

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL MICHAEL
WOBBEMA, COALITION AIR FORCE TRANSITION TEAM CHIEF OF STAFF, VIA
TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ TIME: 10:00 A.M. EDT DATE: TUESDAY, OCTOBER 30,
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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): Okay,
Colonel, go ahead.

COL. WOBBEMA: Okay, let me just say, before I get too far, that you'll
have to bear with me. I can't pass a hearing test anymore, and I've listened to
three of you and you all come in at different volume levels. So if I ask you to
repeat it, it's, A, because my upper Scandihuvian influence won't allow me to
understand your accent, or I just can't flat hear the question clearly. So
please bear with me.

Just to start from the beginning, Colonel Mike Wobbema is my name. I
am actually with the 119th Wing, the Happy Hooligans out of Fargo, North Dakota.
Up until this spring, we were flying the F-16 -- air defense version of the F-
16, actually, aircraft; the A model, actually -- in fact, the last operational A
model unit in the Air Force. And we are currently -- while I've been here in
Iraq, the unit has currently been in conversion to the Predator as well as the
T-21, which is an intermediate step until the joint cargo aircraft is acquired
and put on line, and then we'll be flying that as well out of Fargo -- Fargo,
North Dakota.

MR. HOLT: All right.

COL. WOBBEMA: Okay, that was to answer that specific question. And
Jack, is there anything else you want to prep or start this with?

MR. HOLT: Well, sir, I'd just like to welcome you to the Blogger's
Roundtable this morning. And if you've got an opening statement, go ahead, sir,
and then we'll get started.

COL. WOBBEMA: Okay, just a couple of quick things. Like I said, I'm
with the North Dakota Guard. I volunteered to come over here to be involved
with the Iraqi air force and the startup of the Iraqi air force. The roles and
responsibilities I've had have really kind of migrated over the past several
months as I've gone from a micro to more of a macro level. But I actually came
here to stand up the training program, the (accessions ?) programs for the Iraqi
air force.

What we have going at the Taji air base in Taji, Iraq is basic training program as well as the technical schools -- if you're Army-centric, then it's MOS training -- and officer training programs. We've also migrated to a warrant officer program, which is kind of unique, because there is no such thing in the U.S. Air Force side of the house.

So that's what I came to do. We've brought in people from all over the air force. And most specifically from an opening comment standpoint is I'm really impressed with the airmen that we brought in. The guys that we have in Taji are people who don't normally get the opportunity to deploy per se in their current career fields as instructors at these various locations; specifically, the BMT instructors at Lackland Air Force Base. You know, that's all they do.

We only do it in one location in the United States Air Force, and never before has the Air Force brought people to a foreign country to do their basic enlisted training program like this. So it's really unique, and it's been really interesting to watch it manifest itself. We've graduated a class of jundi, basic training airmen, and now we're in the process of working through some warrant officers as well under a similar circumstance. Likewise, we've got a small class of officer trainees at Taji as well as a group of people at Ar Rustamiyah, which is on the southeast side of Baghdad here, and then several tech training schools going on. So that's how I started.

I've since migrated to CAFTT headquarters as the deputy CAFTT, but -- so now I have more of a macro view of things that are going on, which is creating its own set of challenges and further enhancing the adventure I've got here. MR. HOLT: All right, sir, thank you very much.

And Fred Paisley (sp), you were first on line, so why don't you get it started?

Q Yeah, thanks, Jack. Hi, Colonel. How are you doing?

COL. WOBBEEMA: I'm great, thank you.

Q How's the weather out there? I spent about two months in Qatar a couple of years ago at the CAOC on the Navy side, but that was in the middle of the summer. So I'll bet it's at least cooling down a little bit there for you.

COL. WOBBEEMA: Low 70s now overnight and up into the 90s during the day. It's perfect weather. It's beautiful.

Q That's good to hear. And congrats on that MQ-9 Reaper kill that just came out. That just hit the news the last couple of days ago. So that's good to hear.

And that kind of ties into my first question about UAVs. Is there any -- and I'm not really certain what the scope of what the Iraqi air force is targeted to kind of look like in the next five to 10 years or whatever, but is there any -- with the importance of UAVs in terms of getting out in the intelligence-gathering element of it, is that going to be a big part of the program?

COL. WOBBEEMA: I do not think that we have any kind of unmanned vehicle program established in the long-term planning. Basically what we're doing is we're using a manned form of the same type of intelligence-gathering equipment

in the form of a Caravan, a Cessna Caravan, that we've put an ISR suite on, which is operated by a sensor operator that's actually flying in the aircraft.

Q Okay, that's good. And again, that kind of ties back into another question of aircraft. What's the idea that's out there in terms of what sort of aircraft are going to be part of this Iraqi air force in the future?

COL. WOBBERMA: Well, in the future, of course, you know, I've been a fighter guy my whole career, and a lot of the Iraqi air force pilots are all former fighter pilots. And, of course, if they had an unlimited budget and didn't want to worry about anything else, we'd be buying F-16s, F-18s for them. Or they would be buying them for themselves. That's what they'd be wanting to do.

But we have to walk before we can run, and right now we've got some C-130 aircraft on the ground that they're operating. There are some MI-17 for the rotary-wing side. They've got a few Hueys. And then we've got this Cessna Caravan. The Cessna Caravan will also become -- there will be an armed variant of that that will come online. And then they'll move into -- the next iteration will be a light-attack aircraft of some sort, probably a propeller-driven kind of light-attack aircraft that can take care of their most immediate need, and that is to deal with the insurgency that's taking place inside their own borders.

From there, then, it will migrate to being able to develop an air defense capability to protect their borders from outside influence. And then, from there, you know, who knows? At some point in time I suspect that they will ultimately migrate to becoming a fully integrated part of the world community.

Q All right, thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Andrew Lubin.

Q Yes, Colonel, Andrew Lubin from U.S. Cavalry ON Point. We appreciate you taking the time to speak with us.

Sir, from talking to the various lieutenant colonels, colonels and generals the last few weeks, the courage and aptitude of the various Iraqis is not in question. However the logistics supply and logistics mentality is, how are you -- what are the Iraqis doing to provide and plan their own logistics and repairs, or are we doing all that for them?

COL. WOBBERMA: Okay. Well, there's a couple of different lines a guy could take with this. Most of the logistic support with regard to the Iraqi military is done on the Army side. And I can't speak to that per se. From the Air Force side, what they would desire is to become pretty much independent of the roles and responsibilities that the Army has on that and to develop their own system. They're not there yet. They're still building a force. They've got just a little over 1,200 people in the total air force at this point in time and haven't built the strength or the infrastructure or the human capacity to take on their own logistics (trail ?).

So for the time being, they're going to be depending upon the Army to do that. I know that the Army is trying to get their feet underneath them with regard to the logistics piece. There are so many obstacles in this country that they're still trying to wrestle with; you know, the amount of electricity they have during the war, the ability to clearly transport things over the road

without restriction, which, of course, is not totally possible because of the insurgency that takes place. And then there's still some (weeding ?) and vetting of a bit of a corruption (factor ?) that takes place within the forces as well.

So long term, the Air Force wants to stand on its own, independent of any other service. But in the meantime, they're dependent upon us as well as the Iraqi army, as well as the U.S. Army. So it's a long road to hoe. I really can't give you a time line on how that's all going to flesh out, but it'll be a little while for them.

Q (Inaudible) -- Jack, but can we go for a follow-up?

MR. HOLT: Go ahead.

Q Okay, I appreciate it. And again, nobody -- the time line would be unfair to ask the situation because it's so fluid. What about repairs? What about the training of people to be mechanics? Do we have plans for them too?

COL. WOBBERMA: Oh, yes, absolutely. We have several maintenance supervisor courses going on, as well as -- I think we have in the works about 10 different aircraft maintenance programs in place ready to stand up. Not all of them have students yet, but we're working through that.

Along with the school house, we have several squadrons that are out there that are the military transition teams that are embedded with the Iraqi forces. So we have -- at Taji, for example, we have three helicopter squadrons there that the Iraqis fly. Embedded with them are roughly 60 to 70 U.S. Air Force personnel, maintenance mostly. Several operators are there to help train pilots and for the maintenance guys to help train their maintenance personnel to get them to be more effective and efficient from a western style of aircraft maintenance and that kind of a mind-set. So we're very diligently working that. We see the same thing going on up at Kirkuk, the same thing at Nuomethana (sp) and the same thing in Basra as well.

Q Okay, great. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: And Jared.

Q Yes, sir, Lieutenant Fishman. I have about two or three questions. The first, are there any plans to increase the airlift capacity and capabilities of the Iraqi air force as far as -- I think they have maybe two to three operational C-130s. But clearly the biggest need is for them to be able to transfer troops back and forth wherever there's going to be a hot spot. Is there plans to make that more self-sufficient and that the Iraqis would pretty much be able to do that on their own, move their troops back and forth? COL. WOBBERMA: As a matter of fact, in the current Defense Authorization Act, there's a provision in there for three more excess defense article C-130s to come to Iraq. And so we're going to -- the plan at this point is to double their fleet over the course of the next several months as that gets going.

In addition to that, we have a light transport aircraft mode going on where we're going to bring on board the Cessna King Air. And, of course, then there's the Caravan I spoke about previously, which has some transport capability as well. So that's just the fixed wing.

From the rotary-wing piece, the MI-17 is a very capable aircraft that can haul, I think, up to 25 or 30 individuals, as well as their gear, and a few thousand pounds worth of stuff. But if you've not been in an MI-17, it's a pretty large helicopter that can manage a lot of cargo and has a great airlift capability for a country this size especially.

Q Great. And then a follow-up question on a different plain. How about the doctrine of the Iraqi air force, when they used to have a lot of French and Soviet influence in the air force, and now obviously with the Americans? Are we switching over to our (AFSC ?), as you were talking about the MOS before, to American-style squadron and wing and tactics?

COL. WOBBEEMA: Yes, absolutely. And it is a bit of a hurdle for some of them, because some of these -- the maintainers have been around for a long, long time. I spoke with one individual at Taji, for example, who came into the Iraqi air force in 1961, and he's got a little calendar and he shows -- he's got the date on there, and he's still smiling like "And I'm not leaving any time soon." But he came through and learned all his maintenance practices when there was a huge Soviet influence here.

And it is a significantly different style and mind-set for maintenance, and our guys are working through the process of trying to bring that western influence and do things in a manner that is compatible with the way we think is the best way to conduct business. It's different. We think it's better. Obviously we think our way is better. And there are some bumps in the road on that, because it's hard to get them to see sometimes the importance of that. But we're making progress there.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Jared, was that all you had?

Q Yeah. I mean, we can let the other guys ask a few more questions if they want.

MR. HOLT: Okay. All right. Anybody else got any follow-up questions?

Q I'm going to pass to Jared. He's the Air Force guy. I'm just going to stay here and listen to more from him and the colonel.

Q Okay. Well, I guess -- (inaudible) -- could you speak a little bit to the ability to bring in more of the former Saddam-era -- the field-grade and general officers who were probably kicked out in the last few years because of de-Ba'athification and the efforts to bring them back in because of their wealth of knowledge into the air force?

COL. WOBBEEMA: I can't speak specifically to the de- Ba'athification part. You know, the one nice thing -- and let me just chase a rabbit trail for you just briefly for a moment.

The one nice thing that I've encountered in dealing with the flyers within the Iraqi air force is the whole issue of sectarianism really is downplayed. It really doesn't exist much.

I've had a couple of people personally come to me privately and express some frustration or concern for not being able to satisfactorily progress in their career the way they desire. But, you know, I have people in the U.S. Air Force coming and talking to me about their inability to satisfactorily progress in their career. So I don't put a lot of concern there.

So the key thing is in order for the Iraqi air force to get off the ground, we need to bring pilots on board. And the only way we're really going to successfully do that on a timely basis is to re-recruit those pilots who were in the air force prior to really us bombing them into oblivion from '91, because they really haven't had an air force since then.

So we are -- in fact, there have been a couple of hundred guys that have come in prior to my arrival here, roughly -- I don't have exact numbers -- but more recently they just recruited through a special campaign 150 new guys that have just come back in. They're going through various stages of vetting to make sure that their security backgrounds are appropriate for what we need -- medical screening, just the whole in-processing that takes place. And so they're going through several stages of that. We have 30 of them over here doing this and 60 of them over here doing something else. And so we're going through that process right now.

Obviously one of the primary concerns is since it's a prior regime that, you know, we didn't really see eye to eye with, the concern of security is one of the biggest things. And so that probably is the longest hole in the tent with regard to getting these guys on board. Once we get them going, then they are already qualified pilots. They already have wings. And so the time line to get them mission-capable in their respective air frames will be reduced. And that's the only way we're going to grow the air force to a size and capability on the timely enough basis that we need to have to accomplish those tasks that we have.

Q Great. And then one final question, I guess, would be when it comes to ISR, is there any ability to increase the Iraqis' capabilities for ISR, especially over the strategic assets of oil pipelines, dams, the targets that AQI tries to hit to send the country back into the stone age? Is there any ability to increase that capacity and tie that in with our assets as well?

COL. WOBBERMA: Well, the capacity is limited by pilots, again. And so the first thing we need to do is get the pilots trained. But in the meantime, what is happening, as we get pilots trained, for example, the Huey aircraft that are flying out there, the pilots, and they get sufficient crews adequately trained, those aircraft are tapped to run ISR missions over power lines, over some of the oil pipelines, to check the status and to ensure that the security of those things is taken and stays in place.

Simultaneous with that, there's, of course, the Caravan and the ISR platform on that, which allows them to track and monitor that piece. And then there's also a couple of low-wing -- the CH-2000 that they have down in Basra that they, and also at Nuomethana (sp) they use for the ISR.

So all of the platforms that they have are being used in light of that for the ISR piece, not necessarily traditional ISR programs, but any pilot's got a set of eyeballs and he can get out there and take a look to see what's out there. And that's ISR, from that perspective. So we're going along that line.

Now, in some cases we're kind of a victim of our own success. But because we've done some of that ISR staff with the Hueys, for example, some of the other ministries want the Hueys to go support them with their visual lookouts on equipment that they have.

So what ends up happening very quickly, then, is you get people who are a little bit dissatisfied with the level of performance because everybody thinks

that they're the most important game in town. And so, instead of training pilots, we end up doing a lot of ISR missions, and then that reduces our capacity down the road.

So it's a careful balance of capability and roles and responsibilities and priorities that have to be established here. There's a constant struggle there. So it's a constant point of discussion. But they are moving pretty well forward. It's been nice to see in just the few months I've been here.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much, sir.

Any other questions?

Q No, I'm good.

MR. HOLT: Okay, sir.

Any final comments, sir? COL. WOBBERMA: Well, I didn't get a chance to answer anybody's questions specifically with the training on the ground. But I just want to say that all of the airmen that have come in here have really, really done just a tremendous job laying the foundation, getting the groundwork ready for the Iraqi air force to build a good, solid force for the future. And it is really awesome to see those guys working, especially when you consider the difficult circumstances they find themselves in.

And, by the way, it's not just the ground school piece. We did start a pilot training program here on 1 October, and we've got a couple of Cessna 172s that just arrived this month, and they are currently fighting undergraduate pilot trainees. So it's not just the prior service guys that are going. We have new young officers coming up on line as well.

Q Colonel, do you have time for one extra question?

COL. WOBBERMA: Like I said at the beginning, I've got time I haven't even used yet.

Q Oh, fantastic. This is David Mays from American Forces Press Service.

First of all, could I just get some basic numbers of what the size of the force now? And maybe you could break that down between airmen and pilots. And then my second question has more to do with the lack of sectarianism in your air force that you've seen. I've heard several other American officers speak to that, and I wondered if you could comment on the role of the Iraqi air force into sort of setting the tone for the future national pride of the country.

COL. WOBBERMA: Well, okay, so -- well, let me just talk about the pilot -- I mean, the size of the air force. The air force right now is about 280 -- I'm sorry -- 1,280; 1,280. There's about 140 pilots and there's about 40 people who are on the staff, with about 100 guys actually flying. So the rest of them then are made up of maintenance engineers and logisticians and comm people and all of that other stuff that's going on.

There's about 53 aircraft in their total force, both fixed wing and rotary wing. And we have -- you know, through the month we'll see onesies/twosies more aircraft come on board. And likewise we've got guys through initial training. So it's a steady growth.

The goal for the Iraqi air force was to be at about 3,289 by the end of this year. They're probably not going to achieve that goal. But, I mean, goals are things you just set out there and you try to go for it. But the recruiting is going on and their growth is happening.

As far as being an example, you know, one analogy that's been thrown out there with regard to the air force is you can't -- let me relate it to the army. With an army, you can create regional forces that can cause, you know, regional divisions to take place. But with an air force, you can only really field a national air force.

I've had the opportunity to fly in the Huey a few times, and I've had a chance to fly in the Black Hawk on numerous occasions. The people on the ground are very happy to see the Hueys, and they wave pretty energetically. And sometimes you'll see people wave at you in a Black Hawk, but in most cases they may not even look up at you. But when you're going by in a Huey, they're looking.

And so, to me, getting that Iraqi flag out there in front of them, that's where the sense of pride is going to come in. And that is going to be -- anything that happens in Iraq that's like that is going to be a unifying effort. And from the perspective of all that, too, you know, just keep in mind, we've only been working this Iraqi air force piece really strongly since about the first of this year, the actual building and equipping and plussing-up of the personnel.

We're really just getting started in 2007, which is about two to three years behind where the army is at this point in time. We have just about fleshed out the Iraqi army piece manpower-wise, and so they're just about completed there. We are really just getting out of the chalk, so to speak, on this piece. And it will be where a lot of energy will be going. And until the Iraqi air force counterinsurgency force is built, the whole U.S. military is going to be here working this piece.

I kind of chased a couple of rabbit trails there, but I hope that answers your question.

Q Yes. Thank you, Colonel.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much for joining us today. And hopefully we can check back in with you here in a few weeks and see how things are going.

COL. WOBBEMA: Well, I hope they stay continually quiet like they have been for the last couple of months. It has been very nice, very calm; as the guards say, "Tranquilo." It's been really, really quiet. It's nice to see that there is an impact taking place here.

Q Sir, are you located in the green zone?

COL. WOBBEMA: I am -- yes, I am.

Q That's good. I'll be there in a few weeks, so maybe I'll be able to interview you in person.

COL. WOBBEMA: Oh. I'll be happy to talk to you. Q Great. Thank you, sir.

COL. WOBBEMA: Come visit us at Phoenix Base.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much for being with us, and hopefully you can speak again soon.

COL. WOBBEMA: Well, I hope I've answered your questions. Thank you for the time. I appreciate this opportunity.

MR. HOLT: Colonel, thank you. We really appreciate the time you spent with us. Thanks very much.

Q Thanks, Colonel.

COL. WOBBEMA: You're welcome. Have a great day, guys.

END.