

Full Transcript

Col. Stacy Clardy III, Commander, Regimental Combat Team 2 / Multi-National Force - West

SUBJECT: *Operational Update for Western Iraq*

LOCATION: *5 NOV 2007, Pentagon Briefing Room, from Iraq via satellite*

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Good morning. Welcome.

Good afternoon to Colonel Clardy. This is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me all right, Colonel?

COL. CLARDY: I hear you just fine.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for taking some time, Colonel, to be with us this afternoon.

This is Marine Colonel Stacy Clardy. He's the commander of Regimental Combat Team 2. His command of nearly 6,000 Marines, soldiers and sailors has operated as part of Multinational Force West since December of last year. This afternoon he is speaking to us from Camp Ripper. And as is our usual format, although this is his first time, he is going to give you a brief operational update in terms of what his forces have been doing, and then he's going to take some questions from you.

So with that, Colonel, let me turn it over to you.

COL. CLARDY: Thank you, Mr. Whitman.

Ladies and gentlemen, as you just heard, I am Colonel Stacy Clardy, the commanding officer for Regimental Combat Team 2. I'm responsible for coalition forces out in the western regions of Al Anbar province. Regimental Combat Team -- RCT -- 2 is an organized -- is organized around Camp Lejeune Base, 2nd Marine Regiment. We're headquartered out here at Camp Ripper, which is on al Asad Air Base.

There are 6,000 Marines, sailors and soldiers under my command. Besides the four Marine infantry battalions, we currently employ an Army mechanized infantry battalion, a Navy RIVRON squadron and an Azerbaijani peacekeeping company. These forces are primarily oriented on the five municipal districts that comprise Area of Operation Denver.

I'm assisted by many governmental agencies that provide expertise or resources that the military does not normally possess. One critical organization is the Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team. This team provides expertise through 12 representatives of U.S. governmental agencies. Combined, these Americans as a team are working together with the Iraqis to significantly improve the overall situation here in the AO.

AO Denver encompasses 30,000 square miles and a half a million people, with the -- across the vast province of Al Anbar. My area is roughly the size of my home state of South Carolina, and I -- consequently is one of the largest regimental AOs in Iraq.

If you take a moment to look at the map we provided, you'll see that my AO stretches from the town of Hit, which is 30 miles northwest of Ramadi. It runs up the Euphrates River, through Haditha and out west to -- through Anah and Rawah, over to al Qaim region, which is on the Syrian border. The western edge of my area cascades along about 210 miles of the Syrian border and again, to the south, along the Jordanian border, for about a hundred miles.

05 November 2007

AO: dam

Included in that area are two ports of entry, Trebil (ph) and Walid. Along with the Syrian and Jordanian borders, I've got 16 miles of border area along the Saudi Arabian border. Out west there are also 18 ports that belong to the Iraqi Department of Border Enforcement to provide protection for the Iraqi people in the small city of Arupa (ph).

The size and scope of my AO -- of the AO facilitates one of my main tasks, which is to interdict insurgents and terrorists bent on getting into the major urban areas of Ramadi, Fallujah and Baghdad. Of course RCT 2 is conducting counterinsurgency operations against insurgents and terrorists, securing and stabilizing local areas and transitioning the Iraqi security forces and the municipal government towards Iraqi control.

As a result of our operations and efforts over the last 10 months, each urban area is now functioning -- has a functioning municipal government, a court, banks, markets and a police force. These results reflect the significant and courageous effort on the part of the Anbaris to take charge of their own destiny. We are now diligently attempting to improve the linkages between the municipal governments and the provincial central governments as appropriate. I see progress every week as services -- (audio break) -- construction begins and a sense of normalcy returns to the Anbari people.

I can honestly say that the Iraqi leaders, including the tribal sheikhs, get it, and by "it" I mean they know the way to peace and prosperity is through a legitimate government focused on the needs of the people and driven by a rule of law. On several occasions they've said to me that they want to move on and they want to move into the 21st century. They're tired of war. They understand that prosperity only comes through security and stability.

The Iraqi security forces in my AO include 5,200 Iraqi police, several hundred highway patrolmen and 4,200 soldiers of two brigades of the recently validated 7th Iraqi Army Division. The army brigades have grown 200 percent in the last seven months with the support of the sheikhs and are now responsible for their own security areas and missions across the province, but particularly around the urban areas. The Iraqi police have also grown by 40 -- (audio break) -- and are progressing in professionalism and protecting the population. They're a huge part of (criminalizing ?) the insurgency force. They are now in charge of security within the city and towns and proactively hunting down the insurgents and terrorists throughout their districts and working with the Iraqi judges.

The growth and improvements in Iraqi security forces highlights the commitment by the tribes and the population to their own future alongside coalition forces and Iraqi governmental institutions.

If I were to characterize our situation here in western Al Anbar, I would simply say that we -- the Iraqis and the Americans -- are now winning, and for us, winning is peace. When I arrived here in January, this AO was one of the most dangerous places in Iraq. Now it's not. With the Iraqis moving off and focusing on their own survival, they are now ready to move forward and progress towards a peaceful solution.

Today the insurgents and terrorists are now mostly separated or away from the -- (short audio break). The situation allows progress with governance, economic development and the rule of law. Along with the Iraqi security forces, RCT-2 continues to protect the population, hunt the insurgents, mostly in the deserts, with intelligence-driven operations that keep them off balance, on the run and, in my opinion, defeated.

If you look at the second chart, you'll see a dramatic change in the historical enemy activity in this AO. This reflects a 75 percent overall reduction in enemy incidents over the past 10 months, a significant crippling of the al Qaeda in Iraq and the Sunni insurgent capability, and a real opportunity for progress.

I just recently drove 750 miles throughout my AO, and one of the things that really jumped out at me -- the Iraqis, they're moving on. They feel secure enough to conduct business, go to school, to meet openly and discuss their future, and to live a life without fear of reprisal from those who seek to control their destiny. The Iraqis are taking freedom on their own terms. They have their self-respect, but more importantly, they have hope. This hope is derived from character that only comes from the perseverance over suffering.

05 November 2007

AO: dam

Now, I've only really scratched the surface of what is really happening out here in the AO, but I wanted to leave you with this. War is about will. Our will is strong and reflected in the exceptional and honorable performance of the Marines, sailors and soldiers under this RCT and spread out over a hundred positions throughout the AO. But more importantly, the Iraqis are -- the Iraqi will is also strong, and we know that they are not the -- we know they are the center of gravity and the key to ultimate victory and peace.

Make no mistake, we're still at war and al Qaeda still exists in AO Denver, if only through their minions. These individuals are still committed to their illegitimate extremist views and undermining the path to peace. They hate everything they see out here. They are still driven to harm Americans and Iraqis alike, and to them, all I can say is, bring it on.

I'm ready to take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Kristin, why don't you go ahead and start.

Q Colonel, this is Kristin Roberts with Reuters. Can you tell us a little bit about what you're seeing along your border with Syria, particularly in the flow of foreign fighters and how that flow compares with, let's say, a year ago?

COL. CLARDY: Our impression, and certainly our reports from what we see how out here, indicates that foreign fighters are not coming across the border in any type of numbers that we've seen before. These numbers have reduced dramatically. And I don't want to say we don't have any coming across the border, but those -- the numbers that we've seen in the past are just not there. The Iraqis have certainly secured their own cities, those were safe havens for these foreign fighters. These safe havens don't exist anymore. So if they come across this large area, across this desert, they've got no place to go. They've changed -- if they're coming across the border into Iraq, they're not coming through here.

Q Quantify for us the reduction, then? I understand your unwillingness to put a hard figure on what you're seeing right now, but can you quantify for us the difference?

COL. CLARDY: That'd be very difficult to do. We don't watch every -- it's not possible to watch them coming across the border and count them. But I can tell you, based on our detentions over the last 10 months, where we were in the past detaining, capturing or killing foreign fighters in our city areas and out in the desert, we very seldom find one now. We only very seldom even hear of reporting of foreign fighters in this AO. I can't put a -- I can't really quantify it for you.

Q Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Louie, go ahead.

Q It's Louie Martinez with ABC News. Can you describe how your operations have changed in the last couple months as the violence level seems to have gone down? And I seem to recall that there was a request that was made -- I believe it was in Rawah -- that the units there patrol without their helmets. Was that ever approved, or is that a symbol of the confidence that the U.S. forces now have in the western part of the province?

COL. CLARDY: Our operations have changed in that -- if you're talking about security operations, we are not in the cities as much as we were before. The enemy is just not there. He has moved out into the deserts, into the towns and villages out there. He is transiting a lot. So we've had to change our own tactics. And we are now out in those desert areas, large desert areas, hunting him down. Iraqi security forces, when they can, also go with us to, include Iraqi police and Iraqi army. That is a significant change and it puts a certain burden on the Iraqi security forces, which suffer sometimes from the lack of logistics capability, but we're there to support them.

We do do it in a combined mode, and we find it to be successful. Because the situation has changed dramatically in the cities, we are getting tips not only about what is going on inside these city centers, but

05 November 2007

AO: dam

also out in the desert and these villages, because they are connected. One advantage of Iraq is that they are a tribal culture. These tribes extend not -- extend beyond the city centers, out into the deserts and these towns and villages, and they are connected. So it allows us to pull information, not just where we're physically located but also in distant reaches of the desert.

Regarding the issue of security out here and what we are wearing, that's really something I'm not prepared to talk about at this time. But I will point out one fact. We just recently had a visitor out here who is a blogger.

She was a 65-year-old grandmother whose -- who wanted to come out here and visit with the Marines. It was somewhat of an effort, but we got her out here, and she stayed in the AO for about a week and visited with the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines in Hit and Baghdad. She was, I can assure you, very safe and felt very secure, and I think she got a good example of what the security situation was really in my AO.

MR. WHITMAN: Al, and then we'll go to Tom.

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin for Voice of America. I have two related questions for you. One is, I assume that you have confidence that the sheikhs who have come over to cooperating with the government and the coalition are reliable. My question is, what makes you believe that they're reliable, that some incident or some political developments couldn't push them back over to the other side?

And I also wanted to know whether and to what extent you were involved in this transition of the sheikhs from the insurgent side to the government and coalition side, and if you can tell us, give us any insights or stories about that process.

COL. CLARDY: The nature of my AO makes the effort very decentralized. My battalion commanders, my company commanders and myself all participate in tribal engagement and working with the local governments and the Iraqi security forces.

How can I -- if your question is how do we know that they'll stand if they're tested, they've already been tested. The sheikhs are -- know that they're under constant observation by insurgents in their areas. They know when they stepped to the coalition force's side they were risking their lives. We've had attacks here recently against, as you recall, Sheikh Sattar, also against Iraqi security forces. That serves only to strengthen their resolve. They know they -- they feel that they can't go back; they are now committed fully to the future and the destiny that Iraq will -- this effort will take them.

And when you sit down with them and talk to them, they are fully committed. You can see it in their eyes, you can see (sic) it in their voices, and you can see it in their actions. They're giving up their sons to join the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police. With the full commitment -- with that full level of commitment, I have no doubt that they're committed to the future.

Some examples of how they -- how we see this commitment being -- or how we see it coming about -- this is not a sheikh but a mayor who took over up in Haditha not so long ago. He stood up in front of 200 sheikhs and tribal leaders from across the Haditha Triad. And previous to that, they'd only been able to get 20 or 30 in the room. When he took over office and stood up in front of them to speak to them for the first time, it was -- they were all listening to him, and he talked about -- that this was a stepping-off point, this was the way forward. He said if you stand with the Americans, it's just like if you stood with the Americans after World War II, in terms of Japan and Germany; you can see where they led them down the road to prosperity. And if you look at those countries today, that is what we want here in Iraq. He feels very strongly that this is the way to the future, the way to peace, the way to prosperity.

The fact that there was 200 sheikhs and tribal leaders in the room at the time, I think, reflects on their commitment at this point. This is -- and I could give you story after story along the same lines.

They are meeting on their own. They are talking without any type of prompting from us about their future. They're talking about politics and participating in elections in the coming months. They are planning for their future. They are trying to be as open as possible and transparent with us, and in their way they are

From the Iraq Communication Desk (icd@osd.mil / 703-697-7323 / DSN 312-227-7323)
05 November 2007
AO: dam

fully committed to what will happen in the future and what the future will bring for them. And they see it through the government of Iraq and with support of the coalition forces.

Q Follow-up. Colonel, do you see that sort of attitude and transformation spreading to other parts of the country from what you're seeing in your e-mail traffic and the reports that come to you? And what do you think your colleagues elsewhere need to do to promote that process?

COL. CLARDY: It's very difficult -- and I know you've heard this before as well -- it's very difficult to take what we've been doing out here in either Anbar or AO Denver and plop it down some place else -- (audio break). The one thing about Iraq, every area's different. The tribal make-up is different. The religious make-up could be different. Their history is different, and it's very difficult to apply a cookie-cutter approach, particularly in this type of warfare, counterinsurgency or fighting against terrorists.

Certainly, can we learn from others just as we did? Absolutely. By studying what's going on in Iraq or in other parts of the world in the fight against terrorists, you can apply those techniques and procedures, but in some cases it just comes down to the ability to build relationships with these people. They need to trust you. The Marines have been out here for four years working closely with the Iraqis. I believe strongly that that length of time has built credibility with us, and they are not just Iraqis anymore; they're Mohammad's and Ishmael's. I mean on the flip-side we're not just Marines; we have names like Jones and Smith. And they see the Marines coming in with the same level of commitment that they've had before with the same attitude and the same type -- (audio break) -- of trust.

To be able to take this and apply it to other places, I'm not in those other places, and it would be difficult for me to say that -- how that would work elsewhere.

Q Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead, Donna.

Q Sir, it's Donna Miles, American Forces Press Service. I'm curious. The migration you've seen of the insurgents from the city areas into the desert, how confident are you that they are in fact being beaten versus laying low and for a later opportunity to regroup and move back into the urban areas? And should that happen and there's a lower U.S. presence in the region, how confident are you the Iraqi security forces are up to the task?

COL. CLARDY: The -- when you look out into the deserts, as we do, and when we move to the deserts, we build rapport out there, as well.

The people there are willing to talk to us about what they see. And what we see in terms of insurgents and terrorists that might be moving to the desert is they don't stay put for very long. In fact, they don't like it out in the desert. They are continually moving around. They're primarily, I think, city people. They do not like it out there. They are transient, for the most part.

We are able to in some cases track them. We certainly can find what lines of movement they're moving because they have to follow certain terrain. It's not a flat desert out there in a lot of places. They have to follow certain roads. They have to find water and they have to find food. So it allows us to be able to track where they might be.

It also makes them difficult to catch because they are transient. But frankly, it doesn't matter whether we catch them or not. What matters is that we keep them off balance. And through our operations, we're able to disrupt them. And the reporting we get back is that's exactly what goes on. They see our vehicles out there moving down towards the city they planned on being at. They have to regroup and recock to go someplace else.

Because they're dodging our patrols and our operations out in the desert, they can't focus and plan to get back into the cities. It makes it also difficult for them to get to their caches where they might have weapons stored. They also have to -- if they need those caches and those weapons, they have to move

them around. All those things make them extremely vulnerable to our operations, particularly in terms of our ability to disrupt what they have planned.

You asked about -- I forgot what the second part of that question was.

Q Curious, when the time comes that there is a smaller U.S. presence, how confident are you that the Iraqi security forces in the region have what it takes to stand up to the threat?

COL. CLARDY: They already are. We have many incidents in the past three or four months where they ran into insurgents, stood toe to toe with them and defeated them. We've recently had some Iraqi police out in Barwana who were moving out to -- on a normal patrol, ran into two vehicles that were moving across the desert in a rapid fashion. They attempted to stop them. The vehicles opened up on them with machine gun fire. The Iraqi police returned fire, stopped the vehicles, captured what turned out to be 10 members of al Qaeda. They did that entirely on their own without our support.

That level of commitment is something that we see from -- again and again. We had Iraqi forces that were operating down in the desert south of (Anah ?). They were doing a normal patrol through one of the villages there and caught one of our HVIs we've been after -- high- value individuals -- we've been after for the last two years, Mohammed Sett (ph). They captured him. They did it on their own.

Those are the types -- and he was definitely one of the most dangerous people we had in our AO. Very seldom we do operations unilaterally as coalition forces. In a lot of cases they're doing unilateral operations, and they are being successful.

What they lack is not courage, is not commitment. They do lack some resources, like vehicles, fuel -- (short audio break) -- but it's certainly not commitment and courage.

Does that answer your question?

Q Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike) -- Mike.

Q Colonel, it's Mike Mount with CNN. You were talking earlier about the relationship you have with the locals and that they're kind of used to the turnovers over the last four years. Obviously a good portion of those four years have been a little bit a prickly relationship. What is your concern or how do you transition your next group of Marines that are coming in to work with these locals and make sure these relationships stay successful?

COL. CLARDY: Well, we just went through a transition itself. We just turned over all our battalions and separate companies within the regiment. That process begins six months before they come over here. They make contact with the units they're replacing -- (audio break) -- California. That Mojave Viper is changed on a regular basis to reflect what's really going on in -- out in Al Anbar. They come out on advance visits to visit with me and also with the commanders they're -- in the commands they're replacing. When they get here on the ground, they go through an assimilation process to ensure that they have the right frame of mind about what is really going on here in Iraq.

I will tell you, I am hugely impressed by the ability of the young Marines to figure out what's going on. They think -- they certainly think of themselves as warfighters. That's they joined the Marine Corps. But they understand it's more important to be winning. They're willing to walk the post, walk on patrols, go on convoys day after day, with a lot of commitment and certainly with diligence to make sure that they keep themselves a hard target against any potential threat. But they will do that day in and day out, month after month, for as long as necessary, to ensure that we put this in a win category. And -- (audio break) -- out. They fully understand what is at stake here, not just for the Iraqis but also for the Americans.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike.)

05 November 2007

AO: dam

Q Colonel, it's Luis Martinez of ABC. Going back to the resource issue, I seem to recall seeing that you had to set up your own police academy at Habbaniya when you wanted additional Iraqi police because you were not getting the adequate commitment from the central government in Baghdad or the resources to set them up.

Are you getting the right number of policemen out of that academy, or would you like to see more? And can you tell us where exactly you want to position these folks?

COL. CLARDY: Well, the Iraqi police forces continue to grow and improve. We have several different types of academies set up across Al Anbar, both down in Habbaniya, as you mention, but also here up at al Asad. These are built to support development and training from not just the lowest Iraqi policemen but also to work with the mid-level managers, the first-line supervisors and also the more senior officers. These schools are springing up across the -- across Al Anbar to help with that development.

It's amazing at the -- the commitment or the -- not just the commitment but the desire to learn.

They are coming to these courses with high hopes of taking something back to the police forces. They are in most cases teaching these courses themselves. When they go back to the towns, they're learning about -- they're taking that knowledge that they're passing it on to their fellow policemen. The school down at Habbaniya is, I think, running at max capacity to ensure that we are training as many policemen as possible.

Is it enough? Yes, over the long haul it will be enough. We have training in place at our battalion level to compensate for that so we can ensure that anybody who's carrying a weapon is carrying it safely. And it's a challenge -- (short audio break) -- you will find anywhere in Iraq that resources are always a difficult -- are always difficult to come by, and certainly training time. But the capacity is, I think, where it should be. It will take some time, but we will get all these police trained. And most of them are trained right now.

You will also see, I think, in the future growth in terms of Iraqi security forces, not just on the Iraqi police side, but on the Iraqi army. And it's a growth industry if you're talking about training facilities. They are looking now at expanding the capacity of some of these schools so we can take -- train more policemen.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead, Kristin.

Q Sir, it's Kristin Roberts with Reuters again. Some of the Anbar sheikhs were in Washington last week and asked for \$2 billion in U.S. reconstruction funds plus some foreign investment. Are they not getting the reconstruction money that they need from Baghdad?

COL. CLARDY: I can't really -- that's not something I could comment on. I could tell you that there is money here for reconstruction. Six months ago up in Haditha is one example. We didn't have contractors who could actually take the money and apply it to our project. We are only now at the point where we're actually able to go back and repair the damage and the neglect that's happened over the last -- not just the last four years, but over the last 20 years.

There's a lot to do. It's not just a -- it's not an issue of just money, it's also the capacity to take that money and apply it to projects. I think we're doing it -- and my impression out here, at least in AO Denver, we're applying the right amount of money to the right projects. The government of Iraq itself is passing money to the provincial government, and the amounts, I think, are appropriate. They are taking that money and passing it to the municipal governments in most cases to allow them to apply it locally to fix infrastructure issues -- services, water, sewage, electrical, as necessary. We are seeing improvements along those lines.

I'm not sure I can answer whether it's enough or not enough. It's really an issue of capacity over time to be able to apply the funds that are being used -- or the funds that are available.

But I will tell you the Iraqis here have what they need. Could they use more electricity? Absolutely. Could they use more -- or cleaner water? Sure. We're working on those things. Sewage needs to be

05 November 2007

AO: dam

improved. But they are -- they have what they need. But it's a continuous process just like it is in any part of the world where you have these types of facilities and the numbers of citizens that are out here. It's 1.5 million people living out here in Al Anbar spread over a very large area. The demand on those services is very extensive.

MR. WHITMAN: We have time for about one more. Al, do you want to finish it up?

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin again. We saw your chart on the number of attacks down substantially from the last couple of years.

Do you have the statistics on coalition and civilians killed and injured, as well as for the insurgents?

COL. CLARDY: (Off mike.)

Q I'm trying to get a sense of the severity of the attacks that are happening.

COL. CLARDY: If -- I didn't put this chart up. I know that General Odierno briefed not too long ago, and he showed a different attack trend that breaks down the types of attacks in terms of IEDs, IED finds, small-arms fire, indirect fire, suicide attacks. The severity is down. Six months ago, I would say that the IED attacks were higher than IED finds. Right now we see a ratio between -- of IED finds of 80 percent to 20 percent attacks. That is -- basically reflects the change in the way in which the insurgents are able to inflict harm on either the Americans or the other coalition forces.

Our attacks have gone from, for example -- (audio break) -- six or nine months ago about 95 per week and they've reduced down to about 20. They've gone from where it was -- in the neighborhood where the enemy was attacked -- his initiation of attacks was the majority of the time, when -- to now, where we're initiating -- either us or Iraqi security forces are initiating the engagement.

I don't have the stats right in front of me. In terms of casualties, I can only tell you that casualties have been significantly reduced here in my area of operation.

When I would go out here back in January and February, every night one of my cops or combat outposts was under attack by indirect fire and complex attacks, indirect fire coupled with direct fire. That went on every night that I was here. I was down in the -- down in our surgical unit, I would say, every other night. That is not the case now. We have dramatically reduced the capability of the enemy to inflict harm on us, and he is not able to, you know, put together a complex and coordinated attack.

His IEDs have gone from what we would consider military-grade type ordnance down to homemade explosives. We are seeing his caches -- when before they were being reseeded on a regular basis with new munitions, that is hardly the case anymore. Most of the caches we're finding now are old and crusty. If they have been reseeded, they're only reseeded with a small number of rounds.

These -- without giving you -- I don't have the statistics right in front of me, but it is a dramatic change in terms of the capability of the enemy to wage war against either coalition -- or against coalition forces here.

Q Thank you, Colonel. If you could send those statistics on through OSD for the casualties -- and also you mentioned the weapons caches and the initiation of attacks -- those would all be really useful if you can pass those through. Thank you.

COL. CLARDY: You're welcome.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, Colonel, we have reached the end of our time here with the Pentagon press, and I want to thank you again for doing this. And before we close it here, though, I want to just give you one last opportunity, in case there's something else that you wanted to share with us.

From the Iraq Communication Desk (icd@osd.mil) / 703-697-7323 / DSN 312-227-7323)

05 November 2007

AO: dam

COL. CLARDY: Well, I'll just stand up with the following conclusion. If you're interested in our story, the story of the Marines out here, or the story of the Anbaris, come on out to the western deserts of Iraq. As you will see, the Marines and Iraqi people are very proud of what they're accomplishing out here. You'll be also as honored as I am to be among them.

We'd very much like to have as much media as we can get out here to see what's going on. We think it's a great story to be -- that needs to be told. It is out at the edge of Iraq, and it's difficult to get to, but we'll make it worth your while.

Thank you.

(END OF TRANSCRIPT)