F-O-B and we had to cross a river. And you come across the river in the morning and you'd see ten guys down there slaughtering these big bulls and cows and such, gut piles laying all over. And you look on the other side, and the water's going this way, you've got guys down here takin' their fresh greens and carrots and washin' 'em in that water where they were just—you know. And that's how they did it. Then that went back up on the streets in the market and they sold and ate it that way. I mean, we go into our grocery store and just assume it's clean, and it is clean for the most—you know. And that's what they had.

From that aspect it kinda changed my perspective on things. And maybe that's why she thought it took me a while to adjust. Because I wasn't tolerant of a lotta of those kinda of complaints and such from folks back here, but, yeah. I think I'm back to normal [laughs]. Yeah, yeah. I'd do it again in a heartbeat. Do it again in a heartbeat. I'd love to go back. Don't know if that will happen but.

[01:00:10]

Brewster: What would be the circumstances for you to have that opportunity?

Van De Loop: You know, right now there's missions available or I could volunteer and go for a six month tour but it wouldn't be like it was—I wouldn't be going down range like I was. A lotta the things I can do now at my current rank are up at, in Kabul at the main headquarters for the theater up there. So I don't know as if I'd wanna do that. But I would love to go back though. And see what Gardez looks like and see how the old command is doing there. And seeing Nazamina if she's still up there, if she's alive yet, even. You know, mortality rate for those kids in wintertime is terrible. But, yeah, I'd do it again. Yeah.

Brewster: Well, thanks very much for doing this.

Van De Loop: Yeah, you bet.

Brewster: Appreciate it.

Van De Loop: Certainly, certainly. Edit out all the bad stuff now [laughing].

Crew: Just one more thing is, I don't know how many people—how many people were in the F-O-B. I have no idea what—

[multiple voices at once]

Van De Loop: Yeah, our Forward Operating Base. If we had—I gotta just quick run the numbers here. On our portion of it, uh, fifty Special Forces, a couple dozen, the PRT itself, the PRT proper, the team was a couple dozen maybe. But then they'd have their Marines—like sitting Marines, the 82nd would come in with company sized elements to support them. And then when the Corps of Engineers came in. So,

you know, it probably fluctuated, but you know, 150 at an given time maybe. By the time we all ramped up.

Brewster: Within the F-O-B? 150?

Van De Loop: Yeah. About.

Brewster: And then the ANA attached.

Van De Loop: The ANA, by the time we left, like I say, they had upwards of 4,000 out there. And that base was pretty much done. And when we left our element was in the—the people that were taking over from us were in the process of moving over, 'cause they built an American portion to that base camp for the ANA. So they were gonna move over there. And, the PRT and the Special Forces, those still stayed at the F-O-B. Yeah.

Brewster: You got—does that—

[laughing]

[End of Interview]