



# Counterinsurgency Operations Within the Wire—

## The 306th Military Police Battalion Experience at Abu Ghraib

*By Lieutenant Colonel John F. Hussey*

The commander of the 18th Military Police Brigade, Colonel James Brown, used a personal experience to shape the thinking of the leaders of the 306th Military Police Battalion as the unit prepared for mobilization to the Baghdad Central Correction Facility at Abu Ghraib. He discussed a meeting he once had with a German landlord who had spent time as a prisoner of war (POW). Colonel Brown extended his sympathies but the landlord said it was the best thing that could have happened to him. He was removed from the fighting and treated well by the Americans. This former German soldier's treatment forever changed his view toward Americans.<sup>1</sup>

After the detainee abuse story at Abu Ghraib was reported, the Soldiers of the 306th realized that they had to ensure the highest standards when it came to detainee operations. Similar to the example of the German POW, the 306th would have Iraqi and foreign fighters returning to the streets of their homelands to report their encounters with Americans. For many of these individuals, it would be their only contact with Americans and their experiences would be passed to future generations. The 306th Military Police Battalion's ability to conduct the mission to Army standard and treat detainees with dignity and respect was paramount because of the insurgency within Iraq and the growing extremist Islamic movement throughout the region.

The detainee population could not be managed from a desk. As commander of the 306th Military Police Battalion, I was committed to knowing my battlespace. In order to conduct successful counterinsurgency operations (COIN), leaders must interact with the population.<sup>2</sup> One of my overall objectives was to have U.S. leaders in the camp at all times. This would ensure oversight that would allow us to identify problem detainees and problem Soldiers and remove them from the camp. This was also a commonsense approach that paid dividends during

disturbances. Establishing credibility with the detainee population during daily interaction allowed the U.S. leaders to use that credibility to reduce tension during times of conflict. It would be difficult for the U.S. leaders to ask for detainee cooperation if they had not worked with the detainees on a daily basis.

Each week U.S. leaders met with detainee leaders. I promised detainees that when I gave my word, it would be honored, which is another key to COIN. Once, a detainee leader told me that U.S. military guards were rude in their approach to new detainees. He said this was resented among the population. I told the detainee leader I would investigate the matter, and I asked my command sergeant major to address the noncommissioned officer (NCO) in charge of the guards. The matter was resolved and several nights later I returned and asked the detainee leader for feedback. He told me there was great improvement and thanked me. These actions have a dramatic effect on the detainees' perception of their captors.

One detainee leader said he originally came to Iraq to kill Americans, but his treatment in the camp had changed his view. Before his arrival at the camp, he had never met an American. He had learned to hate the Americans because of propaganda. Based on his interaction with Americans and the way Soldiers treated detainees, he said "the fire in his belly was now out." He was sincere and there were occasions when he was helpful in calming detainees during disturbances, a true measurement of effective COIN.

U.S. leaders spent countless hours talking with detainee leaders about problems in the camps. The dedication and patience of the U.S. leaders were key factors to the success of the 306th Military Police Battalion. The ability of officers and senior NCOs to



**Detainee leaders meet with the Baghdad City Council to address issues regarding their detention and legal status.**

communicate and demonstrate respect for detainees and their culture and religion earned the respect of the population. Knowledge of the camp gave them instincts that helped them measure and anticipate problems. The net result was a detainee population that usually adhered to the camp rules and regulations.

Soldiers stationed throughout Iraq learned how different America's culture is from Iraq's, especially when it comes to religion. The question of dividing and housing the detainee population by religion was discussed frequently. The detainee leaders were in favor of the idea but my staff and I vehemently opposed it. Our decisions considered COIN within the wire, but also COIN on the streets of Iraq. Consider the many races, religions, and cultural groups found in a prison. If each group was provided with a wing populated with its members only, the groups would become more unified, creating problems for the U.S. military guards. Consider the consequences when the groups were released from the prison. They would now be stronger outside, based on networks created in prison. That would be dangerous for the maneuver commanders working in the villages of Iraq.

Detainees were allowed visits by immediate family members, who made appointments and appeared at the reception center on the day of their appointment. This was a great opportunity for COIN within the wire. I always visited the visitation center to

ensure that the Soldiers were conducting operations correctly. Visitors were the people who would return to the Sunni Triangle, and I wanted to demonstrate to them that the Soldiers were treating detainees and their families with respect. I took the time to meet family members and ensure that Soldiers conducted civil-military operations to bolster our image.

Visitation was also an activity where COIN could lose momentum. During weekly meetings with detainee leaders, U.S. leaders addressed complaints. At one such meeting, detainee leaders accused some interpreters of treating visiting family members disrespectfully. Upon review, the complaints were valid and the interpreters were provided with the policy on the treatment of detainees and their visitors. Detainee leaders also complained that the U.S. military guards had dogs at the gate to use against visitors and that Iraqi females were forced to strip in front of males. These were patently false rumors being spread by a minority extremist group. To dispel the rumors, I gave the detainee leaders my word that there were no dogs used to search civilians coming into the prison. The detainee leaders were presented with photographs to show that there were covered tents and female Soldiers provided for searching female visitors out of the view of men. The photographs were distributed to the population, eliminating the rumors and destroying the credibility of the extremists. Photographs were also used to prove that detainees were being released.

The commander of the 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment, Colonel H. R. McMaster, recognized that detainees should be treated with dignity and instructed his Soldiers to refrain from using slang terms such as “haji” when referring to detainees. Colonel McMaster also had to relieve a battalion commander who “did not get it.”<sup>3</sup> Soldiers of the 306th Military Police Battalion were trained that detainees were to be treated with dignity and respect, but this had to be monitored and enforced. A blackboard in the processing area had English phrases translated into Arabic. One of the phrases translated was, “I don’t care,” reflecting a mindset that had to be changed. It was explained to the NCO at the desk how that type of message set the wrong tone.

In a battalion, I had to expect that some Soldiers were going to march to their own beat. Also, after guarding detainees for several months while wearing full battle gear in temperatures exceeding 120°, I knew that there would be some burnout. Officers and senior NCOs were told to watch for the signs. Reports of Soldiers cursing, yelling, and requesting transfers and detainee complaints served as indicators. If Soldiers verbally abused detainees or displayed inappropriate conduct, they would be monitored. This allowed U.S. leaders to retrain potentially abusive Soldiers and educate them on

alternative ways to deal with stress. The policy was to try to accommodate requests for transfer from Soldiers who were burned out. This gave physically and emotionally exhausted Soldiers an opportunity to be assigned to a different mission within the facility.

One time it was alleged that a Soldier made derogatory remarks to a detainee regarding Islam, causing a minor disturbance. Although the detainee’s accusation against the Soldier was not allowed to stand alone, it was used as a foundation to review the matter. In this instance, another Soldier corroborated the accusation and the accused Soldier was admonished and removed from the camp. This sent a clear message to the Soldiers and the detainees that U.S. leaders would not tolerate Soldiers who did not follow the rules governing their conduct in the camp. The key thing to remember is that one undisciplined Soldier can cause a major disturbance that could result in the serious injury or death of Soldiers or detainees and thus destroy COIN within the wire.

COIN within the wire are no different from COIN in the field, but they require more leadership involvement. Soldiers in the field see various aspects of Iraqi life. They may be shot at and subjected to improvised explosive devices, but they also see



Detainees meet visitors in a booth built for that purpose.

positive aspects of Iraqi life such as family, school, and work. These positive aspects motivate those Soldiers and give them the necessary drive to continue the mission. In a prison environment, however, Soldiers see only the negatives of Iraqi life. It is difficult for young Soldiers because the same detainees that they care for day after day are the same detainees who pelt the Soldiers with rocks in the middle of the night. They are the same detainees who may be setting up Soldiers for mortar and rocket attacks day after day. The Stanford Prison Experiment in 1971 revealed that ordinary people placed in charge of others in a prison setting quickly became sadistic and abusive toward their captives when there was a void in proper supervision.<sup>4</sup> To avoid this scenario, U.S. leaders stressed leadership presence in the camp to ensure successful COIN within the wire. Detainees are constantly assessing Soldiers. Many of the detainees served in the Iraqi military. Based on their military experience, they know how to evaluate Soldier behavior and conduct. They use their own form of intelligence gathering to gain insight into their captors to help them plan their own operations inside the wire. They capitalize upon weakness and manipulate it to their advantage.

Having a disciplined detainee population requires visibly disciplined U.S. military guards. Detainees in Abu Ghraib included foreign fighters, former members of the Iraqi security forces, and former soldiers of the Iraqi military. They understood authority and military discipline. They recognized that the U.S. military guards were disciplined. The Soldiers and detainees knew when senior U.S. leaders were present because the announcement that the battalion commander or command sergeant major were on the ground caused a chain reaction. Soldiers ensured that minor rules were observed, that they were alert, and that their uniforms were worn properly.

This behavior was observed by the detainees and served as a key indicator. If the detainees felt that Soldiers were weak or that U.S. leaders would not enforce simple Soldier standards, they saw that as a chink in the armor. On the other hand, if U.S. leaders walked around the camp in 120° temperatures to ensure that Soldiers were conducting themselves properly, to include such minor issues as uniform wear and common military courtesies, then how strictly would those U.S. leaders treat infractions by the detainees? Detainees saw Soldiers enforcing cleanliness in the detainee areas and constantly conducting physical security checks. This Soldier discipline, enforced and encouraged by senior U.S.

leaders, demonstrated the command support and leadership necessary to conduct the mission to standard.

One example illustrates this point. Based on an increased population, the 306th Military Police Battalion expanded the size of the facility within Abu Ghraib, opening Camp Remembrance, named in honor of the law enforcement officers who died on 11 September 2001. Camp Remembrance was home to foreign fighters and individuals who had been convicted by the Central Criminal Court of Iraq. They were “dead enders” with nothing to lose. The camp was slowly becoming a problem for U.S. leaders. I assigned one of the best NCOs in the battalion to the camp. He immediately started to clean up the U.S. military guards. He understood that he would not gain control of his detainee population if he did not have the control of the military police Soldiers assigned to him. Within days he wrote up several subordinates and the message went out that there was a “new sheriff in town.” The U.S. military guards came into compliance and within weeks Camp Remembrance became a model camp with well-disciplined U.S. military guards and a detainee population that adhered to the camp rules.

Night is the most dangerous time in the detention operations business. That is when escapes and fights among the detainees and loss of discipline among the U.S. military guards are most likely to occur. The 306th Military Police Battalion was fortunate to have an outstanding NCO as its nighttime sergeant of the guard. He represented the battalion’s command group during the night and understood the importance of the mission. It is simple, good leadership that enforces discipline through basic Soldier standards.

Many aspects of detainee operations had to be conducted to execute successful COIN within the wire. The medical care provided to detainees ensured that their treatment was according to international standards. The positive and professional relationship between the Joint Interrogation and Debriefing Center and the military police regarding the security of the camp and the U.S. military guards was also a factor. The judge advocate general (JAG) officers who spent hours reviewing detainee files to ensure due process were another factor. Additionally, the JAG officers responded to detainee requests and helped prepare cases for the Combined Review and Release Board (CRRB). This was a process in which detainee cases were reviewed if they lacked evidence or if the detainees were believed not to be a threat. The CRRB could recommend that detainees

be released and sent home. The use of the Criminal Investigation Division (CID) helped establish a system of checks and balances to ensure that detainees were treated according to international rules and the standards outlined by the U.S. military. The CID investigated any allegation of abuse that a detainee made against a Soldier, either at the time of apprehension or during detention at Abu Ghraib, and reported its findings through the CID chain of command.

The detainee mission in COIN is difficult. Numerous factors and other missions will be encountered. Leaders simply must incorporate the art and science of war to complete the mission. I would suggest that the enemy prisoner of war internment/resettlement battalion modified table of organization and equipment be adjusted to include a JAG officer, a cultural advisor, and an information operations officer to support the operational theme. In an insurgency, the U.S. Army needs a civil affairs team to work with maneuver units in matters that occur between family members and detainees held by the United States. The 306th Military Police Battalion completed its mission at Abu Ghraib without having to use deadly force against any detainees. There were no serious injuries to U.S. personnel or detainees due to the use of force, and there were no substantiated claims of abuse.

To have successful COIN within the wire, leaders must—

- Be present in the camp, interacting with detainees and Soldiers every day.
- Actively seek intelligence from all avenues. This includes reviewing detainee files, working with interrogators, and using the intelligence collected by U.S. military guards. Educate U.S. military guards on what to look for as part of the guard mount. Use assigned counterintelligence personnel.

- Enforce basic Soldier standards through strict discipline. If standards are not maintained, discipline will break down and the U.S. military guards will commit errors in judgment, reducing the ability to conduct COIN. Soldiers and detainees must understand the command's intent. If detainees see fairness in their treatment, then the COIN will have a better chance of succeeding.
- Never break their word. This is no different from dealing with Soldiers. A promise made must be a promise kept.
- Listen to their Soldiers, since they are in the trenches and have a better feeling for what is going on.
- Listen to detainees. Verify and corroborate detainee accounts, but do not dismiss them out of hand. In many instances, they are correct, especially about Soldiers who display negative attitudes and present problems within the camp.
- Remove leaders who do not “get it” and do not support the command plan. Leaders who are not loyal and who fail to execute the plan will have an adverse effect on other Soldiers.
- Assign the best Soldiers to work at night, which is a dangerous time. Use staff duty officers as a system of checks and balances.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Colonel James Brown, USA, Commander, 18th Military Police Brigade, during a briefing to the Headquarters, Headquarters Command, 306th Military Police Battalion, September 2004.

<sup>2</sup> David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare, Theory and Practice*, Praeger Security International, 2006, p. 81.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, Penguin Press, New York, 2006, p. 420.

<sup>4</sup> The Stanford Prison Experiment. A Simulation of the Psychology of Imprisonment Conducted at Stanford University by Philip Zimbardo, <<http://www.prisonexp.org/>>.