

Lieutenant Colonel Mike Ogden addresses U.S. Air Force and Army ROTC cadets at Indiana Memorial Stadium circa 2010. Courtesy photo



# Mike <sup>Iraq War</sup> Veteran Ogden

*Finds ‘Sense of Purpose’ Training Kids, Athletes, Business Groups, and Helping Other Vets*

By **Mike Leonard** Photography by **Tyagan Miller**

**T**wo days into his deployment in eastern Baghdad in October 2006, United States Army Major Mike Ogden’s deputy brigade commander was killed in an enemy attack.

The tragedy quickly reverberated far beyond the battle zone.

“The families back home recognize what that means right away,” Ogden explains. “They know that if your second in command gets killed less than 48 hours into the mission, that’s as real as it gets. If someone more senior to their loved one can get killed, how likely is it that their own husband or wife may not come home?”

An aviator by training, Ogden served as chief of operations for the 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, in Iraq through the end of 2007. “We had an offensive mission every night,” he says. “My responsibilities included making assessments to go

after high-value targets, rescue operations, neutralizing any threats that would initiate contact with the brigade, and, defensively, making decisions when we’d come under attack.”

### **Founding Pinnacle Leadership**

After 20 years and nine months of service, Ogden retired from the Army as a lieutenant colonel in 2013. Today, the flat-top buzz cut is gone. But wearing a gray, waffle-knit thermal shirt and camouflage baseball cap, there is still something of the military about him. In conversation, he is affable and thoughtful.

After the end of combat duty at the close of 2007, Ogden’s first real integration into civilian society was a move in 2010 from his station in Fort Carson, Colorado, to Bloomington, where he was assigned to lead Indiana University’s highly ranked Army ROTC. “I felt like I had won the lottery,” he says. “When I saw the Ind. 37 sign, I thought, ‘Well, this is a full-circle moment. To be coming to this place, where I’d always

wanted to be, and taking command of 100-plus cadets. I just remember taking in that moment and savoring it.”

The educational atmosphere of a college community got him thinking about the utility of his leadership philosophies and skills, the abilities of other veterans he knew, and how their training and experiences could transfer from military to civilian applications.

After retiring in 2013, he worked on some initial projects with students and business professionals; then he and former U.S. Army Special Forces Green Beret John Keenan founded Pinnacle Leadership.

Their lengthy client list includes Childs Elementary School, the Leadership Academy in IU’s Kelley School of Business MBA program, the baseball programs at IU and Arizona State University, Hoosier Energy, and Ernst & Young, the global accounting, auditing, and professional services firm.

“What we do is offer training events that improve the ability of leaders



“When you’ve been through combat and experienced some of the things that so many veterans have experienced, bad hair days don’t register on your radar,” says Mike Ogden.



and teams to perform in ambiguous and challenging environments,” says Ogden, 45. “We’re not out to train them to be military leaders. But through a series of exercises and challenges, we force them to think critically, act decisively, and get the job done. Most teams can do what they’re trained to do. But how do they respond when they encounter a dynamic they didn’t anticipate? Do they come together or fall apart?”

### A life of challenges

In his personal life and military career, Ogden, the soldiers he has worked with, and his family have been tested many times by unanticipated crises.

He grew up in Tipton, Indiana, the son of a Green Beret Vietnam War veteran. His parents divorced when he was young, leaving his mother to raise two sons and a daughter. “I had some resentment. Got my fair share of paddlings at school,” he says. “There were scuffles. Getting made fun of for various reasons, like someone seeing my mom in line for free government cheese. I pretty quickly found out that athletics was a



(top) Indiana University Kelley School of Business students tackle the barrel-move challenge during a Pinnacle Leadership event. (above) Major Mike Ogden (right) and Second Lieutenant Chad Peltier in Kuwait in 2006, a few days before their first foray into battle. *Courtesy photo*

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The Ogden Family: (l-r) Alex, Mike, Ross, Tiffani, Drew, and their dog, Rocky.

way to escape the heartbreak of my parents’ divorce and not being as well-off as other kids.” (Today, Mike and his family are very close to both of his parents.)

The autumn of 1984 “literally changed my life,” he says. “My brother Clyde somehow found his way to Indiana University and Bloomington, and I came down here and I did not know this kind of world existed. Just being here and seeing this place made me realize I needed to apply myself [at school].”

Ogden earned an Army scholarship and enrolled at Ball State University, where he excelled in ROTC and earned a bachelor’s degree in education. During that time, he deepened his relationship with his future wife, Tiffani, also from Tipton and the daughter of a Korean War veteran.

The attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2011, changed “a good military life” into one of combat readiness and eventually deployment to Iraq. What Ogden didn’t expect was

how going to war would impact him and his family.

“You’re changed forever,” he says. “Your family is changed forever.”

Three months into his deployment, his father-in-law died, just a week after arriving in Colorado Springs, Colorado, to provide support to Ogden’s wife and the couple’s toddlers, ages 1 and 3. “It was one of those times when you really wanted to be home. But you can’t always be a soldier, a father, and a husband all at the same time,” he says.

In November 2007, Tiffani gave birth to the couple’s third child. “She was able to put on a Bluetooth to talk to me as the baby was being born, and I swear, within 30 seconds of hearing my new son’s first breaths, we came under rocket and mortar attacks and had to take cover. It was a surreal moment,” he recalls. “Combat is very much about life and death, and I was right in the middle of both.”

But the most difficult experience, Ogden says, came just weeks before the end of his deployment. He noticed that the television





Childs Elementary School students take part in the blindfold-orienting challenge under the watchful eye of Pinnacle Leadership Instructor Drew Marcantonio, a former Marine captain and IU student.

tuned to CNN in his brigade headquarters was showing a police helicopter hovering over the New Life Church in Colorado Springs — the church that Tiffani and his sons faithfully attended. A gunman was randomly shooting people and the script on the bottom of the screen read “four dead.”

“Just when I thought I’d seen it all, from suicide bombers to kidnappings and mass executions, I’m training my replacement and about to come home and suddenly, my family is under attack,” Ogden says. “It took 12 hours to make contact with my wife, but in between

that time, we still had a mission. We had an intelligence indicator for our targets, and I had to continue, wondering if my wife and children were under attack. In the military, we call that ‘caching’ that information. You just have to put it aside, because the mission in front of you requires your complete attention. It’s a great skill to have.”

As it turned out, one of his sons woke up sick that morning and the Ogden family did not attend church on the day of the random shootings.

### Teaching life lessons

Childs Elementary School might seem to be an unusual place for a combat veteran to teach leadership skills, but Principal Chris Finley enthusiastically testifies to how Mike Ogden and his company, Pinnacle Leadership, affected his students and staff.

“We talk a lot about the true skills that students are going to need in life, which is to work together, understanding that things won’t always go their way,” Finley says. “We used Mike for the first time last year, and the teachers loved it and the kids had a blast. Our kids were actually experiencing how



During a daylong Pinnacle Leadership event, IU Kelley School of Business students constructed a rope bridge to move supplies across a water obstacle.

***‘Followership is one of the most important components of leadership, and often we have students who just want to be the leader and aren’t great at listening and following.’***

difficult it is to work alone and how much easier it is when you work as a team,” he says. “The other piece, which I love, is that any time we can get people from the community who are great role models, they’re obviously people the kids look up to.”

Ray Luther, director of recruiting and leadership in IU’s Kelley MBA Program, has used Ogden’s programs and seminars for three years, sometimes adding exhaustion to the challenge in overnight exercises. “We have high-performing students. Our students are world-class. But what happens when Mike puts them into an ambiguous and stressful situation is that they jump in and quickly start problem solving without taking a step back and analyzing the situation. That gets exposed,” Luther says.

“Followership is one of the most important components of leadership, and often we have students who just want to be the leader and aren’t great at listening and following,” he

continues. “Sometimes you have to follow for a while so you can offer suggestions that are actually helpful, instead of just throwing ideas out there. Mike is very creative in finding ways of driving that home.”

Baseball coach Tracy Smith, who led IU to its first College World Series appearance in school history, says a seminar with Ogden and his Pinnacle Leadership instructors played a major role in his team’s success. “I talk to our kids today who played on that 2013 team, and they still go back to Mike’s program in the fall of 2012 as one of the most meaningful things we did. It brought out a lot of issues we could identify and address and work on,” Smith says. “It’s not hyperbole to say he allowed us to see some things we couldn’t see and identify some individuals who needed some extra attention.”

Last fall, Smith hired Ogden to work with his new team at Arizona State University, a perennial national championship contender. “He knows how to put the focus on the mission and the intent and being in attack mode,” Smith says. “Identify your mission, and keep at it at a relentless pace.”

**Exercises that challenge the group**

Ogden has a variety of exercises he uses with athletes, business groups, and students. One is the rope bridge, which challenges participants to figure out how to construct and operate an apparatus to move objects across a body of water. Another exercise is the barrel-move challenge, in which participants must build a wheelbarrow-like device to move a heavy object. The most popular exercise is the blindfold-orienteeing challenge, in which all team members, except one, start out blindfolded. The blindfolded participants learn to listen, follow directions, and develop trust. Gradually and one by one, they remove the blindfolds and then add to the problem solving with their fresh perspectives.

**Helping transitioning veterans**

Ogden always looks to military veterans to assist with his seminars and workshops. “There’s a sense of responsibility to immerse more transitioning veterans into doing something meaningful that makes use of their skills and abilities. In the coming year, I’m going to focus on expanding to integrate more veterans into what we do,” he says. “College dropout rates are too high. The epidemic of suicide among Iraq and Afghanistan veterans is intolerable. We have to do more to help transitioning veterans.”

Ogden acknowledges that eight years removed from a war zone, he’s still adjusting to everyday life, too. “When you’ve been through combat and experienced some of the things that so many veterans have experienced, bad hair days don’t register on your radar. Your empathy for everyday experiences is hard to drum up when people died,” he says. “It’s hard to be the emotional support, hard to be an empathetic dad.

“You’re never too far away from what happened and what could have been,” he says. “What I’ve been doing with Pinnacle is a huge factor in helping me get on with my life. It gives me more of a sense of purpose from my experience. I think my fellow veterans and I all have to find that sense of purpose that is critical to getting on with our lives post-combat.” ✨