

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGER'S ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL MICHAEL GARRETT,
COMMANDER, 4TH BRIGADE COMBAT TEAM, AIRBORNE, 25TH INFANTRY DIVISION, MULTI-
NATIONAL DIVISION CENTER SUBJECT: OPERATIONAL UPDATE OF SPARTAN BRIGADE'S
CAMPAIGN IN BABIL, NAJAF AND KARBALA PROVINCES MODERATOR: CHARLES J. "JACK"
HOLT, CHIEF, NEW MEDIA OPERATIONS OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
TIME: 10:45 A.M. EST DATE: MONDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2007

Copyright (c) 2007 by Federal News Service, Inc., Ste. 500 1000 Vermont Avenue,
NW, Washington, DC 20005, USA. Federal News Service is a private firm not
affiliated with the federal government. No portion of this transcript may be
copied, sold or retransmitted without the written authority of Federal News
Service, Inc. Copyright is not claimed as to any part of the original work
prepared by a United States government officer or employee as a part of that
person's official duties. For information on subscribing to the FNS Internet
Service, please visit <http://www.fednews.com> or call(202)347-1400

MR. HOLT: All right. Colonel Garrett -- Michael Garrett with the --
he's the commander 4th Division -- or correction, the 4th Brigade Combat Team,
25th Infantry Division, Multi-National Division Center with us this morning for
the Blogger's Roundtable.

Colonel Garrett, welcome aboard! Thanks for being with us this
morning. Do you have an opening statement for us?

COL. GARRETT: I do. I'll just give you a few minutes, if you don't
mind, and kind of tell you who we are what we've done over the last 13th months.
Well, as you mentioned I'm Colonel Mike Garrett and I command the Army's newest
Airborne Brigade combat team. The Army formed this brigade in January of 2005
and I remember the first day there were three of us staring at each other:
myself, my command sergeant major and the brigade operations officer. And a
year a half later, we deployed to combat and we have been here in Iraq for 13-
plus months. We were here long before the troop surge deployed to areas south of
Baghdad. And our initial focus was on transitioning security to Iraqi control
in the provinces of Babil, Kabala and Najaf and we've seen a lot of change over
the last 13 months.

You know, during our time here violence was at its highest point last
March when coalition and Iraqi forces were attacked 300 times in a period of 30
days. And my sense is now that, yeah, we really have gained the initiative
across most of -- (audio break) -- operations that we are operating on. And
what we see today is Iraqi security forces -- the police and the army --
attacking al Qaeda and Shi'a extremist militias with much vigor and we're all
gaining from the security provided by our Concerned Citizens programs. And the
attack levels are the lowest today that they've been in our 13-plus months here
on the ground.

You know, as I said before, we're responsible for a very large area of
operations in southern Iraq -- stretching really from southern Baghdad all the
way down to the Saudi Arabian border. You know, the province of Babil, Karbala,
Najaf -- roughly 25,000 square miles. And I talked about transitioning the
provinces to Iraqi control. We were able to do that in Najaf in December of
2006. We expect to transition Karbala very shortly and we expect to transition
the province of Babil in the spring of 2008. We've got a large population,
primarily Shi'a, throughout the battle space, but we are on what we call the

Sunni- Shi'a fault line in the northern portion of Babil province where we see the confluence of our Sunni and Shi'a populations. And we have several mixed Sunni-Shi'a population centers.

We are proudly partnered and have established tremendous relationships with three brigades of the 8th Division of the Iraqi army and with the Babil provincial police force to include the elite Hilla Special Weapons and Tactics Unit -- Hilla SWAT. And we provide oversight to the provincial police forces in Karbala. And then since December -- when we transitioned Najaf to provincial Iraqi control -- we provide limited support and oversight to the security there as well.

Forces are in two primary -- we operate out of two primary forward operating bases: One in Iskandariyah along the Euphrates River; and one in Kalsu -- FOB Kalsu -- which is located along the Baghdad Highway. And we have about seven patrol bases where we have our soldiers and paratroopers in and amongst the population. We have our military transition teams, or MIT teams, that provide close liaison, as I said before, with three brigades of the 8th Iraqi Army. And they're located in Hillah, the provincial capital of Babil, down in Diwaniyah at FOB Echo, and then in Hussaniyah, which is inside of the Karbala province. When we came here, our focus was on four lines of operation: security, communications and partnership. And we have made progress along all of those lines, but it has been difficult, challenging and it really wasn't until the EPRT -- the civilian surge -- and I'll talk about our embedded provincial reconstruction team a little bit -- but it really wasn't until the EPRT and the surge forces arrived that we began to make what I will call measurable progress along our lines of operation.

You know, the EPRT -- the embedded provincial reconstruction team -- I remember when the concept was first mentioned to me and you know, I had my doubts as to the value of such a small organization, but I'll tell you what I found almost immediately, as I was introduced to the team leader, who was a senior Foreign Service officer who had served in Vietnam -- so considerable experience -- and he was focused at the right level. He was focused at the local levels of government here. And he brought with him in his very small team expertise that we quite honestly didn't have. I have some very talented majors on the staff, but they just did not have the experience -- the depth and breadth of experience -- as our PRT members and we really have made progress there. And we can talk about that during the questions.

It has been -- in April we fell under MNDC -- MND Center -- which was a surge division headquarters, brought in really to focus on the areas south of Baghdad. And with that division headquarters came not only different enablers that we didn't have, or that we had to compete with with a number of other brigade combat teams under MNDB, but it really brought additional resources in terms of reconnaissance assets, in terms of aviation assets -- which allowed us to mitigate the biggest hazard to our paratroopers over the last 13 months, and that is their long lines of communications and the enemy's ability to target us with improvised explosive devices.

The division also focused us in terms of our mission. You know, General Lynch came in and our mission was very simple. It was to reduce (accelerance ?) of violence into Baghdad. It was to defeat sectarian violence, which applied to us, in the mixed population centers. And it was to protect the population. And with the surge force and the additional forces that we received, we were really able to do that for many months during this deployment. We had to be creative in terms of force application, based on the expanse of our

area of operations and the forces that we had available on a day-to-day basis. But what we also had to do was to continue to work with our Iraqi security force partners to increase their capability. And what we saw was they conducted more autonomous operations and independent operations, which I think has paid us great dividends, you know, 12-13 months down the road.

I could go on and on and talk about this. We've been at it for a long time. I'll just tell you that, you know, over the last 13 months 53 paratroopers have given their lives in pursuit of our mission here. And there were many days -- I always felt that we were making progress, but there were many days when it was only a feeling and that we were moving people in the right direction. Today I can tell you that we are making measured progress and we can see that through the numbers of attacks, the increase in employment, the increase in economic development, the programs and entrepreneurship that we're seeing at the local levels, which really does give me cause for optimism as we transition with another unit here in a little over a month.

So having said all that, I'll do my best to answer any questions that you might have.

MODERATOR: Okay, thank you sir, very much.

Bruce McQuain, you were first online, so why don't you get us started?

Q All right, Colonel. Bruce McQuain with qando.net and a former paratrooper so, you know, a hearty 'airborne!' to you.

COL. GARRETT: All right!

Q (Laughs.) When we talked last, I believe it was in August, you mentioned that you guys, as far as what you were seeing for bad guys out there, were mostly seeing AQI and JAM special groups, no Iranians.

Is that pretty much still the same mix that you've got going right now?

COL. GARRETT: Yeah, not much has changed there. What has changed is that the AQI that are in the area are being attacked by our concerned citizens and our Iraqi security forces and coalition forces. So everyone is attacking al Qaeda, limiting their freedom of movement. And I know that we are having more than a disruptive effect. We are dismantling the al Qaeda network in our area of operations, and that doesn't mean that they're still not capable of spectacular attacks, but they no longer wield the same influence that they did several months ago on the population.

The Shi'a militia, the JAM special groups remain a problem for us. But interestingly enough, we are seeing the same type of movement that we saw early on in the Sunni communities towards al Qaeda in our Shi'a communities towards JAM and especially the JAM special group members. And so today, with our concerned citizens, with the intelligence that we receive on a daily basis, we are targeting and we are detaining key members of the JAM special group network. In the last two weeks, we have removed four of our high-value targets off of the battlefield, and much of it is due to the interaction with the Iraqi police force and information that we get from our concerned citizens and the locals who feel a bit more emboldened to provide that information based on the current security situation and the way that they see things going.

Q And if I could follow up on something else we talked about at that time. You had begun working with the ePRT, obviously. As you touched on in your opening remarks, that has continued. But two other things you talked about were business training classes and computer training classes by USAID, I believe. Could you give us an update on those and whatever else has been going on in that area?

COL. GARRETT: Yeah, and you know, and again, that's why the ePRT very quickly got my attention, because it wasn't, you know, they didn't come into the brigade and talk about projects that would show progress, you know, a year or six years from now. They talked about impact that we would be able to see in 30 days. And in August, I think, and I think maybe even before that, we had started our business training programs in Iskandariyah. And at that time, I think the number was 25 persons per week that were going through a class coordinated by USAID or contracted by USAID and run by an Iraqi businessman. And today, I think that we have done eight iterations of that training program. I mean, there are people, there are waiting lists to get into that program. And what that has spawned, the newest effort that we've done was, again, our very, very small team -- you know, last week we interviewed -- not we, but our ePRT members -- interviewed 40 people in Jurpasuccor (ph), for instance, for microgrants. And you know, what was interesting was the approach that the ePRT took. Again, the effect that they're trying to achieve was one that we would eventually work towards with my staff, but it was the way in which they went about doing it. One of our ePRT members, Dr. Lewis Tatum, who's a USAID rep, went out, interviewed each of the people who were applying for these grants, and it was a fairly detailed interview. I mean, we just didn't give the money away. And so those kinds of programs continue in areas like Jurpasuccor (ph), Iskandariyah, (Diara ?).

Another big example are our agricultural unions. You know, this is a very rural area. And we were just happy to have agricultural unions, because it was a body of people that we could work with, again, focused at improving security. Well, what they've done is taken it to the next level. And most of our agricultural unions are no longer unions but have applied for and received NGO status, and there is benefit there. So ePRT has been very, very important to us, and they've made a very big difference in terms of our ability to make progress in the governance and economic lines of operations.

Q Terrific, thanks.

MODERATOR: Andrew Lubin.

Q Colonel, good afternoon. Andrew Lubin from U.S. Cavalry ONPoint. Good to talk with you again, sir.

Could you talk in more detail about the ePRTs down in your area? You know, what kind of jobs are they setting up, salaries? What are they doing? Because if you're in agriculture -- are you trying to diversify away from agriculture or are you just going to kind of build that up again?

COL. GARRETT: Well, again, if you think about the ePRT, the embedded provincial reconstruction team, what is important to remember is that their focus is at the local levels of government. And so we're not talking about provincial or national level agricultural issues. And one of the purposes of the ePRT was to increase capacity at the local level and the try and link the local to the provincial levels of government. And then the provincial reconstruction teams that are located throughout Iraq had the mission of linking

the provincial levels of government with the local level and the national levels of government. And so, using the agricultural union as an example, you know, what we were doing before in terms of providing through our commander's emergency response program funds, SURP funds, you know, we were providing seed, farm equipment and other things to help our farmers maintain their farms. What we are seeing now and what the ePRT has done for us is to take these agricultural unions, push them more towards a businesslike approach. And what we have now are they are buying their own seed. They are setting prices for their produce. They are buying farm equipment that they can maintain and rent out to other farmers. And there's still lots and lots and lots of work to do, but much of that work has to come from the provincial level of government. And I think that is the next step. As we continue to increase capacity at the local level, they increase demands at the provincial level, and I think that is what will provide the impetus for growth at the provincial level.

Another point that I'd just mention to you is water, for instance. You know, we have -- you know, my guess is that there is a national problem with the distribution of water. But again, our focus at the local level -- what we know is that in some areas during a certain portion of the summer, there was not ample drinking water nor water for crops. And so we looked in our area and determined that the problem was outside of our area generally. I mean, there were some things that we could do in terms of having the government fix pumps, but it caused us to work with the director general of water and irrigation, which caused coordination, communication at the national level with the minister of water. And so we're seeing that kind of movement and that kind of progress as well through the efforts, I think, of the EPRT.

Q Great. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

And David Axe.

Q Sir, thanks for taking the time. This is David Axe with the Aviation Week Group.

I was hoping you could sort of play along with a thought experiment. I'm trying to envision insurgent groups like AQI as businesses that have -- you know, that have an operating budget and revenue. And if you can disrupt their -- say, their income -- their revenue, you could disrupt their operations. So what are you seeing in terms of the business -- the financial health of, say, AQI in your area? Are you taking down the financiers? Are you taking down the networks that keep the organization operating?

COL. GARRETT: Well, you know, I think the issues that you're talking about are far outside of my battle space. But what I will tell you is that more important than money is sanctuary and support from the population. I mean, that's what we have taken away from them and that's what's made the biggest impact in my view on al Qaeda in my area of operation. You know, what's interesting here is there are people as I move around the battle space -- I mean, there are people who have been unemployed seemingly or supposedly for four years. But in many of these places, there are -- there is no lack of money. They're getting money from somewhere. There is still a large number of people in the population that draw entitlements from the government of Iraq.

So, you know, money -- and we looked at that early on in our tour here and our analysis -- what we have found over 13 months that there is no shortage

of money. There is no shortage of funding, especially for -- you know, for groups like al Qaeda and some of the other extremist organizations. More importantly than money, though, is the population that allows them to operate and that's what we have taken away from them.

Q Great. Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

And let's see. Did somebody else join us late? Who's there?

Q Lieutenant Fishman's on.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Jarred. Go ahead.

Q Great.

Thank for your time, sir. Could you tell one thing or two major, important things that you wish the American public would know about in the last few weeks -- maybe the last months that you would think would be the most important point you would want to get across?

COL. GARRETT: There are so many. I think one is that there is in fact -- and General Petraeus and everybody watched and we watched over here -- General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker render their report. But there is measurable progress here in Iraq and -- you know, and I can talk specifically to what we're doing in North Babil. I mean, so there is progress.

But you know, a lot of what we're trying to do really does get at buying more time, creating more space for the government at all levels and I see two level impact directly here, and that the local and provincial level of government to gain more capacity and more capability to take care of the population. I mean -- and this is something that is going to take, in my estimation, many, many years to fix. The security environment, though -- the increase in security, though, I think provides opportunity and space for much of this to happen. And that's where we find ourselves today. We never know -- you know, with any real certainty what's going to happen from day to day. But what we do know is that we have an opportunity right now, given the current security situation and the forces that we have available to us -- and not only combat forces, but elements like the ePRT and other elements that are able to operate because of the security to take advantage of, and that's what we're really trying to do. MR. HOLT: All right. So thank you very much.

Any follow-up questions?

MR. HOLT: Okay, sir.

And Colonel Michael Garrett, with the -- the commander of 4th Brigade Combat Team Airborne, 25th Infantry Division, Multinational Division Center -- thank you very much, sir and congratulations on your successes there. And hopefully we can speak again. And -- but thank you very much for being with us.

Do you have any closing comments for us?

COL. GARRETT: No, just -- again, thanks for the opportunity to talk to you today. It's important to tell, you know, our story here and it's important -- I think that the American population and -- you know, really, our families

who have sacrificed over the last 13 months to share in this sense of accomplishment because it has not always been that way. So again, just thank you very, very much for the opportunity to speak to you today and hopefully I'll talk to you before we head out of here.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

And thank you all for being with us.

END.