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**Presenter: Commander, 2nd Brigade 10th Mountain Division , Multinational Division  
Center Col. Michael Kershaw**

**October 05,  
2007**

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

(Note: Colonel Kershaw appears via video teleconference from Iraq.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Well, good morning and welcome, and good afternoon to Colonel Kershaw.

This is Colonel Michael Kershaw, commander of the 2nd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division, that you see on the screen there. He's been operating in southeast Baghdad as part of Multinational Division-Center, and believe it or not, this is his first time talking to us, even though he's been there for 15 months. So we're happy to finally have you in this forum and appreciate you taking the time to be with us this evening. He is speaking to us today from Camp Victory. And as is normal, he's going to give us a brief overview of what his unit's been doing for the last 15 months and then take some of your questions.

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

COL. KERSHAW: Yeah, thanks, Bryan. Apparently I couldn't redeploy until I had completed this requirement. But thanks. Thanks for having me today.

As you said, Colonel Mike Kershaw. I command 2nd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division, which is known as the Commando Brigade -- and we're based out of Fort Drum, New York -- currently is assigned for duty as part of Multinational Division-Center.

I've got the honor of commanding what the Army Times has just announced is the most deployed brigade in the United States Army. Once we complete this deployment, this brigade combat team will have a total of 40 months deployed in support of the global war on terrorism.

It's a highly experienced unit, particularly within the noncommissioned officer corps, most of whom deployed multiple times throughout their career. One first sergeant in our brigade has deployed nine times with the same battalion since his start in the Army 17 years ago.

And the strength of our brigade, we believe, comes from their adaptability and flexibility, which has been gained in multiple deployments to Afghanistan, Iraq and the Horn of Africa since 9/11. And I think I'm privileged to

lead what's truly a veteran unit.

Currently we're in month 14 of a 15-month deployment to southwest Baghdad. And this gives me an opportunity to talk about what the brigade has done in the last 14 months, and how the situation has changed in an area that was once known as the Triangle of Death. And I'll begin by describing the environment we walked into in August of 2006.

To get everybody kind of up to speed, for those of you who hadn't been here, our area of operations is a 330-square mile area that encompasses Mahmudiyah, Yusufiya, Lutifiyah, essentially the Euphrates River Valley. And the area is mostly Sunni tribes, farmland, agricultural, and it's roughly a 70-30 split for Shi'a and Sunnis within the largest population center of Mahmudiyah, but as you move west, it becomes almost entirely Sunni and in fact borders the Anbar province. The land's partitioned by irrigation canals. The farmers live on their land, so the population is spread out throughout the area of operations, with small villages that pop up really literally across the farmlands.

This is a former Ba'athist stronghold, predominantly Sunnis that lived here, who were removed from prestigious positions within the government, and they helped begin the insurgency. Al Qaeda was able to capitalize on this as a marriage of convenience. The Medina Republican Guard Division is stationed down here, as well as the Qa Qaa weapons facility, and that area provided the people and the ordnance and the know-how to set a stage for a fairly lethal insurgency, which used IEDs primarily and other weapons systems as their method of attack.

The Hillah highway, which runs from Baghdad through the city of Mahmudiyah, is the major transit route from the city to the Shi'a holy cities predominantly in the south, making the eastern part of our sector really key terrain for the Shi'a in this country. Over the first several years, there was really little or no permanent coalition presence in these areas as units moved through en route to Baghdad or up to points north or west as part of our campaign in this country.

Since there was really no long-term presence in our area, our predecessors from the Strike Brigade of the 101st literally had their way into the heartland of this al Qaeda sanctuary. Their hard fight really put us in a good position to launch our counterinsurgency operations, which commenced 20 September 2006, as we assumed this area of operations from our Strike brethren. We were fortunate that we knew we were coming to this area. This brigade completed a rotation really in the western part of the city the year prior, so really in the year between deployments, we were able to study the area and develop the methods for which we wanted to work.

We initially looked at this is a classic counterinsurgency, and we moved in and secured the people. We had several examples we were able to follow and studied the counterinsurgency doctrine that our Army has been pushing to the forefront and were able to apply that immediately upon getting here.

We knew that by moving in, protecting the population, we could drive a wedge between al Qaeda and the locals, really form the backbone, the proverbial fish to which the insurgency swam. And we also realized that one of the decisive points in this operation was going to be the Iraqi army. We chose to partner with the Iraqi army in this area rather than just advise them, and we had placed an entire field artillery battalion against that effort.

So that really put about 350 soldiers, command and control and all the enablers that the United States Army brings to the campaign here, to reinforce the Iraqi army brigade, the 4th Brigade of the 6th Iraqi Army Division.

We've always referred to this as a partnership due to the way that the two units interact, and really with the majority of our force living well forward and cooperating with the Iraqis, we also pushed our logistics and life support forward to create company battle positions and patrol bases located amongst the people. This was made possible by the transformation of the brigade combat team and really gave us the assets to do that.

We also walked into this mission understanding that kinetic means weren't the only answer in a counterinsurgency environment. Again, we entered a tough fight with al Qaeda and we've had to kill a number of terrorists in this area, but preferably we've been able to detain them and exploit the information to drive a wedge between them and the local people. It's really been a battle about information down here. We've been able to develop the intelligence sources through being forward and learning about the terrorist networks. The bottom line is you can't question a dead terrorist.

Upon assuming the battle space, one of our first initiatives was establish battle positions in the villages in order to choke out al Qaeda sanctuaries and the rat lines they really use to conduct attacks against Baghdad. We moved into those population centers and pushed forward to the Euphrates; we secured our logistics lines and secured our routes and put really platoons and companies forward to allow platoons and squads to interact with the local people.

Once we did this, it got us face to face with al Qaeda and we endured some of our toughest fighting very early on in the campaign. This philosophy, though, has lasted us through most of the deployment. And in fact, just last week we established a battle position, platoon-sized, on the western side of the Euphrates to interdict al Qaeda movements on the other side of the river.

One of our most notable accomplishments is seizing the Yusufiya thermal power plant, a former Russian project to provide power to the Euphrates River Valley. One of your colleagues, Josh White from The Washington Post, was embedded with us at that time. And it really was a large concrete, almost Stalinistic, structure, a project between Saddam and the Russians. But really it was a moral rallying point for al Qaeda in this valley. It's only 30 percent complete. Because of its massive size, and with there being no security there, it became sort of an al Qaeda way point for terrorists moving from the predominantly western part of the country into sanctuaries to attack Baghdad.

On 23 October, we seized it with a two-company assault from the Golden Dragons, and since then it's been known as Patrol Base Dragon.

One of the legacies I think we'll also leave behind here is our shared partnership with the 4th Brigade of the 6th Iraqi Army. It's a very capable brigade. It's very well-led. They've conducted almost 138 air assaults, 53 brigade-level operations, 69 battalion-level operations. And in fact, we really conduct almost no operations where we do not have Iraqi forces either embedded with us or where they are in the lead.

Now we've begun to see what's been called the Anbar awakening in other parts of Iraq spread to our AO. That happened about four or five months ago. My reconnaissance squadron, the 189 Cavalry, began working with some local leaders that were becoming disenchanted with the way that al Qaeda was terrorizing the local area. And what was first a marriage of convenience for the local insurgents and al Qaeda, from really a nationalistic resistance, really became splintered.

We were able to capitalize on this, and as al Qaeda overstayed their welcome by forcing, you know, extremist kind of Taliban types of heavy-handed approaches to the insurgency and take liberties like, you know, marriages of convenience with the local females, restricting smoking to the local villagers and just these type of coercive acts, forcing them to emplace IEDs -- it really eroded the support that al Qaeda may have had for the local insurgents.

And we were able to get with the local sheikhs and the former members of the military that had had enough. And we've really seen a dramatic reversal in the security situation, which really started really in about mid-June. My cavalry squadron was able to coordinate with some of these local leaders that wanted to rid al Qaeda out of their areas. They were able to do this on a small scale very successfully and removed -- using a safe house in their area, and then they asked to do further operations to clear al Qaeda out of their areas.

And we coordinated them to prevent any accidental clashes between coalition and these new volunteer or what have now become called "concerned citizens." And this has really been a turning point for what we now call "Concerned Local Citizen Movement" in our area of operation. From this point, we began on capitalizing on the local Sunnis, former military members who wanted to come back into the army, wanted a part of the government. And this has spread into several areas, including Shi'a areas, in our sector as well.

We've developed programs to legitimize these groups. We've taken members of the government out to inspect them, provided security contracts for them to guard roads and critical infrastructure. We pay them about \$10 a day to guard their local areas. That's about two- third of what an Iraqi policeman makes.

And we've also given them an incentive, for them to move forward in joining more legitimate Iraqi security forces. And we're seeing them volunteer to do that on an increasing basis.

We've screened these concerned citizens. We use biometric databases, retinal scans, fingerprints, photos. And this has also allowed us to ferret out the insurgents who have been trying to hide amongst these groups as they've turned against them. To date, we've had great success doing that.

Just some figures: We've enrolled over 16,000 military-age males in our sector, with about 8,800 right now under contract, guarding their local tribal areas. We've been able to conduct an Iraqi police recruiting drive, which has brought out nearly 10,000 applicants, of whom over 5,800 have met the initial phase one and phase two requirements to be an Iraqi shurta or police officer.

And the results from an attack standpoint have been amazing. Since we've been working with these concerned citizens, they've turned in or given us some information which has led to the apprehension of over 85 terrorists, three of whom we have been tracking since our arrival in country. One was wanted for leading the attack against our predecessors' unit, killing and capturing two of our fellow soldiers. And literally we have been searching for this guy since our arrival in country, and they turned him over within three weeks of us beginning these operations.

We've also had great success as tribal leaders have come to us and worked with this program, and the security situation has changed really for the better. We're now able to work on projects in the local areas. It helps stimulate the economy on a limited basis, as more people turn their backs on al Qaeda and move to take care of their own people.

With these concerned citizens establishing their own local checkpoints in their own local areas, the roads are now secure. Workers, government of Iraq programs can now move into areas that were previously denied to them by the insurgency.

We've had a huge decline in the number of IEDs and attacks against, you know, our forces. You know, the two-week increments, by which we track attacks, where we used to have indirect fire, it was really daily around here. Now, we only get two, at most five, attacks over a two-week period, and our casualties are significantly down. The numbers of IEDs turned in and caches has increased substantially, and we're able to transit roads that we couldn't six months ago.

There's no doubt that some of these concerned citizens were at least tacitly participating in the insurgency before us. But in every counterinsurgency, you're really struggling for the bulk of the people, and it's eliminating the terrorists that's important, and the armed coercion that goes on in these villages after night.

What we're trying to do is bring a sustainable lasting peace to this area and to date the results have been very favorable, although, really, they're still tenuous.

And there was a real reluctance at the beginning of this for the legitimate Iraqi security forces to accept what they perceive in their minds as another armed militia running around the country. Likewise, the Sunni volunteers and their tribes viewed the predominantly Shi'a, Iraqi army as under the influence of what they perceive to be an Iraqi or an Iranian-dominated government. But as we have worked with both these groups, we've been successful in establishing a relationship.

My Iraqi army leadership led by Brigadier General Ali now goes out and routinely meets with the tribal and security leaders. The division commander, Major General Abdul Amir, the commander of the 6th Iraqi Army Division, and the commander of the Baghdad Operational Command, Lieutenant General Abboud, had both come down and met with these former army officers, security leaders and the tribal sheikhs that have proven to be so critical in this effort. And what we've done is really removed this perception of this area being the heart of darkness for al Qaeda in this area.

Now, we overwatch this effort with our forces, but for right now all results seem to be promising. As I stated earlier, with security comes, you know, ability to get in and work on economic development. We've placed a huge effort on developing a self-sustaining government at the local level, and much of this has been headed by our local mayor, Mayor Morid al-Amri (ph), who has worked diligently since we've been here to bring the tribal sheikhs together. Although he's a Shi'a, he was raised with the Sunnis down here and has really led the reconciliation efforts in bringing essential services back out to the predominantly Sunni areas.

We've also been able to add an embedded Provisional (sic) Reconstruction Team, which is predominantly State Department in its origins, to help us with assisting the local governance and economic development down here in Mahmudiyah.

Another key player in the governance arena has been the Iraqi army brigade commander, Brigadier General Ali Jassam Mohammed Hasan al-Frazi (ph). This is a pretty significant area of tribal struggles, and to a lesser degree it's related to a lot of the struggles in Baghdad. But the Iraqi army is still seen in large part as an honest broker, a national institution in most cases. Brigadier General Ali has taken the lead, great steps to bring leaders of all groups together in the spirit of reconciliation, and in fact, led a group consisting of him, the mayor, members of the national government and tribal sheikhs to Jordan to talk to some of the grand sheikhs of the predominantly local tribes that had fled the area when the fighting became the most intense here in south Baghdad.

For a long time, al Qaeda had been able to terrorize teachers and targeted schools. We're pretty pleased to say that although formal education, almost ceased last year, as of 1 October, this past Monday, school started in most areas in south Baghdad, and in fact, a lot of the instructors were able to conduct exit exams for those students who really needed to play catch-up from last year.

And most of the schools are open. Children are going to school. Teachers are out. And their own people are guarding their routes to the schools, and -- through the concerned citizen program.

With these improvements both by the Iraqi army -- this has allowed the minister of Education to assess that it's safe enough to hold those exit exams. And in fact, three weeks ago, one of our Iraqi army battalions escorted primarily Sunni tribal children to a area that's -- to a school that's located in a Shi'a enclave so they could take their exit exams.

Just a couple facts on schools. We have four kindergartens in the area, 152 elementary schools, 1,875 teachers, 37 secondary schools, 700 teachers at those, and it's just great to see kids going back to school in this area when the fighting was so heavy last year. So we've been able to decrease those threats against the schools, open roads up that had previously been closed for only military operations, to the local farmers, and repair a lot of the damage to the school that had been inflicted by the terrorists.

We've seen families moving back into areas. Economic conditions are starting to pick up, and previously, where children had to work the farms, now they're able to go to school.

Very soon, we're going to begin transition with our replacement unit, the 3rd Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division, affectionately known as the Rakkasans. And we've been coordinating with them throughout. They've known they're coming here, and their commander, Colonel Don Turacillo (ph), is arriving here shortly, and his staff is sitting down with my staff to kind of pick up our lessons learned from the previous 14 months.

One of the primary responsibilities that we'll talk about is the continuing search for our missing soldiers. As you know, on 12 May, a group of terrorists, from what we assessed to have been about 15 to 18 al Qaeda-affiliated insurgents, attacked and overran one of our checkpoints, killed five U.S. soldiers and Iraqi soldiers, and left two others missing. You know, we flooded the area for about six weeks in a detailed search, and continue a more surgical search since then, looking for Specialist Alex Jimenez and Private Byron Fouty. We've acquired literally thousands of leads, and we think we've developed a pretty good picture of what happened.

Since then, we've detained about 12 of the individuals involved in planning and execution of the attack, and in one case, a tribal sheikh ordered one of the perpetrators to turn himself in to us.

We continue to gather information. In fact, I was out in sector today assessing a strike last night that we believe struck at some of the perpetrators, and we believe we have the information that's going to allow us to bring these perpetrators and other terrorists to justice. This is still our brigade's number one priority, and we're working very closely with our higher headquarters, other coalition forces in Iraq, and we know that the Rakkasans will consider the search effort here, you know, after we depart.

I'd like to take this opportunity to tell the families of the members of Specialist Jimenez and Private Fouty that we've been doing everything possible to bring them back before we leave, but if it's not possible, we're doing what we can to continue the search efforts through all other means possible.

As we noted, or you noted in the intro, this has been a long deployment. Fifteen months is a long time to be deployed. And our soldiers have truly performed extraordinarily. It's taken its toll, 54 killed or missing and over 270 commandoes wounded in action.

A number of reporters, including Damien Cave, have covered this brigade during its tenure here in south Baghdad and have addressed some of the issues that our soldiers are facing as we draw near to redeployment. We're working on several levels to prepare not just for the relief in place with the Rakkasans but also the redeployment issues and taking care of our soldiers as we return to Fort Drum.

First of all, we've provided training and resources for the chain of command to identify any problems. And I've got a great team of behavioral health specialists that are attached to this brigade who work with my soldiers on a daily basis. We've also worked with our rear detachment and our Fort Drum subject matter experts to ensure that our soldiers who have already redeployed have been taken care of and we'll have proper care for our soldiers upon our return.

And then finally, for our families, you know, we're going to be coming home soon. And commandoes will be trickling back to Fort Drum here in the next month or so, and they'll get -- start enjoying a well-deserved rest, you know, with their families. I'd like to say to them they should be proud of what the commandoes have accomplished here in south Baghdad over the past 15 months.

It's been an honor to me -- for me to soldier with them down here and to command them for these last almost 27 months now, in the 15 months we've been here in southwest Baghdad. And you can rest assured that although we've had some heavy sacrifice, that our contributions have been significant and that we're going to leave south Baghdad better than we found it.

And with that, Bryan, I'd like to take some questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you. We do have a few here. Let's start with Pauline and then we'll go over to Courtney.

Q Colonel, it's Pauline Jelinek of the Associated Press.

Your efforts that you mentioned over the last six weeks, and particularly maybe interrogations of the dozen people that were detained, did they lead you to believe that Fouty and Jimenez are still alive?

COL. KERSHAW: Ma'am, you -- I know you asked me this about the 12 insurgents that were detained and their questioning and whether they lead me to believe that our missing soldiers are still alive. Obviously, the 12 detainees and the numerous other intelligence sources that we've worked with -- really since the incident -- have given us really all different kinds of stories with respect to what might be the disposition of our missing soldiers.

In fact, I'll just tell you in the last week, we received one significant intelligence thread that indicated that they -- at least were potentially alive recently, but another that said that they had been killed shortly after the attack. And we have followed both as we've investigated them, and indeed conducted operations last night along with other coalition forces to capture and detain others who might be associated with that attack.

So we followed both general intelligence leads and we deal with them -- you know, as we get them -- and follow them both with the same vigor.

Q (Off mike) -- are certain that you know what group was involved or is responsible, and who is that?

COL. KERSHAW: Yes, ma'am, it was a -- you're asking about the group that was involved in the attack. It was an al Qaeda-associated group located primarily out of the Karguli (ph) Village area in the Mahmudiyah qadha. We've developed a fairly -- a fairly good understanding of the network of that insurgent group. Clearly, they had other linkages outside our area, and we have been able to kill or capture a number of other insurgents that are not directly involved in the attack, but certainly played a supporting role.

Q Thank you.

Q Hi, colonel.

This is Courtney Kube from NBC News. On that same note, you mentioned that you have a pretty good picture of what happened when the two soldiers went missing. Can you share that with us?

And also, you just spoke about other linkages that these insurgents had outside of their al Qaeda -- their area. Who specifically was that? Were they al Qaeda groups in other parts of Iraq? Are we talking about other countries?

COL. KERSHAW: Yeah, Courtney. As I understand your question, you're asking -- say we have a better picture of what happened, and you'd like to hear about that and what were the other linkages outside the attack area.

Really -- and you were here, Courtney, shortly after the attacks, and we really -- in the absence of information, we obviously had some initial leads that we follow, but we really took that opportunity to strike and -- really all the known insurgent cells and terrorist groups that were in our area of operations. In fact, the terrorist that really had led the attack against our predecessor unit -- we detained him about three weeks after the attack

on our soldiers. We went after his group immediately and were able to capture him. But the information that we found that was with associated him lead us to believe that he was not involved directly in the attack on our soldiers.

And what we got greater fidelity on as we have gone on is in fact the personalities that were involved in the attack. And again, we think we have a pretty good idea who was involved -- in fact, as I indicated, conducted operations as late as last night against these individuals.

Obviously the linkages with groups, particularly outside of our sector -- we believe that they definitely intended to remove our soldiers from this sector and were either frustrated or foiled in at least part of that effort. Again, for what happened outside of our sector, I'm not -- I'm really not privy to talk about all of that. But I can tell you that we believe operations conducted by coalition and Iraqi forces were able to interdict some of that and threaten those linkages.

Q Do you have a better picture of how exactly the soldiers were taken? I mean, the actual incident itself -- can you share some of those details with us?

COL. KERSHAW: Courtney, really, those details were -- the actual accident -- you know, actions at the accident site really remain the same as when you were here before. The attack and their attempts to remove the soldiers -- that was clearly their intent. But that was well-known when you were here.

It was the -- what directions they were attempting to move in and what groups we think they were trying to pass them off to which we think our operations were able to interdict during that time period that have really come to light since then.

MR. WHITMAN: Gordon, welcome back.

Q Thank you.

Colonel, Gordon Lubold from the Christian Science Monitor. You talked about the left-seat, right-seat and the transition and the attempts to, you know, kind of make a smooth transition. I wonder if you could just talk a little bit more about this process and how it -- I guess what your concerns are, because when you make this transition, I think the fear of any commander is that the work that comes behind him by the next unit could be undermined some way, in terms of undermining relationships and whatnot.

Can you just talk about what your concerns are as you get ready to transition?

COL. KERSHAW: Sure, and that's a great question about how we approach these transitions. But you know, one thing I'll tell you as far as concerns, one of the advantages of doing these transitions is in general in the Army today, these reliefs are occurring between veteran units. And I'm certainly proud of my units. I outlined in my introductory statements, you know, the great experience that I thought our brigade brought to this fight, but the Rakkasans are an equally experienced unit here in Iraq. And of course, I know their commander personally, and he has a great deal of experience in conducting operations in Iraq.

My concerns are really that we're able to pass really the nuances of the tribal structures and the personalities that we've worked with, with over this last 15 months, as well as our relationship that we've developed with our Iraqi army units. Those by their very nature take a lot of time. No matter how experienced you are, you've got to get to know people. There's the, you know, kind of the culture where there's very long introductions that come first, where business is conducted after, and that happens in all aspects of this culture. And that will be a challenge for the Rakkasans as we take them out to meet the local tribal sheikhs, the members of the former military that are helping spearhead this effort, and then the Iraqi security forces that are -- have been helping us conduct operations.

But the good news is, the Rakkasans are going to come and take a good, hard look at what we've been doing here. And any unit that remains this long in a sector -- you'll start at a certain point to time -- it's to lose your objectivity. The situation here has changed greatly in the past 15 months. And we've made some mistakes since we've been here. We've thought people that were reliable early on, have simply proven not to be, and the reverse. I like to tell people, I met with four Sunni sheikhs when I first got here, two of whom are no longer in power and have been deposed. Other Sunni sheikhs, who I didn't initially trust, have proven to be extremely reliable.

So they're going to have to deal with all that. That'll be tough. But the extra scrutiny that a new unit will bring to this -- they've been able to study the problem set, as we did before we came here. So and then that, applied with the great experience of their unit, their great traditions and their great soldiers and non-commissioned officers, I think, will allow them to take this to the next level.

And that's what I think we're really postured here to do right now. If we can really legitimize these concerned citizens, and the government is showing some very small steps but some significant steps, orders from the Baghdad Operational Command, directing the Iraqi army to work with these, are very considerable. If we can capitalize on this here, I think you'll see that the Rakkasans will enjoy a much better and fruitful relationship with the local Sunni tribes, which was something that we had to earn and fight for in our 15-month tour here.

MR. WHITMAN: Luis and then Andrew and then back to Carl, and we probably will have to close it up by about then.

Q Colonel, it's Luis Martinez with ABC News.

My questions are about the concerned citizens. I saw that you are not arming them or providing them ammunition. Where are you getting those materials? And are they turning in their caches?

And also about the level of coordination with concerned citizens. I saw that there was an incident under investigation from yesterday, where three citizens were shot by coalition forces. I'm not sure if that's in your AO, but I'm wondering, can you provide some more details about that incident? And also can you explain the level of coordination in terms of your troops know where the checkpoints are that are set up by these citizens?

COL. KERSHAW: You know, those are great questions, and you know, those are things that we've struggled with and again, made some mistakes and learned the hard way on. You're asking about, you know, what's the coordination level, you know, confirm that we don't -- and you got to remember, Iraq's an armed society. You know, I'm from south Texas; you know, pretty much everybody has a gun, and Iraqis make us look like -- pretty tame by comparison.

Iraqis obviously are able -- it's a tribal tradition that people are allowed to guard their own tribal areas, and they're all already armed. And that's been consistent throughout our stay here. What this has allowed us to do, though, is to bring them forward. As I talked to you biometric screening, they come forward with their personal weapons and allow us to register them. So now we have a count of every military-age male who participates in this, the serial number of his personal weapon, and accounting of where he keeps it and a sheikh's accounting that he's got that weapon either on his checkpoint or at his home.

It has required close coordination, and that's why -- you know, the issue I mentioned earlier about getting permission from the Baghdad Operational Command for the Iraqi army units to participate in coordinating with these local concerned citizens was particularly key because, you know, they're from the same country, they know each other; they recognize that these people are just protecting their own villages. They understand what they're doing. And this has allowed us to work hand in hand with Iraqi army units, these concerned citizens, and daily we inspect these checkpoints; monthly, when they come forward to receive their pay, we inspect their weapons,

confirm their performance with their sheikhs. And in fact, we've identified a number of terrorists amongst their ranks as part of this. And there have been mishaps, where they didn't follow their instructions, that they would leave their tribal areas at night to attack another tribe, and they've been engaged by coalition forces. And some have inadvertently been killed in the process.

But I'm not familiar with the incident that you're referring to yesterday. But in all cases, we've investigated these, and in fact this has, you know, proved to serve notice to all parties concerned -- Iraqi army, these concerned citizens, and then, you know, our own forces -- that they have a set of rules they have to follow, and that we're not creating militias which can roam the tribal areas at will, that they're manning their checkpoints and protecting their tribal areas, and they're not allowed to roam freely unless they coordinate. They're never allowed to roam freely, but any movement has to be coordinated through coalition or Iraqi forces.

And they've been turning in caches, really, since this began. I was on my way back in, stopped to talk to a group of them -- they brought in 24 artillery shells that had been buried, that were clearly intended to be used as IEDs, and a group of five of them, under a sheikh and a former military officer, brought those to one of our checkpoints, where they turned them over to one my platoons. So that's been going on daily. And, really, as they uncover more of these caches, they turn them over to us.

Q Colonel, it's Andrew Gray from Reuters here. Can you give us an assessment of the capabilities of the Iraqi security forces in your area, and specifically tell us how much longer you think it will be before they can take the lead across your area of operations and you can reduce the U.S. presence? I know that will be a decision for your successor, but how far away is that date?

COL. KERSHAW: That's a great question. Down here, we have one Iraqi army brigade, it's the 4th Brigade of the 6th Iraqi Army Division, and they have one battalion that they've been reinforced with from down south as part of the larger Iraqi army reinforcement of the Baghdad Operational Command during Operation Fard al-Qanun.

Right now -- when we arrived, the Iraqi army controlled just under about a third of our battlespace and were in the lead with our battalion in tactical overwatch. We've since transitioned a third battalion, which has taken the lead in the Yusufiya area, so now they're at about -- just under -- you know, between, you know, two-thirds and a half, you know, of the battlespace, with a fourth battalion that we hope to see move into the lead probably in the November timeframe, shortly after we swap out with the 101st. That will be all the organic battalions of the brigade that's currently down here.

And again, if we see these concerned citizens being moved into a legitimate role in the Iraqi security forces -- you can see them as they're brought into the police primarily, but also there's an initiative to bring them into the army -- you could see U.S. forces begin the tactical overwatch in those areas, I'm sure, during you know -- the Rakkasans' tour of duty here in South Baghdad.

Q Colonel, I'm Carl Osgood with the Executive Intelligence Review. You mentioned a number of redeployment issues during your opening remarks. Can you talk a little bit about what it's going to take to reconstitute your brigade after you get home and what concerns you have that need to be addressed during that process?

COL. KERSHAW: Yeah. I think it was Carl that asked that question. That's a great question. You talked about the redeployment issues that we're looking at.

I'd say, first of all, we're very fortunate that the 10th Mountain Division, you know, our parent division back at Fort Drum, is very experienced, not just with deploying brigades and the division itself forward for combat operations, but also with reconstituting.

When I assumed command of this brigade over two years ago, they had just arrived from a tour in western Baghdad and immediately began the process of rest, refit and reset and to reconstitute the force for known combat operations back here in Iraq, which we essentially had a 13-month break for.

And obviously what we're concerned with is getting our soldiers home, back reunited with their families, recovering our equipment that we've served with over here and really working that process for the first really, 30 to 90 days back at Fort Drum, taking well-deserved leave and getting reunited with our families. With that, officers, noncommissioned officers and soldiers, some will leave the army, previously scheduled to depart, and others will move on to other assignments.

After that 90 day period, I'll in fact change command and depart the brigade, as will many of the commanders. A new command team will move in and begin the process of individual and collective training to prepare the brigade for future combat operations if they are in fact scheduled to redeploy.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, Colonel -- (off mike) -- time.

COL. KERSHAW: (Off mike) -- year, but as always, with the flux of personnel and the change of mission, it may look a little bit different than what we experienced.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, colonel, the time has flown by, and we are actually a few minutes past the time that we've asked you to allocate for this. And so we appreciate your indulgence, and we'll bring this to a close. Before I do, though, if there's any last remarks that you would like to make, let me turn it back to you.

COL. KERSHAW: I appreciate that. I want to thank everybody for their time and coming out to spend some time with us.

You know, the final piece I'd like to talk about is the one of the families back home. You know, they've sacrificed a lot having this brigade. As you know, it's been through multiple deployments, and we are extremely blessed to have just a phenomenal family readiness group and phenomenal group of leadership back with the 10th Mountain Division and in particular, you know, our rear detachment. I want them to know they can be proud of what their soldiers have performed over here in doing their duty in south Baghdad.

This is a tough mission, and there's no doubt about that. And we've faced some incredible challenges here while we've been here, and we know we'll face more challenges as we depart the country. But this brigade has represented itself and its division and, in fact, our nation extremely, extremely well. We took on a tough mission; we executed it with the best of our abilities, and we're leaving this place better than we found it. And we're confident that the Rakkasans are going to be able to do the same. I think that you know, years from now soldiers of the commando brigade and their families are going to be proud to say their loved one served in south Baghdad during some pretty tough times.

And then, finally, to all the friends, the supporters back home, the support groups, the adopt-a-platoon members, Boy Scout troops and all those others who have supported this brigade while it's been deployed, I want to personally thank you for your efforts as citizens to support your soldiers forward. We appreciate it, the soldiers appreciate it, and again, thanks.

Climb to glory, commandos.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, colonel, thank you again for your time this evening. It's very valuable to us to hear from commanders on the ground, and we all wish you and your unit a safe and speedy redeployment.

COL. KERSHAW: Thanks. Appreciate it. Thanks for the opportunity.

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