Appearing Larger Than We Are:

The Story of the 1st Brigade Special Troops Battalion, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 82d Airborne Division

By Lieutenant Colonel Frederic A. Drummond and Major James H. Schreiner

During Operation Iraqi Freedom (from June 2007 through July 2008), the 1st Brigade Special Troops Battalion (BSTB), 1st Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 82d Airborne Division, deployed to Contingency Operating Base Adder in Dhi Qar Province of southern Iraq. Initially charged with the theater security and security forces mission for Dhi Qar, al Muthanna, and Diwaniyah Provinces, the battalion conducted a successful in-stride transition to an operational overwatch mission in the provincial Iraqi-controlled province of al Muthanna and assistance in Dhi Qar. The 1st BSTB was charged with a mission set that tested the limits of the organization. The counterinsurgency (COIN) fight in the Shia-dominated, Iranian-influenced south presented difficult and unique challenges, and it led to a comment about "appearing larger than you are" by General David Petraeus, Multinational Force–Iraq (MNF–I) commander, on a visit to one combat outpost. This is exactly what the battalion was tasked to achieve and exactly what it accomplished. The 1st BSTB was the right unit, with the right capabilities, at the right time to fight counterinsurgent and criminal elements in a nontraditional BSTB role. Through the use of a dynamic task-organization leveraging additional BCT assets, a well-defined campaign design with a stringent targeting system to adjust it, detailed interagency coordination enabling, and creative small-unit leadership, the BSTB's capabilities are well suited for COIN operations.

Traditional BSTB Tasks

Before describing how the 1st BSTB achieved success, it is important to understand more traditional BSTB tasks and current tactics, techniques, and procedures that have evolved during the War on Terrorism.The doctrinal mission statement of the BSTB highlights rear area security as one of the main tasks the organization was designed to accomplish. This responsibility is where the BSTB is more limited in nature due to the lack of depth in the organization. Traditionally, the BSTB has been employed to provide intelligence and signal enablers for the BCT, limited civil-military operations (CMO) command and control (C2) oversight, military training teams, route clearance operations, some base defense operations (with significant augmentation), detainee operations, and BCT C2 support and security with the headquarters/BCT company. Many of these tasks are stovepiped toward addressing specific BCT-level requirements that a BCT commander may not have the organizational energy to focus on specifically and are rarely used in close coordination with each other.

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Often, BSTBs are used as force provider units to augment BCT operations or other task force-sized elements handling very specific tasks. Rarely is a BSTB headquarters charged with planning, synchronizing, resourcing, and executing multiple items from the BCT mission-essential task list (METL) in a BCT's area of operations. The 1st BSTB validated the

idea that the fusion of its unique capabilities into small units under a company C2 system—with the battalion providing the framework for that unity of effort—is ideal for the mission. This unique fusion provided a new way to "appear larger than we are" with some BCT enablers helping to build capabilities that lacked depth. The combination of such capabilities validates the theory described in the July-September 2006 issue of *Engineer* by then Lieutenant Colonel Thomas H. Magness, then an Army War College Fellow at the University of Texas, that 1+1+1>3 in a complex COIN fight.[1] With the right balance and clear vision, the BSTB has ideal capabilities and diverse military skills to apply to COIN operations in a BCT mission set.

The support behind the argument is generally found within the statistics over the 1st BSTB's 14-month combat tour. Three primary mission-essential tasks were assigned to the battalion:

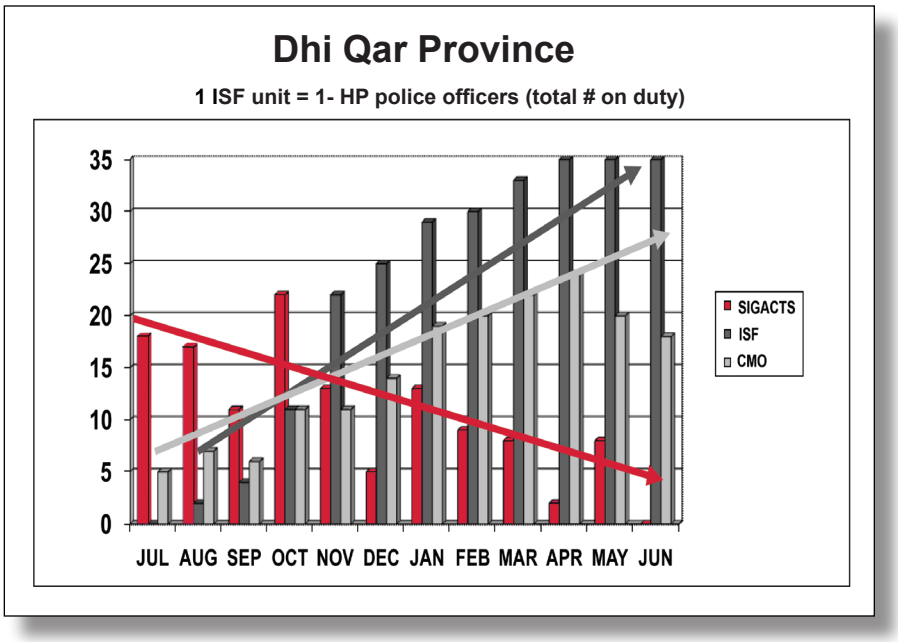

Figure 1. Trend Lines of Enemy Activity (EFP/IDF/Complex Attacks) on Coalition versus CMO Engagements/Partnerships and Capable ISF Application

- Secure freedom of movement along Main Supply Route (MSR) Tampa
- Provide operational overwatch to al Muthanna Province
- Conduct CMO for the BCT

The results for the 1st BSTB's combat actions from June 2007 through July 2008 argue that, while not a completely causal relationship, the skill sets of a BSTB can be very effective within a sound COIN strategy. The downturn in enemy operations (see Figure 1) was a result of all the teams operating in southern Iraq—to include other defense agencies, civil affairs teams, provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs), and other government agencies (OGAs)—but the battalion was a key enabler and catalyst for significant atmospheric changes in the tribal areas that had been previously untouched by coalition forces. This persistent engagement with the locals and assistance from provisional government officials aided in the tremendous success achieved by all forces listed above.

Dynamic Task Organization

On arrival in June 2007, the BSTB was assigned to secure five radio relay points along MSR Tampa and to disrupt improvised explosive device (IED) cells along the MSRs. An offensive mind-set, and some creative repositioning of critical enablers from the brigade and battalion, turned these five relay points into three legacy combat outposts (COPs) through the use of improved communications systems; mortar teams; and human intelligence (HUMINT) collection, signal, and intelligence capabilities. The remaining COPs were task-organized with a similar capability due to threats, but could easily be modified to address surges in explosively formed projectiles (EFP) activity, PRT efforts, and basic engagement needs as the mission set was modified. At COP 4 in Diwaniyah Province and COP 9 in Dhi Qar Province, the threat was almost exclusively from EFPs, complex attacks, and indirect fires (IDFs). At COP 6 in al Muthanna Province, the threat was mostly from criminals acting against Iraqi commerce, using MSR Tampa as the most expedient route from Basra to Baghdad. The task organization in Figure 2, page 52, became the essential team that staffed the COPs throughout the 14-month rotation. Guidance from the MNF–I commander was to "live among the people. You cannot commute to this fight. Position … combat outposts … in the neighborhoods we intend to secure. Living among the people is essential to securing them and defeating the insurgents."[2] The 1st BSTB provided a solid mix of capabilities when augmented by a few additional BCT assets and epitomized the General Petraeus strategy of forward engagement.

Fundamental to the success of each COP was the diverse mixture of military occupational specialties and multiple branch-specific officers. The COPs, with fewer than 100 Soldiers each, could deal with installation defense, installation support, route security, CMO, and security force partnerships. Deliberate route clearance along 250 kilometers of road led to the reduction of Tier 1 IED hot spots from eight in June 2007 to zero in March 2008. This allowed a distinct move to hold-and-build operations along that same stretch of road while maintaining flexibility for the commander to surge security forces back.

Combat engineers and military police focused efforts on security and partnership with Iraqi army, police special units, and Iraqi Highway Police (IHP), while CMO patrols engaged the populations, enabling PRTs and other agencies

to build capacity and infrastructure. Together, these efforts created space, or freedom of movement, for all engagements. HUMINT collection team (HCT) operations from COPs 4 and 9 would be integrated into all security and CMO patrols, thus filling information voids in the three provinces. That in turn led to increased freedom of movement and multiple target packages to be handed off to maneuver forces. The diverse set of capabilities brought to bear set conditions for an ever-increasing sphere of influence for the BCT in the three provinces. In essence, it set conditions for the transition from telecommunications and theater security to an effective operational overwatch mission and created space for the BCT to expand its reach and support Iraqi army operations in Basra and Amarrah with great success during April and May 2008.

Campaign Design and Targeting

The dynamic task organization is only good if all the unit efforts are working toward one common goal. Understanding the dynamics of the COIN fight, and the propensity for battalion milestones to change in achieving that goal, forced an extremely defined, yet adaptive, process to be created. Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency Operations*, has dedicated a complete chapter to the development of rigid processes that increase unit flexibility. "The campaign design must therefore guide and empower subordinate leaders to conduct the coordination, cooperation, and innovation required to achieve the campaign purpose in a manner best suited to local conditions."[3] In operations across three provinces, fighting three distinct sets of enemy influence and actions, the need for relevant systems was instrumental to any success the battalion would have.

The operational design enabled the battalion to keep its focus clearly within a security logical line of operations (LLO) with focus on the COPs and freedom of movement along the main and alternate supply routes. Flanking efforts included the operational overwatch of the al Muthanna Province and a separate LLO for the engagements with three separate PRTs. This road map for the battalion was nested within the BCT targeting cycle and allowed the battalion to adopt a one-week targeting and synchronization cycle that was adaptive and responsive enough to stay even with, or ahead of, the daily change in atmospherics. Reactions to EFP Tier 1 sight evolution; security and reconstruction changes in dynamics; a changing political landscape at provincial, tribal, and district levels; and the BCT focus on operational-level and some strategic-level planning was possible through this system. A simple fragmentary order (FRAGO) with a synchronization and execution matrix enabled resourcing to support operations along the 250-kilometer stretch of MSR. This FRAGO also included the overwatch portion of the battalion's mission.

The culmination of the process included a weekly briefing to the battalion commander that included the following:

- Intelligence summary with more detail than the normal battalion operations and intelligence briefings
- Battalion milestone review with measure-of-effectiveness trends from the previous week
- Breakdown of the high-payoff target list with actionable efforts toward achieving those milestones

New milestones were nominated in this meeting, and the high-payoff targets would be rendered active or passive for the upcoming week. Battalion planning priorities of work would be locked in by the commander and focus the staff for two weeks out. The end-state was an order that provided course corrections to the campaign plan and added maximum flexibility for the COP commanders to engage in security, partnership with Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), and reconstruction efforts. The systems allowed the commander to exercise effective battle command. In particular, the battalion could see the enemy and adapt quickly to understand the dynamics governing the environment.

"Understanding tribal loyalties, political motivations, and family relationships is essential to defeating the enemy we faced, a task more

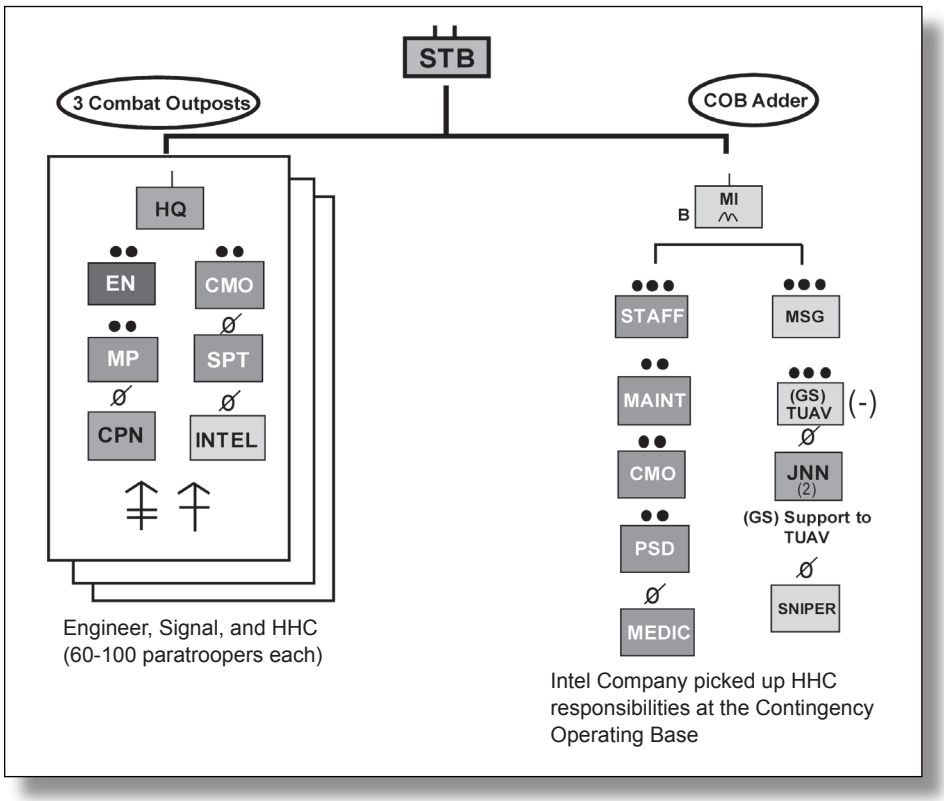

Figure 2. Task Organization

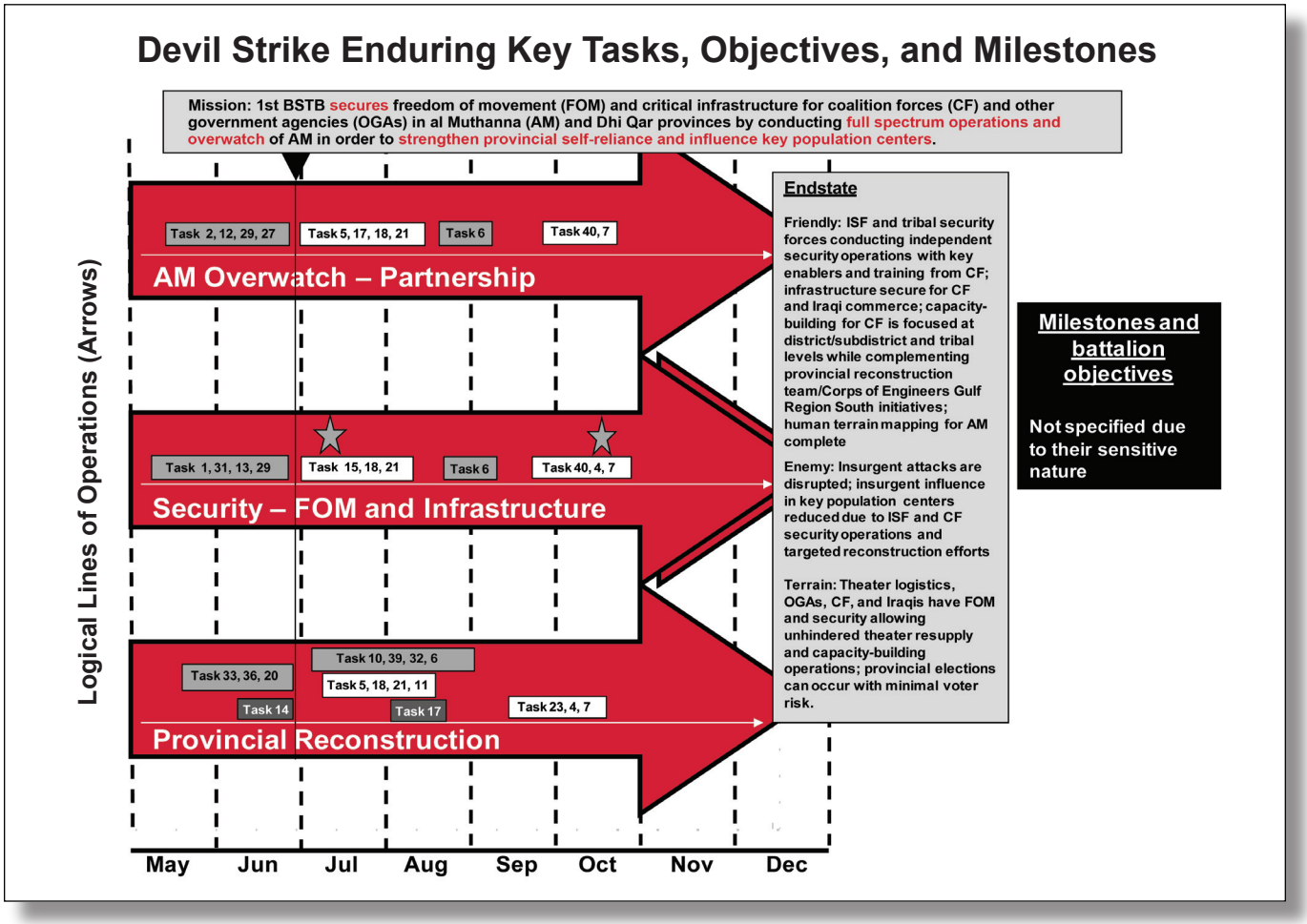

Figure 3. Battalion Milestones and Logical Lines of Operations

akin to breaking up a Mafia crime ring than dismantling a conventional enemy battalion or brigade."[4] The system created an environment within the battalion that allowed the creation of a "human terrain map," helping to feed the targeting process and answer battalion and brigade commanders' critical intelligence requirements. The process enabled the COIN fight focus, and the unique characteristics of the BSTB created the capability to address a wide array of challenges, with these systems providing the rudder for all operations.

In total, the battalion staff required external assets to implement this system, much like the COPs needed augmentation in mortar crew and HCT operators. The need for a full-time fire support/targeting officer, a signal officer, and a CMO officer were just three fills that were external tasking, but critical to mission accomplishment. Systems in a BSTB can make the battalion a large force multiplier to the BCT, but key augmentations must be addressed from a modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) change initiative. Further review of these critical capabilities must accompany unit status reporting and drive the study of MTOE revision for the unit to be a more independent and self-sufficient enabler in both lethal and nonlethal operations in support of a BCT.

While there are some areas where help is needed, the diverse BSTB staff capabilities create an extremely positive learning atmosphere. For example, within the operations and training section alone, an engineer officer in charge led a team of two infantry captains, two military intelligence captains, a logistics captain, and a fire support officer. Making all orders and targeting operational for four different types of companies with 67 different military occupational specialties with different METL sets of core competencies was extremely complex. Leaders in a BSTB must learn each other's skill sets so that the companies can be properly planned for, resourced, and led in training and operations. The rigid campaign design and targeting process provide the framework to ensure that a common language is understood and that the diverse nature of the organization can be overcome when working outside of the core mission sets.

Interagency Engagement and Engaged Leadership

The systems in place in the 1st BSTB enabled quick recognition that a plan was on or off course. Commanders at the battalion and company levels—and their understanding of the nested commander's intent—allowed for maximum creativity in developing the "how" to achieve milestones (see Figure 3). Subsequently, the strong relationships with the Department of State (DOS) and other

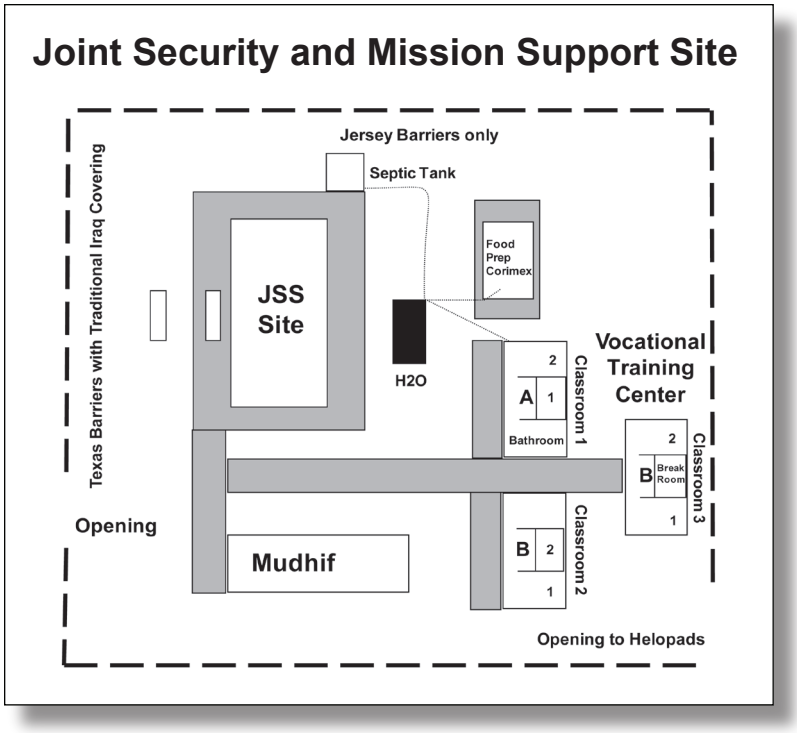

Figure 4. An Example of a JSS/MSS

governmental agencies allowed "spheres of influence" to expand rapidly. FM 3-24 has dedicated an entire chapter to leadership, which must be creative and accountable.

"Senior commanders are responsible for maintaining the 'moral high ground' in all deeds and words of their units."[5] The battalion leadership understood that while the COIN fight is extremely decentralized in nature, each commissioned and noncommissioned officer must be grounded in the commander's intent and prepared to enforce legal and ethical behavior while implementing creative solutions to win influence over the population or deny influence to the enemy. In many instances, this meant high densities of leadership with few Soldiers to conduct key leader engagements.

One prime example of battalion imagination was the creation of a joint security site (JSS)/mission support site (MSS) at COP 6 in al Muthanna Province (see Figure 4). This combined effort between the PRT, the Civil Police Authority Training Team, and coalition forces occurred from battalion through platoon levels. The 1st BSTB provided security for the C2 site, freedom of movement for the PRT throughout the province, and leverage with partners in the ISF and government to begin advanced training of special police and Iraqi army units from the site. It offered a JSS for intelligence sharing and partnership development between key players in the province, encompassing governance at the tribal and provincial levels, and security elements. This initiative was not a specified task, yet it became a beacon for other provinces, Iraqi government officials, and U.S. congressional staffers who became interested in studying because the site leveraged the capabilities of Department of Defense (DOD), DOS, and other agencies in appearing larger than we were. This one example was developed over time by the PRT team chief with the battalion and COP 6 commander and staff.

Another example of creative leadership emanated from the military police leaders at COP 6 and COP 9, who developed training plans with the IHP, the most under-resourced security forces in the ISF. Weekly classroom, range, and on-the-job training enabled the building of bonds between the units and helped deter more than 15 EFP detonations and traffic accidents.

Two examples of the BSTB's unique capabilities that would be missing in maneuver units were the engineer and CMO leaders closely working with the PRTs and military police Soldiers who were experts at traffic checkpoint operations. Given the COIN threats of small EFP and indirect-fire cells, and the limited-sized threat to the units, the BSTB brought the ideal capabilities to apply to the problem set. Couple this with an imagination that can expand and build new concepts in the interagency and multinational reality, and the unit can thrive. Many of the integration concepts for the JSS/MSS are now being studied in new DOS structures for teaching at combat training centers and in the Officer Educational System. An interagency team is currently working to develop such a structure and will become the hub for all PRT lessons learned at DOS and DOD training centers.

One area that will have to be closely developed is the DOS mind-set that an aggressive approach in engagement is needed at provincial, tribal, and district levels simultaneously. This is perhaps one area where a battalion can only cover so much ground due to lack of subject matter experts. The willingness to use those experts and reach out to the provinces plays a key part in the hold-and-build portions of a COIN fight. Even with a mixture of engineers, military police, and CMO personnel, a BSTB still is heavily reliant on DOS experts. Understanding COIN strategy is not a responsibility of DOD alone. Interagency engagement is only as good as the understanding of leaders in both organizations of COIN doctrine.

Summary

Despite many challenges, the 1st BSTB proved that it could be an extreme force multiplier in the COIN fight when left to fight as an organic battalion with key enablers from the BCT. In 14 months, it took roads most susceptible to EFP and complex attacks and reduced the frequency of attacks by as much as 90 percent in most areas and eradicated them completely in others. Augmented with a robust CMO and ISF partnership strategy, systems to keep the battalion leadership on course, and the inclusion of OGAs, the battalion enjoyed extreme success. One of the key themes of the battalion was to "extend a hand in partnership, but always remain vigilant of the threat." Learning to adapt to the

challenges and threats was a daily fight, but accomplished to a high standard. It is possible for a BSTB to operate successfully as a multifunctional battalion. It is about appearing larger than we are as a coalition and will continue to be as long as we are asked to fight and win the nation's wars.

Lieutenant Colonel Drummond is the Director of Operations, Task Force Bragg, XVIII Airborne Corps, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Previous assignments include Commander, 1st Brigade Special Troops Battalion, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 82d Airborne Division; USCENTCOM ground operations officer and J3 executive officer; Combined Task Force 82 Senior Engineer, Operation Enduring Freedom; 307th Engineer Battalion executive and operations officer; and observer-controller (Scorpion and Sidewinder Teams) at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California. He holds a bachelor's in industrial management from the University of Nebraska–Kearney and a master's in business administration through Embry–Riddle University. He can be contacted at <frederic.drummond@us.army.mil>

Major Schreiner is an engineer officer serving as the 1st BSTB's executive officer. He was previously a battalion operations officer during Operation Iraqi Freedom. He served as a company commander in Operation Iraqi Freedom and as a strategic reconstruction officer to Combined Forces Command–Afghanistan Engineer Directorate in 2005. He holds a master's in engineering management from the University of Colorado and is a certified project management professional. He can be contacted at <james.schreiner@us.army.mil>.

Endnotes

[1] Lieutenant Colonel Thomas H. Magness, "Brigade Special Troops Battalions, Part I: All the Way In," *Engineer*, July-September 2006, p. 47.

[2] General David H. Petraeus, "Multinational Force–Iraq Commander's COIN Guidance," *Military Review*, 21 June 2008, p. 1.

[3] Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency Operations*, December 2006, p. 4-6.

[4] John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons From Malaya and Vietnam*, University of Chicago Press; Chicago, Illinois, 2005, p. 13.

[5] FM 3-24, p. 7-2.

This article is reprinted from the *Maneuver Support Magazine*, Winter 2009.