INTERVIEW
OF
MAJOR GENERAL WALTER GASKIN, USMC
COMMANDING GENERAL
MULTI-NATIONAL FORCE-WEST

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PROCEEDINGS

This is the Multinational Corps-Iraq Historian.

Today is Friday, the 11th of January 2008 at approximately 1805.

We are here at the Headquarters of Multinational Force-West at Camp Ramadi -- I'm sorry, at Camp Fallujah outside of Fallujah, Iraq. I am here interviewing the Commanding General, Multinational Force-West.

Sir, to validate the recording, could you go ahead and introduce yourself in your own voice?

MAJ. GENERAL GASKIN: Yes. I am Major General Walter Gaskin, and I am the Commanding General of Multinational Force-West and (Unintelligible).

Thank you, sir.

For the listener's benefit, there was a previous interview done with General Gaskin on the 26th of June 2007. This is an interview that is being conducted within a few weeks of the transition to 1st Marine Expeditionary Force.

So, sir, I wanted to be able to again
capture some of those not quite end of tour, but
coming up on it perspectives.

To start off, I wanted to ask: If you
look at that period from late June when we spoke last
to today, how would you characterize what you have
seen as the key operations, initiations, evolution of
the fight out here in West at this point?

MAJ. GENERAL GASKIN: I think what you
will see is a continuation of what we discovered from
right at the beginning of March through June, and that
was the taking back of the population centers from al
Queda, pushing them out into the hinterland north of
the Euphrates River, east of Lake Tata (Phonetic) and
south down into the wadis and into the areas toward
(Inaudible) and the Mesk (Phonetic) security area.

We believed then that we had to -- as we
have seen now, that we had to have a single focus by
both kinetic effect, was removing al Qaeda, but
followed very closely we had to have an economic
development, a sense of development of governance and
a building of capacity of the Iraqi Security Forces.

So the first thing that kind of grabbed
us, and we were right at beginning of our contribution
from the surge -- What really grabbed us was that, as
we were able to take the population centers back, the
incidents, whether it be IED, small arms fire,
indirect fire, dropped precipitously.

So then we realized that we were really
onto something, but it was not like we had done
before, because we had fought in al Qaim, we had
fought in Fallujah, we had fought in Ramadi, but this
time what we did differently is we backfilled. So
there was a persistent presence with the Iraqi Police

When I got over here, the year 2006 was
the year of police, but I would now characterize 2007
as the actions of the police, because they brought to
the table familiarity with their communities, loyalty
from their community, respect from their community of
being one of them, and their agreement to providing a
rule of law made them a very viable force for
eliminating what we discovered were the (Inaudible) of
al Qaeda, and that is stifling, intimidating and
murdering the folks within the cities.

We also found out that this was a classic
COIN operation separating the al Qaeda from the people, and we made the people the center of gravity.

There, when we saw these happening, the discovery was -- as we got into the city, not only did we gate up the city by dividing into precincts and districts within the city and establishing a Joint Security Station that had an Iraqi Police in charge, but also engaging the populace in support, engaging the Muktad (Phonetic), who was the civic leader for that community, and also bringing in coalition forces along with our Iraqi forces together as a team in there; but clearing that out, al Qaeda out, putting in those security forces and immediately bringing some relief to the people when there were humanitarian aid, some claims to fix things that were broken during the actual fighting, so that they were beginning to have some normalcy.

Then we started having the civic -- started looking at bringing the services back to the folks, because immediately once they get some security, they wanted these services, whether it was electricity, water, sewage, trash, rubble removal.
All of those items were very meaningful to them.

This meant clearing places for the kids to return to school. It also meant day labor for hiring those young folks who were kind of thrown out and caught in the middle of the fighting in there. Since the state owned enterprises were closed, there was no place to work.

So not only the hiring of these Iraqi police meant meaningful work for somebody in the community. It also meant that they brought stability and security so other people could work, could open up their shops and they could participate in the day labor build-out that was pushed throughout the communities.

So we saw this moving throughout the major population centers. Whether you are talking about Ramadi, Hit, Baghdad, al Qaim, Fallujah, it's the same process that was working.

So we watched the Iraqi police grow from about 11,000 up to its current state of 24,000. We also knew that we had to train those Iraqi police, professionalize them, and to make sure that they were
working within the rule of law. But instantly, we discovered that, because the people believed in those indigenous personnel working in the cities, the chips came in.

So discovery of castouts went up exponentially, and the -- and like I said, the incidents just dropped down. So the cities became instantly calm places to live, and then you saw the bustling marketplaces of Iraq.

I think that we were onto something. We discovered how al Qaeda operates, and they operate near a mosque. That's the way they get their recruiting. They had some type of chop shop or place to make IEDs, whether that be vehicles or just the kinds that they buried or shoved out in the roads, those crusher plates; and they have a safe haven where
they could actually hang out and having meetings. And now we discovered that they were very closely located, and they used that to intimidate the police and the leadership of the community.

So once we found that, we had to (Several words inaudible). We were even engaged the Imams as far as their leadership in helping that, rebuilding mosques.

We practiced that we would not go into mosques like Iraqis go into mosques. They appreciate the respect for their culture and their religion that we brought.

Sir, I wanted to ask also, in the context of the governance and economic piece, knowing that as we became less kinetic, how have you seen -- Since we spoke in June, what has been the continued growth of that? And realizing we have had other agencies that were perhaps in play already, some new agencies have come into play, agencies and entities, how do you see that having progressed since we talked last?

MAJ. GENERAL GASKIN: I think it's
tremendous. Matter of fact, probably some of the best things we did in organization was in having a deputy oversight over the economic development portion and the tribal engagement.

So the governance, economic development, in addition to those members of the G-5 as well as the CAG (Phonetic) -- all that came with oversight. But the reason why it became even more -- and then I'll talk about the connection of the provincial reconstruction teams -- but just from the staff perspective, that they were to understand what was happening and how the Iraqis felt as being disenfranchised and separated from their federal government, and even more so, separated from their provincial government because of a boycott of an election in 2005.

Most of them are now experiencing new principles of democracy that they had never had before. They were very, very used to it as being pushed down to them, this is what you get, this is all you get. So that was happy.

Now in order for them to get anything,
they had to find a means to pull it out of a government, a government that they didn't really trust because it was now run by a Shia, Shia from a political sense, and

So they figured that that government (Inaudible). So what we started at the grassroots level -- there was some spark of (Inaudible) up here, and we had a Governor Mamoun (Phonetic). Although he is from IRP, the Islamic (Inaudible) Party, he was still a very brave person, and he never gave up the government shop.

His life has been (Inaudible) 35 times, but he came to work every day, and on a vehicle, (Several words inaudible), but he believed that that was the seat of government and that, if he ever left that, he would leave the government.

The Provincial Council was meeting in Baghdad, and there was no city governance at all. They were, of course, in hiding because of the murder and intimidation campaign of al Qaeda (Several words inaudible).

So once we were able to remove al Qaeda
from the cities, each one of the cities started
setting up their own government. They appointed an
emir. They had a city council. They were explained
the rules of city councilship means that they each had
a city council.

It is subdivided into sections. They had
a section for technical, and there were so many
technicals, meaning a professional person, on that
committee. You have so many seats for sheikhs, and
you have so many seats for their party membership or
political membership. But you were beginning to see
a representative entity.

Once we started getting those formed up,
we then can explain to them, in order for you to get
money from the government, you've got to prioritize
projects, and that includes for the rebuilding, the
electrical power, the fuel, all these services that
you want. You have to also understand that your
government is very, very (Inaudible), because it goes
from the Director Generals. Each level led up to the
central government under their ministers, and that you
now have a governor and we have a mayor, and you have
that line.

So we took time out to train them on how to plan civic life, how to run a city, how to develop a budget, because they had never had a budget before. We did some classes up in Urbil where we got the leadership sitting down and doing, you know, Governance 101.

We had the leadership come together and said this is how you plan a budget; here is the budget that you have. You can't really have any transparency with the 2006 budget, but then (Unintelligible) in 2007, and this is how you got to demonstrate how you would spend that and because of that expenditure they were able to go back (Inaudible) to the Prime Minister for a supplemental, and they were the first one to get a supplemental budget of $7 million, because we could show how they were spending the 107 that was given.

Then we had a thing called Helicopter Governance, and that is where the DCG, General Allen, was absolutely phenomenal. He was able to put the Governor on a helicopter, along with the PC Chair, a Provincial Police, some other DGs and some of the
members of the Provincial Council, and they would go out and see the constituents around Anbar.

Now Anbar would talk about (Inaudible), and you are talking about an area the size of North Carolina or New York. It's an all day drive to go anyway. So when we put them on a helicopter and they could actually fly into these municipalities and actually do what they are supposed to do by their rules - in other words, when the Provincial Chairman goes in, he validates their city council: You've got so many of those represented on here and, yes, you've got that, and okay, what projects that (Inaudible).

The Governor meets with the mayor and accepts the Mayor's papers: Yes, you have gone through the proper vetting. You have been nominated by your Provincial Council. I now say that you are the Mayor and, oh, by the way, I'm Governor Mamoun (Phonetic), because some of them had never seen him before. They had heard about him. He's up there in Ramadi. And you got a Provincial Chairman, you know.

We discovered that, by their own method, that Anbar is divided up into 10 police districts, and
we were trying to divide them up another way. But then we said, hey, they know the districts there are; let's just (Inaudible) districts, and it turned out we got 10 districts.

A district of al Qaim includes, you know, your baby and your saber, you know, all that, and Radifah has a triad like we thought, but we found out that Hit had had Baghdadi and Kasouli ( Phonetic).

So I mean, those districts that were -- well, it says 10 districts. So we (Several words inaudible). He goes out, and he meets at the police, district police, and talked about hiring, a lot of trained criminal enterprise and those things that you would expect the Chief of Police to do and respond to the Provincial Chief of Police.

Of course, the government will then take their petitions, bring it back and prioritize to the province based on funds that he has available. And he had $107 million, and look at all the things that people need. It exceeded actually what he had. So that's what drove them to do that.

The major cities around is where he did
Helicopter Governance.

The other part of that governance is that it's whole country, this whole area is tribal. And if you understand that as how important and how fundamental the tribal society and the influence and position of the sheikh, then you begin to understand how everything works.

They will tell you that they were tribal before they were Muslims, and they will always be tribal. You can ignore that fact if you want to, but it's to your own peril.

They will also tell you that nothing happens unless the sheikhs agree to it. I can tell you, too, that the sheikhs are the ones that say Fight, and the sheikhs are the ones that will say Don't Fight. The sheikhs are the ones who said don't participate in the election.

So understanding why they do what they do and who the power brokers are as far as the sheikhs and their influence, and seeing how the sheikhs are grouped together, we were very fortunate that sheikhs happened to be -- You know, just like we had our areas
of operation get-together, so we had the Fallujah sheikhs, the Ramadi sheikhs and everybody west of Ramadi, all the western sheiks. Frankly, that's what they call themselves, too, western sheiks.

Then we would have a number of sheikhs who were expatriots. They were living in Jordan or Syria. Five of them have come back. Five of the major sheikhs have come back out of about eight. But you know, there is a real misunderstanding if you believe that these sheikhs left and deserted their people.

It was all the other way around. It's the people who sent their sheikhs off. Sheikhs are so important in this society that, when they are killed, as al Qaeda had done to sheikhs, it was devastating. It was like losing a patriarch. I mean, you just lost a head of your existence. You actually lost your connection up through the tribal ones to Mohammad or through Moses.

I mean, these guys trace their history all the way to Adam and Eve, and they can tell you, grandfather -- and one sheikh talked to me, you know, 21 grandfathers ago. I mean, you know, that's the
level of which they (Inaudible) sheikhs.

So when you lost your sheikhs who were the keeper, who protected, you provided for them, they said, no, we can't (Inaudible). So they sent them out of the country -- to get them back. And because they have never lost influence, they were always sending the word through whoever they designated to carry it while they were gone.

So being able to engage with those sheikhs and talk about the future of Anbar, our position is that you've got to realize that the Shias inside -- get over it. Get over the fact that the Shia is inside, and connect with that government that's going to be able to take care of your people.

So our thing that we wanted to do with engagement with the sheikhs was use them in the connecting and the reconciliation that has to occur between the government and the province. That's what we did, and I think that was the major movement that connected together.

The sheikhs approved the leadership. The leadership views the sheikhs council, as they have
always through history, and out in the government
centers further out, there is a sheikh's room because
of how the sheikhs believe. And they remind you that
Maliki, Barahnsalem (Phonetic), or any of the
leadership in Baghdad belongs to a tribe.

So they understand. There is nothing new
to them what we are saying to you. Most of the time,
you don't understand. They understand exactly what we
are saying, you know. They will play like this
political game, but they understand the influence, and
we will not be ignored, you know, on the sheikh — or
belief that they are the foundations of reconciliation
that will occur out here.

The thing that we were able to do is to
forge genuine relationships with the sheikhs. So I
talk about our Sheikh Kamese (Phonetic), and when I
talk about Sheikh Hakim (Phonetic) or Sheikh Maher
(Phonetic) or Sheikh Spa (Phonetic), you know, I'm
talking about guys I know, and that we have set down
and eat goat together and talk about the issues of the
day. It's not someone who you just send a note to.
We've got to genuinely understand.
SECRET

There are two things that I think that have brought about our relationship with the sheikhs that are very important: Trust and respect. You know, if you trust me, then when we talk, we can talk very candidly.

I can tell you when I fought you, why I fought you, and why I won't fight you again and why I hate al Qaeda, and I am not going to ever, ever turn again on you, because you helped me kill al Qaeda, and I have a blood feud with al Qaeda, and it takes six generations to eliminate a blood feud. So it is permanent.

The other thing is respect. You know, I am not somebody running around a fire with a loin cloth on. I am a man. I am a very educated man, and a lot of them are. I have a sensing of my country. I have a history and a respect for my history, and meaning means a lot. So I don't expect you talk down to me, at me or by me, you know.

So when you get there, you know, it's like you are not the only one with good ideas. You may be in a better position to use your ideas, but I have
good ideas as well.

That professional interchange built on trust and respect allowed us to get further along and, I am convinced, faster than we ever dreamed possible for creating stability and peace out here.

We became -- They prefer to call us brothers, rather than friends, and I used to say we are a friend, you know, friendly forces. Friendly forces are colleagues, but a brother is a family.

So friends, you can get mad with and lose. Brothers, you can get angry with your brothers, but that passes because you are bound by blood. So that's the relationship that we sought, and that's where we had (Inaudible).

That relationship has been started a long time. It wasn't just -- forged along in here, but the relationship had been started. You know, these Marines out here, you know, there's something about these Marines, and their ability to see that we were sincere in it, whether we were out in al Qaim or in Fallujah.

So when they hear of us talking about
leaving, you know, they are very concerned. I have had several examples of what they think about leaving. One, I was talking to the Mayor of Fadifah. He says, you know, are you leaving? I said, well -- He says, no, are you leaving, because the last time you left us to go fight in Fallujah, they lined us up in the soccer field and shot some of the leadership of the city. So we just need to know if you are going to be here with us until we can get up on our feet and be able to defend ourselves. And I promised him that we would be here, and we are still here.

We have built capacity of their police. But as Sheikh Kamees says about leaving, you know, you can't take a cake out of the oven before it is done just because it smells good. He believes that.

He was talking about us moving out of the city. He was talking about the IP. He said these IPs are training. They are going to do very good one day. What the Coalition forces do for them is give them professional training and allow them to be able to do what they are put there for, is their security, and that is a lot to them.
Sir, what do they say when you talk to the tribal leaders, when you talk to the Governor -- What is their metric for knowing when it will be time for us to leave?

MAJ. GENERAL GASKIN: The first thing we had to learn was this. You know, it's not my culture, really. (Several words inaudible) and how they go about making decisions.

We are very Type A personalities. We go into a meeting. We have an agenda. We have a time frame which the agenda is going to have, and whoever facilitates moves the meeting along.

For Iraqis, when they go to a meeting, decisions are made. They come to the meeting for the formal part of discussion and probably (Inaudible). So if you go in there thinking that you are going to get a decision, you'll get a lot of talk, a lot of batting back and forth, and if you witness it, you will see a lot of arguing back and forth. But they are only talking about the issues that they didn't get to discuss before they got to the meeting, because this is already decided.
SECRET

So they have already decided that we are their guests, and like guests we aren't here forever. You are here for a particular purpose. So they wanted us to very candidly and openly state what our purpose was, because they remind us that there is no land in Iraq that doesn't belong to the sheikhs. So you can't buy it. You can't come out and put a house on it.

So there's only a few ways to get land. It is through hereditary. You get it through the government taking it, as Saddam used to do, or you get it through conquering.

Well, what are you doing? So when they hear that term "occupation," their connotation of occupation is in the conquer mode. You know, you are here to take my land. But if you help me get rid of those who mean me harm, then you are obviously my friend, and if you fight along with me and shed your blood, you are my brother.

So they think that we are going to leave eventually, but they didn't want us to get caught up in the political implications of leaving that they hear. I mean, they are very astute as far as that
line.

They didn't want us to leave until they were able to stand up on their own and independently.

(b)(3), (b)(6): Given what you described about the situation, sir, any concerns as you get ready to hand over? What degree of risk is there that al Qaeda would be able to reenter Anbar Province?

MAJ. GENERAL GASKIN: Well, you know, that's probably the difficult part. That resides as both the Corps and from the Force as they come in.

Now we had sort of a (Inaudible) breakdown, a reduction of forces, a lot of forces and you were leaving, but that's also predicated on building a capacity by itself.

So, you know, we got two Iraqi divisions out here, the 1st and 7th, and we've got -- There are 4,000 Police, and we've got the border patrol and we got the Iraqi highway patrol, all of them developing in capacity.

So I know it's there, but about 24 months ago -- 24 months -- Now I'm at about 18 months left before I think the Iraqi forces will have the capacity
to stand up on their own. But that's predicated upon us maintaining our force levels about where they are, coming down to potentially -- When I started out in discussing this, I had 14 battalions, U.S. battalions, and by the time I get down to this, there will be eight because of the where we had planned to go.

So here are the dangers. I'm often pushing away the peace dividends. You are doing so well, the incidence levels are so low. And I hear that from both Coalition side and the Iraqi side.

Currently, from the 1st Division there is a 4th Brigade in Baghdad. The 3rd Brigade just left to go to Diyala. I already had one battalion, 221, and I've got another Iraqi battalion, 217, down in Menoah (Phonetic), because they are good fighters.

We just moved 57 Cav out of 13 BCT, had moved into MND-C area, Torahbor (Phonetic). That is where they are going to be fighting. So the point is that, to make this plan work that we call "next step" to where the Iraqis will have two divisions that occupy battle space, has entered with the population centers with the police in the center, in the
population centers, an Iraqi Army outside ready to respond and assist them on anything that exceeds their capabilities.

This is a lot of territory and, therefore, we had planned out, when you start moving units out, you risk that. So my greatest concern is that we don't move the cake out of the oven just because it smells good. It's because we are doing well, and it's because I am of the belief that, just like we ran al Qaeda out and they went around and started using the Tigris River to come down into places like Diwaniyah, Salladin and the fight that MND-North has, you know -- I apologize (Inaudible), because I know who pushed those guys up there to fight. But if fights now -- and he is really engaged in that in every aspect -- they got to go somewhere.

They have already declared that Ramadi is the Islamic capital of Iraq. We saw with the (Inaudible) campaign, they will attempt to come back. The difference is, in all the attempts that we saw so far, whether they be suicide bombers or little cells trying to get back in, the Iraqis (Several words
inaudible).

We have been preparing them for operations out in the desert, because every operation they have been on, they have been (Inaudible). I think that is another thing that was unique about our area, is how we partnered with -- We partnered with all 21 battalions, all seven brigades, and all both divisions. We had transition teams at every level of that, division, brigade, and we enhanced the transition teams enough for those that were at the battalion level, they could push some down to the company level, if necessary, for operations.

We took them on very type operation we have, whether that was using the (Inaudible) in the lake and up and down the Euphrates, aero-stuff where we put them on helicopters and did assault operations. We did move into contacts or we did coordinated attacks, which means airborne and ground. Every operation, we have had the Iraqis with us, even when we were clearing out the cities we had the Iraqis with us.

So that they are good fighters. They have
been bloodied. They know and understand the clearing
fight, and that's why they were kind of pulled off to
do other things. That's what I mean by (Inaudible).
These guys are good. There is no doubt in my mind,
and I think the more they will be able to do these
things with us, the better they will become.

You just can't buy experience. You have
to earn it, live it, do it. So my greatest concern as
I hand off is that General Kelly will be able to hold
onto and continue the timeline of development of the
ISF.

Sir, we are only on your
schedule for about a half-hour. So I don't want to
impinge on the rest of your schedule.

Is there anything else I haven't asked you
before we wrap up that you wanted to make mention of
as you reflect back on your tour?

MAJ. GENERAL GASKIN: I think we about did
it all, but the point is that I hope that you would
get around to talk to the (Several words inaudible).
I think that made the difference, that we (Several
words inaudible), and even the MOC had a battle space
as well, and because of the cross-pollination between
the (Several words inaudible), really became principal
to how we could do that.

Having the DCG able to make it one battle
space between the two RCTs and the BCT, I think, made
all the difference, because it made the boundaries
invisible on the bigger fight, and it will be easier
to move forces back and forth between — rather than
just having the BCT with all those assigned.

So every one of those colonels who had
(Inaudible) BCT command had a joint unit, because he
had an honor battalion, a Marine battalion with him.
So they all got the experience of capabilities of the
various size units.

Sir, thanks very much.

That concludes this interview.