

# Rock of the Marne working with ‘Sons of Iraq’ during Marne Thunderbolt

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A Son of Iraq speaks with Soldiers of Company A, 1st Battalion 30th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, during Operation Browning Jan. 22 in southern Arab Jabour. The Sons of Iraq have been assisting Coalition Forces find improvised explosive devices and weapons caches throughout the 2nd BCT area of operation. (Photo by Sgt Luis Delgadillo)

In efforts to secure their own neighborhoods, the Sons of Iraq (SoI) are assisting Coalition Forces by removing threats posed by improvised explosive devices and weapons caches during Operation Marne Thunderbolt.

Soldiers of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division have had the assistance of SoI for more than eight months; however, utilization of the groups expanded with the beginning of the operation.

Marne Thunderbolt took Soldiers into areas of southern Arab Jabour which had never before seen a sustained Coalition presence.

With the goal of establishing security in former al-Qaeda in Iraq strongholds, Coalition Forces asked for and received assistance from brave men who were tired of insurgents’ violent influence.

At their own risk, Iraqi men all over 2nd BCT’s area of operation assisted with security operations, which in addition to helping their own communities have also helped to save the lives of many American Soldiers.

Maj. James Wilburn, chief of operations with 2nd BCT, said one of the main reasons SoI have been willing to work alongside Coalition Forces is they realize that rather than being an ‘occupying’ force, the Soldiers represent a way in which outlying areas can receive assistance from the government of Iraq.

“I think that we have been successful in getting the message out; we are interested in security, we are interested in conserving infrastructure and we are concerned about their (Iraqi citizens) well being,” said Wilburn, a native of Las Cruces, N.M.

Areas in southern Baghdad provinces such as Sayafiyah, Adwaniyah, Zambraniyah and Bayjiya all saw the establishment of patrol bases and observation posts from where Soldiers conduct missions to eliminate AQI’s ability to funnel weapons and personnel into Baghdad.

While much work remains to be done, the progress seen was made possible with the emergence of key community leaders.

Wilburn cited the example of the community of Sayafiyah as an example of a community whose leaders came forward and asked for assistance to root out insurgent forces and help establish ties with the GoI.

He said the coordination between 2nd BCT leaders and Sayafiyah leadership resulted in Coalition Forces receiving a warm welcome when they entered the town Jan 27.

Col. James Adams, deputy commander of the 2nd BCT, said thus far during Marne Thunderbolt more than 400 IEDs have been turned in or found by SoI. "That could have been 400 Soldiers' lives lost had they stepped on these IEDs," said Adams.

He said that in addition to saving Soldiers' lives by finding deadly IEDs, SoI are giving their communities peace of mind.

"When the families and the kids see their fathers and their elders providing security in the neighborhood it enhances that perception of security," he said.

Once residents feel secure they get their lives back together and are able to open schools, shops, and return to a feeling of normalcy.

Adams said that because the SoI earn a monthly stipend they are able to boost local economies by flowing money into local shops and businesses.

One of the communities he highlighted as showing the greatest amount of progress in a short amount of time is Adwaniyah.

"We've seen that particular community come together faster than others and I credit most of that to leaders of the community," Adams said.

He said that the leaders of Adwaniyah were quick to engage local governmental authorities to receive assistance with utilities, and establish security checkpoints in coordination with other Iraqi Security Forces.

"Marne Thunderbolt could go on for some time, so long as we have troops on the ground working in and around these villages we can expect to see some form of local security," Wilburn said.