By Spc. Jeffrey Ledesma
1st Cav. Public Affairs

BAGHDAD - Although the Emerald City gates and a yellow brick road are nowhere to be found, these "Sunflower State" Soldiers are definitely not in Kansas anymore.

With family and friends back home wanting to help the cause and the Iraqi people needing so much help, one Topeka, Kan., Army National Guard unit stepped up to the plate and killed two birds with one stone with Operation Ruby Slippers.

"Operation Ruby Slippers is a result of being outside in the battle space and recognizing the humanitarian aid piece with the Iraqi people that isn't being provided right now," said Lt. Col. Kirk Pederson, a civil affairs officer with Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, 130th Field Artillery Brigade.

Pederson said that taking his brigade commander out to the Civil Military Operations Center, a place where Iraqis can come get medical treatment and pick up some supplies, is what tipped the scales toward starting up the operation.

"It was that experience and that interaction with the Iraqi people and the children that made us say, "We need to do something,"" said the Shawnee, Kan., native.

The operation asked for the surrounding communities of Topeka to donate everything from over-the-counter medicines, tape, bandages, wraps - the essentials for the basic first aid kit - to clothing and school supplies.

Pederson added that they will be delivering these donations directly to the Iraqi people who need it most.

"Whether its soccer balls, pencils, school supplies or doing a medical operation where we augmented with supplies..."
Kansas Soldiers bring “Ruby Slippers” to Iraq

Ruby Slipper
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given from our family and friends and neighbors from back home, it's all welcomed with open arms and sincerity by the local leaders that we get it to," Pederson said. "The local leaders can make sure the right people in their neighborhood get what they need."

Contributions have been as big as providing the warehouse holding area for all the things being donated or as small as donating a pair of sneakers for an Iraqi child.

The collaboration of all the people, back home and here in the Iraqi capital, resulted in two tons worth of donations.

Pederson said that he knows that people, companies and corporations back home want to help. Whether it's during a hurricane disaster or tsunami, the American people are known for their generosity and compassion, he said.

"Through our (radio) drive, the first donation we got was an anonymous donor. He walked up to the disc jockey and rolled out five $100 bills and said, 'This is for the Soldiers. I didn't know what to get, but take this money and go buy what they need for the Iraqi people,'" Pederson said.

"We are having difficulty via the requirements of the Denton Amendment, getting an Iraqi custodian to accept the donations and acquire the customs approval in Iraq," Pederson said.

Although many people have pulled together to get this humanitarian aid project rolling, it will cost an estimated $20,000 to privately ship the rest of the donated items from Kansas to Iraq.

Pederson said he knew that getting donations - because they’re National Guard, because they’re military and because they’re family - would be the easy part.

"Now," he said, "it's about getting it from Point A to Point B."


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Public Affairs Officer: Lt. Col. Scott Bleichwehl
Command Information Supervisor: Master Sgt. Dave Larsen
NCOIC, Print Production: Sgt. Michael Garrett
Editor: Spc. Shea Butler
Contributing Writer: Staff Sgt. Jon Cupp

Contact the Daily Charge at VOIP 242-4093, DSN 318-847-2855 or e-mail david.j.larsen@mnd-b.army.mil.
Baghdad in Brief

MND-B troops engage insurgents, kill three after discovering IED

CAMP TAJI, Iraq - Multi-National Division - Baghdad Soldiers engaged three men involved in improvised explosive device attacks, killing all three near Tarmiyah, Iraq April 18. One U.S. Soldier was wounded in the engagement.

Soldiers from Company D, 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment were conducting a foot patrol searching for terrorists responsible for IED attacks in the area when the incident occurred. While on the patrol, the troops came across a man attempting to emplace an IED. The man threw his detonator and ran from the Soldiers.

The Soldiers pursued the insurgent to an abandoned house from which objects were thrown at them. Two other men came at the Soldiers from the direction of the house. One of the insurgents attacked a Soldier. Following hand-to-hand fighting, the insurgent was killed. The Soldier suffered minor injuries.

The other two insurgents, who were carrying an IED, attempted to run but were engaged by 2-8 Cavalry troops. The two insurgents were killed when the gunfire detonated the IED. The wounded Soldier was treated for minor wounds and was then returned to duty.

There were no other U.S. casualties from the engagement.

Soldiers find explosives in Al Shira

By Staff Sgt. Jon Cupp
1-1 Cav. Public Affairs

CAMP TAJI, Iraq -- Multi-National Division - Baghdad Soldiers found five containers filled with explosives April 17 near Al Shira, Iraq on the site of a vacant hospital which was destroyed just two days earlier by insurgents.

After receiving information from villagers that insurgents had used explosives to destroy the building April 15, Soldiers from the 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment investigated the site.

Upon examination of the destroyed building, the Soldiers discovered four propane tanks filled with explosives and a separate container filled with an unknown explosive substance.

MND-B Soldiers are currently investigating the incident to find those responsible for destroying the building.

Insurgents destroyed a vacant hospital in Al Shira, Iraq April 15. Pictured is the hospital prior to its being destroyed.

Insurgents destroyed a vacant hospital in Al Shira, Iraq April 15. Pictured is the hospital after its destruction.
Baghdad Operations Command Leader meets new troops

By Staff Sgt. Jon Cupp
1-1 Cav. Public Affairs

CAMP TAJI, Iraq -- The general in charge of leading the Iraqi efforts in Operation Fardh Al-Qanoon, also know as the Baghdad Security Plan, Lt. Gen. Abud Qanbar, commanding general of the Baghdad Operations Command, paid a visit here April 17 to meet with troops from the newly-established 3rd Brigade, 9th Iraqi Army (IA) Division (Mechanized).

Accompanied by Brig. Gen. John F. Campbell, Multi-National Division-Baghdad's deputy commander for maneuver and two other Iraqi generals, Qanbar took the opportunity during his visit to talk to the brigade's leadership about progress they have been making as they work to transition from training to taking an active role in combat missions which support Operation Fardh Al-Qanoon.

The plan which was originally announced in January has been designed for Iraqi security forces, working alongside coalition forces, to take the lead in crushing the insurgency in the capital city and in outlying areas.

In a briefing with Qanbar, Lt. Col. Michael Loew, team chief for the 3-9 Military Transition Team, told the general the units within the 3rd Bde., 9th IA Div. (Mech.) are "...making a lot of momentum, going in the right direction."

"The (brigade's) soldiers have been training with the 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment and they have a great staff and we and the (IA) troops enjoy working with them everyday," added Loew, who hails from Stafford, Va.

An Iraqi officer also present at the meeting told Qanbar that "...the brigade's 1st Battalion is ready" to take on any challenges in their area of operations.

After the brief, Qanbar had the opportunity to meet with his troops from the 1st "Tank" Bn., 3rd Bde., 9th IA Div. (Mech.). The battalion's tankers who operate from T-55 tanks took the lead on their first mounted combat patrol earlier this week.

"Do your best and you will continue to improve in your efforts," Qanbar told his newly-initiated combat troops. "I, and the Iraqi people are very proud of you."

Within a few weeks, IA troops in the brigade's 2nd Battalion will be taking on their first combat patrols as well, a sign that progress is being made toward turning over sovereignty of the newly democratic nation to the control of its people, according to Maj. Steven Rodriguez, deputy team chief of the 3-9 MTT.

"It shows that the security plan is taking affect as planned so it is a validation of the plan" said Rodriguez, deputy 3-9 MTT team chief, who hails from Beatrice, Neb. "They are getting to a point to where they can eventually take over their own security."

He also said that Iraqis actually seeing their own troops on patrols in Iraqi towns and villages will build the people's trust and confidence in their security forces and eventually lead to only limited participation from U.S. and coalition forces.

For San Antonio, Texas native Command Sgt. Maj. Pablo Squiabro, senior noncommissioned officer for the 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, it has been a meaningful experience to see Qanbar's troops in action.

"Training them to take over in sector is our way home," said Squiabro, whose Soldiers in Company C, 2nd Bn., 8th Cav. Regt. have been training some of the troops in the 3rd Bde., 9th IA Div. (Mech.), "With their first patrol the other day, the 1st "Tank" battalion made history, and you could see that they were well trained and following the standards which was very impressive to see. They continue to get better at what they do each day."

Prior to his departure from Taji base camp, Qanbar dined with 3rd Bde. leadership as well as leadership from the 1st "Ironhorse" Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division and members of the 3-9 MTT team.
Raiders' silver (Al Davis' hair) & black (the bruising they'll take) a losing combination

The early favorite in most mock-drafts is Louisiana State University quarterback JaMarcus Russell, whose size, mobility and strong arm make him a top five pick, even he doesn't go first overall this year. The National Football League's annual draft always makes for good drama, and this year should be no exception.

The problem with being the number one pick in the NFL draft is this: you're going to the league's worst team. In this year's case that team is the Oakland Raiders, whose dismal offensive showing last season more resembled a mediocre Division III football program than highly-paid professionals playing in one of America's largest cities.

To be blunt, the Raiders stink.

Now, the Raider Nation of fans hopes to rekindle a lost legacy of excellence by the Silver & Black with possession of the first selection of the draft. Remember, though, that the Raiders couldn't block last year - for the run or the pass - and whoever gets behind center next season will be running for their life, rather than running to daylight.

In that respect, Russell would be a good pick. He can definitely create on the move. Other sports pundits are taking a different tact, however. The buzz on the street is that the Raiders will draft wide receiver Calvin Johnson from Georgia Tech and trade for Detroit Lions quarterback Josh McCown, not necessarily in that order.

Hmmm. The plot thickens.

To be frank (though my name is Dave), whoever the Raiders draft will not help them much in the coming season. Al Davis managed to put together a Super Bowl-bound team a few years ago, but he did it by killing his salary cap with huge bonuses to great players playing on their last legs.

Davis made a name for himself, as did the Washington Redskins of yore, by taking other team's misfits, castoffs, attitude cases and bad boys. Those retread veterans added to some great draft picks over the years made the Raiders (Oakland or Los Angeles versions) one of the best teams in pro football, year in and year out.

The vertical passing game, however, is dead in the NFL today because there are just too many defensive backs now who can clock a sub-4.5-second 40-yard dash and match the speediest wide receiver step for step.

Unless it's a blown coverage, you rarely see someone get beat deep by two steps. There are just too many quality athletes out there to choose from.

Still, the Raiders persist in throwing it deep into Cover Two defenses, and making seven-step drops behind an offensive line that leaks like a sieve.

The Raiders, with all their past glories, remain doomed in the coming season. They couldn't bring back the Raider mystic with Art Shell last season, and as long as Al Davis is calling the shots, history will continue to repeat itself for the Raider Nation.

Al Davis gets the first pick in this year's draft, but no matter who he takes, the Raiders will keep a black eye under that pirate patch.

If you've got something you want to get off your chest (about the sporting world), shoot me an e-mail and we'll include your comments in future columns. You can reach me at david.j.larsen@mnd-b.army.mil.

It's still baseball season, so ...Go, Brewers, go!