

The Business We've Chosen

Michael P. Noonan

May 3, 2006 is the day when my interest in Iraq moved from the analytical to the personal. I had known friends who served or were serving in Iraq, but on that day I found out I would be joining them. Nine days later I arrived at Ft. Hood, Texas, to begin preparations to deploy.

As a U.S. Army Reserve captain, I had of course known for years that deployment to either Iraq or Afghanistan was a possibility and, as time passed, an inevitability. Still, expectations can't rival experience. The process of trading in an office at a think tank for an M4 assault rifle, individual body armor and a helmet is surreal. What follows is part of my continuing effort to translate the surreal back into a new stateside reality, hopefully to make sense of that 14-month experience. At the same time, I hope to provide onlookers with some insight about the war itself, not on the high strategic level, but at the level of sand, rocks and dried blood that typifies the Iraq that I saw, and that I know.

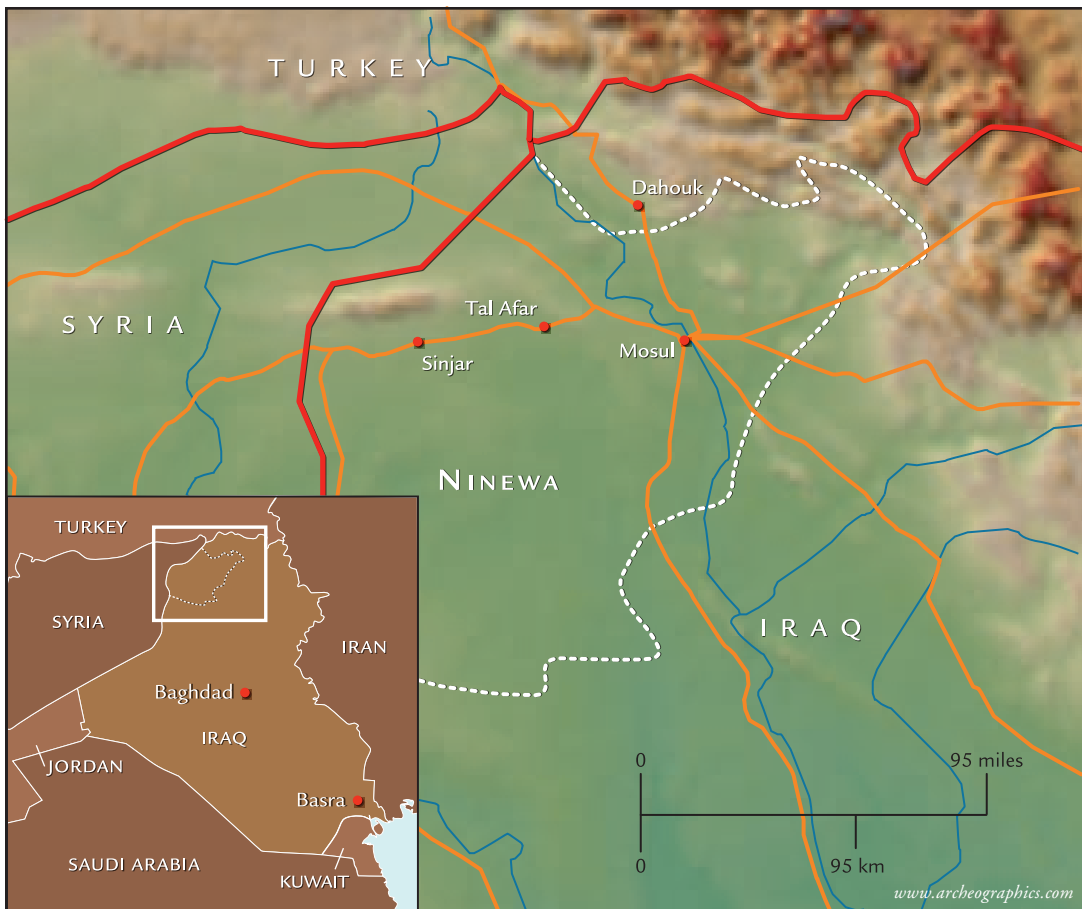
Ninewa

Shortly after arriving at Ft. Hood, I learned I would be serving on an 11-man Military Transition Team (MiTT) embedded with an

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Iraqi Army (IA) light infantry battalion. In early July 2006, after completing pre-deployment training in Texas and follow-on training in Kuwait and Iraq, my team arrived with a unit from the 1st Brigade of the 3rd Iraqi Army Division at a location outside the northern city of Tal Afar, in western Ninewa province.

Approximately forty miles west of Mosul, forty miles southwest of the Iraqi-Syrian border, and fifty miles south of Turkey, Tal Afar sits in a saddle between two ridgelines along the Mosul-Sinjar highway. When you walk through the smaller villages and take in the surrounding hills and plains, you get the feeling that, aside from the occasional modern artifact like a satellite dish, the view has not changed much since Jonah's famous fish-detoured journey to Ninevah (located on the east side of present-day Mosul) some time ago. Wheat fields, shepherds and their flocks of sheep are everywhere; for nine months of the year the palette is made up of hazy golds, soft gray greens, all set in a sea of dark ochre, but the emerald greens of the other three months are best described as dreamlike. While not "as hot" as other parts of Iraq or Kuwait, northern Iraq still features temperatures that range more than a hundred degrees Fahrenheit, from 120-plus degrees in the summer to the low- to mid-20s in the winter. Frequent summer sandstorms, mud-producing heavy autumn and winter rains and the occasional snowfall make Ninewa a war zone conducive to both cursing and zoning out. With all due respect to W.C. Fields, there are definitely worse places to live than Philadelphia.



Demographically, the greater Tal Afar area is an interesting blend. Ninewa province sits along the seam between the Sunni Arab areas of western Iraq and the Kurdish region of northern Iraq. Interspersed throughout those groups are sizeable populations of Turkomen (some Sunni and some Shi'a Muslims) and Yezidi (followers of a pre-Islamic religion with syncretic beliefs). Not surprisingly, this can be a volatile mix, and the Saddam Hussein era made matters even worse. In order to ensure control of the strategic Mosul-Sinjar highway, the Ba'athi regime settled and supported former Turkomen soldiers in the northern half of Tal Afar and turned a blind eye to the arrival of Wahhabi clerics in the city.

The security environment of the province, while not as severe as Baghdad or Diyala Province, is tenuous. Various insurgent groups comprised of foreign jihadists, Iraqi Islamists, Turkomen separatists and Ba'athi dead-enders are all active. Like many other parts of Iraq, roadside improvised explosive devices (IEDs), vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDs) and person-

borne IEDs (PBIEDs) are the preferred means of attack. Sometimes these devices are directed against U.S. forces, other times against Iraqi security forces, and not infrequently solely against purely civilian targets such as markets.

In the city of Tal Afar, for instance, a fairly common tactic for VBIED attacks is the use of the "lottery" recruitment method. Insurgents confront an individual and inform him that he can either detonate an explosive device against an assigned target, or else both he and his family will be killed. Unfortunately, this recruitment method tends to be quite effective, and it makes counterinsurgency work a lot more challenging. What does one do with an attacker of such origin if one catches him?

Mortar, rocket and small-arms attacks, ranging from complex ambushes to simple assaults, are also not uncommon. And it's rarely clear who the enemy is. Aside from insurgents, criminals and smugglers take advantage of the general instability for their own purposes. It's the kind of place where encountering the occasional poisonous snake can be considered a welcome relief.

Working with the IA

The first thing one notices about the structure and organization of the IA are its British influences. In the U.S. Army, captains command companies, with first sergeants as the top non-commissioned officer; in the IA, majors command those formations, with a sergeant major as the top NCO. There is also much greater social distance between officers and enlisted ranks. Officers have their own mess hall, and it is common for the battalion commander and his staff to have individual soldiers assigned to them who handle everything from personal protection to laundry to making amazingly sweet tea (*chai*, or “Iraqi whiskey”, as our battalion commander referred to it).

By organizational tables, an Iraqi light infantry battalion like the one I served with is comprised of four “line” rifle companies, a weapons company and a headquarters/services company, with a total strength of 851 personnel. Few IA battalions, however, are at full strength. Like the U.S. Army, the IA is a volunteer force. Yet unlike the U.S. Army, enlisted soldiers do not have contracts, so they may leave at any time. Compounding this problem is the fact that roughly a quarter of the battalion is on leave at any time during the month. This poses retention issues, as it costs an Iraqi private (*jundee*) from the south roughly half his pay (more than 200,000 Iraqi dinar) just to travel roundtrip to Basra, and the journey is fraught with danger at any price. Even while home, depending on the area, many soldiers hide the fact that they are in the IA. Many never return.

The lack of economic opportunities in Iraq, however, is a powerful incentive for service. Over half of the enlisted soldiers of the battalion I served with were Shi’a Arabs from southern Iraq, where unemployment is very high. (To round out the ethnic makeup of the battalion, roughly a third of the soldiers were Kurds and the remaining men were Sunni Arabs and Yezidi.)

The battalion’s missions consisted mainly of performing “cordon-and-search” or “cordon-and-knock” operations, conducting raids, patrolling, and manning traffic control points. Tactically, the battalion’s performance correlated highly with whether the battalion com-

mander was present or on leave. When the commander, a very brave Kurdish officer, was present, the battalion generally performed well; when he wasn’t present, his executive officer, a Shi’a Arab from Diyala, was much less aggressive in the field and a downright bully in garrison. (This is not a statement on the general martial prowess of Kurds or Arabs. The battalion had many fine Arab officers and soldiers.) The XO enjoyed theatrics. If he knew he was completely safe, he would act brave. If he was in garrison and did not think my team was watching him, he would try to “use power” on detainees—his euphemism for getting rough with prisoners. Outside our base, however, his genuinely cowardly colors would shine forth in deep and bright yellows.

On one occasion when the battalion commander was on leave, one of the battalion’s companies came under a heavy insurgent attack in a remote village. The XO’s preference was to allow the “situation to develop”, a euphemism for waiting for the insurgents to complete their attack and disperse. When the attack persisted and he still failed to act, my team chief initiated communications up the MiTT chain of command. This message passed across to Iraqi channels and eventually resulted in the XO being given a direct order to dispatch a quick reaction force (QRF) to help his unit in combat. Elements of my team accompanied the QRF.

Upon arrival we took a lot of enemy small arms fire and found several IEDs and VBIEDs in the town. Ever the skittish commander, the XO waited for an opportune moment and then “re-tasked” his QRF element, leaving his company in the village and abandoning my team’s two vehicles. Thankfully, other coalition units had arrived and the tactical situation in the village returned to normal, such as it is. Over the course of the operation, the IA and U.S. units disarmed the IEDs, uncovered a weapons cache, and killed or captured numerous insurgents.

What happened to the XO? Not a thing. Personal and political connections at the Ministry of Defense always seemed to insulate him. Every month, my team chief would report on this man’s unworthiness for leadership responsibilities. Every month, nothing happened.

Indeed, more than nothing happened: Before long he was selected for promotion to lieutenant colonel.

Other problems were also evident in the IA. Corruption is pervasive. In the winter, for instance, the battalion had very little fuel, despite the fact that our U.S. headquarters section assured us that the IA had plenty of fuel vouchers. These vouchers, according to officers in the battalion, were changing hands in the Kurdish city of Dahouk; officers within the division were pocketing cash for fuel that obviously never made it to the units. One can get a sense of the kind of payday these officers receive when one considers that gasoline goes for \$7 per gallon and tens of thousands of gallons are involved. Then there were the “ghost soldiers”, Iraqi warriors who existed only on IA unit manning rosters, but whose real pay would arrive monthly only to disappear into some officer’s pockets. At the Ministry of Defense itself,

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corruption problems were even more rampant. Officers and enlisted soldiers both complained to us that they had been asked to pay bribes to join the IA, to have “pay problems” fixed, or to be promoted.

All is not gloomy, however. The IA can run very efficient, intelligence-driven operations. On more than one occasion, I witnessed an informant cell phone call turn into a successful operation in less than half an hour. Like most things in Iraq, rapport and personal relationships are key. If a battalion operates in an area for a long enough time, they can effectively build the ties and develop the institutional memories necessary for successful counterinsurgency operations. In this respect, they are more capable than most U.S. military units, which just don’t have the local knowledge or the time between rotations to build the ties that bind up insurgencies.

The purpose of the MiTTs is to advise IA units on how to conduct staff operations and perform Coalition support activities. The

team also provides liaison capability to the IA for the delivery of Coalition effects, such as attack aviation support. This work walks a fine line between building rapport with one’s Iraqi counterparts and dealing with the U.S. units that have operational control over U.S. military assets and personnel. Iraqi expectations of the support they need and the Coalition unit’s expectations of what Iraqi forces should be able to do on their own are often maddeningly at odds—and the MiTT is caught in-between. We want to wean the Iraqi forces off outside help as soon as possible—to “take off the training wheels.” But we don’t want them killed in such numbers that unit cohesion and morale are destroyed. Like most things in war, each decision point turns on prudential judgment.

That isn’t the only challenge for the MiTTs. In the eyes of certain elements of the U.S. military, living with and working closely with the IA already makes one suspect. As one soldier told a member of my team, we “lived on the other side of the fence” from the Coalition because we were too

close to the Iraqis. This struck us as rather petty. In fact, in our area of operations we lived on an Iraqi base with few amenities. We assuredly did not roll out from a luxurious American forward-operating base. Thankfully General David Petraeus’ new strategy takes U.S. troops away from the large FOBs and deploys them to smaller combat outposts.

Nevertheless, as welcome as that step may be, there will still be problems if we cannot uproot the “Conan the Barbarian” mentality among some U.S. troops. In the 1982 film *Conan the Barbarian*, a Ghengis Khan-like general asks one of his charges, “What is best in life?” When he is dissatisfied with that individual’s answer, he turns to Conan, who responds without missing a beat: “To crush your enemies, to see them driven before you, and to hear the lamentation of the women.” If one subtracts the last clause from Conan’s assertion, one will have described the philosophy of many people in U.S. military uniform. Too many think their job in Iraq is to crush the enemy and see them driven before them. In a



An Iraqi soldier and a civilian with a member of a U.S. Military Transition Team

counterinsurgency environment, that sort of hyper-kinetic approach creates enemies faster than it can kill them.

Economy of Force

Colonel Stephen Twitty, the commander of the 4th Brigade Combat Team of the 1st Cavalry Division and the ranking officer responsible for Ninewa province, recently announced that U.S. units might be able to leave that area by December. The province, particularly its western half, is currently an economy-of-force U.S. military operation. That's military-talk for "our troops are spread thin." Fortunately, the 2nd (Mosul) and 3rd IA Divisions and the Iraqi National Police have stepped up to the plate. Those formations are developing capabilities, such as explosive ordnance disposal, of which only the United States was capable up until a few months ago. However, if these forces ultimately prove unable to handle the security environment after U.S. forces depart, the situation will deteriorate into another round of "whack-a-mole" operations requiring us yet again to send robust forces to dislodge large-scale, consolidat-

ed insurgent positions in cities like Tal Afar or Mosul.

My own 14-month stint makes me cautiously optimistic that Colonel Twitty's prediction may come to pass. Then again, many have been cautiously optimistic about supposed turning points in Iraq that never quite turned. Still, if the new effectiveness of the 2nd and 3rd IA Divisions are harbingers of what is to come in other areas of Iraq, then perhaps the U.S. military can concentrate its forces to better overall effect. At the end of the day though, we might find that too much time has been frittered away on the domestic political clock, that current gains are too little, too late in the face of an on-rushing election season.

In less than a week in late June I went from being in a combat zone to being back in Philadelphia with my beloved wife, the Phillies, cheesesteaks and water ice. A quasi-fishbowl effect soon set in with everyone asking me what is happening "over there" and what should be done about it. As I continue to evaluate my experience and put it into perspective, I'm reminded of Hyman Roth's words to Michael Corleone in *The Godfather: Part II*: "This is the business we've chosen." 🌐