

Reminiscing about Iraq

...and wondering about our own border

BY ALLAN WALL

In 2005, I was deployed to Iraq with the Texas Army National Guard, 36th Infantry Division. Our unit was sent to Iraq two years after the initial invasion. In 2005, the American and coalition troops deployed there were engaged in various aspects of what could be described as occupation duty. Iraq had plenty of violence that year, as insurgents attacked the coalition, and various Iraqi factions fought each other. Therefore, the focus on security was paramount.

Infrastructure-wise, it was impressive to see what the U.S. occupation had accomplished by 2005.

The size and scope of the American military presence was enormous. In a scant two and a half years, the U.S. occupation had made its physical mark on Iraqi territory. The American presence included a vast complex of over 100 military bases and installations throughout the country.

Obviously, these bases had to be supported and supplied, under hostile conditions. Thus there existed a vast network of highways over which the bases were supplied by fleets of supply trucks escorted by military vehicles in convoys. The convoys were in danger from attacks by insurgents and their IEDs (improvised explosive devices), requiring even more security. Convoy duty actually became the riskiest assignment in the operation.

In some respects the situation was similar to that of U.S. Army cavalry posts in the Old West. Interestingly, the area “outside the wire” of the military bases was sometimes referred to as “Indian Country.”

The vast host of personnel tasked with defending and supplying this vast complex of bases was also enormous. It included U.S. military personnel, Iraqi military personnel, troops from coalition allies, civilian employees, private contractors, and contract laborers often hailing from the Indian subcontinent.

The entire system was in a constant state of flux.

Personnel were rotated in and out while base facilities were constantly upgraded through various construction projects.

In 2005 there were coalition troops from 26 other nations helping us in Iraq. Assembling an effective military coalition involves careful planning and coordination.

Coalition armies were deployed in Iraq in their own units, wearing their own uniforms, bearing their own weapons, using their own equipment, flying their own national and unit flags, and operating under their own chains of command. But they were all part of a coordinated military effort.

Military elements from various countries would work together and support each other on specific operations. This was obvious from the very beginning of our tour, when we were flown from Kuwait to Iraq in a South Korean Air Force C-130.

Iraq was divided into more manageable sections known as “divisions.” Each nation’s military was assigned an area of responsibility. This was to avoid duplication, confusion, and “friendly fire” incidents.

For most of my tour, I was posted at Tallil Air Base, which was under U.S. Air Force jurisdiction. Our Army National Guard unit had responsibility for a smaller base nearby. The Italian military was responsible for the rest of the province, while the British sector was not far away.

Besides the various military forces, there were organizations of civilian contractors who provided various services. These included armed security units which weren’t officially military.

In the U.S. Army, each soldier has a specific MOS (Military Occupational Specialty). This is an individual soldier’s job in the Army, the one for which he is trained.

After deployment to Iraq, though, it soon became clear that one’s MOS was now irrelevant. The soldier would perform any task that was deemed necessary, whether he was trained for it beforehand or not.

Plus, the specific training we had received to prepare us for Iraq wasn’t always directly relevant. For example, in our stateside training in the months before arriving in Iraq, we had been trained in how to react to

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**UPPER LEFT: The entrance to a U.S. military base in Iraq (2005);
UPPER RIGHT: Allan Wall on a Guard Tower, Iraq (2005);
CENTER LEFT: Early stage of the security fence we built;
CENTER RIGHT: Later state of the security fence we built;
LOWER LEFT: Allan Wall, Euphrates River, Iraq (2005);
LOWER RIGHT: Allan Wall, guard tower, Iraq (2005).**

an IED in a convoy. By the time we got to Iraq, the rules had been changed. Really though, there is no “good way” to respond to an IED. You could do everything “right” and still die, or everything wrong and live. It really depended upon where you were at the moment.

During my deployment, I performed a variety of tasks at different times. It did give me a broader perspective of the operation.

Upon reflection, almost every mission I performed in Iraq had something to do with security.

I served some time in guard towers and in supervising them. Soldiers pulled eight-hour shifts on guard towers, and they had to be fed, checked on, and replaced.

Patrols were carried out in pairs of armed Humvees in the countryside. These were presence patrols, designed to be seen, demonstrating that we were the authority. Patrols might include searching a vehicle or setting up a checkpoint.

Another security task was guarding the gate of a military base, which controls entrances and exits.

For a month I was tasked to work on the construction of a fence around a base. Three of us guardsmen were selected for the task, and quickly trained by a military engineer in how to construct a fence. I had worked on fences back on the farm, but they were to keep cows out or in. Fencing for human infiltrators must be more complex. Our fence had a strand of barbed wire and three strands of concertina wire.

In the afternoon we worked with the aid of regular U.S. Army soldiers, and in the morning with Iraqi civilians. I had learned some rudimentary Arabic so was able to serve as a translator. At the end of the month, we had constructed a rather stout fence. I wonder what it looks like now, and how those Iraqi workers are.

After that mission, I was posted with a U.S. Air Force security unit as a liaison of the Army, which gave me a broader view of things. One night I received a call from a U.S. Marine whose vehicle had broken down in the British sector, so I contacted the British Army and requested their assistance. That’s how it worked.

My next mission was serving as a liaison with the Italian Army. I was representing the U.S. Army so we wouldn’t have any friendly fire incidents, and we never did. The Italians were very professional and also knew how to have a good time, even cooking their own pizzas in Iraq. One night, my National Guard unit, carrying out a ground operation, requested and received air support from the Italian Air Force, which I was able to arrange. They were good allies.

I was posted for most of my tour on the large Talil Air Base, which had originally been an Iraqi base in the Saddam era. This base was well-fortified and well-equipped, but once again, much of the assignment there revolved around security. Security guards were encoun-

tered entering the base, and departing the base. The ruins of Ur, the hometown of Abraham, were within the base’s security perimeter, and the ziggurat of Ur was almost hit during a rocket attack one night.

Protocol could be changed in response to potential security threats. For example, when a suicide bomber blew himself up in the dining facility of another U.S. base, the word went out: no photographs can be taken in a cafeteria, lest insurgents use them to plan another such attack.

Our base had good telephone and Internet connection with the outside world. We had been instructed, however, not to be too specific in reporting on military operations. Occasionally a certain unit was forbidden from communicating for a short time.

Security is a multi-layered operation. A military base had fences around it, but just putting up a fence is not sufficient to keep out infiltrators. It also has to be watched 24/7. Thus there were guard towers which had to be manned day and night. There were patrols in the area outside the base. Security was also required upon entries to such installations as the cafeteria and the PX (a store) on base. Soldiers were to be vigilant, even during leisure time.

The occupation phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom was an enormous enterprise, and though I personally only saw a small part of it, I could sense that I was a part of something big.

The operation even worked on securing the borders of Iraq. While I was in Kuwait waiting to be sent into Iraq, I read a *Stars and Stripes* article about how the U.S. Marines had built or rebuilt several dozen Iraqi border forts. They had recruited an Iraqi border force to guard Iraq’s borders with Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Interestingly, when the Marines brought Iraqi soldiers to a particular sector of the Iraqi border to guard it, they intentionally brought Iraqis who weren’t from that particular region, so they’d be less prone to corruption. I thought it was fascinating that the U.S. military would work hard to secure the border of Iraq while the then-government of George W. Bush was lax about border security and encouraging of illegal immigration.

It’s now 2014. The U.S. military was withdrawn from Iraq in 2011, though a smaller contingent of personnel has been sent back to Iraq this year under an entirely new mission.

Iraq may be breaking up. As for its borders with Syria and Jordan, they are mainly under the control of the Islamic State Army.

Veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom are saddened by how Iraq has turned out. The country’s fate has been determined by several factors, including the artificial nature of Iraq itself, its ethnic divisions, and the Islamic issues. Dreams of democracy were not enough.

Nevertheless, at the height of the U.S. occupation of which I was a small part, I saw firsthand the enormous investment the United States government made in Iraq. Whatever was needed for the mission was provided. The U.S. government sent the manpower, the weapons, the vehicles, the equipment — it was all brought in, obtained there or constructed if necessary.

Although besieged by insurgency, the U.S. was able to maintain an enormous occupation in the Middle East, thousands of miles away, for years. Why can't it secure its own border with Mexico?

Open borders boosters go berserk when the possible militarization of the U.S.-Mexican border is mentioned (despite the fact that the Mexican side is already militarized). Yet how would a militarized border be worse than the current violent no-man's land?

The U.S.-Mexican border currently is beset by thousands of illegal invaders from various countries, drug smugglers, Mexican military incursions, and who knows who else. It's a border where people are routinely murdered and die of thirst in the desert. This is worse than an orderly militarization by the U.S. military?

The only logical conclusion is that our leaders don't secure the border because they don't have the will to do so. We have the manpower, the equipment, the technology, the weaponry. All we lack is the political will at the top. Our own government does not want to secure the border and actively sabotages any attempt to do so. That's what we're up against. ■

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