Logistical Base Support for the Polish Multinational Division

By Captain Christopher S. Cooper

The chief of engineers for the Polish Multinational Division (MND) faced challenges when he and his advanced party entered the Operation Iraqi Freedom theater in late July 2003. The MND headquarters at Camp Babil, controlled by 1st Marine Division, 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, was scheduled to receive more than 12,000 soldiers from more than 16 countries in three weeks. There was not enough room for everyone at Camp Babil, next to the ancient city of Babylon, and historical covenants prevented further expansion of the base. Furthermore, the closest logistical center was more than 250 kilometers to the south in an area not even within their sector.

To alleviate their space and logistical problems, the Polish MND decided to use a 10-acre compound along the Shatt Al Hillah, a stream 7 kilometers away on the outskirts of the city of Al Hillah. The site was a former Iraqi youth training center that focused on mobile bridging operations. Unfortunately, other than the natural border of the river to the west, a wall that bordered the street to the east, and civilian residences to the south, there were no force protection measures in place. Complicating matters, 20 billets, 10 administrative buildings, and several burned-out Iraqi mobile bridging pieces stood where the planned logistical base was to go. The Polish MND needed help, so it turned to Coalition Joint Task Force-7 for engineering support.

The 265th Engineer Group, a Georgia National Guard unit currently in control of the southern Iraqi sector with four battalions, received the call. After a reconnaissance of Al Hillah, the 265th developed a joint mission with U.S. Army engineers; MND forces; Kellogg, Brown and Root, the support services contractor; and local Iraqi labor to assist the Polish division.

Kellogg, Brown and Root—with an Iraqi contractor—focused on establishing the southern gate and berm, preparing the fuel and ammunition supply points, and refurbishing the buildings. U.S. Army engineers were responsible for demolishing the former Iraqi billets and administrative buildings, then constructing a protective berm surrounded by a triple-standard concertina wire fence. For that mission, the 265th selected a company (-) consisting of an equipment support platoon and a platoon of combat engineers from the 1092d Engineer Battalion, a West Virginia National Guard unit. The Polish MND supported them with Romanian engineers and equipment, as well as Hungarian soldiers to provide security. Local Iraqi workers assisted as laborers.

The mission had three phases: reduce the 30 buildings to rubble; construct the berm; and concurrently, train and supervise the Iraqi laborers. In addition, combat engineers would sweep the area for unexploded ordnance and supplement the Hungarian security force.

Engineers use a bulldozer to push debris into a protective berm around the logistical base.

Rubble from demolition projects was reused to construct force protection berms.

The first night after the mission began, a mortar attack dropped eleven 60-millimeter shells on the site. No one was injured and no equipment was damaged, but the need for force protection became acutely obvious.

An immediate problem was the extremely high water table. Next to the river, it was as close as 6 inches to the surface, so very little fill material was available for berm construction. Leaders decided to use rubble from the building demolition and several of the destroyed mobile bridges as fill material for most of the berm.

Demolition of the buildings progressed rapidly. However, loading the rubble into dump trucks and transporting it to the berm for fill material was hard on the equipment. The Iraqi buildings were constructed with a lot of rebar that wreaked havoc on tires. In one day alone, the support platoon's vehicles had 15 punctures. Their maintenance element performed admirably, establishing a close relationship with the maintenance shop at Camp Babil for replacement parts.

The Iraqi laborers quickly learned fence installation and kept pace with the berm construction. The Polish commander inspected the work one week into the mission and said that he now felt more comfortable bringing his forces into the area. He mentioned that stories about the mortar attack had been printed in the Polish press. When reporters asked what he was doing about the situation, he responded, "The U.S. Army engineers are currently solving the force protection issue for the MND forces." After 15 days on the ground, the mission was complete.

Captain Cooper is a member of the U.S. Army Reserves. He served as a combat engineer platoon leader and as a battle captain for the 265th Engineer Group during Operation Iraqi Freedom. At the time this article was written, he was the Polish MND liaison officer. He holds bachelors' in journalism and education and a master's in education. In civilian life, he is a teacher.

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