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MNFI Director for the Strategic Engagement Cell

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Embassy Annex, International Zone, Baghdad

By (b)(3), (b)(6)

MNFI Historian

The recording will go into the MNFI archives, Central Command archives, and the archives of the Center of Military History at Ft. McNair, DC. With Maj Gen Hughes's permission, I will provide a copy to the Ministry of Defense (UK) Corporate Analyst, (b)(6) for British military records. Classification of the interview is restricted to ~~SECRET/REL ACGU~~.

Abstract

~~(S/ACGU)~~ I served with UNPROFOR in 1995, before Srebrenica. There were some similarities to this situation. It was a very difficult time resolving policy problems. We assumed they were all no good, which is a good place to start. The policy was unsustainable. Working with Rupert Smith in Bosnia and Northern Ireland was significant for me. British planning, mobilization, and deployment in 2002 and 2003 were very difficult because we couldn't second-guess civilian leaders, who were not done deciding policy. Most everything fell by the wayside to support this campaign. In Basra in 2005, the police and extrajudicial killings were a serious problem. The policy of how we went into to Basra, being separate from Corps, posed its own challenges. We had to turn to the UK for support rather than MNFI. Deploying the Black Watch to support Basra was policy-wise extremely painful. After the invasion, as things slipped away, doing the wrong things or not having sufficient forces allows criminality to flourish, and that forces you, later, to resort again to decisive action. Force levels in 2005 were even more strained. Preceding the surge, some concluded there was nothing more to do in Iraq; others thought something could be done, and were determined to do it. 48:24. *Great Interview. Well worth listening to and checking this transcript for detailed correction. I've skipped over a few places in this transcript.*

Interview

(U) Please describe your time in Bosnia with UNPROFOR.

(U) 1:40. I was the 19th Mech Brigade (UK) Chief of Staff. We deployed to [Gorni ba koof?] in what was then command of Sector South West in UNPROFOR. I joined the brigade halfway through their tour, in December 1994 through Spring 1995. It was just before Srebrenica and all of that. When fighting was still going on but we were just getting to the point where UNPROFOR came to an end, Srebrenica, and NATO took over, the Dayton agreement, and so it was all the months leading up to that. Sector Southwest was not just the UK brigade, it was Multinational, and actually from my perspective the most important thing that happened to me there was I met Major General Rupert Smith, who was the commander of UNPROFOR, who I then went on to be the Military Assistant or XO for in Northern Ireland

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a couple of years later. There is some similarity between what was happening in the Balkans in the early '90s and what is happening here, in terms of ethno-sectarian conflict, in terms of capacity for violence, and in terms of how those things are resolved, both through force and softer measures.

(U) What did you learn, or what surprised you about Bosnia or other early operational assignments?

(U) 3:50. I was here in 1990 and I'd been in Northern Ireland, commanded a company there, so I'd been around a bit, and Northern Ireland fed into it a bit. But the Balkans were a much more complex set of problems, because it wasn't our country, as Northern Ireland was, so you've got all the language and cultural issues. And you had a sort of three-sided set of cultural lessons to learn from the Muslims, the Serbs, and the Croats, and like all of these things, it is extremely difficult to judge who is telling the truth, and it is very difficult for soldiers to judge where right sits. And the normal default setting for British soldiers, which is quite healthy actually, is to assume that they're all no good [laughter], to try and be your best [?], but not to pick sides, and it was quite easy not to pick sides in the Balkans actually, particularly as when this is when the siege of Sarajevo was going on: a lot of unpleasant stuff, but, yes, it taught me about meeting these sorts of people. I had lunch with Radko Mladic, which is still my only certified war criminal, and so I began to understand how those sorts of conversations were had. If that makes sense.

(U) Closely related, sir. As a young officer, I thought policies were things that were decided, but what I've heard frequently and come to appreciate is that policy is something that accumulates. Did you face a challenge in UNPROFOR, in Bosnia, of understanding how policy happens?

(U) 6:35 Yes, that was very true of UNPROFOR and it was very true of Rupert Smith, who was driving policy at the time from Sarajevo, because we had the issue of the safe havens, for example, both Srebrenica and the British had Gorazde down south, and then there were one or two others whose names escape me at the present, and then we also had some UK SF presence in some of the other safe havens. And it was quite clear that they were unsustainable in the form that they had, because obviously the UN operation absolutely depended on consent, and this was at a point that consent was failing, and there was a need to plan for forcing supplies down into those safe havens, either by road or by air, and it was probably going to have to be by road, and that had huge policy implications, and so they were being addressed, both nationally, with . . . my commander at the time was the senior UK officer, because Rupert Smith didn't hold that position because of his UN position, so it was my brigade commander who held the national red card, and there was a great deal of tension between UK policy, and UN policy, and indeed other nations' policies. And a few months later, by which time I had gone, that played out in spades in Srebrenica, which the Dutch would be only too quick to tell you was a policy failure and a strategic failure rather than a tactical failure on their part, because when the question that everybody feared was eventually asked, which is to say, what if, in overwhelming force, the Serbs decided to overrun one of the Muslim safe havens, what are we going to do about it? Nobody had a singular view that allowed for prompt military action to take place, and everything flowed from that. And I think that, actually, as Bosnia went from an UNPROFOR to a NATO mission, it was a very good example of . . . a policy failure if you like in capitals . . . and though . . . failure is pretty harsh, because

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these things are so complicated once when you've got an alliance of that size in the planning process, but a failure of capitals to formulate policy which was able to be operationalized on the ground. Masses on the ground therefore driving policy is a fait accompli, and the senior commander on the ground being one of the people who could best influence the policy made back in home capitals.

(U) Please describe your tours in Northern Ireland and in Cyprus.

(U) 11:00. I skipped over the following, just transcribing notes rather than listening carefully to the tape. Come back to transcribe, and listen carefully to my prefacing question citing the value of failure to education. In North Ireland, I served in South Amarah, and separately with Rupert Smith. It was very different, and there are parallels that don't apply. Our government with the Irish had to deliver a solution, but we were also part of the problem. We were seen as a 'tool' of the sovereign power. Cultural specificity. There was a counter-terrorism campaign, a counterinsurgency campaign, needed support of the people, had to protect them, and restore normalcy. Provisional IRA, MA GoC. Security and Policy. 1st exposure. IR Min N.I. GoC senior civil servants. I was able to sit in. Significant moments to the Good Friday agreement, but I had just left.

(U) Cyprus was easy by comparison. I commanded a battalion in Nicosiya. South and North. There was minimal violence. We provided a presentational presence and fostered political solutions. It had no greater significance. Length of time. Last couple of days – substantive talks kicked off in 1974, property disputes. Length of campaign.

(U) I've previously interviewed Brigadier Hankinson on 2003, and a couple of other UK officers. At that time, the US Army had a very difficult time planning, mobilizing, and deploying for the operation due to the nexus of policy and strategy. How well did British planning, mobilization, and deployment proceed in 2002 and 2003?

(U) 18:40. It was very difficult, because of course, and this has been true throughout the campaign to some extent, because we the UK are not only not the primary, and not the first decision makers. In other words, it was your war, which you were making strategic decisions about, and we obviously were making our own strategic decisions. But once we had made the political decision to participate, that was done quite late in the day. You know, it didn't go to the House of Commons, the Prime Minister did not stand up until very late in the day, so we were having to work under a set of assumptions. Planning couldn't be done openly, because we could not . . . we could make a set of assumptions but we could not second guess the Prime Minister and the cabinet, and the House of Parliament, whose decision it was, not the House of Parliaments, although it did go to a vote. And because of all those negotiations and because the negotiations were going on in the UN, we were having to do various contingency plans, and then once the decision was made, and whilst we'd got an awful lot of stuff lined up, there were a lot of last-minute changes, and, you know, for those reasons, but also for strategic reasons on the ground, that is to say, we thought we would, until very late, be part of the force that came through the north. And then when Turkey refused to play, we had to look again, and we had to decide how we wanted to participate, and there were certain things driving us.

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(U) We had 40K troops in Basra in 2003¹ We wanted to throw in with the Americans, but we couldn't be merged. The British public had to see the British contribution as its own effort. There were last minute changes to the order of battle, to equipping and training, and the timeline was tight. Ships, trade, limited shipping.

(U) Turkey was an attractive option. We realized the effort had to endure.

(U) For British forces, what fell by the wayside, or what was the cost, in terms of other operations or priorities, because you'd made this commitment?

(U) 26:43. Everything apart from our sovereign national interests, pretty well. So obviously we maintained the effort in Northern Ireland, although the troop numbers then were significantly less than they had been ten years before, we were still committed. There were other national defense tasks which we needed to cover, defense of the mainland, some of the specialist equipment, and the commitments in the Balkans, but everything else went by the board, training, anything other than that, dwell time, as you would call it, was severely affected, and it became absolutely the main effort.

(U) What were the significant events of your brigade's 2005 deployment?

(U) 28:00. I was in Basra from May to August of 2005, and pulled out of the job early for a position in London, but it was . . . Basra then was probably just on the turn after I left, so we still had freedom of movement before I left. The governor was Waili, and we didn't think he'd last very long, but he is still the governor of Basra. The focus at my time there, and the focus I gave the brigade, was on reformation of the police, where it was quite clear that many if not most of the extrajudicial killings that were being done, and there were many being done nightly, were being done by the police, and it was clear that many of the police were, at best, ineffective, and it was clear that until that could be solved in some way there was never going to be a lasting resolution to the issues down south. Although I'd been here in 1990-1991, that had ended for us when we cut the Basra highway. We hadn't gone to the next stage, so this was the first time of having been amongst the Iraqi people, which was very helpful in preparation for this job.

(U) My area of operations was Basra province, down to Umm Qasr and the Kuwaiti border. We were using both force and engagement, and most of my time was spent in engagement rather than running kinetic operations. Most of those operations were at the battle group level rather than at brigade level. The majority of my time was about key leader engagement. We were based at the airport and I had a forward post at Basra Palace. I did not have much interaction with the Iraqi divisional commander, whose name I think was Latif. My main security contact was the Basra Chief of Police, whose name was Hassan Suwaidi, I think, but who I think is now retired.

¹ I think it was more like 24K, but check my records at CMH, specifically the CFLCC BUA slides for March through June 2003.

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(U) Through 2005, MNFI, MNCL, and MNSTCI put a lot of emphasis on forming training teams, and these became the MiTTs, PiTTs, and advisory teams. Were there comparable efforts in Basra?

(U) 32:35. There was an awful lot of training going on, but I think . . .

~~(S/REL ACGU)~~ 33:16. What you have to understand, and this is what a lot of people don't get [draws a quick schematic of Iraq and Basra]. When the UK decided to go south, or were forced to given the loss of the north, there was a decision made that we needed our own sector to show what we were doing, and also, frankly, we wanted to fight with the Americans, but not amongst you, because we have legal issues, rules of engagement issues, and we fight in a different way, it is actually much closer now, and I would not be saying this about the US-UK military relationship in 2008, this is about 2003, when a very different set of conditions pertained. We said, Okay, we're in, but we're going south, and we'll do Basra, and we'll block it off, and the US would obviously have to move through there, but once you've moved through, we'll take care of it. That meant that, in Basra, we owned the risk. The Corps knew that, the UK knew that, and the US knew that. What that meant was, because we owned the risk, if we ever needed reinforcement, we didn't do what a division would normally do and say "hey Corps, we need somebody to pile on here. We need some more attack helicopters and you need to switch the main effort from Baghdad and put it down here." Instead, we had to go back to the UK and said "hey, we need some more guys here." And the UK didn't have many guys, because we were getting pretty stretched, because of Afghanistan and elsewhere. So the first time that Basra really got the attention of both the Iraqi government and the Corps was in March 2008, five years on, in Charge of the Knights, when enough force went down there to make a very significant difference. But until then, it was a fiefdom which we were not able to . . . resource in the same way as you could if you had been playing as a Corps, if you'd genuinely said, we'll be part of your Corps, and just treat us like MND-North, or MND-Center, and allocate forces accordingly. Now, I'm not blaming anybody for that, that's just how it was, and it is easy to forget that's how it was. Does that make sense?

(U) Yes, sir, it does.

(U) 36:30. And actually, if you pursue that, it tells you quite a bit about what's happened over the last five years, in relationship to Basra. I'm sorry, I can't remember what your question was.

(U) I asked about training teams.

(U) 37:15. Oh yes. There were lots of training teams. We had UK police there, but we had a different view of how you do that, and a different ability to resource that. I mentored one of the Iraqi brigades, for example, but we did it at brigade headquarters. We were mentoring at battalions as well, but certainly nothing below that in the same way as we are doing in Afghanistan, and in Basra with US and UK MiTT teams. My personal view is that MND(SE) only truly became a part of this Corps, . . . and I don't meant that it was saying we won't play . . . I mean the Corps only realized it as part of the Corps, and the division only played as part of the Corps, from March 2008 on, and that is the significant, singular difference you've seen in the last few months.

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(U) I would caveat that. There were sensitive, controversial moments when one battalion or another moved in reinforcement to another sector.

(U) 38:30. Yes, there were.

(U) Fallujah?

(U) And it was strategically horrible. And I was in London by then and I running the commitments desk and responsible for Iraq. When the Black Watch went north, and went to an area where . . . the operating environment was different, and we'd lost some boys, and it was an unhappy experience . . . politically unhappy.

(U) Operationally OK?

(U) 39:10. Yeah, I mean, they're a very good unit. But this again was part of the political debate back home about do you want to cross that line? The Corps are asking for British forces to go up there, do you want to do that? And I think, I can't remember or swear by it, and I knew it that once it happened that once, that would become a subject of [intense] discussion, it was Operation Brackenberry, I think.

(U) Early on in the invasion, there was a hope that successful British operations in the south would open up Umm Qasr quickly, make it operational, stabilize Basra, and that stability and economic development would spread from south to north. Umm Qasr, however, was very hard. Do you have sense of how Umm Qasr developed over time?

(U) 41:20. No, I don't. I can imagine, and you start seeing things slip away from you. It is about force levels and how fast you can bring about change. We were in the same position as you were in. We spent too much time trying to do the wrong things, or trying to do things we didn't have the resources to do, and so the mood changes, and that allows other things to come in, it allows criminality to come in, and it allows people to manipulate places like Umm Qasr, and then you're left sometime later with nothing but decisive action to take to try to reverse that, which is exactly what is happening at the moment.

(U) As the Director of Joint Operations, how did you reconcile your many on-going commitments?

(U) 43:26. I ran both the Iraq and Afghan desks, along with all other commitments, and the resource pull, in terms of troops and equipment, was immense, and has been intense ever since 2003, and we were making relatively early on, certainly when I got there in 2005, we were looking to expand in Afghanistan and expanding the NATO mission in Afghanistan down into the south, what was known as stage III and IV of NATO expansion. It was clear we would need, for us, a pretty significant force in Afghanistan, at a time when we thought that was achievable because we had imagined a drawdown in Iraq, or a lesser demand for forces in Iraq, on a timetable that didn't pertain, that turned out to be "aspirational." And that occurred against the background of this being a deeply unpopular war in the UK, with approval ratings for it far below what they [are even?] now in the states, and that has been so for some time, and the politically unpopular war as well. Now, I'm not suggesting that because it was politically unpopular that we were constrained by the politicians as to what we could put in. That would be unfair. Most of the constraint of what we could put into Iraq was a physical constraint; we just didn't have the guns. Because we had also committed to Afghanistan and other places as well.

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(U) Can you comment on any discussions from late 2006 involving MNFI, USG, UK, UK MOD, on the situation and resources? This is setting us up for the surge.

(U) 46:30. I won't comment on exactly what you just asked me, but I will say this, and it comes back to the point you made about failure teaching something about how to succeed. What there was was a genuine recognition by people here, which was infectious, even for cynical people back in capitals, that actually this was doable. And there was a belief and confidence that it was doable with the right resources, if the right resources were made available, and then there was a confidence that people understood, and the senior leadership understood, how to apply those resources in order to gain success, and there was a breaking down of the issues into manageable proportion, so there was a time here, in early '07 and late '06, when it did seem insurmountable. "It's just how it was." And there was that absolute grim determination that actually it isn't just how it is. If you deal with each piece, understand how to deal with each piece, understand the doctrine, apply the doctrine, then this is doable. And what I think is evident to me, and has been evident to me over the last year, is an absolute determination that the US military is not leaving this place defeated. And you see that run through the whole force, and I think that's what started ahead of the surge. 48:24.

I ran out of time due to other projects and was never able to pose these follow on questions.

1. How do Northern Ireland and other conflicts provide a context for engagement and reconciliation?
2. How did FSEC form, and how did engagement and reconciliation develop before you joined MNFI?
3. What was the situation when you arrived in November 2007?
4. Who are the key Iraqis and regional actors today?
5. What are your priorities today?
6. What is the way ahead for your successor and for LTG(P) Odierno?