

# *Tal Afar 2005:* Laying the Counterinsurgency Groundwork

By MAJ Jay B. Baker

**T**he battle for Tal Afar, which occurred during the period from summer 2005 to winter 2006, was the first successful counterinsurgency campaign for American forces in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). The principal antagonists were the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR), also known as the Brave Rifles, led by COL H.R. McMaster, and the insurgency forces in Tal Afar. The campaign emphasized principles of full spectrum operations, including initiative, mission command and the simultaneous application of offensive, defensive and stability operations.

*A soldier from 2nd Battalion, 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, patrols the streets of Tal Afar, a city of some 200,000 in northwestern Iraq's Ninewah Province, in November 2005.*

A U.S. Army OH-58D Kiowa helicopter from the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) conducts a combat air patrol over the ancient city of Tal Afar in February 2006.



DoD/SSgt. Aaron Allmon, USAF

### Strategic Setting

Tal Afar is an ancient city of approximately 200,000 people in northwestern Iraq's Ninewah Province, near the Syrian border. It figured prominently in Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's strategy of fomenting sectarian violence to undermine the American effort in Iraq due to its ethnic makeup of 75 percent Sunni and 25 percent Shiite Turkmen. Tal Afar had been cleared of insurgents once before, in September 2004, but the United States did not leave an adequate force to maintain security. Insurgents reclaimed Tal Afar within a month, besieging police stations and forcing terrified residents to flee the city or retreat into tribal compounds. By November 2004, Tal Afar had replaced Faluja as a center of the insurgency.

Sunni nationalists and extremists known as *Takfiri* had aligned to seize control of the city and use it as a base for operations. They employed brutal violence to control the populace; methods included leaving headless corpses lying on city streets for days. The Shiite police force was little better than a sectarian death squad, likewise leaving a trail of bodies as a vicious cycle of fear and sectarian violence choked the life out of the city. Meanwhile, Tal Afar became a transit point for foreign fighters arriving from Syria and a support base and sanctuary for insurgents to organize, train and equip insurgent cells throughout northern Iraq.

As a U.S. Central Command staff officer, COL McMaster observed in 2003 that an insurgency was developing in

Iraq. Upon taking command of 3rd ACR in 2004 following its redeployment from Operation Iraqi Freedom I, COL McMaster implemented a training strategy based on classic counterinsurgency doctrine, including cultural training and emphasis on intelligence, information operations and civil affairs. Fortunately, two of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment's squadron commanders, LTC Chris Hickey and LTC Greg Reilly, had previously commanded in OIF-I and applied the lessons learned from their experiences with the theoretical experience of COL McMaster to plan and implement a tough and realistic counterinsurgency training program. The Brave Rifles shed the force-on-force training scenarios of the National Training Center and trained instead in realistic scenarios with soldiers and Arab-Americans playing the roles of Iraqis. This training would pay tremendous dividends during OIF-III.

Had American forces allowed insurgents to retain control of Tal Afar, they would have ceded the initiative to the enemy in northern Iraq and handed them an important propaganda victory. The Brave Rifles did not anticipate orders to "clear and hold" in Tal Afar, but there was no unit better prepared to conduct a counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq in 2005.

### Tactical Situation

*Mission.* At the time the 3rd ACR received its orders, "clear and hold" was not a core doctrinal concept, and guidance from senior civilian and military leaders was lacking. Tal Afar was critical to the insurgents' strategy to incite an ethnic and sectarian civil war in Iraq. Having reclaimed the city once before, the insurgents had the advantage.

*Equipment/effects.* The Brave Rifles carried nearly a full division's firepower: the M1A2 Abrams main battle tank, the M3A2 Bradley cavalry fighting vehicle, artillery including M1064A3 self-propelled 120 mm mortars and six M109A6 Paladin 155 mm self-propelled howitzers, M1114 Humvees with mounted weapons, and organic aviation assets including AH-64D Apache Longbows, OH-58D Kiowas and UH-60 Black Hawks. Dismounted cavalry troopers carried M4 or M16 rifles, M249 squad automatic weapons and M240B ma-

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*Crews and M1 Abrams tanks attached to the 3rd ACR, also known as the Brave Rifles, maneuver in the streets as they conduct a combat patrol in Tal Afar in February 2005.*

chine guns, M14 sniper rifles, M500 12-gauge shotguns, and 60 mm and 80 mm mortars. The insurgents' weapons included AK-47 Kalashnikov rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, mortars, rockets and various types of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), including triple-stacked and shaped charges. The insurgents employed their weapons asymmetrically, terrorizing the local population into passive support through kidnappings, beheadings and public executions as well as exploiting Tal Afar as a centerpiece of their propaganda campaign following the fall of Falluja. The 3rd ACR possessed superior equipment, but the insurgents held the advantage in effects.

*Terrain and weather.* The city of Tal Afar consisted of a confounding variety of urban terrain, ranging from modern multistory buildings, garages and small alleys to districts

with ancient caves and subterranean catacombs. The insurgents held the advantage.

*Troops available.* The regiment's 2nd (Sabre) Squadron received the primary mission for Tal Afar. Sabre Squadron took with it three Bradley troops, two Abrams troops, a howitzer battery, a combat engineer company, a Kiowa troop and an operationally controlled Special Forces team, and it was paired with an Iraqi army brigade and the Iraqi police force. The unit requested additional combat forces and received 1st Squadron assets throughout operations in Tal Afar as well as control of the 2nd Battalion, 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, from September to December 2005. The insurgents' force was estimated as mustering between 500 and 1,000 men. The magnitude of American and Coalition forces gave the 3rd ACR the advantage.



*SGT David Schafroth, 3rd ACR, conducts a combat patrol in Tal Afar in February 2006. The campaign to reclaim the city emphasized principles of full spectrum operations, including the simultaneous application of offensive, defensive and stability operations.*

*Time.* Many local recruits grew up in the city and consequently knew its environs intimately. Having controlled the city since November 2004, the insurgents had the advantage of time.

*Civil considerations.* The 3rd ACR recognized the long-term importance of securing the civilian population and gaining their support for the Iraqi government. The insurgents demonstrated their true intentions to the people of Tal Afar by their brutality but retained a powerful stranglehold on the city through intimidation and fear. The 3rd ACR had the advantage—if it could learn to leverage it.

*Soldiers with the 3rd ACR conduct a combat patrol in Tal Afar in February 2006. The insurgents' brutality and intimidation of the civilian population complicated the Brave Rifles' mission.*



DoD/Ssgt Aaron Allmon, USAF

### The Battle for Tal Afar

Sabre Squadron moved north from Baghdad to western Ninewah Province in April 2005, to be joined subsequently by the rest of the regiment the next month, and was struck by three IEDs on its first convoy into the area. Fortunately there were no casualties, but how fully the insurgents controlled the city was sobering.

Before transferring authority from the outgoing unit, Sabre Squadron suffered its first casualties when an IED composed of six or more stacked 122 mm artillery rounds exploded beneath a Stryker, killing four soldiers. The insurgents had welcomed the Brave Rifles to ancient Ninewah.

Early in May, Sabre Squadron began to improve security by placing Iraqi army patrol bases along Alternate Supply Route Santa Fe, a vital artery between Syria and Mosul, to provide overwatch and security. The result was an immediate decrease in IED attacks. Meanwhile, Sabre Squadron's commander, LTC Hickey, began to study the local power structure by spending most of his time each week visiting Tal Afar's Sunni and Shiite sheikhs. By the end of the month, the unit developed a clearer picture of the situ-

ation in Tal Afar: The insurgent centers of gravity were the Sarai and Qadisiyah Districts, including the city's hospital. More fundamentally, LTC Hickey began to understand the reasons for the popular alienation that sustained the insurgency, which included tacit local support, sectarian retaliation and persistent ill will from prior American operations in Tal Afar. He also observed that low rates of education and literacy and a 75 percent unemployment rate made the population especially vulnerable to insurgent subversion.

COL McMaster and LTC Hickey reasoned that changing the environment in Tal Afar would be more productive

and enduring than continuing a search-and-destroy mission against "whack-a-mole" bands of insurgents. The 3rd ACR sought to drive a wedge between the Sunni nationalists and the *Takfiris* by adjusting its information operations to emphasize that they were intended to help the Sunnis—not punish them. Fair and respectful treatment of detainees as well as rigorous adherence to detainee processing standards persuaded fence-sitters to join the Coalition instead of the insurgents. Sabre Squadron also exploited intelligence from new informants—for instance, conducting an operation in June that killed 20 insurgents and detained 23 high-value targets.

The 3rd ACR established joint operations from the start with its counterpart, the Iraqi army 3rd Division, and mutually determined how to deploy forces throughout the area of operations. A strong team was chosen from the regiment to facilitate this vital partnership and was placed at the Iraqi 3rd Division headquarters. This included operations, intelligence, communications and logistics as well as liaison staff functions. In addition to the already embedded military training teams, this was essential to executing the



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*Soldiers from the 3rd ACR conduct cordon and search operations in Bi'aj, Iraq, once a rest stop for Sunni Arab insurgents traveling to the northern cities of Tal Afar and Mosul in January 2006.*

scale of coordination that the regiment intended.

By the close of August, conditions were right to flush the main body of insurgents from Tal Afar. Sabre Squadron had executed more than 1,500 reconnaissance patrols, 111 cordon and searches, and 46 raids, resulting in the destruction of more than 900 enemy weapons, including artillery pieces, and captured more than 200 insurgents while killing more than 130. Simultaneously, 1st Squadron secured the border with the Iraqi border defense forces by such measures as destroying a chain of safe-house locations stretching from Syria to Tal Afar. American forces also constructed a 12-kilometer berm around the city to control traffic in and out of the population center and deny maneuverability to the insurgents. Most critically, perhaps, the constant diplomacy of LTC Hickey with the local tribal and city leaders and COL McMaster with Tal Afar's mayor, Najim Abdullah al-Jabouri, and the Iraqi army 3rd Division's MG Khorsheed Saleem al-Dosekey had convinced the local leaders that the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment would remain in Tal Afar following the operation to build security forces and infrastructure and help the local government navigate the bureaucracy of the Iraqi government.

More than 3,000 American and 5,500 Iraqi soldiers and policemen amassed outside the city in preparation for the assault, while the coming offensive was publicly announced and thousands of people vacated the city. The largest single operation in the battle for Tal Afar, Operation Restoring Rights, kicked off with a three-day assault on the Sarai neighborhood as Sabre Squadron descended upon the insurgents' stronghold from both north and south while 1st Squadron formed an anvil of force on the city's west side. Fighting was occasionally fierce and many buildings were damaged, but it wasn't close to the destruction of Falluja nearly a year earlier. By the end of the combat phase, the 3rd ACR had lost only two troopers compared to insurgent losses of 150 killed and more than 600 detained.

The efforts of both the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police were essential to the success of Operation Restoring Rights. The Iraqi army provided two brigades of combat power, received the full attention of division assets and leadership, and executed the same mission and tasks as U.S. forces. The

Mosul chief of police participated in planning and assigned an effective leader as Tal Afar chief of police. During the clear phase, the police conducted population control, detainee operations, intelligence gathering and checkpoint operations. A primary reason the Iraqi army and Iraqi police were successful was that they had strong leaders who cooperated with one another and did not let sectarian differences or parochial concerns interfere with the mission. U.S. forces fostered this cooperation through combined rehearsals and situation updates, intelligence sharing and regular meetings. Sabre Squadron's leadership was highly effective in promoting information sharing and regular face-to-face contact that helped the Iraqi army and Iraqi police work together.

True to their promise, 2nd Squadron remained in Tal Afar to maintain security following combat operations. The newly arrived 2nd Battalion, 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment (White Falcons), 82nd Airborne Division, received responsibility for the Sarai and Hassan Qoi Districts for the next four months. Both Sabre Squadron and the White Falcons established company-sized patrol bases in the city, no longer commuting to the fight, and became neighbors with the people they were tasked to protect. LTC Hickey collocated his squadron headquarters with those of the Tal Afar city police and Sabre's partner Iraqi army brigade in the old Ottoman fortress in the city's center. A joint operations center was established there that included civil, military, police, fire and other representatives, offering improved access for citizens willing to share information.

With security more firmly established, rebuilding Tal Afar could begin in earnest. Initiatives included development of essential services, education projects, police stations, parks and other reconstruction projects. LTC Hickey stated in *Military Review*:

Restoring the community's faith in the hospital was one of the keys to our strategy of restoring confidence in the Iraqi government. The other keys were restoring confidence in the city government, getting the judicial system operating, improving the schools, getting markets reopened and people to work, improving the food distribution system, improving power and water services, and restoring trust in the Iraqi security forces.



*Ssgt Len Danhouse, 3rd ACR, conducts a combat patrol in Tal Afar in February 2006. Attacks in the city were reduced from 170 to fewer than 20 per month by the time the Brave Rifles redeployed.*

Civil Affairs teams managed more than \$4 million in projects designed to restore normal life to the city while security continued to improve. Early warnings of attacks became common as the people of Tal Afar grew confident in the Iraqi security forces and the Coalition's commitment to ensure their security.

The Iraqi army and Iraqi police played critical roles in securing the victory after major combat operations in Operation Restoring Rights. They participated in humanitarian assistance operations, controlled key routes in and out of the city, secured important infrastructure and construction assets, recruited police candidates, deterred crime, and cooperated with local government and tribal infrastructure. They conducted regular foot patrols of markets and arranged support contracts with local businesses. In all, more than 1,000 new police officers were added to the Tal Afar police force, and four police stations were rehabilitated. The Iraqi army and Iraqi police were accepted by the vast majority of the population because of their demonstrated actions for the benefit of Tal Afar's citizens.

Sabre Squadron continued to perform combat missions, albeit in reduced form. Prior to the October 2005 constitutional referendum, insurgents unleashed three devastating attacks in Tal Afar, killing scores of Iraqis and wounding many more. Tal Afar's citizens refused to buckle—more than 17,000 citizens voted in Iraq's constitutional referendum in October, and more than 40,000 cast ballots in December's national elections. By the time the 3rd ACR redeployed in February 2006, attacks in Tal Afar had dropped from 170 to fewer than 20 per month, most of

was unimaginable prior to Operation Restoring Rights.

### Significance

In the short term, the battle for Tal Afar severely disrupted al-Zarqawi's ability to use the city as the center for insurgent operations in northern Iraq. The improved security conditions allowed the people of Tal Afar as a majority to reject the *Takfiri's* brand of hatred and violence and to enjoy life and peace in their city once again. They also voted en masse in the October constitutional referendum and the December national elections. In February 2006, as the 3rd ACR redeployed, al Qaeda in Iraq bombed the Samarra mosque, abruptly shifting the war in Iraq into a new phase of civil war.



*U.S. and Iraqi soldiers, their mission to disrupt insurgent safe havens and clear weapons caches, cross an intersection during a security patrol in Tal Afar in September 2005.*



DoD/SSgt Jacob N. Bailey, USAF

*SPC Antoine Davis, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Battalion, 37th Armored Regiment, 1st Armored Division, patrols a residential street in Tal Afar in August 2006.*

In the long term, the 3rd ACR's successful application of the principles of full spectrum operations and counterinsurgency—before new field manuals (FM) were written—showed the rest of the U.S. Army, joint forces and Coalition forces how to successfully conduct counterinsurgency in the current conflict. The surge of American troops in Iraq was successful not only because combat troops were increased in Baghdad, but also because those combat troops were employed according to principles of success in counterinsurgency warfare, demonstrated first in Iraq by the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment in Tal Afar.

### Analysis

The 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment successfully applied principles of full spectrum operations in Tal Afar, which, according to FM 3-0 *Operations*, "combine offensive, defensive and stability or civil support operations simultaneously ... to seize, retain and exploit the initiative ... informed by a thorough understanding of all variables of the operational environment." Full spectrum operations emphasize the importance of initiative, which the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment seized in Tal Afar by steady persistence born of preparation that shaped the operating environment and created opportunities. In September, initiative was decisively wrenched away from the insurgents when Operation Restoring Rights swept away the insurgent infrastructure and created a vastly more secure environment, enabling stability operations to accelerate exponentially.

The U.S. Army's preferred method of command and con-

trol in full spectrum operations is mission command, which expresses the commander's intent and then gives subordinates the greatest possible freedom of action. For example, one of the regimental lines of operation was civil-military operations. Without specific guidance, the regimental surgeon led a regimental medical civil-military operation that engaged frequently with the Tal Afar hospital, offering assistance, collaborating in problem solving and improving the capability of the Iraqi government to care for its people. As this operation developed and was implemented over several months, it was fully supported and resourced by the regimental commander and staff, enabling its success.

Full spectrum operations require simultaneous application of offensive, defensive and stability operations, which the 3rd ACR demonstrated successfully. Offensive operations throughout deployment, and particularly during Operation Restoring Rights, demonstrated the importance of intelligence-driven operations to precisely target attacks on insurgents and their strongholds, avoiding further antagonizing the population through overuse of force. The enemy was disrupted and dislocated from its physical bases, American and Coalition forces safely occupied the city in progressively greater depth, and the insurgents were further isolated from the population by increased human intelligence.

An important role of defensive operations in full spectrum operations is to establish a shield behind which stability operations can progress. This was the case in Tal Afar as strategic terrain, such as the castle and the hospital, was secured and occupied, creating safe locations for the local populace to meet with 3rd ACR leaders to discuss and plan stability operations.

The 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment's achievements in stability operations, particularly after Operation Restoring Rights, were the key to its success in Tal Afar. Primary stability tasks include civil security, civil control, restoration of essential services, support to governance, and support to economic and infrastructure development. The 3rd ACR worked with Coalition units to establish civil security in Tal Afar by limiting the insurgents' influence and isolating the insurgents from the people. Essential services and infrastructure were vastly improved after Operation Restoring Rights: More than \$60 million was pumped into the city by Civil Affairs and the Iraqi government. When the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment redeployed in February 2006, more than 95 percent of the city enjoyed electricity for 20 hours or more each day. Local governance was improved as the judicial system was reestablished, and the city government had begun to meet regularly to address local grievances.

The 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment achieved the first campaign victory in Operation Iraqi Freedom in Tal Afar in 2005–06. New field manuals—including FM 3-24 *Counterinsurgency*, FM 3-0 *Operations* and FM 3-07 *Stability Operations*—formally established as core Army doctrine the principles employed successfully by COL McMaster and LTC Hickey in Tal Afar. The counterinsurgency campaign of the Brave Rifles in Tal Afar helped shape how the Army and joint forces will fight for at least a generation. ★