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**Presenter: Brigadier General John P. Basilica, Commander of 256th Brigade Combat Team, Louisiana National Guard, Assigned to Task Force Baghdad, Multinational Corps-Iraq**

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**Defense Department Special Briefing**

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MR. WHITMAN: General Basilica, this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me?

GEN. BASILICA: Yes, Bryan, I can hear you fine. Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, General, for joining us this morning. And good morning to the Pentagon press corps.

Our briefer today is Brigadier General John P. Basilica. General Basilica is the commander of the 256th Brigade Combat Team, Louisiana National Guard. This brigade is in the process of completing its deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, where it's been part of Task Force Baghdad for the past year, with the 1st Cav [Cavalry] Division initially and now with the 3rd Infantry Division.

I had an opportunity to talk to the general yesterday and I have to tell you, the accomplishments that that unit has achieved in the last year are tremendous and they have an awful lot to be proud of. And as we all know, they are coming home to a difficult situation back here in the United States, also.

The general would like to start with an overview of what his unit has been doing in Iraq and then will take some questions from you.

So with that, sir, why don't I turn it over to you.

GEN. BASILICA: Thank you all for being here. And I appreciate the opportunity to give you an overview about the deployment of the 256th Brigade Combat Team, the Tiger Brigade. About 18 months ago the brigade was mobilized for combat in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The brigade is made up mostly of Louisiana National Guard soldiers, but we were also supplemented with soldiers from the state of New York, mostly infantry from a very storied unit, the 69th Infantry, which I'll talk about a little bit more. We also received some soldiers from Minnesota, from Illinois, state of Washington and Wisconsin, most notably.

This team was formed in the May time frame of 2004. And it is a unit that is one of the Army's enhanced separate brigades, and as such, we were fortunate to have a degree of additional resources for our training prior to our mobilization. As an enhanced brigade, we were afforded all of the opportunities that most of the active component units receive. We were afforded the opportunity to go to the National Training Center, which is the premier collective training event for any combat formation. We trained for that. We received additional resources and monies. We were able to go to additional schools and training, and all of that set the framework and the foundation, I think, for the performance that we were able to achieve on the battlefield.

When we were mobilized, we received the other units from out of state. The 69th Infantry is a unit that is from the Manhattan area, for the most part. They are a unit that responded immediately in their state capacity to Ground Zero during 9/11. They moved immediately. Most of them spent a year doing that type of service, and then turned right around and came to combat with us.

Our relationship, ironically, goes back to the Civil War, where we were on the opposite sides of that particular fight. But this time we were shoulder-to-shoulder, and those soldiers certainly kept us motivated and reminded us why we were in Iraq and -- because we were attacked in America, and we were there to protect and take the fight to those that would threaten our security and our freedoms.

So with that, we went to Fort Hood. We spent approximately five months there going through training. We received all of the latest equipment that the Army had to offer, the very best. We trained on it. We gained proficiency with it. We trained together as teams. We cross-attached and became a very, very cohesive unit. And then without any delay and without any difficulties, we had a very smooth deployment into the theater, where we attached initially to the 1st Cavalry Division.

We have been part of Task Force Baghdad for the entire year that we have been here, and our tour has been marked with a great deal of adaptability in that we have had to move around that task force area of responsibility. And in the last 12 months, we have almost had responsibilities for just about every square inch of battlespace west of the Tigris River at some point or another. So we have moved around, both in a rural setting, and now we are just leaving a very urbanized setting.

So the soldiers achieved a level of proficiency and confidence. They were very flexible and adapted every day to the situations that were presented to them. And again, I think that that was a tribute to the training that we did receive prior to our coming.

Much of what we were able to accomplish, we did across what we refer to as all of the lines of operations, and there are five that we do focus on.

The first is combat operations. Clearly, we were in some of the most dangerous and hostile areas that we operated in in Task Force Baghdad, and we were in some very, very difficult areas when we first arrived. And in just about every case, what we were able to do was provide positive results.

The area that we first deployed into was a very rural area, which was a place where most of the enemy forces would cache and stage their attacks. It was a place where they used to fire lots of rockets and mortars. As a result of very aggressive patrolling and offensive operations in those areas, most of that was reduced, and we had very, very positive results.

We had mostly offensive operations the entire time we have been in the battlespace. We've had over 1,000 suspected insurgents that have been captured; 500 of them -- based on the quality of the work that the soldiers have done in terms of being able to provide the evidence that's necessary to retain these suspected terrorists -- all of that good work has earned them trips to the Abu Ghraib prison, where they await trial in CCCI, the Combined (sic: Central) Criminal Court of Iraq. We have prosecuted almost 10 percent of those, and they

have a very, very high success rate. So these are individuals that have been convicted of these crimes and are now being incarcerated in the Iraqi prison.

In addition, the combat operations that have been successful in terms of raids, the brigade and some of its units were responsible and participated in the very, very good story of releasing the Australian hostage Mr. Wood. That was certainly a highlight of combat operations force. In addition, we have had very good luck in terms of keeping the MSRs [main supply route] open. We are finding about as many of the Improvised Explosive Devices as we are -- as are detonating. We have the latest equipment, the Buffalo IED -- counter-IED device. We've found over 50 IEDs with that device, so the technology is certainly helping us. And we just have had a lot of momentum. And I would tell you that the battlespace is clearly a safer place, and we do have the insurgency on the run.

All of that, clearly the highlight during our period there was the elections in January. We played a key role in providing security in the zone, so that the Iraqi people could vote, and they've voted in droves. This has given them the momentum, moved right into the formation of the constitution, and as we leave, we have set conditions for what we are sure to be a very positive referendum on the October 15th.

The other line of operation that we're particularly proud of is that we've had a key role in training Iraqi security forces. From day one, we've had a partnership with the 1st Iraqi Brigade. Now, this is the first brigade that has developed to such a point that they now control their own independent battlespace as part of Task Force Baghdad. We actually have two brigades that we're working with, the 1st and the 3rd, and they have had tremendous progress in the year that we have been here, such that they control a large segment of the battlespace in downtown Baghdad.

They are now producing qualified noncommissioned officers. They have noncommissioned officer education systems. They are recruiting and training women into their formations. They are very progressive, and we couldn't be prouder of them. They've gone on all of the patrols, and most of the operations that we have been doing since we moved into the urban areas. Those have all been combined operations.

The next line of operation that we were very successful with is in, what we refer to as, essential services. Those are what I think we understand as SWEAT projects: sewer, water, electricity and trash. The brigade during this period there managed over 100 individual projects, \$300 million worth of work. This did two things: it put Iraqis to work, number one; number two, it also provided improved quality of life for the citizens there in Iraq. Both of those things provided confidence to them that their government was beginning to mature and to be able to provide the type of support that they would expect. And again, the Iraqi forces were providing security so that these people could provide these types of services.

Last, but not least, was economic development and governance. In the urban areas it is fairly mature. The Neighborhood Advisory Councils and the District Advisory Councils are meeting regularly. That was something that they could not do because of the security situation when we first arrived. Now it is no longer a problem. They are accountable to their citizenry. They have excellent debates. They hold their public servants accountable. And that is now a very, very mature process in the battlespace that we have responsibility for.

And as far as economic development, we had a very, very successful operation when we were in the rural areas initially to help the farmers restore their agricultural industry. And we provided seed and fertilizer, some expertise, and then a large tractor issue with generators. And that is paying big dividends as the agriculture industry in our part of the area has now been able to improve itself.

So all told, I would tell you that it's been a very eventful 12 months that the 256 has been in the theater. We are appreciative to the great support that we received from the two active component divisions, the 1st Cavalry and the 3rd Infantry Division, during our stay here. And we are very proud of the contributions that we have made to the effort, and we are very, very optimistic about the future for the Iraqi people.

At this point we are ready to redeploy back to Louisiana. Clearly, the disaster there because of Hurricane Katrina leaves us a challenge that we do face. Again, in the irony of the relationship that we've had with our New York brothers in the 69th, they had a catastrophe to deal with before they went to combat, now we have one that we have to face after combat. We are more than up to the task. We are very, very well trained and have fought hurricanes before and have performed recovery operations in the past. This one is on a scale and a scope that we've never seen. And there's a tremendous amount of suffering that's going on, and our hearts go out to our fellow citizens in Louisiana. We are not far away. We're about ready to come home and to lend a hand. We have a significant number of soldiers in the brigade that are ready to transition from this fight to that fight and hope to provide some relief to the people in Louisiana.

With that, I will turn it back over to Bryan and we can begin with some questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you. Let's go ahead and get started here. Will?

Q General, this is Will Dunham with Reuters. Can you tell me how many of the soldiers in your brigade are going to be playing a role in disaster relief in Louisiana? And what specific role do you think your brigade is going to be playing in the disaster relief effort?

GEN. BASILICA: Well, what we know right now is several things. The first thing, which I believe is very, very important, is that we've been assured that as we return home, that each individual soldier is going to be able to make a choice. There are going to be those soldiers whose particular life situation is such that he's going to be able to move immediately from a combat situation to a recovery operation.

And right now, just with a very, very informal poll of the soldiers when I've talked to them, out of about 2,500 soldiers, about 800 have indicated that they are interested in serving in some capacity when we return. About 1,500 have said they are going to go ahead and just come off of active duty and return to their civilian occupations. And then there was about 200 that just did not have enough information to make an informed decision. I think that's what characterizes the situation right now.

As many of you know, there are a lot of National Guard forces as well as some active component forces that are in Louisiana that are very appreciated and are already serving. It will be up to the adjutant general of the state of Louisiana, Major General Landreneau, to find the best use of the brigade.

We are a very flexible force. I think what we certainly bring to the fight is the fact that we have a headquarters that has got a large planning staff, a staff that can solve problems, develop solutions to complex problems. We can command and control large formations, which we did here in combat, both active and reserve, so we're very comfortable doing that. And then again, we can sustain ourselves as a force.

So we believe that we provide a great deal of flexibility to the adjutant general, to the governor, and we'll be prepared to serve in whatever role they feel that we can best make a contribution.

Q May I just follow up briefly? When is the entire unit going to be back home? And have some elements of it already returned?

GEN. BASILICA: Yes, they have. We had approximately -- a little over 500 soldiers from the brigade that were negatively affected themselves personally. Those soldiers have been the priority, and we have adjusted the flow of soldiers out of the theater in consideration of them, to get them home the soonest. There are soldiers in Kuwait, as we speak, that are waiting for their transportation back to the United States. There are soldiers that have already arrived in the United States. So we are in the throes of the redeployment process as we speak, and we've made the necessary adjustments to get the most needy home first, and then provide the next group, which would be the ones that we would hope could have volunteered to support, and then we'll flow the rest in, but all of

it going in accordance with a redeployment process and a structure.

Q General, Jamie McIntyre from CNN. Have you personally been affected by the disaster in Louisiana? And can you also just talk about what's being done to help your soldiers who have suffered either the loss of property or homes or even perhaps still have missing loved ones?

GEN. BASILICA: Yeah, first of all, let me just say that personally, I live and work in Baton Rouge, and I was spared any particular damage to my house and to my family. However, when you have 500 of your soldiers that have been affected as catastrophically, I have to tell you that I feel like I'm very much affected. It saddens me terribly. It's just a terrible thing that they are going to come back from 18 months of sacrifice, where they have risked their lives, and have a disaster of this nature; don't have a home to come back to.

I appreciate the question in that the Army has really -- and the Department of Defense -- stepped up to provide an unprecedented level of support to them. There is a tremendous amount of additional benefits that are being laid out in the -- as I mentioned -- as a menu of options that they can make a choice. There is what is referred to as a Tiger Team. There's an active component brigadier general, General Byrne, is over in Kuwait right now as part of the out-processing. He is briefing my soldiers on some of those benefits that the Army is going to make available, such as safe haven, where there's going to be some housing made available to them. There's a lot of details to that that have yet to be worked out. But the Army is going to take care of its own. And I will tell you that Louisiana does it as well as any state. And we are going to get our arms around these soldiers and make sure that they are taken care of, and then we will take care of the rest of the population that is suffering.

Q General, Lolita Baldor with AP. Can you tell us how many soldiers have already arrived in the United States, and when you expect those in Kuwait to get here?

GEN. BASILICA: There's about 200 that are on the ground as we speak and more flowing in, as I said, by the hour. We do have the 500-plus most seriously affected programmed for all of the earliest flights, and by the evening of the 10th, Louisiana time, if all goes as planned, we should have all of those soldiers back in the United States. Again, but right behind them are more flights of soldiers that will then move to the demobilization process, and then make their own choice about whether or not they're going to be able to continue to serve in a recovery capacity or just return back to their civilian lives.

But we're going to get those soldiers back the first. We're going to provide them with the maximum amount of support. I think what you'll find is they'll be characterized by 500 individual situations that require an individual solution to each. Some will require more services than others. Some have families in Louisiana. Some do not. Either way, we will come up with a plan and come up with the support that they need to help them get their lives back together.

MR. WHITMAN: Jeff?

Q Hi, General. Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes. I just want to make sure I have the numbers correct. You said there are about 2,500 soldiers from the Louisiana National Guard in the brigade of which an informal poll shows 800 are willing to be part of the disaster recover effort and about 1,500 say they're going home?

GEN. BASILICA: That's correct.

Q So the Louisiana National Guard, the unit coming back, hasn't been drafted into the effort? The soldiers themselves can decide whether they want to be a part of the effort?

GEN. BASILICA: That is correct.

Q (Off mike) Can you speak as to why it seems like two-thirds of the unit is going home and one-third is going to the disaster relief?

GEN. BASILICA: Again, what it represents is an opportunity for those soldiers that have just spent 18 months in preparation for and in combat, that they can continue to serve, and in some cases that's a good thing for them in terms of their future employment. The other 1,500 -- there is certainly no negative connotation to the choice that they might make about returning back to their civilian lives. As National Guardsmen, these soldiers in many, many cases have come from small businesses, have come from work environments that have literally hung on by their fingernails until these soldiers have returned. And so they are not being pressed into service. I think what you see is, again, the National Guard family with the leadership right from the national level, from the National Guard Bureau and the Army National Guard, has provided support from our fellow states, which is what we've done in the past when there's been disasters in other states. We work as a national team, and we are now in a position where we can rely on some others to assist us. They're there; they're available. And so having the choice, we believe, is an appropriate course of action here.

Q General, this is Scott Foster with NBC. The soldiers who do decide to assist in recovery, are they going to stay on their active-duty status or would they be transferred to the control of the governor?

GEN. BASILICA: The plan right now is for them to go to a Title 32 [state] status.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike.)

Q General, an Iraq question. The 69th, which is under your control, at one point had the airport road. Is the airport road, Route Irish, still under your oversight, or was it recently? And what's the status of the safety for Iraqis and Americans using that road?

GEN. BASILICA: Yes, it was under my control up until recently when -- as we did our transfer of authority with other units and turned it over. And yes, the 69th was under my command and control, and they were the ones responsible for its security.

I think if you check the record in terms of the numbers of attacks and if you would look at some of the improvements that have been made to the physical surroundings in terms of the interchanges and some of the checkpoints that we've put in, have had an extremely beneficial effect on that road. And attacks are down.

And we also have another success story in that we've got Iraqi special police who during our period here we brought them into that fight, and we now work shoulder to shoulder with them on that very, very important main route. So what you've seen since their arrival, the Iraqis, and the additional improvements that we've made to the road during the period of time that the 69th controlled it, the number of attacks have gone down. It's been a safer road. I believe that the significant activities and the attacks would prove that out as far as the numbers are concerned.

MR. WHITMAN: We have time for one or two more. Will, why don't you go ahead.

Q General, Will Dunham with Reuters again. Just to return to an earlier question, when will the entirety of the unit return home? And also, how much earlier than previously scheduled is the unit returning home?

GEN. BASILICA: Well, the only thing that we're doing right now is the Army and everybody is trying to see what they can do to try to increase the aircraft that can accelerate the redeployment of the brigade. We have completely finished our mission. So it's not like we're leaving earlier in terms of what the tour required. The current plan for the flow that was going back to Louisiana was predicated basically on the flow that would go through Fort Polk as we demobilized. Well, and that extended it out over a period of time because there was only

so much capacity there. So it was a much more relaxed flow there.

Now, with these circumstances, what everybody is trying to do is to see the extent to which we can make additional transportation available and speed the process up.

I can't answer your question directly because all of the efforts are under way right now. And to the extent that they're successful, we may be back sooner. As of right now, if we were to just stay on plan, the entire brigade -- well, the vast majority of the brigade would be home somewhere in the neighborhood of the 20th of September.

I have to mention that there's a small group of about 200 that is in the trail party. These are soldiers that are going to remain in Kuwait that are responsible for loading the ship and ensuring that all of our equipment gets back to Louisiana. That's all part of the plan. No difference. Those soldiers, every one of them, have been carefully selected to ensure that they don't have any -- that they can serve on that extended type of an assignment without any negative effects based on the hurricane or their personal lives. So they're set to do that. But the vast majority of the brigade should be back somewhere in the neighborhood of the 20th to the 23rd. We're hopeful that perhaps we can get back a little sooner, if the aircraft can be made available.

MR. WHITMAN: General, I think we'll bring this to a close.

Again, I just want to thank you on behalf of everybody here for taking some time today, and congratulate you for a mission well done over the last 12 months.

And I know that we all wish you and your men the best as you return back to Louisiana, to what is undoubtedly a difficult situation for many of your soldiers.

GEN. BASILICA: Thank you very much.

Again, I appreciate the opportunity to chat with you this morning about the unit and the good work that those soldiers did. They're great Americans. And I would just say to the citizens of Louisiana and Mississippi and the affected region, our prayers are with you, and we'll be home soon.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, General.

GEN. BASILICA: Thank you.

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