

Reconstruction in South Baghdad

Steve McGregor

Humanitarian aid is increasingly becoming more important to US military operations—not only because the military works more closely with aid agencies than ever before but because the military now implements great amounts of aid. According to a recent study by the Washington Post in August of this year, the US military has spent over 2.8 billion dollars on aid projects through the Commanders Emergency Response Program (CERP)¹.

As military commanders deal with how to properly implement aid the aid community is struggling to redefine itself. Many strategists and writers believe aid needs reform. David Rieff, when speaking before the Carnegie Council in support of his book “A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis,” argues that in Sudan aid organizations were “logisticians to the war effort of the belligerents, that in effect what Operation Lifeline Sudan was doing, whilst doing a great deal of good by saving lives, the humanitarians were in effect allowing the war to continue.” In another article, anthropologist Alex de Waal charges the aid community with over-estimating damage, creating false need, and unnecessarily complex programs².

On the other hand, humanitarian aid implemented by the US military in Iraq is reinforcing stability and quickening the peace. One area of Iraq this is particularly noticeable is Yusufiya, where Task Force 3-187 was able to completely transfer their area of responsibility back to Iraqi control.

It is important to note that army units like Task Force 3-187 are not aid organizations by nature and, while in Iraq, are focused on waging counterinsurgent operations not implementing humanitarian aid. According to the seminal US Army Field Manual 3-24, “Counterinsurgent operations strive to restore order, the rule of law, and... the host nation government.” This purposeful nature is in stark contrast to the general altruism of humanitarianism, “which is charity, which is to give relief,” as defined by David Rieff. According to Rieff’s perspective, this charity is so inviolate that modern humanitarian aid suffers from the interference of state organizations and private interest.

However, the direct approach of the army provides for long-term stability in a way that aid organizations cannot. Task Force 3-187 incorporated its projects into a coherent

¹ Hedgpeth, Dana and Sara Cohen; “Money as a Weapon,” *The Washington Post*, August 11, 2008; Page A01

² De Wall, Alex, “Anthropology and the Aid Encounter,” *Exotic No More: Anthropology on the Front Lines*, 2002, p. 251.

strategy as opposed to isolated acts of goodwill and, consequently, avoided succumbing to potential pitfalls of aid organizations described by Rieff and De Waal.

Yusufiya, Iraq is a predominately rural area approximately 600 km in size. Canals perforate the fields of okra, cucumber, tomato, eggplant, and potato. Orange groves and date palms are also abundant along the Euphrates which bounds the western edge of the region. The farmlands host a relatively dispersed and uneducated population, which in Iraq means: favorable conditions for hiding insurgent soldiers and weapons caches. Because of Yusufiya's proximity to Baghdad, terrorists used the city for staging attacks in the city at large. When Task Force 3-187 arrived in late 2007 they discovered a region bereft of essential services and a threatening history of violence. However, after fourteen months of counterinsurgent operations, including \$32 million dollars of humanitarian aid, Yusufiya was completely transferred to the Iraqi Army and Iraqi government.

Task Force 3-187 is comprised of just over 900 soldiers. At its core, the Task Force is the 3rd Battalion of the 187th Infantry Regiment. The addition of various attachments, such as a civil affairs team, psychological operations team, and others make it a Task Force. Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Rohling, the Task Force Commander, structured his time with "daily lunches, dinners, discussions with tribal leaders." Initially, these meeting engagements formed the foundation of the 'sahawa' movement, or Awakening, where influential Sunni tribesmen began allying themselves with Coalition Forces. But conversation soon shifted from discussion of insurgent activity to needs of the community. "It provided us with a way to incorporate their input, to hear what was happening," Rohling explained. According to Field Manual 3-24, "aggressive saturation patrolling, ambushes, and listening post operations must be conducted, risk shared with the populace, and contact maintained" (1-27). The saturation of Yusufiya by 3-187 prevented "disaster tourism," a concept described by Alex de Waal. De Waal observes that aid workers and journalists tend to over-estimate famine in Sudan because of a "combination of factors, including visiting at the worst times of year, visiting famine camps, where the worst suffering is to be found, and meeting the most destitute, combined with a failure to understand coping strategies..." For 14 months the Task Force patrolled the poorest slums of Yusufiya and the relatively wealthy land-owning neighborhoods as well. They understood local needs from a comprehensive perspective.

In February of 2008, almost a third of the way through the deployment to Yusufiya, Rohling began to fully understand the shift in focus. "I knew we'd have to do security and reconstruction in concert. But I thought we'd have the big 'S' and a small 'r'. By then I saw it was the other way around." Still, the Task Force lacked expertise. "We couldn't actually fix infrastructure," explained Rohling, "we could finance it, contract it out, supervise—it was the government that had technical know-how." However, this weakness provided an opportunity that allowed the Task Force to provide new support to the local government.

Prior to 3-187's efforts the young government of Yusufiya worked in obscurity, if at all. Many had been targets of extremist violence. Al Qaeda succeeded in murdering eight members of the new representative council. But Lieutenant Colonel Rohling appointed a

six man American and Iraqi team to partner with the new government and ensure their voice was heard among 3-187 commanders. The assessments of Iraqi councilmen, many of them engineers, became sought-after and valued. With 3-187's support, the Iraqi government began to assume increasing amounts of responsibility. Accordingly 3-187 began to decrease their involvement. This enabled transition.

Conversely, aid organizations struggle with creating false need. De Waal observes, "The population and family-planning agencies, for example, locate a crisis of population almost everywhere they cast their institutional gaze. Environmental agencies are comparable. The food aid business is a classic example of a solution searching for problems." Providing aid was not 3-187's primary or justifying purpose so there was no encouragement to create false need. Aid was simply a means to an end.

In one instance, the Task Force initiative to clean irrigation canals through American funded projects was met with resistance by the local government Irrigation Director. He claimed the Ministry of Irrigation would clean canals if three local sheiks would sign paperwork agreeing to safeguard the digging machines. The Task Force agreed to support the Director—saving thousands of American dollars but delaying the canal cleaning by almost a year. Still, it was an Iraqi solution to an Iraqi problem. Even though the Task Force was only a passive contributor and received no credit, Rohling considers this one of 3-187's greatest achievements during the deployment because it empowered the Iraqi Ministry of Irrigation.

Other projects, though, required private contracting and direct contribution of American cash—such as a 32-kilovolt circuit breaker repair. 3-187 responded with CERP funds. Though the program has drawn negative attention for its flexibility and exemption from federal acquisition laws, CERP allowed 3-187 to receive funding through already established chain of command. The ad hoc nature of the program helped prevent bureaucracy from slowing the funding process. De Waal notes that, "Taking the aid industry as a whole, ever more elaborate language codes are also developing, with specific dialects for each branch... that are impenetrable to the layperson, unless he goes through a prolonged apprenticeship." Yet CERP training required only two hours. The program allowed commanders to fund projects under \$500,000 in about two weeks and could be implemented by enlisted soldiers without college degrees.

With project funding Colonel Rohling was insistent that the Task Force rely primarily on numerous inexpensive projects instead of the ungainly million dollar projects that have made CERP infamous. 3-187 company commanders responded by implementing projects that were often less than \$25,000. This allowed for better distribution of projects, reduction in potential for corruption, and increased control. Often the million dollar projects conducted by USACE lasted years and were never completed because of contracting disputes.

Another important technique implemented by the Task Force was the use of local contractors. Often groups like USACE and USAID would employ large contracting firms who then subcontracted work. This inflated project cost, complicated project

management, hindered feedback, and distanced the local government. 3-187, however, completed most of their projects with contractors who lived in Yusufiya. Working locally and with nearby contractors allowed for instant feedback. 3-187 patrols could visit projects routinely in order to supervise and monitor work completion. This also increased local ownership. In one instance, 3-187 renovated a 20-classroom school in the city center of Yusufiya. Barely 400 meters from the gate of the nearest patrol base, American and Iraqi soldiers visited the school daily. Also, the work was contracted through a local citizen whose children began attending class in the school upon completion. The project became a local concern and sign of success. When the work was completed, the American army attended the opening ceremony, but only in an observatory role: local children sang the Iraqi national anthem, the mayor and education director gave speeches. Renovating the school might have been a Task Force project but it was perceived as an Iraqi success.

One of the most dramatic examples of the Task Force's unique ability is an air assault mission known as Operation SARATOGA. The mission was led by Captain Cliff Kazmarek, a company commander within the Task Force. Since arriving in Yusufiya, Kazmarek had developed a close relationship with Abbas Faddil, a tall, barrel-chested, and mustached Iraqi whose commanding presence emanated from more than just his physical stature—Abbas was the Ministry of Electricity appointed director for power distribution in Yusufiya. For many years Abbas was targeted by Al Qaeda in an attempt to further destabilize the region. His blue kia sedan is pierced with bullet holes from an earlier attempt on his life. Yet he remains quick to draw wire diagrams with pen and scratch paper to describe problems with the power grid. And with a military escort Abbas frequently traveled throughout Yusufiya to make repairs. During one meeting, Abbas complained that in the most rural regions tribes would overload the grid with illegal taps or extort weaker tribes for money using threats of disconnection. Kazmarek, responsible for several villages in the heart of rural Yusufiya, heard similar complaints from tribes in his area. And so 3-187 responded in a uniquely overpowering way.

After considering the situation Captain Kazmarek decided to use Army Blackhawk helicopters to drop a force of American and Iraqi infantrymen just outside Mufargi Village—an area suspected of illegal electrical wire-tapping. Abbas was invited to fly along with Captain Kazmarek and after arriving at the landing zone, escort the soldiers through the village and identify offenders.

The day before Operation SARATOGA the Task Force was tense. Often dust clouds or aircraft maintenance issues cancelled Air Assault missions at the last minute—scrapping weeks of planning. And like all missions, the soldiers would venture out into potentially hostile territory. Final preparation included cleaning machine guns, helicopter loading practice, and rehearsal of medical evacuation procedures. And the Americans were unsure if Abbas would fulfill his commitment to ride along. Years of military rule have given Iraqis a healthy distrust of the military. To make things easy, Kazmarek dispatched a platoon to pick up Abbas in order to prepare for the early departure the following morning. When the patrol arrived at the meeting location Abbas wasn't there. The men almost returned to base but decided to radio Kazmarek. This same morning, Sheiks from

the area came to the patrol base in hopes of meeting Kazmarek. They said another tribe had cut lines in an attempt to extort money. Kazmarek realized that if the air assault went as planned it would appear as an immediate response to a pressing local need. But he was careful not to make promises. “We still didn’t know where Abbas was and if he was even willing to come with us. He’d never been on a helicopter before.” Kazmarek knew Abbas was the lynchpin of the operation, he told the men to wait. An hour later, Abbas showed.

And the next morning the weather cooperated. Kazmarek received confirmation that the mission was a ‘go’ and at 0540 Four UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters, under the call sign ‘Smuggler 16’ checked in over the radio. The first lift of soldiers took their seats and the helos lifted off. Barely five minutes later, as the sun broke across the Euphrates river valley, the Blackhawks touched down in a fallow field in Yusufiya. Almost 50 American and Iraqi soldiers fanned out across the farmlands.

After exiting the helicopters, Captain Kazmarek and Engineer Abbas confirmed that wires from the nearby feeder station had been disconnected. “It was like a scene out of Forrest Gump—we were walking down the road and Iraqis just started coming out of their houses to talk with us and find out what was going on. It totally established the government’s control over the issue.” With an escort of American and Iraqi soldiers, Abbas made all necessary repairs and restored electricity to several hundred rural Iraqis. One week later, through coordination with a neighboring company commander, Captain Kazmarek was able to convene a meeting between villages in the region to establish Abbas’ expertise and authority over the Yusufiya electrical grid. Kazmarek realized “At the end of the meeting I was no longer involved. I was just hearing what my translator could catch. Abbas became the honest broker and we backed him up.” The Iraqi government achieved a long-term solution.

What can be learned from Task Force 3-187?

1. People: the Army possesses and develops better leaders than the aid community. As an institution the US Army relies on national service academies, Officer Training Courses, leadership schools such as Ranger School, and real-world experience, to develop leaders. Aid organizations as well as the US Department of State need to reevaluate how they prepare their staff for austere environments and the rigors of nation building or consider military exchange programs.
2. Funds: Task Force 3-187s success was largely due to their focus on small dollar amount projects: often totaling less than \$25,000. This improved project oversight, allowed for quicker access to funds, and decreased the possibility for corruption.
3. Flexibility: The army was willing to try projects in all areas of Iraqi society, implementing programs to improve water, electricity, education, culture, and more. They focused on adapting to meet real need.
4. Purpose: at all times 3-187’s concern was transferring control to the Iraqi army and Iraqi government. This prevented Yusufiya from becoming dependent on American aid.

During previous deployments to the Philippines, Korea, Vietnam, and most recently, Samarra, Iraq, 3-187 has developed a fearsome combat reputation. But during this deployment to Yusufiya they are not credited with scores of enemy deaths. Instead they have built or improved thirteen schools, six health clinics, thirteen water treatment facilities, over 50 kilometers of road, and hundreds of kilometers of irrigation canals. They also paid micro-grants to over 100 separate small businesses, repaired electrical transformers and circuit breakers, installed solar-powered streetlights in the city center, and supplied the local government with computers and Internet connections. Restoring essential services and developing the local government allowed the Task Force to return to the United States a full month ahead of schedule. Success in areas like Yusufiya needs to be considered by the international aid community in order to understand how to effectively assist conflict areas. Sudan, for example, which de Waal and Rieff both mention as a failure of humanitarian aid, suffers because of a lack of direction and security—elements an organization like the US Army integrates into their approach.

Captain Steve McGregor received his commission from the US Air Force Academy in 2004. After one year in the Air Force, CPT McGregor cross-commissioned to the Army, completing Infantry Officer School and Ranger School. He then received an assignment to the 101st Airborne in the Fall of 2006. CPT McGregor recently returned from a 14 deployment to Yusufiya, Iraq with Task Force 3-187, 3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). While there he served as a platoon leader and was then appointed to the S9—the primary battalion staff position responsible for Civil and Military Operations. At the end of his tour, Captain McGregor worked in the Policy and Plans Section of the Baghdad PRT helping to shape revision of the Joint Campaign Plan and coalition election involvement. Next year CPT McGregor is leaving the army to pursue graduate studies in Social Anthropology and a career in the US Department of State.

[SWJ Magazine](#) and [Small Wars Journal](#) are published by Small Wars Journal LLC.

COPYRIGHT © 2008 by Small Wars Journal LLC.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution – Non-Commercial – Share Alike 3.0 [License](#) per our [Terms of Use](#). We are in this together.

No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Contact: comment@smallwarsjournal.com

Visit www.smallwarsjournal.com

Cover Price: Your call. [Support SWJ here.](#)