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Presenter: U.S. Army Commander of the 1st Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division Col. Charles Flynn

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DoD News Briefing with Col. Flynn from the Pentagon, Arlington, Va.

(Note: Colonel Flynn appears via teleconference from Iraq.)

Q Hi.

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Hello, Courtney. How are you?

Q Very well, thanks, Bryan.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, good morning and welcome to the early birds here in the Pentagon. We will (be), I've been assured, joined by some of your colleagues here shortly, as they file in. But let's go ahead and get started.

I do have Colonel Flynn. Let's just make sure that he can hear me okay.

This is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me all right, Colonel Flynn?

COL. FLYNN: I can hear you, Bryan.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for joining us.

This is Colonel Charles Flynn, who is the commander of the 1st Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division. Colonel Flynn and his brigade are responsible for theater security force operations in Iraq and have had that mission since July of '07. This is the first opportunity that we've had to hear from Colonel Flynn about what his unit's been doing, and we appreciate you taking the time this afternoon to do that.

As is our normal format, he's going to give us a brief overview of what they've been doing and then take some of your questions. He is at Contingency Operating Base Adder, which is at Tallil Air Base, is where he's coming from us (sic) today.

So with that, Colonel Flynn, let me turn it over to you to get us started.

COL. FLYNN: Okay, Bryan. Thanks a lot.

Good morning. As was stated, I'm Colonel Charlie Flynn, the commander of 1st Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, based out of Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The 1st BCT is on its fourth deployment, with two rotations each to Afghanistan and Iraq.

Our mission is to secure ground lines of communications and to protect key command and control and logistical nodes and theater support convoys. The 1st BCT does this in order to enable all forces within Multinational Forces Iraq to sustain a relentless pace of operations against enemy threats and to needed support to Iraqi security forces.

The strength of the BCT comes from its leaders and paratroopers; their adaptability for multiple deployments is really extraordinary. The unit is highly experienced, with many officers and NCOs having deployed numerous times.

Today gives me the opportunity to discuss what the BCT has accomplished since July of '07. For those of you unfamiliar with our operations here in Iraq, we're not landowners per se, but our area of operations spans across every multinational division's battlespace. We range as far as south as the Kuwaiti border, extend as far north as the Balad Airfield and operate west all the way out to the Iraq- Jordanian border. And we essentially fight along the main and alternate supply routes throughout Iraq. My headquarters is at Contingency Operation Base Adder near An Nasiriyah, which is the capital of the Dhi Qar province.

Upon assuming our mission, the brigade identified two main lines of operation. Those are security and partnerships.

First I'll discuss security. Overall, security in southern Iraq can be assessed as stable and improving. Jaish al-Mahdi has lost significant public support in southern Iraq, and as a result, we expect Muqtada al-Sadr to take a more active role in the political arena.

One area of concern is with special groups. We believe they'll continue to be influenced by those who seek to disrupt the government of Iraq and coalition forces. Understanding the enemy threat in southern Iraq is critical, as it differs from enemy threats in Baghdad and parts elsewhere in Iraq where we fight and operate.

With this understanding, the BCT is better able to protect the lines of communication and the critical nodes along it. Freedom in maneuver is essential for our formations and soldiers and likewise for local citizens, police and army.

In an effort to create safe highways for people, commerce, and normal patterns of life to return, we identified three key objectives: first, reduced EFP attacks; second, build combat outposts and joint security stations along MSR Tampa; and finally, third, develop strong partnerships with the police and the army.

This next slide you'll see now includes attacks on COB Adder and our JSSs. A steady decline in attacks has evolved since July. I attribute this decline to Muqtada al-Sadr's standdown and the resulting fractures within Jaish al-Mahdi.

Our increased patrols, intelligence collections and the use of JSSs has also helped. Our initiatives and outreach programs with tribes and the increased capability and capacities of the Iraqi army and highway police have also contributed to this downward trend.

On slide 6, in order to effectively safeguard the highways, we organized Community Transportation Improvement Teams in southern Iraq. The focus of these crews is to highway cleanliness, a form of what we

would probably know as public works. Currently we have multiple contracts covering nearly 800 kilometers of highway. These crews remove debris, fill in holes, and their mere presence has reduced the ability of EFP and IED cells to operate.

Programs like this are positive and have two huge benefits. First, it complements our security efforts along the highways and in the local villages. Secondly, and more importantly, it created employment opportunities and engaged tribal sheikhs to participate in Iraqi security.

Our second line of operations is partnerships. We have enormous capabilities co-located here at COB Adder, and the cooperative efforts of the Australian and Romanian battalions, U.S. Special Forces, Army Corps of Engineers, Gulf Region South, the 10th Iraqi Army Division and the Iraqi police and highway forces has been remarkable. Collectively, coupled with the Provincial Reconstruction Teams of Dhi Qar, Muthanna and the Maysan province, we've made huge gains with the provincial government leaders in delivering essential services.

Our intent to conduct civil-military operations in coordination with our Iraqi partners has really paid off. The sharing of information allows us to develop a common picture and maximize our efforts in areas where it's most needed.

Currently we have several projects, but I would like to highlight the preservation of a historical site, the Ziggurat of Ur. This site has been off-limits since Saddam's regime, and we're working closely with the Ministry of Antiquities, our coalition partners and the PRT to preserve this site, along with refurbishing a visitor/conference center.

The goal is to return this rich and traditional historical site back to the Iraqi people and instill a sense of pride and achievement in the local population.

While community outreach is important, we're also focused on developing our partnerships with the police, highway police and the 10th Iraqi Army Division. Since arriving, our partnership has matured, and we now conduct joint patrols and joint checkpoints. This work is enabled by establishing those joint security stations to build trust and share information and intelligence. These are powerful positions as they afford U.S. and Iraqi forces to partner in defeating any extremist threats that may emerge. These courageous U.S. and Iraqi junior leaders have really created a bond and trust amongst one another, and it's been impressive to watch and grow in this complex environment.

Although there is a long road ahead, we realize that joint and coalition partnerships enhance the safety and security for all of Iraq. We also realize that security will afford the economy of Iraq to grow, bringing with it jobs and opportunities for all Iraqis to prosper in this new year. Working together with the Iraqi forces, leaders and people, 1st BCT is helping to create conditions for successful transitions in 2008.

And with that, Bryan, I stand ready to take any questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thanks for that overview, and we have a few here. Go ahead, Courtney, if you want to start.

Q Hi, Colonel. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News. You mentioned that one of the roles of your brigade is to support the Iraqi security forces. Can you give us an idea of how that's going, what areas of the country are you having the most problems with the logistics, what areas is it working out the best, and why?

And then one other thing you mentioned was one of your number-one goals was to reduce EFP attacks. I was struck by the fact that that was one of your -- that was your number-one goal or one of -- your number-one priority. Can you sort of update us on where you stand with that, what areas you continue to see EFP attacks, if

any?

COL. FLYNN: Right. Great question. We have done a lot of work in the -- in southern Iraq with the highway police along MSR Tampa. And as I mentioned, the partnership that we've developed with the highway police has really paid off.

Additionally, in the provinces where we operate, which is predominantly occupied or supported by the 8th Iraqi Army Division and the 10th Iraqi Army Division, the development of those -- initially they were combat outposts, and they've since turned into joint security stations because the information sharing and the collaborative partnership that we have with both police and army on MSR Tampa and the surrounding roads and alternate routes -- that collective work together has really afforded us a window here over the last six or seven months, where there's been a drop in attacks, and I'll tie that into EFPs.

Early in the deployment, for example, in the July time frame, if you saw the earlier slide, where the attacks were, we had about nearly 20 of those IEDs were EFPs. And for example, in December, we went all the way down to 3 EFPs.

So in my mind, they have been reduced, and I think the numbers show that. And as a result of that, commerce, people, security forces and all the things that we must move on the highways to support the coalition really has been enhanced.

Q Beyond the U.S. efforts and the Iraqi security force efforts to reduce the EFPs, do you see any indications, any early indications, that one of the reasons the EFPs have been reduced in the area is because of Iran's stopping the supply of these weapons, any kind of Iran involvement in this in a positive way?

COL. FLYNN: Yeah, I think that since the talks in September, there has been what would appear to be a reduction in lethal flow of the EFP and other ordnance or munitions that have been used in attacks. At the same time, as I mentioned, there are influences and elements, particularly in Southern Iraq, where they're going to continue to try to foment unrest and use some of their malign influences to try to disrupt our operations, and those really of the Iraqi security forces, namely the police and the army.

MR. WHITMAN: Jim, go ahead.

Q Sir, this is Jim Garamone with American Forces Press Service.

Do you notice any difference between the areas that are under Iraqi provincial control and areas where the coalition still maintains command?

COL. FLYNN: Well, I really can't talk too much about areas where the coalition still, or I should say, non-PIC provinces. But I will talk a little bit about PIC provinces, since the ones that we operate in, predominantly in the South, have that. The governor, in fact, in the last four days, have been to both the Muthanna and the Dhi Qar security council meetings, with the governor, deputy governor, chiefs of police and, in this case, both brigade commanders and representatives from the 10th Iraqi Army Division. And clearly they are working together, strengthening their relationships, communicating with one another and establishing a strong network within those provinces to execute the security tasks that the governor dictates.

Just to give you one example, in the Muthanna province they have a provincial joint operations center manned 24/7 by police, army -- their ISWAT element, or their special tactics police force, and it really operates at the request of the governor to perform security tasks within that province.

And just this morning, we had the same meeting with the Dhi Qar governor and the same membership of his provincial government security council, and they are moving leaps and bounds towards creating the same

kind of provincial joint operations center so they can coordinate their activities for the governor.

Q How about in the area in and around Basra? Do you have actions there?

COL. FLYNN: We do patrol down to the Basra boundary where the province is, but other than dialogue between MND-Southeast and some of the special operations forces that operate down there, I don't -- I can't speak about the security council that the governor in Basra runs.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead, Lisa.

Q Colonel, this is Lisa Burgess with Stars and Stripes. I noticed on your slides when you were talking about spheres of influence, you're missing that one link that's right around the Muthanna area. Can you explain what the situation is with that and how that affects your ability to provide security up and down roads throughout there?

COL. FLYNN: Right. Well, that area -- there actually is a little bit of a break there, and it's really because there's almost no villages in that area. As you know, in the south there's either marshlands or desert, and it's just really an area that is -- Bedouin tribes really kind of migrate and transit through that area. So there's really no threat in there, and we haven't had to deliver a lot of civil military or nor have we even been attacked in that area.

So, the spheres of influence around those combat outposts are focused really around the surrounding villages and towns that kind of ride along the MSR-Tampa corridor, but that gap there is really -- because there really is very little population that resides in that area. So it's really an economy-of-force operation area for us.

MR. WHITMAN: Gordon?

Q Sir, Gordon Lubold with the Christian Science Monitor. I wonder if you could talk a little bit, if you haven't already, about the concerned local citizens in your area. What kind of numbers do you have? What's the breakdown, Shi'a-Sunni? I missed, maybe, before, the composition. And what kind of activity do you see them conducting, any operations against them that you've seen so far?

COL. FLYNN: The program that I mentioned in my remarks was a Community Transportation Initiative Teams; it's really not part of the concerned local citizen program, although it is like that. It's more a civil-military outreach program and really an employment program. It does engage the tribes through the tribal sheikhs. We have over 12 tribes involved in that. It essentially goes from the area on Tampa northeast of Diwaniyah and goes all the way south to the Kuwait border and then down to Camp Bucca just east of Basra.

And it's really been a fantastic program. It has employed over 250 employees, and they get paid to do essentially roadwork. And they're out there every day. They're working hard. Their members are engaged in reporting information. In fact, just yesterday we had one of the teams identified an IED that was in fact later discovered to be an EFP. They saw it on the side of the road. They called the local police. The local police called and went over to our Joint Security Station. They went out together, cordoned the area off, and they were able to recover the EFP so we could get the -- you know, exploit the information that we get from those attack sites.

So to me -- and there's been a number of those that have occurred. So to me that's really the most positive part of this, is that it's an employment opportunity, the tribes are involved, and they are working with us to reduce attacks on the highways. And that's not just attacks against Iraqi security -- or coalition forces, but also against Iraqi highway police, oil pipeline security forces and, of course, Iraqi army elements that move on those roads.

Q Do you have also more traditional concerned local citizens manning checkpoints and that kind of

thing, and how many of those do you have in your --

COL. FLYNN: No, I don't have those in our area. I know they're in the Qadisiyah province when we're on MSR-Tampa, but I believe those are being executed and implemented by the Georgian brigade that operate up there. We do most of our work here with the Australian battle group and the Romanian battalion, as I mentioned in my statement.

MR. WHITMAN: Jim?

Q Colonel, in many other places in Iraq the police are sort of lagging behind the Army. Can you assess the role of the police in your area?

COL. FLYNN: Yes, I -- the recruiting that has gone on recently with the police here in the south has been really positive. They have recently increased their ranks, I think, by about 700-750 people at least in the Dhi Qar province. They are doing a much better job, I think, now than in the previous deployment I had here of screening and vetting these recruits that come in. They go through a fairly -- a rigorous recruitment process and then they are identified for their local villages or urban areas where they live around. For example, in the Dhi Qar province I can speak about police that have been hired to operate in the Al Shatra, Nasiriyah and Shuq a Shut (ph) area. So they really become, you know, neighborhood police for those areas. And of course, in my case, we're concerned about the highway police. They have been able to hire more. In fact, one of the police stations on -- south of here, between here and Basra, they just hired another 25 people.

Of course, we'd love to have them have more vehicles, so they can get up and down the highways. But they have an adequate amount right now and every three or four months, they'll get a few new trucks and patrol vehicles with, you know, weapons and uniforms. And it's been very, very helpful for them to be out on the road and being able to secure their own roadways, so that people can get back and forth to work and not be threatened.

Q Sir, do you have like a training mission for these officers?

COL. FLYNN: There is a training element that is down here working with the police, and they do do investigatory training. There is some training on forensics that they provide them. I really can speak more about the officer training.

And in fact, yesterday, I was talking to the 10th Iraqi Army Division commander, and he was really happy with the junior officers that he was getting in the last three or four months. They'd been through the academy and they are coming down here. These are young, courageous and, in some cases, educated young men that are joining the ranks as lieutenants and being involved in the army and the development of the army with the 10th Iraqi Army Division here in Dhi Qar and the Muthanna and Maysan province.

Q Colonel, I wanted to find out, do you know what the record in your brigade is for the most time spent deployed? What is your personal amount of time spent deployed? Have you done all four rotations?

And also can you talk about what your experience, having been deployed before, what that brings to the game this time around, how that makes you a better commander and why that is helpful for you now?

COL. FLYNN: Well, I think if the brigade, I think, the brigade does a 15-month rotation over here, it'll be 41 months, since really December of 2002, deployed. The brigade spent a year in Afghanistan. I happen to have the unique opportunity really to have been a battalion commander in this same brigade for the first Afghanistan rotation and the first time we went to Iraq.

In terms of experience of the officers and NCO corps, I mean, I just, I can't overemphasize how important

it is to have leaders in the organization that have previous rotations. And in the case of this brigade, we've got sort of a balance of people that have been to Afghanistan and to Iraq. So you know, that is incredibly important when you get on the ground over here because of their experiences, particularly with younger troopers who may be in their first deployment.

But I would like to back up a minute and say, you know, the year that we spent at Fort Bragg between a year rotation in Iraq and a year -- or 15 months over here -- I'm sorry, a year in Afghanistan and 15 months over here in Iraq -- was a year where we converted into the modular BCT formation, and in doing that, having a seasoned and a core group of noncommissioned officers and officers that are familiar with the organization and, more importantly, are familiar with the operational environment, whether that be in Afghanistan or Iraq, having them to be able to form and build that team and get ready to go on another deployment is -- it's unbelievable.

And it's so helpful having those leaders around to be able to grow from, because they really are just a wealth of experience in training and, more importantly, probably, getting the troopers and the formations and the families mentally prepared for that separation and for the demands of combat operations.

Q (Off mike) -- lives on the ground?

COL. FLYNN: I'm sorry?

Q Do you think that it has saved lives on the ground? Once you get on the ground, has that experience saved lives?

COL. FLYNN: Yes, without question. Their ability to have the intuitions and the instincts that they have developed through repeated deployments I am certain saves lives. And they're also the same people that know that if you take a shortcut in training or inspections -- even while you're deployed, this training has to go on. They just instinctively understand if you take a shortcut, it could potentially cost somebody his life or her life. And having that experience really -- those are the kind of people in your formations that do not do that, and therefore their organizations are just better prepared when confronted with violence.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, we have reached the end of our time, just about, and I wanted to give you the last minute in case you had some closing thoughts you'd like to share with us.

COL. FLYNN: I do. Thank you.

I'd just like to thank you for your attention today. And we recognize that we've made some definite strides towards progress here in the South and throughout Iraq, but there's still a good deal of work to be done. I believe that us, along with our Iraqi partners and the PRTs, we're going to need to continue to create an environment that allows for political and economic progress. Every day, I see their hard work, and it really is achieving some significant results over here.

I'd also like to thank the families of the paratroopers and soldiers back at Fort Bragg. Your strength is really extraordinary and it continues to inspire for our way ahead here in Iraq. We appreciate all the sacrifices that those families have made in their selfless dedication to their troopers and their friends.

You would all be very, very proud of every one of your soldiers over here every day, because they are making enormous contributions. Their efforts bring about peaceful change, and I could not be more proud to lead such a skilled and courageous group. It's been my honor to serve, in this regiment alongside these great Americans, at this challenging time in our history.

And I just thank you for the opportunity today to be able to speak with you all.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, Colonel, thanks for taking the time this morning and this afternoon there, I guess. And given that you have a few more months on your tour, we hope that we'll get an update from you a little bit down the road. Again thank you very much. We appreciate your time and your insight, and we wish you the best.

COL. FLYNN: All right, thank you very much and I look forward to getting back with you.

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