

Army captain tells of experiences fighting terrorist war in Afghanistan

By Chris Gauthier
Apopka Chief Staff

A captain in the U.S. Army told of his experiences in Afghanistan during the Apopka Area Chamber of Commerce's monthly luncheon at Captain and the Cowboy Wednesday, November 14.

Michael Waldrop, vice president and part owner of McCree Designed & Built Right, served as an embedded trainer of an infantry division of the Afghanistan national army from 2006-2007. He warned that his story would be graphic. "This is the cold, hard truth of being in combat," he said. "A lot of men and women are doing heroic and courageous acts day in and day out that we don't hear about, but we always need to be aware of."

A family man with a wife and two young children, Waldrop didn't plan on being activated for service. However, he had a family tradition in the service. His grandfather fought in World War II and his father in Vietnam. While in Afghanistan, Waldrop received a Purple



Army Capt. Michael Waldrop speaks to the crowd at the Chamber of Commerce luncheon Wednesday, November 14.

Heart and a Bronze Star for valor.

He described Afghanistan as a "war graveyard" that has been in turmoil for thousands of years, with three civil wars in the past 100 years. "When the Taliban

took control of the country in 1994, whatever was not destroyed was destroyed. Every predominant structure or monument is just littered all over. The country is in ruins," he said. Most of the

people earn their livelihood through drugs, he said, with 93 percent of the world's heroin coming from the southern part of the country. Marijuana and poppy fields became the battlefields that the troops fought in, Waldrop said.

Most of the educated people in Afghanistan fled the country during the last two decades and the Taliban shut down all infrastructure and education throughout the country, he said. "They don't want the Afghanistan citizens to be educated because the people can be much more easily manipulated and brainwashed if they're not educated," said Waldrop.

He showed a slide of a river that served not only as a car wash, but also a sewer system and a source of drinking water for humans and animals in a highly populated area. "The country is rampant with disease," he said. "It's got one of the highest infant mortality rates in the world. Tuberculosis, malaria and all sorts of other disease are absolutely rampant."

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Army: Waldrop's multimedia

presentation showed combat scenes

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The saddest part was the children, he said. "The children are everywhere. They're right there on the battlefields. It's not uncommon at all to have 20 siblings. More often than not, children in this part of the world don't even have shoes." He spoke of one young girl that Waldrop's unit had given food and water to. "If the Taliban saw her even make eye contact with one of the infidels (Americans), she would be beaten or killed."

The search for Osama bin

Laden is no longer the focus of the war, Waldrop said. "If he is not dead already, he is in Pakistan. There's probably no doubt about that whatsoever. He's still a legitimate target, but he's in a safe haven somewhere." Bin Laden befriended Mohammed Omar, who was the founder of the Taliban movement in 1988, Waldrop said. "He still controls the day-to-day operations of the Taliban; he controls the money and resources and he also is a very legitimate target. He's a very ruthless, ruthless individual. The Taliban banned all

games, kite flying, chess playing. They (Afghanis) weren't even allowed to have a family portrait in their house. If they were caught with a picture hanging in their house, they could have been publicly beaten."

Prior to his deployment, Waldrop trained in Mississippi for more than five months. He served as an embedded trainer, which means he was the combat adviser and attached to an Afghan rifle company of 60 to 80 men. He also was with two American senior non-commissioned officers. "My job was to

work with them, advise them, mentor, train, and lead them. We were sent to the front lines, the borders of Pakistan, within four or five days. These were my boys; these were the people I could not understand. I didn't understand their culture or their language. They didn't understand me or my culture, but we bonded in a brotherhood. These were our brothers. These were the guys that were relying on us and we relied on them."

The terrain was very rough and there were few roads, Waldrop said. Some of the roads

switched back through mountains, allowing the enemy to see the troops from a distance and set up an ambush. Temperatures, too, were harsh, ranging from 130 degrees in summer to below freezing at other times of the year.

Waldrop and his men were engaged in several ambushes and well over 100 firefights. He credits the superior equipment issued by the United States in saving many lives. "Our tax dollars are equipping our men with the best equipment known to man," he said. "You learned to

love your equipment."

Despite the harshness of the country and the ravages of war, Waldrop felt that his time in Afghanistan was well spent. He showed a final slide of girls carrying backpacks and wearing uniforms and shoes on their way to school. "That's what it's all about," he said. "I can tell you that 100 percent of the troops that I served with felt this was a good cause. If they had to do it over again, it was worth it because of them having an opportunity and a hope that they'll have a better future."