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On Dangerous Ground

Frederick takes the guidon upon assumption of command of the 584th MAC.

An Army company led by Joseph Frederick ’05 disarms roadside bombs in Afghanistan.

Story by
TIM OBERMILLER

Among the many hazards facing Americans troops in Afghanistan, roadside bombs have proven to be the most disruptive — and deadly.

Keeping that risk at a minimum for both soldiers and Afghan civilians is the job of Army Capt. Joseph Frederick ’05.

Frederick commands the 584th Mobility Augmentation Company (MAC). In February, the company arrived in southern Afghanistan to begin a yearlong deployment. Their mission is to hunt down and neutralize IEDs (improvised explosive devices) that plague the war-torn nation.

In this job there are two outcomes — finding an IED *before* it goes off or finding it *because* it goes off. As company commander Frederick’s job is to ensure the first outcome.

This is the 584th MAC’s second 12-month tour in Afghanistan and the first under Frederick’s command, which he assumed this fall.

In June, Frederick reported that his team had conducted some 120 route-clearance patrols, continually clearing IEDs from roads in and around Kandahar City, Afghanistan’s second largest city, with a population of 512,000. He was happy to report that no soldiers under his command had suffered casualties. But there had been many dangerous moments, such as when his patrol was “engaged by small arms fire. Although you talk about it every day, it’s definitely a key moment as a commander when your soldiers are in harm’s way,” he says.Frederick says he decided to join the U.S. Army as a high school junior. Both his grandfathers served in World War II “and they instilled in me a great appreciation for service in the military,” he says.

Some of the weapons, explosives and other materials used by insurgents to make IEDs were uncovered by Afghan National Army patrols.

A business administration major, he attended Illinois Wesleyan on a federal ROTC scholarship. Frederick believes his ROTC training, which took place at Illinois State University, complemented his college studies. “In many ways [ROTC] enhances a student’s abilities to accomplish tasks because of the regimen and discipline required.”

Reflecting on his Wesleyan experience, Frederick says, “It exposed me to a number of viewpoints, which helped prepare me for both the criticism and support I receive. My time there helped frame my service in a broader framework, incorporating not only my own values, but the values of others.”

The company Frederick leads with his senior enlisted advisor, First Sgt. Lionel Evans, is a diverse group, “hailing from Sri Lanka, Colombia, Mexico, nearly all 50 states and several U.S. territories,” he says. “All volunteered to defend our nation and will represent themselves, the 584th MAC and our nation very well.”

He sees each of his soldiers as a leader. “They are all decisive, adaptive, disciplined and engaged.”

To carry out the company’s mission, it is vital that each member of the company receives the training that will give him “the skills and confidence to act decisively in the face of danger,” Frederick says.

Prior to deployment, 584th MAC soldiers received extensive training planned by the 20th Engineer Battalion at Fort Hood military base. Tools such as the Virtual Route Clearance Trainer were used to accurately mimic real-world scenarios. In the field, soldiers spent hours IED-hunting, working with “Afghan police” (role-played by soldiers) and participating in simulated medical evacuations such as would occur after a bomb strike.

Also covered was “a broad range of training, from marksmanship and tactical movement to cultural awareness and recognizing the signs and symptoms of combat stress,” says Frederick, who has seen firsthand the results of proper training. In 2008, as a brigade engineer at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, Frederick was responsible for maintaining detention facilities with a team of 14 soldiers and sailors. When a hurricane approached, his team was tasked with preparing more than 60 facilities for the storm.

During a 36-hour shift, they “accomplished every task,” he says with pride. In Iraq, he served on a transition team that prepared Iraqi military leaders for everything from first-responder care to mission planning while teaching them how to establish their own training programs.

Afghanistan likely will present Frederick and his team with new challenges almost daily. The inadvertent burning of Korans by U.S. troops sparked violence throughout the country just as the 584th MAC was arriving in the southern Kandahar Province. Frederick provided a quick email update from Afghanistan shortly after the incident. “We already conducted several route clearance patrols,” he wrote. “I can’t really go into specifics but we continue to use intelligence-driven operations to support the freedom of maneuver for the local nationals, Afghan National Security Forces and Coalition Forces.”

Another tool for Frederick’s clearance patrols, the RG-31 mine-protected vehicle searches for deadly explosives.

A recent story in *USA Today* reported that, in 2011, “attacks with makeshift bombs hit a record high of more than 16,000” in Afghanistan. While U.S. service members are the main targets, more than 4,000 Afghans, including many children, were killed or injured by IEDs in 2011.

IEDs were a common threat in the Iraq War, and roadside bombs are even more problematic in Afghanistan. Because

most Afghan roads are dirt, not paved, it's easier to conceal and bury explosives. Another factor is the ease in which smugglers can bring in fertilizer — a main ingredient for the bombs — from across neighboring Pakistan's border.

To neutralize the IED threat, Frederick's company moves throughout southern Afghanistan in heavily armored vehicles equipped with instruments designed to detect anomalies that signal the presence of hidden explosives. Mechanical arms or robots are used to disable or destroy bombs.

A key piece of equipment in this job is the Husky tactical support vehicle. Equipped with a mine detector and ground-penetrating radar sensor, the armored Husky can withstand a detonation underneath the vehicle with minimal damage.

While such technology gives soldiers some peace of mind, Frederick knows the stress of the job can take its toll. He's proud of work done by a company team assigned the task to develop programs that help "prevent, mitigate and identify" problems such as combat stress, as well as to assist in "family and financial issues."

He strongly believes the families that "tirelessly support" his soldiers "should be very proud of all the soldiers' accomplishments and the manner in which they conduct themselves." Frederick speaks with emotion about his own family. "I will tell you that I could not do what I do without the support of my parents, my sister Amanda and my wife Sarah. I lean on them, and they truly make all that I do possible."

Looking beyond his company's mission in Afghanistan, Frederick says, "The current goal that drives my career planning is to earn a position as a battalion commander." Beyond that, he hopes to be accepted into the Army's Advanced Civil Schooling program and complete his graduate degree prior to being assigned to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Asked what he might like to do if he weren't a military officer, Frederick doesn't hesitate in his answer. "I cannot think of something I would rather do. I'm a passionate supporter of the profession of arms, proud of what I do and honored to serve alongside so many amazing young Americans."

Editor's Note: In June, we checked in with Joseph Frederick to see how his mission in Afghanistan was progressing. Here are his emailed responses:

How are you doing so far?

The company is doing well, as am I. I'm very proud of the team I fight alongside. We have conducted approximately 120 route-clearance patrols, continually clearing hazards such as IEDs, IED components, and UXOs [unexploded ordnance] from the roads. The company as a whole maintains very high morale and they have earned a total of six Army Achievement Medals for outstanding work, two certificates of achievement and six combat action badges to date. Over two-thirds of my soldiers are currently enrolled in either college courses or taking online classes through the Army as they constantly seek to improve themselves.

What is a typical day like for the company?

Basically my patrols work 12-18 hour days, and almost everyone in the company works at least 12 hours a day. We try hard to give the guys a half-day every couple weeks and get everyone together once a month for a CrossFit competition and barbecue to relieve some stress and build the team.

What's the most important thing you've learned since arriving there?

It matters why we do things. Compliance with thetactical directives, escalation of force procedures and the rules of engagements are essential, but ensuring every soldier understands why we do it is even more important. Nobody can predict exactly how a sequence of events will play out while in contact with the enemy, but a soldier who understands why the rules are in place and that this is a war of perception can take steps to create a positive perception. We make every effort to eliminate civilian casualties. That is our why. We are here to protect the local Afghanis and spend countless hours each week training and learning to ensure we make the right decisions to protect them and mitigate damage to their property even while being engaged. To quote Gen. Allen, [John R. Allen, commander, International Security Assistance Force], "We can lose this war without firing a shot." Our actions matter and why we do them matters.

Frederick and his wife share a dance at the 20th Engineer Battalion Ball in 2011.

How is your family holding up? How often to get to talk to your wife and the rest of your family?

I talk to my wife nearly every day and my parents every other week or so. A lot of the soldiers utilize Skype to contact their families and do a great job staying in touch. Communication is a constant challenge though. Teaching soldiers to deal with the separation and communication challenges is important to me. I've worked with Chaplain Bird [Jason Bird, 223rd Engineer Battalion's chaplain] to develop a wellness week for the company next month. The classes will be relationship and communication focused to ensure we do our part to improve soldiers as a whole person.

Recent polls show that Americans' support for the war is dropping. What's the most important thing you would like to tell people about what you are doing there?

There are so many reasons one could use to justify our presence here. As one example, the political and cultural position of Afghan women has improved substantially in recent years. The bottom line is, we have an opportunity to make the world a better place.

We do our very best every day to represent the United States of America as a free and caring nation by protecting those who cannot protect themselves while training and strengthening them to stand up and act in the face of danger and oppression.

There is an entire population, our veterans, who understand the importance of each moment, that life can be snatched away from you or changed forever instantly. I hope the lessons of these veterans are captured by the broader population. Each moment can be our last, so live it the best of your ability. You may never get another chance.