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Presenter: Commander of Regimental Combat Team 5 Col. Patrick Malay and Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team Leader Robert Carrington

**April 14,
2008**

DoD News Briefing with Col. Malay and Robert Carrington From Iraq

(Note: Colonel Malay and Mr. Carrington appear via teleconference from Iraq.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Well, good morning and welcome, and thank you for bearing with us, with some technical difficulties that we are having. I think we were expecting one briefer. We've got two here. So we'll -- I think we have solved some of the technical problems, but let me just do an audio check and make sure.

Colonel Malay, this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me okay?

COL. MALAY: Yeah, Bryan, I hear you good. How do you hear me?

(Cross talk.)

MR. WHITMAN: Okay. Well, maybe we solved the technical difficulties. Let's try again from the control room. We have no sound on Colonel Malay.

STAFF: (Off mike.)

MR. WHITMAN: We have room noise, but I don't think we have any sound. (Pause.) Colonel Malay?

COL. MALAY: Yes. I can hear you, but obviously you can't hear me.

MR. WHITMAN: Actually, we're now getting you in the briefing room. So let's go ahead and get started. Again, thank you for joining us this afternoon, Colonel Malay, and good morning to the press corps. Today our briefers are Marine Colonel Pat Malay, who is the commander of Regimental Combat Team 5. And joining him today is Mr. Robert Carrington, who is the Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team leader.

The unit began operations as part of Multinational Force West in January of this year, and this is the first opportunity that we've had to meet with these two individuals via satellite like this.

They are speaking to us from Camp Ripper, which is at al Asad Air Base. And as is our traditional format,

they have some opening comments to kind of set the stage for what they have been doing and then will take some of your questions.

So, Colonel, thank you again for joining us this afternoon.

COL. MALAY: Yeah. Thank you for affording us this opportunity to discuss the accomplishments of America's men and women in the region -- this region of Iraq. The Regimental Combat Team 5 and the western Al Anbar Embedded Reconstruction Team, the EPRT, are partnered to execute counterinsurgency operations by leveraging the elements of national power and synchronizing our efforts with the Iraqi security forces to assist western Al Anbar -- achieve self-reliance. RCT Five has been on the ground approximately for three months, and the sailors, soldiers, airmen and Marines have quite quickly wrapped their arms around the multitude of challenges that the environment presents here on a daily basis.

Along with the Iraqi security forces, we're working diligently to achieve and assist in the development of the functioning of the local government; create, maintain and continue to improve the capacity of the industrial complex; repair and maintain critical infrastructure; and aid the Iraqis to improve their daily standard of living. In an area the size of South Carolina, of approximately 30,000 square miles, that stretches from west of Ramadi to the Syrian, Jordan -- Jordanian and Saudi borders, it contains roughly 700,000 people. And this is no simple task.

We remain vigilant and continue to operate in unison with the Iraqi police and Iraqi army to maintain security in western Al Anbar. We deliberately hunt insurgents who aim to disrupt Iraq's path to self-sufficiency. We have enjoyed a number of successes in our targeting efforts that have enabled us to find, fix and destroy insurgent teams who are obviously bent on delivering violence upon the people of Iraq in al Anbar.

In today's environment, we must really be fluid like the insurgents, but the important thing is that we need to double their patience. And we're proud to say through the -- though, that the Iraqis are taking the lead in multiple sections of our area of operations, in cities like Hit, Haditha, al Qaim. And the Iraqi security forces habitually launch independent operations that yield encouraging results. The insurgents, by and large, have been marginalized and seek refuge in the wadis and in the deserts, where we continue to relentlessly pursue them.

The RCT-5 staff which, in the conventional setup, would limit their focus to traditional warfighting functions -- we devote most of our time now to coordinating the various lines of operation: transition, security, governance, economics, rule of law, essential services and communications. No longer solely concerned with kills and captures, they monitor the increased autonomy of the Iraqi security forces, the new-found prominence of the local governance, the micro-financing and oil refinery enterprises, and the appearance and functioning of courts in six major population centers and the renaissance and renewed mobility of the local Iraqi media.

The battle has evolved a lot since I was here last, but so have we. Likewise, the insurgents are on the run. Our battalions have been able to dedicate more time to humanitarian operations. I'm sure you heard about the 2-year-old Haditha girl named Amina, for instance, who was discovered by Marines on patrol and ultimately transported to Vanderbilt University in Nashville, where she underwent open-heart surgery to correct a congenital and ultimately deadly heart condition. Ammar, a 5-year-old son of one of our local Iraqi policemen, has a similar condition. He was recently flown to South Carolina. If we were engaged in the daily firefights that were common here two years ago, none of this would be possible.

I'd like to leave more questions -- time for your questions, so I'll close with this: The synergy between RCT-5 and the western Anbar EPRT continues to expand on the success of our predecessors. These efforts, though great, would be fruitless if not for the dedication and bravery and commitment of the Iraqi people and their homegrown security forces. It goes without saying that the Marines, sailors, soldiers and airmen in RCT-5 continue to honor the tradition of American armed servicemen and women.

And if you'd like to check me at my word, catch a plane and embed with us any time, as you're always

welcome here.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike) -- that overview, and we will get into some questions here.

So let's start with Kristin.

Q Sir, it's Kristin Roberts with Reuters. I'm hoping you can give us a little detail about your efforts to incorporate the CLCs or the Sons of Iraq, the local folks there, into the Iraqi security forces or other government jobs, specifically how many want to be transitioned into the ISF and how many have been already.

COL. MALAY: All right. Well, I need to point out to you right off the bat that the Sons of Iraq are common to the Ramadi-Fallujah area. In Al Anbar, we progressed way past that months ago, and we have Iraqi policemen, we have provincial security forces, we have Iraqi highway patrol and the Iraqi army. That constitutes the security forces that we work with out here.

Now, to answer your question, we are training all of these individuals at the Hammurabi Institute, which is where we train the Iraqi police, as well as the Habbaniya Police Academy down in Habbaniya. So to answer your question, Kris, we are integrating them on a daily basis. A good deal of what we focus our budget on is the development of the Iraqi security forces, all of them across the board. I would like to also mention that we're well on our way to developing an Iraqi waterway patrol so that we can partner up with the Navy RIVRON units that are patrolling Qadisiyah, Tharthar and the Euphrates River -- (audio break) -- those forces.

Q Can you offer us some numbers, though, on that? Do you know how many Sons of Iraq are being integrated or going through the training?

COL. MALAY: Okay. Again, I don't have any Sons of Iraq in Al Anbar Area of Operations West. I do have 5,000 Iraqi police, I have 1,000 highway patrol, and I have 7,000 Iraqi army soldiers who are fully up and functioning in AO West.

Q Got you. Thanks.

MR. WHITMAN: Courtney?

Q Hi, Colonel. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News.

You spoke about the successes you're having in some of the bigger cities in your area of operations, but I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about the more rural areas that your Marines have been moving into in recent weeks, specifically down in the southwestern part, near Rutbah. Can you talk about the economic situation there? And then, are you seeing foreign fighters continuing to flow into that area, and weapons? Can you update us on that situation?

COL. MALAY: Certainly, Courtney. You know, we're still very much working the clear, hold, build aspect of the counterinsurgency. We're well past clear in all of the areas, to include Rutbah, and now what we're concentrating on is hold and build. The hold is fulcrumed on how well the Iraqi security forces are able to integrate into the city areas and then extend out into those rural areas that you're talking about.

We're having exceptionally good success. Those people are very happy to see us. And there are some things out there that we're able to throw some reconstruction funds at to get us immediate results; for instance, turning on the wells, fixing some of the electrical power grid, fixing up the schools and addressing things like the agriculture aspects.

I wanted to comment quickly about the foreign fighters. Yes, they're still out there and we're still running

into them, and we're finding them -- they're hard to find. They're hard to fix in place because they're running from us. But once we find them and we fix them, they're very easy to finish. We've had great success destroying them and a good portion of their network in the wadi systems, in particular around Rutbah.

MR. CARRINGTON: (Off mike) -- the economic efforts and essential service efforts that are being provided, and the gains we're making in those go hand in hand with security operations. And you'll see those sorts of rural areas continue to change and progress like we have in the north, in populated city areas.

Q Can you give us any -- sort of quantify the foreign fighters Have the numbers gone up, gone down, since you've been there, or even since the last time you were in the area?

COL. MALAY: Oh, goodness, last time I was here was 2004 and they were coming across literally by the busload, full-up weapon systems, grenades, chest plates, chest rigs, the whole thing. It's completely different now. These guys are few and far in between. When they see us, they run like crazy. They're living in caves in the wadis. And there's very few of them now.

MR. WHITMAN: Luis, go ahead.

Q Gentlemen, it's Luis Martinez of ABC News.

General Petraeus, in his testimony last week, kind of indicated that Anbar would be transitioning to provincial Iraqi control fairly shortly, and more of an overwatch role.

How is your role going to change? Are you transitioning already for an overwatch role? And what can we expect more in terms of on the PRT side under PIC?

COL. MALAY: The issue of PIC was addressed with Governor Mamoun. He's the governor of Al Anbar province. And when we broke down the details and discussed it, we see very little change other than what we are already doing on a consistent basis.

We are well down the road to Iraqi control. And putting a P in front of it is just part of what we've been pushing for.

What role do we see ourselves doing? You know, we continue to empower the Iraqis across the board -- their security forces, their city councils, their industry, all of the aspects of the civil society.

MR. CARRINGTON: Not only the Marines but the EPRT team and also a local Iraqi government team will take part in this transition to Iraqi control. And you'll continue to see the great strides of it happening, as Iraqis take charge and do more and more of our business, and more hand-in-hand in trying to move forward.

Q Colonel, this is Meredith MacKenzie from Talk Radio News Service.

I'm wondering if you could talk to us a little bit about the status of your forces. How many times have the forces in your combat team been to Iraq? What number tour is this? And how long have those tours lasted? And is anyone anticipating this transition in August to strictly 12-month tours?

COL. MALAY: We have consistently throughout the Marine Corps's areas of operations -- our Marines we have deployed for seven months at a time. And that is the vast majority of them because that's the battalion-sized units and lower.

The regimental headquarters is going to deploy here for 13 months, and that allows us to do the consistent command and control and, more importantly, it helps us develop those personal relationships, those

habitual relationships with the Iraqis that, you know, continues to win this insurgency.

I haven't heard anything about one-year tours for Marines. I know that our pre-deployment training plan and the schedule that I see for the regiment -- the battalions that are in my regiment, continues to be for seven-month deployments at the battalion level and below. And for the regimental level and above headquarters, they're 13-month tours.

MR. WHITMAN: AI, go ahead.

Q Colonel, it's AI Pessin from Voice of America. I was planning to ask something that you partly already answered, where you talked about how much clearing, how much holding, and how much building. It sounds like most of the -- most of your AOR is in the hold and build phase. Can you, again, try to quantify the percentages for clear, hold and build? And as you move more towards this role that you say you're already playing to a large degree, the overwatch role, when does that translate into an ability for that area to function without so many U.S. Marines there?

COL. MALAY: Well, we're already well -- (audio break) -- three months, we've gone from five battalions to three battalions. We've taken a 40 percent cut in our combat power and a 30 percent reduction of personnel in my area of operations. And we're doing quite well with that because we're thickening the Iraqi security forces. The EPRT is helping fight this counterinsurgency along all the lines of operations. And what we're seeing is tremendous response and positive atmospherics from the locals.

I recently did a patrol in Baghdadi and I asked the people, hey, have you seen any Takfiri -- said, we haven't seen them here in 18 months, and if they ever come back we'll kill them and lay them in the street for you.

So as you can see, we -- we're pulling back. I haven't had Marines out in that area in months and months and months. And it is still very peaceful, very prosperous. And people are very comfortable with the fact that the Iraqi security forces and their governing bodies are giving them what they need to get on with their lives in the 21st century.

Q If I could just --

MR. CARRINGTON: We've been successful in the build phase so much because of the security provided by the Marines and the Iraqi security forces, and that goes hand in hand. You can't do one without the other. And once the security environment's laid, then you can work -- concentrate on the build phase and work together to accomplish great things here in this part of the west Anbar.

Q Colonel, if I could just follow up, how many Marines do you have in your area of operations now? And have you thought in terms of when you could see the next step-down in your numbers or your successor's numbers?

COL. MALAY: Yeah, I would be happy to comment on that. You know, one of the first things that you do when you come in here is you try to envision what you're leaving for the unit that is going to take over for you, and you build a great deal of your plan around that.

So what I have now on hand is about 4,300 Marines that work for the Regiment Combat Team. And that number is going to significantly decrease here as we move into the summer -- as I mentioned before, a 40 percent cut.

What do I envision next? I -- what I see is the Iraqi security forces building up and thickening to the point where we are going to be able to move into operational overwatch as soon as our headquarters says, "Hey, now's the time to do this." And I know they're working on it constantly.

(Pause.)

Q (Okay. That's fair, isn't it ?)?

Q This is Lisa Burgess with Stars and Stripes. I'm sorry. Can I just ask for a clarification here? Have you already taken this 40 percent cut, or is this something that is going to happen?

COL. MALAY: It's happening as we speak.

Q But how many, and you will end up with how many? And where did they go or will they go?

COL. MALAY: We had five battalion task forces out here and we're transitioning to three as we speak. Where did they go? They went home.

Q Before their deployments were over?

COL. MALAY: They finished their deployments and they're rotating home as scheduled.

Q I have a question. Colonel, you were saying that a couple years ago you had a lot of foreign fighters running around in western Iraq there, western Anbar. Where did they come from? Were they, like, from Syria? Were they coming over the border from Syria, or where were they coming from? And how do you account for the reduction? Has the border been sealed off?

COL. MALAY: This was two years ago? I was in Fallujah. What I understood is a good many of them were coming across the Syrian border. And they came from all over the world. And why are they not here now? Well, quite frankly, I think we've killed a lot of them. I think that the enemy is having a more difficult time recruiting to the numbers that they had in the past. And no, they're not coming across.

MR. WHITMAN: We have -- (off mike) -- time and we've got a full schedule back here today. So, before I bring it to a close, though, let's turn it back to you to see if there's any final comments that you'd like to make there, Colonel Malay.

COL. MALAY: What I would like to do is just tell you that you would be incredibly proud of the service that the American fighting men and women are doing here. The service members are doing a great job. I mean, it's on a humbly bended knee you watch them go about fighting this counterinsurgency, and you'd be very proud of them.

If there's anything I would ask you to communicate to the American public, it's that they should be very, very proud of their military services. And, you know, they're a national asset. They're a national treasure. They're the next great generation. And they are winning here.

And no doubt about it, what I've seen in the last -- since I was here in 2004, it's mind-boggling the changes that have taken place here. I mean, we're past clear, we're past hold, and we're so far into build -- I mean, it's a civil society that we're building here.

For example, before, there was no government. There was no city council, and then we built one. But they couldn't drive around. You had to fly them anywhere before they could start to function. Now they get in their cars and they drive all over the place. They visit the governor at will. Places from al Qaim and Rutbah, they just get in the car, drive down the road, and they're taking care of business. So tremendous change, and if you're looking for a reason, it's because we've got some great servicemen and -women following orders and getting the job done out here.

MR. CARRINGTON: In addition to that, I would also emphasize the partnership between the Department of Defense and the Department of State and between other people out here in Iraq that are making this tremendous effort so successful. And without that partnership and also the partnership with Iraqis in west Anbar, we wouldn't be so far along in the build phase as the colonel described.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, gentlemen, again, thank you for taking some time to give us perspective from the region that you're operating, and we hope that we'll be able to talk to you again sometime soon.

COL. MALAY: Yeah, come on out. We'd like to talk to you out here. We've got plenty to show you.

MR. CARRINGTON: Thank you.

COL. MALAY: Thank you.

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