

# A TRANSFORMED FORCE IN LEGACY CLOTHING

COLONEL BLAIR ROSS



Photos by Private First Class Brandon Aird

*A Soldier with the 173d Airborne Brigade pauses to adjust his gear during a mission in Iraq.*

The deployment and subsequent actions of the 173d Airborne Brigade during Operation Iraqi Freedom do much to demonstrate how today's legacy forces can lean forward towards the intended capabilities of the Army's Future Force. By taking advantage of evolved organizational and operational constructs, as well as exploiting U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR)-provided modular enhancements to their baseline force — all the while leveraging emerging technologies for command, control, and intelligence — the Sky Soldiers of the 173d have shown that they can project an agile, mobile combined arms team across strategic distances, ready to accomplish a broad array of battlefield tasks.

The 173d Airborne Brigade Combat Team's parachute assault and follow-on airland operations into Bashur Airfield, Iraq, have been covered in detail in other publications. On March 31, 2003 — just 96 hours after their parachute jump — the brigade task force's 2,000-plus personnel and equipment were closed into the airhead with their lodgment secure. Coordinated operations were also underway with U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) and the Kurdish elements they were working with. In the absence of the 4th Infantry Division,

which was denied overland passage through Turkey, the 173d firmly established a conventional force presence in northern Iraq. The Light Airfield Repair Package (LARP) from the brigade's organic Combat Support Company, with the assistance of the Air Force's 86th Contingency Readiness Group, had a C-17-capable expeditionary airfield fully operational, and the brigade was ready to call forward additional combat and supporting forces for expanded operations.

Over the next eight days, the brigade built supply stocks and established a workable sustainment infrastructure. The 201st Forward Support Battalion headquarters, attached to the brigade from the 1st Infantry Division, orchestrated a broad array of logistics activities. Leveraging joint and locally contracted capabilities, the 201st enhanced the lean organic sustainment package brought in to the lodgment by the 173d's 501st Forward Support Company. Exploiting a direct link to the USAREUR/21st Theater Support Command's 200th Materiel Management Center, as well as a nightly air bridge from Ramstein Air Base, Germany, the 201st generated a versatile, responsive sustainment system that kept the 173d and nearby SOF units fully supplied.

It simultaneously began building the stocks necessary to support follow-on heavy forces upon their arrival.

During this period, paratroopers from the brigade's 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry (Abn); 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry (Abn); and organic 74th Long Range Surveillance (LRS) Company conducted reconnaissance of routes and key terrain beyond the airhead and within the "Green Line" that informally demarcated the boundary between Kurdish and Iraqi-controlled territory. Throughout these operations, the brigade exploited the capabilities bestowed by a unique motorization package adopted over the previous two years.

Providing expanded organic mobility down to the rifle company level, the brigade's units were able to push well away from their perimeter without the need for extensive external transportation support.

These distributed operations placed a premium on the 173d's satellite communications capabilities. From a TSC-93 wideband multi-channel system at the brigade tactical operations center (TOC) to PRC-117s with individual LRS teams, the brigade and its subunits maintained positive control over great distances in highly compartmented, mountainous terrain.



*An Iraqi man waves to members of the 173d Airborne Brigade as they drive along a road in Iraq.*

Situational awareness for unit commanders was further improved by the Enhanced Information System (EIS), a USAREUR-fielded initiative that provides satellite-based blue force tracking as well as text message capabilities, all Global Command and Control System-Army (GCCS-A) compatible and displayed in unit TOCs via the Command and Control Personal Computer (C2PC). The ultimate challenge for the brigade's communications network came as its units began escorting convoys of nonlethal supplies — belatedly permitted access through Turkey — from the Turkey-Iraq border over a 180 kilometer ground LOC through Kurdish-controlled territory to Bashur.

The Brigade S2 section was able to exploit a range of intelligence systems as they sought to refine the picture of the dynamic enemy situation. Equipped for this mission with Joint Deployable Intelligence Support System (JDISS), Trojan Spirit, and Common Ground Station (CGS) downlinks, and supported by elements of B Company, 110th MI Battalion, (attached from the 10th Mountain Division), the brigade had unparalleled access to intelligence products provided by higher headquarters and agencies. Shortly before deploying, the brigade received two Dragon Eye UAVs, a simple-to-operate, Marine Corps-developed system that gave over-the-horizon video capabilities at the tactical level. These sources, on top of the information provided by visual reconnaissance and reporting from unit patrols and LRS teams, allowed the brigade to maintain a superb picture of what

was occurring in their area of operations.

The intelligence that this robust architecture provided fed a targeting process that the brigade used to gradually focus its assets against defending enemy forces. With dug-in Iraqi units facing Kurdish Pesh Merga elements along the Green Line, the brigade coordinated for and executed two supporting artillery raids. Using the 105mm howitzers of D Battery, 319th Field Artillery (Abn), as well as newly-fielded 120mm mortars from the infantry battalion mortar platoons, they brought these Iraqi ground units under conventional artillery fire for the first time. The same intelligence-driven targeting process later evolved to focus a broad array of assets in the execution of stability operations following the collapse of Iraqi resistance.

By April 8, adequate fuel stocks had been built to support sustained operations by heavy forces. Over the following several days, USAREUR Immediate Reaction Force (IRF) elements deployed into Bashur via C-17 and C-130, under the tactical control of the headquarters of the 1st Battalion, 63d Armor. These forces consisted of the IRF's Heavy Ready Company (HRC), the Medium Ready Company (MRC), a C130-transportable infantry company equipped with M113 APCs; as well as Combat Service Support, Scout Platoon, and 120mm Mortar Platoon Force Enhancement Modules (FEMs). The IRF, with equipment maintained at Rhine



*A Sky Soldier from the 173d Airborne Brigade watches bystanders walk by during a patrol in Iraq.*

Ordnance Barracks (next to Ramstein Air Base) and personnel provided by tactical units on a rotational basis, gives USAREUR a tailorable, rapidly deployable capability to project mobile, lethal, and well-protected forces in response to a wide range of contingency requirements.

As the 173d closed these additional forces, it prepared for anticipated combat operations in the vicinity of Kirkuk and the neighboring oil fields. Kirkuk is a key northern population center, and the oil fields and associated oil production infrastructure that stretch for many miles to the north and west of the city represent the most



*Soldiers from the 173d Airborne Brigade practice advance party dismount procedures in Bashur, Iraq.*

significant strategic asset in northern Iraq. The Iraqi forces defending Kirkuk and its surrounding areas had been subjected to increasing pressure by Kurdish forces and their advisors from the Coalition Forces Special Operations Command's Joint Special Operations Task Force-North (JSOTF-N), heavily supported by coalition air forces. After being pounded by coalition air strikes, continuously probed by the Pesh Merga, confronted with the rout of Republican Guard and other forces in the vicinity of Baghdad, and facing a building conventional force to their front, Iraqi units began coming apart by the end of the first week in April. In the face of the rapidly disintegrating Iraqi forces, the 173d accelerated preparations and initiated an attack towards Kirkuk on April 10. The Sky Soldiers were immediately confronted with a situation significantly different than what they had expected. Instead of fortified defenses, they encountered a chaotic urban environment, with civil authority entirely broken down. Kurdish resistance groups, Turkmen elements, and other factions were vying to establish themselves. Looters were starting to emerge, initially focusing on government buildings, then any place and anything of potential value. Water and electric power services were shut down, and food stocks were dwindling.

The response to these highly charged conditions presented an exacting challenge to the Soldiers and leaders of the brigade, placing a premium on the flexibility and initiative of officers and NCOs up and down the chain of command. Companies, platoons, and squads began operations in a decentralized framework as the brigade stretched its assets to protect key infrastructure and address localized problems, in an AO at approximately 10,000 square kilometers. The brigade's senior leaders relied heavily on the judgment and initiative of young officers and NCOs well honed by operations in similar environments in the Balkans. By April 14, key nodes, including the large military airfield at Kirkuk, were secure, and presence patrolling initiated.

Attached Civil Affairs teams came to the forefront, although

almost every maneuver unit was conducting civil affairs operations of one form or another. The brigade's early engagement along these lines, backed up where necessary with the overwhelming combat power of the attached M1s and M2s, suppressed a number of potential problems before they grew into crises. The few linguists who deployed with the brigade proved unable to meet the volume of requirements, and the brigade rapidly worked to acquire the support of contracted local interpreters. With an absence of open conflict, media attention soon focused on frictions between various factions and lack of order in general; the strong relationships and attention to media concerns that the brigade's leaders formed

during the embed process paid big dividends as the brigade's Soldiers told the story of their efforts in Kirkuk.

With presence required at key locations dispersed over hundreds of square kilometers, any of which might require reinforcement at short notice, the brigade again leaned on its distributed command and control and logistics infrastructure to direct and sustain its components. The brigade organized Quick Reaction Forces, enabled by both its motorized capabilities and its attached heavy assets, to mitigate the risk to widely dispersed subunits.

The brigade's leadership, from top to bottom, reoriented on the demanding tasks of reestablishing order, moderating tensions between various factions, restoring basic services, and setting the conditions for the regeneration of a stable system of government in the area. Early successes were followed by continued progress. At the time of this writing, linkup with forces arriving from the south, as well as the arrival and initiation of work by representatives from DoD and other agencies, finds the brigade on the cusp of overseeing local elections to populate a new, democratically based government.

Throughout their participation to date in Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Sky Soldiers of the 173d Airborne Brigade have demonstrated many of the attributes at the heart of the Army's Transformation concepts. The rapid deployment of an agile force tailored to a mission; leveraging of many of the highest technology C2 and intelligence systems available to ground forces today; flexible application of capabilities to a rapidly changing environment; and the reliance on the judgment and initiative of all levels of the chain of command to adapt to fluid situations all show the 173d to be much more than a vestige of the Army's past structure — it is truly a transformed force in legacy clothing.

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