

From Army Brat to Army Colonel
Interviewer

Well let me ask you first, Colonel, to tell us "for the transcriber's benefit" your rank, your name and the spelling of your name.

Jeffrey Peterson

Okay. My name is Colonel Jeffrey D. Peterson. Spelled J-e-f-f-r-e-y, D for David and P-e-t-e-r-s-o-n. Colonel as in full colonel now, but for the time period that we'll be talking about, I was lieutenant colonel.

Interviewer

Actually we're going to talk about "initially" your whole life and career. So you're from where? Where did you grow up?

Jeffrey Peterson

I'm an Army brat actually. I was born into the Army. My dad was a career chaplain in the United States Army; served for 30 years. So I bounced around. I don't really have roots in a traditional sense, but have been in the Army all my life, basically. And have lived everywhere from Alaska to North Carolina, Kansas, New Mexico. My father deployed to Vietnam twice, and we served together in Desert Storm. So that's a little bit about my background.

Interviewer

Your father is still living?

Jeffrey Peterson

He is. He retired in 1995 after 30 years of service and has retired to Sturgis, South Dakota in the Black Hills.

Interviewer

Wow. Remote area.

Jeffrey Peterson

It is. It's nice.

Interviewer

Now growing up as the son of an army chaplain, you must have been acutely aware of some of the stresses and strains of combat because your father was hearing about them all the time, right?

Jeffrey Peterson

Quite often. When he served in Vietnam, I was just a young child, so I don't really have vivid memories of that except for him coming home. But I was privy to the amount of counseling that he had to do in the mid-70s. And a lot of his counseling involved helping people deal with trauma from Vietnam and the after effects of that.

Jeffrey Peterson

And then, really, it was the Cold War era where he served the majority of his service, so not intense direct combat effects, but still some of the stresses of serving.Â Serving in Germany and Korea and places where if youâ€™re not separated from family, youâ€™re at least out training a lot and not around family very often.

Fatherâ€™s Tested Faith
Interviewer

Did you say he heard a lot of veterans speaking to him after they returned from Vietnam, so there was a lot of PTSD, I guess, that he witnessed, is that right?

Jeffrey Peterson

I think we would characterize it as PTSD now.

Interviewer

Not back then it was probably not that terminologyâ€™”yeahâ€™”

Jeffrey Peterson

Iâ€™m not sure it was PTSD then or not.Â So some of it was PTSD-type issues.Â Some were just dealing with the stress and maybe guilt of some particular activities that went on in Vietnam.Â I was never really privy to the details of theseâ€™”just understanding that as a chaplain he was always available to talk with these soldiers. And soldiers that used to be in his unit, but were not even in the Army anymore would sometimes call him and they would discuss these things.

Interviewer

Now he wasâ€™”do you look upon him as someone who was Army first and then a chaplain second or was he a chaplain who decided to go into the Army?

Jeffrey Peterson

Thatâ€™s an interesting question.Â Itâ€™s unique for a chaplain in that they really serve in two professions: the clergy where they have a commitment to their own religious beliefs and work for their god, but also as a commissioned officer where they serve at the pleasure of the President and support and defend the Constitution.Â My memories are that my dad balanced it very well.Â That he never really had to choose one over the other, but was able to fill both roles very effectively.

Interviewer

I take it was a Christianâ€™”?

Jeffrey Peterson

Yes.Â Presbyterian.Â Presbyterian Church of America.Â He grew up on a farm.Â The town was in South Dakota.Â Lemmon, South Dakota.Â The farm was in North Dakota.Â But it was a hard living; he had a big family.Â Iâ€™m not exactly sure of all the details, but at some pointâ€™”senior year of high schoolâ€™”he felt called to the ministry.Â My fatherâ€™s family was very religious, attended church regularly, and he felt that calling about his senior year in high school, went to a Christian college and then transitioned into

seminary to become ordained.

Interviewer

So he was ordained as a minister before he joined the Army, then.

Jeffrey Peterson

Yes, yes. All chaplains need to the route to become a chaplain is you have to be ordained by your particular denomination and sponsored or endorsed by your particular denomination and then seek either a reserve component or an active component commission. In fact, after my dad retired, he became the endorsing agent for his particular denomination and so he continued to work in the chaplaincy, but just on the endorsing side to make sure that Presbyterian chaplains were able to join the military.

Interviewer

Did you ever have a sense that his faith was shaken by things that he heard or saw as an Army chaplain?

Jeffrey Peterson

No, no. I think that there were periods of frustration maybe, but he was I guess a couple times he shared some experiences in Vietnam where things were happening that bothered him, that maybe caused him to question some aspects of his faith, but I would not go so far to say it was shaken. It was more of an awareness that he needed to dig deeper for answers. And I do believe that as he came out of Vietnam, his faith was actually strengthened as opposed to shaken.

Interviewer

Do you remember what those things were that challenged him to go deeper?

Jeffrey Peterson

I really don't remember many of the specifics. In general conversations, he talked to me about how, much to his surprise, that American soldiers, if not given the right leadership and sense of purpose, can do things that we would not expect them to do. And I think we see that played out even in today's combat.

Jeffrey Peterson

I think that's a historical truth. And we would have those conversations because as I was becoming commissioned as a second lieutenant and onto company command and then onto squadron command in a combat situation, I talked to him frequently about the mental health, the moral climate, the ethical climate of a unit, so he helped me wrestle with some of those things.

A Strained Moral Code

Interviewer

So he must have helped reinforce for you the importance of leadership in such situations. That you couldn't just simply count on the training to deliver men who would do the right thing.

Jeffrey Peterson

That's right. And it really needs to be a constant theme in the commander's discussions with leaders of all types and with soldiers. I made it a distinct task for me that every time I had a chance to address a group of officers or the squadron to talk about these moral/ethical issues and how we needed to be able to return home with no shame or embarrassment about what we did, that everything we did needed to be morally upright so that it would represent the nation well, so that it would further the mission, but also

Jeffrey Peterson

so that long after their service, they could look back on it and be proud and not be embarrassed or ashamed or guilty of anything that they did. And so that was a pretty consistent theme in the talks that I would have with the soldiers and officers.

Interviewer

What sort of temptations are we talking about? What's in the heat of the moment doing the wrong thing? What does that involve here?

Jeffrey Peterson

I think the main area of concern is that in a counterinsurgency operation, the frustrations with the local population can become fairly intense. You want the population to do certain things, but they won't. And often times the soldier can't understand why. And then when the soldiers are physically tired, mentally tired and so their guard is down. And they may be frustrated or suffering emotional pain because one of their comrades may have been wounded or killed recently. And so in their mind, they become convinced if we're not careful that the Iraqi people are the enemy as opposed to the terrorists and the insurgents being the enemy.

Jeffrey Peterson

And when you have somebody in that mental state, and they have an automatic weapon in their hands, and the ability to inflict great harm on people, there's you have to be careful that they don't lash out emotionally or in a reactive mode that they do something that they would not normally do, but because of the circumstances, something bad might happen.

Jeffrey Peterson

And it can happen so quickly, that it can be over before you even realize it. So unless it's a constant theme unless it's constantly in somebody's mind that they need to conduct themselves in accordance with the laws of land warfare and in accordance with decent humanity, and in accordance with rules that will allow them to continue to be proud of their service, the unit becomes more susceptible to making these kinds of errors.

Jeffrey Peterson

Is it that much harder when we're fighting an enemy as in al Qaeda that is not signed onto the rules of land warfare that has not had the same moral code with respect to conflict that we might adhere to.

Jeffrey Peterson

Absolutely. Absolutely. Soldiers can get frustrated because the enemy's fighting with a different standard than we are. And so the temptation is to say, "Well,

they're not following these rules, why should we? Because it appears, at least in the short term, they gain an advantage because they're not following the same rules that we are.

Jeffrey Peterson

And again, that's the role of the officer and the leader to remind them that this is not always about the short term. It's about the long term. And that the quality of our ideas and the ability to adhere to our own moral standards in the end is more superior than what al Qaeda or insurgents may be doing.

Interviewer

Do you remember specific instances, without referencing names, where you had to discipline a soldier because he had breached that line? Can you tell those stories?

Interviewer

Well, I can. I'll just talk about them in generalities. The place that this starts is just a general attitude towards the Iraqi people. And it comes out in everyday language. When a soldier is describing what they're going through on a daily basis, and they'll refer to an Iraqi citizen as a Haji. And so you begin to describe them in ways that demean them.

Jeffrey Peterson

Hadji.

Jeffrey Peterson

Haji.

Jeffrey Peterson

H-a-d-j-i?

Jeffrey Peterson

I'm not sure there's a "ced" in there. I think it's "and it has to do with their religious beliefs of going on the Haj, and so"

Interviewer

It's a derisive way of

Jeffrey Peterson

It's a derisive term. And so part of my communication was to not to do my best to not let them refer to the Iraqi people that way. Or when in a moment of anger, they'll be describing something and just talk about what they would like to do. And what they would like to do is not in accordance with the way we should conduct ourselves. And so there has to be this constant dialogue that when that conversation begins to bubble up, it needs to be dealt with right there. Because if you don't, then it just becomes easier to let these words manifest themselves into actions.

Jeffrey Peterson

There were some instances maybe where soldiers, in the process of detaining people, were being rougher than they needed to be, putting the flex cuffs on a little tighter than they needed to be. Maybe not giving them as much water as they should have been given. And in and of themselves, these are just small things. They're not against the law of land warfare, but they're against human decency.

Jeffrey Peterson

And it's one of these things that if you allow these small things to happen and go unchallenged, then the next time it'll be a little worse. And then the next time it'll be a little worse. And before you know it, bad behavior becomes the norm. And then from that bad behavior springs an atrocity. So the constant effort is to keep it's to nip it in the bud. I know that's a little bit of a trite phrase, but you have to stop it as it's growing without allowing it to manifest itself in really bad behavior.

The Paradox of War
Interviewer

There's a contradiction built in here, which is that in order to fight a war, in some respects to have to dehumanize your enemy. Otherwise, you would be emotionally crippled by the acts you have to perform. And yet if you're the kind of things you're describing that you're trying to tamp down are things that are aimed at dehumanizing the enemy and yet you're telling them not to do that.

Interviewer

I can see a conflict in a soldier's mind that, you know, how can I do this is my way of venting. This is my way of dealing with what I have to do, sir, right? So let me do it because this is the only way that I can let steam off from what I'm having to do with my day hours, right?

Jeffrey Peterson

You know, that was a common pushback from soldiers when I would talk to them about this. And I would respond in a couple of different ways. The first is: understand the need to dehumanize the enemy. You don't want to deal with the guilt of killing or wounding a person and having an emotional connection with them. It's just too hard for a soldier to deal with. But there's a difference between dehumanizing the enemy and dehumanizing the entire Iraqi population. And so they needed to be careful about viewing everybody as the enemy and dehumanizing everyone. So that was the first distinction.

Jeffrey Peterson

The second distinction is it's okay, once we identify somebody as the enemy, to be as ruthless and deadly as we need to be to accomplish the objective. I do not believe in a fair fight, and I made sure that my soldiers did not have to believe that this fight somehow needed to be fair. But the trigger for that action was it was clearly an enemy. Clearly a trigger man on an IED. Clearly somebody with an AK-47 demonstrating hostile intent or hostile action. Now that doesn't mean that if we suspected there was an insurgent in the house, we just leveled the entire house.

Jeffrey Peterson

I mean, there's an escalation of force within reason. But what my soldiers needed to

know was that they would not be punished, they would not be viewed as immoral actors, if in theâ€”in a combat situation they used every resource at their disposal to win.Â And I wanted them to win.Â And so the precarious balance here is that in one part of your day, you have to be this compassionate, empathetic individual that can relate to the needs of the average Iraqi family and want to make their life better.

Jeffrey Peterson

But then within 30 minutes, you would have to turn a switch and then go into combat mode where you could unleash the weapons at your disposal.Â And then maybe 30 minutes after that, go back to another compassionate moment.Â That is really hard to do.Â Itâ€™s hard to get yourself amped up for a combat situation and then make the transition to maybe a humanitarian mission or a governance mission or whatever that particular task could be.Â And it just takes constant vigilance.Â Iâ€™m not going to say that we got it right all of the time.Â Iâ€™m not going to say that I got it right all the time.Â I had my own internal conflicts with this sort of thing.

Jeffrey Peterson

So yeah, itâ€™s not easy.Â Itâ€™s not easy.Â But I think if we get to the point where weâ€™re dehumanizing people, that weâ€™re getting into some very dangerous ground, and weâ€™ll do things with the intentions of protesting ourselves, we end up becoming people we donâ€™t want to be.

Redirected Academic Ambitions
Interviewer

So letâ€™s back up and see how you got to where you were there. You wereâ€”first of all, are you West Point?

Jeffrey Peterson

I am. Graduated in 1987.

Interviewer

1. And was it a foregone conclusion that you were going to go to West Point coming from an Army family? Is thatâ€”

Jeffrey Peterson

No, it wasnâ€™t.

Interviewer

Your father didnâ€™t go to West Point, obviously.

Jeffrey Peterson

He did not. Actually, my greatest desire was to go to the Air Force Academy and become a fighter pilot. That was my dream for as long as I can remember. When it came time for the medical exam, I had astigmatism. This was before laser eye surgery, and so I was told well, you could go to the Air Force Academyâ€”I was admitted to the Air Force Academyâ€”but I wouldnâ€™t be a pilot. And I basically said well, if I canâ€™t be a pilot, I donâ€™t want to go into the Air Force. And West Point was my fall back position.

Jeffrey Peterson

I had a football scholarship to a small school—Washington University in St. Louis.

Interviewer

A very good school, actually.

Jeffrey Peterson

It's a good school. I would have been happy to go there, I think. But when I got accepted to West Point, it just seemed to be a good fit and I knew that I wanted to be involved in leading organizations. And the idea of being an officer and leading soldiers was appealing to me. Obviously, I was not foreign to—I was not—the Army life was not foreign to me, so that didn't bother me.

Interviewer

So if you had—you didn't choose aviation as your branch. If you had chosen Army aviation, would astigmatism have kept you out as well?

Jeffrey Peterson

It did. I mean, it was just not an option for me. Now one of the great ironies of this is for my particular year group, the Air Force was very short pilots and I would have gotten a waiver to be a pilot. So that's one of those things where you just kind of ask yourself, "What if?" What would my life be like if I had gone ahead and went to the Air Force Academy? But the fact is—no regrets. I absolutely have loved what I've done.

Jeffrey Peterson

So you came here in '83. Had you been to West Point before you arrived as a plebe?

Jeffrey Peterson

No.

Jeffrey Peterson

What were your first impressions?

Jeffrey Peterson

Actually I need to back up on that a little bit. I had been to West Point for a short period of time. Between my junior and senior year of high school, my dad received orders to PCS—permanent change of station—from Fort Riley, Kansas to West Point where he was the community chaplain—the post chaplain here at West Point. So during that summer, I went with my family for that move, so I was at West Point, but then I went back to Fort Riley, Kansas to finish my senior year in high school. So my family was here at West Point. I stayed in Kansas, and then accepted into West Point and—so arrived the following summer—the summer of '83 was my second time at West Point.

Interviewer

And your parents were still here.

Jeffrey Peterson

My parents were still here. So my dad was assigned here as the chaplain during my plebe

year.

Interviewer

I see. So what were your Beast Barracks like?

Jeffrey Peterson

It's kind of a whirlwind. I remember a lot of yelling. I remember a lot of stress. I remember how incredibly hot it was. I remember that the first time we had a break and, I went up and started having a conversation with my mom and she didn't realize it was me because I looked so different until I actually told her who it was. It's been a consistent joke in our family about that particular incident.

Jeffrey Peterson

But I also remember being very proud that I finished, very glad that I did it. I felt like I had accomplished something really hard. And so it felt good and I liked it and then coming back at the end of Beast, I was just terrified because we were going into reorganization week and all of a sudden there's three upper classmen for every plebe and that week was really hard. I remember "reorg week" being no fun at all.

Interviewer

What happened that week?

Jeffrey Peterson

First day, my roommate and I overslept, so we were late to formation, which got everything started on the wrong foot. And then just the uniform drills "trying to get in the right uniforms, figure out how to get my academic schedule, all my books, all the plebe duties, distributing laundry, calling minutes" just all these tasks that individually seem so petty, but collectively are really hard. And to do it while you're under this incredible stress of upperclassmen yelling and so on "it just made it hard. I'm not saying that the yelling and everything is correct or good leadership, but it induced stress and I think that was part of the motivation.

Interviewer

What was your major when you were here?

Jeffrey Peterson

Civil engineering. Yeah, I have never done any civil engineering in my entire career. I majored in that because it's an engineering school and I just thought I should major in something engineering. And civil seemed interesting. I liked the idea of building things "bridges, buildings, skyscrapers. It seemed fun. As it turns out, it really wasn't that enjoyable for me. But it did open a lot of doors later that I would have never expected, just because I had an engineering background.

Plebe Year Friendships: An "Instant Intimacy"

Interviewer

Did you build close friendships here?

Jeffrey Peterson

I did. I did. Friendships that continue to this day.

Interviewer

Tell me about a couple of them.

Jeffrey Peterson

Wow. My plebe roommate, Ross Brown, he and I were actually in the same Beast squad together. We were plebe roommates stationed at Fort Carson, Colorado as majors together. And Ross is one of those friends that we can go for months, in fact we've gone a couple of years sometimes without really exchanging much communication, but when we get together, it's absolutely a great time, and we enjoy each other

Interviewer

You get back to where you were, you mean. An instant intimacy.

Jeffrey Peterson

That's right. Yeah. Yeah. Come to find out that Ross had commanded a squadron just south of the area where I operated in Baghdad, and I only realized that because I saw his picture up in the barbershop up at the FOB at we lived at. So it was just one of those things where you see a classmate, great friend, see his picture and it prompts you to send an e-mail, and then you take a walk down memory lane and have a good time.

Interviewer

Where's Ross now?

Jeffrey Peterson

He's actually selected to be a brigade commander for a joint task force in Honduras. Other friends—a good friend, Keith Ladd, we went to high school together and ended up at West Point together and our families have just been friends for most of our career. And then classmates that I was aware of as a cadet, but then somewhere along the way in the Army, we get stationed together and realize that we're classmates and then a relationship begins—even after graduation, and then those friendships continue.

Jeffrey Peterson

Friendships that have reengaged or regained here at West Point the first time I was stationed on the faculty. Assignments in Korea, Colorado. Deployments—you just run into classmates all over the place. And so some of those friendships started as cadets and continue through your entire career. Other friendships—you may not have been really aware of each other as cadets, but your paths cross somewhere in the future. You realize that you're classmates and you have this common bond and the friendship can develop from there. So I've got several friends in both categories.

From West Point to Desert Storm to MIT

Interviewer

Tell me about branch day. What did you choose?

Jeffrey Peterson

Armor. As I mentioned earlier, I majored in civil engineering; I fully expected to go into the Corps of Engineers, but I had a cadet troop leading experienceâ€”CTLT in Germany, where I went to Schweinfurt, Germany and was assigned to a tank battalion and was able to be a tank platoon leader during a tank gunnery cycle. So individual tank qualification and then the platoon battle run. And I was hooked. I loved the tanks; I loved the big machinery, shooting targets 2000 meters away, the firepower.

Jeffrey Peterson

At the timeâ€”the height of the Cold War, heavy armor and heavy mechanized infantryâ€”those were the prime branches. Wanting to have assignments to stand up against the Soviet Union if they should decide to invade Europe. That was really our reason for existence when I was commissioned. So Armor was my choice, and got it; and the first assignment at Fort Bliss and had all kinds of great plans for how my career was going to materialize over time.

Interviewer

And then the Soviet Bloc dissolved.

Jeffrey Peterson

It did. You know, I had this great plan. I was going to go to Fort Blissâ€”the only post in the continental United Statesâ€”CONUSâ€”that had the M1A1 tank. And I was going to go there, become an expert cavalryman, and then I was going to go to either 11th ACR or 2nd ACR to be a troop commander on the border between eastern and western Europe. And that plan was going very well until the wall came down. And then one of the major shifts in historyâ€”and my career shifted with it. So that was the best-laid plans that started right, but it didnâ€™t last

Interviewer

Now when that happened, people began to talk about the end of history and wars were going to become obsolete and other than for career reasons, did you buy into any of that back then? Were you thinking, â€œGee, Iâ€™ve chosen a career thatâ€™s got no future to it now?â€

Jeffrey Peterson

You know, I donâ€™t remember having conscious thoughts of that.

Interviewer

The draw-down happened, right, fairly quickly after that in the â€™90sâ€”

Jeffrey Peterson

It did. Thatâ€™s an interesting question. I think that there was a search for purpose, particularly in the heavy branches. If the Soviet Union no longer exists, why do we need all these heavy divisions. So thatâ€™s kind of the first big question. The other thing isâ€”at that time in the Army, sort of the late â€™80s to the mid-90s, I think the Army itselfâ€”the Officer Corps itselfâ€”was going through somewhat of an identity crisis. We had become more of a bureaucracy. We werenâ€™t quite sure what it meant to be a successful officer and what it took to achieve success in the Armyâ€”what it really meant to serve the nation. At least I hadnâ€™t internalized that.

Jeffrey Peterson

Thereâ€™s been lots of studies about the lack of professional identity in that time period in the Army, so I almost viewed it as a jobâ€™”too much like a job.â€™ And so if I wasnâ€™t getting paid enough or if I wasnâ€™t getting the kind of work that I wanted, then it was just an easy option to try to do something else.â€™ And I really wrestled with whether or not to stay in the Army.

Jeffrey Peterson

And then, you know, we had Desert Storm, which seemed to give us purpose again.â€™ It validated the need for heavy armor and mechanized formations.â€™ It was amazing to me how much the bureaucracy went away when we had a combat mission.â€™ And so I was reinvigorated to stay in the Army.

Interviewer

Were you in Desert Storm?

Jeffrey Peterson

Yeah, I was.â€™ I was a first lieutenant with the 3rd ACRâ€™”the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment out of Fort Bliss.â€™ And so that rejuvenated and I was pretty excited about it.â€™ Then we come back, then itâ€™s peace dividend time.â€™ The Army starts really struggling with how many officers to keep.â€™ A lot of my classmates left early.â€™ We were paying officers to get out.â€™ There was a lot of micro management and I just really chafed against that.â€™ And was ready to get out of the Army again.

Jeffrey Peterson

My second assignment was at Fort Hood.â€™ I was a tank company commander and I was ready to get out.â€™ Then West Point called and I was offered a position to teach economics in the Department of Social Sciences; fully-funded MBA; I thought, â€™œWhat a great thing.â€™â€™ And so that was a retention tool for me and it kept me in the Army.

Interviewer

Back up to Desert Storm for a minute.â€™ So did you see combat in Desert Storm?

Jeffrey Peterson

No, no.â€™ It wasâ€™”I referred to it as our 100-hour road march.â€™ We were on the scene between 18th Airborne Corps and 7th Corps.â€™ So we were way out west in Saudi Arabia, took a long road march, ended up north of Kuwait, but did not have a single fire- fight.

Jeffrey Peterson

No oneâ€™s [Inaudible].â€™ Boring.

Jeffrey Peterson

Well, I wouldnâ€™t say it was boring.â€™ The movement itself was pretty challenging.â€™ This is the age, really, before GPS, so we had some navigational tools, but I mean, it was hard to do.â€™ I mean, to move a cavalry squadronâ€™”in my case I was a cavalry troop XOâ€™” so to move continuously for 100 hours is not an easy operation.â€™ If we had gotten into a firefight, obviously it would have been a lot more difficult.â€™ But still a hard mission, but no

combat.

Jeffrey Peterson

It wasâ€”I donâ€™t want to say it was uneventful, but especially now given whatâ€™s been going on in Iraq and Afghanistan, it seems almost just like a blip on the radar.â€” At the time it was a big deal.â€” It was great to be part of Desert Storm.â€” But the fact is, I was gone for six months.â€” At the time, that was a big deployment and now six months just doesnâ€™t really measure up.

Jeffrey Peterson

But it didâ€”I mean, the result of it was we were very proud to be in the Army.â€” We accomplished our mission. There seemed to be a sense of purpose and focus and that got me rejuvenated and excited about being an officer again.

Interviewer

So you go to get your MBA where?â€” Whereâ€™d you do that?

Jeffrey Peterson

Went to the Sloane School of Management at MIT and then I taught economics here for two years.

Interviewer

And then you were rotated out of West Point where?

Jeffrey Peterson

I was.â€” I went to Command General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth and from there went to be a tank battalion S-3 in Korea, 172 Armor; Camp Casey.â€” Which at the time for Armor, was really the frontier of an actual mission where we actually had rounds loaded up in our tanks in the motor pool.â€” We had general defense plan, alert plan.â€” Had an actual enemy to study and a defensive plan to rehearse and put together.â€” So it was a good mission.

Interviewer

Letâ€™s fast forward to Iraq, then.â€” You were deployed to Iraq not at the beginning, right?â€” Actually, letâ€™s go back, just for a moment.â€” Where were you on 9/11?

Surreal Anticipation in the Wake of 911

Jeffrey Peterson

I was a squadron executive officer at Fort Carson, Colorado for 2nd squadron, 3rd ACR.â€” So that was my second assignment with the 3rd ACR.â€” By this time they had relocated to Fort Carson.

Interviewer

And do you remember exactly where you were on that day, and how youâ€™

Jeffrey Peterson

I do.â€” I was at the gym.â€” It was PT time, so it was aboutâ€”it had to be about 6:30 or so,

maybe 7:00. And I was working out in the weight room or something and then all of a sudden noticed that a bunch of people were gathered around the TVs that they have up in the corners of the cardio room. I heard somebody say, "A plane just flew into a building in New York. That's kind of weird. I wonder what's going on with that." And then so we were just standing there watching and then it's the footage it catches the footage of the second one going in and that's when everybody kind of realizes okay, something very weird has gone on here.

Jeffrey Peterson

And so at that point, just sort of went into an immediate action drill where you get everybody back to the squadron headquarters. You account for everybody, you account for all your equipment and you just sort of get ready for what's coming. And, of course, there was locking down of the installation, controlling access in and out. Quite a few steps that were taken just to secure the local area, and the installation itself and then just preparations to deploy.

Interviewer

How did you react emotionally though, at that moment?

Jeffrey Peterson

But once you accept it, then it just becomes almost business-like. You begin to realize that well, these are the kinds of things we trained for to react against. We didn't really know what that reaction would be or what it would consist of, but we knew we should get ready. And then you just go into the basics of preparing a unit with personnel and equipment and then figuring out what you need to train and how you would prepare yourself to move your equipment to some undetermined location. Nobody knew, but there are standard things that you do to get your unit ready to fight. And as the XO, that was really my area of responsibility, all the logistics and preparation is what I was responsible for.

Jeffrey Peterson

The first part was just kind of bewilderment, or kind of a disbelief that this actually happened. I mean, I had been assigned "I was a cadet at West Point. I had been assigned to West Point, so I'm familiar with New York City and the World Trade Center and just the image of those buildings collapsing was surreal. Almost a disbelief that this was really happening.

Interviewer

So when it became pretty quickly apparent that the action had been originated with al Qaeda in Afghanistan, did you anticipate you might be deployed there? In the end [Inaudible] and this was primarily [Inaudible]"

Jeffrey Peterson

Well, yeah. There was this vague expectation that we would deploy. When we found out it was about Afghanistan, we believed that the probability of us deploying went down significantly. We were a heavy unit. I mean, the 3rd ACR is essentially three heavy battalion equivalents of tanks and Bradleys and Afghanistan just isn't conducive to our type of fighting in the 3rd ACR. So we didn't really expect that we would deploy to Afghanistan, but I think in the back of our minds there was always this expectation that

Saddam Hussein and Iraq must be involved somehow. A So we pretty much thought if we're going to deploy, that it would be to Iraq.

Jeffrey Peterson

But for me personally, I have to admit that once things developed in Afghanistan and we seemed to be really successful in Afghanistan, I began to think okay, this is—that was our response. It's kind of over and that'll be it. And it was clear that Osama bin Laden was in Afghanistan. That's where everything originated from, so. When I say it was clear, it may not have been so clear at the time. It's hard to disentangle all the information that's been disclosed in the last eight years about this. But I just remember thinking, "Wow, maybe we won't get deployed after all."

A Combat-Detour from Academic Life

Jeffrey Peterson

Now at the outset of the war in 2003 in Iraq, your division was not deployed there, is that right? Or were they?

Jeffrey Peterson

Well, I need to back up a little bit on my own personal story here, because while I was in Korea and then at Fort Carson, I applied for a position here at West Point to return to the permanent faculty to teach economics and to run the economics program. When I made the decision, it was pre-9/11, so I had a lot of angst about whether to take that position, leave the operations field and go into academia. Ultimately, I made the decision to go into academia.

Jeffrey Peterson

And so I left Fort Carson and the 3rd ACR before the unit knew they were going to deploy to Iraq. And so I went to graduate school in California and it was while I was in graduate school that the 3rd ACR then ended up deploying.

Jeffrey Peterson

They deployed though at the outset of the war?

Jeffrey Peterson

OIF2 essentially. So after Saddam's regime change happened, then 3rd ACR was part of the second wave of units. And so I didn't deploy in the first part. I finished my two years of graduate school, my qualification exams. Got my dissertation.

Interviewer

Where was that? Which university?

Jeffrey Peterson

It was at the Rand Graduate School. Rand is a think tank and they run a PhD program in policy analysis. Heavy on the microeconomics. Now this is where I really count my blessings because the angst that I was feeling was pretty intense that I had taken this path into a non-combat role when all of my peers and colleagues are getting involved in this fight. But I was blessed to come up on the battalion command list and so I was able to command a cavalry squadron at Fort Lewis and subsequently deployed eventually.

Jeffrey Peterson

So then when did that deploy to Iraq, then? What month?

Jeffrey Peterson

Yeah, we deployed in July of 2006, expecting a one-year deployment. Over the course of that time, the decision was made for the surge. We got extended to 15 months to create that overlap between units that were already deployed and units that were coming in so we could get the troop numbers up. And so we didn't return until September of 2007.

The "Year of the Police" in Iraq

Jeffrey Peterson

So let's focus now rather intensely on that period so we can understand more about what happened. When you arrived at the "when the insurgency was really starting to kick up, is that right?

Jeffrey Peterson

In July—really by the time we moved into sector in August of 2006, the sectarian violence was beginning to peak. I think the actual peak was in October of 2006, but it was definitely not a good situation when we showed up.

Interviewer

Now what was the reigning sort of countersurgency policy at the time?

Jeffrey Peterson

The year we showed up was the year of the police. Upon arrival, me, all my troop commanders went to the COIN Academy in Taji.

Interviewer

COIN—counterinsurgency—

Jeffrey Peterson

Counterinsurgency Academy. And General Casey came to talk to us about our upcoming mission, and he expressed to us that the decisive operation was development of the Iraqi security forces, but specifically the police forces. And that this particular year, we needed to transition the local security requirements to the police and extract ourselves from the local communities. There was an emphasis on protecting the population. There was an emphasis on having a lot of contact with the population. There was this realization that we needed to do more than just fighting, so economics was part of it, local governance was part of it.

Jeffrey Peterson

But without question, the main focus was turning this over—turning the security situation over to the Iraqi Police, whether it was the local Iraqi police or the National Police, which was another type of police organization.

Interviewer

And did you find that “were you in agreement with that doctrine or “had you studied counterinsurgency doctrine at all before you got there and did you have any questions about that approach?

Jeffrey Peterson

I had studied counterinsurgency before that; probably about two years worth of my own self-education, reading various books. I didn’t necessarily disagree with the idea of developing the local police. At some point, good counterinsurgency strategy includes developing the local security forces so that you can transition out. At the time, I did not know any better, really, than to question this idea of turning it over to the police in that particular year.

Jeffrey Peterson

There was less discussion about governance. There was less discussion about economics and information operations than I would have liked. But the truth is, nobody told me I couldn’t do that stuff. And so within my area, I could pursue it as much as I wanted to. I may be limited on resources, but in terms of emphasis from a commander, I could pursue as much economics as I wanted “as much governance as I wanted. So “and I did that, but it was pretty difficult to do in the face of all this sectarian violence. And then what I came to realize is that the National Police “the Iraqi Police “were nowhere close to being ready to take over security for anywhere in my sector.

Interviewer

How would you describe their capabilities, their “the incidents of corruption and incompetence within the Iraqi Police in your area? Which was your area, by the way?

Jeffrey Peterson

My initial area was in the Rashid Security District. I was in east Rashid, which is to the east of Route Jackson to the west of the Tigris River. Just south of Dora. So the neighborhoods that were in my area had Saha apartments, mechanic neighborhood and Abu Dashir. Heavily Shia in the southern part of my sector; a mix of Sunni and Shia in the northern part of my sector. So the National Police were just completely unprepared for taking over any security measures. They were poorly trained, poorly equipped. They were corrupt in multiple ways, and I can describe some of those ways

Jeffrey Peterson

But worse, they were probably 98 percent Shia and were there for propagating sectarian violence against the Sunni wearing a uniform. And so they were completely unprofessional. And it took about two weeks to really realize that not only were the National Police not helping to stop sectarian violence, they were in fact facilitating it and participating in it and perpetuating this sectarian conflict.

Jeffrey Peterson

And so they were “not only were they not prepared for a security mission, they were part of the security problem. The local population was terrified of them. And so I eventually took some pretty drastic measures to deal with that, but “

Interviewer

Let's back up for a second. The Shia police—these local police, I'm sorry, and the National Police; largely Shia—probably in Saddam's Iraq, therefore were superseded by the Army and the Republican Guard, is that right? Because if the state was a Sunni state and if the Shia police were there, they probably were fairly well impotent, is that right? And so what you inherited was the impotent police force having already disbanded the Army and fought back the guard, right? So here you were with this force that had no capability and they had a lot of resentment built up over these decades of being the subcitizens. Is that right?

Jeffrey Peterson

Well, it's not clear to me what the history of the National Police is actually. I'm not sure that the National Police as we found them in Iraq in 2006 even existed under Saddam's regime. I know Saddam had secret police. I know he had an intelligence gathering apparatus. I know there were local police. But this is what I think. I'm not saying that this is fact. I believe that the National Police were created as a balance against the Iraqi Army so that the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense were balanced against each other. And so, in large part this National Police organization was built from scratch.

Jeffrey Peterson

And so at the regime change time, the people that were recruited into this force were predominantly Shia. And then when a Shia government emerged out of the election process, it became almost a lock on the governments and the law enforcement. And that's when all of these sectarian divisions were put in place. And then you have the bombing of the mosque in Samarra and that's just the match that really lit the fire to make it intense. Now the sectarian strife had been going on before the Samarra Mosque bombing, but that was the event that really seemed to bring it to the forefront.

Interviewer

What is your particular lens on all this—your battalion, your the squadron commander. And you're watching this happen in front of you. Is there any relationship between the police leadership, the insurgents' leadership and you during any of this?

Jeffrey Peterson

Well, I partnered with the National Police battalion commander, so my squadron was aligned with a National Police battalion. And we shared responsibility for this area that I described in east Rashid.

Jeffrey Peterson

But you're saying you didn't—you couldn't even trust them.

Jeffrey Peterson

I couldn't. I couldn't. So

Interviewer

Tell me something about that relationship. You're meeting with them obviously.

Jeffrey Peterson

Regularly.

Interviewer

I mean, you're talking strategy and you're looking straight into the eyes of someone who is lying to you?

Jeffrey Peterson

Absolutely. Absolutely. I had concrete evidence that this battalion commander was, if not part of Jaish al-Mahdi "the local Shia militia" was definitely cooperating with them and revealing information about our operations to them. The first couple weeks, you know, we go in there and we want cultural sensitivity, we want them to be our partner, so we're going in there trusting that their motives are right, that they want to help security. But it doesn't take very long to find out that these guys are not on our side.

Interviewer

They see this as their opportunity to bash the Sunnis, essentially

Jeffrey Peterson

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. There was no question that they were part of a concerted effort of Jaish al-Mahdi to purge our area of anything Sunni. It was clear. Within 30 days I could see how they were doing it. And

Jeffrey Peterson

How were they doing it?

Jeffrey Peterson

There's a couple of things. Not only did they have a lock on the national government, not only did they have a lock on the local enforcement, but they had a lock on the local governance as well. So we put these local governance institutions in place. The neighborhood councils, the district councils, that were almost all Shia. So I would equate it to a siege strategy.

Jeffrey Peterson

They would meticulously expand their Shia enclave in multiple ways. The first is that the militia would go into a Sunni neighborhood and put flyers under their doors saying, "You're not gone by tomorrow morning, we're going to kill your family." And if that wasn't effective, if the family didn't leave, then in fact they would go in and they would kill the family. And that only has to happen once or twice before these notes have the desired effect. And so the Sunni would vacate a particular block of houses. Jaish al-Mahdi would come in and occupy and essentially take over the house.

Jeffrey Peterson

They would take a Shia family and put it in that house and charge them rent, so now we have a way to finance the militia. If Jaish al-Mahdi could not evict somebody from a house, then they had the National Police. And the National Police, in fact, were involved in some kidnapping and what we called EJK "extra-judicial killings" where essentially they have their own judge, jury and executioner in one room. Your only transgression was that you were a Sunni. And if you were a Sunni, then you were going to be killed.

Andâ€”

Interviewer

Did Sunnis come to you for assistance during this time?

Jeffrey Peterson

Oh, yes.Â Yes, they did.Â And so thatâ€™s the physical siege.Â Now the other thing thatâ€™s a littleâ€”this is where the nuances and the complexity get really frustrating.Â And Iâ€™ll give two examples.Â The first is, economic development money would come to a district and the decision for where to spend that money would be made at these neighborhood councils and district councils.

Interviewer

This is American money.

Jeffrey Peterson

This is American money.Â And of course, these councils, because theyâ€™re predominantly Shia, are going to direct that money to Shia neighborhoods.Â So thatâ€™s where the moneyâ€™s going.Â Thatâ€™s where the projects are going.Â So the Shia neighborhoods are doing pretty well.Â Theyâ€™re getting a lot of money.Â The Sunni neighborhoods are getting nothing from this council.Â But our task is to try to make this local government look good and effective.Â So we canâ€™t really intervene and tell them no you canâ€™t spend money there, you have to spend money there, because weâ€™re trying to build this capacity.Â But all along itâ€™s very clear that they are spending money in Shia areas to the neglect of Sunni areas.Â So that was working against the Sunnis.

Jeffrey Peterson

Then we would have these situations where the National Police would go into a Sunni area and find themselves in a firefight with a Sunni mosque.Â Now the laws at the time were that a Sunniâ€”any mosque could have five armed guards and one heavy machine gun.Â And so the National Police, without us in the area, would start a firefight with the Sunni mosque.Â When theyâ€™d get in this firefight, they would most of the time start losing because they just werenâ€™t competent.Â They could shoot, but they werenâ€™t competent.Â So they get on a radio and they call us and so we come to their aid.Â And soâ€”

Sectarian Violence Escalates

Interviewer

The Shia police would call you and youâ€™d come to Shia police aid.

Jeffrey Peterson

Thatâ€™s right.Â Because our partnersâ€”our security force partnersâ€”are in a firefight, theyâ€™re getting beat; itâ€™s our job to partner with them and to support the security forces because this is the year of the police.

Interviewer

But they had initiated the fight.

Jeffrey Peterson

They had initiated it. Now, I didn't know this the first time this happened. So I sent I striker patrol to support the National Police. Now you put yourself in the perspective of the Sunni guard. I'm in a fight with the National Police. I know they're Shia and I know they're coming after me because I'm Sunni. And now I've got this American patrol coming up against me in this mosque. And so they're natural reaction is, the Americans are coming to fight me because they're partners with these National Police, so I'm going to shoot at the U.S. patrol.

Jeffrey Peterson

Well, under the rules of engagement, we're never allowed to engage a mosque unless they shoot at us first. And so as we approached the area, the Sunni guards, because of how they perceive it, engage our patrol. Automatically and rightly and completely with in the rules of engagement, the U.S. patrol opens fire on the mosque. And when a platoon of strikers opens up on a mosque, the fight is over pretty quick. And so what happens is we get drawn into this fight where we're now partnered with the Shia National Police to take down a Sunni mosque, and this mosque ends up closing. Well you can imagine how the Sunni population feels about this. And now we're the enemy of the Sunni. The friends of the Shia; the enemy of the Sunni.

Jeffrey Peterson

This happened a second time and it was red-flagged big time. Okay, this is getting kind of weird. And then a third time I said we're not coming to help you any more, which was a major break in the strategy of being the year of the police. And it was shortly after that that I came up with this idea of the isolation zone where I took an entire neighborhood I scrounged every barricade I could find, and I created a wall around the Sunni neighborhood with two checkpoints. And I made it off limits to the National Police. They were not allowed in there. And the only people that were allowed to provide security within that area were patrols from my organization, and manning the checkpoints in and out were my soldiers with National Police.

Jeffrey Peterson

Let me back you up here because I'm a little confused. In the year of the police, you could make that kind of decision?

Jeffrey Peterson

Well, it was—it was a very unpopular decision. It was a major setback in the year of the police. And the first time I asked if I could do it, the answer was no way, are you kidding? And when I tried to—

Interviewer

Did they understand the dynamic—you're talking about your leadership. Did they understand the dynamic operating—

Jeffrey Peterson

I believe that they did. I mean, I explained it as best as I possibly could. And I think they were aware of the problem, but they're also aware that this is the year of the police, and we need to make this transition work. And by locking them out of an area, that's not helping with the transition.

Interviewer

Hereâ€™s a place where the theory, essentially, from the top gets bollixed in theâ€™when it hits the street.

Jeffrey Peterson

Yeah. Yeah. And I think the strategy was based in a misunderstanding of the capabilities, motivations and intentions of the National Police. I think we thought that they were better than they actually were.

Jeffrey Peterson

I distinctly remember briefing a senior leader about the status of our National Police battalion and he was shocked. He was completely surprised that this was going on. I have no idea how the information filters up. It may be that National Police in some areas was doing real well, but in my area they were not, and so I had to lock them out.

Jeffrey Peterson

Now what ended up happening, the first time I asked to do thisâ€™to take this particular course of action I was told â€™No.â€™ After that, there was an incident where we caught National Police involved in kidnapping and murdering people in our sector. And so when I had hard evidenceâ€™

Interviewer

This is against Sunnis again, is that right?

Jeffrey Peterson

Thatâ€™s right. So the Shia police had kidnapped some Sunni citizens; took â€™em to this field in the middle of our area that was essentially a big dump, and just throw them out on the ground and shoot â€™em in the head is what it amounts to. And so we caught â€™em and we had the physical evidence to catch â€™em. And once we were able to do that, then I got approval to go ahead and lock down this area and not let the National Police in.

Jeffrey Peterson

And it was a big deal. Richard Engle came out and conducted an interview with us. MSNBC, CBS came out. I mean, this was a major setback. And so this was late September, early October of 2006, so sectarian violence is peaking. Itâ€™s supposed to be the year of the police and hereâ€™s this unit that barricades the National Police out of an area because theyâ€™re propagating sectarian violence instead of establishing security.

Counterinsurgency: A Misnomer?

Interviewer

Let me ask you somethingâ€™so here you are, youâ€™ve beenâ€™youâ€™ve had a rather peaceful experience in Desert Storm. You have been spending most of your career in academia, really, it sounds like. I mean studying, or what? Well, the preparation for academiaâ€™put it that wayâ€™right?

Jeffrey Peterson

Yeah, it was a mix of operational and academic work. So I spent a couple years in grad school, a couple years teaching. But at the same time, I commanded two companies. I had a deployment to Guantanamo to take care of some Cuban refugees, migrants.

Interviewer

What I'm leading up to though, is that even operationally, you're confronted here by something that had to be wholly surprising. Because now you've arrived at this place where this enormous sectarian and historical sectarian violence is going on. I mean we're really talking I realize those who were in Bosnia saw this, but you weren't in Bosnia. And you certainly know of it from Europe but you probably knew of the breaks between the Shias and this but to see this level of hatred must have been eye-opening to you.

Jeffrey Peterson

It was very eye-opening. It was something we were completely I don't want to say completely unprepared for, but what we were facing was not counterinsurgency. This was not something where you had a legitimate good government that you were trying to convince the population to support. So this was a sectarian conflict where one side was trying to annihilate the other.

Interviewer

This was civil war.

Jeffrey Peterson

You know, I was asked that by Richard Engle. Is this a sectarian is this ethnic cleansing, is it civil war? And I caveated. I said, well I don't think it's sectarian or ethnic cleansing. I certainly think it's ethnic conflict. I'm on the ground it looked like civil war to me. Now I know there's all these criteria for when civil war is actually declared, but what I know is that one side, based on their ethnicity, was fighting another side because of their ethnicity and they were competing for control.

Jeffrey Peterson

They were competing for who would run the local area, who would get the spoils of government and to me that seems like civil war. But because it had the sectarian edge to it, it just got nasty in ways that, frankly, I was unprepared for.

Interviewer

Well I'm thinking about that, because essentially to be operationally trained in the 1980s is to expect army upon army, right? Now here you are, I guess in a sense a peacekeeping force, right? COIN is essentially a peacekeeping strategy. At least that's the notion, right? To try to

Jeffrey Peterson

Roughly.

Interviewer

So you're confronting a situation where you have deep-seated ethnic strife and yet you're in the middle of it.

Jeffrey Peterson

Yeah.

Interviewer

And operational wisdom does not necessarily apply here.

Jeffrey Peterson

That's right. So I showed up with the mission—a counterinsurgency mission establishes safe, secure, stable environment, transition to Iraqi control. But the problem was, the government that was in place that I was supposed to support was a Shia-dominated local governance that directed all resources to Shia and used their power to marginalize and cut off the Sunni population. I was supposed to partner with the security force that was to establish security for the entire population, but actually used their authority, their power and the resources and the credibility they got from U.S. forces to continue this purging of the Sunni population.

Jeffrey Peterson

So I was partnering because of my mission with one side in the sectarian violence against the other. And so because of that, we became the enemies of the Sunni. And that's when IED attacks go up, that's when ambushes go up and all these other aspects of being in this type of fight. But it's because I was between two fighting sides, and initially, unbeknownst to me, siding with one side but then eventually realizing it and trying to become neutral between these two sides.

Interviewer

Was there ever a moment of confrontation between you and the police battalion leader over the fact that you'd been lied to repeatedly—that they were essentially working against you.

Jeffrey Peterson

You know, this was—the short answer is no. I never had a direct conflict with the battalion commander and here's the reason why. It's almost like burning a source. If I have a confrontation with him and I call him on what's happening, then I disclose the fact that I know he's dirty and so he'll change his behavior. And so what I started doing was I continued to partner with him. I continued to have as productive a relationship as I could.

Jeffrey Peterson

But when we planned joint operations I wouldn't reveal all the details. Or I would say we're going to this particular target and then en route to that target we would change the target to another location or change the time or cancel the mission or do a mission on short notice—all kinds of things to try and keep them off balance so that they couldn't call ahead, so that they couldn't warn where we were coming.

Jeffrey Peterson

Individual confrontations happened a lot between my patrols and the National Police checkpoints. We became convinced I could never find hard evidence for this we became convinced that at night, our patrols would go out and the National Police would turn on their lights to signal that a U.S. patrol was in the area and that would alert a trigger man to conduct an IED attack. And we were every bone in our body told us these guys were disclosing our locations and where we were coming by. Now, their story was Well, we turned on our lights so you don't shoot us, so you don't think we're the bad guys. Which is nonsense because that never happened.

Interviewer

Now let me clear up a bit of confusion. They wanted you out of there even though you were they had put you in a corner where you actually had to support them. Is that right?

Jeffrey Peterson

Well, support the National Police? Well, we supported the National Police because our mission was to develop these security forces

Interviewer

Right. But they had you where they wanted you.

Jeffrey Peterson

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

Interviewer

So why would their mission be to get you out of there, then?

Jeffrey Peterson

I don't think it was they didn't think we were leaving, so they wouldn't compromise these patrols because they thought it would push us out of there. I think that they would compromise these patrols because they wanted to inflict damage. They wanted to destroy vehicles, if they could.

Interviewer

To what end, though? Because they were suspicious you were aiding the Sunnis. Is that what it was?

Jeffrey Peterson

I think that it was predominantly a way to show loyalty to Jaish al-Mahdi. That we're not in complete cahoots with the U.S. Forces here. We're not really partnering with them; we're using them. And just to prove it, we're going to attack them every now and then. But our true loyalties lie with Jaish al-Mahdi and the Shia population.

The Fog of War

Jeffrey Peterson

And because of the kind of equipment I had I had strikers I had continuous presence in our sector all the time. And I didn't need a combat outpost to achieve that because

of my proximity to the area and the capabilities I had in my formation. Now some units were very far away from their area of operations so they did have this long drive from their FOB to their area for patrolling and then this long drive back, so it's an inefficient use of time.

Interviewer

The intricacies of all these symbolic statements—loyalties, disloyalties. It's the fog of war, isn't it? I mean, it really is.

Jeffrey Peterson

Did it work?

Jeffrey Peterson

I think initially it worked. We started off with this isolation zone that was too big. Eventually they figured out how to penetrate it. I can't control that big of an area and so we choked it down into what we called a safe neighborhood that was just a couple of blocks.

Interviewer

Built a market, refurbished the schools and got eventually a Sunni community emerged in the safe neighborhood that was a really good community. It was fragile, but it was a prosperous, small, local area. And my idea was well, if we can get it to work in this area, then we can almost make it like a franchise and I'll just cordon off a couple of blocks at a time and eventually two blocks at a time will give the Sunnis something to have.

Jeffrey Peterson

Now you're doing all of this from the FOB? I mean, you're not with the population are you, at this point? That comes later

Jeffrey Peterson

No, no. Combat outposts were not part of the strategy. In fact, during this time the strategy was to get all the forces into not just FOBs but super FOBs where it would be a fewer number of bases, and from there we would just provide overwatch and assistance to the National Police.

Interviewer

But one of the interesting issues with this—and I have a bit of a philosophical difference with some of the interpretation of what happens—the combat outposts are not the only way you can have a persistent presence in the population. Now in our particular area, my FOB was adjacent to our area of operations.

Jeffrey Peterson

And because of the kind of equipment I had—I had strikers—I had continuous presence in our sector all the time. And I didn't need a combat outpost to achieve that because of my proximity to the area and the capabilities I had in my formation. Now some units were very far away from their area of operations so they did have this long drive from their FOB to their area for patrolling and then this long drive back, so it's an inefficient use of time.

Jeffrey Peterson

A combat outpost in that situation is probably pretty good.Â But to have this idea that thereâ€™s just a blanket requirement to have combat outposts, for me, was a waste of resources, â€™cause now I have to protect it, I have to defend it.Â It consumes more patrols to secure that area when I could have those same patrols out interacting with the population.Â So we knew our area, the people trusted us.Â We were there with them a lot.

Troop Surge Marks Turning Point
Jeffrey Peterson

Thatâ€™s right.Â Thatâ€™s right.

Interviewer

The surge conversation is starting to happen.

Jeffrey Peterson

Thatâ€™s right. And eventually the decision was made for the surge, and General Petraeus was pushing this combat outpost requirement.

Interviewer

In late February, early March of â€™07, we were pulled out of our sector. So this area that we had builtâ€™this isolation zone, the safe neighborhoodâ€™another unit came in and replaced us. And we were sent on an out-of-sector mission south to Diwaniyah, which was a purely kinetic mission. There was no counterinsurgency, no peacekeeping issues at all.

Jeffrey Peterson

It wasâ€™Jaish al-Mahdi was in charge of that town and they were brazen about it and it was our job to go in and retake that town from Jaish al-Mahdi. And so that was purely a kinetic mission.

Jeffrey Peterson

And so we went from our mission in Rashid down to Diwaniyah. We were there probably about five weeksâ€™April and the first part of May. And then when we returnedâ€™

Jeffrey Peterson

You took the town.

Jeffrey Peterson

Whatâ€™s that?

Interviewer

You took the town. Is that right?

Jeffrey Peterson

We did. We did. We took the town and turned it over to the 8th Iraqi Army Division and then left. And when we came back to Baghdad, we were given a different sector in Kark security districtâ€™the Haifa Street sector, which is just north of the International Zone or the Green

Zone. And given the same counterinsurgency mission: secure the area; stabilize the area; pursue economics; governance; Iraqi security force development and so on.

Interviewer

So weâ€™ve got to talk aboutâ€™ before we go to that, so how did you take this town?â€™ Tell me about the arrival there, the Jaish al-Mahdi Army there.â€™ What was the situation and how did youâ€™youâ€™re directing the whole thing, is that right?

Jeffrey Peterson

Yeah.â€™ Well, we wereâ€™I mean, we were tasked for this mission andâ€™

Jeffrey Peterson

My task force, right.â€™ Right.â€™ My task force was two cavalry troops and an infantry company; striker-equipped.â€™ And so one of the reasons we were given this mission is because a striker gives us the capability to move long distances very quickly, establish quick command control and then bring the right combat power to bear for these types of missions.â€™ So itâ€™s really tailor-made for a striker formation.â€™ Diwaniyah was about 120, 130 kilometers south of Baghdad.

Interviewer

How big a townâ€™population?

Jeffrey Peterson

Oh, thatâ€™s a good question.â€™ I really donâ€™t remember.â€™ A couple hundred thousand, maybe? Itâ€™s a good-sized town, but I donâ€™t remember specifically the population estimates.â€™ But what had happened in this town was essentially Jaish al-Mahdi emerged as the dominant power.â€™ There was no real Coalition Force presence in this town.â€™ There was a FOB thereâ€™FOB Echo.â€™ It was part of MND Central South.â€™ So the commanding officer in this area was a two-star Polish general. A coalition force thereâ€™forces from Mongolia, Romania and a couple of other countries that I canâ€™t quite remember.

Interviewer

But because of the rules and restrictions on their ability to execute combat operations, they were essentially limited to being on the FOB itself and could not venture out into the city.â€™ The only unit that routinely patrolled in Diwaniyah was an U.S. MP platoon.â€™ And every time they went out, they were attacked, ambushed, RPGs; taking casualties, Humvees getting destroyed.â€™ And then there was some Special Operations work going on in Diwaniyah.

Jeffrey Peterson

But Jaish al-Mahdi emerged as the dominant power.â€™ They took over Iraqi Police stations, kidnapped Iraqi Police officers, murdered them in the streets, essentially terrorizedâ€™

Jeffrey Peterson

This had been a Shia town to begin with?â€™ Or was it a Sunniâ€™

Jeffrey Peterson

It is a Shia town.Â A Shia town.Â But you know, the Iraqi Army and the Iraqi Police attempting to take over as the dominant Iraqi power, and Jaish al-Mahdi was not going to have anything to do with that, and so they became the dominant power.Â And so it was our job to take the city back.

Interviewer

So we conducted an attack fromâ€”in March we moved the entire squadron down to FOB Kalsu.Â And then early one morning, left at about midnight and attacked into Diwaniyah at about 6:00 in the morning, andâ€”

Jeffrey Peterson

The operation was pretty basic.Â We secured a route into the middle of Diwaniyah, so I had one cav troop securing the route in and then one can troop and one infantry company; we just took key intersections in the middle of town, and set up essentially a hasty defense.Â And the intent was to go there, establish a presence as just the signal that Jaish al-Mahdiâ€™s not in charge any more.

Jeffrey Peterson

Now do the Iraqi leadership there know youâ€™re coming in?

Jeffrey Peterson

Yes.Â Yes.Â The division commanderâ€”I forget the division commanderâ€™s name, but he essentially requested help from General Odierno, who was the MNC-I commander at the time, and so this was General Odiernoâ€™s response.

Interviewer

Did you trust that instance?Â Iâ€™m just thinking of all these overlapping loyalties.Â Would there be worries there that defectors within the Iraqi Police would pass word to Jaish al-Mahdi and that theyâ€™d be ready for you?

Jeffrey Peterson

There was this big-time concern about that.Â But we took a lot of steps to prevent that from happening.Â The first is, we were very deliberate and secretive about setting up any presence at all on FOB Echo.Â Typically what happens in these cases, the attacking force would move into the local FOB, get themselves all set and ready for combat operations and then venture out from the FOB. Well, thatâ€™s easy to discover for the local population.Â So we didnâ€™t want that to happen.

Jeffrey Peterson

It was adjacent to the cityâ€”within mortar range.Â They got attacked by mortars all the time.Â So we had a very light footprint in FOB Echo; just enough to set up some casualty treatment and to establish a basic command and control mode.Â And then we had no other presence down there at all.Â And so that was the advantage of the striker formation.Â That we could attack from a distance.

Interviewer

You were at FOB Echo, right?

Jeffrey Peterson

I was not. I was with the task force at Fob Kalsu.

Interviewer

Ok. Which is where, then?

Jeffrey Peterson

Which is north. Probably about 50 kilometers north of Diwaniyah. You'd have to check the distance on that. My squadron executive officer was at FOB Echo. But part of the security measures is we had everybody take off all their patches because we didn't want anybody to know that a new unit was in town. So these representatives from my task force were there, but they just looked like everybody else. So there was no real indication that another unit was coming in.

Interviewer

And then attacking from the march they have no idea. They don't have people up in FOB Kalsu reporting down to Diwaniyah that a unit's coming. So we approached the city in the cover of darkness and then moved into the city at first light. And so we had some minor attacks of essentially their sentries, their outposts, a couple of ineffective IED attacks. The trigger men weren't in place. The RPGs were not accurate. And so we achieved the element of surprise only because the striker gave us the capabilities that we needed to establish that surprise.

Jeffrey Peterson

So essentially we go in and we occupy some ground in the middle of town ground that we knew was symbolic because it's where a couple of years ago Jaish al-Mahdi fought a U.S. unit and the U.S. unit took it on the chin. It was in the vicinity of this Iraqi Police station that they had taken over. And so we went in, we occupied this ground and they attacked us, which now the advantage is really completely with us. When they disclose who they are and when it's apparent on who the combatant is, and we're stationary and they're moving, I mean, it's no longer really a fair fight.

Jeffrey Peterson

Their plan was to draw them out? Not to go to the police station and run them out but wait for them to come.

Jeffrey Peterson

That's right. That's right.

Jeffrey Peterson

So they may have just made a big blunder.

Adaptability as Strategy

Jeffrey Peterson

They did. Essentially, we appealed to their ego. I mean, Jaish al-Mahdi's part of their appeal is their swagger. Their appeal is: "We're just the toughest guys in town and we poke the authorities in the eye and there's nothing they can do about it."

Well, I wanted to turn that on them. You know, you're not the biggest game in town. We're here, now what are you going to do about it? And they can't there's no way that their culture and their egos would allow them to sit back while we occupied the center of their city. There was just no way they would do that.

Interviewer

Now you've got that knowledge from local Iraqi intelligence, I understand. This kind of cultural knowledge which was said, what are these guys about? Are they sort of like a gang of thugs who want to sort of flex their muscles or are they what drives them? What motivates them? Where do you learn that?

Jeffrey Peterson

Part of it was studying the culture before I went there. I read several books on the Arab culture in general.

Interviewer

Do you remember which ones they were? If you were to give a primer to a cadet before they go to Iraq in two years and sectarian violence explodes again?

Jeffrey Peterson

I'm embarrassed to say I don't remember the title of the book, but I've referred it to several people. It may come to me in the course of this interview. There was actually three books that I read. One was a business book called Understanding the Arab Culture, which was written to help businessmen go and make deals in this culture. I wish I could remember the name of that book. But the other part was I had six months of experience working with Jaish al-Mahdi in Rashid and so I knew how they operated.

Jeffrey Peterson

These guys eventually came to the conclusion that they operate just basically like any gang in the U.S. would act. And in fact, as I developed my own techniques, I would read books on how the FBI took down the mob in New York. It's that same sort of mentality.

Interviewer

That's interesting, though, because you come back to this question that armies usually don't prepare this is police, FBI, this is prosecutors, right? So the notion that the Army in a transformed the world of the 21st Century has to think like a police officer, like a mayor, like a commissioner of education. All the things you listed out things that you have done while you were there describes a different course plan than the one you probably had here at West Point.

Jeffrey Peterson

So here I am, a tank company commander, and all of a sudden I'm in charge of 2,500 Cuban migrants in this village on an airfield. And so I have to establish I have elections. I have to figure out the culture of the Cubans. I have to develop relationships with another culture. I have to I didn't really use economics, but I had to distribute humanitarian aid and work with interagency

Jeffrey Peterson

Oh, definitely. Everything I got at West Point was, "Win the Cold War." And so all of this really "the ability to react to these different situations I think is a product of the type of education we get at West Point. It's a combination of the accumulation of experiences you get over the course of a career. I mentioned as a captain I went to Guantanamo, Cuba.

Interviewer

So you're saying it's that adaptability "the ability to come to any sort of complex situation and impose order. That's the skill, right?

Jeffrey Peterson

Absolutely. There's no way we can predict what's going to happen, and so we have to be able to respond to a lot of different situations. But it became very clear to me that Jaish al-Mahdi was a lot about the swagger. They wear black, they all have beards. They have the type of sunglasses "the mirrored sunglasses. It's all about image and dominance. And that's part of the Arab culture "the male dominance and sort of the machismo approach to things.

Jeffrey Peterson

So I just knew if they had established themselves as the predominant power and we went right to the center of that city and dared them to kick us off that they would have no choice but to come out. And that's what they did. When they came out and "now when they're trying to maneuver, you begin to realize that they're really not that competent in terms of a fighting force.

Interviewer

So there's a series of firefights break out, each of these intersections?

Jeffrey Peterson

Yeah. So we had a few firefights on the initial troop going in to secure the route. I mean, that's the "we're penetrating, essentially, the security zone. And then once we get the infantry company and the cav troop moving in, they begin to marshal more forces. Now whatever signals they have that it's time to fight, they all come out, they're carrying their RPGs, their AK-47s and they just begin attacking us in a haphazard, uncoordinated way. But for about "we stayed there for 72 hours. The fighting wasn't continuous for 72 hours in that initial battle.

Jeffrey Peterson

Are you back with the task force or are you there?

Jeffrey Peterson

Oh, I'm there. Now the task force is in the middle of Diwaniyah, so I've got a cav troop to the south on my right. The infantry company to the north.

Interviewer

But you have to have a basic "because you're command and control at this point, aren't you?

Jeffrey Peterson

I am.

Jeffrey Peterson

So where are you delivering this from then, from the outskirts of Diwaniyah?

Interviewer

Delivering the command and control?

Interviewer

Yes.

Jeffrey Peterson

No, I'm in the middle. I'm with the forces that are fighting. But my command and control node goes from my TAC tactical assault command post with all my suite of communications and I can talk to the command post that we established forward in FOB Echo where my squadron executive officer is. So now that's my link.

Jeffrey Peterson

I left the link in Baghdad; kind of went into a dead zone until I came into this link with our command post on FOB Echo. And so now I'm command and control from the battlefield while my XO is command and control from the FOB, marshaling resources like medical evacuation.

Interviewer

Is Odierno looking in on any of this too? I mean, is this happening?

Jeffrey Peterson

You know, this is really I mean, a one task force fight is really not General Odierno's concern. Now I had a brigade commander then, Colonel Mike Garrett. I was attached to the 4th Brigade, 25th ID out of Fort Richardson, Alaska. So he was there.

œDampening the Pain of Losing Men

Jeffrey Peterson

Who was he? Do you remember his name?

Interviewer

So how many men did you lose or did you?

Jeffrey Peterson

We didn't lose anybody. We didn't lose anybody. I have to say that was probably my proudest moment. Not in myself, but pride in the unit in how we executed this mission.

Interviewer

Did you ever lose anyone under your command while you were in Iraq?

Jeffrey Peterson

From my squadron, we lost two soldiers. One soldier was injured in a EFP/IED attackâ€”essentially died of wounds back home.

Interviewer

Where did that happen?

Jeffrey Peterson

That happened in Rashid. And heâ€”I mean, the bad news, obviously, is he was a casualty; eventually died of his wounds. The good news is we got him home so he could see his family and visit with his family before he passed away. So if thereâ€™s any way to dampen the pain on that, we at least felt good that he saw his family.

Jeffrey Peterson

Sergeant Kahalawai. Sergeant First Class Kahalawai. And then we lost Sergeant E-5 Yuro. Who isâ€”he was detached. He was in the cav troop that was detached from my squadron and attached to another task force and he was killed by a sniper. So those were the two soldiers in my task force that were killed. But on this attack in Diwaniyah, we fully expected to receive some significant casualties. Expected heavy EFP attacks. Thought that theyâ€”we expected that they would be waiting for us. We achieved more surprise than we thought we would.

Jeffrey Peterson

Their RPGs were ineffective against our strikers. I mean, my striker took a direct hit. It rung our bell, but we didnâ€™t suffer any casualties. I think that whole day we had one minor wound from either a ricochet or piece of shrapnel and that was it.

Interviewer

One day did it. You established control in one day.

Jeffrey Peterson

One day. Now we stayed there for 72 hours, and there would be sporadic attacks, but nothing organized.

Interviewer

Did you take prisoners?

Jeffrey Peterson

We didnâ€™t. We didnâ€™t, not on that first day. A lot of heavy fighting; a lot of casualties; no prisoners. So after about 72 hours we had a rotation set up where one troop would be at the FOB for refitâ€”quick reaction force. Another would beâ€”two others would be on patrols out in the area. And so we just did kinetic operations, clearing neighborhoods, target detainee operations for about four to five weeks before we turned it over to the Iraqi Army.

Jeffrey Peterson

These are steady patrols is what they are, right?

Jeffrey Peterson

Yeah. The Special Forces there had a lot of intel on where various targets were and so we actioned on all of those targets. And then eventually, the operations became a partnering with the Iraqi Army forces where we would conduct joint operations with them and just slowly transition to turning it over to the Iraqi Army—the 8th Division there in Diwaniyah.

Post Conflict Rashid: A Completely Different City
Interviewer

What's Diwaniyah like now?

Jeffrey Peterson

That's a good question. That's a good question. I haven't really kept track of what happened to it. I'd like to know. I know the story in my areas in Rashid and Kark, but I really don't know about

Interviewer

What's Rashid like now then?

Jeffrey Peterson

Well, interestingly enough there is a troop commander who wants to come back here and teach. And so on his R&R leave he came by the department and I just happened to run into him and find out that he was operating in the same neighborhood. So he sent me some pictures and gave me an update and it looks like a completely different city. Businesses open, things are cleaned up. People out playing in parks. So, pretty happy about that.

Interviewer

And so how was the situation resolved between the Shiite police and the Sunni neighborhoods then?

Jeffrey Peterson

There was a nationwide effort to re-blue the National Police. Their colors were blue. And what it involved was taking entire brigades out of Baghdad, sending them to a National Police academy—and I forget where it was located—but they would go through a indoctrination period of understanding what it means to be a law enforcement agent.

Jeffrey Peterson

Reprofessionalize them and put new controls in place to equip them better, support them better, and bring them back into the area with a little more supervision. And I don't understand all the mechanics of how that happened, but it was essentially rebuilding the National Police from where they were in 2006.

Interviewer

So you go from Diwaniyah to—you said back to the north of Baghdad. Is that right?

Jeffrey Peterson

Well, it was Kark security district which is downtown Baghdad; Haifa Street. And it's just north of the Green Zone.

Interviewer

And what was your mission there then?

Jeffrey Peterson

Then it was back to counterinsurgency. This government was a little better established. It was not sectarian. It was a mix of Sunni and Shia so they seemed a lot more legitimate.

Interviewer

Now this was at the time of the "the surge is in full blossom at this point, right?"

Jeffrey Peterson

Yes, yes. So this is May of 2007. We found out while we were in Diwaniyah that we were extended and so we'd come back to finish the rest of and the extended part of our tour in Kark.

From "Year of the Police" to "Secure the Population"

Jeffrey Peterson

Now the philosophy has switched from the "year of the police" to this new

Interviewer

Secure the population. And so this is

Jeffrey Peterson

Now the philosophy has switched from the "year of the police" to this new

Jeffrey Peterson

Yeah, well, the overall theme was established these cops, live in and amongst the people "command outpost" constant presence so that you can begin to build these relationships that lead to the intelligence that you need to detain or capture the "or kill" the insurgents or the terrorists that are causing the problems. So that's the overarching theme at this point. Now while the

Interviewer

Good theme in your judgment? I mean, do you think this was a wise shift of policy?

Jeffrey Peterson

I do. Now what was interesting to me is it wasn't really a shift in policy for me. Now I'm not trying to paint myself that I had this all figured out. But we had already been living in and amongst the population. Not physically living, but we were there with them all the time and we knew that being with them and establishing these relationships were absolutely critical and essential.

Jeffrey Peterson

So actually I was told that I needed to establish one outpost per company-sized organization in my squadron. And so for me, that would have been three. And I thought that

was just a horrible directive because it just consumes all my resources and fixed site security and gives me no flexibility to maneuver.

Jeffrey Peterson

And it was just unnecessary in my sector. And it was a blanket application of a tactical technique without really giving further thought to the intent and the purpose of these combat outposts.

Jeffrey Peterson

So what ended up happening in the sectorsâ€”I set up one. I set up one combat outpost in a large house along the Tigris River. It was either Uday or Qusayâ€™s river palace or something like that. We heavily fortified it and occupied it. But I didnâ€™t occupy it to increase my interaction with the population.

Jeffrey Peterson

Because the truth is, with this combat outpost I had three barriers to protect against car bombs. I had entry control points. This is not the kind of place where the average Iraqi is just going to walk up and start giving me information. Thatâ€™s not the purpose of this particular combat outpost. For me, it was about prepositioning units forward so that they could be more efficient in either their response time or patrolling.

Jeffrey Peterson

Because my FOB was onâ€”FOB Union 3 was within the Green Zone. Now my sector was only two kilometers away. The problem is that two kilometers was checkpoints and traffic jams so that I could not respond quickly from my FOB to my area of operation. So the only way I could do that was to preposition forces forward and so thatâ€™s why I did it. So I had oneâ€”it was a minimal use of resources on protecting that area because I built it up so much. I put concrete all over that place.

Jeffrey Peterson

I wanted it to be safe with concrete so that I wouldnâ€™t have to consume soldiers to man checkpoints. Just a sort of a capital labor exchange there. And then the other benefit that I had was as we moved into the heat of the summer when itâ€™s 120, 130 degrees, that my guys who were patrolling in these high-rise apartments and in this dense urban environment, they can move into this combat outpost, get a drink of water, take off their gear, rest, get a little air conditioning, go to the bathroom, eat a meal and then go back out on patrol.

Jeffrey Peterson

And so I actually got a lot more out of a single patrol because they could go for a couple hours, take a break, a couple hours, take a break. And so that just increased my presence. But I didnâ€™t establish a COP just to have a COP. It had a very specific purpose to help us achieve this presence in the area. So the COP itself was not the answer. The answer was it facilitated the interaction with the population.

Interviewer

But the big shift, it seems to me, would have been less reliance upon the police and more reliance upon this relationship with the local population.

Jeffrey Peterson

The relationship”

Jeffrey Peterson

Gathering intelligence, right for reassuring a sense of command.

Jeffrey Peterson

Right. Well, a couple of things were different about this particular area. For one thing, in January of 2007 there was a significant firefight battle along Haifa Street that essentially removed almost all of the Al Qaeda presence in Kark. So there was not much enemy in that area. Now there was still Jaish al-Mahdi. But what kept Jaish al-Mahdi in check was that the National Police brigade commander was really good in this area. It was a combination force of Iraqi Army and National Police.

Jeffrey Peterson

And almost as a force of nature, this commander made his Iraqi security force brigade competent. The Iraqi Army battalion commander that I partnered with was exceptional and so we just had a better quality Iraqi force to deal with that actually helped us capture Jaish al-Mahdi. That helped enforce security and that part was really good. And then the last piece was we had kind of broken the code on how to use economics at the tactical level.

Jeffrey Peterson

And so I had mentioned this safe neighborhood that we built in Rashid. Well now I gave each platoon a task to establish these safe neighborhoods. So now we’re doing nine of them at a time and so we can reach some critical mass on economic resources, revitalizing markets, getting generators in place and these types of activities that really begin to win the loyalties of the people because they see that we’re serving them.

Interviewer

Now you can see this is a generosity of spirit emerging between Iraqi locals and the Americans.

Jeffrey Peterson

I wouldn’t call it generosity of spirit. It was the ways that I looked for or I could measure improvement was really by civilian presence on the battlefield or in town. Kids playing soccer in the middle of the street in the evening time is a good sign. Markets staying open later—markets staying open well into the night. Women with their children out in the streets. Shops open 24-hours a day in some cases. The number of lights that are turned on in a home at night. All these indicators”

Interviewer

This is the economics theory of stability, right?

Jeffrey Peterson

It is. It is. And so when you start—when people start revealing by their own actions that they feel safe, that’s when you really know that you’re making progress.

Now almost all the time, the Iraqi people were fairly kind to patrols. It was not unusual to be treated well by the Iraqi people, so that wasn't really a good gauge. But information would start coming in. We'd get tips every now and then.

Jeffrey Peterson

We didn't have a single attack against us our entire time in Kark; so, it was a safe and secure area. The economics could begin to grow. The local governance was doing a pretty good job. It was even-handed development, just as much went to Sunnis as went to Shia. And so it was, in my mind, the way it should work.

Jeffrey Peterson

Now amongst my soldiers, this was a little bit of a frustration because soldiers, they sign up to do all the things that soldiers do like we did in Diwanayah. That's the kind of mission that they wanted. And what I tried to convince them was that hey, this is how we want this whole thing to end up. This is what a win looks like and we need to be able to show people what a win looks like in Baghdad. That it can, in fact, be done. And so that really became a motivation and the impetus behind what we were doing.

Jeffrey Peterson

And for the most part people bought into it. Not everybody bought into it, but enough bought into it. And besides, I was the commander so they were going to do what I emphasize what I wanted them to do.

Interviewer

This is where your deployment ended, was in Kark.

Jeffrey Peterson

In Kark, yeah, in September of '07.

Life After the Year of the Police

Interviewer

And then you came back here?

Jeffrey Peterson

Well, redeployed to Fort Lewis and then for me personally, from fort Lewis I reentered graduate school, finished my dissertation, and then moved here in 2008.

Interviewer

Your dissertation was on what subject?

Jeffrey Peterson

It was an evaluation of a manning policy that the Army was pursuing called "life cycle manning," which is to assign all the personnel to a brigade at the beginning of a three-year cycle so that they can train together, deploy together and return together. And the theory is that if you keep soldiers stabilized in the same unit, that that unit will become more cohesive, and therefore perform better. So I tested that assumption.

Interviewer

How did it come out?

Jeffrey Peterson

It was a narrow test on battalion command group stability which is the battalion commander, the battalion operations officer, the battalion executive officer. And what I found is that stability really didn't matter that much. And in the tasks that it did matter, all the benefits to stability were realized within the first six months. And so the actual training that you went through was a lot more important than the amount of time that you spent together.

Interviewer

How do you measure that—the effective stability? That was a big problem, I imagine.

Jeffrey Peterson

It was a huge problem. What I was able to capitalize on was a data set that the Rand Corporation had collecting performance data out at the National Training Center. So there was a pretty rigorous process of evaluating units in a variety of tasks on a scale from one to five; five being the best, one being the worst. And so that was really my performance measure—my performance outcome. Dependent variable, if you will. And then I built a set of stability variables that captured individual experience of the command group and then time together spent on the command group.

Jeffrey Peterson

So the theory should have been the larger—the more months that that command group had been together, the higher score they score they should have received at the National Training Center. And what I found was there really was no detectible relationship, which was counter to the Army's assumption, but there's limits to generalizing it. Just because it's true for the battalion command group doesn't necessarily mean that it's true for platoon or squad-level operations.

Jeffrey Peterson

But what I think it's a testament to is that the Army does a pretty good job of training its individuals, and when we buy into the same culture— it doesn't take us very long to meld into a team a work together, particularly when there's an important mission. We can put our differences aside. We can come to an agreement pretty quickly on how to operate. And I think that that has borne itself out.

Jeffrey Peterson

The fact is we have to deal with turnover all the time. We have casualties, we have—people need to move on to get to other assignments. So there's constant churn. Even if we had no casualties, we would lose people because of R&R. So you would lose leaders for 30 days and who's going to step up? And the unit can't just stop working because a leader disappears for a month or so. What I found was that the Army units are—the Army is pretty resilient on that. You don't want to have too much churn, but you can have some and it's not—it does not have a detrimental effect.

Interviewer

For a final question, let's come back to Iraq because yesterday we had given control to the Iraqi Army in the midst of what is still tremendous political instability. Given your experience on the ground there, are you optimistic that peace will hold and a government—a legitimate government will emerge or are you worried that we're going to be back there again?

Jeffrey Peterson

I don't think we'll go back. I hope it holds. The honest truth is I'm a bit skeptical about it, simply because the degree of hatred that I saw between the Shia and the Sunni and the amount of distrust—it was so intense that it's hard for me to imagine that they can peacefully coexist.

Jeffrey Peterson

But so much has changed since 2007. The security forces are better. The government is more mature. The truth is, I think the Iraqi people are just tired of the violence. I think they're just done fighting. I think, in large part, a lot of the reason that the violence went down is because the segregation happened. The equilibrium was reached and people were just tired of the fighting. Of course there's lots of other factors. The Anbar Awakening; the Sons of Iraq; some more political compromise—all these things are helpful. The security forces are better. So all that working together, I think that they might be able to reach a stable equilibrium. I certainly hope it's true. Nobody wants to go back. The mission continues; it's certainly not over. Operation Iraqi Freedom might be, but there's still 50,000 soldiers over there risking themselves to keep it all together.

Jeffrey Peterson

So I'm cautiously optimistic. I hope that optimism is based on truth on the ground as opposed to just this desire to have our efforts have a payoff. But I'm optimistic about it.

Counterinsurgency in Practice: A Genealogy
Interviewer

Do you think it wise for the political leadership to rely upon the Army to take on operations like these that are so in some ways counter to Army training and historically counter to Army mission. Or is this—I mean, they're talking in Afghanistan about real counterinsurgencies, nation-building and it's a 20 or 30-year operation.

Interviewer

It's not something that can be done, quick in and quick out. Do you feel that way? Are you worried about the reliance upon the Army to do these kinds of tasks instead of large armies moving against other large armies?

Jeffrey Peterson

Interestingly, if you look at the history of the Army, I think we've spent more time in these types of missions than we have in conventional combat.

Interviewer

You mean going all the way back. Thinking, post-Civil War, Reconstruction—

Interviewer

Post-Civil War, the Philippines, you could even view westward expansion as counterinsurgency-type operations. Vietnam, Central and South America with the Marines. There is so much of our history as a military that involves these counterinsurgency nation-building-type missions that I think we need to be a little cautious of saying that thatâ€™s not part of what we do historically. I think, in fact, itâ€™s the majority of what we do historically.

Jeffrey Peterson

The reality is, I think the situation in our world now is that these are the kinds of situations that weâ€™re going to be faced with. Failed states, close to failing states, rogue actors, urban populations, asymmetric threats that blend into the population. And if itâ€™s not the Army that does itâ€™s not the military that does it, then whoâ€™s going to? Thereâ€™s no other organization we have that has the capabilities in personnel, budgets, talent to get this job done.

Jeffrey Peterson

And so one of the things I studied is economic development. And thereâ€™s a big debate about whether or not the military should be involved in economic development. And whenever I get push back on that, my answer is, â€œWell, if we donâ€™t do it, whoâ€™s going to?â€ Itâ€™s not like thereâ€™s a lot of civilian capacity that can move in and do these kinds of things in a combat, conflict environment. So if itâ€™s necessary to win, then itâ€™s necessary for us to master these tasks. And I believe itâ€™s necessary for us to win.

Jeffrey Peterson

We cannot kill and capture our way to security in these particular situations, so whether we like it or not, we have to be good at economics, we have to be good at governance and information operations and capacity-building and infrastructure development and all these issues that may, in normal times, be civilian responsibilities. But in failed states, in these areas where the army is committed, civilian capacityâ€™s not there to do it.

Jeffrey Peterson

Now thatâ€™s a policy debate. Should we build the civilian capacity to do it? Sure we should. But thereâ€™s still going to be a period of time where bullets are flying, economics needs to be used and the civiliansâ€™ not going to be there. So I buy into the argument that we need to embrace it, we need to revamp our education and training to make sure that weâ€™re good at the full spectrum. Itâ€™s hard. We need really good people. We need to train effectively, efficiently and by no means is it easy or risk-free. But I think we have to be able to do it.

Interviewer

Thank you very much.

Jeffrey Peterson
All right.