

# SGM TOM HOSKINSON'S EXPERIENCE AS A SENIOR ENLISTED ADVISOR

OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM-JOINT INTERAGENCY TASK

FORCE-EAST

BAGRAM AIR BASE AFGHANISTAN 2005

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## ABSTRACT

During the year 2005, I was deployed to Afghanistan as the Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Joint Interagency Task Force - East at Bagram Airbase in Afghanistan. This experience was the highlight and culmination of my 20 year US Army Reserve career. I was able to experience some of the best officer leadership and the finest Soldiers and service members I have ever seen. I also had to deal with some challenging personnel issues. I saw the full spectrum of military operations with specific emphasis on Military Intelligence Collection and Analysis efforts. I was also able to gain valuable experience in leadership and interpersonal skills that I will try to share with the reader.

In March of 2004, I was assigned to the 2400<sup>th</sup> Military Intelligence Group at Fort Sheridan, Illinois. I served as the detachment sergeant of a unit that concentrated its efforts on supporting various warfighters for the National Ground Intelligence Center in Charlottesville, Virginia. We were in the third year of what was then called the Global War on Terrorism. My commanding officer asked me if I was interested in an opportunity to serve my country and expand my US Army Reserve resume at an overseas location. I then contacted my next higher ranking civilian counterpart, my wife, and told her that I was being offered this opportunity. She of course was not surprised at this development and supported me completely.

I had been serving in the US Army Reserve in Military Intelligence (MI) and Special Operations Units since 1985. Most of my time was spent training or in operations within the United States. I was trained in MI collection and analysis and spent many days training and preparing for war. I saw numerous field and command post exercises against fictional and notional enemies but never against a real foe. I spent 1996 in Bosnia assigned to the Dayton Peace Accords Implementation Force (IFOR) in the Former Republic of Yugoslavia. I had not been deployed overseas since. In 2001, I was serving as the First Sergeant of the Headquarters Company of the 16<sup>th</sup> Psychological Operations Battalion. My wife had recently opened her own business and I had promised her that I would step down from this very time consuming role and accept a position in an Instructor Unit. On the weekend of 7-8 September 2001, I reenlisted in the reserves and handed my company over to a good friend of mine. Three days later, the horrific attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> occurred. I sat stunned and amazed and realized that the company that I had trained and led would now be going into combat without me.

Staying true to my word, I assumed my role as an MI Course Manager at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin and spent the next two years trying to find an assignment that would allow me to become engaged in the fight. In the fall of 2004, my good friend and mentor, Major Brian Baker, called me and asked me to take a position as a detachment sergeant in the 2400<sup>th</sup>. He assured me that he could find me a mobilization tour I agreed immediately and joined the unit that next week. This set the stage for my deployment to Afghanistan as the Senior Enlisted Advisor (SEA) of the Joint Interagency Task Force-East (JIATF-E).

The JIATF-E is a group of military and civilian intelligence professionals whose mission was to find, collect, and analyze information in the Central Command Area of Responsibility. Prior to arriving, I spent many restless nights trying to imagine the types of leadership issues I would face. I had served in a joint environment before while deployed to Bosnia. My experience there was limited to a smaller team and the environment was very stable when compared with that of Afghanistan. I had become used to dealing with senior officers during my career but now would be interfacing with General Officers on a regular basis. I eventually decided to just take each challenge one at a time and deal with them with the best interests of the Soldiers in mind.

My first exposure to the officers of this unit was refreshing. MAJ JP McGee, a Ranger Battalion veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan, was the JIATF-E Director. MAJ McGee sat me down and asked me what I thought my job was. In good Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) fashion, I told him that I had three major jobs: Take care of my Soldiers, execute the JIATF-E mission and make his job easier. He agreed with these and added one: "Make the Director look good." That

last comment has truly been valuable to me. I found that if you make your unit and the Soldiers in it look good, everyone wins. The commander can take credit for this accomplishment; The Soldiers in the unit can take true pride in their hard work and the Senior Enlisted can sit back and know what an important role they played. MAJ McGee had an excellent combination of leadership and interpersonal skills. These were invaluable in this challenging environment. He taught me the value of being flexible, fair and firm. Any type of negative or prejudiced decision or statement in this arena could cause friction on a level that would bring political attention of the most unwanted and uncomfortable nature. MAJ McGee's guidance on political climate and culture was valuable. Good officers like MAJ McGee are a true treasure.

The JIATF-E assignment allowed me to be exposed to some of the best and most modern MI operations the US military has ever conducted. In my previous MI experience, I had never seen all the Intelligence disciplines working together at the same time. I now had the opportunity to see surveillance assets working in direct support of the warfighters. Modern technologies such as the Predator and Global Hawk were combined with good hard analytical work from every discipline. I was able to see how gaps in coverage were covered by various platforms. The intent was to deliver seamless coverage of the battle space. At times this was very difficult but other times it worked flawlessly. Young analysts gave me a new appreciation for the advantage of modern computers and large complex interconnected databases. The power of their skills meshed well with the senior civilian analysts who have been studying some of the entities for several years.

Many of the staff were on 90 day rotations from their host agencies or organizations. Some were on full one-year deployments and there were others with varying time lengths in between. There were advantages and disadvantages to this. The first problem that I had to deal with was some jealousy towards the shorter tours by those on longer tours. While the professionalism of the individual kept this under control, there was an underlying tension that at times reared its head. A real advantage to the various time lengths is that you avoid the large influx and "brain drain" of an entire entity rotating out of a location at one time. This requires a complete turnover and loss of institutional knowledge. Yes, there are usually very effective transition efforts and the negative effects are reduced by this. But, I think there is always something lost in that type of rotation. An advantage to a shorter tour can be the impact on the individual's family and home life. Long extended tours can strain relationships, friendships, marriages and sometimes financial situations.

One way that MAJ McGee and I both attempted to keep morale high and reduce stress was require mandatory Sunday social events. When the operational tempo allowed, Sunday was a reduced work day. Most normal JIATF-E work days extended for 12-14 hours. Sunday was changed so that the staff could sleep later, get some laundry done and relax. Volleyball was a popular diversion and was made voluntarily mandatory. You had a choice to work or play. Most chose to play. We also celebrated any and all holidays possible. If a birthday was found among the staff, we would capitalize and try to break up the week.

Prior to my assignment as the SEA, it had been several years since I had direct contact and influence on Soldiers straight out of Advance Individual Training. My new assignment

brought this to back to me and reminded me of the challenges of these new moldable and invaluable assets. Three of my freshly graduated and now deployed Soldiers were a pleasure to work with. They needed very little guidance and were eager to work as many hours as I would allow them. Their work product was amazing when compared to their experience level. Their efforts eventually led to very successful opportunities for Allied Air and Ground Forces.

On the darker side of the coin, two of my Soldiers presented me with an embarrassing and complex situation. They decided not to exercise an appropriate level of self control and were found in violation of several of the Commanding General's orders. This was certainly an embarrassment to the unit and the Soldiers but the final responsibility lay on me for their mistake. I had let them become influenced by senior civilians and their habits. Their professional influence on my Soldiers was appropriate and helped to develop their professional and technical skills. However, their actions on a personal "off duty" area was not appropriate. I failed to recognize this negative influence and allowed these Soldiers to lose their military bearing. The final decision by the Commander was influenced by my input on these Soldiers. They were allowed to be reassigned to different duty locations and received appropriate punishments.

I have tried to pass on my experience as the JIATF-E SEA to my peers and subordinates in the last few years. I have done this in the form of informal conversations, professional development sessions or over a beer during down time. I recognize that the lessons that I learned, often the hard way, can help them to deal with their career challenges. I have seen some of my Soldiers from my old detachment go on to bigger more challenging assignments.

One accepted a commission as a 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant and another chose warrant officer as his path.

Each was deployed to Iraq. I hope that in the following years that I can catch up with them and find out if I had any impact on their professional or personal development. I can only hope that my influence was positive. For that will be my legacy.



## REFERENCES

All information contained in this paper are drawn the personal experience of the author.

## APPENDIX: PHOTOS



SGM Hoskinson, left and MAJ JP McGee second from right, enjoy a break from volleyball with JIATF-E members



SGM Hoskinson on a field trip