

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL PHILIP BATTAGLIA,
COMMANDER, 4TH BRIGADE COMBAT TEAM, 1ST CAVALRY DIVISION VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM
IRAQ TIME: 9:30 A.M. EDT DATE: WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 2008

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LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG (Office of the Secretary of Defense for
Public Affairs): With that, I'd like to say hello and I'd like to welcome you
all to the Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Wednesday, September
3rd, 2008. My name is Lieutenant Jennifer Cragg with the Office of the
Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs and I'll be moderating the call today.

And a note to the bloggers on the line: Please remember to clearly
state your name and the organization you're with before you ask your question.

Today our guest is Colonel Philip Battaglia, commander of the 4th
Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, who will provide an overview of the
4/1 mission in Iraq since deploying in mid-June of this year. With that, sir,
I'm going to turn it over to you for any opening statement and then we'll go
right into the questions.

COL. BATTAGLIA: Okay, thank you, Jennifer. Thank you for the
introduction.

As mentioned, I am Colonel Philip Battaglia, and I am the commander of
the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, the Long Knife Brigade, as
we're called, out of Fort Hood, Texas.

First off, I'd like to say that I appreciate your interest and time
today to discuss our operations here in southern Iraq.

I'd like to start off by providing you a brief overview of what we're
doing, and then I'll be glad to take your questions.

Our brigade is currently partnered with the 10th Iraqi Army Division
and other Iraqi security forces, and we operate in three provinces. From the
west to the east, the provinces are Muthanna, Dhi Qar and Maysan. I'll just
tell you very briefly about each of the three provinces.

Muthanna is in the southern part of the country, borders with Saudi
Arabia, the capital is Samawa, and it has approximately half a million people,
mostly in the capital of Samawa. It is a rural province, and it's about the
size of the state of West Virginia.

Dhi Qar is much smaller than Muthanna. It is our central province. The capital is Nasiriyah. It has approximately 1-1/2 million people, and it is about the size of Connecticut.

Maysan is in the far east province and borders with Iran. The capital is Amarah. It has approximately 800,000 people. Land mass-wise it is only just a little bit slightly larger than Dhi Qar, but it is the focus of (our work?) right now as we work to stop the smuggling of weapons and other munitions into Iraq.

All three provinces are under provincial Iraqi control and they are predominantly Shi'a. And I'll tell you just a very brief little bit about our mission statement and what we do.

We have four key tasks. First one is to partner and professionalize the 10th Iraqi Army, the Iraqi police and the Department of Border Enforcement. Those are the Iraqi security forces that we work with. Second is to defeat violent extremist networks. Third one is to set the conditions to continue on the building of good governance and economic capacity within the provincial governments. And the last key task is to protect, project and sustain our forces.

Now with that, I'm sure you'd like to get to some questions, and I'll turn it back over to you.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir.

We're going to go with Marisa. Marisa, you were on the call first. Go ahead with your questions. Q Thank you, sir. My name is Marisa Cochrane, and I'm with the Institute for the Study of War. I'm wondering if you could comment a little bit about activity that you're seeing in your AO by Iranian-backed splinter groups, whether special groups or some of the newer names we're hearing, such as the League of the Righteous.

And also, have you seen any return of fighters from Iran? Are you concerned about that? And if so, what are you doing currently to mitigate any attempts by returning fighters to inflame violence?

COL. BATTAGLIA: Yeah, thank you for that question, Marisa. Let me kind of take down and address the different parts of your question.

First of all is, have we seen return of foreign fighters? We have intelligence that some foreign fighters are attempting to return into the southern provinces.

Some of the things that we're doing -- as I mentioned in my opening statement, Maysan and -- the province of Maysan, which borders with Iran, is part of our main effort. Currently I have two of my maneuver battalions that are operating with the Iraqi security forces, specifically the 38th Brigade of the 10th Iraqi Army, the Iraqi police and the 11th Department of Border Enforcement Brigade, which is deployed around -- along the border.

So we have a strong presence working with the Iraqi security forces to protect and secure the Iraqi people, but also at the same time to prevent both accelerants, explosive munitions and also foreign fighters from moving into Iran (sic).

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Marisa, we'll come back to you if you have an additional question, but let's go to Grim. And then after Grim, it's Jared.

Q Yes, this is Grim of blackfive.net. Colonel, I have sort of an "inside baseball" question for you. The areas that you are located in used to be part of MND-Central-South, but I'm looking at the MND-C website and they're claiming division command of you. Have you replaced MND-CS? And if so, does that represent a change in coalition force levels in your area?

COL. BATTAGLIA: No, this is a -- this answer's going to take a little bit of explaining. And let me start first with -- I work for the 10th Mountain Division out of Fort Drum. Major General Oates is my commander here. I replaced the 1st Brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division. And their mission was primarily a theater -- as a theater security force. What that means is they were primarily involved with the escort of convoys going -- starting from Kuwait, delivering supplies, going all the way up to Baghdad and to the west and further north toward Balad.

Our mission has changed. Instead of being as a theater security brigade, we are battlespace-owning brigade, and that's when I talked about the - - when I talked about three provinces that we operate in.

So, not an increase in force level, but rather a changing of mission for the unit that has been traditionally over the past four or five years -- five years that has been here in Tallil airbase.

Does that answer your question? This used to be part of MND Southeast with the Australians, but when the Australians departed, we kind of filled in into their area.

Q Oh, so not --

COL. BATTAGLIA: Does that answer your question?

Q I thought it was in the Polish area.

COL. BATTAGLIA: No, the Polish is further north.

Q Oh, I see. Thank you.

MS. CRAGG: Okay. Jarred?

COL. BATTAGLIA: Okay? Sure.

MS. CRAGG: I'm sorry, sir.

Jarred?

Q Yes, sir. Thank you for your time. Could you talk a little bit about -- you mentioned a little bit about the border with Iran, which obviously Maysan has a very long border. We've been there for five years. Is there any greater support from the Baghdad central government to installing even more border fortifications, sensing, you know, smart sensing like we're trying to do on our southern border, as the Israelis have, so that, you know, years from now we're not going to have to worry about half of Hezbollah coming across that border?

COL. BATTAGLIA: Yeah. I'll tell you, in my opinion I think that the Iraqi government has taken great interest in their border and controlling their border with Iran. And I think the perfect example of that, of course, is the operation Basha'er as-Salaam, which was launched just as we came into country. And they're still conducting the operation with the security of Maysan province with not just the 38th Iraqi Brigade, but there's also additional battalions from the 10th Iraqi Army that are also out there in Maysan province. So I think the Iraqi -- they're very interested in their ability to control their border. And we are there partnered with the 11th Department of Border Enforcement Brigade and the 38th Brigade and the 10th Iraqi Army to help them do that.

Does that answer your question?

Q Yes, sir. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, we have time for some additional questions. So Marisa, go ahead.

Q Sure. Sir, can you please talk a little bit about reconstruction efforts? You have in your area of operations several of the poorest provinces, particularly Maysan. And I'm wondering what you're seeing, if you're getting the support you need from the central government in these efforts, and what in particular your forces are doing.

COL. BATTAGLIA: Yeah. Let me tell you. That was going back to the four key tasks in our mission statement. The third one I mentioned was to set the conditions to continue to build on the governance and economic capacity in the provinces.

We do that -- I do that specifically with and through the provincial reconstruction teams that are co-located right here on Adder Base, Tallil Airbase. All three of the provincial reconstruction teams for Maysan, Dhi Qar and Muthanna are co-located. I will tell you that I meet with them on a weekly basis. Many times it's a daily basis. And we work together hand in hand to plan our reconstruction efforts.

Now, my efforts are more focused toward the quick impact to gain access to a certain area, whereas the PRT, of course, are working in their efforts to rebuild, to work with the provincial government to provide those services, and they have the expertise to rebuild and work with the provincial government.

So you see us working hand in hand in working to increase the capacity of the provincial governments and build their ability to provide for the long-term needs of the Iraqi people.

Just to elaborate just a little bit on that, you know, we're out of a lot of the huge brick and mortar-type projects, and we're more into building capacity. And I lend my efforts to make sure that the PRTs are able to execute and conduct that mission.

Does that answer your question?

Q Yeah. If I could just ask one short follow-up, are you finding that the Iraqi provincial government and -- are receiving the support they need, particularly from the central government in terms of getting funding for these projects? COL. BATTAGLIA: Yeah, I -- right. The answer, from what I have seen, is yes. I will tell you that the central government allocated \$100

million for the province of Maysan, right, that went hand in hand with the Operation of Basha'er al-Salaam. And right now, there's been substantial progress in terms of committing those funds toward projects in Maysan. For the other provinces, what I have seen is that the Iraqi central government has allocated a surplus to the budget of those provinces for the -- for execution this year.

Q Thank you, sir.

COL. BATTAGLIA: Back to you.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. After Marisa was Grim. So Grim and Jarred, if you want to ask one final question.

Q If you have one, Jarred, I can let you go.

Q Okay. Yes, sir. Could you talk a little bit about your experiences on the ground as you're traveling through those three provinces of the southern part? And obviously, you're up along Basra. What's really the feeling that you get from talking to the populace, from your -- what are your observations of the Iraqi army security forces, just your firsthand impressions you could give to the people back in the United States?

COL. BATTAGLIA: Yes. Let me kind of take that in a couple of different parts. First of all on the army. I am very impressed with the professionalism and the willingness of the Iraqi army to go out there and fight and go after the insurgents, smugglers or other special groups out there. I tell you, they go out there and they're willing and do it on a daily basis. I am, you know, again, just very surprised at the proficiency and the sacrifice that the Iraqi security forces are making. That's on the Iraqi army and the Iraqi security forces.

Traveling around the provinces, going back to a previous question, I tell you, I see a lot of -- a lot of construction. There is just an incredible amount of constructions both in Nasiriyah, in al-Amarah, which is the capital of Maysan, just a lot of construction. A lot of activity.

You know, just about a week and a half ago, I took the PRT team leader -- a great guy, Dan Foot (ph) -- that works for the State Department, we went out to al-Amarah and decided to take a little two- and-a-half-mile walk in the downtown shopping district. Lot of activity. Stores were full with products, music, CDs, clothes, shoes. I mean, all this stuff was out there. You know, even in a place like Maysan, you know, both Dan and I were both pleasantly surprised at the level of activity, the friendliness of the people out there.

They were willing to talk to us. So it's just -- it's surprising.

You know, you mentioned that these are the poorest provinces. Yes, they are. But, you know, a lot of other folks that, you know, have traveled in other parts of Baghdad, they -- you know, they mention to me and say, hey, you know, we expected conditions here to be much worse and they're really not. So I apologize for the long-winded answer, but I hope that that has addressed several of the questions that you have asked before.

Back to you.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Grim or Jarred or Marisa, do you have any final questions?

Q I've got another one. I'll go after everyone else, but yes, sure, we could keep going for the full time.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, go ahead.

Q Okay, sir, and then Marisa could go. Could you talk a little bit about, with provincial elections possibly coming up -- hopefully coming up, what's the sense when you're meeting with the different city councils? Are they starting to come together? Are there still differences in opinions between the Shi'a and the Sunni? What's really going on on that local qadha level?

COL. BATTAGLIA: Yeah, good question. I tell you, first off is -- here in southern Iraq is almost homogeneous in terms of Shi'a population. So we really don't have the Sunni -- the Sunni-Shi'a split. Now, having said that, there are still a lot of various parties in terms of within the Shi'a, whether it's ISCI or Badr or Sadrist groups and so forth and so on. And it's a healthy -- you know, healthy political argument, in terms of the parties.

What I see out of the people is there is dissatisfaction with them. They elected at the last elections many leaders that were -- with religious affiliations, but you know, frankly, the people are somewhat disappointed at the current leaders that they have elected. And I tell you that what I hear in the streets and what I hear from local sheikhs and folks as we walk around is they're looking forward to the elections to get new people in there. So, you know, I look at it as a healthy democratic process. They're dissatisfied with the current leaders and they're looking forward to elect new leaders.

Back to you.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. We have time for just a couple more and then -- anybody else? Jarred, Marisa or Grim?

Q No.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Well, with that, sir, if you would like to -- I'll turn it back over to you for any final statements or final thoughts.

COL. BATTAGLIA: Yeah. Thank you for that opportunity. And I want to thank you all for participating and allowing me and giving me the opportunity to tell you a little bit about our mission here. I hope I've answered your question.

And two comments that I'd like to make -- first off is tell you about the sacrifice of the Iraqi security forces, not reported very often, but that is the thousands of casualties that they have suffered and yet they continue to enlist for both the Iraqi -- to join the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army. And to me, that shows their confidence in their system, you know, the overall system; their confidence in Iraq and the future of Iraq. So that is a -- you know, that is a great -- a good news story.

The level of competence of the Iraqi security forces -- again, that is -- you know, they're willing and ready to go out there, provide security to the Iraqi people, but also to fight the insurgents. So I'm very pleased with that.

The other piece that I want to just tell you about, and of course, is the sacrifice and commitment of our great soldiers, Marines, airmen out here. We work as a great team. I tell you -- I just want to tell you about a PFC -- Private First Class Jacob McHenry (sp). This is a young soldier from Monroe, Louisiana. He is assigned to my Alpha Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment. And young McHenry here, he just reenlisted about a couple of weeks ago. And believe it or not, all he wanted was a battalion t-shirt for reenlisting. That was the only incentive that he wanted.

We have -- in the past two months that I've been here, we have reenlisted hundreds -- hundreds of soldiers and noncommissioned officers to stay in our great Army. And you know what? They're not getting these huge bonuses. You know, there's not huge bonuses out there for reenlisting. But these great and wonderful soldiers, they're reenlisting because of -- they're doing what they believe in. They're reenlisting because of the leaders that they work with. And I am simply amazed and humbled to be working with great soldiers and great Americans such as this, working in these conditions and still committed and willing to serve, willing to serve our great country. And with that, I turn it back over to you. Again, thank you very much for allowing me this opportunity this afternoon.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir. And thank you for some great comments and then questions, of course, today.

With that, I just want to remind everybody that today's program will be available online, the bloggers link on dod.mil, where you'll be able to access a story based on today's call along with a source document such as the colonel's file, the audio file and the print story.

Again, thank you, sir, for joining us today. And thank you for the bloggers on the line as well.

Q Thank you very much.

LT. CRAGG: And this concludes today's event.

END.