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FEATURE

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BRITISH PEACE-SUPPORT OPERATIONS IN IRAQ: Low density, high demand

Tim Ripley *JDW Correspondent*
London

Making the change from warfighting to peace enforcement, while keeping deployment numbers low in a still unsettled country, has tested UK forces to the full. Tim Ripley reports

Moving from warfighting to peace enforcement has proved to be one of the major challenges for coalition forces in the aftermath of last year's US-led war in Iraq.

The armour-heavy ground forces and strike aircraft armed with precision-guided munitions, deployed to win the war against Saddam Hussein's government, proved of limited use in 'street-level' security operations intended to protect the Iraqi population, international aid workers and coalition forces.

Getting the right troops and equipment for post-conflict missions into Iraq has been complicated by the unpredictability of the country's security situation.

The UK's military presence in the region has evolved dramatically over the past 10 months, driven by the need to keep troop numbers in Iraq to an absolute minimum and to carefully manage the deployment of 'low-density, high-demand' assets or units.

Rapidly changing requirements on the ground in Iraq have forced planners to react quickly in innovative ways. "This is a feature of operations in the 21st century," Col Richard Barrons, Chief of Staff of Multinational Division (South-East) in Basra, told *JDW*. "You flow the forces in and out on the requirement. People shouldn't get hung up on static [troop] levels or six-month tours."

Post-war force

UK forces were assigned to occupy four provinces in southern Iraq immediately following the war, guarding key buildings, manning checkpoints and distributing aid to civilians. Initially, this was achieved by simple measures such as re-tasking tank and artillery crews who were no longer needed to fight the Iraqi Army.

This short-term expedient prevented many of the problems encountered by the US military in Baghdad after the fall of the Saddam government in April 2003 when there were not enough personnel to secure key facilities to prevent looting. Based on its experience from other peace-support operations, the UK's Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ) in Northwood near London had already developed plans to flow in units better suited for long-term occupation duties, such as infantry battalions and experts in civil affairs.

The introduction of new units and troops was accomplished at the end of June 2003 when 19 Mechanised Brigade was rotated into southern Iraq to replace the three warfighting brigades: the British Army's 7 Armoured and 16 Air Assault Brigades and 3 Commando Brigade Royal Marines that had deployed to Kuwait in February. The new brigade deployed with two mechanised infantry battalions mounted in wheeled Saxon armoured personnel carriers (APCs) and one infantry battalion mounted in Warrior infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs). A Royal Artillery regiment was also deployed in the infantry role, equipped largely with soft-skinned vehicles. Only a single squadron of 14 Challenger 2 main battle tanks was deployed with the new brigade, assuming operational control of vehicles already in theatre fitted with full armour packages.

The force package totalled 10,000 personnel deployed inside Iraq, of which 3,000 were assigned to a joint services logistic group. This compared with a strength of 33,000 ground forces, with 120 Challenger 2s, at the height of the war. Most of these forces were drawn from the British Army and included a 1,000- to 1,500-strong contingent of compulsory mobilised army reservists and Territorial Army soldiers.

The preparation and deployment of the new troop rotation, called Operation 'Telic 2', was sufficiently lengthy to allow them time to train in 'theatre-specific skills' that were now in demand, such as non-lethal crowd control, force protection and local language skills. A cell of experts was set up in the UK to train Iraq-bound troops and pass on the latest information and intelligence about what they could expect to find when they arrived in theatre.

Due to the continuing instability, the PJHQ was ordered by the UK government to begin long-term planning to maintain substantial land forces in theatre until at least 2007. The six-month rotation of a divisional headquarters, a brigade-sized land force and a logistics support element, backed up by helicopters, fixed-wing aircraft and naval forces, was the basic planning assumption. A schedule for identification, training, deployment and recovery for those forces was established in much the same way as the UK has deployed forces in the Balkans from 1992 onwards.

In case the situation on the ground deteriorated, the PJHQ could also draw on an 'over-the-horizon' reserve battalion in Cyprus and the high-readiness 'spearhead' battalion in the UK.

This predictability was considered essential to allow the forces deploying to train properly. Each rotation was intended to be different, with units and capabilities reflecting the different tasks and other factors. Other armies, such as the US Army, which deploy their troops to Iraq for year-long tours, do not have this level of flexibility, say British officers. The second rotation, Operation 'Telic 3' third roulement of UK troops that deployed last November to Iraq included new capabilities, such as a battery of Phoenix unmanned air vehicles of the Royal Artillery to enhance the intelligence-gathering capabilities of the UK-led multinational division.

As more countries joined the division the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) began hosting a series of force-generation conferences to allow the contributions of allied countries to be incorporated in the planning process.

Limitations with traditional combat net radio systems that became apparent in the early phase of the occupation also led the MoD to authorise moves by the British Army to allow a Kuwaiti mobile telephone operator to extend its network to cover southern Iraq. UK military subscribers were provided with priority access to the network.

Around the middle of last year it became increasingly apparent that the security situation in the UK-controlled sector was deteriorating because of shortcomings in the locally recruited police and paramilitary forces.

The UK divisional headquarters in Basra generated a requirement for the deployment of extra troops to provide enhanced force protection for the existing troops and to set up and run training teams for Iraqi security personnel. The over-the-horizon reserve and spearhead battalions were deployed but reorganised once they arrived in Iraq for their new missions. The majority of command personnel from the three rifle companies in each of the two battalions were re-rolled as training teams for the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps (ICDC), whereas most of their infantry soldiers were deployed separately as specialist escort and guards teams or as quick-reaction forces. This meant the existing in-theatre troops did not have to pull back from working with the local police, population and civic leaders to carry out force protection duties.

The initial deployment of these extra battalions was only a short-term measure, but when it became clear that ICDC training and force protection requirements were a long-term task a light-role infantry battalion was deployed on a six-month tour to undertake these roles. "We will keep troop numbers under constant review. If the threat recedes then we can take those measures away, but we still have the capacity to go and do surge operations and other more manoeuvrist activities that allow us to ensure that we retain the initiative," said Col Barrons.

Additional specialist equipment required ahead of the next scheduled rotation, Operation 'Telic 3', was deployed by air and sea to Iraq, including 200 armoured Land Rovers and equipment to detect and make safe improvised explosive devices.

The Land Rovers were considered essential because UK troops in Iraq had deployed with their organic warfighting equipment that was not configured for internal security duties in urban areas. Until the new vehicles arrived, the troops in Iraq had to make do with improvised wire grills fitted to their windscreens to provide protection during riots.

Battlegroup operations

The tactics of the UK battalions or battlegroups have changed considerably over the past 10 months and look set to evolve further.

At the heart of these changes are moves to increase the involvement of locally recruited Iraqi forces in maintaining security: a process also known as 'Iraqification'. In the first days after the war, UK troops were solely responsible for security and they manned a series of fixed checkpoints through their area of responsibility and also mounted regular patrols. They also began their first efforts to recruit and train the Iraqi police; UK Royal Military Police detachments were diverted from their wartime traffic-control duties to take on much of this work. Then UK training teams were deployed to set up the ICDC.

By the end of last year, the Iraqi police in Basra had taken up responsibility for routine tasks, such as manning fixed vehicle checkpoints and guarding key buildings. This released UK troops for more mobile tasks. Each British battlegroup by then had a couple of ICDC companies operating under its direct command.

Lt Col Andrew Cuthbert, commanding officer of the Queen's Royal Hussars (QRH) Battlegroup in northern Basra, told *JDW* that since his tour, which began in November 2003, he has commanded a force of more than 1,000 personnel including 340 Iraqis.

This includes a squadron of his own regiment deployed as infantry and mounted in Land Rovers; a squadron in the armoured role with Challenger 2s and Land Rovers for infantry work; a company of the 1st Battalion The Light Infantry with Warriors; a company of light- role infantry from The Royal Scots; and a reconnaissance company from the Royal Scots. Two ICDC companies complete the QRH's Battlegroup.

In addition to the basic training conducted by the infantry training teams, the QRH is providing additional support to the ICDC. "The ICDC is all about getting Iraqis to own their security," said Col Cuthbert. "We give them continuation training for other ranks after the training team finishes with them and we are also doing leadership training for officers and non-commissioned officers. Then the ICDC works side-by-side with our soldiers. They will become the nucleus for a third force of paramilitary troops in Iraq."

The UK infantry companies in Basra have also adapted their organisation to better suit urban operations. Each infantry platoon has now been issued with a pair of armoured Land Rovers to supplement its normal complement of four Warrior IFVs or Saxon APCs.

A Light Infantry platoon commander attached to the QRH Battlegroup told *JDW* that the combination of Warriors and Land Rovers gave him more options during urban operations. "When we need to go somewhere and don't want to draw attention to ourselves we use the 'snatch' armoured Land Rovers, which are quiet and blend into the normal traffic noise," said the officer. "It's good to have the Warriors as well when we need to show the Iraqis who is boss. They are big, noisy and have a presence. People take notice when they turn up. The Land Rovers are also good because they don't generate great clouds of dust and hack off the locals."

Almost a year into the occupation of Iraq the UK has managed to juggle its forces to meet constantly changing requirements. It has been able to reduce the size of its forces in theatre from 33,000 to around 11,000 personnel in less than a year, which the US and other troop contributing nations have so far not been able to do.

To date the UK armed forces' 'force packaging' concepts have provided their worth to military planners, but the future size of the force the UK deploys is now crucially dependent on the outcome of the political process in Iraq - an arena in which the UK MoD has little influence.



The UK's presence in Iraq over the past 10 months has been shaped by the need to keep the number of troops to a minimum and manage the deployment of low density,

high demand assets

*city police officers in April 2003. British troops were in the forefront of efforts to recruit Iraqi police officers
(Source: PA)*



spearhead battalion, which was reoled for the task



*In the first days after the war British troops were solely responsible for security, operating
(Source: T Ripley)*



*British infantry fighting on the streets of Basra in June 2003. The combination of the use of Land Rovers and Warrior vehicles gives UK forces more flexibility during urban
(Source: PA)*

Since British Army Challenger 2 main battle tanks captured Basra International Airport at the height of the -led war in Iraq in April 2003, the Royal Air Force (RAF) has had to dramatically re focus its operations in the region from fighting a high intensity air campaign to supporting the army. Running Basra's airport as an in theatre 'air transport hub' is now the main effort of deployed RAF personnel.

thing," Group Capt Tony Gunby, who is RAF Deployed Operation Base Commander, told *JDW* no handbook or manual. We had to make the best of what we had available."

according to Gp Capt Gunby. "This is the only RAF flying detachment in Iraq. My job and my people's job is to operate this airfield and prepare to hand it back to the people of Iraq. Out of my people, 95% of are

Cyprus. My people spend four months here; I get six months. The aircrews of my two C- here for four- -six weeks at a time. The initial set up here was provided by a core team from RAF Lyneham, led by their station commander. They had formed units such as the RAF Mobile Catering Team. -formed unit basis with personnel rotating in as individuals. 34 Squadron



The RAF runs Basra's airport as an 'air transport hub'

British Army troops on patrol in a Warrior infantry fighting vehicle through the Iraqi town of
(Source: PA)

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