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**Presenter: Colonel Robert Brown, Commander of The 1st Brigade, 25th September 14, 2005 11:00 AM EDT
Infantry Division, Multinational Force-Northwest**

Special Defense Department Operational Update Briefing on Operations in Northwest Iraq

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(Note: Colonel Brown appears via teleconference from Mosul, Iraq.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Colonel Brown, this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me?

COL. BROWN: I can hear you, Bryan. Can you hear me?

MR. WHITMAN: I can hear you fine here in the Pentagon briefing room in the Pentagon. Thank you very much for joining this morning. We know that you're very busy, but we also know that you're about to come to the end of your tour in Iraq with your unit, and we appreciate the opportunity to get some perspectives from the commander that's been on the ground for some time now.

Colonel Brown joins us from Mosul. He is the commander of the 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry Division. It is Stryker-equipped. It's a Stryker brigade. And as I said, they're in the process of wrapping up a yearlong deployment there in Iraq, where the unit's been assigned to the Multinational Forces-Northwest up in the Mosul area.

He's going to give you a brief overview of what they've been doing, and then we're going to take some questions. So with that, let me just turn it over to you, Colonel Brown.

COL. BROWN: Okay. Thank you very much for this opportunity.

The Stryker brigade has fought from Fallujah, Baghdad, Euphrates River Valley and then up in the Tigris River Valley and all the way up to Mosul in northern Iraq and out to the border out in Syria over the last year. We're very proud of the soldiers' performance. And two different situations that we faced in our time here -- pre-election and post-election. Prior to the elections last January, we faced a very well-trained foreign fighter and some very intense battles. And what we've seen is a population that was on the fence at that time, to post-election, a population that has absolutely understood that their government, their Iraqi security forces support

them, and the terrorists offer no hope for the future.

One of the great pieces of information we got recently is 80 percent of the al Qaeda network in the north has been devastated. And those are not our figures, those came from the last six leaders in Mosul, al Qaeda leaders that we captured; they informed us of that. We also had a letter that was captured from Abu Zaid (sp) going to Zarqawi. We recently killed Zaid (sp) and we had that letter, and it also talked about the desperate situation for the al Qaeda and the insurgents in Mosul and in the north. And then also, sources we have inside the al Qaeda network up here have also informed us of that.

So we're very proud. We have a situation where the Iraq army is being rebuilt. The Iraqi police that ran away in November are standing and fighting. In fact, they recently found one of the largest caches certainly in the north, and maybe all of Iraq. And they're doing a very good job.

And then we have the population, I think is the most significant change I've seen over the last 11 months, from a population clearly on the fence, not sure -- they want freedom, but they weren't really sure what freedom was, and they were clearly intimidated, to a population that clearly understands they want freedom; they are absolutely sick and tired of the terrorists, the brutal acts against innocent civilians, and they want a brighter future for their children. And we've got a lot of statistics to back that up. Like when we first got here in October, there was -- no hotline existed. We opened a hotline; we got about 40 calls a month prior to January. The last six months, we're up to 400 calls a month. Every day the citizens are stopping us on the street telling us where a potential suspicious individual is who may be a terrorist, and telling us where they tried to plant IEDs and those type of devices. So the population is clearly very confident.

Also, I'm out -- I was out every day over the last 11 months on the ground, and great news about elections up here. You know, we went from last January we weren't sure if we could even have elections. Right now, 80 percent of the folks on the street in Mosul and Nineveh province in the north here say that they will vote. And very interesting -- these are -- many of the folks I talked to are Sunnis who are very upset that they were lied to last election, told not to vote, and they were very excited to vote this election. And I think the biggest challenge is going to be getting enough ballots to the polling sites because so many people want to vote up here.

Finally, the government has really improved their legitimacy. They've had significant economic recovery up here, excellent political participation in Nineveh province from a security council where no one would meet before the last elections to now we recently had a regional security conference with some-300 participants and 400 in the southern part of Nineveh province, so a lot of folks participating, very excited about the future.

So we're very proud of the year here, and our soldiers have worked hard. It has come at a very high cost. We've lost 33 soldiers in the brigade over the past year. Those fallen heroes paid a very big price for liberty, but I will tell you that we are very proud of all our soldiers and how hard they've worked and the great efforts of the whole team up here. And we see the Iraqi forces getting better and the situation improving on a daily basis in Mosul, and it's really the most normal I've seen Mosul since I've been here. The city of 2 million is really at the lowest level of attacks over the last year, and normalcy has come back to the city.

So thanks for this opportunity, and I'm willing to take any questions you have on anything and from my perspective that I can possibly answer for you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for that brief overview. And we'll get right into some questions right here. Charlie, let's start with you.

Q Colonel, Charlie Aldinger with Reuters. Are the Iraqi troops, the army, well enough trained yet to take over?

COL. BROWN: That's such a great question. We have the full gamut or the spectrum of Iraqi troops. We

have some that have taken over and have their own areas of operation. We still are there training with them, but they could do it independently. We have two predominantly Sunni battalions that I would put up against any battalion in Iraq. They're absolutely fantastic. We also have battalions that, I think, are about six to eight months away from taking over their areas of operation. They're just newer battalions. They are going through training.

One of the things that's been, I think, a very significant change -- when I first got here, we did all the training and effort with the Iraqi army. Now, there's these military transition teams. They are fantastic, and they do a great job. There are coalition force soldiers with the Iraqis every single day teaching them about being an army in a democracy, teaching them everything from great staff work to how to become a better army, and I've seen a huge improvement just over the last three months since they've been here. And I think that's going to get us to where we have an Iraqi army that can take over -- as I said, I think up north here -- six to eight months without any issues at all, and we have some that are ready to take over now and predominantly do operations in their area of operations. They do it all themselves with just our occasional advice.

Q Colonel, it's Thom Shanker from The New York Times, sir.

You said something interesting I haven't heard before. You talked about your sources inside the al Qaeda network. Are those people you've captured, people you've sent in to infiltrate, or al Qaeda who have flipped and come to you? And more broadly, as you prepare to depart, how is the insurgency different today than when you arrived?

COL. BROWN: Well, the -- we have about 40 sources in each battalion, and these sources are a real combination. Our best source -- the terrorists killed his relatives, and he doesn't want anything but sheer revenge against these cowardly terrorists that would perform these acts. So we have a number of sources that provide information. We work very hard to develop these sources. Some of them walk right up to you, and some of them, it's passed on from other units -- they've been here.

But the interesting thing is that it gives us a great feel for what the insurgents are doing, what their plans are. They also know that we have sources, and it causes them to be very disruptive. They don't trust anybody within their organization, and they shouldn't because some of these sources have moved up to pretty high-level positions, and it helps us quite a bit.

What was the second part of your question again, sir?

Q How is the state of the insurgency different today than when you arrived to start your mission?

COL. BROWN: There's a significant difference from when we got here last October. Last October, we faced a foreign fighter that was very well-trained. I remember watching attacks out -- we had an attack that involved about 60 foreign fighters in a pretty complex ambush. By complex I mean three or four forms of engagement. They'll hit you with an IED, small arms, mortars -- a very complex attack. We saw that regularly in November and December. We also defeated -- in one of those fights, we killed 40 terrorists, and we did not lose anybody, and we defeated them every time they tried to do that against us. We really worked hard and aggressively at getting out. I mean, we conducted some 2,100 cordon and searches, and thousands of aggressive offensive operations -- 18 attacks a day against the insurgents back in that time period. I remember watching an attack and seeing the insurgents move against us, and I had to look and say, gee, are those our guys or their guys because they're moving very well around buildings. Now, that was November and December. What we saw is that that's faded away very quickly, as we captured and killed. And we killed some 550 enemy and captured over 3,000.

And as we got to February and March, we saw a completely different foreign fighter. We've captured Libyans. We've captured Saudi, Yemenis, Algerians. And many of these -- one Libyan that we captured about a

month and a half ago -- he was clearly brainwashed. And he was told that, you know, what was going on here and brainwashed to come and be a -- what he thought was -- he was going to be a foreign fighter against this crusade against the Muslim religion. He got here. He saw that was not correct. They told he was going to be a suicide martyr. He said he didn't want to do that. When we happened to capture him, several other foreign fighters and the cell leader that was orchestrating them, he was very happy to talk to us about what he had seen and what they had done.

And very interesting that younger foreign fighter that we're seeing now -- very poorly trained. We would call them more like RPGs for hire. And we believe it's the -- we know that the leadership is severely disrupted. Again, from -- about 25 percent of the attacks were very complex prior to elections, as I described. Now we're down to five percent are complex. And we're at the lowest number of attacks by far over the last three months. And that is -- clearly the foreign network is disrupted. The leadership is severely disrupted. We captured Abu Talha, the number-two al Qaeda leader in the north of Iraq. And right after that we got Abu Bara, Madhi Musa (sp), Abu Zab (sp), the next six leaders that would step up and take over. Nobody's taken over now. It's not a very popular position because if they step up, they get captured or killed. And so they're really disrupted, totally different.

The other thing -- the other huge change is the population. And in a counterinsurgency, of course, the terrorists don't have to -- the people don't have to love them; they just have to remain neutral and not turn them in. And when we got here, the people were intimidated, and they were neutral. Now they are turning them in. We'd like to call it, you know, the terrorists swim in a sea of anonymity, and that sea has been taken away from them.

And for example, when we got here, they could fire mortars, and they did that. Three hundred mortar attacks a month was the average for the six months prior to us getting here. As we got the population more and more on the side of their government and their security forces, as they saw how the terrorists offered no hope for the future and their government did, they started turning these guys in. And in the beginning, a guy would fire a mortar; in a city of 2 million, it's pretty hard to track him down. Well, we've captured over 142 mortar systems, and now the average is six attacks a month in the entire province, from 300 to six.

And just a couple of weeks ago, when they did fire a mortar, the people told what they looked like, what their license plate was. In one case, they knew one of the individuals. The Iraqi army went out, tracked them right down, arrested them, and there you have it -- much different from that prior to elections, when, you know, they wouldn't say anything. It was -- we didn't see anything, and it was very hard to stop this.

So it just shows -- and again, I talked about the number of call-ins, the number of tips on the street, the cooperation of the people. The people have -- are fed up with the terrorist acts. I mean, I -- you know, I was -- witnessed one suicide VBIED that killed innocent women and children, and I've never seen evil like that. And the people -- Iraqi people saw that, and they know -- it's very clear to them that their government wants a brighter future for them, the Iraqi security forces want a brighter future, and the terrorists offer nothing but fear and intimidation and a very poor future.

MR. WHITMAN: Bret?

Q (Off mike.) It sounds, the way that you describe it, that your intelligence-gathering operations have improved significantly in recent months. You have these bigwigs that you're interrogating. That said, have you heard about any recent sightings or whereabouts of Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi?

COL. BROWN: No, we have captured quite a few of the high level, and we sure are trying to get information on that. And I know, over our year, my soldiers wanted to come up here, because we definitely would have captured him and hope he would come up here.

But no, we have not gotten any specifics. You know, we speculate he's in the Euphrates River Valley. We have forces down there, helping, assisting in the north of the Euphrates River, in Rawah and other locations. And that's where we think he is, but I have not gotten directly that any of these high-level leaders we've captured have given us direct information as to where Zarqawi's located.

Q Since I struck out on that one, the series of car bombings we've seen, do you have from your intelligence gathering any sign of where this flow of car bombers is coming from, and how, perhaps, it's getting into the country, into the middle of the country?

COL. BROWN: Well, we've known for a while that foreign fighters, as I talked about, they will -- I use the term "brainwashing." I mean, that's what it seems like to me. I don't know that that's an official term, but clearly, they get these guys, they lie to them and they bring these foreign fighters in. I know that we have -- again, we've assisted in search in the Euphrates River Valley and we have 3rd ACR out to our west doing a fantastic job on the Syrian border to stop the flow of foreign fighters in.

To me, the -- we saw this increase in Mosul in the April timeframe of SVBIEDs and VBIEDs from foreign fighters because things were going so well; that was the response of al Qaeda, to try to create -- first of all, I believe, to grab headlines. They're masters at information operations and they want to grab headlines and take away from the success that we're having. And I think we're having success in Tall Afar and many other areas now, and Mosul and all over the north of Iraq. And so they're trying to steal those headlines away.

And it's really desperate, as we saw it again in April-May time frame in Mosul, a lot of targeting of civilians. And I will tell you, I've never seen anything like the people's response to it. It was really something. That they absolutely were fed up. And I saw people who were on -- whole neighborhoods that were on the border of, well, what do we do -- a lot of them Sunnis, in fact -- and after they saw the killing of innocent women and children by these cowardly suicide bombers, they turned and absolutely supported their government and are excited to vote. And as I said, 80 percent say they're going to come and vote.

And so I think clearly they're -- you know, it's tough to stop completely the flow. We have disrupted the flow of foreign fighters. I think if we keep working, we can disrupt it even more. When we first got here it was pretty easy to get across the border and there was very little disruption, and that was causing us issues of the well-trained foreign fighters I talked about earlier. Now I see a pretty good disruption. It can get better and we need to work to get it better, and we're working with everything from the border police to the Iraqi security forces to help get that -- stem that flow in foreign fighters.

I mean, I think another thing that's key is the al Qaeda leadership understands, I mean this is a fight that is for their very survival. And this -- you know, I think it's the most evil enemy we've ever faced, because this is happening in Iraq, but they want it to spread to the United States as they -- you know, they already have. And they want it to spread everywhere. And they know how important it is here; that if they lose here and we have a democratic and free Iraq, we have a great example and it will give the people hope. And they want the people in fear. You know, freedom is the terrorists' biggest enemy by far.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike) -- come back to you, but since we're on foreign fighters, I think I need to go to Joe here.

Q Yes. Yeah, Colonel, this is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra TV. Talking about foreign fighters, you said that you are facing well-trained foreign fighters. Do you have any information about who is training those foreign fighters and where?

COL. BROWN: We did face well-trained foreign fighters prior to January elections. We have not faced well-trained foreign fighters since. Since February of this year until now, we have not seen any well-trained, in fact, very poorly trained foreign fighters. So whoever was training them before, I don't know, but apparently

they've lost their support and they're not able to train them and they've -- you know, now we're getting much younger -- we had 15- to 17-year-olds, very young. You know, we were estimating -- it's kind of hard, you know, when you see the remains of a suicide bomber, there's not much left. But from captured ones, and then reports from these folks, they were very young, 15- to 17-years-old; not well trained. And we have not seen well-trained foreign fighters at all since February. So wherever they were training before, I don't know, but it's sure not -- they're not doing it anymore that I'm aware of because they're not coming here and we have not seen them.

MR. WHITMAN: Bob.

Q Colonel, this is Bob Burns from AP. In your description so far of the insurgency, you've referred exclusively to al Qaeda and terrorists. Do they actually represent the predominant element in the insurgency? What about the former regime elements in your area?

COL. BROWN: Yeah, that's a great question. I apologize. Concentrating a little bit too much on al Qaeda. There are other folks involved. There's former regime elements. What we have seen -- we saw prior to January, the former regime elements and other extremist groups and other borderline terrorists groups that were working pretty well together prior to elections. What we've seen since February on is many of these former regime elements are coming forward; they want to be involved in the political process. They realize it was a mistake to align themselves with al Qaeda. And the biggest split we saw was when al Qaeda got so desperate and started attacking women and children, and then Zarqawi said it was okay to attack women and children. That's the biggest split that we saw. At that point, many of those -- you know, ones we captured, turned themselves in. We had many other -- you know, the former regime, some borderline Sunni groups, Ansar al-Sunni, some of these other groups that realized that this was not what they signed up for, and there was a real split there. And so the reason I'm concentrating right now so much on al Qaeda is that clearly is our biggest threat.

The other -- you know, we do have also some folks who are just simply unemployed and the terrorists will coerce them into, you know, firing an RPG for a hundred dollars or whatever it may be. And you have that kind of criminal aspect that's still there, smaller, much smaller, we've seen over the year, much, much smaller. As more jobs become available, as the government is functioning better and better, that element is getting smaller and smaller, and as people see that that doesn't offer any hope for the future and really see the true -- the evil ways of these terrorists.

So we did see that prior to January, a lot of these groups working together. We don't see it as much now at all, and many of the folks are moving over to the, "Hey, how can I get involved in the process," stepping forward wanting to be involved and wanting to make this government work and get involved, and realize that that's their best hope for a bright future.

Q Can I ask a follow-up, Bryan?

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead and follow up.

Q Colonel, Bob Burns again. Could you put a number, an estimate of the percentage that the foreign fighters represent of the total opposition you face?

COL. BROWN: Yeah. I'd say of the 550 enemy killed, I would say 70 -- 60, 70 percent foreign fighters. And a lot of those were in those large attacks prior to January. Of the 3,000 detained, over 3,000 we've detained, probably not as many detained, probably 40 to 50 percent foreign fighters, and the rest either, again, a "RPG for hire" type or one of these earlier groups earlier. But we're seeing more foreign fighters now, more poorly trained foreign fighters now than we did earlier, but the numbers have come down so much, it's kind of a tough comparison. But, yeah, clearly the level of proficiency is down in the foreign fighter, and clearly we see the level of complexity of attacks is way down, the level of attacks is down and the leadership is severely disrupted, no

doubt about it.

MR. WHITMAN: Tony?

Q Sir, this is Tony Capaccio with Bloomberg News. We met back in November when I was up there. I have an equipment question. Not only are you fighting the insurgents, but you're the highlight unit for the Stryker, that's gotten mixed publicity. We were told by The Washington Post earlier this year that it could be unsafe for soldiers to ride in. Give me the unvarnished assessment of how well the vehicle has performed and what are some of the weaknesses that need to be corrected.

COL. BROWN: Yeah, Tony, I'm glad you brought that up, because I'll tell you, nothing makes our soldiers madder than criticism of the Stryker. That report, I think, was absolutely ridiculous. The Post -- I'll be honest with you. They had a reporter up here and he wanted to provide input. I said, "Go talk to any soldiers you want. Go ask any soldier which vehicle they would prefer to ride in; they would choose a Stryker, I guarantee it." And they never asked them. They published the report based on a lessons learned report of how you could improve the vehicle. Well, of course, we try to improve every vehicle we have. No vehicle's perfect.

The Stryker's fantastic. It has incredible mobility, incredible speed. It has saved hundreds of my soldiers' lives. I'm telling you hundreds of their lives. We've been hit by 84 suicide VBIEDs have hit Strykers, and I've had the greater majority of soldiers walk away without even a scratch. It's absolutely amazing. If I were in any other type vehicle, I would've had huge problems.

The other thing is it carries, you know, the infantry men in the back that no other vehicle can do; nine infantry men that come out of that Stryker and are incredible in urban operations. You could ask any one of my soldiers, and they would choose the Stryker of any vehicle they could possibly ride in. By the way, our Strykers are in their second year of combat. We left our new ones back at our home station, and we fell in on Strykers that are in their second year of combat.

And I love the other vehicles in the Army inventory. I had a Bradley battalion, but there's no way you could take a Bradley two years in a row in combat. You couldn't do it maintenance wise. We maintained over 95 percent operational readiness rate. We went -- with 5.2 million miles on the Strykers -- 5.2 million miles, and I will tell you, interestingly enough, that same Washington Post reporter, after that report came out, he came to me and he said, please, Colonel Brown, do not make me ride in a Humvee. He said please, let me ride in a Stryker. And I was too nice a guy. I should have made him ride in a Humvee. I let him ride in a Stryker.

But our soldiers love the Stryker. Does it need improvements? I don't know of any vehicle that doesn't. I'd put a laser range-finder on it. I'd stabilize the gun, maybe put a larger gun on it. The Army's working all that. Is it a fantastic vehicle? Yes. You know, I alone put thousands and thousands of miles on my Stryker, and I'm going to miss it when I go back home. I rode in it today for the last time, and I got to tell you it's been very good to me. And I'm going to miss it a lot. And it's a great vehicle, fantastic vehicle.

Q Colonel, do you have any specific tactical instances where in the city Mosul these vehicles accomplished more than a tank could of or a Bradley could have, given their construction and their mobility?

COL. BROWN: How much time do you have? Because I could give you an example every single night. I'll give you one example of a company. In Deuce Four, 1-24 Infantry, a young company commander out being very agile and adaptive, he went out, and during the day some cars drove by and fired at the Strykers. They chased the cars in the Stryker. You wouldn't have been able to keep up in a tank or a Bradley. They chased the cars. The guys got out of the car and being, again, the cowards that they are, they hid behind women and children, so the soldiers didn't shoot them. But they went up to the cars. They found caches of weapons in the cars, and they found their wallets in the cars. They then went to some sources who said, yeah, we know where these guys live. So two hours later, they went and raided the home with one platoon, captured some more.

Those guys talked. They went and raided more.

By the end of the night, one night, one Stryker company, about 120 soldiers, about, you know, 14 Strykers involved, went seven different locations, captured 15 out of 20 terrorist cell members, captured mortar systems, sniper rifles, a very large cache of weapons, et cetera, all that was mobile, all in cars. And they were able to get their quickly using their digital capability, using the speed of the Stryker, and oh, by the way, maintained perfect situational understanding at this time using a UAV up above and all the digital systems in what the Stryker affords. And the biggest thing the Stryker affords is nine infantrymen out in this urban setting -- this was all in a city, population of 2 million -- a very populated area, downtown city area that this happened. So that's one example. It happens every night, and every single day the Stryker has performed like that. And it's been a fantastic vehicle.

Another couple of quick examples are, you know, we needed some forces down in the Euphrates River Valley to stop foreign fighters from flowing in. Tanks and Bradleys would have to head down there. They couldn't drive the 300 kilometers without a huge logistics tail and requiring more fuel. And I love tanks and Bradleys, again, but they all, you know, everything does something a little different.

With the Stryker -- we sent a Cavalry Stryker unit down there, the 214 RSTA Cavalry Squadron, and they got down there in less than a day, no problem at all with 55 Strykers down there all over the battlefield, putting in -- one of those Strykers put in 38,000 miles alone this year over here, didn't require a heading. They drove down on their own.

Had another battalion in Fallujah; we needed them up in Mosul. Within 12 hours they drove from Fallujah 350 -- 400 kilometers, maybe more, but all the way from Fallujah up to Mosul, got in the fight the same day in Mosul. Couldn't do that with any other type vehicle because, again, they carry all those soldiers. They were ready to fight. In fact, on the move from Fallujah, we diverted a company to a mission enroute, and they did a great job on a mission enroute. Couldn't do that with our type vehicles.

So I could on forever about what the Stryker has done, but the important thing about the Stryker is -- are the soldiers, the great agile depth of soldiers that it carries inside and the digital connectivity and the speed, mobility and survive ability. We were hit by 115 RPGs hit Strykers over the year we had here, not one penetrated a Stryker, not one. Not any -- no machine gun fire penetrated a Stryker inside. We did have a soldier that was killed in a hatch by an RPG -- standing up in a hatch, and they fired from a building on top, but not one RPG penetrated a Stryker; 115 hits, it's a fantastic vehicle.

And I think another -- you know, you have a lot of other units and elements looking for it and wanting Strykers. It's very popular. The biggest problem we have is keeping our brigade together because we're more powerful than. Because everybody wants a little bit because they're so useful and such a fantastic vehicle in concept.

MR. WHITMAN: I guess we'll put you down as an undecided, Colonel, on the Stryker there.

COL. BROWN: (Laughs.) Well, I've had three and a half years in command, and I -- you know, I did this test of the Stryker versus the 1-1-3 three years ago. And I had a 1-1-3 Company many years ago, as a matter of fact, serving with General Casey at the time at Fort Carson, Colorado, and you know, to even think to compare those two is ridiculous. The Stryker is a fantastic vehicle, and I will tell you that certainly it can be improved. But every soldier -- you could talk to any of my soldiers, every one of them would choose a Stryker to ride in. It's done a fantastic job here in Iraq.

MR. WHITMAN: Colonel, we have reached the end of our time. We do appreciate you taking the time. Clearly, it's been a year of -- that your soldiers can be very proud of and many accomplishments over the past year. And we wish you all the best as you return your unit back to the United States.

Thank you.

COL. BROWN: Thank you very much, and thanks for the questions. And thanks for the opportunity to tell the story, and we really appreciate it. And thanks for all you're doing there.

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