

After Action Report: COIN Operations in Rutbah, Iraq

By Lieutenant Dan Alldridge, U.S. Marine Corps

IN JANUARY 2008, as a lieutenant in 2d Battalion, 11th Marines, 1st Marine Division, I was deployed as part of a Provisional Civil Affairs Group attached to Regimental Combat Team-5. Upon receipt of the mission, I was assigned a team and an Area of Operations (AO) that consisted of 10 Marines and the city of Rutbah in western Anbar Province in Iraq. I turned immediately to the Army and Marine Corps' 2006 counterinsurgency manual, Field Manual 3-24 (FM 3-24)/ Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5 (MCWP 3-33.5).

This article first outlines key stages of a CounterInsurgency (COIN) fight as laid out in FM 3-24/ MCWP 3-33.5. From this foundation, the article focuses on my actions to execute counterinsurgency operations through each stage in Rutbah. The concluding section offers some critiques and realities that influenced my work through the deployment. My experience is limited to 2008 and 2009 within Rutbah, but hopefully the lessons learned by my team will be utilized by future civil affairs teams deployed throughout the Middle East.

Counterinsurgency

FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 outlines three stages of a counterinsurgency operation. The goal of the first stage is to "protect the population, break the insurgents' initiative and momentum, and set the conditions for further engagement." This first stage sets the foundation for the counterinsurgency force.

FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 emphasizes in the second stage utilizing the conditions set by the first to "develop and build resident capability and capacity in the Host Nation (HN) government and security forces." It is in this stage that the manual lays out Logical Lines of Operation (LLOs) as a focal point: "each LLO represents a conceptual category along which the HN government and COIN force commander intend to attack the insurgent strategy and establish HN government legitimacy." My team's primary focus was in the governance, economic, and essential services LLOs.

In addition to these three LLOs, the task force we were in direct support of worked across the security and communication LLOs. FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 notes that during this stage "the host nation increases its legitimacy through providing security, expanding effective government, providing essential services, and achieving incremental success in meeting public expectations."

Finally, the third stage is the battle handover of the LLOs. FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 states that the goal "is to transition responsibility for COIN operations to HN leadership." According to FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5, as separate LLOs move toward a state of relative functionality, the counterinsurgency must move into a more "supporting role." It is through these latter two stages and the LLOs that this article will address the accomplishments, shortcomings, and difficulties in my team's COIN fight.

Governance

The goal of stage one had already been met when we arrived, allowing us to focus on building and developing the local government. As we began work in Rutbah, we were already falling in on an established local government; there was an elected mayor and all city council member seats were filled. Our immediate focus was on finding the key leaders that would help progress the city along. We were able to identify several individuals that became vital to our success in the city. We did, however, run into those less supportive of our presence. These hard liners were only interested in progress that would directly benefit their own personal well-being. The biggest personnel hurdle with which to deal was the current city council president, who maintained direct ties to the local insurgency. During the insurgents' reign in the city, this individual was their puppet head in the local government. Our immediate focus was to help facilitate the council expel him as their president. After months of work with coalition force intelligence as well as the local Iraqi police, we were able to bring up several criminal charges against the now ex-president. With him out of the picture, the council was able to elect a new council president. Fortunately from our point of view, it was one of those key individuals we had identified earlier in the tour.

With the new council president in charge, we shifted our focus on building cohesion between the city council, mayor and city department Directorate Generals (DGs). The only way to make progress in the city was for these three entities to cooperate with one another. By developing appropriate city council sub-committees to partner with specific DGs, we were able to ensure weekly interaction between the two. On top of keeping the council informed, the DGs were also able to request support from the council on future projects and funding requirements. Just as with all our work so far, there were a few speed bumps. A fair amount of the DGs knew little about the departments of which they were in charge. This is in part due to appointments by past officials based on familial and tribal ties versus professional advancement in the particular field. With these open lines of communication, however, we were able to make informed decisions on the type of projects we would be completing in the city.

Project development with the city council and DGs became a significant focus of my team's tour. With the use of a projects sub-committee, we were able to establish a project flow that facilitated communication between all levels of the local and provincial government. Before any project was proposed to my team, it had already been through the local project submission process. Between the local DG and city council, a project idea would develop. From the idea, the local government engineers would create a scope of work outlining what specifically the project would entail. After reviewing the scope, the projects committee would then invite local contractors to bid on the project. It was at this point that my team would sit down with the projects committee to discuss the selection of the contractor for that project. Once approved, the projects committee would be responsible for day-to-day oversight of the project, with my team conducting weekly inspections to ensure payments were warranted. Through our weekly projects committee meeting, we were able to develop projects that fit inside the larger government of Iraq projects planned for the district.

It is within this system that my team was able to transition to the third stage of strategic oversight. The council and the

DGs now have a process in place to cycle projects through with minimal need for coalition force support or funding.

Essential Services

As our work with the projects committee continued to take shape, the primary focus of our projects was on providing essential services to the city. Due to the lack of government funding outside of directed projects, the local DGs did not have an ability to do work on their own. This is where my team was able to greatly affect the ability of the local government to provide essential services for its citizens. Through the city council sub-committees mentioned above, we were able to work one on one with local DGs. This relationship gave the DGs control over what projects should be funded.

As our bond developed, so did the effectiveness of our projects. In one instance, the local DG of electricity was given 33 electrical transformers to install throughout the city. The government, however, failed to provide his department with all the essential items needed to hook up the transformers. Upon his request, my team developed a project to provide all necessary equipment to hook the transformers into the local power grid. With the transformers in place, the department was able to provide 80% of the population with access to the national power grid, compared with the 50% prior to the new transformer installation. It was only through this joint effort that we were able to see our projects have the greatest impact on the city.

This close relationship also facilitated my team's transparency in the process. By allowing the local DG to inspect and control the work, the public saw its own officials out in the city. Building the rapport between government officials and citizens was extremely important in a city that has been plagued with corrupt leaders. By taking a coalition face off the project, we were able to avoid the "save the day" label with the local populous.

Although not all essential services are fully functioning, the work with the local DGs has allowed the primary responsibility of providing services to shift from coalition forces to the local

leadership.

Economics

Due to the security limitations in the city, our influence on the local economy was unfortunately mostly negative. The city was and still is being controlled by two checkpoints that limit traffic flow in and out. This has put a strain on the local economy and its ability to mature. The city has historically been a stopping point on the Baghdad to Damascus highway; however, with the checkpoints this commerce has slowed over the years. Instead, the business has been pushed to gas stations and markets just off the interstate. Over time, the security in the city has progressed to a point where the checkpoints are manned and controlled solely by the Iraqi police.

Although our team was limited in the resources we were able to provide individual business owners, we did have a significant impact on a government owned enterprise. Through our work with the projects committee, we identified the city's neglected slaughterhouse as a source of income for the area. After several months of work on the site and some word of mouth advertising in the city, the Rutbah slaughterhouse was reopened. The success of the slaughterhouse is limited not just to economics, but it also has the added bonus of bettering public health by taking the slaughtering off the streets.

Recent attempts at economic growth have been through the use of micro grants in the city to help stimulate the economy. These grants are given to local business owners that have been identified as a trusted friend of the city. Due to our short duration and experience with the grants, it is hard to assess how they will affect the city in the long run. Currently, they have been a resource to immediately reopen a business and provide employment opportunities.

With the improved security and more reliable essential services, conditions have been set in the city for economic growth. It will be up to the local entrepreneurs and business owners to exploit these conditions for continued expansion.

Conclusion

My team's work with the local government of Rutbah has been extremely challenging and frustrating. It would be a mistake to state that our work in Rutbah has beaten the insurgency. We were not able to solve all the problems that plague the city. Nevertheless, across our different LLOs we have been able to see small improvements in the quality of life in Rutbah. As my team worked through the deployment, we identified targets of opportunity and engaged them as effectively as we could. Our work across each LLO allowed us to accomplish several objectives while setting the city up for future success. It is my hope that the conditions we have set in Rutbah will allow the local leadership to further mature through its own capacity.

First Lieutenant Dan Alldridge graduated from Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville with a degree in Criminal Justice Studies and received his commission through OCS on August 11, 2006. After completing The Basic School in March 2007, First Lieutenant Alldridge attended the Field Artillery Officer Basic Course at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Upon graduating from Fort Sill, he reported to 1st Battalion, 11th Marines. After only a week at 1/11, he was assigned to Detachment 1, 2d Battalion, 11th Marines, Provisional Civil Affairs Group. From January 2008 through February 2009, he served as a civil affairs team leader in support of seven different battalion task forces under RCT-5 and RCT-8 in Rutbah, Iraq and later in Ninawa Province. Upon completion of the tour with Detachment 1, First Lieutenant Alldridge returned to 2d Battalion, 11th Marines and was assigned to G Battery.