Combat-Zone Turnover – A Case Study in Success: Lessons-Learned from Forward Operating Base Bucca

by COL (Retired) Bill Edwards

Military operations are inherently tied to planning. It is a core function of any tasked military mission designed to give the unit a greater understanding of the problem and provide various ways to approach a solution. Establishing a workable framework is needed during the infant stages of a mission to "build the team." Then tremendous effort by the commander and staff is needed to stay focused and remain diligent, especially in austere, dangerous environments. Remaining agile is key.

In 2010, the 3rd Brigade Special-Troops Battalion (BSTB), 3rd Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 4th Infantry Division, found itself tapped for just such a mission in Iraq. I was its commander.

Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) was undergoing significant transition as the environment and landscape of combat operations for the United States and coalition forces began to shift to the newly established Iraqi government. Subtle shifts in the operational environments across the country, realities on the ground and more than seven years of combat operations were beginning to wear on the patience of the U.S. public and the pace/operations tempo of the U.S. Army.

The visible transfer of responsibility for the country and combat operations was ongoing as Iraq established all major elements of government to take ownership of its country while simultaneously generating an army under the supervision of coalition forces. It was the beginning of returning Iraq to civil authority.

Beginning situation

The seeds for the transition of civil authority to the Iraqi government had been planted and were beginning to sprout as U.S. forces continued to arrive in the Iraqi theater. BCTs were assuming responsibility for provinces and landmasses previously held by much larger units. In essence, this was another indication of the shift in commitment/change and early indications of an exit strategy.

In February 2010, it was decided that Camps Freddy and Bucca, now renamed as Forward Operating Base (FOB) Bucca, would be the first large-base transfer to the Iraqi government. To meet the expectations of U.S. military leadership, it was necessary to create a formal base-transfer process. This began by conducting a pre-deployment site survey to gain an understanding of the operational environment.

Ultimately the FOB Bucca transfer was executed in 10 steps. It showed a methodological and responsible approach to transitioning a large base in a combat zone. This was not rocket science, but it was a mission that required attention to detail, energy at all levels, agility and an understanding of the environment, including local Iraqi cultural norms.

Camp Bucca was a detention facility maintained by the U.S. military in the vicinity of Umm Qasr, Iraq. The facility was initially called Camp Freddy and was used by British forces to hold Iraqi prisoners of war. After being taken over by the U.S. military in April 2003, it was renamed after Ronald Bucca, a Soldier with 800th Military Police Brigade and a New York City fire marshal, who died in the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. It was the largest detainment facility for captured combatants in the country.

After the Abu Ghraib prisoner-abuse scandal, many detainees from Abu Ghraib were transferred to Camp Bucca. After a substantial turnover in the chain of command at Camp Bucca and substantial amendments to camp policy, the U.S. military held up Camp Bucca as an example of how a model detention facility should be run.

In September 2009, the facility saw its

Figure 1. Families wait at the welcome center April 10, 2008, to schedule a visit to see their relatives who were being held at the theater internment facility at Camp Bucca, Iraq. Within two years FOB Bucca would be transferred to Iraqi authority. *(U.S. Army photo by SPC Amie McMillan)*

last detainee transferred to another facility; this was another sign of transition as detainees moved into the Iraqi legal system and were housed in holding facilities outside of U.S. jurisdiction.

Framework begins

As units conducted transfer-of-authority (ToA) responsibilities, the formal mission was assigned to 3rd BSTB. We developed the following framework to execute the transfer of FOB Bucca to the Iraqi government. It is simple, functional and will stand the test of time.

Step 1:

- Plan a phased-approach with set milestones. Coordinate operations and logistics simultaneously.
- Maintain security throughout the process and continue to conduct daily combat operations to secure the surrounding area and the FOB.

Establishing phases and milestones helps guide staff regarding actions linked to the calendar. In this case, we set a timeframe for transfer but not a definitive date. Our goal was December 2010. Also, maintaining vigilance concerning security was critical. Conducting transition during combat operations always creates opportunity for enemy action; therefore maintaining security is paramount throughout transfer operations. The perception and reality that the facility is still a hardened target is a key detriment to adverse action. Security-force operations remain until the official transfer is complete and a ToA of forces has taken place.

The plan and milestone-development activities provide the unit with "time and space" to execute the mission to the desired endstate. In this example, my team consisted of the BCT support staff, 1st Infantry Division key leaders, contract personnel, contract-officer's representatives (CORs), Multinational Force-Iraq (MNF-I) key staff, partner security forces, local nationals and theater-support units in Kuwait.

Step 1 is about setting conditions and developing a plan.

Step 2: Establish and identify internal and external stakeholders.

This is the next logical step in the process as you "build your team" for execution. The task of identifying all stakeholders is hard, and you will find that adding to this list is accomplished over time. The initial set of stakeholders will get the mission moving forward, but you have to be prepared for more support from organizations you will not identify in the beginning. Remain flexible.

Identify the internal assets first; this is the easy step. Solidifying the external assets is not as easy, especially within a foreign government that is beginning to build its own infrastructure, departments and agencies. The commander's efforts require energy and stamina because keeping the mission moving forward is leadership business.

One of the key stakeholders for the transfer of Camp Bucca was the Iraqi governor of Basra province. I met with him to establish the final terms by which he would assume responsibility for the FOB. Specifically, this pertained to the importance of the wastewater and water-purification facilities. Also discussed were the timing and support the unit would need from officials within his team. During this negotiation, the final details were agreed upon and the date for transfer was set.

Step 3: Set a battle rhythm (a cadence of weekly meetings) or in-progress review schedule around the transfer tasks/milestones, and organize weekly milestone check-ins with all stakeholders.

Leading is all about people, and a leader needs to be involved in the day-to-day operations of the plan. Setting a battle rhythm is an important function because it not only holds the team accountable, but it allows the commander to see progress and to make adjustments where required.

Once the battle rhythm is established, a joint effort between the operations lead and the logistics lead needs to take shape to form the milestones of events. Milestones not only provide the staff and on-ground personnel to execute the task, but it provides predictability to support staff and personnel providing the service. They are directly related to equipment use and retrograde; they are also linked to end-service notices and planned personnel departures.

Step 4: Identify key-leader engagements (KLEs) and work with the right decision-makers.

This specifically applied to the Iraqi government and the governor of Basra's province. KLEs come in many forms, but in the case of this transfer, the critical link for the commander was with the governor of Basra's province. In this case, the commander met with the governor once or twice a month to solidify transfer plans. It's also a good time to articulate the timeframe and expectations. This includes stay-behind life systems and major facilities.

It is important to note that KLEs are negotiations. During this transfer, the negotiations went on for 10 months and were not always a smooth process.

Understanding cultural norms and working within cultural understandings is very important and necessary. Leveraging the concepts of power, status and influence in the cultural setting is critical. Know when to execute each. This is senior-leader business and based on environmental conditions. Plan and coordinate a strategic-communications plan with the higher headquarters two levels up. Maintain a stable interpreter throughout the process. This is necessary to ensure each meeting is a build or follow-up from the last and there is no need to play catch-up on agreements, arrangements or past exchanges.

Since this was a new mission and the first large-base transfer, selecting a leader with maturity and patience was key. The level of visibility and engagement is high.

Step 5: Understand contract details and coordinate contract closeouts under the milestone glidepath with contracting office representatives.

The U.S. Army doesn't go to war without a strong, deep logistics tail, which includes contract companies and personnel. In fact, the contract footprint is often larger than the combat force assigned to the area. This fact emphasizes the need to understand this aspect of base-support functions.

A good lesson in this case involved the base-service support. Dining facilities, laundry services, carpentry, metalwork, etc. ... all existed under contracts led by CORs, which were managed out of Baghdad. This was a lesson to identify those stakeholders who would not necessarily be on the first team in, but at the end, they were essential to the transfer. The commander needs to engage the CORs and the senior representatives to fence funding and contract end-of-service rules.

Step 6: Begin the process of moving people out of the area of operations.

Start with identified non-essential personnel. Determine essential contractors, civilians, local nationals and third-country nationals, and phase their departure in coordination with established milestones and end-of-services. One of the most important functions of a transfer is to keep people at the forefront of your mind. It is easy to get consumed by the daily tasks of moving equipment and ending services. People are key to these functions, and providing predictability to them is important.

Also, giving each person safe movement options ensures that the service they provide will be executed to high standards up to the day they end. Taking care of people in combat zones is a priority and requires command-level experience and diligence. Engaging each contract company and its internal-support functions will aid in this process. This is all about collaboration and relationship-building.

Step 7:

- Identify equipment and services and methodically move and close in coordination with established milestones.
- Keep all U.S. equipment in the logistics system and enter it back into the supply chain for redistribution. Leave nothing that could be used against our forces.

In this case, it was vitally important to return functional equipment to the logistical system so it could be redistributed in theater where there were identified needs. This action requires the BCT's senior logistical officer to support. Messages need to be generated to units across the theater detailing equipment that is available and when it can be transported.

We spent an enormous amount of time moving equipment to support units in every part of the country. We moved all concrete barriers, generators, tools, etc., when requested. It was estimated that by the close of this mission we had saved more than $35 million worth of U.S. government equipment. This was a significant lesson-learned and a model for future base transfers.

Step 8: Plan for secure and non-secure communications degradation.

Keep critical lines of communication open until the end of the official transfer ceremony, then move to tactical communications. As obvious as this may seem, it is something that is quite often overlooked. Make it a point to keep the communications team on the FOB until the end. I ensured the right teammates executed this mission. In combat, communications are equally as important as combat power.

Figure 2. The author cases the colors at Camp Bucca to transfer authority to the Iraqis.

Step 9: Keep security in place and conduct a relief-in-place (RIP) with the transfer partner.

In this case, we were moving a contracted Ugandan guard force and replacing it with an Iraqi navy/marine unit. Security and military presence is the absolute last element to leave the area. This is a task that U.S. military units understand and rehearse.

In this environment, the key was to conduct an RIP with a foreign military unit – in essence, passing critical posts and functions to a unit you don't normally work with. The RIP takes place simultaneously with the transfer ceremony to project an illusion of seamless change of responsibility. This was all under the supervision of senior noncommissioned officers from the battalion and contract supervisors.

Step 10:

- Coordinate and confirm the official transfer.
- Ensure all stakeholders are informed and invited.
- Finalize administrative tasks.
- Plan for a transfer ceremony to serve as an official change of responsibility.

Believe it or not, this is a mission that requires extensive coordination. In our case, we conducted an official transfer ceremony that included Iraqi military units, government officials, 1st Infantry Division and 3rd BCT leadership. We also included the local population, including a school choir from the area. We conducted an official transfer of national flags and held a small reception after the ceremony.

At this time, the FOB was a shell of its original structure, and we accomplished the original mission order in the timeframe designated. All that remained on the FOB was equipment directed by MNF-I as a life-system necessity and the last military personnel. After the ceremony, the remaining military element departed for a nearby U.S. installation. This step was all about the security, physical transfer, symbolism and successful

end-of-mission. Keep that in mind as you prepare for this final action.

Key lessons-learned

Since this was the first transfer of a large base in theater, a template for how to accomplish the transfer mission had not been written. Therefore, the BSTB worked diligently to set conditions for a successful effort using the preceding 10-step framework. The 3rd BSTB's ToA mission was accomplished Dec. 29, 2010.

We safely, securely and peacefully transferred the FOB and directed the transfer of the MNF-I life-system end items to the government of Basra Province. This included fully functioning wastewater and water-purification facilities, both multi-million dollar facilities designed and constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Ultimately these facilities became a great asset to the Iraqi people of the region, including the small towns of Umm Qasr and Safwan.

Following are the key lessons we learned along the way:

- Develop a plan with all key stakeholders. Nurture team buy-in and build confidence for success. Sequence the transfer in a thoughtful and responsible manner. Don't rush to failure.
- Lead from the front. This type of mission is senior-leader business. Be visible, accessible, energetic and supportive.
- Trust your team and support their efforts. Build synergy.
- Stay vigilant. Understand the operational environment. Know your enemy. Security is paramount in this type of environment.
- Understand the concepts of power, status and influence in a different cultural environment. Know when to execute each.
- Build in a strategic-communications plan with the higher headquarters two levels up.
- Plan, coordinate and execute KLEs on a routine basis. Building relationships is senior-leader business.
- Remain agile. No plan survives the line of departure, especially in a combat zone.

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Acronym Quick-Scan

BCT – brigade combat team
BSTB – brigade special-troops battalion
COR – contracting-officer's representative
FOB – forward operating base
KLE – key-leader engagement
MNF-I – Multinational Force-Iraq
OIF – Operation Iraqi Freedom
RIP – relief-in-place
ToA – transfer of authority

Unit background

The brigade special-troops battalion (BSTB) was conceived during Operations Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Enduring Freedom to provide the brigade combat team (BCT) with a lieutenant-colonel-led organization specifically focused as the force multiplier for the combat-arms battalions (CABs) within the BCT. The unit was organized around all the low-density military-occupation specialty skills needed for a BCT to function. It was not designed for split-base operations.

In the past, these organizations were assigned separate companies, sometimes with a headquarters outside the BCT garrison footprint. This provided a challenge for the BCT because there was no direct senior leader with responsibility for each company. By normal organization, the unit is assigned an intelligence company, a communications company, a military-police platoon, a battalion headquarters company and a brigade headquarters company. It is designed to support all BCT operations enabling the CABs to accomplish their mission.

During OIF the BSTB became an agile fighting force concerned with transition and operational-environment needs. It had to reorganize to bring on more combat power to support the overall BCT mission and the expanded area of operations. This was a mission that was unique by any stretch of the imagination.

The BSTB also became an operational-environment owner in the same manner as the BCT's infantry, armor and field-artillery battalions. The BSTB assumed responsibility for multiple forward operating bases and outlying security outposts in 12 locations across an area of operations the size of Kentucky. This required the BSTB to grow to eight companies, adding infantry, armor, logistics and military police to the overall structure. By the time this task-organization was complete, the BSTB had nearly 800 personnel, and it was organized for combat operations.

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BCT – brigade combat team
BSTB – brigade special-troops battalion
CAB – combat-arms battalion
OIF – Operation Iraqi Freedom