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Presenter: Commander, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, Col. Pat White

**August 28,
2008**

DoD News Briefing with Col. White from Baghdad

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Colonel White, this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon.

COL. WHITE: Yeah, Bryan. I've got you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for taking some time to spend it with us today and to give us a perspective on what the 2nd Brigade Combat Team is doing.

This is, for our audience, Colonel Pat White, who is the commander of 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division. Colonel White has been serving with his brigade in Multi-National Division Center since May of this year. And this is our first opportunity to speak to him in this format.

He's at Forward Operating Base Hammer in Nahrawan, Iraq. And he is going to give you a brief overview, of what his unit has been doing and what he is seeing and his perspective, and then take some of your questions.

So again Colonel, thanks for joining us this morning. And let me turn it over to you.

COL. WHITE: Thanks, Bryan.

Good morning, everybody. As Bryan said, my name is Colonel Pat White. I'm honored to be in command of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division from Baumholder, Germany.

We're known as the Iron Brigade and we're 4,000 Army strong. Of the 4,000 soldiers that are serving in my brigade, over a quarter have served at least once in Iraq or Afghanistan. And almost 300 are on their third deployment.

This is the brigade's third deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. And once complete the Brigade will have deployed for a total of 42 months to Iraq.

That makes us one of the most-deployed brigades in our Army. We are currently assigned to the 10th Mountain Division's multinational division center in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The area we're operating in is named the Madain qadha, and it's also known as the southern belt of

Baghdad. This qadha's comprised of a very diverse population. It's primarily agrarian. It's about the size of the greater Washington, D.C., area, with a population of around a half a million people. There are three major cities in the Madain: Salman Pak, which is primarily a Sunni city, Jisr Diyala, which is a mix of Sunni and Shi'a, and Nahrawan, which is predominately Shi'a.

As Bryan said, we've been here for four months, currently scheduled for a 15-month deployment. We have an embedded U.S. Department of State Provincial Reconstruction Team that has been absolutely invaluable in supporting the economic growth of the Madain.

I want to take just a little bit of time to describe to you the progress in the Madain. And before I begin, I'd like to say this is my second tour in Iraq. My first was as a commander of the Iron Dukes -- 2nd Battalion, 37th Tank Regiment, 1st Brigade, 1st Armored Division -- from May 2003 to July of 2004, where I served in Baghdad. First Armored Division, as you all know, was extended for three months during Muqtada al-Sadr's first uprising and my battalion fought for five weeks in An Najaf.

Honestly, the progress here in Iraq since my last visit is absolutely phenomenal. I can state this because a portion of my current brigade sector was also a portion of my battalion sector five years ago. Five years ago, as a battalion commander, I never worked with an Iraqi army unit. The combined security cooperation effort depended almost solely on an Iraqi police force heavily infiltrated by the Jaish al-Mahdi. At that time, we supported the recruitment and training of a nation organization named the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps.

Today, I'm partnered with an Iraqi army division and the qadha has six fully functioning Iraqi police stations with a district headquarters, highway patrol and an emergency response unit. Now Iraqi security forces routinely plan, prepare and execute offensive operations and the population clearly respects and trusts them.

Our mission, in partnership with the Iraqi security forces is to secure the population and interdict accelerants -- accelerants being described as enemy forces and munitions -- from entering Baghdad.

Clearly, there is a measurable improvement in the security of the Madain. And this improvement is primarily a function of the hard work done by our predecessor unit, the 3rd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, known as the Hammer Brigade, which is one of the surge brigades that operated out here in the Madain prior to our arrival.

When Colonel Wayne Grigsby's brigade assumed responsibility for the Madain in 2007, attacks averaged two and a half a day. In April, as we began transitioning with the Hammer Brigade, attacks were down to one per day. And today, as I sit here and speak to you, attacks are less than one per day, with over half of those directed at Iraqi security forces.

I believe the significant reduction and the fact that attacks remain low can be attributed to two things: first and obviously, the astounding efforts of the Hammer Brigade over 14 months and now our 2nd Brigade, 1st Armored Division, in an area that really saw very little U.S. presence prior to 2007. Now the populace is absolutely assured of our commitment and the commitment of the Iraqi security forces. The second contributor to the decrease in attacks is the ever-increasing professionalism of the Iraqi security forces. Coupled with the security contributions of the Sons of Iraq, we have achieved a point here in the Madain where operations are by, with and through Iraqi security forces.

All these efforts combined deny anti-Iraqi forces sanctuary and provide a solid foundation of hope for the free citizens of the Madain. The most significant effects of this reduction in violence -- our ability to shift focus from predominantly offensive operations to enabling improvement of essential services and improving the capabilities and capacities of the Iraqi local governance. Security conditions have also allowed for significant progress in growth and economic capacity.

Since our BCT began efforts in May 2008, the Iron Brigade has continued to support the improving Iraqi civil works infrastructure and supplemented the substantial Iraqi government's own funding initiatives. The Provincial Reconstruction Team, in coordination with the local government, recently has facilitated the completion of projects worth three-quarters of a million U.S. dollars and we have additional plans for projects valued at just over \$9 million to be funded by the Iraqi government.

The great news story in all of this is the increasing capacity of the Iraqi government to fund civil works reconstruction. Their financial commitment to projects in the Madain now exceeds that of ours by about a 60 to 40 ratio, and their future plans clearly show a continued commitment to take over the reconstruction funding and move beyond a 2007 reliance on U.S. funds.

To support reconciliation throughout the qadha, the Iron Brigade has organized and funded over 6,000 Sons of Iraq, and this is an excellent and currently necessary investment for us.

The improved security conditions have also had positive side effects. Recently across the qadha, we have witnessed a resurgence in the return of internally displaced persons. This is a good news story twice over because the government of Iraq has taken the lead in settling land disputes and assisting in the resettlement of over 9,000 displaced personnel.

The gains in security in Madain now allow us flexibility to address security concerns in more remote areas. I recently took a portion of my brigade, a unit from the Iraqi army, and conducted offensive operations outside of the Madain in an area near Balad Ruz in Diyala province. We were cross-attached to the 1st Armored Division, Multinational Division-North. We began operations in the middle of July and recently returned back to the Madain.

In closing, I want to express how proud I am of the accomplishments of the Iron Brigade and our Iraqi partners. I want to thank the American people for their continued support of our most precious resource, the sons and daughters of America who volunteer to serve in the Army of the greatest country in the world.

Thank you very much for your time today. At this time, I look forward to taking your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, Colonel, for that overview. And we do have some questions here. And I'm going to actually ask Jim to help me get through the questions here in a minute, as I have to go. But let's start with Courtney.

Q Hi, Colonel. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News. You mentioned in your opening statement that you're now seeing attacks that are fewer than one per day in your area and that about half of them are directed specifically at Iraqi security forces. There were three pretty significant attacks against Iraqi security forces and Iraqi police recruits earlier this week. Have you seen any kind of assessment -- not visibly in your area, that is, but -- have you seen any kind of assessment that there's an increase in going after these recruits? Who specifically is going after them? Who's the enemy that is conducting these attacks in your area right now?

COL. WHITE: Courtney, I can't speak for the attacks against the recruits, because it didn't happen in my area. I can say that as we recruit both Iraqi army, national police and Iraqi police, the same precautions we've been taking for the last year are taken into account. And really, because those type of attacks against those recruits has not occurred here in the Madain, I couldn't really say who was targeting those recruits that were recently attacked.

I will say, though, in general as we look at who does conduct attacks against both Iraqi security forces and, of course, the Iron Brigade, it is really down to two organizations. It's an organization -- Jaish al-Islami, which is a Sunni-based insurgency, and again, we still have Jaish al-Mahdi -- excuse me; I'm choking here -- Jaish al-Mahdi special groups which have moved back into Iran (sic) and are -- and we're starting to see a resurgence in our southern area.

Q Colonel, this is Courtney again. Could you talk a little bit more about that? You're seeing a -- you're seeing a resurgence recently in special groups in your area? Can you put any kind of numbers behind that?

COL. WHITE: Yeah, Courtney, I really don't have any specific numbers. We continue to conduct intelligence-based operations to capture and detain those individuals that are against the Iraqi government. And of course, now we have a more heavily -- reliance on the Iraqi security forces to assist us in that. Their human intelligence networks are absolutely outstanding throughout the Madain. We combine our efforts to take down those individuals that are against the government of Iraq.

And again, I don't really have any numbers for you. We get this reporting as we do our questioning of the detainees. And as I said, really, what we're facing here just in the Madain -- I'm not speaking for the rest of Iraq -- are those two organizations, acronyms JAI and JAM special groups.

MR. WHITMAN: Joe.

Q Yeah, sir, this is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra. Yesterday, General James Conway said that the Iraqis in the Anbar province want the Americans to stay. Do you agree with that? And do you feel the same thing in your area?

COL. WHITE: Yeah, Joe, I'll tell you, we have really developed a relationship with the Iraqi people over five years. In our short time here -- over four months -- we truly have befriended a number of Iraqis in the Madain. Whether they want us to stay or not, as we go around, they're very appreciative of our efforts. As I mentioned earlier, we're still committed to providing them security and interdicting the accelerants that move along some of our major avenues of approach into Baghdad.

I absolutely believe that the Iraqi people will continue to want our presence here as long as there is a need and as long the government of Iraq sees that need for us to be here.

Q Colonel, Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes. I've seen reports that the government of Iraq is actually arresting members of the Sons of Iraq. Are you having to deal with any of that in your area?

COL. WHITE: Well, here in the Madain, as I mentioned, we've got 6,000 Sons of Iraq. There's 70 separate contracts, so we have 70 separate Sons of Iraq leaders, per se, that are in charge of the groups that equal 6,000. We have not experienced any warrants or any arrests at this point in time for any of our Sons of Iraq, and I think that really goes back to a question of who reconciled with the government of Iraq and who -- and who did not.

And again, I cannot speak for the government of Iraq and where they generate these warrants from, but at least in the Madain, to this day, as I'm speaking to you, we have not had an issue with Sons of Iraq being arrested by GOI forces.

Q Could you talk about how the -- what progress you're making in either integrating these Sons of Iraq into the security forces or training them for other jobs?

COL. WHITE: Absolutely. And I think this is a common theme across Iraq, but let me talk about specifically in the Madain. Again, I have a pretty low number of Sons of Iraq, and it's -- and it's based on the security situation here and the need for them. We have a number of programs that we transition. The first and most important for us and for the government of Iraq is that transition from Sons of Iraq into either the Iraqi police, the Iraqi army or the Iraqi National Police.

We currently have over 400 packets in with Ministry of Interior to transition Sons of Iraq into the Iraqi police force. Next month we'll begin a recruiting drive again for another 1,000 Iraqi police shurta. Now not all of those will be Sons of Iraq, but it's another opportunity for us to engage the Sons of Iraq. They consistently look at how they can backfill into the Iraqi army with Sons of Iraq after they are recruited and trained.

But that is just one area where we transition Sons of Iraq. Here in Madain we have nine civil service corps projects that are solely employing Sons of Iraq. Most of them are down in the Salman Pak area. I do have two that are in the Jisr Diyala area, and then we have three more that we're looking at for the Nahrawan area, to assist us in providing them the training that is required to seek and gain a sustainable job over time.

There are a number of Iraqi initiatives that will also begin, as we are familiar with it, on the new fiscal year. And as we study and look at those programs, I'll be able to pass along what we think from a percentage-wise that we be able to transition.

But truly we remain committed to the Sons of Iraq. The government of Iraq has also recently said they're very committed to maintaining the Sons of Iraq here in the Madain -- can't speak for the rest of Iraq.

And so we're looking at all this on a daily basis to see how we can help these young men who have said they are going to be committed to a nation and a young nation and give them the jobs that they need.

And then finally, just to kind of close this out, I want to say, you know, I mentioned this is an agrarian society. They really haven't had the desert blooming in about 30 years out there, and we're working very hard to get water into all these farmlands. I honestly believe that once that is achieved by the government of Iraq, and the farmers begin going back to their fields, that we'll transition more of our Sons of Iraq back into their own homes and back into their own fields to become farmers again.

Q Carl Osgood. I write for Executive Intelligence Review. Could you speak more broadly about Sunni-Shi'a relations, what you see there in your area? Because one of the things we keep -- I keep hearing in Washington is that in spite of the great improvement in security, the underlying political grievances have not been addressed. So I'm wondering what you see in your area on that?

COL. WHITE: Yeah, I think if you could repeat the very first part of your question. You came in very muffled.

Q If you could address the broader issue of Sunni-Shi'a relations, what you see in your area in terms of the relations among the Sunnis and Shi'as.

COL. WHITE: Okay. Yeah, amazingly, here in the Madain -- and maybe it's because everybody is an agricultural-based city, town, mahala that's out here in the Madain -- the relationships between the Sunnis and the Shi'as of the Madain itself are very cordial. And as I mentioned, if you can imagine Nahrawan, which is my northern-most city, is predominantly Shi'a, and then as you move south and you get to Jisr Diyala, as I mentioned, it's about a 50-50 split, with Sunnis and Shi'as living next door to each other. And then, of course, Salman Pak is predominantly Sunni in nature. But they do have about 30 percent Shi'a living in the Salman Pak general region.

So we really haven't seen much of what you would call in the past any way sectarian violence. What we do see is what will continue well into the future -- because this country is based on tribes -- are tribal conflicts, not violent tribal conflicts, but just the traditional, "Those are my goats. No, those are my goats." I mean, that's kind of what you see out here in the Madain.

Q Colonel, it's Luis Martinez with ABC News. You mentioned earlier about the battalion, I think it was, that you sent up north to Diyala for the month of July. How did that affect your operations? And could you have survived -- could you have successfully operated for longer without their continued presence in your sector?

COL. WHITE: That's a great question. I mean, the area that we went into in Balad -- just to the southeast of Balad Ruz was an area that coalition forces have gone into twice over the past couple of years, but we did not leave anybody behind in that particular area. And so General Hertling, the commander of 1st Armored Division, asked General Oates, the commander of 10th Mountain, because we border and our boundaries touch 1st Armored Division, if we could do a combined operation.

We were able to pull a battalion minused from the 8th Iraqi Army, which is to my south, to conduct those combined operations with us. We air assaulted the Iraqi army battalion in with us at night. They conducted operations side-by-side with us for almost four weeks, and I was truly amazed by their performance and their persistence out in the Balad Ruz area. It was quite a successful operation, at least from our point of view, in attacking that support zone of AQI.

But in general, we really could have pulled back had we had more Iraqi security forces and allowed them to completely take the lead in this operation. Unfortunately, in this area there were no Iraqi army forces, and so what we did was we just did side-by-side combined operations.

When we left, though, I just want you to know that the 5th Iraqi Army did place a battalion into the area, so we now have persistence -- persistent presence in that area, which prevents AQI from receding after we spent three to four weeks out there with offensive operations.

Q Sir, if I could ask you a question on another topic, you talked about how you had forces in some of the cities in your sector. With the discussion of the Strategic (sic) of Forces Agreement talking about pulling U.S. forces out of cities by next -- by June 30th of 2009, how do you see that timeline in the way your -- things are going in your sector right now?

COL. WHITE: Yeah, I am not read into exactly what this agreement is going to come down to between the Iraqi government and the United States government, and then of course Multinational Forces-Iraq. So I can't speak to that.

But what I can say is that our combat outposts and our forward operating bases are all on the periphery of our two major and larger cities, which are Jisr Diyala and Salman Pak. What we've done is the Iraqi army and the national police have reinforced, per se, the Iraqi police in the inner cities for now. Until I -- if I was told today to move further out into the desert and get away from the cities, we would be able to do that and continue operations. We would move most of our forces here to FOB Hammer, which again was a surge base that was built for 33 ID. And I don't think we would have a problem here in the Madain doing whatever our higher chain of command asked us to do, if Iraqis truly wanted us to get out of the cities.

MR. JIM TURNER (Defense Press Operations Deputy Director): Any more questions?

Okay, Colonel, it looks like that's about it. So with that, would you care to make any closing remarks?

COL. WHITE: Yeah, I would.

I'd like to thank all of you for this opportunity to share with you the progress of what's going on out here in our small little portion of the overall mission in Iraq.

I'm truly honored to be serving with the soldiers and leaders of the Iron Brigade. You know, every day I'm amazed by their accomplishments and commitment to a cause that is as challenging as any generation has faced in our history.

I'm humbled by the tremendous sacrifice of the Iraqi people.

And to the American people, I just want to thank them. We couldn't do our mission without your support.

And then I'd like to close it out thanking our families and the families of our service members for their continued sacrifices and support because we truly do draw our strength from them.

And again, thank you very much for your time, and I hope I answered all your questions.

MR. TURNER: Thank you, Colonel White, for that update, and we hope to hear from you again sometime soon.

COL. WHITE: Thank you.

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