



A project of the Combat Studies Institute, the Operational Leadership Experiences interview collection archives firsthand, multi-service accounts from military personnel who planned, participated in and supported operations in the Global War on Terrorism.

# Interview with LTC John A. Nagl



**Combat Studies Institute**  
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## Abstract

The acclaimed author of *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (2005), Lieutenant Colonel John A. Nagl served as the operations officer for Task Force 1-34 Armor – part of 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division – during the battalion’s September 2003 to September 2004 deployment to Iraq’s volatile Anbar Province, and during which he discovered an environment that was “far more difficult than [he] had imagined it could be.” In this email interview, Nagl explains that, even though the term “counterinsurgency” was not yet “being widely used to describe what was happening in Iraq,” the waging of it in the face of a “very determined enemy” became the overarching mission of his task force. In particular, Sunni insurgent elements as well as those of the al-Qaeda in Iraq group arrayed themselves against his unit – using everything from sniper fire and improvised explosive devices to car bombs as their weapons of choice – and, as Nagl noted, “We could practice classic counterinsurgency against the Sunni insurgents but the AQI members had to be killed.” Drawing upon his both in depth historical knowledge and his on-the-ground experiences in Iraq, Nagl discusses the often complicated intersection between counterinsurgency theory and practice, stressing among other things the need for far greater interagency presence and cooperation. (Indeed, after returning from Iraq, he was actually asked to take the lead on writing the Army’s new counterinsurgency field manual; and while his job at the Pentagon precluded his spearheading the project, he did offer a great deal of assistance.) In addition, Nagl reflects on his task force’s efforts to recruit, organize, train and mentor Iraqi security forces, and also talks about how the Internet and other technologies can be used to “disseminate best practices in counterinsurgency” to those who are (or will be) conducting it in the field. “The key to success in a counterinsurgency environment is not to create more insurgents than you capture or kill,” Nagl said. “A stray tank round that kills a family could create dozens of insurgents for a generation. Thus, it is essential to use force as carefully and with as much discrimination as is possible.... Always consider the long-term effects of operations in a counterinsurgency environment.” As he reminds us, “Killing an insurgent today may be satisfying, but if in doing so you convince all the members of his clan to fight you to the death, you’ve actually taken three steps backwards.”

# Interview with LTC John A. Nagl

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[I, Dr. Christopher K. Ives (CI), developed the following questions for Lieutenant Colonel John A. Nagl (JN) in support of the Operational Leadership Experiences Project at the Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He, in turn, responded in writing to each and submitted his responses over email. In preparing these questions, I read his Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). This first paperback edition included a new preface by the author, "Spilling Soup on Myself," reflecting on his experiences as the operations officer (S3) for Task Force 1-34 Armor in 2003-2004. I also heard Lieutenant Colonel Nagl speak on a similar subject on 19 October 2005 at the US Army Soldier Heritage Center and Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. In addition, I consulted Peter Maass' article and review in New York Magazine titled "Professor Nagl's War" (January 11, 2004, section 6). The resulting "discussion" was conducted at the unclassified level.]

CI: Where were you assigned and what was your duty position when your unit spun up for participation in the Global War on Terrorism? When was your unit alerted?

JN: I was a major and the S3 of 1-34 Armor at Fort Riley, Kansas, when we were alerted in August 2003 that we would be deploying to Iraq.

CI: What was the battalion's mission set prior to alert and deployment?

JN: 1-34 Armor was part of the 1st Brigade Combat Team (BCT) of the 1st Infantry Division. It had a worldwide mission with an emphasis on reinforcing Korea in 2003. We were preparing for a National Training Center rotation built around conventional combat operations when we were alerted to deploy.

CI: What missions did the warning order and subsequent operations orders detail for the battalion upon deployment? Did these combat orders mention civic action, combined operations with Iraqi or other coalition forces?

JN: We were ordered to prepare for combat operations in a complex environment. The word "counterinsurgency" wasn't yet being widely used to describe what was happening in Iraq. The Iraqi Army had been demobilized and was not yet being stood up again – and indeed, doing that would be one of our primary missions in Iraq. The main thing I remember is the need to get to Iraq immediately. We had about six weeks between being notified that we were deploying and our arrival in country in mid-September 2003.

CI: In your "Preface to the Paperback Edition" of *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, you mention some of the challenges of adapting battalion operations while in theater, in contact. Could you discuss the following topics you mentioned (pp. xii and xiii): preparation for counterinsurgency operations in predeployment training; task organization and training of the battalion staff especially for intelligence support?

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JN: In "Spilling Soup on Myself," which was posted on the Internet by the University of Chicago Press, I discuss this subject in some depth. We were only allowed to take one company of tanks and ordered to prepare the other two tank companies to deploy in Humvees. We reorganized two companies into dragoons, created situational training exercise lanes replicating our understanding of the situation in Iraq – snipers, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and mines – and did some basic counterinsurgency training. We had next to no information on the enemy situation in Al Anbar Province, where we were deploying, and were limited in our ability to train the battalion staff for the intelligence support that would prove so essential once we were in the area of operations (AO).

CI: Was the battalion augmented with special operations forces, with engineers, medics, information operations personnel, personnel from other government agencies?

JN: We were task organized with Bravo Company, 1st Engineers, which is a great engineer company that took heavy casualties during its service with us. We had our own medical assets. Once we arrived in theater, we received augmentees including civil affairs teams, psychological operations teams, Special Forces teams, and occasional visits from other government agencies, but we did not have the chance to train with these folks prior to our arrival in theater.

CI: Was it your sense that the US Army's participation in armed social work in Somalia, Haiti and the Balkans prepared soldiers and leaders (and the institution of the Army) for counterinsurgency in Iraq?

JN: The term "armed social work" is misleading, as it implies that post-conflict stabilization is not an appropriate military task. In truth, the establishment of a legitimate, functioning government is the surest means to fostering a lasting peace. I believe that many of the soldiers and junior officers in the task force understood the mission we were assigned in Iraq better because of their experiences performing a similar mission under much less dangerous conditions in Bosnia. Unfortunately, I do not think the Army as a whole institutionalized the lessons learned by these individuals. Certainly we did not have much to draw upon by way of counterinsurgency doctrine as we were preparing to deploy and beginning combat operations in Al Anbar in September 2003.

CI: Were there any issues with other predeployment activities that stand out, good or bad?

JN: There was a real sense that we were making it up as we went along. For instance, Cobra Company did not receive vehicles in the United States and was told it would draw them in Iraq. It was hard to get good information on our AO and our responsibilities there, so we tried to be ready for anything. We read a newspaper article about an attack in Khalidiyah, the main town in our AO, in the *Early Bird*. That article was the most important intelligence on the threat environment I received prior to deployment.

CI: Did the battalion leaders and staff have opportunities for reconnaissances prior to deployment? Was there a right seat-left seat ride during the reception, staging, onward-movement and integration (RSOI) process?

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JN: There was a brigade-level predeployment site survey. We sent Sergeant Major Sheldon Parks, our operations sergeant major, on the reconnaissance. Once we arrived in the AO, we did some right seat-left seat activities with elements of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) we were relieving, but these were rather limited. There was no battalion staff to cross-level information with. The Brave Rifles had been stretched pretty thin across all of Al Anbar and had been able to provide only a tank company and an engineer company to garrison Habbaniyah. After a very difficult episode in the government center in August, they no longer went to downtown Khalidiyah. The police chief was assassinated and his body was dumped in the town center during our right seat-left seat rides. Politically we were absolutely starting from ground zero.

CI: Were there any deployment issues you would like to comment about?

JN: The Army is very, very good at deploying. Somehow we were issued the vehicles we needed, brought them together with weapons and radio systems and brand new Blue Force Trackers, fired another round of Humvee gunnery at Udairi Range in Kuwait, and got ready to go to war. It was an extraordinary logistical accomplishment, made possible by the hard work of our sergeants and soldiers.

CI: Did the battalion deploy its combat equipment or fall in on other unit combat systems? What about up-armored Humvees?

JN: We deployed one company of tanks, received another company's worth of M1025 Scout Humvees, and drew a company's worth of up-armored Humvees in Kuwait. Over the course of the year, we added armor kits to our 1025s. I received armor on mine in August, 11 months after we arrived in country.

CI: How would you characterize operations in your battalion's AO?

JN: We faced a very determined enemy in Khaldiyah - actually several different categories of enemy. The Sunni insurgency was quite strong and comprised the majority of the enemy we fought, but there were also elements of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) north of Khaldiyah in the irrigated farmlands known as al-Jeezera. The Sunni insurgents fought us with IEDs and sniper fire because they saw us as supporting the Shi'a. AQI viewed the fight against us as part of the global struggle to form the caliphate and their weapon of choice was the car bomb. We could practice classic counterinsurgency against the Sunni insurgents but the AQI members had to be killed.

CI: In both your introduction to the paperback edition of your book and in the Maass article, you discuss "hearts and minds," the classic counterinsurgency requirement. Where was this requirement in the stated or implied tasks the battalion received in its mission statement? As the battalion's tour unfolded in Iraq, did "hearts and minds" change in importance? If so, how?

JN: "Hearts and minds" is actually a terrible phrase. Committed insurgents are fighting for a political goal and many of them (not AQI) can be co-opted through the classic political technique of "half a loaf is better than none." Winning hearts and minds really means providing a basic level of security to the uncommitted members of the population so they feel secure

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enough to provide the counterinsurgency force with information on the minority of the population that is actually actively supporting the insurgency. As the task force proceeded through its year in Al Anbar, we came to realize that a very high percentage of the population – almost exclusively Sunni in our AO – did support the objectives of the insurgency, which was a restoration of Sunni ascendancy over the Shi'a. The Sunnis saw the American occupation as propping up the Shi'a and therefore targeted us. We couldn't win this fight at the local level. Success demanded national-level reconciliation between the Sunnis and the Shi'a – a process that has not yet reached fruition.

CI: You state in the “Introduction” (p. xiii), “Dollars are bullets in this fight. The Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP), which provides field commanders funds to perform essential projects, wins hearts and minds twice over – once by repairing infrastructure and again by employing local citizens who are otherwise ready recruits for the insurgents.” What was done to prepare commanders and staffs to use this program? If the battalion was not augmented, what other resources did the task force’s units require to take full advantage of the CERP?

JN: The CERP program didn’t exist when we deployed, or if it did we hadn’t heard about it. I recall getting into the program during our first month or two of operations, in October or November. By December, we were thinking hard about how, where and to whom to allocate CERP funds to rebuild schools, create health clinics and kick start the local economy. Our civil affairs team helped manage that process, but we really didn’t have the deep understanding of the local economy or full knowledge of tribal affiliations and contractor management skills to be as effective as we could have been. This is an area where State Department augmentation down to the battalion staff level would be immensely useful, although State isn’t manned to support such a requirement at present. A good interagency team at the battalion level – when battalion task forces conduct independent operations, as ours did in Khalidiyah – and certainly at the brigade level should be the objective of a national security restructuring process to make us more effective at the nation-building tasks that I think we’ll be required to perform for the remainder of the “long war.” I’d like to see a CIA rep, an Agriculture rep, a Justice rep and a State Department rep, at a minimum, permanently task organized to every Army and Marine Corps brigade, or at least assigned to them from the beginning of the train up through redeployment. In their absence, we’ll make do; but we could be much more effective with their expertise and reachback.

CI: Could you discuss the nuts and bolts of TF 1-34 Armor’s efforts to recruit, organize and train Iraqi security forces?

JN: The recruiting and basic training of what was then called the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps (ICDC) was centralized under brigade control in Ramadi. About six months into our deployment, in the spring of 2004, we received operational control of an ICDC battalion. We refurbished barracks for the ICDC, provided them with additional weapons and training, and mentored their leadership. We chose not to embed advisors with our ICDC 24/7 because of the very tenuous relationship between the Sunni ICDC forces and the local population, particularly after the Sunni uprising after the first battle of Fallujah in April 2004. Indeed, it was extremely dangerous for both our ICDC and our Iraqi police comrades to be seen working with us at all. Two police chiefs were assassinated in Khalidiyah between May 2003 and our arrival in

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September, and Brigadier Ishmael, the third chief, survived at least two attacks during our year with him. We knew he was supporting the insurgency to some extent but assessed that he had to do so to stay alive. We were assigned responsibility for a second ICDC battalion in May or June 2004 and I worked closely with its commander, Lieutenant Colonel Sulieman. He was beaten to death in Fallujah in August 2004 for his relationship with us. Lieutenant Colonel Hussein, the S3 of our ICDC battalion, was later killed as well. We left behind a police force and an Iraqi Army battalion that showed some promise but were far from ready to conduct independent operations when we departed in September 2004.

CI: Did the TF efforts ultimately include an advisory role? If so, how would you evaluate this mission?

JN: I spent a great deal of my time advising both Brigadier Ishmael and Lieutenant Colonel Hussein, working to equip them, giving them advice on patrol routes and checkpoint locations, helping them build police stations throughout the AO in an "oil spot" pattern, and practicing "diarrhea diplomacy" by eating meals in their headquarters. We did not permanently embed forces with either the Iraqi police or the ICDC, and I don't know of any units that did so in Al Anbar in 2003-2004. Major General Peter Chiarelli was just starting this program in the Shi'a parts of Baghdad in the middle of 2004 when we were getting ready to turn over our AO to elements from the 2nd Infantry Division.

CI: In your remarks at the Military History Institute, you mentioned that doctrine was a trailing indicator of change. Could you discuss how TF 1-34 Armor found the match of counterinsurgency doctrine to tasks in Iraq?

JN: The Army counterinsurgency doctrine in effect in 2003 when we deployed still dated from 1987. The Army didn't publish an updated manual until after our return to CONUS, when FM 3.07 was published as an "interim" field manual. I received a copy when I arrived at the Pentagon in November 2004 and began working revisions to the manual with its primary author, Lieutenant Colonel Jan Horvath. That process ultimately resulted in Lieutenant General David Petraeus asking me to take primary responsibility for a complete rewrite in November 2005. I begged off, citing the demands of my day job as a military assistant to the deputy secretary of defense, but agreed to assist with the project under the direction of Dr. Conrad Crane of the Army's Military History Institute at Carlisle. That process has now reached fruition, with the publication of the new counterinsurgency manual in December 2006. Having helped make the sausage, I now understand why it is that doctrine is such a trailing indicator of change!

CI: You also mentioned in your remarks that the TF's soldiers participated in Internet-based communities of practice. Could you elaborate?

JN: In my talk I cite the importance of the Internet as a way to disseminate best practices in counterinsurgency, with particular reference to the companycommand.army.mil community. Although I didn't join companycommand.army.mil until after I returned from Iraq, I recall email distribution lists passing on best practices and lessons learned, and disseminating those lessons through conventional battle update briefs to my company commanders. Internet access

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was not yet mature in Al Anbar in 2004, so the company commanders had a harder time sharing good ideas over that net than they do now.

CI: In the Peter Maass article, you discussed “calibration of force and discrimination in the use of firepower” (p. 24). Could you elaborate on your remarks and thoughts?

JN: The key to success in a counterinsurgency environment is not to create more insurgents than you capture or kill. A stray tank round that kills a family could create dozens of insurgents for a generation. Thus, it is essential to use force as carefully and with as much discrimination as is possible. This is especially important at situations like checkpoints when soldiers must be given the non-lethal tools to protect themselves from possible car bombers without relying upon deadly force. Always consider the long-term effects of operations in a counterinsurgency environment. Killing an insurgent today may be satisfying, but if in doing so you convince all the members of his clan to fight you to the death, you've actually taken three steps backwards.

CI: Maass discusses your book and academic credentials and quotes you as saying, “[T]he ‘expert’ thing just kills me.... I thought I understood something about counterinsurgency until I started doing it.” (p. 24). Where were the largest gaps between what you did in Iraq and your comparison of British and American counterinsurgency approaches and results?

JN: The environment in Khalidiyah was far more difficult than I had imagined it could be – more dangerous, I think, than most places in Vietnam were for most of that conflict. It was therefore far more difficult to conduct any operation involving contact with the local population than I had ever considered. Protecting members of the population who wanted to help us but who faced assassination at night if they were seen talking to us during the day was an immensely difficult challenge. It was also harder working through interpreters than I had imagined it would be, and interpreters were in much shorter supply than I had thought they would be as well. Clausewitz talks about friction with the words, “In war, everything is very simple, but the simplest things are very difficult.” In an insurgency, a smart, committed, ruthless enemy dedicates himself to adding friction to everything we do and with greater effect than I could have imagined before doing it myself.

CI: What sorts of issues arose when the TF's year in country drew to a close? Was the TF relieved in place?

JN: We were relieved in place by 1-506 Infantry out of Korea and planned and implemented what I thought was a very well-coordinated and comprehensive right seat-left seat ride program. You'd have to ask them how they felt it went, although they learned far too quickly how dangerous the AO was, suffering a KIA during the process. A tank commander was killed by an IED.

CI: Do any RSOI issues come to mind as unusual, good or bad?

JN: Historical evidence suggests that the first 90 days of any deployment to Iraq are the most dangerous, as our soldiers learn AO-specific tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) and the enemy surges to try to intimidate what it sees as vulnerable new kids on the block. I think that the Army has gotten better at using technology to assist in the relief in place process, passing

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battle update briefs and intelligence information onto the relieving unit while it's still at home station, making earlier determinations on who will replace whom and where they will be stationed. Certainly we were able to pass on far more information to 1-506 than the 3rd ACR elements we relieved could pass onto us, which is not surprising given that they'd been there only a month or two and we'd been there for a year – and also that we had a full battalion staff while the 3rd ACR was only able to put two company-sized elements on the ground.

CI: How did redeployment unfold?

JN: The only war story I'll add is that the elements that flew out of Taqaddum Airfield, across the street from our base camp in Habbaniyah, received a final gift from the insurgents. About three hours before we were scheduled to fly to Kuwait, after our bags had already been palletized, a mortar attack hit the main ammunition dump on Taqaddum setting off secondary explosions for hours and closing down the runways for 24 hours. Our flight schedule was completely disrupted and we spent several days waiting for new flights to be rescheduled. It was one hell of a sound and light show watching a division main ammunition dump go up in flames, but it wasn't worth the price of admission!

CI: Are there any issues concerning TF 1-34's year in Iraq or your involvement that you would like to add?

JN: I feel enormously fortunate to have served with such dedicated and professional soldiers, 20 of whom gave all they had and dozens more who were grievously injured in the fight to provide freedom to Iraq. I remember their sacrifices and salute their courage every day. Centurions!



END OF INTERVIEW