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U.S. ARMY EUROPE'S 'DAGGER BRIGADE' GETS CREDIT FOR INCREASED SECURITY, RESTORATION OF SERVICES IN BAGHDAD

By Sgt. James P. Hunter

2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division Public Affairs Office

BAGHDAD, Iraq -- "Thirty-two hundred years of invaders and oppression in this land," said Maj. Timothy E. Collier, civil affairs officer for the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division. "From Genghis Khan on, this part of the world has been invaded time and time again."



CPL BEN WASHBURN

Staff Sgt. Kyle Scott of U.S. Army Europe's Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, smiles widely as he and his fellow Soldiers packed their gear Oct. 28 for their return home to Schweinfurt, Germany, after a 15-month deployment in Iraq. The 1-18th troops and their fellow Soldiers of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, are credited with making major strides in bringing security and normalcy back to the areas of Baghdad for which the brigade was responsible.

This area has been devastated by years of destruction. Today, while coalition forces have spent nearly five years trying to reconstruct the nation and revitalize the Iraqi government, terrorists and insurgents have wreaked havoc throughout the area, preventing the government, economy and people from moving forward.

To achieve the goal of a stable, self-controlled government and economy, coalition forces have also had to weed out these destructive forces.

The Soldiers of U.S. Army Europe's 2nd Brigade

Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division -- the "Dagger Brigade" -- have been a key part of those efforts. For more than a year, "Dagger" Soldiers have conducted counter-

insurgency operations such as joint patrols, cordon-and-search operations, house-clearing, and cordon-and-knock missions to take out insurgent forces.

“When I look at the history of this brigade combat team in northwest Baghdad from February of this year to September of this year, it’s what I label as the 'Battle for northwest Baghdad'... we saw some very high rates of violence,” said Col. J.B. Burton, the "Dagger Brigade" commander.

Even before its fight to control northwest Baghdad began, "Dagger" placed joint security stations in neighborhoods and established safe neighborhoods with gated communities with controlled entry and exit points, Burton said.

The JSSs are patrol bases within Iraqi communities from which U.S. and Iraqi security forces conduct combat and dismounted presence patrols to get face-to-face with the Iraqi people, said 1st Lt. Kurtis Larson, executive officer for Company B, 2nd Squadron, 12th Cavalry.

In March, when the coalition "surge" in Baghdad began, there was a significant increase in violent indicators, especially in May and June, Burton said.

He attributes that to "Dagger" Soldiers, Iraqi security forces and local volunteers being more active on the battlefield in areas the enemy was determined to control.

“A lot of people sacrificed (their lives) to get this city where it is right now,” said Collier.

“The single most dramatic thing that has happened I think is what we call the concerned local citizens or the Ameriyah freedom fighters or the Ghazaliyan Guardians or some of the Sunni citizens groups -- a lot of them former al-Qaeda, former anti-coalition fighters -- that have decided that nothing good is coming of al-Qaeda,” Collier said, “and nothing good is coming of further extremism and violence after four-and-a-half, five years. They’ve seen enough death and destruction.”

These volunteers stepped up and paved the way for economic growth, volunteering themselves for the greater good by providing safety, justice, peace and order to their friends and neighbors, Collier said.

“Nobody wants to see their neighbor suffer,” he said.

But coalition efforts did not focus solely on insurgent forces. As the bad guys were being pushed out, efforts to improve essential services for the Iraqi people were stepped up as well.

Baghdad is an ancient city, with its municipal services laid in between the 1950s and 1970s that must be serviced and repaired to continue working.

“Essential services absolutely cannot go forward unless the municipal workers can go across the city and do their jobs,” said Collier. “A trash collector or utility repair guy isn’t going to go into a hostile war zone, because he’s not trained as a Soldier. Unless there is security in an area, the trash doesn’t get picked up; the sewer lines don’t get fixed; the water lines don’t get fixed; the electrical lines don’t get repaired -- then the neighborhood falls apart.”

In July, electricity, previously available one to two hours a day, increased to six to eight hours a day. The Dora Thermal Power Plant brought all its boilers on line, and al-Qaeda is no longer targeting the high-tension electrical cables coming into the city. Repairs are proceeding on all the substations and transformers, and a lot of that is thanks to increased security, Collier said.

With the "Dagger Brigade's" deployment on its final leg, it will be up to the Soldiers of the 2nd BCT, 101st Airborne to continue the success of the USAREUR troops who preceded them.

“So now we’ve hit a turning point. Now (2nd BCT, 101st Airborne) is taking over where it’s pretty critical,” said Maj. Henry Delacruz, "Dagger Brigade" civil affairs officer. “The (government of Iraq) has got to take advantage of the improved security and help provide essential services (and) help create employment through various means, whether through essential services or through economic needs.

“This is the hard part. As Soldiers, we know how to fight. We know how to find the bad guys. The hard part is this nation-building piece. It’s helping facilitate governance in an area. It’s tough trying to revitalize the northwest Baghdad economy, and it’s tough trying to revitalize essential services, especially something that has been broken for the last three, four or five years.”

“If we could get 20 hours of electrical services across the city, that would be immense. You would see a greater boom of prosperity, and people able to educate themselves,” Collier said. “The industry can get back on their feet much easier.”

The first steps, getting essential services and physical structures up and markets and stores running again, seems to be taking shape, Collier said. Improving security sparked a dramatic turn-around; eight of 10 markets here are open, and 90 percent of the shops in them are operational.

“The next piece is building some of the economic structures that nations and economies have,” said Collier. “People need money to start a business.”

Iraqis need to financial institutions in which to deposit money, get loans, write business plans and manage their money based on Islamic traditions, he added. The third step is the continual expansion of markets and building associations and increasing the amount of business that goes through the neighborhoods.

As all these trends move forward, the Iraqi government needs to play a larger role in securing Iraq's future. There is a huge gap between the government and the people of Iraq, said Collier.

"We want to bring the government to the people," he continued. "We want to broker a relationship between the government and the people."



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