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Brigadier Piers DP Hankinson MBE

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Abstract

This was an excellent interview. Hankinson has had a long engagement with Iraq, from the war of 1990-91, through commanding a tank battle group in Operation Telic, operations around Az Zubayr and Basra in 2003, and Al Amarah. He accepted a commander's resignation on the eve of the invasion, recounted the first death in his unit which included friendly fire, and Basra's fall. The level of looting was surprising. For comparison purposes, he discussed British operations in Mesopotamia in 1916, and he drew together the various strategic threads that shaped the British position in 2003. He briefly discussed the effects of the Samarra bombing in 2006 and the UK pullout from Basra in 2007. The current problems on his desk include 1) ISF command and control architecture, 2) direction on basing, 3) DMCNS issues regarding BIAP shenanigans, 4) the plan after 15 brigades, 5) SOFA. The biggest challenge is defining the steady state toward which we should direct our energies. Transcription Priority: High for content, but I think my notes capture the essential elements.

FIRST RECORDING

Hankinson has been in SPA since September '07 and will be here until May. He commanded a tank regiment in the First Gulf War. In 2003, he commanded a tank battle group as part of Operation Telic. His battle group went into Az Zubayr west of Basrah, and after Basra fell rapidly deployed to Al Amarah for four months before redeploying. He came to Baghdad in late 2004 as a SPA Campaign planner to Gen Casey, and served here for six months.

Operation Telic. His brigade was training in mid-2002 when he got word of a possible operation coming by the end of the year, in which he would be attached to the 7th Armored Brigade. Britain's Labor government (Blair) was facing a number of public strikes, and the government did not want to commit to an Iraq campaign without a second UN resolution due to domestic opposition. Hankinson finally got orders for his regiment on 6 January, then the operation began on 21 March, which was a very short flash to bang time. It made for an interesting comparison with 1990-91, when they had months to prepare. When the orders came in January 2003, his infantry were literally fighting fires in the UK, so they were unavailable. On short notice, he got other infantry units cross attached to the regiment in Germany. His was the 1,000-strong 2nd Royal Tank Regiment Battle Group. They were attached to the MEF and received a US Marine Corps Fires Team to help coordinate fires. His was the fourth regiment to deploy in 7th Brigade's flow. The regiment reached Kuwait on 8 March, and it was a very tight schedule. They had three days on the ranges, did reintegration, and up-armored their vehicles, and back

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to the concentration areas. They still lacked essential supplies, notably armor plates for their body armor. The impact was a soldier died from a gunshot wound that proper armor would have prevented.

Against the odds, the regiment was ready in 10 days, on 18 March. This was after the confirmatory firing and equipment upgrades. Hankinson faced a morale dilemma in this period. With little time, he had to push to get the regiment ready, but this involved taking risks from pushing too hard too fast. Their accident rate went up, and they had a negligent discharge. The dilemma was realizing the drive to be ready, and it was not a game. They would be fighting. He had to think long and hard about how to coordinate it all and make what had to happen happen. The weakness was at the sub-commander level. Hankinson assessed the risk, and concluded he could manage it. He felt it could. This was important because he had to report to his commander that he was or was not ready. In the campaign, his regiment mounted seven battle group attacks that he felt validated his readiness. They did everything to assure their readiness. Knowing they would launch on 21 March, he intended to do final training exercises on 20 March. The Iraqi rockets disrupted all the training because the troops had to stay masked up. He finally cancelled the training because they could not do it in gas masks. He had intended to give the entire battle group a rousing speech, but the Iraqi rockets likewise disrupted this. Instead, he delivered the message to the sub commanders, and they delivered it to the troops.

Hankinson had a squadron of engineers under the command of a major. Before the invasion, the major came to Hankinson and told Hankinson that he (the major) had lost his troops' confidence and he would not be able to lead them into Iraq. Hankinson knew the major was struggling, but the major's XO was strong. Hankinson accepted the major's resignation and sent him back to the rear to work with the division engineers.

Before entering Iraq, Hankinson expected a hard fight against conventional troops. Just before the invasion, intelligence indicated a Republican Guard tank division was near the border.

On 20 March, he had three contingency plans for supporting 7th Brigade. He did the 1st two. He got a short notice task to clear Route Topeka. He was told Route Tampa would not be available because so many Americans would be using it. As the situation evolved, he had to head out on short notice. He literally mounted up the regiment and lead the way north. They cleared two positions by fire. Began dealing with locals in Umm Qasr, and soon faced the issue of the fedeyeen.

Across the border, they were re-organizing to make the advance to contact. Hankinson had had a couple of his squadron commanders' tanks pull up to his own. An Iraqi farmer walked up wanting to sell them some tomatoes. Hankinson was surprised by the third world poverty he encountered. There was the irony of seeing oil pipelines on one side of the road, and slums on the other. He was also struck by how welcoming the locals were. He was struck by how quickly the mission changed from the conventional fight he expected to dealing with irregulars.

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On 25 March, they were in Az Zubayr and trying to work out who they were fighting. They had three tanks making a checkpoint and dealing with civilians. An Iraqi man walked up in civilian clothes and started attacking a sergeant with stones. The sergeant responded, shooting the man. The situation escalated further, and a tank opened up with machine gun fire that killed both the Iraqi man and the sergeant. This was the first death, it involved friendly fire, and it impacted the soldiers. Within 24 hours, the battle group launched a full attack on Az Zubayr. It was led by the Cyclops squadron. The troops were well led and focused. It left an impression of when you lose one of your own, how everyone responds.

In Basra, 1st UK's original purpose was to fix the 6th and 10th Armored Divisions, and take Basra when appropriate. Hankinson was still securing Az Zubayr.

On 6 April, 7th Brigade launched a three-battalion attack on Basra. Hankinson was not supposed to move until the 8th, and his mission would be to exploit success from whatever battalion achieved a breakthrough. On the 6th, expecting to wait 48 hours to move, he was suddenly told to move out immediately because resistance had collapsed. Within two hours, his troops were ready, and they completed taking Basra after a bit a fighting.

The 7th Brigade consisted of 1) the Scotts Guards, 2) the 1st battalion of the Black Watch, 3) the 1st battalion of the fusiliers, and 4) Hankinson's 2nd Royal Tank Regiment, which had two tank squadrons, two armored infantry companies, and the squadron of engineers.

Hankinson was surprised by the level of looting. He'd been in Kosovo in '99, but this was worse. Hankinson's priorities after Basra fell were 1) own force protection, 2) hospitals and the banks. He thought about guarding the Basra Hotel (Hilton?). However, he was told they would not be using the hotel as a military headquarters. As a result, he ran out of troops and could not spare any to guard the hotel. As a coalition, we misjudged how the Shia population would react to the regime's fall. We should not have. In subsequent readings of history, he found that massive looting attended both of the previous British campaigns in Iraq, and the results were devastating.

After the fall of Baghdad on 9 April 2003, US units were exhausted, needed rest and refitting, and their equipment needed considerable maintenance. What was the condition of British forces after Basra fell?

UK troops were not as worn in Basra because they had not had to travel as far and their lines of communication were short. But, their main battle tanks were in very poor shape. It is difficult to imagine how hard it is to change a road wheel on a tank. They were exhausted, and Hankinson and many troops were suffering from vomiting and diarrhea. There were not to the limits of their endurance. They had not worn their full chemical kit because they judged the risk low compared to the risk of lead or other degraded capability.

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The day after Basra fell, got a report that Chemical Ali was in a village on the other side of the Shatt al Arab. They put together a hasty operation with a pontoon bridge, a psyop team, and other elements, and crossed the Shatt al Arab. An old Arab sheik greeted Hankinson and warmly welcomed the British back to Iraq for the 3rd time in 90 years. (Previous times were 1916 and 1940s). The sheik admonished Hankinson not to repeat past mistakes. He said "If you stay too long, we'll have to start shooting at you."

When Hankinson got to Al Amarah, he visited the grave of his great uncle in the British military cemetery. His great uncle, Robert Prothero Hankinson, commanded the 56th Punjab Rifles and died in February 1917.

How does British strategy in Iraq today compare to its strategy in 1917?

The context for British operations in 1917 was totally different. The operation against the Ottoman Empire was first and foremost an effort by the Indian command. Their goals were economic—the oil fields. Generals Townsend and Maude were pushing to exploit Ottoman weakness in Mesopotamia. White Hall only wanted to fix Turkish forces as part of grand strategy in the European war.

There were multiple threads to British strategy in 2003.

- 1) The regional piece. Britain has long-term connections and wants to safeguard its economic interests and alliances.
- 2) Britain saw the UN as an authorizing authority. The 1st Security Council resolution was enough, but the labor government and domestic pressures wanted a second one.
- 3) The UK relationship to the US is important. Once it was clear the US was going in, it was right to stand by the US. Its reasons were just and correct.

These same threads continue to weigh on British strategy, that of regional influence, diplomatic and economic concerns, interests, and the role of alliances.

How has the situation evolved in recent years?

Samarra in Feb '06 was the key. The mosque bombing initiated a spiral of ethno-sectarian violence feeding civil war, largely fed by the ineffectiveness of the government of Iraq. All that time, the GOI took five months after the elections of January '06 to get organized. The US surge of 30K plus the ISF have allowed the security situation to improve, along with Sadr and Sunni roles. We must continue to ratchet down the violence.

Hankinson can not offer much on the events of '05 and '06 because he was not here, but he believes we are headed in the right direction. We are in a conditions-based drawdown, and we have a good awareness of the problems. Hankinson greatly respects Petraeus' leadership and direction.

On the UK pullout of Basra, the dynamics have been different. There was a determination to not stay too long. We could have pulled out earlier, and '07 was the worst year. The sheer dynamic of various fractions and Iranian influence could only have

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been changed with many more troops, which we did not have, especially because the UK has chosen to move its effort to Afghanistan. The situation in the south remains fragile.

SECOND RECORDING

The problems Hankinson is working on include: 1) ISF C2 architecture, which currently is quite confused. We have the joint headquarters and the possibility of setting up regional operations commands. The ROC is complex. 2) Direction on basing as we drawdown. 3) Dealing with the Deputy Ministerial Committee for National Security on BIAP shenanigans. 4) Planning for after the 15 brigades and the SOFA.

What is the steady state for the coalition that our planning is heading toward?

The concept changed from Casey to Petraeus. We currently have 62 COBs. Under Casey, the intent was to move toward fewer and bigger bases. Under Petraeus, it is getting the troops out among the population, troops in smaller bases and drawdown of big bases. The actual philosophy has changed. We going to turn big bases over to the ISF, and just keep small corners of those bases for US. US troops will have a lower density presence, reflecting a fundamental change in the philosophy.

With the situation improving, it is not obvious that a US presidential candidate can win by calling for withdrawal. Hankinson hopes the US political sensitivities will not drive operations in Iraq. The military plan is on course, with 9 of 18 provinces now in PIC, and we should stick with the plan. We do not want a militarized Iraq. Iraq has to defeat its insurgency, but we don't want it pouring its resources into a big, robust military. It needs to use its wealth to develop the country. The CF reason for being here should be to spare GOI the expense of robust military capabilities while it rebuilds the country. But, Iraqis are very proud and conscious of their sovereignty. We must try to persuade them to accept our defense umbrella to buy the time necessary for all elements of reconstruction.

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