

Presenter: Commander, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division Col Ted Martin  
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DoD News Briefing with Col. Martin from Iraq

(Note: Colonel Martin appears via teleconference.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs):  
(Off mike) -- Bryan Whitman. Can you hear me now?

COL. MARTIN: Yes, I can hear you now.

MR. WHITMAN: Very good. Okay. Well, we have good video on you, Colonel Martin, and we've got the press corps assembled here. And let me just thank you and welcome you into the briefing room. Colonel Ted Martin is the 1st Brigade Combat Team commander for 4th Infantry Division. Multinational Division-Baghdad is where he's operating.

He's been in Iraq since April of this year, and this is our first opportunity to speak to him since he's been in Iraq in this format. He's at Operating -- Forward Operating Base Falcon in Baghdad today. And as is customary, he's going to give us an overview of what his unit's been doing and then take some of our questions here.

So, Colonel Martin, again, thank you for joining us today, and let me turn it over to you.

COL. MARTIN: Okay. Thank you very much.

Good morning. My name is Colonel Ted Martin, and I've got the best job in the Army. I command the 1st Brigade Combat Team of the 4th Infantry Division from Fort Hood, Texas. We're known as the Raider Brigade. The Raider Brigade is composed of more than 4,000 soldiers. My area of responsibility is the Rashid district. The Rashid district comprises the southern quadrant of Baghdad, and it's composed of a large and diverse population.

The Rashid district is roughly the size of Orlando, Florida, and has the population of Dallas, Texas. Rashid sits astride the main north-south highway from Basra and serves as the gateway to Baghdad.

The 1st Brigade Combat Team has been in Iraq for more than four months, and we are currently scheduled for a 15-month deployment.

Today I will provide you with a report on our progress. Before I begin, however, I would just like to say that this is my third tour of duty in Iraq. I was with the 4th Infantry Division during the initial invasion in 2003 and returned again in 2005 as a member of the IED Defeat Task Force. I've seen phenomenal progress in that time. During this tour, for the first time, I've seen Iraqi security forces that can plan, prepare and execute first-

class offensive operations. I've also seen a high level of trust and respect by the people of Rashid for their own army and police forces.

The mission of my brigade is to protect the population. We accomplish this by standing shoulder-to-shoulder with our Iraqi security force brothers defending the people of Rashid. Together, we conduct relentless offensive operations designed to kill, capture or drive from Rashid anyone who threatens the safety and security of the people we have sworn to protect. This is a straightforward mission and it translates into hours of backbreaking work in miserable conditions, patrolling alongside our Iraqi counterparts to defeat anti-government forces.

Our hard work and sacrifices have paid off. There's been a measurable improvement in the security in the Rashid district since our arrival here in March. When we arrived, we averaged five attacks per day in the Rashid district. By July, we'd reduced that average to 1.5 attacks per day. As a reference point, in the same security district there were 824 attacks in July of 2007 with a daily average of 27 attacks, making Rashid one of the most dangerous places in Iraq.

I believe this reduction in violence is a direct result of the conditions set by the success of the surge in forces and combat power. We built on this success and have seen a dramatic reduction in violence in the past four months. For example, we have reduced the number of attacks from 122 in April to 48 in July. This represents a 61 percent reduction. The daily attack average was four in April and has been reduced to 1.5 in July. Additionally, there were 18 rocket and mortar attacks in April and only three in July of 2008. This represents an 83 percent decrease. Regarding the IED, there were 69 attacks in April and 37 in July, and this is a 46 percent decrease. When we look at direct-fire attacks, we saw 30 in April and five in July. This represents an 83 percent decrease.

What this reduction in violence in Rashid district has allowed me to do is to shift my focus from kinetic operations to enabling the improvement of essential services and to continue to improve the capabilities of our Iraqi security force partners. It is my firm belief that the decisive defeat of the special group criminals and militias in May and June of this year has opened a window of opportunity for us to make substantial and lasting improvements in the Rashid district.

I would like to talk for just a moment about my Iraqi security force counterparts. I've seen substantial improvement in the performance of the Iraqi security forces. They are well equipped, well led and very aggressive. They performed exceptionally well during offensive operations against the militias. The fact is, the Iraqi security forces are increasingly carrying the load in southern Baghdad.

In partnership with Iraqi security forces, our forces have detained 56 al Qaeda in Iraq operatives in the past four months. We continue to pursue them relentlessly. We have captured more than 170 special group criminals associated with the Jaish al-Mahdi militia. Intelligence reporting indicates that these criminals have received reports -- support from elements in Iran. Our task now is to exploit the opportunities provided by

these operations and to prevent the enemies of Iraq from returning to make life miserable for the good people of Rashid.

Seizing on the improved security conditions, we are pursuing reconstruction progress -- projects to improve the quality of life for the Iraqi people. To date, we have completed 22 projects valued at more than \$5 million. Currently, we are managing 78 active projects valued at more than \$45 million. We've also proposed an additional 117 projects valued at more than \$26 million. Each product -- project is coordinated with the Rashid district council leadership to ensure that we are meeting the needs of the people. I'm very proud of the work my soldiers have done working hand-in-hand with the Rashid district council.

In closing, I'd like to thank the American public for their support. We receive care packages from family, friends and caring and patriotic people that we've never met from all across America, from an elementary classroom in Frankfort, Kentucky; Cub Scout Pack 773 in Houston, Texas; volunteers from Operation Gratitude from Encino, California and many others.

Thank you very much.

At this time, I'm prepared to take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: All right. Well, thank you for that overview. And we'll get right into it. And we'll let Jeff start us off today.

Q Hi, Colonel. Jeff with Stars and Stripes. Just a really quick housekeeping question.

I think you said initially attacks had dropped from an average of 5 in April, 5 per day, to 1.5 per day in July. But later I thought I heard you say it had dropped from 4 per day to 1.5 per day. Can you kind of clarify that?

COL. MARTIN: Yeah. If I confused you there, it should be -- it's averaging right at 5 attacks per day when we arrived. It's down -- (off mike) -- a day now.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead, Al.

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America.

You mentioned that some of the folks you've captured have gotten support from Iran. Can you tell us what the time frame of that support was? Is that still going on? And what sort of support are they getting?

COL. MARTIN: Well, I can only speak for the Rashid district. But I can guarantee you that we have found Iranian-made munitions inside of the Rashid district. Upon

arriving into the battlespace in March of this year, pretty much we coincided with the uprising of the Special Group criminals. We started uncovering caches.

Some of these, we uncovered through reconnaissance operations, through active patrolling. But many of them were -- actually the people of Rashid district called in on our tip lines. And just as an example, within the last two weeks, we found a cache of munitions hidden inside of a water tank. That was a combined operation between the national police and my forces in the vicinity of the town known as Abu T'shir. Inside of that water tank, we found 107-millimeter rockets that were clearly Iranian made.

Now, I am not an expert on munitions. I rely on the experts, in the explosive ordnance disposal company and the other assets we have in Baghdad that can determine the origin of these weapons. So in this case, we found rockets which had obviously been used or been planned to be used against the people of Iraq; Iranian-made, I believe, February 2008.

Q And just to clarify, I'm sorry, exactly when did you find those? And through your interrogations of these people, have you got some sense of whether this Iranian support is continuing even now?

COL. MARTIN: Well, that's the -- again I can only speak for the Rashid district. And we did not capture anybody who was associated with that particular cache. But we could tell from what was in it. It was rifles, rockets, mortar rounds. And both the rockets and the mortar rounds were determined by the explosive ordnance disposal folks as being Iranian-made.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q Colonel, my name is David Morgan. I'm with Reuters News Agency. You say that there were 42 attacks in July. Can you rank for us, please, the threats that you face in terms of the actors that are taking part in these attacks? And when you say that you've shifted away from kinetic operations, does that mean that you're making progress towards an -- becoming an overwatch operation as opposed to a combat operation?

COL. MARTIN: I didn't understand the first part of your question. I'm sorry.

Q Can you rank the threats that you are facing in Rashid district in terms of the groups that you are seeing carry out attacks?

COL. MARTIN: Sure. That's a fair question. If I was ranking the attacks, the number one threat to my soldiers and to my partners in the Iraqi security forces are improvised explosive devices emplaced by special group criminals who operate as part of the illegal militias in Baghdad.

Q What's their motive? What are they trying to achieve?

COL. MARTIN: Well, I think it's clear they're trying to destabilize the government of Iraq as they continue to build capacity and capability here. I think they want to undermine the government, and they're using the neighborhoods of Rashid as a battlefield. I'm pretty confident that we've denied them that capability. Just looking at the types of attacks that the -- that my soldiers and my counterparts in the Iraqi security forces face, they've dwindled in weeks. And a lot of that is due to the aggressive actions of both my soldiers and the Iraqi security forces.

When I say kinetic operations, I mean offensive patrolling designed to interdict the enemy either in placing their improvised explosive devices, discovering their caches -- or the caches, and disrupting them in their meeting places, a variety of different ways we do that. But the best way we do that is we get tips from the local people. The biggest ally I have on the battlefield today are the people of Iraq. They provide us great intelligence, and that is played out in the number of raids, denial patrols that we conduct to keep the enemy from -- able to influence a particular area. And since May and June, we've seen that dwindle to almost -- you know, to the low numbers that you see now. Make no mistake, they're still a threat to my soldiers and to my Iraqi security force counterparts, but there's been tremendous progress made in just the last four months. I am -- I couldn't be happier with the performance of my soldiers and my Iraqi security force counterparts.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's just go one, two, three -- (off mike).

Q Yeah. This is Kernan Chaisson with Forecast International. The GAO has talked about the MRAP program, saying that in order to get the vehicles to the field, multiple manufacturers were used, and as a result, there's the potential for problems with maintenance, sustainability, training and that sort of thing. Has your unit received its full complement of MRAPs? Are they all from the same company? And have you experienced any problems as a result of them being so new?

COL. MARTIN: Sure. I'm in a heavy brigade combat team. My primary mode of transportation on the battlefield are tanks, Bradleys and howitzers.

We do have our fair share of MRAPs. I think they're fantastic pieces of equipment. I currently have 136 MRAPs. There are, I think, three or four different varieties. Just like there's different varieties of humvees, there's different varieties of MRAPs. We have some of the larger troop-carrying ones and some of the smaller versions. My operational readiness rate is -- maintained over 90 percent since I arrived in country, and I don't see that falling off. There's not a reliability problem with the MRAPs.

I'm very pleased with the -- both the MRAPs and the maintenance support I've received at Forward Operating Base Falcon. It's a good piece of equipment.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q This is Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. I was wondering if you could talk about how durable you think this decline in violence is in your sector and how you would go about judging that.

COL. MARTIN: Sure. That's interesting you use the word "durable," because our commanding general had challenged us to achieve sustainable security in Baghdad, and I thought, as I arrived in the country, that was a pretty lofty goal, a tough mission. And we went after that.

Just before -- I guess just about a week ago, I was talking to the commanding general, and I told him I think we're on the cusp of achieving durable security. So we share the same word. I think that what I'm seeing right now in Rashid -- and again, I'm -- my view goes back to 2003, when I first arrived, through 2004 and again in 2005, and I've been studying this area since October of last year. There's been a phenomenal change in the security situation in Rashid district. And I don't want to speak to all of Baghdad, because that's not my area of operation. But in the southern quadrant, what I've seen is, I've seen the people come forward now and not accept militias.

This really broke in the May-June time frame. There seemed to be a wedge that was placed between the people and the insurgents and we tried to exploit that. And we've exploited that by continuing to improve the effectiveness of the Iraqi security forces. We also went all-out on our clearance operations to take away the base of support, and by that I mean he can't fight unless he has access to munitions.

A signal that I see in the Rashid district is the quality of the improvised explosive device. When we see the Iranian-made explosively-formed projectile, we know that the pipeline has not been cut off. Less and less do we see these specific anti-armor improvised explosive devices. We're seeing homemade explosives, low quality, and many that have improper initiation systems. So not only are they -- have they not been very effective in the past 45 days, that -- we've actually been able to discover more. That means that the quality foot soldiers of the enemy have either been killed, captured or driven away and now the amateurs are at work in our area.

Now, that is not to say that there's no threat to our soldiers, because frankly it's -- the improvised explosive device is very deadly. And complacency, when it sets in, is a big danger to our soldiers. So I would say that we're aggressively pursuing the IED threat. And what I'm seeing on the battlefield right now is telling me that there has been a fundamental shift in the security situation in Iraq and we are moving out fast to exploit that.

Q Could I follow up?

MR. WHITMAN: Sure.

Q What would you have to see to go beyond it being on the cusp of durable security to being durable security? What more are you looking for?

COL. MARTIN: Well, as a military man, I'm pretty conservative. I'm going to look at the battlefield and I'm going to have to feel it in my gut. And I've got quite a bit of time here in Iraq and I've had different feelings in my gut. But right now, my gut is telling me that if we're not there, we're close.

And I think to actually say that the security is durable in my district, I need a little bit more time to convince myself. Again, I said I'm very conservative here. I don't want to -- I don't want to make a rash judgment on what I'm seeing, because, you know, it's easy to get disappointed in a combat zone. But I think, with the attitude of the people -- and that's what's different, the attitude of the people. These people are reaching out. They're opening their stores back up. They're participating more in the government. And the Rashid district council's one of the best in Baghdad.

I have a great relationship with District Council Chairman Mr. Yaqoub. I see that Mr. Yaqoub and the Iraqi security force brigade commanders, of which there are three in this area -- he's got a great relationship with them. So the voice of the people is shared between both the security forces and the governing forces in Rashid. And I've never -- frankly, I've never seen anything like that. And that is enabled by the blanket of security, the hard-fought and hard-won blanket of security that's been provided in the Rashid district. And I'll be honest; a lot of that success is because of the quality of the Iraqi security forces that we're seeing.

MR. WHITMAN: Jim -- (off mike).

Q Sir, Jim Garamone from American Forces Press Service. A lot of your guys in your brigade are on their third deployment to Iraq. How is that affecting them, I guess, is the first question. And the second one is, you're -- you were talking about the projects that you started. I guess it adds up to about \$76 million that you've started or proposed. Is the Iraqi government putting money into the district too?

COL. MARTIN: Yes, sir, I'll answer your first question first. In this brigade combat team, approximately 40 percent of my soldiers have at least one deployment under their belt. Many are on their third tour. For example, the -- my security detachment staff sergeant that is responsible for my personal security is on his third tour. He's a combat infantryman. He's -- by the time he's done, he will have 38 or 39 months in the combat zone.

And like many other soldiers in the brigade combat team, these deployments do take a toll on the soldiers and their families. And I think if we think about it for a minute, the real burden here -- I mean, it's very difficult for the soldiers in Iraq. It's just -- it's tough. But I think it's a little bit tougher on the families back home because, you know, their loved ones are deployed to a combat zone. The uncertainty, missing all of those special moments with your family, I mean, that takes a toll.

But we've done a lot to close that gap, and if I think back to OIF 1 and what we had available to maintain connections with the folks back home, it's dwarfed by what we have now. I mean, the Army -- the Department of Defense has gone all out to do the best that we can to maintain good connections between the deployed soldier and the family back home. Just a couple of examples I could tell you about is -- in my particular brigade area, I have 15 combat outposts or joint security stations in addition to Forward Operating Base Falcon. So more than 60 percent of my brigade is forward-deployed to a small company-sized outpost. And really, that's what makes us so successful, our connection with the people.

But even at those isolated outposts, we've got Internet connectivity, we've got telephone connectivity, we have mail delivered every other day. And what that does is it allows those soldiers, after a hard day or night of fighting in the field, when they come in they can knock out a quick e-mail back home and say, "Hey, I'm okay." And just knowing that their loved one is okay is a great thing. Additionally, we have Internet cafes at the larger forward-operating bases, webcams, things like that.

I'd also like to say that I think the Army's learned quite a bit since OIF 1. I think we went into -- I know my squadron -- I was a squadron commander in OIF 1. We thought we had broken the code on providing a good environment for the families back home, but now what I have, like I said, dwarfs what we had in OIF 1. I have a 52-soldier rear detachment. I have full-time hired support to help families out when they need help back at Fort Hood, Texas. And all these things combined, I think, make it so that we can better weather this 15-month deployment.

And what's the Iraqi government kicking in? Is that -- (pause).

Q Yeah. The second part, Colonel, was -- (pause).

MR. WHITMAN: Okay, we kind of stepped on each other there. Colonel, the second part of the question had to do with the reconstruction efforts and if you could talk to the Iraqi government's participation in funding of Iraqi construction and development.

COL. MARTIN: Okay, sure. Well, there's two kinds of CERP. CERP is the Commanders Emergency Response Program money. You've probably heard about that before. And that's how we're able to apply funds to emergency projects in order to improve the security situation and build the infrastructure here in Iraq.

Of all the projects that I mentioned, I didn't mention that I've got about \$82.5 million in U.S. funds through Commanders Emergency Response Program money that's either planned or already been spent. Additionally, I've got 84 projects that are funded by what is called ICERP, and the "I" stands for "Iraqi"; "CERP" hasn't changed. And right now I have about \$19.5 million that's been funded by the Iraqi government. And I think that in the future, you're going to see more and more of the projects funded by ICERP. So that's the direction that we're going.

Q Can I just ask a quick follow-up? Colonel, one of the things -- going back to the personnel assets. One of the things that's in discussion here is that the service members serving overseas don't have a chance to vote. Do your guys know about the absentee ballot situation?

COL. MARTIN: Oh, yes, they sure do. I've got a voting officer. Actually, my brigade adjutant is the voting officer for the brigade combat team.

And every battalion has a voting officer. Every company has a voting officer. We have a primary and an alternate.

It's also a very strong message from the command, from the commanding general all the way down to the company commander. We ensure that every soldier has an opportunity to vote. And it's not a matter, I mean, I can access the Internet anyplace in the battlespace.

And personally I've taken on as a mission that every single soldier will get a ballot. Whether they choose to vote or not, that's their call. But it will be in their hand, and then they will have time to vote. And I think they will.

Q Thanks.

Q Sir, it's Meredith MacKenzie from Talk Radio News. A question about the 45-day period of review. How is that affecting the Iraqi security forces in your area? And what else is being looked at as that 45-day period continues?

COL. MARTIN: Well, I wouldn't get stuck on the 45-day period. When the earlier question was asked, you know, when am I going to say that the security is durable, I said I'm pretty conservative when it comes to this. So when I say 45 days, 45 days could be 60. It could be 30.

But you know, day after day after day, if I keep seeing the same thing and I'm very aggressive in the way we conduct reconnaissance in the area, you know, I'll be more than likely to make the switch and tell my commanding general that, you know, with my own two eyes, this is what I've seen.

Now, how has that affected the Iraqi security forces? I'll tell you, since the combat in May and June against the militias, I've seen a marked increase in their -- what word am I looking for here -- confidence, their confidence.

You know, when you get into a scrap, and many of these are relatively new soldiers. They're battle-tested now and they have a certain level of confidence. I would say that they're not cocky.

But they're confident and they're confident in themselves and their leaders and their equipment. And that confidence also, I think, inspires the people of Rashid. At least that's

what I've seen. And that -- it's kind of hard to put my finger on what I'm seeing. Maybe I'm not articulating it well enough. But what I'm seeing is a level of confidence that I've never seen before and a willingness to take a risk, you know, to open the store, to transit the area, to drive around to, you know, spend a little money on better clothes.

I'll tell you, that's one thing I've noticed. When the security situation is better, people dress better. And I'm seeing a lot of that in the area; a lot of little intangible things that you really can't put your finger on. But I think the biggest thing I've seen is, you know, the people of Rashid, they trust the Iraqi security forces. And that is a big leap.

Q (Last thing ?).

MR. WHITMAN: Yeah. After the question, the colonel has to leave.

Q Sure. Just a quick follow-up. When you said make the switch, does that mean to recommend that Iraqi security forces take over most of the operations?

COL. MARTIN: Well, actually, there's a couple of terms that we use. You know, we are in a shared battlespace. In fact, if you look at the Rashid district, not only is my brigade there; there are three Iraqi security force brigades, which is about the combat strength of a U.S. Army division. So we deconflict how we conduct operations by a couple of terms. One term that -- where -- we use is tactical overwatch. And what tactical overwatch means is who has the lead for security in a particular neighborhood, for example. Currently I have lead in all areas of the Rashid district.

What we're moving towards rapidly here is probably by the 15th of August, I will have two battalion -- two Iraqi security force battalion landowners that are in tactical overwatch. Additionally, I'll have three mechanized battalions that straddle Route Irish, as I mentioned in the beginning of my talk to you. It's the main north- south route into Baghdad. They will be in tactical overwatch. So I predict that by the end of August we'll have five of the 13 battalions in my area in tactical overwatch.

Depending on the security situation, the level of the training of the soldiers and of course the call of the commanding general, we may be able to transition more battalions. That's the way we adjust here. We -- we're not on a timeline. We're not under any pressure. But when I'm ready to transition to tactical overwatch, I work with my security force counterparts, and we make that decision, and then we move on from there.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, Colonel Martin, we have reached the end of the time that we've allocated for this. And -- but before we bring it to a close, I'd like to throw it back to you, in case you had any last, final thoughts for us.

COL. MARTIN: Well, sure, I appreciate your questions. I hope I was complete in my answers to you. It's a real honor for me to be -- to serve as the commander of the Raider Brigade Combat Team. There's a lot of families back home that are away from their loved ones over here, and the sacrifices that they're making -- they're on our mind

every day. We try our best to safeguard these soldiers and ensure that they get the mission done.

They've done great work. They've defeated both AQI and special group criminal militias in Rashid district, and we're exploiting those victories by improving the quality of life for the people of Baghdad.

So I'd like to give a special thank-you to our families and friends back home at Fort Hood, Texas. Your love, support and understanding is all we need to make it through each day. So thank you very much, and God bless you all.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, and we hope to talk to you again soon.

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