

Order From Chaos: The 422nd CA Battalion in OIF



by Cherilyn A. Walley with Michael R. Mullins

THE U.S. Army Reserve 422nd Civil Affairs Battalion from Greensboro, North Carolina, crossed the berm into Iraq with the 3rd ID on 21 March 2003. Its assignment

As the 422nd Civil Affairs Battalion advanced north with the 3rd Infantry Division toward Baghdad, it assessed villages' needs and offered help when it could. Residents of all ages offered insights into local conditions.

to the main invasion force placed the 422nd CAB at the forefront of ground combat operations, a place few Civil Affairs teams are ever found. Once the 3rd ID reached Baghdad, the battalion successfully made the difficult transition from the military side of civil military operations to the civil side, and was instrumental in helping the capital city move forward and begin to rebuild. The experiences of the Civil Affairs soldiers on the march north and in Baghdad itself epitomize the juncture between civil and military operations.

Six-man direct support teams from the 422nd CAB accompanied the 3rd ID's brigade combat teams during the rapid advance towards the capital. The 422nd CAB direct support teams were tasked with minimizing civilian

interference with combat operations, which preserved both civilian life and combat momentum. Major Dustin Hilburn* described the battalion's planning process:

We focused on the ethnic makeup of the population, and whether they were pro-regime or not, agricultural or industrial, normal means of transportation, and what type of ethnic strife was going on in the city. We looked at the possibility for relocation of

civilians and what direction they might move. We tried to plan how we would react to different sizes of groups. We had to differentiate between [displaced civilians] and civilians on the battlefield. We ended up surprising lots of Iraqis just coming home from their fields. During the combat operation, the [displaced civilians] were not a problem.¹

While the 3rd ID did not confront significant civilian resistance to the advance, the direct support teams did have to deal with non-aggressive interference. One soldier in Direct Support Team 3, attached to the 3rd ID's 2nd Brigade, commented, "There were civilians who would try to pass our convoy in cars and we would get on the bullhorn and pull them over and tell them [to] stay off the road for their own protection. They were scared at first, and then they were very happy." As the brigade entered villages, the Civil Affairs soldiers "would go find civilians and tell them to stay away from U.S. forces."²

Loudspeakers—"bullet magnets"—helped the teams broadcast their instructions quickly and effectively. On at least one occasion, DST 3 "cruised through the town broadcasting the message that [they] weren't there to harm them." The terrorized populace received the news

Not even a fierce two-day sandstorm kept the dedicated soldiers of the 422nd Civil Affairs Battalion from interviewing villagers about local conditions.



*Pseudonyms have been used for all military personnel with a rank lower than lieutenant colonel.

cautiously: “We could see joy from the people, but it was restrained as there were still Baath Party personnel around,” commented one Civil Affairs soldier. “In retrospect, I understood the ambivalence toward Americans, as the Iraqis were getting barraged by the Iraqi information minister saying how the Americans were getting the crap kicked out of them. They didn’t know what to believe.”³

Many of the civilians the direct support teams encountered were not aggressive toward the U.S. troops, but actually helpful. One DST 3 soldier recounted an incident that occurred near Najaf, which aptly illustrates the benefits of allowing Civil Affairs soldiers to do their job:

On the outskirts of Najaf, there were a bunch of civilians at this bridge, and the infantry guys were wanting to light them up [because] they had been hit by a bus the day before. There were people working in their gardens about five hundred meters away, and I asked the company commander, ‘If I could go over and talk to them, would you provide a squad for security?’ We walked over there without [an] interpreter and these guys were just farmers, and they told us not to go that way because the Iraqi Army is there. And they told us where the Baath Party headquarters was. We brought that information back and farther down the road, there were fifty to a hundred people in the road, [so] I drove down there with two tanks as protection. The people were out in the road because it was their village and they were wondering what was going on. We started talking to them and they started telling us that the Iraqi Army pulled out the night before.⁴

As the direct support teams made sure civilians did not interfere with the advance, the soldiers also took the opportunity to assess villagers’ needs and tried to address them. Another DST 3 soldier related, “the Bedouins would say they used to get water trucked to them, so we would call back and get them some water from the [division] rear. If a tank [ran] over water lines, we would also call back to the [division] rear to handle it when they

As the 422nd traversed the deserts of Iraq, the battalion encountered Bedouins and villagers in need of water. Customers carried purified water home in any container they could from this water distribution site located outside Najaf.



The 422nd Civil Affairs Battalion spent a week in the area around Najaf, which gave it time to conduct humanitarian assistance and other aid missions. Through the efforts of the battalion, and the generosity of individual soldiers, on 4 April 2003 these children attended classes at their newly reopened school.

came forward.” In another case, the native Iraqis led the brigade to water: “We came across these Bedouins and asked them where the water was, and one jumped in the HMMWV [High-Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle] to go show us. We set a ROPU [reverse osmosis purification unit] up right there.”⁵

The speed of the advance usually prevented the direct support teams from providing immediate humanitarian assistance. As a DST 3 officer put it, “Our intent for humanitarian aid was like [dealing with] a stray cat. If you put a bowl of milk out, you will get every stray cat in the neighborhood. So we just didn’t put a bowl out.” Captain Merino* of DST 4 corroborated the truth of that strategy: “The longer we stayed outside Karbala, the more civilians came out asking for water and food. We knew if we kept handing out food, it would bring more civilians.” Hilburn, the 3rd ID plans officer, recalled one incident where the lack of humanitarian assistance was met with agreeable resignation by the civilians involved: “At Karbala, we had approximately 110 people come out to a checkpoint and request food and water. We told them we didn’t have any to give them at that time and to turn around and return to their homes, and they did.”⁶

The direct support teams and their assigned brigades did give as much help as they could without compromising their own security and missions. DST 3 encountered one such situation near the Karbala Gap: “There was a fight that day—a lot of fighting. There was this one Iraqi woman who came out and said, ‘Please help me, please help.’ We stopped and got out to look, and the medic truck stopped and went over to find that her husband had been shot in the butt. They treated him and put him on a stretcher by the road, and we moved on. The guy was waving at us as we all drove by him.”⁷

At times, the direct support teams found themselves in the position of taking instead of giving, ironically much to the civilian population’s relief. The team led by Captain Ted Morgan* found itself in just such a situation on 31 March. Residents of the town of Khairat informed



The 422nd Civil Affairs Battalion was instrumental in finding key personnel to restore power to Baghdad. Each power industry employee received \$20 in emergency pay, which not only ensured an intact workforce, but helped revitalize the city's economy.

the team that a local school harbored a large Saddam Fedayeen weapons cache. The Civil Affairs soldiers passed the information on to the infantry and engineers, who investigated and discovered more than nine hundred mortars, twenty-six thousand AK-47 rounds, dynamite, and chemical protective gear. After removing and inventorying the cache, an explosive ordnance disposal unit dug a hole and detonated the weapons that could not be moved very far. The rest were disposed of in a field outside the village—after clearing it of sheep.⁸

Their positions with the forward brigade combat teams placed the direct support teams in live-fire situations much more often than they found weapons caches. A member of DST 3 described one of the team's more stressful moments as they neared Baghdad:

As we pulled into this little town, there was this car sitting in the middle of the road. There was a dead man in the street, and the woman in the front seat was dead, and in the back seat was a teenage boy, shot but still alive. And in the lap of the dead mother was this baby who was untouched; [she] had these wide eyes and was just crying. The city was to our left and the canal to our right. The infantry guys were freaking out, as there were bullets flying everywhere. I went over to the girl and there was this fedayeen truck coming directly at us. I said, 'There's a truck!' and the .50 [calibers] just opened up, and this truck explodes. And then we started receiving all sorts of bullets [from] the guys [who] had jumped out of the back of the truck we hit. Then we heard this whoosh and a huge explosion up in the air, and I said, 'Holy s—!' The Bradleys and us went further into the city, and we dismounted and went inside a building to establish a fighting position. They called up a tank platoon, and it came forward and everything calmed down.⁹

Although the teams' primary mission was to clear civilians from the battlefield, occasionally events deteriorated forcing the soldiers to concentrate on fighting. DST 3 experienced one such incident near Najaf:

We went to this bridge where a PSYOP [Psychological Operations] team was checking people walk-

ing across the bridge. There were fedayeen fighting positions underneath the bridge. We put up a PSYOP message on loudspeaker: 'Put your weapon down if you wish to surrender.' We had a couple of civilians who had already crossed the bridge and given us information on where the fedayeen fighting positions were located. The enemy then pushed about two hundred civilians across the bridge and we were totally overwhelmed. We then had to stop the people, as the company commander was scared. We told the people the bridge was closed, and this one Iraqi guy took charge of all the civilians and moved them back across the bridge. In hindsight, we should have detained him. He became very offended when we told him to leave. [Then] we were hit by mortars and RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades]. The CA [Civil Affairs] mission was pretty much over at that time.¹⁰

Beginning on 7 April, teams from the 422nd CAB moved into Baghdad. The battalion focused on controlling civilians on the battlefield during the advance with the 3rd ID, but now that Baghdad had been taken, the Civil Affairs soldiers shifted to civil military operations. Unfortunately, the battalion was not provided with a clear Civil Affairs plan from higher and was left to its own judgment in prioritizing missions. Hilburn explained, "A plan for Phase IV was never passed from CFLCC [Coalition Forces Land Component Command] to V Corps and on to 3rd ID. There was no guidance on which targets we needed to protect once we got into Baghdad. We weren't told to protect museums or banks, and we didn't expect the scale of the looting [that occurred]." Merino concurred: "There wasn't a plan for Phase IV, and there wasn't a plan to deal with all the civilians [flooding out of Baghdad]."¹¹

The first challenge facing the 422nd CAB was the outflow of civilians from Baghdad. The battalion had met relatively few displaced civilians during the advance north, but was confronted with hundreds of scared people fleeing the battle in the capital city. Unfortunately, adequate plans for dealing with those civilians were not in place, in spite of the fact that they were considerably fewer than had been expected. Merino reported, "We had pages and pages of schools that were to be used as collection points, but they weren't outside the cities. We would look for areas that could be set up as collection sites. The schools inside the cities were not viable, as the Iraqis held the cities." In spite of the lack of a plan, the battalion managed to direct civilians to safe locations and provide them with basic necessities.¹²

Once in the city, the 422nd CAB turned its attention to infrastructure. Hilburn recalled, "We started looking at what we could do with a [civil military operations] focus that could have the most impact on the civilian population." In short order, the battalion concluded that power was the most important issue, since it controlled the water and sewage systems. On 10 April, battalion commander Lieutenant Colonel R. Alan King led a mission to locate



Dr. Ali Saeed Saldoon (center) was appointed Baghdad's interim fire chief soon after the 422nd arrived. He worked closely with Major Bob Glass, a captain in the Greensboro, North Carolina, fire department, to rehabilitate the capital city's ability to fight fires.*



Major Vaughn Christian (far right) of the 422nd Civil Affairs Battalion worked with experienced police officers from the former regime to rebuild the Baghdad Police force.*

and assess power transformers in the Firdos district of Baghdad. Local residents advised King's team that there were fedayeen forces operating in the local area, and that they had rocket-propelled grenades and other weapons. As King's team neared the transformers, it came under small arms fire. The team turned around, but was then ambushed with rocket-propelled grenades and more small arms fire. Several of the team's vehicles were struck by rounds, but functioned well enough to get the team back through the ambush—a tactic of last resort chosen because the route forward was blocked. King and the other Civil Affairs soldiers returned suppressive fire during their exit, killing several enemy personnel.¹³

The next morning, King's team set out once again on a mission to return power to Baghdad. This time, the team planned to meet the transformer engineer. Once again, the team ran into an ambush, this time involving a parked diesel tanker truck. Unable to retreat, the team proceeded down the middle of the fuel-soaked roadway, ducking small arms fire from two separate locations. The team called in Bradley Fighting Vehicles, which laid down suppressive fire. The team escaped unscathed and was able to return later in the day—accompanied by fifteen Bradleys—to secure the transformer site. The next day, the team located Baghdad's senior power plant engineers, who were instrumental in restoring power to the city thirteen days later.¹⁴

While Civil Affairs efforts were directed toward getting the Iraqis to rebuild their own infrastructure, U.S. soldiers had to step in and help at all levels. The 422nd CAB and the city of Baghdad were fortunate to have Major Bob Glass*, whose civilian career was as a fire captain with the Greensboro, North Carolina, Fire Department. In late April, Glass met with Dr. Ali Saeed Saldoon of Civil Defense, who was able to report that twelve of the city's twenty-five fire stations were operable. Approximately four hundred fire

fighters were still working as well. "The good thing about it is that they, like fire fighters around the world, are dedicated to their job," remarked Glass. "The majority of them stayed on throughout the hostilities, and more were coming back each day. Within a matter of days we went from 400 to 892 fire fighters back on duty." Just weeks later, the number had risen to 1,100 out of the prewar force of 1,400 fire department personnel.¹⁵

The first priority after identifying available resources was to make sure that the operable equipment was distributed to those fire stations that were manned and operating. In rehabilitating the fire defense system, Glass focused on using the native resources as much as possible: "I wanted to utilize [Dr. Saldoon] to do this, because our job is not to stay here and do it for them, but to get them to do it and become self-sufficient. So I gave him the orders to do that, and then he went out and talked to his officers in turn." Getting as many fire stations operational as possible was vital, since by American standards Baghdad was woefully lacking in stations anyway. Other shortfalls in the fire system included the lack of a nine-one-one phone system and inadequate personal protection equipment. One advantage Baghdad did have,

Captain Ty Patrick helped retrain Baghdad police officers by teaching them American police practices, such as the proper way to approach a stopped car. He also passed on professional tips, such as leaving a thumbprint on a suspect's car as evidence in case the situation deteriorated and the officer was injured or killed.*



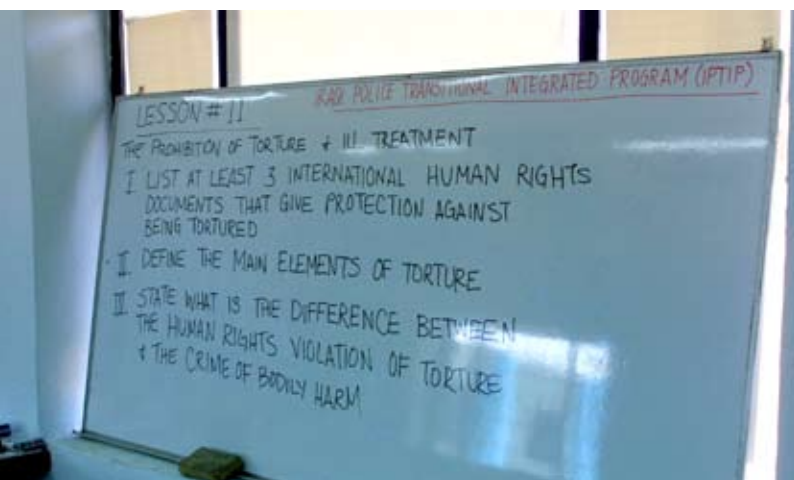


The Coalition Provisional Authority approved emergency funds for essential employees; officers in the Baghdad Police Department qualified for payments of \$20 each, a considerable amount of money in the months following the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime.

however, was the fact that most buildings were built of concrete and did not contain large amounts of “fire-load” to catch fire. The majority of fires historically occurred at power plants and refineries.¹⁶

Revitalizing the Baghdad police force was another high priority for the 422nd CAB. King appointed former Texas public safety officer Major Vaughn Christian* to be Baghdad’s interim police commissioner, or the “Sheriff of Baghdad,” as some called him. In turn, Christian looked to Baghdad’s former police administration and officers to return to service. Christian and his team prioritized aspects of law enforcement, concentrating on the most immediate needs first. “Obviously I can’t come in and start setting up an arson division, an investigation division—that takes time. I tried to prioritize. The city had just come out of a war, so my priority was getting security back on the streets, for one.” The department focused on traffic, facility security (hospitals, utility plants, and such), and patrols.¹⁷

A vital part of the 422nd’s transition program for the Baghdad Police was an education in human and civil rights. Torture, which had been a feature of police work under Saddam Hussein, was immediately prohibited.



Christian also concentrated on teaching the police department how to function in an ethical manner. He quickly put an end to such practices as transporting suspects in car trunks, openly carrying AK-47s, challenging U.S. Army soldiers at checkpoints, and various other abuses that were customary in the former regime. On at least one occasion, Christian turned a routine evidence check-in into a lesson in proper police procedure. Addressing the evidence room officer, Christian instructed, “You are the only person who belongs in this room. You count the money, and write down the amount and names of the officers who brought it in.” Such basics needed to be explained and repeated as the 422nd CAB trained officers to represent and run what would be an entirely new kind of police force in Iraq.¹⁸

In addition to the expected challenges of rebuilding a large city just emerging from tyranny and war, the 422nd CAB faced the unexpected chaos of rampant looting. With no concrete plan indicating which buildings and sites needed protection, the battalion and other Coalition forces in the city found themselves reacting to problems as they arose. Hilburn described the situation:

We would watch some TV broadcast live from Baghdad with the reporter saying this museum is being looted, and a few hours later we would get an e-mail [fragmentary order] down from higher to protect this museum. The same thing happened with banks and other locations. In a lot of ways it was planning by CNN. We were reacting to problems being identified [by the media]. One of the problems we ran into was museum names; we would be told one name and it did not exist. We got some wrong grid coordinates, which caused some confusion about where to protect. I would still receive e-mails a week after we had secured a museum that the museum was being looted and needed to be protected.¹⁹

U.S. forces were also surprised at some of the looters’ targets. Hilburn remarked, “We were not prepared for the hospitals being looted. We did not plan for it and did not receive any information [that] we would have problems in these areas.” While looting initially concentrated on buildings representing the former regime, the thievery quickly spread to all types of public buildings, including museums, hospitals, and schools. By the time schools were targeted, the looters were seeking basic building materials, such as electrical switches and wires, desks, blackboards, and plumbing fixtures. The thefts left the 422nd CAB scrambling for basic school items—like blackboards and desks—as they attempted to restore educational services to the city.²⁰

One group of 422nd CAB soldiers ran into bigger crime than looting when they witnessed and foiled a bank robbery. Sergeant Chris Mercer* recounted the story: “We were driving . . . and we got stopped by [an officer] of the 3rd ID. He said, ‘Hey, there’s a bank robbery going on. You all want in on it?’ ‘Of course!’” The team proceeded to the bank and found that the would-be robbers had been at the bank

... for a while. Because you could see on the doors that they had beaten them with pickaxes, sledgehammers, mauls, whatever they had. Eventually they got some dynamite and were able to blow a small hole in the top of the safe, through about two feet of concrete and rebar, then the steel. It was just big enough to get a small child in there. So they had lowered a child in there, and he was coming and giving them money. We think they probably got away with about \$2 million. We secured seven people inside the bank without incident. We went ahead and blew the other safe and pulled out \$6.3 million in U.S. \$100 bills. We took the money back to the airport and turned it over to the 3rd ID. While we were there [at the airport] we actually got called to another bank robbery, and went in and apprehended two [people]. They hadn't blown the safes yet. It was just another day in Civil Affairs.²¹

The 422nd Civil Affairs Battalion responded to reports of looting throughout Baghdad. They caught a large group of men and boys looting the Al Rashid Contracting Company for valuable building materials, such as windows and doors.



The roles of Civil Affairs units in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM were diverse and constantly changing. The 422nd CAB's experiences are representative of the challenges met and the successes enjoyed by all Civil Affairs units during the first months of the war. From managing and protecting displaced civilians to protecting museums and catching bank robbers, the Civil Affairs soldiers stepped in wherever they were needed. The lack of a comprehensive Civil Affairs plan often left these units in positions of determining their own priorities and reacting to situations as they arose. The units' ability to excel can be attributed to a combination of training and serendipity. More often than not, the individuals' own skills and talents created order from the chaos of war-torn Iraq. ♣

Endnotes

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- 5 DST 3 interview.
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- 20 Hilburn interview; Jim Garamone, "Civil Affairs Teams Help Put Baghdad Back Together," *American Forces Information Service*, 4 May 2003, www.defenselink.mil/news/May2003/n05042003_200305042.html.
- 21 Sergeant Chris Mercer*, 422nd Civil Affairs Battalion, interview by Sergeant First Class Dan Moriarty, 28 April 2003, Baghdad, Iraq, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Hamil R. Harris, "From Md Law To Postwar Iraq Lawlessness," *The Washington Post*, 28 April 2003, sec. B, 1.