

“What do you do for an encore?”

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“[S]mall wars are operations undertaken under executive authority, wherein military force is combined with diplomatic pressure in the internal or external affairs of another state whose government is unstable, inadequate, or unsatisfactory for the preservation of life and of such interests as are determined the foreign policy of our nation...Small Wars represent the normal and frequent operations of the Marine Corps.”

Small Wars Manual (USMC 1940)

Evening was falling on 9 April 2003. “First Team” (1/7) was consolidating in our just won section of downtown Baghdad. We had inherited over 28 square kilometers of dense urban terrain that included the “Manhattan” equivalent of the city, home to the remaining embassies and national figures like Terik Aziz. It had been a heady victory making this final push. In the space of a few hours we had been welcomed by a disorienting mix of cheering crowds, a frenzied press, and a full blown ambush on the grounds of the Baghdad University. Surreal!

But now we were hit by a far more perplexing challenge. Having thoroughly defeated the “Evil Empire” of Saddam, we had effectively stripped away all vestiges of his Orwellian dictatorship. Leaving only...us. What to do for an encore? We were now the single center of authority. In a blinding flash, we had become the local government, the utilities, the banks, the information bureau, the health care provider, the police, the court system, even the dog catchers. We were it. Just over 1000 Marines, Soldiers, and Sailors comprising our Battalion Task Force became responsible for an area and population the size of Manhattan Island.

Transition Mission

The following article will outline how we in 1st Battalion, 7th Marines addressed the daunting issue of what are often called “Transition Operations” in Baghdad. Of course, no one operates in isolation, and this article should hopefully address the great support we received from our higher and adjacent commands. But it will also identify some thoughts on how we can better affect these operations when presented with similar circumstances. Additionally, this will be the first of a series of articles that also address the challenge of what are being called “Stability Operations” as we further refined our tactics in the Southern city of Najaf. These articles will provide a little history, a bit of perspective, some strong opinions, and some suggestions on what to do if you find yourself similarly challenged.

The most significant aspect of the transition I saw in Baghdad was the immediacy of our succession to the sole responsible authority in the city. Within minutes of our

seizure of the capital one of my Lieutenants was presented with the rapidly expiring body of an Iraqi who had been pried from a vehicle accident seconds before. He was not a war casualty, but a simple victim of a “routine” incident. The fact that the locals brought him to us as he was in his final death spasms was their unequivocal realization that the normal procedure, going to the hospital or calling the police, was gone. This episode was duplicated throughout our zone with geometrically increasing frequency. Frantic locals ran up to tell us phones were out, doctors reported hospitals being looted, and that the water was off. They were desperate to know where they should dump the trash, could they use cell phones, or was it OK to drive to their father’s house in Mosel? They wanted us to arrest a strange man with a gun lurking in their neighborhood. We were approached by alleged sheiks who demanded to “his Excellency the General” about their tribe’s loyalty to Mr. Bush....On and on the requests came. All being diligently received and somehow answered by our young squad leaders and Platoon Leaders.

We too were in transition. Having overwhelmed organized resistance, we were hot on the trail of Saddam’s more shadowy SSO and Fedayeen. As if a great light had been turned on, the locals were quickly letting us know the identities of these terror troops and we found them fairly easy hunting. Stripped of their official protection and well known as a result of their horrific bullying, our aggressive small unit leaders were able to hit them in their homes and offices in ever quickening succession. We created hunter-killer teams on the fly sending our very talented Human Exploitation Teams (HET), Psychological Operations (PsyOps) and Civil Affairs Group (CAG) Teams down to the platoon level in some cases to rapidly turn around actionable intelligence from one target to the next. Companies worked huge urban sectors usually rotating platoons to achieve a 24/7 battle rhythm. The effect was dramatic. And as the locals saw our progress they joined even more enthusiastically into the feeding frenzy.

At the same time the city was changing under our feet. Prior to our attack we had reports of scattered looting of government buildings and the disappearance of the local police and “Gestapo” type Secret Police. Immediately following the attack we saw some looting, but it was limited to the homes of the ousted (and absent) government officials mostly being done by rejoicing neighbors. But this quickly changed to a wholesale “grab and go” of whatever was of value. And the grabbers were multiplying and getting more and more aggressive, using weapons where needed to burgle what they could not simply walk away with. Literally, it was a chapter out of H.G. Wells as the Morlocks were feasting on the proverbial Eloi.

On top of this was the total lack of operating city infrastructure. The electricity, water, sewage, fuel stations, Police, Fire Department, Public Hospitals, and all those things that make a city function were off, closed or absent. Some blamed Saddam; others said the US had bombed the critical nodes during our attack. Regardless, every facet of this modern city was hard down and no one knew where the magic “big red switch” was to turn it back on. Instead it appeared that it was all fatally interlinked like a circle of dominoes. Each critical service was dependent on another couple to get back on line, and none could be easily kick started. From time to time we ran into individuals

who claimed to have the answers, but the sad truth was that the utilities infrastructure had been in a death spiral before we came, and gave its last gasp as we arrived.

Governing 101

My battle journal notes dated 10 April lists a plethora of deduced tasks to include “power on”, “more interpreters”, “water/sewage on”, “trash pick up”, “locate police/police authority”, “open schools”, “destroy SSO/Fedayeen”, ad infinitum with the final comment “Who is government? What is government? Where is government?” The answers turned up in our shaving mirrors.

So like good Marines we confidently waded in and figured it out as we went along. The staff met early the morning after liberation and conducted a mission analysis. Effectively our mission was to run a city with a battalion. Of course, several other battalions, regiments and the division were conducting the same analysis. As a true testament to the trust our leaders had in us, all the battalions were allowed to create their solutions with only the most general mission tasking and guidance from above. But every option for support was offered and taken. The dilemma was that our rapid push to Baghdad left us barely able to support ourselves with basic necessities, let alone a city of 5 million. But the last thing we could afford to do was to suck off the already overtaxed local infrastructure as parasites.

We were very fortunate to have a particularly talented crew working on our solution set. I had a brilliant Operations Officer, a well seasoned and savvy Executive Officer, very creative staff officers, and a group of exceptionally experienced company commanders who averaged over 18 months in command in addition to a battalion of incredibly creative Marines, Soldiers and Sailors. This talented pool dissected the mission into digestible pieces and created on the spot, a very effective “battlefield organization” and TTP’s (tactics/techniques/procedures) for controlling our area of responsibility (AOR).

Their first product was a list of 21 critical Priority Information Requirements (PIR’s) that we placed into the hands of every small unit leader or individual with the potential for direct contact with the local population or environment. These PIR’s were our metrics for determining crisis areas in the city where we could direct critical assets. They included the condition of key utilities, location and condition of hospitals, identification of local leaders (non-Ba'ath Party), traffic flow, commercial activities, religious affiliations, ethnicity of neighborhoods and their opinion of us, opening of political party offices, status of local schools, and criminal activities. In addition, we also tracked a healthy list of threat related information requirements as we continued to dismantle the Ba'ath/SSO/Fedayeen insurgents as well as other potential sensitive sites. These collection requirements were reported out every night during staff meetings, and analyzed in depth by our S-2. Together they provided us a very raw but telling look at our AOR and allowed us to allocate resources, track trends, and focus on what we determined were centers of gravity. We also rapidly discovered that in this environment,

literally every Marine, Sailor and Soldier is a collector as they were in the environment and able to fill in the blanks on our report to great effect.

Our next product was to rebuild the staff to reflect our changing mission. With our attacks focused on smaller targets, we no longer needed the robust Fire Support Control staff we did in our fight through Iraq. That left a group of very talented Marines to reassign as our battalion level Civil Military Operations Center (CMOC). In short order, our Air Officer became the head of our CMOC with all our FAC's, FO's, and their communicators as his staff. Now instead of processing fires, they became city managers processing our reports and going out as contact teams to trouble areas to find solutions. This was a powerful tool. It also allowed our CAG teams, who were our duty experts on Civil Affairs, to focus their efforts on the most critical issues without becoming tied down in the more mundane concerns our CMOC handled. Our higher and adjacent headquarters organized in the same fashion which provided great continuity between the various CMOC's.

We also substantially reorganized and retasked our Intelligence Staff. Gone were the large enemy formations we had been tracking. Now the enemy consisted of disorganized fleeting former regime members that our small units were doing very well tracking using the locals and HET on site. But our requirements for analysis of the city's population needs, organizations, and affiliations were daunting. That changed dramatically the methodology and organization of our Intel staff. With a battalion of collectors, and reams of raw information coming in, they organized into a JIC that combined the talents of our CMOC, PsyOps Det, CAG, and our HET into an analytical body that could relate the information for trends and targets. This quickly refined intelligence became the lifeblood for our operations as we "fought" the cities problems in order to win it back for the population and encourage our popular support.

Within the battalion we reorganized our combat formations to complement the city. Each rifle company was assigned a zone to provide security and "govern" like a borough. They then assigned platoons smaller zones to operate from in Combined Action Program (CAP) type linkages with the locals. We set up "Firm Bases" within large facilities like the Baghdad University for each company to use as a logistics/bed down site. The Firm Bases allowed commanders to run continuous operations in their zones with at least a reinforced platoon providing presence while still being able to rest and refit the remainder of the company. This was important because our preferred tactic was foot mobile patrolling which we called "saturation patrolling." Firm bases allowed us to always have an alert unit on patrol or conducting operations while resting small units were kept away from the public eye. In order to increase our coverage we turned Weapons Company into a provisional rifle company, although we used the Combined Anti-armor Teams (CAAT) as a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) throughout the AOR. Our Headquarters & Service Company provided security for one of our firm bases and also rotated in and out of QRF duty.

Tactically, our operations consisted of random saturation patrols to collect information and keep our sector secure. These footmobile patrols were very

approachable by the locals and we facilitated this contact by pushing interpreters down to the platoon level. This allowed us to get tips from the locals on threats, as well as to gain SA on our collection requirements. If we got actionable information on a threat, the Company would often simply handle it internally, informing the Bn COC as they were going in so we could position the QRF to support if things went awry. This resulted in an extremely high tempo of operations that yielded great success against the disorganized and overwhelmed former regime combatants. We paid a price sometimes from dry holes, but by allowing the attacks to be executed at the lowest level possible, these misses had little effect on our overall operations. At the same time our aggressive actions gave a very positive sign to the locals that we were serious about tearing down all the remnants of Saddam's regime further engendering their support.

Our Rules of Engagement (ROE) also changed rapidly. Prior to our entry into Baghdad we had discussed at length the necessity to rapidly adjust to the changes of entering a dense urban environment where our actions could easily turn the population against us. The First Marine Division's now famous credo, "No better friend - No worse enemy" lent itself to this transition. We started to discuss more and more the requirements for positive ID of all targets and limiting weapons effects to decrease collateral damage. Our higher headquarters was also tailoring back the ROE and TTP's to meet emerging realities. Military vehicles turned lights back on at night to match civilian traffic. Vehicle checkpoints used long serpentine entry points to reduce "runners". Shoot first engagements were replaced by more forgiving Peacetime ROE with graduated levels of force. These changes were critical to winning the population and avoiding our own fratricide in a densely populated environment.

Another facet of modifying our ROE, was changing from a "no rules" combat mentality in how we drove, acted, and talked in front of the local community. If we were the government, then we needed to set the example vice join in the anarchy. Where possible, our Marines obeyed traffic rules. They avoided social taboos like relieving themselves in public, using foul language, or leering and pointing weapons at innocents. Uniforms were policed up from combat standards to a more professional look. Sunglasses were removed to reveal eyes, considered an important "mirror to the soul" for the Iraqi's. Washing became an influence operation as we tried to "humanize" our warriors in the eyes of our new public. Where tactically possible, we shed body armor to look less threatening and less threatened. There were hundreds of these small details that we incorporated, but their sum total was powerful. It added normality to the community and created a level of respect that bullying would not.

Our last major reorganization involved all the commanders. Having inherited the yoke of local government, we now needed to match that responsibility with some good old fashioned politicking. It meant all of us going out and meeting the locals, sitting in on their neighborhood meetings, and becoming a physical presence in their lives as a sign of stability and control. Effectively, the population had been subjected to 35 years of Big Brother type omnipotent tyranny from Saddam. Perhaps they were free, but their comfort zone was to have a strong leader to look to for direction. Add to this the utter confusion of little or no utilities, many suddenly irrelevant jobs, no media after having it

force fed, no phones, and the complete absence of the usual repressive bureaucracy. This resulted in a tremendous feeling of isolation and instability for the population. Many simply stayed home fearing the great unknown, who was us in most cases. So we started spending our days traveling around like incumbents in an election year, meeting our “constituents” and building up our popular support. It took some getting used to, but the effect was dramatic. Senior officers shaking hands in the street? Accepting criticism? Pitching in to help neighborhoods? Destroying the invincible Saddam regime? Amazing to the locals, but very welcome.

This could be working...

The TTP’s listed above helped to get us on the road to recovery, and to provide a way ahead in a confused and chaotic environment. But it was impressive to see the reorganization of the city under this influence. Again, we were not unique. The other battalions, as well as our Regimental Headquarters and the Division were all making similar adjustments as the city/country came under more control. Within a week of liberation the markets were open again in our sector, many were going back to work, there was a new police force reorganizing, hospitals were reopening, and most impressively, neighborhoods were organizing their first attempts at representative government counsels. These nascent steps toward democracy generated tremendous excitement in the population despite their concerns over their lack of critical services.

But at the same time, we were starting to see the enormity of the challenge offered by the political transformation of a diverse city like Baghdad. Like most of the world’s great cities, Baghdad is made up of a wide compellation of cultures and ethnic groups. I think we understood that we would find divisions like Sunni and Shia neighborhoods, but we were surprised to find large boroughs of Palestinians, Syrians, Armenians, and Christians, as well as smaller communities of even more variety. The locals told us Saddam purposely created these segregated pockets of division in order to keep the various communities in check. Whether this Machiavellian construct was deliberate was now academic as we now were faced with the seeds of ethnic tension in a no longer totalitarian setting. The issue was to manage these groups fairly without showing any overt favoritism, but effectively use their stabilizing influence to promote security and popular support. We found ourselves operating more in the political realm as we balanced competing groups seeking influence in the post regime power vacuum. These early experiences would become invaluable lessons in our later stability operation missions.

From Embedded to Dreaded

A final component of the transition period was the sea change in our relationship with the media. During the combat phase we experienced unprecedented media access via the embedded reporters. The First Team had a TV crew from CNN and two newspaper reporters (Washington Post and Chicago Tribune). Our relationship with them followed the same pattern as most units in OIF, going from a wary start as we sized each other up, to all out mutual acceptance as we shared the battle across Iraq. By

Baghdad there were few secrets as we had each proved trustworthy under extreme circumstances.

But that relationship came to an abrupt end as we transitioned out of combat operations. Media home offices were eager to point their valuable news crews at more focused and “newsworthy” events than the seemingly mundane affairs of security operations. So our “Embeds” were quickly extracted and joined large press pools downtown in the Palestine Hotel. As the Embeds withdrew, we encountered geometrically increasing numbers of free roaming “freelancers” out to find the story of the day. They had come to Baghdad on the coattails of the advancing forces having been shut out of most of the combat units during the fighting. These freelancers had a completely different view of the war and our occupation of Baghdad, and a wide range of agendas that matched their parent media and national diversity. They also were fond of flaunting their perceived freedom of access across the still unstable city without the battlefield sense of the Embeds and with credentials that were as minimal as the letters “TV” taped on their SUV and calling cards for an ID. Handling these droves of swarming reporters became a major consideration that was as much a security issue as a public relations and information operation. Although some were vetted and certified by our higher headquarters, the sheer numbers of reporters and no opportunity to control their ingress into the city left this a constant problem.

In retrospect, I believe that this was an opportunity lost for both the media and our military. Prematurely severing the Embed linkage removed the opportunity to report on reawakening of the country and the metamorphosis of an exclusively combat force into a reconstruction force. While this may not have first appeared to be a “newsworthy” subject, I would argue that it has become a major story of late. In later operations the Division was very successful in dealing with freelancers by attaching Public Affairs Office NCO’s (USA/USMC combat correspondents) to Battalion Task Forces and by using our PsyOps to monitor the messaging we were delivering in the local and international media.

Hand Off and Re-hack

On 20 April, Easter morning, we handed off our sector of Baghdad to several units from the US Army. We accomplished the Relief in Place in about three days, emphasizing “right side/left side” type interactions down to the platoon level. This process had relieving small unit leaders accompanying our live patrols, raids, and security operations as observers, followed by our small unit leaders accompanying their first operations in their new zone. We also conducted more formal turnovers of our local intelligence on our sector to the respective staffs, as well as the physical turnover of obstacles, firm bases, and static support. The most unique portion of this RIP was our focus on passing along our assessment of the political and social architecture of our city, as well as detailed surveys of the local infrastructure. Key to this was the sharing of the names and introductions to the key local leaders and contacts we had developed. These interpersonal contacts were invaluable pathways to the support of the local community and the maintenance of critical balance between competing groups.

We withdrew to an assembly area well south of Baghdad and awaited our next mission. That mission would start 4 days later as we occupied and conducted security/stabilization operations in the 1.2 million person Governate of Najaf in South Central Iraq. Our experiences in Baghdad would prove critical in our next mission, and we spent the intervening days reviewing our lessons learned and incorporating them into our new operating plans and SOP's. The Najaf mission will be the next article in this series.

Lessons Learned:

- Transition operations are key to long term success, but should not be exclusively a military show. Marines can do it militarily, even politically for a very short time, but what is needed is the rapid replacement of a civil power vacuum with civil solutions. No time for amateurs and promises. Bring in the pros from Dover right behind attack for a lasting peace.
- Invest in critical transition forces. For example, our PsyOps Teams needed the capability to immediately saturate the local media with our message, but could not do it because all they had were loud speakers and leaflets. They need portable radio/TV transmitters in Transition/Stability Operations. You can lead a population, but only if you can effectively get your message and personality out to citizens. In urban settings, even the poorest have some access to electronic media and its use provides immediate influence over the population. Other critical military skills sets were HET, translators (especially US citizens who are ex-patriots of the host country), Civil Affairs, Engineers, lawyers, and Military Police.
- We need to better plan for actions and effects during the combat phase that will produce the best complement of subsequent transition and stability operations. I think this was attempted in varying degrees by higher and adjacent commands, but there did not seem to be a unity of purpose throughout the theater in defining a cohesive political endstate fully supported in all phases of the operation. As a result, I believe that post conflict operations were complicated by how we waged the combat phase.
- Be ready for instantaneous transition. Don't stop being a warrior, but be ready to dual hat as a Mayor/City Manager/Borough Chief. Press flesh, kiss the babies, and kill the enemy.
- Read more than FM's. Understand the local culture, political history, and the basics to managing a successful government. The Small Wars Manual is certainly a great start, but Machiavelli's Prince, The Articles of Confederation, The Constitution, The Federalist Papers, international political journals/texts, area histories, and cultural studies like "The Arab Mind" (Patai) and the Koran are just as critical as Sun Tsu and Clausewitz in Transition Operations.
- Be creative. You have many untapped secret weapons in your units. Create special skills lists prior to combat that identify your Marines with past experience as electricians, oil workers, Heavy Machinery Operators, fire fighters, police, political campaigns workers, media creators, etc.

Look at opportunities to build unique non-military skills during peacetime operations that will be key enablers later. Few of these investments are wasted.

- Experience is a critical asset in the unique environment of Transition Operations, just as it is in combat. Foreign deployments with maximum international contact, bilateral training, and any opportunity for Interagency and Multinational interactions are invaluable. And when those opportunities are not there, the next best thing is to read about someone else's experiences to gain their lessons for free.

In summary, if we accept Clausewitz's dictum that "war is politics by other means" then we must also accept that war and military actions are simply a phase and enabler for the entire political solution to international crises. That being the case, we must be able to "work the seams" by ensuring that military operations are embedded in political strategies in order to complement and facilitate national objectives. Transition operations represent the operational merger between high intensity combat operations and nonmilitary solutions to a political crisis. Our epiphany was discovering just how far down that linkage goes and just how politically astute our "strategic Corporals" must be. In a perfect world, there exists a detailed Political/Military (Pol/Mil) Plan for any crisis that would address these transition periods with the early insertion of critical civil stabilizing assets. The reality is that most conflicts are come as you are occasions where the price of early success will be ad hoc transition operations flowing into long term stability operations using predominantly military forces. And as the lead quote in this article states, these are "*normal and frequent operations*" for our Corps, so we need to be very good at them. What do you do for an encore? Play well enough that you never need to come back.