An Exercise in Mission Command:
The Panther Brigade in Operation Inherent Resolve

COL CURTIS A. BUZZARD
LTC JOHN C. WHITE
MAJ JARED N. FERGUSON

In the late summer and early fall of 2014, the world watched in shock as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL — also known as Daish) attacked into Iraq from Syria and seized key terrain in Anbar and Ninewa Provinces. Much of the Iraqi army retreated, and the country appeared on the verge of collapse. In late November and early December, efforts were initiated to provide forces to assist in training and advising the Iraqi army. The 1st Infantry Division was selected to deploy its headquarters and assumed the role as the Combined Joint Forces Land Component Command – Iraq (CJFLCC-I). The 1st Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 1st Infantry Division was already deployed to Southwest Asia in support of Operation Spartan Shield and was tasked to provide elements as a temporary solution. This complex mission was evolving daily and would require an extremely adaptable force that was capable of operating in a complex, changing operating environment and able to interoperate with joint, coalition, and Special Operations Forces (SOF) as well as interagency partners.

The 3rd Brigade Combat Team (BCT) of the 82nd Airborne Division (the Panther Brigade) had recently relinquished the Global Response Force (GRF) mission — ready to deploy on no-notice anywhere and jump, fight, and win — and remained at a high level of readiness and in a "surge-ready" status. An initial request for forces (RFF) was issued for a security element in Baghdad, and elements from the brigade's 1st Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) began deploying in late December 2014. A second RFF followed for another 1,000 Soldiers to train and advise the Iraqi army. The 3rd BCT, consisting of the BCT headquarters and elements of six battalions, received the mission and deployed to Iraq by the end of January 2015. Over the nine-month deployment (December 2014 through September 2015), the Panther Brigade contributed substantially to a complex mission and learned a variety of key lessons learned.

As the BCT arrived in country, they replaced a small footprint of 1st BCT, 1st ID and some elements that were in key areas around Iraq and had begun to develop necessary partnerships. Initially, the emphasis was on the build partner capacity (BPC) aspect of the mission and training the five new Iraqi army brigades formed for the Iraqi counteroffensive against Daish. The BPC was generally centralized at two

An Iraqi soldier with the 73rd Brigade, 15th Division works to improve his kneeling firing stance with a Panther Brigade Soldier at Camp Taji, Iraq, on 24 March 2015.
Photo by SGT Cody Quinn

distinct locations – the Taji Military Complex (TMC) and the Besmaya Range Complex (BRC) — while the Marines and Danish operated a BPC site at Al Asad. At the first two sites, we began setting conditions for the arrival of other coalition partners (Australia, New Zealand, and Spain), who would later take over primacy of the individual and collective training effort. Throughout the duration of the deployment, the BCT would lead or assist in the training of more than 12,000 Iraqi soldiers while also assisting with the equipping and specialty training on U.S.-specific weapons and some niche capabilities. While training was ongoing, advise and assist (A&A) teams — built around the BCT and battalion headquarters — were partnered with the Iraqi Ground Forces Command (IGFC); the Baghdad Operations Command (BOC); the Ninewa Operations Command (NOC); the 9th, 15th, and 16th Iraqi Army Divisions; and the Ministry of Peshmerga in Erbil. This also included a French A&A team that was partnered with the 6th Iraqi Army Division. The advisors quickly developed rapport with their partners; trained the staffs; assisted in planning operations; ensured our intelligence, security, and reconnaissance (ISR) and joint fires capabilities were nested appropriately; and helped them measure effects. Quite frankly, they also advised us as we gained a greater understanding of their perceptions, priorities, and challenges. The BCT also secured various critical facilities, oversaw the coalition footprint on TMC, and eventually provided a variety of enablers and sustainment support to Marine A&A teams at Al Asad and Taquaddam. In addition, the BCT maintained a headquarters in Kuwait and rotated elements to train and maintain readiness. We used the location as an "arms room for people" concept, rotating unique capabilities into and out of Iraq as needed, which established a significant intelligence reachback capability in order to stay within the force management constraints. Clearly, the BCT was executing distributed mission command in theater and back to Fort Bragg, N.C., where approximately 3,000 paratroopers remained in a surge-ready capacity.

Throughout the deployment, paratroopers and leaders at all levels — from the youngest private to the BCT commander — were challenged every day in some capacity and learned many valuable lessons. First, it is critical to have an appreciation of the operating environment because many of the lessons are driven from its complexity which will remain an enduring characteristic of this region. Many books are devoted to this area of the world, but we have attempted to briefly capture the key components.

Complexity of the Operating Environment

There is nowhere in the world more complicated right now than Iraq. One must approach the challenges in Iraq and the region holistically and factor in "great power" politics as well. There is clearly a competition for influence — first internal to Iraqi politics, secondly from its border states, and finally between great powers with respect to influence in the region. Collectively, this context must be understood with a level of nuance not always expected of paratroopers and junior leaders, and we learned this in spades throughout the deployment.

First, the Iraqis are still defining their own political solution

> *Throughout the deployment, paratroopers and leaders at all levels — from the youngest private to the BCT commander — were challenged every day in some capacity and learned many valuable lessons. First, it is critical to have an appreciation of the operating environment because many of the lessons are driven from its complexity which will remain an enduring characteristic of this region.*

after the removal of Saddam Hussein, the U.S. military's departure, and growing relations with its neighbors. The military's influence declined after we left, and Prime Minister Nouri Maliki's consolidation of power and personnel moves across the Iraqi military were based more on political favor or influence than competency. While we were training and advising the Iraqi army, it was fundamental to understand the background of our partnered leaders — virtually everyone had a political connection and their own "Tony Soprano." We found operations were planned and decisions of commanders were driven by politics and heavily influenced by factors outside military competency or priority. This isn't unusual as war is viewed as an extension of politics, so understanding the state of Iraqi politics — who were most influential and their agenda — became very important to us throughout the deployment. Thus, it was vital that we spent time understanding the social analysis network of key leaders and maintaining a pulse on Iraqi politics — most often through open-source media, engagements, and close cooperation with the Embassy.

Any discussion on the complexity of Iraq unfortunately must include sectarian competition and friction. After years of oppression under Saddam Hussein, the newly empowered Shia government and Shia majority exercised dominance over other factions across all facets of government, and the Sunnis felt disenfranchised. This disenfranchisement extends beyond the borders of Iraq and to some degree facilitates Daish's success because Sunnis often wonder which is better — succumbing to Daish's brutal rule or trusting a Shia government that seems unable to effectively court and integrate the Sunnis. Daish is also enabled by disaffected Baathists and former Saddamists, many of whom possess the management and leadership skills necessary to run a government and Daish's army. Thus, defeating Daish is both a political problem and a military one. Effectively reaching out to moderate Sunnis, discrediting Daish's ability to govern, and creating a truly inclusive Iraqi government are essential to success.

But, it is not simply a Sunni-Shia conflict; there's tremendous internal friction within each. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi is a member of the Dawa Party (the same as Maliki) but is viewed as more of a centrist while being pulled by a variety of forces in Shia politics. He is largely beholden to the Arab Shia in Iraq, led by Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani and the marja'iyah, who are Iraqi nationalists and want to limit Iranian influence. When Daish invaded Iraq and threatened Baghdad, Sistani issued a fatwa for Shia militias in Iraq to defend their country, and

these militias have largely been effective and not associated with the perception of sectarian revenge against Sunnis. The other pull is from Persian Shia in Iran. Former Prime Minister Maliki forged strong relations with the Iranian government, and the Iranians have gained significant influence in the Iraqi government. Iranian-backed militias filled an urgent security need when Daish attacked and the Iraqi army was unprepared or unwilling to fight. These militias, which many considered terrorist organizations and responsible for U.S. deaths during Operation Iraqi Freedom, are less nationalistic, not truly under the control of Iraqi leadership, and often exacerbate tension with Sunni populations and also the Kurds. Their intentions and those of their masters clearly do not have the best interests of Iraq as their primary motivation. Prime Minister al-Abadi needs to forge good relations with neighboring countries and is reliant in the near term on these militias, but the question remains how he will control their influence once Daish is defeated. Iraq must depend on a credible national security infrastructure that reports to its leadership and not that of its neighbor.

Within the Sunni population, beholden to tribal allegiances, there is also friction. The inability of the Sunni tribes to unite within key provinces (Anbar, Saladin, and Ninewa) further hinders their ability to gain influence. They are often driven by self-preservation, parochial interests, corruption, and posturing for post-Daish influence, and they risk never seeing a secure Iraq again. This weakens their ability to gain trust with a Shia-dominant government and risks prolonging Daish's occupation in predominantly Sunni population areas. Encouraging them to speak with one voice is a key component of U.S. policy in Iraq, which is essential to defeating Daish.

Of course, we must not forget the Kurds given that Kurdistan is part of Iraq. The Kurdish population is extremely proud of their heritage and their ability to defend themselves from Daish while the Government of Iraq suffered numerous losses and high desertion rates during the fall of Mosul. The persecution of Kurds during Saddam Hussein's regime is a salient feature of Kurdish identity, so distrust persists. A majority of Kurds do not identify as Iraqi citizens and desire to create an autonomous Kurdish state. The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) operates in several ways as a sovereign country with an elected prime minister, a pseudo-military (known as the Peshmerga but essentially a political militia), and its own flag; but there also remains tremendous discord internally. They are not in favor of a presence of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in the KRG, are secular, ethnically Kurd rather than Arab, and often interact with foreign countries as an independent state. Due to the ongoing conflict, the Kurds reclaimed their historical territory and expanded into traditionally Arab areas, which will inevitably be a point of contention following the defeat of Daish and liberation of Mosul.

The struggle for unity between Kurds and Iraqis is a significant obstacle in the war to defeat Daish, especially in terms of Mosul. A large part of the friction revolves around oil and ultimately money. Since Mosul is proximate to Kurdistan (approximately 85 kilometers between Mosul and Kurdistan's capital Erbil), it is essential for the Kurds and ISF to synchronize

efforts, but this is challenging given the generally deplorable history of the Iraqi army in Kurdistan during Saddam Hussein's reign. During the deployment, we played a vital role in bridging the gap between Kurds and Iraqis through our continuous engagement of Iraqi and Kurdish security forces. The brigade staff, partnered with the NOC, worked diligently to garner an agreement to support the Mosul counterattack with training bases and forward staging of equipment. One of our battalion headquarters was partnered with the Ministry of Peshmerga and worked daily to advise and assist while encouraging them to recognize the advantage of cooperating with the Iraqis. While the Kurds remained reluctant to work in a partnered capacity with the ISF, progress was slowly materializing as we departed, which is critical to the defeat of Daish and long-term security of Iraq.

The BCT also had to look beyond the borders of Iraq. Without having a basic understanding of the interests of Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and, of course, the ongoing conflict in Syria, it is difficult to appreciate Iraqi decision making. Furthermore, great powers are engaged overtly in competition through soft power in order to gain influence in the region. Nations such as Russia and even China, though not neighbors, are looking to influence outcomes, extend their influence, and seek economic gains. Collectively, these nations all have an impact on the political, economic, and security situation in Iraq, and attempting to understand the problem made us better advisors.

Additionally, operating in Iraq on this deployment was much different than previous ones — we were operating in a country enforcing its sovereignty and under a mission led by the U.S. Department of State (DoS). This resulted in a variety of different constraints — limitations to the number of personnel in theater, inability to operate off of forward operating bases, challenges in getting personnel and equipment into country, and limited modes of transportation. As a result, these challenges and the economy of force nature of the mission forced the BCT and its leaders to closely coordinate between various SOF, conventional forces, interagency elements, and coalition partners. The primary lesson learned is that this type of complexity is likely to be the norm in the future and reinforces the Army's emphasis on critical thinking, adaptability, and a mission command approach. It also drove many of the following lessons learned.

Preparing and Organizing for the Mission: Transforming from the GRF to Advisors in 45 Days

Upon receipt of the mission, the BCT conducted a rapid mission analysis — there were few facts and a lot of assumptions about the evolving mission. We would have to adjust from a unit focused on deploying with no-notice, seizing an airfield, establishing a lodgment, and executing decisive action to equipping, training, and advising Iraqi army soldiers and supporting ourselves in a much different Iraq. First and foremost, the BCT aggressively implemented a leader development program (LDP) that initially leveraged the Security Force Assistance Advisor Team (SFAAT) Academy, which is based at the Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk, La. Their program of instruction served as an excellent

primer for advising tasks and the cultural nuances of Iraq, and provided a great start point to examine the mission. However, leaders at all levels knew the mission would require a much more in-depth and continuous analysis of the culture of both the Iraqi army and society.

As a result, BCT leaders focused leader development on a series of LPDs that they felt would have the greatest impact. COL Joel Rayburn, author of *Iraq After America* — a book that examines the Iraqi government and the sectarian and secular factions that emerged following the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 and through the departure of U.S. forces — presented a session to key leaders. His insights on how the Iraqi political and military institutions had changed since U.S. forces departed Iraq were hugely beneficial. This session cultivated a relationship with COL Rayburn, and the BCT leveraged his connections to many experts throughout the deployment.

Photo by SSG Mary S. Katzenberger

Paratroopers assigned to the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division disassemble a foreign AK-47 rifle during a class at the U.S. Army's John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg, N.C., on 22 January 2015.

During the session with COL Rayburn, he was joined by someone the BCT would become intimately familiar with during the course of the deployment — Iraqi Army Major General Najim alJabouri, who at the time was working at National Defense University. Najim was born in Qayarah and served in Iraq during some of the most tumultuous times where he gained a reputation while serving as the mayor of Talafar for his ability to work closely with U.S. forces. Prime Minister al-Abadi later named Najim as the commander of the NOC, which had dissolved when Mosul fell and was chartered to plan and execute the counteroffensive. During the deployment, the BCT worked with him daily to prepare the newly formed Iraqi units. Part of any successful advising partnership depends on personal relationships, and it was extremely helpful to have a pre-existing one with Najim and his ability to leverage a tremendous network of contacts throughout Iraqi — both inside the army and across the political spectrum.

In addition, the BCT hosted experts from the Combating Terrorism Center, which is located at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y. They shared their most updated products and information on the Islamic State and offered valuable perspectives on the retreat of Iraqi forces and politics in Baghdad. The BCT also invited the West Point Negotiation Project and executed a seminar focused on developing negotiation strategies for the BCT's leaders. Aside from a variety of professional reading, we found a valuable publication produced by our Army titled *How the Iraqi Army Operates*. It described how the Iraqi army recruited, manned, trained, and equipped, etc.; it gave insight to just about every aspect of the Iraqi army. Arguably, it was the most important reference we had. Throughout the deployment, we found that it was still largely applicable and served as a touchstone for us.

Finally, the BCT executed a mission rehearsal exercise at Fort Bragg, just weeks before deploying. This culminating training event focused on the known and likely missions the BCT would execute in country as well as addressed our combat readiness should circumstances change and we found ourselves conducting limited offensive operations. This event also served as a final validation for each of the battalions as they transformed their formations and solidified their task organizations. The SFAATs themselves were leader centric and composed of staff expertise across the warfighting functions as well as unique skill sets — prior advising experience, Arabic skills, balancing intelligence and fires across all battalions, etc. Within broad guidance, each battalion had a slightly different approach to the advising, security, and sustainment requirements for the distributed and sometimes austere locations they would occupy. This reflected our Army's mission command philosophy — all relied on the strengths of their respective units, their in-depth knowledge of their personnel, and the overall trust in the units to exercise initiative in how they approached the mission and continuously adjust or "right size" throughout the deployment as conditions changed. This agility would prove critical over time.

Photo courtesy of authors

During its deployment, the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division worked daily with Major General Najim alJabouri, commander of the NOC.

Adaptability

From notification of the mission throughout execution, adaptability was critical. We continually had to evaluate our assumptions and reconfirm our facts in the ever-challenging environment. The mission required problem solvers, innovative thinkers, and creativity. No region, relationship, or Iraqi unit was the same, and we couldn't treat them as if they were. Our leaders and paratroopers were well trained and masters of the basics, and we used this as the foundation from which to adapt to the mission.

> *From notification of the mission throughout execution, adaptability was critical. We continually had to evaluate our assumptions and reconfirm our facts in the ever-challenging environment. The mission required problem solvers, innovative thinkers, and creativity. No region, relationship, or Iraqi unit was the same, and we couldn't treat them as if they were.*

As an example, our initial mission analysis bore out that we needed to ensure maximum flexibility with respect to combat capabilities, given that the mission was evolving. We established a headquarters at Camp Buehring, Kuwait, upon arrival and used our footprint there for two purposes:

(1) To facilitate training necessary for maintaining readiness given that our requirements could change; and

(2) As an "arms room for people." We positioned a variety of unique capabilities that we would deploy forward for specific purposes and time periods within the force management constraints. Capabilities included everything from unique intelligence and engineer assets, mobile training teams for short-duration equipment fielding and training, and even our chaplain and behavioral health provider.

It was necessary to make some extremely difficult decisions regarding which capabilities should be brought forward and what could be left behind. Every commander wants to have a robust intelligence capability; however, the constraints we operated under did not allow this to occur on a routine basis. The initial intelligence package at the BCT level consisted of only three personnel forward: the OIC, a senior all-source warrant officer, and one cryptologic linguist. The battalion intelligence sections were also shorthanded and usually had no more than three Soldiers at a time. To combat these shortfalls, we came up with several very creative and unique methods of gaining, developing, and sharing intelligence within our own formation and our partners. The first place we looked for a solution was through creating a reachback capability for in-depth analysis. We embedded an analyst from the National Ground Intelligence Center (NGIC) who had continued to look at Iraq after the U.S. military's departure and had a great deal of expertise for us to leverage. We also immediately stood up an analytic cell on Fort Bragg and, after discovering that Kuwait was capable of hosting our brigade intelligence support element (BISE), we quickly brought the majority of our all-source, geospatial intelligence (GEOINT), and cryptologic sections forward. Bringing those elements forward to Kuwait had the additional benefit of co-locating our analysts with the division analysis and control element (ACE) and the Operation Spartan Shield BISE. This allowed our analysts to interact directly with our higher intelligence cell and adjoining forces. This also allowed the Operation Spartan Shield analysts to focus on a real-world problem set, thereby increasing the analytic expertise across the force. Throughout the deployment this also enabled the BCT's intelligence section to quickly rotate forward the subject matter expert for any number of issues that arose.

A second area that facilitated our success centered on information sharing. Everyone in theater was extremely shorthanded. While collaboration is essential, it rarely occurs as freely as desired. During our deployment, every coalition partner and task force worked diligently to ensure all information made it to the force that could best utilize it. In addition, our partnership with host nation forces allowed a very free-flowing information channel. These working relationships provided situational awareness for all commanders and increased the utility of assets across the battlefield. On numerous occasions our coalition partners provided information that directly contributed to the safety of U.S. service members, and our BCT intelligence sections worked relentlessly to ensure the safety and success of our partner and coalition forces.

As the deployment progressed, the BCT's intelligence apparatus took a specific shape in which the cell in Baghdad supported expeditionary operations and immediate response requirements. The BISE in Kuwait took responsibility for near-term projects and battle rhythm events, such as the intelligence summary and collection requirements. Finally, the reachback to Fort Bragg held the responsibility for the long-term projects such as overall atmospherics and deep dive research.

By no means was this solely a single section's effort. Rather, it was a demonstration of multiple entities across the battlefield taking a less-than-ideal situation and working together in the way that the intelligence community espouses but rarely does. Adaptability was key across the BCT, and these examples highlight just a few of the innovative approaches undertaken as part of this mission.

Interoperability

Immediately upon alert for the mission, we recognized that we would find ourselves working closely with SOF, interagency, and coalition partners at the BCT level. This requires leaders and paratroopers at all levels to build personal relationships and trust as well as ensure the technical means to communicate are available. We had paratroopers assigned to various locations serving with SOF and coalition partners in many different capacities. The economy of force nature of the mission necessitated partnering. Our paratroopers assigned to Union III had to work hand-in-hand with U.S. Marines who were tasked with the base defense of the Baghdad Embassy complex. Synchronizing efforts, understanding each other's standard operating procedures, and gaining knowledge from their

Photo courtesy of authors

A Panther Brigade leader discusses training with Spanish Legion coalition partners.

lessons learned were paramount to our success at Union III and providing overall security.

The intelligence assets available from the SOF community proved vital in our decision-making process and ability to gain greater context. They were able to provide us with a level of situational awareness and background information that we otherwise would not have had, which we then used our reachback capabilities to evolve further. Our coalition partners were also a big part of our success. They came in motivated and ready to advise and train the Iraqi forces to which they were assigned. Our paratroopers gained valuable insight to the cultural differences between militaries and immediately recognized we could still work together and actually complement each other's capabilities to accomplish the common mission.

Our biggest challenge throughout the operation was the ability to communicate classified information with our coalition partners. During the deployment, we worked side-by-side with Spanish, Australian, and New Zealand forces training the Iraqi army. Additionally, we had a French A&A team part of our task organization which was partnered with the 6th Iraqi Army Division in Baghdad. To mitigate this issue, we employed expeditionary digital liaison support teams (EDLSTs), a concept developed by the 82nd Airborne Division during its numerous multinational training events as the GRF. Though the mission was different, we provided a small package of experts (communications, intelligence, a liaison officer, and linguist where required) with the required U.S. equipment and systems to our coalition partners in order to provide them with the proper information and analysis. The requirements were minimal but unexpected at the beginning of our mission, and as they evolved over the deployment proved priceless. In the end, this mission reaffirmed that we can expect to fight in the future with

coalition partners that bring credibility to a mission along with important capabilities, so interoperable communication systems will remain a priority. Similarly, it remains clear that we will continue to find ourselves working closely with various elements of SOF. Ideally, personal relationships will already be in place with SOF, interagency, and coalition partners, but if not, we must build them quickly and in a way that positively supports the mission.

Talent Management

Perhaps the most important decision each deploying battalion had was determining who should deploy and who needed to remain at Fort Bragg and lead the surge-ready force, which was the majority of the BCT. Without question, we knew that the unit required quality leaders at all locations and we could not overload one force without hindering the other. We also realized that regardless of whether a paratrooper deployed or not, they would be asked to execute many tasks and solve many problems they were not accustomed to doing.

For those deploying, we initially looked at who had previously been part of an advisory mission or had similar experience. We also identified those who had previously deployed to Iraq, particularly on advisory teams, and may have dormant relationships with Iraqis that could be leveraged. Since the majority of our paratroopers had not deployed before and even less had previous Iraq experience, we decided to look even closer at the additional skills our paratroopers could bring to the fight. We identified those who could speak a second language, especially Arabic or Kurdish. Those who spoke Spanish or French turned out to be valuable assets when working with our coalition partners. We identified those with previous experience as an observer/coach/trainer at one of the Combat Training Centers since A&A was very similar, just doing so within a unique cultural

Photo by USAF SrA James Richardson

A linguist attached to the 2nd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment talks with Iraqi soldiers prior to conducting weapons qualification at Camp Taji, Iraq, on 8 March 2015.

context. We even sent some of our organic engineers to additional training to enhance their vertical engineering skills, with a focus on welding, carpentry, electrical, heating/air, and contracting. However, we eventually came to realize that our junior leaders and paratroopers all had a unique skill set, no matter their military occupational specialty (MOS) — they were able to quickly build rapport and trust with Iraqi soldiers and our coalition partners because they were well trained in the basic fundamentals of warfighting. This skill set alone carried us through the deployment and contributed to more successes than thought possible.

As previously mentioned, however, we had to leave the right level of leadership at Fort Bragg in order to continue to maintain readiness, discipline, and standards for the more than 3,000 paratroopers who would remain. Although the battalions each handled it differently, they all empowered those who remained at Fort Bragg with the necessary information and guidance to execute in the absence of continuous orders — the pure essence of mission command. The deployment allowed paratroopers at all levels to expand their own knowledge base and lead with distinction, often being responsible for tasks normally meant for those one or two levels above their pay grade.

Building Partner Capacity – How to Train, How to Fight through Equipment Challenges, and the Enduring Importance of Leadership

Upon deploying, the priority initially was the BPC mission — the mission of training new Iraqi army brigades. These brigades were newly formed for the liberation of Ninewa and specifically Mosul. However, as they arrived to either TMC or BRC, they were usually undermanned, poorly equipped, and led by a mix of quality committed leaders and others who were inexperienced, aligned with malign actors, or more concerned with political issues than tactical ones — largely a result of the Iraqi army's decline since the departure of U.S. forces in 2011. The majority of the forces were Shia, with a small percentage also moonlighting with Shia militia groups, causing us to be very cognizant of force protection requirements. However, with respect to BPC, we generally found the Iraqi soldiers eager to learn. Just like ours, they disliked mundane tasks and classes and most enjoyed hands-on training. We quickly realized several key aspects to a successful BPC mission:

1) Consistency in the training;

2) The need for common equipment that was supportable by the Iraqis; and

3) The presence of Iraqi leaders during training.

The newly formed brigades consisted of a mixture of different types of Iraqi soldiers. Some were new recruits, others were transferred from existing Iraqi army units, and some had even been in the units responsible for the original defense of Mosul and fled when it was inevitable that Daish would overtake the city. As a result, their experience level varied, and it was our responsibility to train them to a common standard and establish a consistency for the Iraqis to accept. However, that standard needed to be an Iraqi standard — not an American or coalition standard. Through close collaboration with all the

Photo by SGT Deja Borden

An Infantryman with the 2nd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment instructs Iraqi soldiers during a breach assault and building clearance course at Besmaya Range Complex, Iraq, on 18 April 2015.

BPC sites and CJFLCC-I planners, we established a common training curriculum focusing on the basics of physical fitness, marksmanship, and small unit collective training. This was not only important for the Iraqis but for all coalition members conducting the training as well. We learned that the Iraqis would become frustrated if we taught them something one way and then our coalition partners taught them the same task a different way. We quickly had to develop a common training strategy with our coalition partners, particularly the Australians at the TMC and the Spanish at the BRC.

Once the Iraqi army units mastered the basics (which our junior leaders and paratroopers taught very well), we were able to move onto larger company and battalion-size collective training and focus on operations that would be beneficial in future offensive operations, such as a combined arms breach. Our focus was on teaching conventional military tactics not counterinsurgency operations because Daish was largely fighting like a conventional army. Daish constructed obstacle belts, built engagement areas, and maneuvered in the offense using basic military tactics. Daish fighters weren't particularly good fighters; they just were skilled at using tactics that evoked fear, such as snipers, various forms of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in the defense, and vehicle-borne IEDs as their version of "strikes." We trained the Iraqi soldiers on basic maneuver and how to counter these tactics. The biggest lesson we took from the training

was that we could not desire success more than the Iraqis. No matter how hard we pushed a particular unit or leader to train or meet established standards, it would only work with prescribed guidance from higher. This was the exact opposite of our Army's mission command philosophy, and the BCT had to learn to work within that specific constraint of the Iraqi army. To solve this problem, we utilized established partnerships at all levels — from CJFLCC-I to DoS to our coalition partners — to influence the necessary Iraqi decision makers to provide the appropriate guidance to the training units.

Throughout the BPC mission, equipping the Iraqi army was a challenging endeavor. Our ability to train them was dependent on units being properly equipped. Working through the larger enterprise within Iraq proved even more challenging due to various loyalties held by power brokers within the Iraqi army and its stove-piped warehousing system. Though coalition partners would assist via donating equipment, once the equipment was given to an Iraqi entity at the strategic level, we lost visibility; final disposition was relatively unknown at the tactical level. For instance, 30 vehicles given to the Iraqi Minister of Defense on a particular date did not necessarily mean the Iraqi brigade we thought the vehicles were slated for would actually receive them. Though a formal acquisition through the Iraqi army supply system is theoretically possible, many times the struggle revolved around an Iraqi staff's reluctance to utilize the process in favor of a more informal practice built around pre-existing loyalties and relationships. We found the Iraqi logistical system, particularly equipping, was counterintuitive in many respects when compared to our Army system of modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) authorizations and equipping priorities. As a result, we had to rely on the logistical A&A teams in country to help us gain visibility on the location and scheduling of a fielding for a particular Iraqi unit. Through this process, we were able to influence what Iraqi units needed priority for fielding based off of Iraqi operations. Essentially, we helped the Iraqis create an Army Force Generation (ARFORGEN) cycle where units were manned, equipped, trained, and then employed in combat operations, and then this cycle would be repeated. The Iraqis came away recognizing the importance of such a cycle and the value of training because they saw effectiveness in the units that completed this cycle.

The last major lesson learned while conducting the BPC mission — and perhaps the biggest lesson learned throughout the deployment — was the absolute necessity for Iraqi leaders to be present and actively participating in the training; however, this was often easier said than done. As mentioned, some Iraqi leaders were not placed in a leadership position because of their competence. This meant that their desire to train or improve their respective unit was not always noticeable. We originally thought we could train the Iraqis on how we train, with junior leaders or NCOs leading the training. However, we eventually realized that the Iraqis operate off a very centralized

Photo by SPC Paris Maxey

A paratrooper assigned to A Troop, 5th Squadron, 73rd Cavalry Regiment assists an Iraqi soldier at a range on Camp Taji, Iraq, on 27 June 2015.

command structure with almost everything revolving around the commander. Once we identified this, we came to the understanding that without the commander's "buy in" to a particular training plan or idea, it would not be successful. We had to modify our training approach, and our junior leaders had to interact with Iraqi leaders much more their senior. Lieutenants or captains, and sometimes even platoon sergeants or first sergeants, began to dialogue with Iraqi colonels and generals with great success. We found that over time, as these partnerships grew and the good Iraqi leaders began to trust us more, that we had a tremendous responsibility to provide candid feedback on some Iraqi leaders who were not executing the orders or the training plans as necessary. Over time, this resulted in some leaders at the tactical level being rotated and some Iraqi leadership positions being filled by competent Iraqi soldiers.

Iraqi army staff members participate in one of several command post exercises.

Photo courtesy of authors

Ultimately, the BPC mission was a success because each Iraqi unit that rotated through a training site became better. In fact, as we were leaving, with our help, the Iraqis developed a training rotation plan for existing units, and some Iraqi army units were even "lobbying" for a chance to train with us or our coalition partners.

Advising and Assisting — Listening, Training Commanders and Staffs, and Helping Them "See Themselves"

The other, and equally important, task we executed during the deployment was the A&A mission. As described earlier, we were partnered mostly with the new Iraqi army brigades intended for the Mosul counterattack and the BOC, which were responsible for the security of Baghdad and the surrounding area. While our companies concentrated on BPC, the BCT and battalion staffs focused primarily on the A&A mission. Much like the BPC effort, we initially began to advise our counterparts on what WE thought they should do, without much thought, knowledge, or synchronization with what the Iraqis wanted to do. We then realized that it was their mission and only sustainable if they accomplish it, not us. Once we took a step back and LISTENED to our counterparts, and began to analyze and understand all the other complexities to each situation, our A&A activities became more effective. As such, over time we learned the following lessons to various degrees over the deployment:

(1) We not only were there to advise and assist the Iraqi unit staffs, but we had to train them as well within the constraints of a very centralized commander's decision-making process; and

(2) We had to allow and help the Iraqi units "see themselves" before we could properly assist with the decisions of the Iraqi commanders.

In the beginning, we thought we were going to just advise our counterparts on the plans they developed. However, we quickly realized, for many different reasons, they did not always develop their own plans independently or in conjunction with guidance from a higher headquarters. Our problem was that we had to figure out a way for our Iraqi staff counterparts — and to some extent the commanders — to be proactive instead of reactive. They needed to learn to anticipate potential friction points to provide the commanders or higher headquarters with facts or analysis to allow the commander to make a decision. As a result, we began to train them on a modified military decision-making process that fit within their very centralized commander's decision-making style. Understanding the "pulse of the commander" and developing personal relationships with each were key to building trust and ultimately the ability to have a positive influence.

We started with, and never really graduated from, training the Iraqi staffs on very simple and basic staff functions and responsibilities. Unlike the staffs in our Army, the Iraqi system is generally stove-piped when it comes to information sharing (information is power), and collaborative planning or staff cross talk did not exist. In an attempt to get them to understand the importance of this, we were able to design and execute several command post exercises (CPXs) with some of the Iraqi army units. The results were astonishing in that once a staff member realized that if information was shared with others, then the overall analysis or recommendation was more complete. Through many rehearsals and repetition,

the commanders realized, or admitted, that their staffs were functioning better in a collaborative manner and that the unit was more successful, which in turn allowed the commander to be seen as a more effective commander.

This also contributed to our other A&A lesson learned: help and allow the Iraqi units to "see themselves." In the Iraqi army culture — and Iraqi society in general — no one in a position of power or influence wants to admit they don't know something or cannot do something because they will potentially be seen as a failure. This often resulted in staffs or commanders saying they had the necessary equipment or had requested something when in fact they had not. At first, it was very frustrating to witness this sort of dialogue within the Iraqi army. However, through our candid advisory efforts and by utilizing our own staff functions, over time we were able to provide the Iraqi leaders with a more accurate assessment or analysis, which in turn they began to expect from their own staffs. By essentially becoming an extension of an Iraqi commander's staff, we were able to influence the guidance and direction he gave his own staff, which then allowed us to train the Iraqi staffs in a more efficient manner. Only then were we better able to synchronize our primary capabilities — ISR and joint fires — in support of their operations and ensure reinforcing effects. Successes included a variety of short-term, tactical operations in and around Baghdad and Fallujah. By employing expeditionary A&A teams to support initial operations in Ramadi as well as advising at the operational level, we were able to reinitiate a force generation and training model for the Iraqi army at the IGFC and set conditions with NOC for the eventual counteroffensive in Ninewa to liberate Mosul. Again, the A&A mission appears to be likely in the future, both in Iraq and elsewhere, so these lessons will continue to apply.

Mission Focused — Challenge of Expectation Management

Last but not least, the mission itself required frequent explanation to our paratroopers. We are all certainly proud of the fact that our young paratroopers and leaders volunteered to serve while we remain at war. However, a small percentage did not expect to find themselves primarily training and advising host nation forces instead of also fighting with them. They had seen all of the recent war movies and expected this to be their opportunity to fight, share hardship, display courage, and build lasting memories of ground combat. They didn't have the experience of previous deployments to Iraq, had not seen the cost of war in blood, and quite honestly could not fully comprehend the importance of Iraqis doing it themselves. Those of us who had been in Iraq before generally agreed that for success to be sustainable, the Iraqi Security Forces had to clear, hold, and build with their own ground troops. Although our participation in offensive operations would be exciting, it would likely result in U.S. casualties and only have a temporal impact that would unlikely provide for an enduring peace unless the U.S. agreed to an open-ended commitment. Bottom line, the senior leaders of the BCT spent significant time and personal energy explaining "why" to both our young paratroopers and

to the Iraqi soldiers themselves. Not because we had to, but we knew it would assist in managing expectations and also explain how truly important and historical this mission was. Iraqi soldiers would live and die based on the quality of our training and advising. Fighting through a proxy is hard, but we came away from the mission tremendously proud of the performance of our partnered forces.

Conclusion

Over the nine-month deployment, both the paratroopers deployed and those who remained at Fort Bragg learned many valuable lessons. Our leaders and paratroopers embraced a complex, evolving mission and contributed substantially to progress in what will undoubtedly be a long and enduring campaign. Collectively, they gained insights on an exceedingly complex, culturally sensitive operating environment that epitomizes those we can expect to operate in the future; demonstrated tremendous adaptability, initiative, and innovation throughout an ever-changing mission; validated the importance of our own high level of training and readiness and our ability to transfer those skills to Iraqis; and learned valuable lessons in interoperability and the importance of a coalition. As one looks at predictions of the future operating environment, one cannot help but see similar requirements and missions on the horizon. Through a mission-command approach, proper leadership, adaptability, and creative thinking, success is achievable.

COL Curtis A. Buzzard currently serves as the commander of Operations Group, Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) in Germany. He served as commander of the 3rd Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 82nd Airborne Division, Fort Bragg, N.C., during the brigade's deployment to Iraq as part of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR). His previous assignments include serving as the G3, operations officer, 82nd Airborne Division; commander of the 1st Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), 3rd BCT, 82nd Airborne Division; Army Military Aide to the President, The White House; and a variety of other command and staff positions in the 82nd Airborne Division, The Old Guard, and 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. COL Buzzard earned a bachelor's degree in economics from the U.S. Military Academy (USMA) at West Point, N.Y.; a master's in military science from Marine Corps University; and a master's in public administration from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

LTC John C. White is currently attending the National War College. His previous assignments include serving as the deputy brigade commander for 3rd BCT, 82nd Airborne Division; commander of the 2nd Battalion, 505th PIR, Fort Bragg and Iraq (OIR); staff officer in Central Command J3-Current Operations (Special Activities Division); and a variety of other command and staff positions in the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions. LTC White earned a bachelor's degree in systems engineering from USMA and a master's in emergency and disaster management from Trident University International.

MAJ Jared N. Ferguson currently serves as the intelligence officer for the 3rd BCT, 82nd Airborne Division. His previous assignments include serving as a platoon leader in E Company, 102nd Military Intelligence Battalion, 2nd Infantry Division, Republic of Korea; platoon leader and company executive officer in B Company, 2nd Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, Fort Polk, La.; detachment commander of the International Student Training Detachment, Fort Benning, Ga.; intelligence officer for the 2nd Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, Fort Riley, Kan.; and brigade assistant intelligence officer, 4th BCT, 1st ID, Fort Riley. MAJ Ferguson earned a bachelor's degree in history from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, and a master's degree in international relations from Troy University.