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

Interview with
MAJ Mitchell Hoines

Combat Studies Institute
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Abstract

An aircraft commander with VMGR-252, a Marine Corps KC-130 air refueler/air assault squadron – part of the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit, Special Operations Capable and what became Task Force 58 in Operation ENDURING FREEDOM – Major Mitchell Hoines helped bring the first “boots on the ground,” in the form of two MEUs, into Afghanistan in November 2001. “We shuttled the Marines in at night from Pasni, Pakistan, all the way to Camp Rhino,” he said, “with an insertion to take the airfield and insert the Marines.” A veteran of as many as 150 sorties during his October 2001 to January 2002 deployment, Hoines discusses this initial D-Day mission – an unprecedented 450-mile amphibious assault – in great detail. In addition, he talks at length about his experiences piloting the only platform in the Marine Corps that did not have night vision goggles, and doing so under the harshest and most dangerous conditions, environmental and otherwise. “We were doing all the night flying in the mountains with low-illumined, unimproved dirt strips with no lights on them,” Hoines recounted, “so it was very challenging, obviously. To do what we had to do, we flew overweight; we flew at emergency war weights. Not only were we flying airplanes heavier than we’ve ever flown them, we’re flying at night, in the dark, to a desert landing strip in a war zone.”
Interview with MAJ Mitchell Hoines
12 January 2006

JM: My name is John McCool [JM] and I’m with the Operational Leadership Experiences Project at the Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. I’m interviewing Major Mitchell Hoines, U.S. Marine Corps, on his experiences during Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF). Today’s date is 12 January 2006 and this is an unclassified interview. Before we begin, Mitch, if you feel at any time we’re entering classified territory, please couch your response in terms that avoid revealing any classified information. And if classification requirements prevent you from responding, simply say you’re not able to answer. Okay, Mitch, could you please start off by giving me a brief sketch of your military career, sort of beginning of time up through you OEF deployment?

MH: I have been a Marine, up until that time, since 1993. I was seven years enlisted with the Air National Guard before that. But as far as my military experience with the Marines, I was flying KC-130s as an aircraft commander for about five years before 9/11 hit. At the time, I was with VMGR-252 Squadron out of Marine Corps Air Station, Cherry Point, North Carolina. I was their 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) KC-130 liaison officer. Each special operations capable MEU (MEUSOC) that goes out has two KC-130s on a 96-hour tether to support it; while it floats, we will support exercises and fly back and forth as needed by the MEUSOC commander. So when 9/11 hit, I was that liaison officer and I was also one of the planners for Exercise Bright Star in Egypt, the joint exercise. Immediately, we turned to and went to that exercise fully thinking that operations were going to follow; and as it turned out, that was exactly the case. We practiced amphibious landings in Egypt and operations, then based out of Suda Bay. I’m an East Coast Marine so we are Mediterranean Sea area Marines. U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) has this area of Afghanistan for OEF, which is covered by 1st Marine Expeditionary Force (1 MEF) Marines and 3rd Marine Air Wing (MAW), which is West Coast United States Marines. Basically, once the operation started to get worked up, we were attached: our MEU would float and become part of the operation in OEF. Our 26th MEU was attached to the 15th MEU and became Task Force 58, which was led by, at the time, Brigadier General James Mattis, who obviously became the 1st Marine Division (MARDIV) commander in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF). So basically, the concept for my side of it as a KC-130 pilot: Marine KC-130s are air refuelers; they’re tactical tankers for helicopters and jets for the Marine Corps. They also do everything else that a Marine Hercules can do. They do air drops, rapid ground refueling, which we’re really good at – meaning land at a forward operating base (FOB), pull out our hoses and offload all the fuel in our airplane, from either our wings or a large tank we can carry in the back to accommodate that. We can also bring in cargo for them, combat search and rescue (CSAR) or casualty evacuation (CASEVAC). So, we took four Hercs from the West Coast. The 15th MEU plussed up their two Hercs to four and then we added our two KC-130s to make a six plane detachment (DET). We moved through to Southwest Asia basically from the Med theater. We were able to base in Jacobabad, Pakistan, where the U.S. Air Force and Army had started up a base; and at the time, that was not out on Fox News, obviously. Anyway, we had our six Hercs in Pakistan and we needed to move Task Force 58, which was the two MEUs, from the Indian Ocean and insert them into Afghanistan – and what they chose
was Camp Rhino. It was an abandoned Russian airstrip out in the desert south and mostly west of Kandahar International. I don’t remember the distance off hand, but it was about 25 minutes by flight in the desert. The problem was to get the MEU - the Marines – 450 miles inland further than we had ever gone so, at the time, it was the largest amphibious landing. The Marines came to shore in Pakistan at a city called Pasni where the landing craft air cushions (LCACs) and helicopters brought them from the amphibious ships. We shuttled the Marines in at night from Pasni all the way to Camp Rhino, with an insertion to take the airfield and insert the Marines.

JM: This is in November 2001?

MH: Yes. I believe D-Day was November 26th but you’ll have to check on that. So, to get helicopters in at night over the mountains, they found a base in Pakistan; it was a Saudi prince’s little runway. It was a beautiful 5,000 foot cement runway with lights and like two huts on it. It was a hunting lodge for some Saudi prince.

JM: This is in Pakistan?

MH: Right. It was called Shamsi, on the way up from Pasni on the southwest coast; almost a straight line up to this area where Camp Rhino would be southwest of Kandahar. It worked out well as a forward rearming/refueling point (FARP), so the helicopters could go there and we’d offload fuel from our C-130 into some bladders there. Now the helicopters have an extra place to get gas, especially the CH-46s that can’t do air-to-air refueling like our ’53Es. Also, the Cobras and the Hueys could stop there for fuel and then make it to Camp Rhino. We did constant six-plane sorties, all at night; obviously, the reason is because night was priority for secrecy and also just for the threat of any air-to-air or Stingers that Afghanistan or the Taliban had.

JM: So you are flying on night-vision goggles (NVGs) all this time?

MH: Actually, the Marine KC-130 in the regular Marine Corps was the only platform that didn’t have NVGs. I have been qualified with NVGs because I had flown in the Reserve squadron; the Reserves had the new airplanes with NVG lighting and were NVG compatible, but the Fleet Marine Corps, as we call it, did not. That brings up why we crashed one airplane later on, in my opinion. The reason we didn’t have NVGs in that one platform was because, on the books, we were buying the brand new KC-130J model from Lockheed so it’s like, “Why upgrade the old car if you’re getting a new car?” and that was the way of thinking. There wasn’t a war going on and we were slated to bring this new plane online, so that’s why we were the only platform in the Marines without NVGs. And we were doing all the night flying in the mountains with low-illumed, unimproved dirt strips with no lights on them, so it was very challenging, obviously. To do what we had to do, we flew overweight; we flew at emergency war weights. Not only were we flying airplanes heavier than we’ve ever flown them, we’re flying at night, in the dark, to a desert landing strip in a war zone. In fact, it was on the darkest night you can possibly pick, because you always pick by the lunar chart those zero-zero illum nights where we have the advantage, if we have goggles. If not, it’s like the postage-stamp carrier landings in the sea at night. Basically, the Marines on the ground will put out five little lights: four to make a box and one to show you which way the box goes. We would do a self-contained global positioning system (GPS) approach run by our navigators. Of course, our navigators in the Marine Corps are all enlisted until they become warrant officers, and we’re the only service that still does that,
as far as I know. I’m not sure if the Coast Guard uses enlisted navigators but the U.S. Air Force uses commissioned officers, so they’ll have captains and colonels and majors guiding their planes from the backseat where we usually have enlisted, which is kind of interesting. They’re very motivated and they’re very sharp. As a matter of fact, they’re trained by the U.S. Air Force, but it’s an interesting story. Anyway, one of our hardest challenges was flying at night in the mountains.

JM: Once you got word that you were going to be operating in Afghanistan, what were the preparations you guys made? How far out did you know you’d be flying in these conditions without NVGs?

MH: We really didn’t have time. You know, each MEU is out there for six months and replaced by another MEU for six months, which is replaced by another MEU for six months, and you can use SOC, technically, once they’re qualified. They train up together so they make a combined squadron of four to six Harriers, four to six Cobras, eight to 10 CH-46s and the standard is four CH-53E Super Stallions. Those guys will work as a team together to get qualified to go do their stint; and when they come back, they can recoup, go back to their old squadrons, and they start that cycle again. With the Marine KC-130, we’re always in the cycle. We always have to provide the one floating, so it’s not like only those two airplanes with those four crews go to those guys. It’s a fungible asset, like money in the bank. When they call, the two good airplanes and the crew we pick go on this one. When that plane breaks or has to fly back, we’ll send another plane and it might have another crew just as qualified. We maintain our quals that way, and the U.S. Marines and Navy traditionally do things like that. But 9/11 hit and we were already gone into October. We got to use Bright Star to get a little prepared. We didn’t totally turn it into a night exercise; we just tried to work on the normal logistics stuff in getting guys qualified and ready for the different types of missions. But we were definitely all qualified to go do those sorts of things. We focused primarily on air-to-air refueling, the tanking aspect, which we did very little in this theater because the Marines needed us to haul trash and that’s what we’re real good at also.

JM: Did you end up experiencing any major terrain problems, because Egypt, of course, is pretty flat and not perhaps the best place to prepare for an Afghanistan deployment.

MH: Egypt is pretty flat, exactly; North Carolina is very flat; fly to the Meds is pretty flat. And so now you fly to Pakistan at night. Jacobabad is in a valley and that’s fine, but it’s a Third World style air force, a Pakistani airbase is what it was. We slept in old hangars. But on the way to Afghanistan, there’s a mountain range between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and that’s why they always talk about the borders are so rugged. You’re flying over a mountain range on the way there and then you’re landing in the high desert, which is not bad for terrain inbound. I’ve had to fly Bagram to Kabul and, really, those mountains are part of the lower Himalayas. You can image that 14,000 or 15,000-foot peaks in the dark are very intimidating when you know they’re there but don’t have NVGs, the benefit of approach radar, approach navigation aids and have reduced comms – that’s when it gets a little more challenging. But we did pretty well.

JM: You said you were flying the two D-Day missions in there. Could you basically walk me through those?
MH: Sure. We had free reign on the air tasking order (ATO) because we were going to be low and run these sorties, and it was hard to say which one would be exact. But we had a fairly good skeleton of what we’d do. I believe the first night I flew in there twice, so a solid eight hours of flying. I flew from Jacobabad heavy direct to Camp Rhino, and I believe I was the number three airplane. The lead plane was a Raider aircraft, and we used that call sign because that’s their squadron call sign at VMGR-352. So we were Raider call signs, the six planes, and we had a route designed in there and had to worry about max airplane on the ground (MOG) at this dirt strip and offloading in the dark. Because we were cautious with no ground support equipment, we left our motors running, which is a safety issue. Obviously, these motors are blowing a lot of sand on the Marines that are offloading cargo – bullets, beans, and band-aids, other Marines or whatever rolling stock equipment – so that made it a little more challenging on us.

JM: Now, are these the first Marines to hit the ground?

MH: Yes, we took the very first Marines.

JM: The first regular force –?

MH: Yes, the first regular force on the ground was us; we brought them in and they were Marines. I think at Camp Rhino – and this is just my speculation from what I’ve heard – there were some Special Forces (SF) or other government agency (OGA) guys on the ground to make sure it was clear. It wasn’t a dirt strip as you would think of a desert strip with sand. It’s a very fine talcum powder lake bed, if you can image that fine dust on a dirt road in Oklahoma kind of dust. It was amazing because you would walk in it and could see it ripple ahead of your boots. So we landed there and offloaded for numerous chalks all night. One of the big problems we had was fuel available and the ability to do all these chalks with a finite amount of gas. We didn’t have the ability to run back and refuel. Jacobabad was the only place with fuel and not a lot of fuel trucks and not a lot of fuel actually. So we could get filled during the day, but now let’s go out at night and play. You had to utilize all the fuel on the plane to do as many runs back and forth, as many sorties, so what that did was require your first takeoff and your first landing to be overweight, over maximum. We were in that emergency war weight category. Now what that does is decrease life of the plane; planes can fly that heavy but it wears the wings out, wears other things out. It’s also a safety factor; you’re so heavy that if you lose a motor on takeoff, which could happen, those three remaining propellers might not have enough lift to keep you flying on a hot night – even though it was November in Pakistan – to get above those mountains. So that was a challenge. The Marine KC-130 is not air-to-air refuelable; we do air-to-air but we can’t receive fuel like many of the Air Force’s assets can. That, to me, would have been a huge advantage if the Marine Corps Herc – in the joint world or a world of different contingencies – could have went up to the tanker, all those tankers above, and got our squirt of fuel. It would have kept us from landing heavy and would have opened up some options. A couple weeks down the road was when India and Pakistan were having their nuclear problems, so our host nation support started to run out, which was bringing fuel to the U.S. on their airbase. They wanted that fuel in their fuel farms for their jets, as a contingency. As Marines, we do rapid ground refueling. We had the idea to ask the Air Force, “Hey, you’re bringing C-17s in here, bringing color TVs for the Air Force guys while we’re fighting. How about bringing and offloading some fuel?” It took a day or so to get those guys to do that, and I
think it's something they hadn't really thought of. One C-17 may hold 350,000 pounds of fuel or more, so that's an incredible amount. So that was challenging, flying heavy, landing heavy, at least the first few until you burned down that first 10,000 or 15,000 pounds of fuel. Now you're on your third or fourth run and into your normal weight of flying the airplane in training. To decrease the risk, we put the aircraft commander in the left seat at all times vice swapping. We figured the most experienced guy would be in the side of the plane that we'd fly from in emergencies and he'd control the show. We tried to minimize the risk by strictly sticking to procedures, being in the books, and making sure we were dotting the i's and crossing the t's on all our safety items and issues. It worked out very well.

JM: Did you ever have an enemy threat, an air defense threat? Did you ever come under attack?

MH: Going into Camp Rhino we weren’t, but we thought that we could be. We thought there might be anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) around. We were especially worried about the Stinger missiles the CIA had given Afghanistan to fight the Russians. So in our tactics, we did high approaches into Camp Rhino, flying with the lights off, flying in high above the threat, and then doing a corkscrew down. The thing we learned in the corkscrew, just pilot stuff, was when you're flying in the dark and leaning to the left, you’d get the leans when you couldn’t see the horizon. So after coming out of it to land the plane heavy for the first time in combat and having that perpetual feeling that you’re going to the left even though you’re not, we quickly learned to do two corkscrews left, two corkscrews right and undo it. That worked out much better, and we learned a bunch of those small aviator techniques. I flew a mission to Bagram with General Mattis and I was the first plane to get to go up there. It was controlled by the Brits, I believe, Bagram Airfield; there was a Brit controller there. We took some tracer fire on the way in.

JM: General Mattis was in the airplane?

MH: In my airplane, yes. I told him about the tracers and, in classic Marine style, he just said, “Hooah, Marine.” It was pretty interesting to land up there with the mountains around. That night, the moon was out a little bit so we could see some of these mountains and that kind of opened our eyes. Landing there was like going into a surreal movie. There were broken tanks next to the runway, weeds growing up in the runway cracks. As I was landing with no lights on, we clicked one taxi light on going down just to get a look at where the turn was, and at that moment a jackal ran across the runway, so it was very Hollywood. It was like, “Cue the jackal,” to make the scene look good.

JM: You mentioned that you think the reason you lost one plane was due to the lack of NVGs. Can you expand upon that?

MH: Sure. It was obviously investigated and I wasn’t part of it. I left because I got selected to go serve in Canada, so they pulled me out early. It was my Christmas present, so I basically left on 2 or 3 January 2002. I rotated home after having flown all these missions – and we were flying all night missions, again, and flying two on and one off. We had a six-plane DET with only 120 total people running six KC-130s, so the size of the DET was very small and lean like the Marines like to keep it. But for that long of a time, it was probably too small – and this is my opinion, not the Marine Corps’ opinion. We could have used some augmentation; but at the time, even back home didn’t know how much involved we were in this war. It was really not on
Fox; it really wasn’t on anything immediately post 9/11. For instance, there were two C-130 CSAR birds there from the U.S. Air Force; they had 500 people in their squadron and they weren’t flying. They were waiting to fly a CSAR mission. It was interesting. Anyway, I was sitting in Disney World, as a matter of fact. I had taken my family to Disney World for missing Christmas and Thanksgiving, and I saw the ticker come across on headline news that a KC-130 had crashed in Pakistan killing all seven on board. The Marine Corps was flying the old planes so we had no cockpit voice recorders or data recorders. We had them on some airplanes but we didn’t maintain them because – God bless the Marines and I love the Marines – they were getting this new airplane: “The old ones aren’t working; we’re getting this new plane; we don’t need to fix that.” The other thing is equipment: GPSs and inertial navigation units (INUs). You know, we’re flying older airplanes and sometimes those don’t work as well. What I think happened was they crashed in the vicinity of Shamsi, that runway I told you about; the Saudi prince’s runway. It had lights, but there were numerous things that went wrong: it was a very mountainous area.

JM: Was this on landing or takeoff?

MH: They weren’t taking off; they were on approach. I didn’t read the investigation so I’m just giving you Mitch Hoines’ version of what I think happened, just for posterity in this interview. I’m not trying to dime out the Air Force, but we had switched from Marines to U.S. Air Force controllers at that airfield. In my opinion, the Marines were always awake when we flew in there and would turn the lights on.

JM: Because you were all fellow Marines?

MH: Part of that, exactly. I have great friends in the Air Force and I was prior enlisted in the Air National Guard, but when they took it over we started to have a problem with comms, of them literally not being awake or on the radio when we were calling them, so we wanted them to turn the radio on. You can’t land on a totally black runway like that; you’ve got to have something, like a chem light, so they would turn the lights on and there it is and we’d land. With no lights you’d have no way to do it. Anyway, our technique to wake them up was to shoot a 500-foot approach, a low approach. They’d hear this Herc now and run to their radio – in my head this is what they’re doing – turn it on: “Hey, Raider, roger, clear to land, lights are coming on.” But without the benefit of the voice or data recorder from my friend’s airplane, we don’t know what they did. We do know that they did one or two of those approaches, and we weren’t doing practice approaches in the war. What I think happened is maybe those guys didn’t wake up or maybe the radio was broken. But after the second go around, an explosion or a fire was seen. I’m not going to get into anything else of what they did; we just don’t have a way of knowing. My point for this interview is that it would have been very nice to have NVGs to see this terrain. Basically, it could have been comm air, mountains, high, night. I told you about the amount of work we were doing, crew rest issues. There are all those issues, those little things that line up for all accidents, and we definitely had it by then. So bless their hearts, they didn’t make it. But I really wished we’d had NVGs because it might have eliminated one of those factors, which can stop an accident. But anyway, I was back home then – and literally 32 days later, we crashed another airplane in training at 29 Palms. No one got killed but it was a night mission in the desert at 29 Palms; and it took those two then to finally get people to say, “Hey, you guys don’t have NVGs?” General Mattis was one of them looking at the issue: “I
thought all Marine airplanes had NVGs.” “Yes sir, all of them but the Hercs.” And we’ve always been like the stepchild of Marine Corps aviation because we’re not pointy and we’re not a helicopter. Needless to say, NVGs materialized on all of our airplanes after that. So in OIF, thank goodness we had all the equipment we needed.

JM: You said you’re assaulting some 450 miles inland and it’s my understanding that this is the longest amphibious assault ever done by the Marine Corps. Hadn’t this previously been the preserve of Army airborne units?

MH: Exactly.

JM: Do you have a sense of why the change was, why you guys were called on to execute it? Also, how do you account for the success?

MH: Number one, I think support from our commandant and General Mattis. In addition, what Marines bring to the fight is this Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTAF) that all works together, trains together to do one thing. And then when you put a MEUSOC off shore, you get this whole team to project. So our advantage as Marines was we were in the theater; we also had the capability, the fighting power, the right size and the right command and control. As to airborne units taking the field, and I’m sure they had plans drawn up – but coming from the continental United States (CONUS), flying many, many hours to do that, and then not having the backup logistics trail like the Marine Corps. A MEU has about 15 days sustainment, a Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) has 30 and a MEF has up to 60, so we can take care of ourselves for that long before the Title 10 requirements of the Army really have to kick in. So we’ve got this package out there that self-sustains and has its own organic air: that’s fixed wing, that’s rotary wing, that’s tanker, that’s cargo, that’s us. It makes sense looking at these exercises here in school that, of course, that’s the right package to use. Part of it, I think, in the Marine Corps was also selling my airplane, the KC-130, back to the Marine Corps on what we could and couldn’t do. We’ve always trained for the air-to-air refueling, and that’s an incredible force multiplier for training and support for our air assets. We’ve always had that ability since Vietnam to haul cargo and troops and we do those things, but we had never exercised them. It was part of the sales pitch with the helicopter and grunt Marines for getting the MV-22 Osprey to fly over the horizon. “We need that capability, we need that capability.” And then the Marine KC-130s, we said, “We’ve already got that capability; we can fly over those mountains that it can’t; we’re pressurized and heated; and oh by the way, we can haul four times as much and go three times as far.” So it was almost like selling back a capability we already had, so that was pretty interesting.

JM: You mentioned that there was a British controller that you guys dealt with. Were there any other coalition forces you were assisting or helping refuel or anything like that?

MH: Not really. We were basically assigned to the MEU because that was all that was there, actually. I mean, SF was on the ground. I think the 101st Airborne Division was guarding that base in Jacobabad and the Air Force detachment with their CSAR were at Jacobabad too, so we liaised with them. We got some support like intel, logistics support, from the U.S. Air Force and the Army. We ate their chow and that helped. They had tents for us. But otherwise, no, we were pretty much a Marine show at that time.
JM: Were you exclusively a pilot during this time or were you also performing other duties on the ground?

MH: Both. Because we’re so small and this is the way we classically do it: I was the operations officer for our VMGR-252 detachment, those two planes that came with our 30 folks. As second in command of our DET, I did those type admin things; but as ops, though, I was the second senior Marine pilot on the ground. I backed up our DET commanding officer (CO), who was a major. You’re basically just part of that command element that’s keeping all the wheels turning correctly. As aircraft commanders, you flew two nights, slept days, and then on your third night and day you worked, so you didn’t get a day off. You flew two, did work before and after, you slept during the day in these big hot tents, and showed up for work again every afternoon. On your “day off,” you ran the DET from the DET tent, helped plan missions, and helped the other guys who were actually flying stay coordinated and focused. You did pass intel, you passed weather, you passed situation reports (SITREPs) and things like that back and forth.

JM: How religious were you guys about varying routes and things like that?

MH: We had a few set routes and checkpoints and procedures to use. We were not too worried in Pakistan, but we did tactical arrivals and departures and varied it up on how and where we arrived from in the dark, just minimizing threats. Another thing with the old Marine Hercs is, I think, only four out of the six had the defensive electronic countermeasures on board. We had two old F Models, which are the 1960s planes, that obviously had no NVGs, no voice or data recorders, but also no chaff and flare dispensers or missile warning systems. So that’s definitely cutoff criteria for any U.S. Air Force bird going into combat. But it’ our way of thinking and, again, I’m not busting on my Marines. We had to do what we had to do, especially after 9/11, to get the planes over there. It’s not the most ideal; but the way we perceived the threat, it wasn’t a show stopper. Definitely nice to have, though, if somebody is shooting at you.

JM: You’ve mentioned NVGs. Are there any other tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) that you can talk about on an unclassified level that you think were important or you’d like to share?

MH: One that worked was the way we used the ATO. Because there were so many sorties that we flew, we basically told the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC): “Hey, just give the Raiders six open lines; we will tell them where we’ll be,” so as long as we had a squawk. Basically, when the controllers are looking at us, they see I’m a C-130, I’m flying down low, Raider call sign, and I have that squawk. But I don’t have to be in this route, in this thing, at this time, and this clearance to go to this area, because we are flying back and forth across. That helped make it easier for us to operate. “You go down to Pasni and get this load; it has to be first. Then you go there, then go to Shamsi and dump some of that fuel, and then come back and do this.” It gave us the flexibility we needed. A couple of those airplanes did not have the encrypted radios, the KY-58 radio which, again, bless my Marines: we go and do it. Obviously, as an operator, I want that stuff now. I want it on every plane. I want it perfect and I want to be able to flip my switch. But because of the threat, the way it worked and as fast as it fell, we didn’t think the enemy was doing what our traditional Soviet enemy would be doing: monitoring our radio calls and having a very well spoken, American accented guy turn you the wrong way into a mountain. That wasn’t the case. When we did the second D-Day into
Kandahar - which was in December now, almost a month later after flying into Rhino - the entire MEU drove over land. We flew the other assets into Kandahar and opened that up. I’ll talk about that field in a second. We switched to an Air Force controller on the ground again, because now the Air Force had flown some missions into Camp Rhino with C-17s, which was great, and they also had the controllers in Kandahar once we started going in there. What happened was that the ATO and the special instruction set (SPIN) said to talk in the clear – which is normal non-encrypted radio – going into Kandahar so everybody is on the same sheet of music. It’s a common aviator technique. Unit’s coming in, it’s a joint exercise, and they were like, “We’re not doing that because standard operating procedure (SOP) is what I was told in person: my squadron says we have to go covered because we’re in combat now.” That’s the debate about new guys coming in and they’re all ready for war. Old guys have been there and have figured out TTPs, like you said. So they would come in on NVGs and talking covered, in the red. If you’re not in the red in your plane, you can’t hear them coming; you don’t even know they’re coming; and you don’t even get to hear a one-sided conversation from the tower: you just hear silence. The enlisted controllers on the ground were doing that and we had asked them not to, also according to the instructions. So there were numerous times that we would be flying an approach in and the U.S. Air Force flash call sign would be coming in, thinking he’s priority. That’s what I’m learning here at the Command and General Staff College, this whole joint thing. You have to put away your squadron SOP and have the SOP of how to fly into a theater. Because if we bumped metal on those then, obviously they’d be talking about that and it would be fixed now. So those are interesting things: call signs, covered, guys with NVGs, guys without. You’ve got to turn the lights on or off, depending, because an NVG plane wants to stay NVG on the way down, but then he’s got to taxi in. The forklift’s got headlights on, maybe it’s not tactical, maybe it is, but there are conflicts there with different types of airframes. Kandahar was interesting because it was a long runway. I think it might be an 11,000-foot runway but we had bombed it. So the night we went in, it was like 3,700 feet long, so you had that little short strip again to land, which was actually shorter than Camp Rhino. So that was fun and made for some tactical challenges, to get your airplane stopped before the first crater in the runway. Now this time, we weren’t over gross weight; we were at half max gross weight for landing. So I think I landed at 155,000, which is a lot of weight and that’s a short patch to do it; you’ve got to do it just right. So I definitely got to brush up my pilot skills over there, which was awesome. That was basically another cargo running, Berlin airlift type thing of bringing in Marines, bringing in pallets and pallets and pallets of stuff to get set up. That’s also where they had the initial prison, the initial cage full of Taliban.

JM: Were you involved in any detainee movements?

MH: I didn’t fly the detainees. I flew one dead body, which turned out to be an Afghani.

JM: A Northern Alliance guy?

MH: I don’t know and I don’t want to go down the classified thing. Basically, we had some dead and they wanted to make sure it wasn’t American. So they gathered it up from some battlefront – could have been Northern, could have been whatever – and went to the ship and got looked at. It turned out it was an Afghani man, so we got tasked and honorably flew it back to Camp Rhino and took care of it that way.
JM: Did you end up having to do any CSAR missions?

MH: We did not, although we were always prepared to do that or do any radio relay. We saw a lot of explosions on the first few nights, saw stuff blowing up below us, but mostly hauling Marines back and forth. Now one night at Camp Rhino, a little story: I flew in and it was one of the days where I got to stay over during the day, because we always wanted to be gone by daylight. General Mattis said they were going to do a raid that night and so we had one KC-130 stay at Camp Rhino for CASEVAC out of the country. I was lucky enough to get that mission and hang out with the Marines at Camp Rhino with General Mattis. Because we were all on the night shift, we were all sleeping on the airplane and, well, it’s hot in the airplane so we’re sleeping under the wing on the desert floor. We’re dusty and dirty and not used to a Marine general walking up and kicking you in the boots. Well, we popped up to attention: “Hey, hooah, sir” and he’s like, “Hey, Marine, you the aircraft commander?” “Yes, sir.” He’s like, “Tonight you guys standby for CASEVAC. It’s going to get hot around here and if any of these zappers come through the line, I want center of mass, double tap, two shots. I don’t want you shooting any of my Marines, but I want you to put that guy down, center of mass, let them come in close and take him down.” “Roger that, sir.” I’m thinking, “Does he know something I don’t know? I thought we were kind of secure out here.” Then that night actually, it was interesting – real quick story. Basically, we’d do the checklist down to clear number three engine, so in case somebody came we’d be right there on the checklist just to start the motor and go. I was in the cockpit with the copilot and the other guys were kind of resting in the back. All of a sudden, flares go off, big trip flares, looks like Apocalypse Now out there. Everything lights up and it’s surreal, like in training. So now you’ve got all this light over this field that’s just been beautifully black and your eyes are adjusting to it. All of a sudden explosions and machine gun fire and you go, “Holy cow!” The net lights up, because we’re listening to the tactical net, and something hit the trip wires or guys were coming in. It goes crazy. The helicopter guys, they run for their Cobras – and there’s a line of helicopters parked in the dirt behind us. A Cobra and a Huey were ahead of us, maybe a 70 yards, not even. Cobra takes off, Huey takes off with that powdery dirt. Huey gets to 10 or 15 feet, we can see the glow of him in the dust, and he crashed. We’re like, “Holy smokes, now we will have wounded; what’s going on”? Flares are still going, machine guns going, and it was obviously pretty exciting. I’m thinking, “Okay, what do we have to do?” Well, there’s no fire department at a place like that. You kind of lock up for just a second and go, “Wait, what do we do?” Well, no one’s running to help them because we’re the closest ones. There were actually other Marines on the way, which was awesome; these guys come out of nowhere. Anyway, I told my guys in the back: “Grab the fire extinguishers from the plane,” which are little tiny five-pounders, “run up there, see if you can help and get those bodies. Remember, guys are going to be burned and it’s going to terrible, so get the corpsman and do some buddy aid. Crew, be ready to evacuate these guys and burning flesh stinks, okay, so be ready for that and be strong. Let’s take care of these Marines. I don’t know if we’ll be ready to leave right away because there might be more wounded. Standby for that.” So my Marines are grabbing the fire extinguishers and are off headset. I had one Marine, our flight mechanic, on the long chord out front and I had a change of thought. I saw the Marines running to help those guys, and we actually had one Chevy pickup that had a fire nozzle on it that we’d brought in. So they’re putting the fire out and, using NVG binoculars, I could see guys climbing out of that wreck, which was great. I said, “Stop those two Marines! I need my Marines. I don’t need two of my crewmembers gone and hurt in the fire and not able to use them to fly away.” They’re the guys I need as loadmasters to help take care of any bodies or wounded guys in the
back. Well, they were fired up to go and help, but they obeyed. As it turned out, both pilots
were fine. I think they had a crew chief that got knocked up a little bit, but everybody was fine.
No Marines were hurt that night, as far as I know, and we kind of calmed down. I think the
story was that they thought there were some Taliban feeling our lines out over there – the desert
lines they had set up. So that was very interesting; pretty exciting for a small town kid. That’s
pretty much my experience: the war stories from being over there, a little bit of the background
KC-130 woes, KC-130 winning the war, taking us in that far, being utilized that much. We got
NVGs out of it and we brought two MEUs the furthest in history up until that time.

JM: Do you recall how many sorties you flew?

MH: My air medal says like 110 night combat missions, but I flew about 150, I think.

JM: These were individual missions?

MH: Each sortie – so one night you might get two or three, but takeoff and landing is a sortie.
You’re flying eight or nine hours of flight time in a night, and it might be a 10-hour night of
being out there, sitting on the ground, loading and unloading. I’d hesitate to quote how many
Marines and how much cargo because I don’t remember now. Nonetheless, it was an incredible
amount when you consider one of those missions is 25,000 to 35,000 pounds of stuff, not
including fuel.

JM: What’s a full load of Marines?

MH: That’s a good question. You’ve seen backs of C-130s and such with these red nylon seats.
Well, fortunately, we don’t do it that way. The loadmaster from my squadron actually flew in
Vietnam, so we had the senior Marine loadmaster of the Marine Corps, which was great.
Anyway, these Marines show up – and you’ve seen them with these big tortoise shell packs,
huge, 100 pounds, that these guys are carrying in. There were no seats set up in the cargo bay
because they won’t fit in the seats; and where are you going to stack that, and when you get off,
how are you going to find your individual pack in that pack mountain? So you march them in,
turn them around, sit on your pack, five, six or seven across. I’m not sure Lockheed or the Navy
Safety Center will be thrilled if they listen to this, but that’s how we did it and it worked great.
Because, you know, if you crash that plane or get shot, what’s that seatbelt going to do? Sure,
they’re fine in a rough landing or something, but you’re sitting on this big soft pack. That way,
in combat, when you get out – we had a cargo strap that was their one seatbelt; those big heavy
cargo straps across all their laps. You told the guy on the far right, “Here’s how you unlatch it,”
he’s goes click and they’re all out. So when you land, you pull in and they march out just like
the Roman Legion out the back: five across down the ramp. It’s awesome and they’re ready. So
anyway, the U.S. Air Force flash got to fly into Pasni and get a run. Everybody wants a piece of
the pie. Finally, “Okay, yeah, we’ll take some extra air support; go there and tell them.” What
are they doing? Well, they’re setting up seats. It takes a couple good guys like 20 to 30 minutes
to set the back of an airplane up, but in a combat zone is no time to be doing it – trying to set the
back up so you can load Marines the way your rules says you should load them. It’s great, it’s
their plane, they’re being safe, but it’s something that might have been nice to work out,
because the Marines expected to get on just like our plane and be gone. Basically what we did is
say, “Okay, we’ll take the Marines, you take the cargo and don’t set your back up.” We briefed
the Air Force on how to fly into Kandahar on the routes we had, which the ATO did not have set up and we should’ve had more in depth instructions on procedures for flying in and out of an uncontrolled airfield. We did, as Marines. Anyway, so I briefed the Air Force captain and sent my enlisted navigator to talk to his captain navigator. Well, my enlisted guy squared him away and dammed if those guys didn’t do exactly the opposite of what we told them not to. They came beak to beak with us when they came in because they went the exact opposite way. So those are frustrating things, especially if someone would’ve gotten hurt when you’ve already briefed it and asked them to do it. Those are details that I hope have gotten changed with joint ops. You’ve got to get down to that level of detail, especially when everybody wants a piece of the new war. It’s like Grenada: everybody wanted a piece. This is the new thing. The Marines are in now, the Air Force is jumping up and down, “Hey, we want to fly those combat missions,” because we all do. So those are the details that I’d like to see squared away.

JM: As kind of a capstone here, is there anything from your deployment that you feel has made you a better leader or contributed to your professional development in an especially positive way?

MH: I’m pretty fond now of going, and I think we all are. It’s kind of like laughing at a funeral: you’re going to laugh a little bit, whether you’re nervous or excited. It did help me mature with the flying and the leading of Marines by having to face the fact that, yes, these guys can die. Hauling the dead Afghani guy made me think: “This isn’t just the video game or the big training thing with us kicking butt. This is a dead person here.” And you know, hopefully it was a bad guy and not Farmer Joe. I don’t know that. So it matured me that way and that’ll help prepare me for command later, to keep my young studs in line, to help prepare them for it. In combat, you lose people; going to the funerals for those guys who were the first dead of this new war, that matured me. The flying definitely matured me, to go back and be a commander and say, “Hey, I’ve done that.” I finally got to do that real world stuff so now my training will be more realistic. I also got an idea of the joint-ness and the big picture. It was an awesome experience and I wouldn’t trade it for the world; and if I could go to Iraq right now, I would. So yes, it did help my leadership. I think it helped put me to that next level in the military, driving home the realization that these are your kids, you take care of your troops as always, but they might not be there the next day - and that’s something all leaders need to have in their hip pocket. All citizens need to know that these guys are going off to fight and possibly die; they put their lives on the line. So it makes you proud of the Marines, sailors and airmen and soldiers that do that – and these are young kids, 18, 20 years old. They didn’t join up for the great college benefits that some people want to say. Yes, they’re great things, but the bottom line is “fight and die,” so it’s pretty inspiring.

JM: Any other issues we didn’t bring up that you’d like to talk about, or any other points you’d like to make?

MH: I don’t think so, John. It was pretty nice just to tell my side of the story in this kind of setting. I’m sorry if I didn’t have a lot of the details of how much we took in or whatever.

JM: Well, it’s no problem at all if you’d like to track down that information and add it in later on.
MH: And I think if someone is using this for research they can find those stats later. It was two MEUs, each one equaling about 2,000 to 2,500 guys, depending on how they came in, but that information is out there. When I left it was classified and I didn’t get to keep a little journal of all the good stats that we made. But anyway, I appreciate it.

JM: Thanks very much for your time.