

Inside the Surge: 1-5 Cavalry in Ameriyah

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I had the privilege of commanding the 1st Battalion, 5th US Cavalry in Ameriyah from November 2006 until January of 2008. I have watched a debate on our actions unfold since last summer as we started having success in Ameriyah, but have refrained from jumping into the middle of it up to now. I acknowledge that I am not an unbiased observer, which is why I have avoided this debate. However, since the operations of 1-5 CAV under my command have become a part of the discussion I believe it is time that I jump in and try to clarify some of the facts about our operations and also offer some thoughts.

I start by emphasizing that I appreciate the efforts of 8-10 CAV and the other units in Baghdad that preceded us. My comments are in no way intended to question their dedication or valor, nor suggest that they did not conduct COIN operations. I fully appreciate the sacrifices made by Col. Gian Gentile and his battalion. However, I disagree with Gian's position on the importance of the surge and the change in operational focus that accompanied it.

So that everyone knows where I stand up front I offer the following points:

- The factors that led to the drop in violence are extremely complex. It is an oversimplification to say that the surge itself led to the drop in violence. However, on the other hand it is a gross oversimplification that it was a result of paying off Sunni militia.
- The surge in troops was invaluable to help us defeat al-Qaeda and stop the advance of JAM in northwest Baghdad.
- The surge was only as good as the operational design that went along with it. The change in focus from transitioning security to the Iraqi Security Forces to protecting the populace was also a major part of the success last year.
- While units before us were conducting COIN operations we did make fundamental changes in how we conducted COIN based upon the change in operational design. These included changes in tactics at the patrol level, but probably more important a concerted effort at battalion and brigade levels to increase our engagements with the populace and leadership within the communities. Some of these changes we implemented early, some we made as we adapted to the changing situation.

When we arrived in Iraq in October 2006, the focus of the operational concept was transition to the Iraqi Security Forces. Gen Casey briefed us at the COIN Academy in Taji that we would be transitioning the lead for security in Baghdad to the ISF by summer 2007 while our forces would provide tactical overwatch over these security forces. While this sounded great, we quickly realized once we got to Baghdad that this was an unrealistic goal and did not take into account the increase in sectarian focused violence we were seeing on the streets. This strategy also failed

to take into account the sectarian agenda of elements within the government itself to include the security forces.

We soon shifted our focus from transition to protecting the populace. I cannot recall exactly how this shift occurred, but it started before Gen Petraeus' arrival and was definitely influenced by what we were hearing and reading. It would be a mistake to understate the importance of this shift. While I am sure units were doing what they could to protect the populace, the focus upon our arrival was on transition. The transition focus seemed to be more interested in getting out of Iraq as quickly as possible regardless of events on the ground based upon the premise that our presence was the cause of much of the violence we were seeing. I believe this was a false premise based on a poor understanding of the dynamics playing out in the political and social infrastructure within Iraq. This strategy also ignored our moral responsibility as an Army and as a nation that we have for rebuilding what we tore apart.

By shifting our focus to protection of the population we made a distinct change in our understanding of the center of gravity of this fight. With this understanding we came to one quick conclusion: we were doing a poor job in protecting the populace. The shift in focus led to a subsequent shift in our tactics, techniques and procedures that placed greater emphasis on getting into the community and engaging the populace to a greater degree at all levels. The changes in TTP included the establishment of JSS and COPs, more focus on dismounted operations, increased efforts in getting into the social and political fabric of the community, establishing walls to protect markets and channel insurgent movement, increased cooperation and partnership with the Iraqi Security Forces to name just a few.

Initially at the brigade level it seemed like we were not working together and had no common vision of where we were going. Battalions were conducting independent operations with little to no coordination between adjacent units. I have to give a lot of credit to Col. J.B. Burton and the staff of the 2nd BDE, 1st ID which served as our higher HQ during most of our deployment. Col Burton and his staff developed a campaign plan which provided a simple yet effective vision for northwest Baghdad. Col Burton sought to stop Shia extremist expansion while attacking al-Qaeda and its ability to conduct operations. Burton then allowed his subordinate commanders maximum latitude to achieve his vision and provided the needed top cover to allow us to push the envelope. This support became crucial when the Sons of Iraq came forward in Ameriyah.

At the battalion level we developed a campaign plan with a vision for the way ahead. Initially this campaign plan was focused on Ameriyah and Khadra, but we had to readjust within a few weeks to include the entire Mansour Security District which we took over in mid-January. We developed this plan across five lines of effort: security, infrastructure, governance, economic development, and information operations. Looking back our first efforts at this were pretty weak. We readjusted this framework on several occasions to include a major overhaul when the Sons of Iraq came forward and another when we had pushed al-Qaeda out of Ameriyah and began to focus more and more on civil projects.

This last campaign plan we developed was the most comprehensive look we made at our problem set. I drew on my operational planning experience at Combined Forces Command in Korea and did my own Political, Military, Economic, Infrastructure, Social and Information

analysis within our area of operations. We then took each line of effort, defined it for our own area, established goals and then established steps to achieve those goals. We also put a mark on the calendar for when we intended to achieve each task. We spent the most time on developing our Information Operations line of effort with three separate planning sessions for a total of 16 hours. We identified our various target audiences to include the local population, local civil leadership, the Sons of Iraq, the Iraqi Army, the Iraqi Government, our higher headquarters, our Soldiers, the press and the American people. Once we identified the target audiences we identified what their interests were and what we wanted from them. We then developed our messages and how we would convey them. The bulk of this planning fell on the shoulders of my S3, MAJ Chip Daniels, and my XO, MAJ Chris Rogers, two extremely talented officers. Our intent was to hand over a blue print for 4-10 CAV who followed us in Ameriyah to use for the first sixty days they were in country.

We also made some adjustments at the small unit level. One of the first changes I implemented was in the use of Small Kill Teams (SKT). I read several debriefs that described the impact on the population of occupying their homes to establish these ambushes for short periods of time. I believe these operations were undermining our efforts at gaining the trust of the local population and stopped them immediately. Other changes I made were to implement more active counter-sniper measures and increasing the amount of dismounted patrolling.

We were challenged from the start with trying to conduct operations throughout the entire Mansour Security District which stretches from Camp Liberty to the International Zone. We simply did not have the combat power to protect the population nor partner with the Iraqi Security Forces. The ISF for their part were not a cohesive organization and lacked direction. When JAM attacked into Hurriyah in Jan 07 we couldn't do anything and the IA chose not to do anything. Instead, we watched helplessly as thousands of Sunnis were forced out of their homes getting pushed into Mansour. I became increasingly frustrated with our inability to control the ground. For a while many of us were debating the value of establishing combat outposts in order to gain better control of the situation. I even remember Gen Casey asking if I had considered this when he visited Ameriyah shortly before he departed Iraq.

Col Burton encouraged us in getting outposts set up and the first two were set up in Ghazaliyah by 2-12 CAV commanded by Lt. Col. Jim Nicholas, and one we set up in the middle of the neighborhood of al-Jamia in central Mansour. I decided to put my HQ out as our first COP which we put into an old wedding hall which was at the time occupied by an IA company. While the conditions were a bit Spartan the value of this site proved itself quickly. First, we had a better understanding of what was going on in al-Jamia. Second, we began to get an increase in intelligence from the people. Third, we got to know the community better and started developing relationships at all levels. I believe I was able to get a better feel for the fight and it was also the only way we could communicate with all of our patrols from one end of our AO to another. Soon thereafter we established two more outposts with one in Adl and another at a police station in Khadra. Both of these locations served the same effect as the one in al-Jamia. The one in Adl was crucial for keeping an eye on the sectarian flashpoint between Adl and Hurriyah.

The establishment of the COPs served to disrupt the freedom of movement of both JAM and AQI, but we were still too thin. Another way we disrupted their movements was the

establishment of walls to channel their movement. Col Burton had tasked us to conduct daily checkpoint operations with the ISF in our area. I felt like this was an exercise in futility since the checkpoints were too easily bypassed. I spent two days in personal reconnaissance to find bypasses of these checkpoints from Abu Ghraib up to central Baghdad. It was all too easy. I briefed this at a nightly update with the intent of cutting down on our requirement, but Col Burton and his S3, Lt. Col. Brynt Parmeter, saw an opportunity. Instead of stopping our requirement to conduct combined checkpoint operations they came up with a plan to emplace barriers throughout northwest Baghdad starting with the main highway south of Ghazaliyah and then cordoning off Ameriyah and Khadra. While we already had walls around Ameriyah they were not very effective. We were engaged in a running battle with AQI as they tried to establish holes in the barriers while we tried to keep them intact. This new barrier system was much more effective by using larger barriers and pulling them onto the main roads away from homes. The barriers were then complemented with heavily defended entry control points to check all people coming into Ameriyah. The combination of barriers and COPs was limiting the freedom that AQI used to have throughout the community especially in an area around what we called the catcher's mitt consisting of southern Ghazaliya, Khadra and Ameriyah. AQI needed to keep their LOCs flowing through this area so these neighborhoods became key terrain.

We also focused more effort on integrating our operations with the ISF. 8-10 CAV was conducting a weekly ISF synchronization meeting with the MiTT and S3 from the IA battalion in attendance. At times reps from the NP and IP would also attend. I thought this was a good idea, but did not go far enough. We restructured the meeting to include the commanders and staff down to company level for both our partnered IA BN and us. We then included the battalion commanders and operations officers of the other battalions we were partnered with throughout Mansour. The intent was to integrate, coordinate and synchronize our operations and also to serve as a training tool to improve the staff processes of our partners. It was amazing to watch their capabilities grow with the assistance of the MiTT (under MAJ Andy Kahmann) especially in the areas of IPB and targeting. When Abu Abed and the Sons of Iraq came forward we also included him and his staff. The quality of intel we received improved dramatically.

One of the best efforts at ISF integration occurred during Operation Arrowhead Strike 9. While I generally felt that this clearing operation was ineffective, it served as a great tool to train the leadership of the 6th IA Div. Col Burton encouraged the Div Commander to conduct daily updates for these operations where Col Burton would call upon his subordinate commanders to brief their on-going operations and eventually got the IA commanders to do the same. Soon the IA was taking more responsibility for the planning of the operations and growing in competence and confidence.

We also tried to get more involved in the community. When we arrived only the CA officer was going to the Mansour District Advisory Council meetings. I did not even know they had a weekly DAC security meeting. When we found out I made it my weekly habit to attend the DAC's security and reconstruction meetings as well as the main DAC meeting. While it took up a huge chunk of time, it served several purposes. First, we established relationships with a greater cross-section of the community. This became essential in helping to develop some level of reconciliation between different sects within the community. Second, it served as a conduit to get our IO messages out. Finally, it served as another source of information that generated

intelligence. Many times at these meetings someone would pull me aside to give me information that later proved valuable in our targeting process. I was joined at these meetings by other battalion commanders in the BDE to include Lt. Col. Glen Massett who commanded the brigade's engineer battalion and served as the lead in civil projects.

As for why Abu Abed and his men came forward when they did...I don't know for sure, but do have some thoughts based upon my conversations with him and community leaders. First, these guys did not just spontaneously erupt. I believe there was a group of people who were willing to work with us against al-Qaeda, a minority against the cause of the AQI led insurgency. This minority was getting organized and looking for an opportunity. Among this minority were the imams that Col Gentile introduced me to. Not all were on board at first. I think this group was looking for the right time. Setting the conditions likely started well before our arrival and included forces not under our control. However, I believe our operations throughout northwest Baghdad, not just Ameriyah helped establish the conditions that led to this group contacting me and committing themselves to fighting al-Qaeda. It was not just about Ameriyah. It was tied to the greater forces acting themselves out throughout Baghdad itself and more specifically in northwest Baghdad. Factors in this decision included the commitment we had demonstrated to the protection of the population. The increasingly effective targeting we had been doing against al-Qaeda based upon our increased intelligence which included SOF operations. Another factor was the relationships we had continued to foster with the Sunni imams. The increase in combat power I had placed in Ameriyah which was enabled by the increase of forces in Mansour also played a role. In March 2-32 FA took over part of our area. In April my D Company returned under our control after being detached since our arrival. We also received A/1-23 IN a Stryker Company under the command of CPT Kevin Salge. With three companies massed in Ameriyah we were able to conduct 24/7 ops and keep pressure on AQI.

During this time we also put in a COP in northwest Ameriyah. While putting in this outpost a deep buried IED exploded killing an entire Bradley crew of six Soldiers and one interpreter. I believe that our response to this catastrophic event was also one of the reasons the Sons of Iraq came forward when they did. One of the imams told me later that the whole neighborhood expected us to tear the place apart after this event. We had been going through a tough month with six other Soldiers killed in the previous two weeks. The restraint and discipline of our Soldiers was noted and cited by the locals themselves as one of the reasons they chose to work with us. I put increasing pressure on the imams to help us in our efforts and they came forward ten days later.

While the outpost we emplaced may not have been the reason for Abu Abed to come forward, I do not think we would have been effective in shaping our cooperation with Abu Abed and his men if we did not have it. Likewise the second outpost we put in Ameriyah proved to be essential to our operations. We would not have been able to emplace this second outpost if it were not for the arrival of 1-64 AR which took over most of the rest of Mansour while we focused on Ameriyah. It is important to note here that previously whenever we focused on one area in Baghdad, the insurgents would just go somewhere else. While we may have been conducting a great COIN campaign before the surge, we simply did not have enough forces to keep pressure on them. During Arrowhead Strike 9 the insurgents simply left Ameriyah or blended into the populace while clearing operations were being conducted. Now, with barriers

and COPs to impede movement and additional forces to put pressure on AQI throughout Mansour, AQI really had nowhere to go. Bottom line the increase in the number of Soldiers in our area greatly enhanced our ability to defeat al-Qaeda. For when we pushed them out of Ameriyah, Ed Chesney and 1-64 AR were able to target them in Khadra, al Jamia, and Mansour. Likewise the addition of 1-325th up in Hurriyah under Mike Richardson prevented JAM from continuing their expansion.

The outpost in NW Ameriyah was essential in helping us gain control of Ameriyah. When we started working with the Sons of Iraq, Abu Abed and the imams did not have the support of all of Ameriyah. The area in the northwest was hard to convince. The relationships established by the Soldiers in this outpost helped us work political deals within Ameriyah to gain support. The other outpost put us in the center of Ameriyah and became an important hub to help us conduct command and control. I established a forward TAC in this outpost and it served to coordinate the operations of our forces.

The dynamics behind gaining and maintaining the support of Abu Abed and his men is much more complex than the pay off narrative that many critics have pushed forward. Money was not the primary motivator for Abu Abed. Instead, I believe he was driven by a desire to protect his family and bring stability to the Sunni areas. While he was very much against JAM, I would not label him as sectarian. Several of his closest aides were Shia. I would classify him as a nationalist if anything. It took us a while to feel each other out, but in the end we developed a close relationship and I still consider him a close friend despite the accusations levied against him by the government. While I cut a deal to work with Abu Abed in early June, we did not have a contract to pay him and his men until September. While it is true we paid them for caches they found, the money was a pittance compared to the risks they were taking, and at least at first was much lower than AQI was paying to get fighters.

One of the major challenges was getting support of our efforts from the Iraqi Army. This required a lot of negotiating, first with our partnered battalion commander, and more importantly with the brigade commander. I remember meeting with him for over two hours to convince him that this was a great opportunity while Abu Abed cooled his heels outside. I remember writing in my notebook that this was the most important meeting I would probably ever have. Finally I got him to agree to work with Abu Abed. The relationship remained strained and only improved after the IA battalion commander was removed and replaced by an outstanding officer. Still, the BDE CDR was at the same time jealous of the accomplishments of Abu Abed and his men, but also risking his own career and perhaps life for working with him.

Abu Abed and the imams were also cutting deals within Ameriyah in order to gain more support. As we got closer to the community we gained a greater understanding of the social mosaic we were dealing with which included influential imams, technocrats from the previous regime, former military officers, tribal sheiks, and businessmen. Not all of them were immediately drawn to our efforts. The imams were extremely important in galvanizing the community and Abu Abed agreed to incorporate the various factions into his force. There were several times that I thought the whole project was going to end.

Once we got a signed contract we began establishing small outposts throughout the community. As we gained control of an area we would establish another outpost. We started in the southeast part of Ameriyah where Abu Abed had established his HQ. Our second COP was also emplaced nearby which served to help us maintain an eye on operations. This proved crucial to respond to threats to Abu Abed's home and also assure the government and our higher HQ that we had not simply turned over Ameriyah to Abu Abed, contrary to writings in some articles. We also established small outposts with the Sons of Iraq in the northwest part of Ameriyah which was more secure because of the COP we emplaced in the area. My intent was to use these two corners as the oil spots from which to expand our operations.

As we continued to operate together we pushed AQI out of one muhallah after another. The last AQI concentration was in the northwest, which we pretty much cleared out by the end of July. This was aided by the finalization of the wall around Ameriyah and the establishment of two checkpoints which were manned by the IA and the Sons of Iraq. We had some issues with the two groups working together so we began to also man these checkpoints for twelve hours each day. These checkpoints were initially closed to all vehicular traffic and all pedestrians were searched when they came in. We gradually opened up the vehicle restriction by allowing people to request a pass from the IA BN commander.

As security increased both economic development and our ability to improve the infrastructure increased. Over two hundred stores opened up in late summer/early fall and we were able to fix the sewage and water systems and start a project to repair the fronts of the buildings on the two main commercial strips.

The success we were able to achieve was a result of a comprehensive counter-insurgency strategy from MNC-I level on down. While this strategy was a shift in focus, it would not have worked if it was not based upon a general understanding of COIN and the conduct of COIN operations before this shift in focus. I believe the discipline of our Soldiers going back throughout the war was a major contributing factor in the Sunni populace deciding to support us. However, I believe our ability to conduct COIN at all levels had continued to improve as the war has progressed. Even now innovations made by battalions on the ground are improving our ability to provide stability. Some of these innovations include the Company Intelligence Support Teams which we focus on at the NTC. Battalions are also coming to the National Training Center with a greater understanding of targeting than I had two years ago as I prepared my battalion for our deployment. Our use of biometrics and UAVs has also improved. I hope we continue to evolve and improve our operations so that we can bring stability to Iraq. Our next challenge then will be to balance our preparations for conventional conflict while maintaining the skills and expertise we have developed as an institution in conducting COIN.

Lieutenant Colonel Dale Kuehl, US Army, commanded 1st Battalion, 5th US Cavalry in Ameriyah from November 2006 until January of 2008.

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