

# JANABI VILLAGE

## VICTORY IN AN AL-QAIDA STRONGHOLD

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From November 2007 to April 2008, the military transition team (MiTT) from C Company, 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment (3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division) and the 1st Battalion, 23rd Brigade, 17th Iraqi Army Division successfully applied the clear-hold-build counterinsurgency approach to achieve victory in southern Baghdad's former insurgent stronghold of Janabi Village.

Located at the pre-Flood civilization of Sippar (or Sepharvaim as referenced in the Bible), the Janabi tribe served as hosts and operatives for al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) for the first five years of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Helping earn the regional moniker "Triangle of Death," the Yusifiyah corner of the triangle caused some of the worst bloodshed for coalition forces in the war.

### Our Deceptively Simple Mission

Our mission was to reconcile Janabi Village; however, the path to that goal was fraught with hazards. By increasing operational duration, recognizing the limitations of U.S. forces and working toward a host-nation solution from the onset, our combined units first reconciled and then built a lasting solution for Janabi Village.

*A Soldier with the 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment provides security during a mission near Qwesat, Iraq, November 25, 2007.*

TSgt Adrian Cadiz, USAF

### Our Complex Enemy

Several factors significantly contributed to fomenting insurgency in the Janabi Village area. A contributing cause for instability of the region was the Coalition Provisional Authority's summary disbanding of the Iraqi Army and the simultaneous Baathist purge. This, in conjunction with an epidemic of misunderstanding regarding counterinsurgency in the U.S. military, primed the region for turmoil. The Janabi Village area, as part of the greater Yusifiyah area, was a region in which mid-level officers in Saddam's favor retired. Baathist participation in local government was strong, and the Baathist purge caused the collapse of civil administration in the area. During this period of turmoil, many locals adopted the title of sheikh either by hereditary right or by status in the community, and these individuals attempted to fill the vacuum caused by the collapse of the administration. These self-appointed leaders had little positive effect and proved susceptible to insurgent recruitment. The population became dissatisfied with the liberating coalition because of the failure of essential services, and pro-insurgent sentiments developed as a result.

The 2006 rape and murder of a 14-year-old girl, along with the execution of her family and the burning of their home by U.S. Soldiers in the nearby village of Hayy al-Thobat proved to be a major catalyst allowing fundamentalist radical forces of AQI and subsequently Jaysh al-Mahdi Sh'ia extremists to dominate the region. While the rape-murder had initially been attributed to local anti-Iraqi forces by the neighbors who had responded to the fire, the news that it had in fact been perpetrated by Americans solidified the Janabi tribal allegiance to AQI in Iraq, enabling the

establishment of a full-fledged training facility in the ruins of ancient Sippar and the village.

AQI-affiliated forces, discovering the existing but rudimentary homegrown insurgent network, capitalized on their knowledge and materiel resources while providing funding, recruiting, and information operations assets. The local AQI leadership felt comfortable establishing themselves southeast of Janabi Village in the towns of Sa'id Abdullah and Sobahiya. To the southwest, the insurgents established the village of Shubayshen as a holding area for incoming foreign fighters prior to their assignment to insurgent cells in Baghdad proper. These villages, in conjunction with the Sa'id Abdullah Corridor leading east to Mahmudiyah, formed an essential part of the southern belt of the AQI logistical chain transporting materiel and personnel into Baghdad proper.

Readily available munitions, foreign and local fighters, active tribal support for the insurgency, negative image of U.S. forces due to the acts of a few rogue Soldiers and national dissatisfaction with the liberation formed a volatile mix. This ultimately resulted in two missing/captured Soldier incidents. Admittedly, the situation was far more complex. The impassioned response of both American and Iraqi forces and the locals to the incidents further escalated the situation.

The concrete affiliation of the Sunni Janabi tribe with AQI resulted in the expulsion of a portion of the Sh'ia Anbari tribe that lived in the hamlet of Abu Habba immediately to the north of the Sippar ruins. Escalating sectarian and tribal tensions ultimately climaxed when impassioned Janabis expelled Anbaris from their homes in 2005, smashing glass and destroying property in a scene akin to the Nazi Kristallnacht pogrom in November 1938; however, the Janabi incident was on a significantly smaller scale. This, combined with the affiliation of the Anbari tribe to



Jaysh al-Mahdi, created a schism between the two tribes colored by open conflict and mutual harassment. The schism grew wider as local Sh'ia migrated to Jaysh al-Mahdi-dominated downtown Yusifiyah, displacing Sunnis to outlying rural areas. This exacerbated the already dire situation with sectarian issues.

### **Dangerous Terrain**

The Janabi tribe effectively isolated itself and the training facility by emplacing a thick defensive ring of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) around the village. The improvised minefield made maneuver by friendly forces virtually impossible without heavy Engineer and Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) assets to clear roads, or assurances of safety by local leaders along with the physical presence of a guide through the net. This proved an effective deterrent to coalition and Iraqi operations in the area, leaving air-assault clearance operations as the tactical option with the most acceptable level of risk. Unfortunately, the institutional monomaniacal focus on closing with and destroying the enemy resulted in many clearance-only operations leaving no positive lasting effect on the battlespace by failing to progress to the later phases.

### **Friendly State of Affairs**

As the war progressed, the air assault clearance operation became an end instead of a means. Operational planning did not consider anything beyond first order effects. Significant assets were committed to operations, exposing Soldiers to risk with no real gains in territory or influence. U.S. forces incorrectly considered the fleeting terror instilled in the population by incoming helicopters, along with the ensuing harassment during a search for persons of interest, to have a lasting deterrent effect. Unfortunately, when used in an isolated manner, the air assault clearance operation served to dehumanize coalition forces and foment unrest among the population. Occasionally, high value individuals would be detained or caches would be recovered because of an operation; however, on the average, the payoff was not worth the investment. Soldiers across the Army fundamentally misunderstood and derided counterinsurgency and stability and support operations. These theater-wide trends characterized operations in Janabi Village as well as other areas.

### **Time and Civil Considerations**

We desired speedy resolution of the Janabi problem; however, we were willing to be patient and let the situation evolve. Attempting to resolve the situation too rapidly prevents desired effects from taking hold. Civil considerations would prove to be an important factor that we would focus on in the build phase; however, learning to navigate the human terrain proved essential.

### **Act 1 – Our Naïve Approach**

During the October relief-in-place and in early November, Charlie Company (also called Choppin' Charlie), 3-187 and 1/23/17 IA conducted three raids into Janabi Village and received enemy contact twice. Each time resulted in finding only a handful of males in the area. The combined forces could only safely enter the village on foot from an Iraqi Army battle position due to the mounted and dismounted IEDs suspected to block key avenues of approach. The handful of military age males living in the village indicated the

enemy's inability to conduct significant offensive operations. If true, this created an opportunity to conduct an extended operation to attempt to do more than simply clear the village. The Iraqi Army commander informed us that he would not risk stationing a permanent element of Iraqi soldiers in and around the village. This necessitated an unorthodox approach to the tactical problem of how to hold the ground once cleared.

We affixed the mantra "not just another air assault" to the operation that would soon be named Operation Iron Crazyhorse. We knew that continued raids in the style of the air assault clearance would not effect a permanent solution in Janabi Village, and that complete isolation of the village would never occur due to the ability of insurgents to blend into the populace. The larger area of Yusifiyah would never be secure with the dagger of the Janabi tribe at its throat just a kilometer south of the Sh'ia urban area of downtown Yusifiyah.

The challenge remained as to who would hold the ground if the Iraqi Army refused. Our first answer came instinctively — send us. We will just do it ourselves with or without our partners. The Rakkasans pride themselves as an organization willing to do the toughest of missions without a second thought. However, we must resist the temptation to follow this course of action in counterinsurgency operations. The notion that an American presence would solve a historic tactical problem should not gain credence in the course of action development phase of the military decision-making process. Despite the apparent ease and logic of the solution from the American perspective, a counterinsurgency is often counterintuitive. T.E. Lawrence's driving imperative to let the Arabs do it their own way meant that Iraqis had to be the ones to secure Janabi Village. The other element was the Iraqi Police, a 50-man Sh'ia group that performed only a fraction of its required duties. However, the Military Police platoon that served as their Police Transition Team (PTT) had recently completed a portion of a recruiting drive in the areas undergoing reconciliation.

We selected 30 of the best Iraqi Police recruits, ostensibly to prepare for a training exercise. These Sunni recruits would temporarily hold the ground with checkpoints hastily emplaced by the forward support company of 3-187 Infantry. The plan called for U.S. and Iraqi infantry forces to clear the ground with an air assault while Alpha Company, 3rd Special Troops Battalion engineers cleared the routes. Our expectation was that these police recruits would be able to hold the ground for 36-48 hours while Choppin' encouraged local leaders to emerge from hiding and join the reconciliation movement. We even held out for the possibility that the Iraqi Army commander would recant and decide to place his own forces at the checkpoints. If the checkpoints held, we would continue clearing the route with the engineers and reinforcing each checkpoint with force protection assets.

After establishing the basic maneuver plan for the clearance phase of the village, Choppin' developed a four-day plan to initiate the reconciliation between the Janabi and their many enemies. If one spoke the word "Janabi" in the Yusifiyah marketplace, schoolchildren would draw their hand across their throat to connote the murderous nature of the tribe. Although we understood the complexity of any progress in reconciliation, we sought to gauge the effects across tribal, government and Iraqi Army lines. We secured tentative buy-in from governmental leaders, who committed in theory to visiting the village once safe. The Iraqi Army and local

tribes, especially the Anbari tribe, scoffed at the possibility of reconciliation in the days leading up to the operation. For the Janabi, we needed to find the tribal leaders, whose names we knew from intelligence reporting. Unlike all of the other tribes, the Janabi leaders had no contact with other tribal leaders, Iraqi government officials, Iraqi Police, Iraqi Army, or coalition forces. We would need to entice them to emerge.

The MiTT medical officer would conduct a combined medical engagement (CME) with \$30,000 of medical supplies and medication in the village on the second day of the operation. We knew the certainty of significant enemy contact and the distinct possibility of friendly casualties, but we would have to continue with the reconciliation gestures. Each Soldier would have to suppress any emotions or personal feelings about providing aid to people actively trying to kill him. If successful, we planned to bring local Nahia government leaders and a veterinarian to the village on the fourth day of the operation to demonstrate the advantages of reconciling.

Key to success would be every Soldier's personal understanding of the operation's purpose and end state. The tone established during the conduct of each raid must indicate respect for the populace. Building mutual respect and dispelling the popular perception of Americans as the root of all evil would be crucial to the reconciliation effort. At the Soldier level, this required restraint in searching houses and interacting with males undergoing tactical questioning.

Unfortunately, we had difficulty convincing the Iraqi Army to commit to supporting anything beyond the clearance phase. In what would become routine, the Iraqi Army commander took a vacation on the eve of the operation. Although highly regarded as a strict and effective commander by both Sunni and Sh'ia tribes and by Iraqi and coalition forces, the Iraqi commander would not commit to reconciling with Janabi Village for an additional six months. His subordinates included a small but competent collection of officers to include four aggressive maneuver company commanders and a brilliant battalion operations officer. Their efforts produced intelligence, and they detained several Janabi insurgents despite their inability to contribute to the reconciliation process until so ordered.

The question of which force (U.S. or host-nation) has the lead is fundamental to every operation, discussion, and resource in a counterinsurgency. U.S. and Iraqi forces must come to a mutual understanding prior to initiating any action beyond closed doors. Experience taught us that a subtle nuance to this issue is to expect the force in the lead to change multiple times during an event. Overall responsibility comes from who is driving the action. If it is American, then the Americans with few exceptions need to take the overall lead. If it is an Iraqi Army directive, then the opposite applies. However, the shifting lead allows both friendly forces to take advantage of their respective talents, equipment, and organization. A night operation with poor illumination might require coalition forces to take the lead in the navigation to the objective phase, but a canal crossing on the final approach may dictate an Iraqi lead during the actual assault due to their lighter equipment load. Furthermore, a casualty taken during initial entry could cause the other force to assume the lead. In contrast to the rest of Choppin's battlespace, we knew from the onset that coalition forces would be in the overall lead in Janabi Village until the IA committed to the reconciliation.

The maneuver plan for Crazyhorse I called for a platoon air assault with Iraqi Army soldiers to the northeast and east of the village. This allowed the combined force to circumvent the defensive perimeter of IEDs. Simultaneously, another platoon MiTT would stage vehicles at the Iraqi battle position (BP) and infiltrate the village

through fields while carefully staying off trails or paths. The engineers, known as Task Force Iron Claw (TFIC), would use a BP to launch their route clearance of the hard surface and dirt perimeter roads with the ground assault convoy (GAC) close behind.

The fighting on Day 1 of the operation was intense but nothing more than expected. The first IED detonated against the follow-on mounted forces at a little after 0500, and TFIC conducted a controlled detonation of the last IED of Day 1 around 2330 hours. However, the only significant enemy contact occurred at 0953 when the PTT, IPs, and IP recruits received several small arms rounds from the man later known as "the Janabi Sniper." The sniper's first round struck an Iraqi policeman in the head, killing him. Choppin's elements moved to the site and led the pursuit of the two-man AQI sniper team along with a handful of MPs, IPs, and recruits.

The sniper attack precipitated the failure of the operation's goals. Although several IP recruits joined in the counterattack against the sniper, they ultimately decided that no amount of money or prospects of a future job with the Iraqi Police were worth the risk of staying in Janabi Village. Without the Iraqi recruits, police, or army committed to securing key routes into the village and after the discovery of activated IEDs between our forces, we decided to suspend the planned four days of continuous presence. Unfazed by the enemy contact, on the second day we conducted the combined medical engagement with the



SPC Luke Thornberry

*Women and children from Janabi Village wait in line to receive humanitarian aid.*

women and children that remained in the village. We passed our message of commitment to reconciling the people of Janabi Village throughout the day as the doctors treated the people. Soldiers passed out vast quantities of humanitarian aid to the families of the husbands and fathers that had tried so diligently to kill us the day before.

Little enemy contact occurred on Day 2. It is rare for coalition forces to return immediately after encountering significant enemy contact on air assault clearance operation. The enemy, used to long intervals between U.S. incursions, took the time to refit and was unprepared for the uncharacteristic return of U.S. forces. We assessed that Janabi Village was not yet ready for reconciliation — largely because AQI still psychologically dominated the village and aggressively intimidated the surrounding area. We immediately began preparing for Crazyhorse II. The enemy did as well.

One of the principles of COIN is to constantly reinvent yourself and modify your patterns if not the actual techniques themselves. Everything about Operation Crazyhorse II would have to look different to the enemy to create confusion and avoid being templated. There are only so many ways to invade a village. The use of a portable footbridge to create our own insertion point was one such technique. The bridge would play a vital role in our freedom of maneuver into the village from the north. The purpose of Operation Crazyhorse II remained the same as before — find the Janabi leadership and begin the reconciliation movement essential to the eventual hold phase. The lead element would emplace the bridge and use it to infiltrate the village. A supporting platoon would similarly infiltrate from a BP, but TFIC and the GAC would initiate clearance along a previously unused route from the north. The plan called for a larger two-platoon air assault to interdict expected insurgents fleeing out of the area shortly after the enemy reacted to the ground forces.

The Iraqi Army commander gave us mixed responses in his level of commitment to the operation. During one discussion, he would commit to permanent battle positions in the village, but the next engagement would garner a more ambiguous response. In our final meeting before the operation, we sensed a new commitment. The conditions appeared to be set, and we had more confidence in the possibility of holding the village once cleared. We would hold it with the Iraqi Army and rotate coalition platoons as we increased the force protection at each of the four planned checkpoints.

During Day 1 of the operation, TFIC encountered seven IEDs, three of which detonated causing one medical evacuation and two damaged vehicles. We discovered a fresh torture site and a significant cache in a partially destroyed portion of the al-Qaida training facility. We also found an IED factory at a potato warehouse owned by a recently killed insurgent leader and prosecuted small arms engagements. The Iraqi colonel surprisingly returned and brought an Iraqi media crew to a BP, which was as close as he would get to the village. To our disappointment, he informed us that he misunderstood our goal and would not be placing any forces in the village after the operation. In his defense, there were legitimate force protection reasons for not garrisoning forces in the village. Furthermore, the conspicuous absence of the tribal leaders was an insult to his authority as commander of the region. Other tribes, even during the deadliest of periods in the war, maintained some form of contact with coalition and Iraqi forces.

A remarkable event occurred on the second day as we began

another CME in the heart of Janabi Village. A Janabi sub-sheikh approached our element overwatching the footbridge. He introduced himself and indicated a desire to begin reconciling. Concurrent with the CME, the sub-sheikh assembled a collection of 53 men to undergo biometric testing. Confident that we had achieved as much as possible, we pulled back all forces from the village. We did not quite understand how to proceed, but we knew that the environment had changed. We decided to let the situation develop and plan no more raids or even patrols into the village until the situation developed further.

## Act 2 – Return of the Janabi

After Crazyhorse II, a group composed of displaced Janabi tribal members met with intelligence assets at a forward operating base in Baghdad regarding the possibility of American support for their return. Although dismissed by the local unit as irrelevant because the issue did not directly affect their battlespace, this group utilized the rival Haraj family of the Ghariri tribe to make first contact with our company. After the Haraj set up a meeting at a patrol base, the leaders of the Janabi group provided coalition forces with a list of 50 displaced heads of families committed to reconciliation. Many of the individuals on the list had positive association with AQI in Iraq.

We began conducting patrols throughout the Janabi tribal areas to engage locals in what was effectively door-to-door diplomacy.



Courtesy photos

*Members of the Janabi tribe await registration by the Iraqi Army at an IA compound. The hole in the roof was thought to have come from a mortar fired by the Janabi while they were working with AQI.*

This approach provided those engaged with a sense of investment in the operation and familiarized the skeptical populace with U.S. forces. Subsequent meetings with the Janabi reconciliation leaders, beginning February 9, 2008, involved representatives from the Iraqi Army Intelligence Command, participation from Choppin', representatives from the al-Baloosh sub-tribe of the Anbari, and the Janabi and Haraj leaders. We observed the initial construction of defensive checkpoints along the north side of the Janabi Run Canal on 12 February 2008, because locals had fears of foreign fighter retaliation after the tribe-initiated reconciliation.

As the negotiations with the displaced Janabi continued, we planned Operation False Prophet, a multidisciplinary operation intended to have the effect of increasing popular support for coalition forces while simultaneously marginalizing individuals providing active support to enemy forces. We achieved these preparatory effects on the battlefield by fusing aviation, indirect fire support, information operations, intelligence, and psychological operations. We kicked the operation off on 15 February 2008. Simultaneously, the first meeting with village leaders occurred at Patrol Base Yusifiyah in the Iraqi colonel's office. This served to awe the leaders as well as allow the locals to form their own opinions without negative influence. We drove the message home that we were committed to reconciling Janabi Village. We had the means to do so by force if necessary, but we strongly preferred to work through them.

The operation bluntly informed the populace of the Janabi Village area via audio broadcast of the eventual and permanent push that we would be making into the village without providing any information on the date of such an intrusion. This deliberate but counterintuitive violation of conventional wisdom served to prepare the populace psychologically for upcoming change in their village. UH-60 helicopters dropped leaflets over the village; however, due to cumbersome administrative regulations, it was infeasible to have the leaflet designs custom tailored to the target population. Despite this, feedback collected later indicated that the pamphlets were effective.

In order to evoke feelings of shock and awe among the population, we utilized our organic indirect fire support assets. Carefully planned high-explosive fire missions and Lighthouse Scout Weapons Teams contributed to this effort as well, providing terrain denial fires, overwatch, and reconnaissance. F/A-18 Super Hornet fighter aircraft provided demonstrations of air power over the Janabi Village area. By executing low-altitude, high-speed flyovers, the air assets forced all local activity to a halt as the locals fixated on the unfamiliar rushing noise followed by a streak in the sky. Following the flybys, the locals discussed the nature of the flying machine. Several fledgling Janabi Sons of Iraq were convinced that the fighters were in fact a new American helicopter. We made no effort to clarify the situation.

While fundamentally simple in overarching concept, execution of the operation required significant amounts of coordination to draw together disparate assets that rarely worked together. In contrast to the common air assault operation, we executed the operation with as many assets as we could resource. Ultimately, the



*C Company, 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment orchestrated a historic meeting between Janabi and Anbari tribes on 17 February 2008.*

combined effects of False Prophet captivated and positively influenced the population. These effects proved to be critical to the ultimate success of the hold phase in Janabi Village.

Over the course of the next several meetings, the list of Janabis to repatriate grew to approximately 300. The timing of the formation of the Janabi group combined with the serendipitous personnel strength led to the dubbing of the group as the "300" after the iconic film depiction of the battle of Thermopylae. Initially applied to the group in jest, the moniker stuck. Intelligence personnel researched the backgrounds of all 300 individuals. Discussions with the Iraqi Army resulted in a decision to watch but not immediately detain individuals identified as affiliated with or in close association to the AQI organization. This strategy facilitated the supervised return of all 300 without scaring off persons of interest and was in line with reconciliation. As with all reconciliation efforts in the region, the amnesty specifically would not forgive murder or manslaughter. Liability for previous insurgent activity resulting in the death of a civilian by any mechanism would continue. We observed displaced families beginning to return to the area as early as 16 February 2008, just one day after Operation False Prophet.

No real inter-tribal healing occurred until 17 February 2008, when we engineered a meeting of influential members of both the Sunni Janabi and Sh'ia Anbari tribes along the no-man's land of the Janabi Run Canal. While initially the tribes were antagonistic, eventually someone broke the ice under the watchful eye of the American and Iraqi troops securing the area, and members of both tribes ultimately ended up embracing and raising a Sh'ia Ashura flag together. This critical step towards inter-tribal reconciliation set the tone for later operations in Janabi Village.

Shortly thereafter with the forces of the 300, we executed Operation Crazyhorse III. The first day of the operation consisted primarily of the biometric inprocessing of the 300, combined with a route clearance by TFIC. Notably, TFIC interrogated multiple suspicious sites while only finding one IED, which had had its detonator moved so that forces moving along the road could not trigger it. Prior to the operation, the forces of the 300 had unearthed the majority of the devices and transported them to the east. Members of the 300 turned in some devices and caches to U.S. and Iraqi forces. It was clear to both U.S. and Iraqi forces that the Janabi



*Leaders from C/3-187, 1/23/17 IA and the Janabi 300 conduct the initial planning of checkpoints.*

had disarmed the village. The IA's 4th Company commander commented on the abundance of males in the village, describing it as a shocking contrast to the women and children that he had become accustomed to seeing in the village. Regrettably, IA commander called his subordinate commanders ordering them to withdraw a mere two hours after the start of the operation. This action left us in the village alone. The on-scene commander was extremely embarrassed and ashamed when he informed us of his orders to withdraw.

We pressed on, and the second day of the operation was more complex. Biometric inprocessing continued, while members of the 300 who had already been processed kept order. Lighthorse Scout Weapons Teams overflowed the site, dropping candy while simultaneously making a show of force. One local remarked, "Yesterday, your helicopters shot rockets at us. Today, they dropped candy for our children. We like the candy." The U.S. medics conducted a U.S.-only medical engagement, treating more than 300 locals. We distributed humanitarian aid, and Janabi leaders hosted a luncheon at the home of the Imam. The Imam was widely known for his anti-government rhetoric disseminated during his sermons. The day wrapped up with a 300 member leading us to a dismantled house-borne IED and several other explosive devices previously removed from the road.

The loss of Iraqi Army support forced the cancellation of the construction phase of the operation. The concept of the operation included the construction of several battle positions along the lines of communication surrounding the village; however, the inability to execute this phase necessitated Operation Crazyhorse IV. To ensure Iraqi Army commitment to the next operation, our brigade commander engaged the IA brigade commander. This engagement resulted in IA brigade commander attaching his own troops to man checkpoints in support of the next iteration.

On 15 March 2008, Zero Day of Operation Crazyhorse IV, 1/23/17 IA brought the majority of the 300 to Patrol Base Yusifiyah in order to document them and initiate the Government of Iraq reconciliation paperwork. This process went smoothly under the control of the Iraqi Army. The act of bringing the 300 to the patrol base forced criminals to face the specter of detention. Despite the biometric inprocessing conducted during Operation Crazyhorse III, none of the 300 had legally reconciled. The leap of faith required in trusting that Iraqi forces would not arrest them demonstrated their personal commitment to reconciliation. The 300 leadership largely facilitated this, facing a colossal effort in coordinating the event. In Janabi Village, an informant from the 300 led us to five cache and IED locations in the ancient ruins of Sippar.

Day one involved TFIC conducting route clearance and the construction of two battle positions. The placement and design of the battle positions were a collaborative effort between the 300, the Iraqi Army, and coalition forces. This marked the first time IA commander actually visited the village one kilometer from the patrol base. The following day continued with much of the same, and both days passed without significant incident. The third day built upon the previous two by continuing development of the battle positions and engaging the Anbari tribe about repatriation. The Anbari indicated interest in re-inhabiting their shattered homes; however, they wanted to ensure that the security situation had indeed stabilized and that intertribal friction would be minimal.

### **Act 3 – Maintaining Forward Momentum**

With the hold phase essentially complete yet ongoing, we rapidly began to move into the build phase. On 24 March, the Task Force 3-187 IN civil-military operations officer coordinated for agents from Relief International to visit the decimated Anbari hamlet in Abu Habba. Unfortunately, due to the lack of inhabitants and a broken promise on the part of the sheikh to disseminate information, few Anbari were present to receive the patrol. The tribe later took responsibility for the error. The representatives briefly listened to the Anbari tales of woe; however, they decided that the conditions were not right to begin conflict mediation. Despite this mishap, the patrol demonstrated our commitment to and support for reconciliation and reconstruction. Following this, we launched a project to reopen the Janabi School, continued to develop relationships with the population, and continued to facilitate sectarian healing through reconstruction of the Sa'id Abdullah Shrine, a Sh'ia holy site destroyed by AQI in 2005.

### **Retrospective**

Our resolution of the Janabi question flipped the existing paradigm on its head by winning local support and holding the area with allied partisans first, then building checkpoints for host nation military assets to secure the ground further. This is in contrast to the general method of clearing, leaving U.S. forces in sector, building checkpoints for host-nation forces, and then

attempting to win the support of the population. We committed to reconciling a tribe considered a lost cause, and by persistently trying new approaches to the situation, we learned enough to develop a resolution. Our experience in Janabi Village taught us that persistence in achieving our long-term goal, understanding the dynamics of the situation, using conventional assets in unconventional ways, and using small units to engage the populace regularly proved essential.

At the close of each operation, we immediately injected the lessons learned into the mission planning cycle for the ensuing operation. Each built upon the other, and we executed them as the human terrain presented favorable conditions. The three-hour air assault has its place as a disruption tool; however, it has limited long-term effects regardless of its size. Although our early operations failed to achieve our intended end-state, every operation was an attempt to execute all three phases of clear-hold-build. We learned that the phases need not be sequential, but can deliberately overlap in support of one coherent end-state.

Progress gained within the scope of one phase contributes to the success of the others, and planners must consider interweaving all three “threads” into each operation. All too often, U.S. focus is exclusively on clearance, leaving hold and build for later operations. This prevents the realization of a lasting solution because subsequent hold and build operations receive less attention than the familiar clear phase. Clearance operations fit clearly into the doctrinal missions of combat arms forces; however, both historically and likely in the future, these same forces are required to conduct counterinsurgency operations. It is necessary to recognize when the mission has evolved beyond simple clearance, and reconcile the mission with COIN doctrine.

Our approach had both pros and cons; however, given the manner in which events unfolded this approach required the least American manipulation. U.S. combat arms forces only begrudgingly use diplomatic methods of accomplishing goals; however, a native

solution to a native problem is the most effective, if not necessarily the easiest or most logical by Western standards. Furthermore, taking a diplomatic and reconciliatory route takes time to produce results. Americans are all too willing to move in and take an area by force. Large-scale operations, while impressive on paper, in and of themselves have limited positive effect on the battlefield. Yet force protection requirements, risk-aversion, and desire for creature comforts combine to restrict the effectiveness of American forces in holding territory. Therefore, a locally based solution is essential.

The local population has a vested self-interest in their own security and prosperity. When the epiphany that resistance is counter to those interests occurs to the populace, friendly forces may then hold ground with marginal active resistance. However, if the population is not prepared to receive the forces, they will perceive the invasion of their territory by friendly forces as a violation of those interests. Proper assessment and management of popular opinion is essential to the success of the hold phase, and “build-style” operations significantly contribute to this.

President Theodore Roosevelt once quoted a West African proverb: “Tread softly but carry a big stick; you will go far.” While he was commenting on foreign policy, the comment directly applies to the execution of counterinsurgency operations. Focusing on securing the population (hold) and winning their support (build), instead of focusing on capturing insurgents (clear), allows for local emotional investment in the solution. Fundamental to accomplishing this is the use of the partnership with host-nation forces, and engagement and collaboration with indigenous leaders. As we learned, U.S. forces need to continually re-evaluate their position, shed their preconceived notions, truly accept and engage their host-nation partners, and value patience and flexibility above all else.

**Authors’ Note:** The men of Choppin’ Charlie merely stood on the shoulders of the valiant U.S. and Iraqi Soldiers that bought each Yusifiyah battle position with blood and fire. We have the deepest respect and admiration for these units that created the conditions for the eventual victory. We remain humbled by their sacrifices and bravery and wish that they could have tasted the historic success in the final Operation Iron Crazyhorse.

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*Soldiers from C/3-187 and 1/23/17 IA lead Anbari tribal members in a reconnaissance of their destroyed homes.*