

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH LIEUTENANT COLONEL RICHARD HALL,  
COMMANDER, 2ND BATTALION, 7TH MARINE REGIMENT VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM  
AFGHANISTAN TIME: 9:30 A.M. EDT DATE: WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 27, 2008

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): Lieutenant  
Colonel Hall, welcome to the Bloggers Roundtable. Appreciate you being with us  
this morning. And the floor is yours, so we're ready when you are, sir.

(There are technical difficulties in Lieutenant Colonel Hall's audio  
connection throughout.)

COL. HALL: Hello, this is Lieutenant Colonel Hall.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Do you have an opening statement for us,  
sir?

COL. HALL: I do, sorry. I didn't know if anyone was on the line yet.  
Yeah, first of all, appreciate you giving us the opportunity to talk to you  
today. I guess it's morning, your time. MR. HOLT: Yes, sir.

COL. HALL: All right. Just got a couple things I'd like to start off  
with. And first thing I'd like to mention is basically to say how pleased I am  
over the care of our wounded and -- (inaudible) -- and I'd like to lead off with  
that, just to start with the probably most important, impressive things I've  
been exposed to over here. And you know, the families -- (inaudible) --  
especially, you know, and the spirit of our wounded. They've just given so  
much. Their sons or husbands have given all. And their fortitude is absolutely  
extraordinary.

(Inaudible) -- I'd like to just -- I'm in such awe of these guys. Quick  
story is seeing a Marine and a Corpsman run straight into -- (inaudible) --  
suppress the enemy on the dock, runs out to tend to the wounded man who's down.  
And then when I go to visit the wounded Marine at the hospital, he's lying there  
in the hospital bed and he's looking up at myself and the sergeant major and  
he's got this incredible passion in his voice and he literally begs us not to  
medevac him so he can go back to his platoon. You know, you just can't put that  
in words. And you stand there, speechless, knowing that you're in the company  
of a true hero. And, you know -- (inaudible) -- represents so many of those --  
(inaudible) -- are just -- (inaudible).

(Inaudible) -- you know, one of our biggest challenges over here and  
how we've overcome that challenge, and I had to say that probably the biggest  
challenge has been the size of our area of operations. It's about 28,000 square

kilometers, about the size of the state of Vermont. And to answer how we've overcome that challenge, I summed it up in one word: Marines.

Our very own Marines have had a tremendous amount of responsibility on their shoulders and they continually prove themselves every single day while accomplishing the mission. I've never been disappointed of them. They're just absolutely amazing, these young, inexperienced NCOs just doing the work that captains and lieutenants used to do.

So we're continuing to focus on the people, despite -- (inaudible). And if the enemy -- (inaudible) -- we defeat them -- (inaudible). Our aim is -- (inaudible) -- Afghan people, provide -- (inaudible) -- more secure and prosperous livelihood. So our mission is to -- counterinsurgency ops with a focus on police training and mentoring. And what that means in practice is we try to focus enduring efforts to those -- (inaudible) -- which create the foundation for the future, like build schools, educate the people, teaching and equipping the docs. More specific to our mission is that of the training -- (inaudible) -- reason that we were first brought here. And we want them to become -- the police, anyway, we want to them to become more proficient, respectable, and a legitimate force, which is really an extension of the government on the district level. You know, focus on the Taliban only gives temporary effect. You know, we want to -- (inaudible) -- something that will last well beyond our presence here.

So the bottom line is, we want to give the people liberty. We want to create a safe and prosperous environment where the people will willingly accept the newly trained and respectable ANP -- and that's the Afghan National Police -- as a form of their -- legitimate form of their local governance and to create conditions where the people take responsibility of their own affairs and provide for their own future. You know the old adage of teach a man to fish.

(Audio break) -- opening statement, and I appreciate you again giving me this opportunity. So I'm honored to take your questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

Andrew, you were first on line, so why don't you get us started?

Q Thanks. Colonel, good afternoon. This is Andrew Lubin from Naval Institute's Proceedings and Get the Gouge. Appreciate the time tonight, sir.

COL. HALL: Thank you.

Q Sir, you -- 2/7 has probably the unfortunate reputation now of just taking more casualties than any Marine unit in Afghanistan for a while. Is this -- how are the efforts of the ANP and ANAs? They don't get very good press back in the States.

COL. HALL: Yeah, that's a good question. That's in -- (inaudible) -- a lot of the media reports, we seem to get a lot of press for the things that the guys do over here. And the ANA have really come a long way. And I can't really speak a lot about the ANA because I'm not (with ?) them as much as I am the ANP. The ANA have been doing a great job. (Inaudible) -- been observing and we work with them from time to time in some of our districts.

The ANP are certainly behind, and we're starting that process now of the focused district development and the in-district reform programs -- (inaudible). We formally (train with them ?). It's like a boot camp. They're coming out of the courses (proficient ?) and we've -- (inaudible) -- and, in the eyes of the people, legitimate. So it's going to take a while. We're just getting started, but they -- when we've gone on operations with them -- (inaudible) -- noted, they are very brave. They stand by our side. They're willing to learn. So we share that warrior ethos that's common to both of us, and that's been a very positive thing from our experience here.

Q Are you able to get enough of these people in? Are they rogering up to work with you like the Sunnis work with the Marines down in Anbar?

COL. HALL: I think your question is are we getting enough recruits, is that right?

Q Yes, sir.

COL. HALL: We've had a little bit of struggles with that, just because of the nature of our disparate locations, having to try to recruit, if we can, from the districts in which there have been -- what happens is, we can't always get the right number of recruits out of a district, so we have to recruit from other districts. When they go through the training and come back, those ANP have an expectation that they are going to go back to the district they came from, and sometimes we cannot do that. We send them somewhere else, and it doesn't go over real well with them, but for the most part, we've had success. But -- (inaudible) -- because they had an expectation of something else.

But by and large, we're slowly bringing up the -- (inaudible) -- and slowly but surely -- (inaudible) -- those numbers. There's a new process just beginning, which is the reconstitution effort which is -- (inaudible) -- we're going to have them replaced.

Q Okay, thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Bruce?

Q Thank you.

Hey Colonel, Bruce McQuain with QandO. If you were sitting down to an ops brief and your intel guys were up, how would they characterize your enemy?

COL. HALL: How would they characterize what, sir? Q Your enemy.

COL. HALL: The enemy. What we've really come to realize since our time here is if we had (an expectation ?) that these would be -- (inaudible) -- religiously -- (inaudible) -- individuals.

That is not the case here -- (inaudible). What we really have are the terrorist types, the criminal types, power-mongers. They are more like (gangsters ?) or mafia-oriented. They -- (inaudible) -- don't have that -- (inaudible word) -- sense that we thought they were going to have. So we're fighting more of a criminal type -- (inaudible) -- a religious zealot.

Q And how are they organized?

COL. HALL: They do have an organization that kind of -- which has structure. And when someone is taken out, they actually go through some form of an election -- (inaudible) -- to replace that individual. So they do have a hierarchy, and they are connected.

What we have -- what we're finding, though, is that we are -- we -- (inaudible) -- their line of command and control. So most of the time they operate from a disrupted perspective, but they try to quickly reconstitute. And then they lose more fighters every time they come into contact with Marines.

Q Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Christian?

Q Hello, Lieutenant Colonel Hall. This is Christian Lowe calling you from military.com. I wanted to follow up on some -- a conversation we had the last time you spoke with us, back in late June. And Andrew sort of touched on this in his question. You know, you do have the dubious distinction of having the highest rate of killed in action of any Marine unit in Afghanistan right now. And I know that's tough.

And when we spoke last time, you said that the main cause was IEDs. And you also added that someone from CENTCOM -- or MARCENT, I'm sorry -- was coming through the AO to get an assessment and to chat with your unit about what kinds of equipment he could provide or MARCENT could provide to help stem that tide of casualties. Since then, you've lost three more. And I'm curious to know from you, how has the threat changed, if any? And what has MARCENT done to lend a hand here to keep you guys safe?

COL. HALL: That's a good question. I appreciate it. The first thing I would say is at this point in time, I'm really overwhelmed and humbled by the amount of support we're getting from everybody. The well-wishers just don't -- they don't stop. They're calling, they're -- (inaudible) -- every element of -- (inaudible) -- and offering whatever they can based on the needs for the mission.

Since that time, we certainly have been given a lot, given more MRAPs, more mine rollers, the Afghan version of mine rollers. We've gotten some of other types of equipment -- equipment items that I don't really want to talk about here, but certainly aid in the detection of the threat.

We've been given air -- (audio break) -- and we got the Cobras and four CH-53s now, which will mean that we will have to spend less time on the road doing the -- (audio break) -- where we were hit by IEDs. So we'll do a lot of the resupply by air. And so the short answer to your question: since -- (audio break) -- we have been given tremendous -- a lot of capabilities. We'll meet and defeat the IED threat.

Q So then to what did -- what -- how do you attribute the three that were killed within this last month? Is it the same threat, the same IED threat, or is it a new threat from sort of small arms, that sort of thing?

COL. HALL: It is -- the last three were a result of IEDs.

Q Uh-huh. Yeah.

COL. HALL: And so one question I didn't properly answer that you asked was the nature of the threat. It is evolving, just as it had in Iraq. And so we're starting to experience a lot of changes as well, and we're adapting to their changes. And -- but the one thing that you cannot do is completely eliminate all threat that is here until you completely saturate an area and control it.

The areas -- (audio break) -- patrol. There are not enough forces here to completely control those districts, so there is going to be risks. And consequently, the casualties do come. But by and large, we have developed -- (audio break) -- techniques and procedures and have now the equipment that will certainly reduce the likelihood of those things from happening.

Q Okay, Jack, can I follow up real quick on what he just said? I'm sorry.

MR. HOLT: Yes.

Q I know there's probably only one other person on the call.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Go ahead.

Q Colonel Hall, so you just said that unfortunately, you can't saturate the area because there's not enough forces there. Now, this is an issue that's being talked about a lot back at the Pentagon and in Washington. From your perspective, as a battalion commander who's in charge of a huge area like Helmand, what -- do you need more forces? Have you asked for more forces? And how many would you need to secure the area so you're not losing so many Marines?

COL. HALL: Yeah.

The first thing is, is we're both in Helmand and Farah, both provinces. And for us, we originally assigned to come as a one-time solution to meet a training and mentoring mission.

(Off mike) -- needs to happen and what is happening is that more forces will be coming here, in order to extend the security zones, of each of the districts that we're in, as well as to assume control of other districts as well as have -- (off mike) -- that will be able to interdict the enemy's freedom of movement in between those districts.

The way I'm task-organized right now, I as a infantry battalion don't have the numbers of Marines that can effectively operate within all these different districts as well as influence the area in between those districts. And that is where we normally get hit by the enemy, is in between those districts that we don't control.

So over time, the solution isn't going to be so much the numbers of people that you bring in here, although it will tie directly to it. It is the effect on the people that we have in the context of doing our mission which is, I call it, turning 4 into 40. That 4-man fire team, as he influences a constituency, they then join his side and become an enemy to the Taliban. And we're seeing that more and more.

The longer we're here, each of our districts have more local nationals that are siding with us and are actively fighting the Taliban. Just in Delaram

alone and in a couple other districts, they have literally taken up arms on a couple of occasions and fought the Taliban. And we didn't do anything to start that.

Q Okay, well, specifically --

COL. HALL: They did it all on their own because they -- (off mike) -- we provided, and that was --

Q Specifically how many more troops do you need to secure those areas; another battalion?

COL. HALL: (Off mike.) That's a broad, broad question. Can you narrow it down a little bit? Are you talking about my districts?

Q Yeah. You said the areas with the most threat are the transition areas between the districts. So in order to secure those areas, how many more troops do you need? COL. HALL: I'd have to do an assessment on that. I would -- I would literally be taking a SWAG at it if I was to answer you right now. I have not done a troop -- (inaudible) -- on that to come up with a definitive number to tell you exactly what it's going to take, but I'm sure there are -- (inaudible) -- that are doing that very analysis. But I couldn't give you a really good answer on that one.

Q Okay. Thanks a lot, Colonel.

Q Colonel, Andrew Lubin again. To kind of follow up Christian's questions with yours, sir, you've been extended by about a month. Has a unit been nominated to backfill you? And will they be on the ground before you leave?

COL. HALL: They're working that right now. Nobody in our chain of command is going to commit to an answer until the secretary of Defense makes a decision on that. We believe a decision is upcoming here fairly soon. We do believe we -- (inaudible) -- backfilled. Certainly, everyone in my chain of command wants us to be backfilled. They're working that very topic right -- (inaudible). And I have a hundred percent confidence that it will happen, that we will be backfilled.

And I think everyone recognizes -- (inaudible) -- presence is a requirement for good counterinsurgency ops. And so they're going to continue to work and improve upon the successes that we've had and take it to the next level.

MR. HOLT: Okay --

Q Would you have any -- would you think, then -- sorry, go ahead.

MR. HOLT: Andrew, stand by. We've got -- Claire hasn't had a -- had an opportunity yet. Claire?

Q Yes. Sir, this is Claire Russo. I'm at the Institute for the Study of War in D.C. And I'm wondering -- while I'm not sure that you were with 7th Marines in Iraq, if there's any way -- 7th Marines had a particularly unique experience in Iraq, with being out in western Iraq. And I'm wondering if you can compare the relationship to the population that you have as well as the enemy has in the area you're in now to what we were -- what you were dealing

with in Iraq? COL. HALL: Yeah, I was with 1st Battalion, 7th Marines in OIF 1 in Iraq. And I guess if I follow your question correctly, how are the comparisons between the experience there and here -- is that right?

Q Well, specifically, sir, I'm talking about -- I was talking about later on, 7th Marines being out in al Qaim and their relationship with the population -- their relationship with the population out in al Qaim, both 7th Marines and the enemy's relationship with the population. It was probably one of the more heated fights early on in Iraq. And I just wonder if you feel that your enemy is living amongst the population or if they're projecting power from somewhere else and just whether or not you can compare that at all to what 7th Marines dealt with in al Qaim.

COL. HALL: Yeah, I understand your question now. And there's a very positive answer to that question over here. I guess the easiest way for me to answer that is not even to go into the Iraq thing, but to talk specifically about Afghanistan --

Q Sure.

COL. HALL: -- and that is that the people right now -- (inaudible) -- every one of our districts are turning against the Taliban because they continue to commit such atrocities and take away a livelihood of the people, that they're actually physically turning on our side and away -- (inaudible) -- Taliban. The problem is that they have a murder and intimidation campaign that continues to threaten them.

Q Right.

COL. HALL: So only through threat are they living in -- and in some cases even supporting, but not that often. But by and large, their moral support truly will side with the coalition forces. And it -- (inaudible) -- every day.

Q Well, Colonel, just to follow up on that, do you -- do you find that your enemy is projecting power from somewhere else? Do you think that you need to be closer-tied to units surrounding you or do you feel as though your enemy is living within the population? You talk about being hit mostly in areas in between. Is that due to the fact that they can't operate amongst the populations within your districts or is because they're coming from outside of the area you're operating in?

COL. HALL: Yeah, most of the time they're coming from some sort of outside area and then they come in and they take from people, whether it's food or fuel or -- (inaudible) -- in order to do their operations.

A lot of their operations we would consider, you know, the illegal-type activities through the poppy and opium trade and so forth as well as the taxing of people in order to continue to buy ammo and food and that sort of thing that they need. And then they disappear back into either the mountains or other districts or even other provinces. Some of the provinces to our north don't have -- (inaudible) -- coalition force presence, so they find that as a safe haven.

So to answer your question, yeah, they mostly come out of other areas, do their job and then they return.

Q Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And just --

Q Colonel --

COL. HALL: Thank you.

MR. HOLT: -- got a few minutes left. Go ahead, Andrew. Q Yeah, Colonel, it's Andrew Lubin again. Do you have any possibilities of being the first unit extended twice in Afghanistan, do you think?

COL. HALL: I don't think so. I think so far things are tracking fairly well. We are definitely setting some conditions for success for the follow-on unit that we believe will be coming. And if there's any kind of extension, it won't be -- (inaudible) -- extension, it will simply -- because of a flight delay or some kind of transportation issue, something on that order. That's my thought. I certainly don't think that we'll get a second extension.

Q Great. Hope so. Hopefully -- hope so. Appreciate the time.

MR. HOLT: All right. And Colonel, we're about out of time, here, so do you have any closing thoughts for us?

COL. HALL: Well, again, probably say that we're definitely accomplishing the mission.

And the thing I'm most enthusiastic about is the people themselves and the reaction that we're starting to achieve with them.

So we leverage heavily on our civil-military operations. And we're really trying to improve -- (off mike). They're enjoying that prosperity. So therefore they want it more and so they like our presence. They like the security that we provide. And now they're starting to add to the security of their situation and help us help them.

So that's -- (off mike) -- very motivating for our Marines to see that. And so by and large things are improving. And we've got Ramadan coming up here pretty soon so we don't know if that's going to change anything. But we don't think it will.

I think that what we're going to see though is that the people are going to continue to respond. And the conditions are going to improve with the additions of forces that, we know are coming especially this next year. So I've got a lot of hope. And I appreciate all your time.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you very much.

With us on the Bloggers Roundtable today, Lieutenant Colonel Richard Hall, who is the commander of the 2nd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment in Helmand and Farah provinces. Thank you very much for joining us, sir.

END.