

Task Force Patriot and the End of Combat Operations in Iraq

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GOVERNMENT INSTITUTES
An imprint of
THE SCARECROW PRESS, INC.
Lanham • Toronto • Plymouth, UK
2012



**Government
Institutes**

Published by Government Institutes

An imprint of The Scarecrow Press, Inc.

A wholly owned subsidiary of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706

<http://www.govinstpress.com>

Estover Road, Plymouth PL6 7PY, United Kingdom

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

<to come>



The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

To my best friend, Aree

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Acknowledgments

*F*irst, I would like to thank all of the men and women who have stood shoulder to shoulder with me through two tours in Iraq, and especially all of the Proud Americans of Task Force Patriot. Special thanks go to Lt. Col. Robert “Bubba” Cain for teaching me everything I will ever know about commanding a battalion and Maj. Tim Blackwell and Maj. Matt Payne for teaching me everything I will ever know about running one. Thank you, also, to Mike Samander; with your wise council over evening cigars and your keen negotiating skills, you, as much as any soldier in the task force, contributed to our success. I apologize to all of the civilians and soldiers in Task Force Patriot that I was not able to mention in this book. Please know that I will forever be in awe of the sacrifices you have made for your country.

Second, I would like to thank my agent, Grace Freedson, for believing in me and my work way past the point where it made logical sense. Your passion was a huge inspiration to me in completing this book.

I would also like to thank Mr. James Hill and all of the hardworking folks at the Department of the Army’s Office of the Chief of Public Affairs.

Thank you to my lovely wife, Aree, and my children, Amy and Jonathan, for their heroic patience with all of the rigors of being an Army family. Thank you, as well, to my mom and dad, Patricia and Ronald, for all of their help holding down the fort each day I was gone.

And, above all, I thank God, through whom all things are made possible.

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Introduction

The US Army that went to war in Iraq in March 2003 was the US Army that the Vietnam War built. That is not to say that the Army was the same Army that fought in Vietnam. In fact, it was anything but. Rather, the US Army that crossed the border from Kuwait into Iraq on 21 March 2003 was profoundly changed by the US Army's experience in Vietnam—or rather the American military's interpretation of that experience. While some of these changes were for the better, others created unintended consequences when the US Army was faced with yet another grueling insurgency, this time in Iraq.

In the early 1980s, when the US defense establishment finally began to grapple with the implications of the Vietnam War that had ended a decade before, they sought a clear guide for policy makers in deciding when and where to use military force (and, more importantly, when and where not to use military force). Their goal was to prevent the US military from becoming mired in similar wars in the future. President Ronald Reagan's secretary of defense, Caspar Weinberger, was the first to enunciate a clear policy. It was later amended by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Colin Powell. The policy recommendations, which have since become known as the Powell Doctrine, advocated the use of overwhelming force in conflicts with clear objectives and definable exit strategies. The American security establishment's answer to the Vietnam War, then, was to not fight another Vietnam War.

The logical conclusion of the Powell Doctrine was Air-Land Battle. This military doctrine reached its zenith during the 1990 Gulf War—an

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aerial campaign of massive, precision firepower followed by a brutally effective lightning invasion that swept aside the world's fourth-largest military and restored Kuwaiti sovereignty. But, most importantly, within a matter of months, the US military returned to the United States to fanfare and parades.

It was not until thirteen years later, when the US military found itself embroiled in a guerilla war against a variety of enemy factions in a hostile land full of hostile people, that the US Army realized its folly; it had deluded itself into believing that it could simply choose not to fight wars it was not good at fighting. Yet, in the finest American tradition, the officers of the US military rolled up their sleeves and started trying to figure out the problem.

The first tool they turned to was actually an offshoot of Air-Land Battle: Effects-Based Operations. The doctrine advocated analyzing the environment as a system of systems and trying to identify key nodes in that system that, if acted upon, would produce the desired effect. Unfortunately, the theory was a victim of its origins; it was designed by airpower theorists to select targets for bombing, where the effects of actions could be accurately predicted. Such was not the case when your nodes were people rather than power plants and your action was building schools instead of dropping bombs.

As Effects-Based Operations fell, counterinsurgency rose. Gen. David Petraeus and a corps of civilian and military intellectuals began an insurgency of their own, inside the US military; they revived a doctrine that had lain dormant since the age of post-World War II anticolonialism and had briefly found favor in the latter days of the Vietnam War, before being rejected by the 1980s revisionists within the US Army. The US military insurgents were successful, enshrining their doctrine in Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*. US Army and coalition forces must, this doctrine demanded, isolate the insurgents by living among the populace, protecting them from the insurgents, and addressing their grievances. The populace would then, this doctrine promised, turn away from the insurgents and toward the government of their country. Gen. Petraeus briefly took command of the Combined Arms Center, in charge of all of the Army's combat training centers and the Army's premier midgrade educational institution, the US Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Once counterinsurgency was firmly entrenched as the new paradigm for US Army operations, Gen.

Petraeus went forward to take command of all coalition forces in Iraq in 2007 and put counterinsurgency into practice.

Another change the Vietnam War wrought on the US Army was its view of the media in warfare. The “credibility gap” created during the Johnson years, in the view of 1980s military revisionists, had created a hostile public that refused to believe US military claims and turned against the war. The military solution was simple: never lie to the press. The post-1980s Army struggled, however, to put this solution into practice. Small, short wars like Panama, Grenada, and even the Gulf War allowed the US military to tightly control access to the battlefield and shape what the press saw or did not see. It was not until press coverage of the disastrous military operation in Mogadishu, Somalia (immortalized in the book and movie *Blackhawk Down*), that the US military began to appreciate that it had wished away the problem of media coverage.

The solution the US military arrived at on the eve of the Iraq war was, at the time, radical: absolute disclosure. International media would be “embedded” with US and coalition forces and would accompany them during the invasion, with unfettered access to the battlefield and no censorship of the stories they sent back to their respective countries. The program was wildly successful during the invasion, when the war was going swimmingly for the coalition. But once the invasion gave way to arduous guerilla warfare, the media picture became a liability to the war effort. It is an American media axiom that “if it bleeds, it leads”; every night the US and international press served up a steady diet of car bombs, suicide vests, and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and the American public began to sour on the war. The US Army began to sour on the media, too, becoming increasingly insular and hostile to press coverage of their operations.

Gen. Petraeus’ arrival and the strategy the president had sent him to implement—the Iraq “surge”—finally stopped the bleeding. At the same time that he changed the focus to protecting the populace and addressing their grievances, Petraeus threw open the shutters of Multi-National Force–Iraq (MNF-I, the senior military headquarters in Iraq), opening it to press scrutiny. He candidly admitted how bad the situation was and allowed the press renewed access to every corner of the war. This effort, combined with the success of Petraeus’ new counterinsurgency strategy, “reset” the media’s preconceptions about the war and created a new narrative of returning from the brink. US public opinion followed, and within two years, the American public could once again see the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel.

This turnaround in public opinion finally gave President George W. Bush the political and strategic freedom to chart a course for America's exit from Iraq. In late 2008, the United States and Iraq settled on a security agreement that had US forces leaving Iraqi cities by June 2009, ending combat operations by August 2010, and leaving Iraq by December 2011.

A final change the Vietnam War wrought on the US Army in the Iraq war was the practice of one-year unit rotations. During the Vietnam War, each soldier would rotate into South Vietnam to complete an individual one-year tour. The practice created a host of problems. It was difficult to create cohesive units because of the massive personnel turnover that was constantly taking place. The unit was constantly faced with the imperative of training new soldiers for the rigors of the dangerous combat environment before they were hurt or killed by those dangers. For married soldiers, their families had to carry on alone, without the support of other unit families.

Once it was clear that the US Army was not going to be able to simply declare victory and leave Iraq, the Army leadership, wary of the Vietnam example, decided to rotate entire combat brigades into and out of theater. This solved the problem of training new soldiers; they would all train together—first at their home station and then in Iraq, under the guidance of the departing unit—before being fully exposed to the dangers of combat. Each brigade's families, supported by a military rear detachment, could lean on one another for support while their soldiers were deployed.

Yet this practice also created problems that the US Army was never able to solve throughout the Iraq war. On the eve of the War on Terrorism, the US military had conceived and implemented a process called Army Force Generation (ARFORGEN) in which units would go through a "life cycle" of resetting, training, and becoming available for deployment. The massive demand on the small, all-volunteer Army for personnel in Iraq turned this cycle—which began to be sarcastically referred to as Iraq-FORGEN—into a brutal merry-go-round of training, deployment, and redeployment that wreaked havoc on soldiers and their families. Moreover, the complex environment of Iraq, simply put, took more than a year to effectively understand. Every year US forces switched out, but Iraqi politicians, security leaders, sheikhs, and of course insurgents never left. No matter how good the transfer of information from old unit to new, each new force that arrived in Iraq had to contend with a three- to

four-month “memory gap” in which all of these Iraqi stakeholders were able to exploit American ignorance to advance their own interests.

Six years of war in Iraq had profoundly transformed the US Army as well. The Americans who entered Iraq in March 2003 led with heavily armored M1 Abrams main battle tanks and M2 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles, but trailed with unarmored, thin-skinned trucks and high-mobility multiwheeled vehicles (HMMWVs, pronounced “hum-vees”). The soldiers mostly wore woodland-patterned camouflage and nothing for protection but a Kevlar helmet. If they were lucky, they had desert camouflage and a flak vest. They fought with the massive firepower and lightning speed of Air-Land Battle, with little consideration for security in rear areas. The Iraqi populace was an obstacle to be bypassed on the way to finding and killing massed formations of Iraqi soldiers.

The US Army that had emerged by mid-2009 would have been unrecognizable to the same soldiers six years before. The Americans had parked their tanks or shipped them back to the United States. In their place, heavily armored HMMWVs and mine-resistant armored personnel vehicles (MRAPs, a sort of huge, armored bus) now lumbered about the battlefield, seldom slowing or stopping on their way from place to place. When they did stop, heavily armored soldiers, with high-tech digital camouflage, state-of-the-art body armor, and precision optics atop M4 carbines, stepped out onto a complex battlefield, equally prepared to close with and destroy the enemy, engage in politics with local sheikhs and imams, or plan projects to rebuild infrastructure. This was the military force that US Marine general Charles Krulak had envisioned in the 1990s when he predicted his “three-block war” (in which forces would be fighting, doing peacekeeping, and engaging in humanitarian assistance, all “within the space of three contiguous city blocks”). This was the counterinsurgency US Army.

The Dragon Brigade (4th Brigade, 1st Infantry Division) was conceived in the darkest days of the Iraq war. In 2004, as the demand for personnel in Iraq was becoming acute, the US Army began an effort it called “growing the Army,” in which it created additional brigade combat teams (self-contained, multifunctional Army units of around 3,000 soldiers that could deploy as independent, modular units, without their parent headquarters). The Dragon Brigade, established in January 2006 at Fort Riley, Kansas, was an incremental step in this effort.

The brigade was created from scratch, with personnel and equipment flowing into the unit throughout 2006. The brigade was not scheduled to deploy until 2008, but the demand of the Iraq surge, combined with the campaigning of the brigade's first commander, Col. Ricky Gibbs, convinced the Army to rush them into the fight. They were still receiving equipment even after they arrived in the toughest areas of Baghdad in February 2007. The unit's deployment was extended to fifteen months, and it saw some of the toughest fighting of the surge, losing nearly one hundred soldiers during its deployment. In the process, it also established itself as one of the toughest light infantry brigades in the conventional Army.

Due to the desperate demand for ground troops during the surge, the Dragon Brigade's field artillery battalion, Task Force Patriot (2nd Battalion, 32nd Field Artillery), parked its towed howitzers and joined the other combat arms battalions of the brigade as a ground maneuver force. The battalion was stationed in the Mansour district of Baghdad, just across Route Irish from its sister battalion, Task Force Black Lions (1st Battalion, 28th Infantry). (Route Irish was the road from the coalition's fortified "Green Zone" to the Baghdad International Airport—BIAP—often referred to at the time as the deadliest road on earth due to the constant threat of IEDs.) The battalion was split from the Dragon Brigade and attached to the Strike Brigade (2nd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division).

Task Force Patriot got its name from its battalion crest (an insignia worn on the beret and dress uniform of every soldier in the battalion), which bore the words "Proud Americans," a moniker also frequently used to identify the battalion. This battalion had last seen combat in South Vietnam, including participation in the incursion into Cambodia in 1970, before being deactivated in the mid-1970s. Now it was back in the thick of the fight, but without its big guns.

While the rest of the Dragon Brigade saw heavy casualties, Task Force Patriot had no soldiers killed, though tragically its commander was gravely wounded. Lt. Col. Greg Gadson, Patriot 6, was traveling to a sister battalion to attend a memorial for fallen soldiers when his up-armored HMMWV was struck by an explosively formed projectile (EFP, a particularly lethal form of IED). Lt. Col. Gadson was evacuated from Iraq and lost both legs. He was replaced by Lt. Col. Mike Lawson, who commanded Task Force Patriot for the remainder of its deployment.

As soon as the Dragon Brigade returned from Iraq, it was back on the Iraq-FORGEN treadmill. Over the next year, from summer 2008 to

summer 2009, the vast majority of its personnel changed, including all of its battalion commanders and the brigade commander. Its equipment was refurbished and reissued, and it hurriedly prepared for its next deployment. While the Dragon Brigade was slated for deployment to Iraq, there were strong indications that it might be diverted to Afghanistan. As a result, the brigade spent considerable energy preparing for that war; the Proud Americans fired over 10,000 artillery rounds, training to provide artillery fires, rather than maneuver forces, in Afghanistan. Throughout the brigade's training, personnel and equipment continued to arrive and be hastily integrated into the unit.

It was not until just before the brigade's capstone training event, its mission readiness exercise (MRX) at the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, California, that the Dragon Brigade staff finally concluded that the brigade would indeed go to Iraq and that the Proud Americans battalion would indeed be a maneuver unit. With only three months left until deployment, Task Force Patriot had to hastily reorganize and retrain, a process its sister infantry battalions had had a year to complete.

It was at this time that I joined Task Force Patriot as its S3 (operations officer). I was a relatively senior major to be beginning the job because of the strange course my Army career had taken to that point.

I had been an observer/controller (O/C, a kind of coach/grader) at the NTC at Fort Irwin when the Iraq war began. Back then, the training center was still training Army forces to fight Air-Land Battle, to face off against Soviets in the plains of West Germany, despite the fact that the Soviet Union had collapsed over a decade before.

We O/Cs were out in the Mojave Desert, training the first Stryker brigade (a highly digitized, networked, interconnected, motorized light infantry brigade), when the Marines pulled down the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad. We grumbled, sure we were going to miss the whole war. However, once it became clear that the US Army was in for a long, grueling conflict, NTC began a startling transformation into a guerilla warfare laboratory. This was the front line of the Army's journey from Air-Land Battle to Effects-Based Operations to counterinsurgency. None of that made us feel any better about being trapped there for three-year tours while our peers went off to fight the war.

I finally made my escape by going to the yearlong US Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC) in its first winter class since

World War II (a side effect of the sudden demand for majors in the war). During the course, I became fascinated with the changing face of war and decided to take a detour from the normal Army officer path of progression. I applied for the US Army School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS), both an educational institution and a think tank for emerging doctrinal concepts and military theory. I was accepted but would not be able to begin for seven months after the end of CGSC.

I finally saw my chance to deploy and finagled a short, six-month tour in Iraq. It was a three-way “drug deal” between the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL, which wanted to capture lessons from the senior headquarters in Iraq); SAMS (which wanted me to do research for my projected monograph, a requirement of the course); and MNF-I (which was happy to have free labor). I was told before I arrived that I would work in the information operations (IO) cell, which was related to my proposed monograph topic. When I arrived, I discovered that they wanted me to help create an IO cell—Gen. George Casey Jr., then commander of MNF-I, had abolished his, and his staff wanted to build a new one before Gen. David Petraeus arrived. After spending the first three months of 2007 standing up the IO cell, I snuck my way onto the Joint Strategic Assessment Team, a cast of luminaries (including legends like Col. H. R. McMaster and Ambassador Robert Ford) assembled by Gen. Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker to create a plan for implementing the surge in Iraq.

After Iraq, it was back to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, for SAMS. The emerging concept that was being incubated within its walls was “operational design,” a postcounterinsurgency method for understanding, identifying, and solving problems on a complex, ever-changing battlefield. It rejected the certitude and mechanical planning of conventional military operations and instead advocated a sort of iterative experimentation to achieve success in an environment of ill-defined problems. It is difficult to overstate what a departure this thinking was from the traditional planning paradigm that had informed military planning since the age of Napoleon. For a military culture that rewards decisive, even audacious action, deliberation and “looking before you leap” was revolutionary.

Nor can I overstate the profound effect this new way of thinking had on me when, following SAMS and a mercifully short obligatory stint as a division planner, I was let out of purgatory to join the Proud Americans. I was a bit long in the tooth for a battalion S3, but no less eager to rejoin the fight. I arrived just in time to travel with the battalion to NTC and then deploy Task Force Patriot to Iraq.

Ad Dawr

The weeks before Task Force Patriot (2nd Battalion, 32nd Field Artillery) deployed to Iraq were a flurry of activity. After the battalion returned from the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, California, an inevitable engine groaned to life, pulling us through the myriad of activities that had to be completed to move our 350-man organization from Fort Riley, Kansas, to Camp Buehring, Kuwait, and then on to northern Iraq. After four years of deploying brigades to Iraq and Afghanistan, this engine had not exactly become a well-oiled machine, but it did move soldiers from here to there. There were records to update and inoculations to receive. There was last-minute equipment and personnel to receive. There were connexes (large metal shipping containers) to load and move to the rail yard, and barracks and headquarters buildings to close.

But, for the staff of Task Force Patriot, the most important task was planning what the battalion would do once it arrived in Iraq, how it would fight its little corner of the war. The first challenge was figuring out exactly what corner of Iraq that would be. The Dragon Brigade (4th Brigade, 1st Infantry Division) had known for a year (rumors of an Afghanistan diversion aside) what brigade it would replace in Iraq; it would go to the Salah ad Din province to replace the Bronco Brigade (3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division)—like the Dragon Brigade, a light infantry brigade—from Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. A short survey of the Secret Internet Protocol Router Network (SIPRNet, a sort of secret version of the World Wide Web only accessible by the US government and select