

Task Force Marne - Iraq

Troops live, work among local Iraqis



Major Jimmy Brownlee, a Charleston native, is shown in his military gear.

Soldiers work to gain trust, push insurgents from area.

Charleston native Maj. Jimmy Brownlee, 41, a public affairs officer for the U.S. Army's 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, has been stationed in Iraq at a forward operating base south of Baghdad since May and will be there until August as part of President Bush's surge plan. This is his second deployment to Iraq since the invasion in 2003. He agreed to be interviewed via telephone once a week or so about conditions while he is based there.

Instead of commuting to work, soldiers in Iraq are being stationed among local inhabitants to make them feel more secure, to gain their trust and to gather information about insurgents and hidden weapons caches.

In Maj. Jimmy Brownlee's area of operation, which is south of Baghdad and about the size of metropolitan Baltimore, a new outpost set up after the first of the year brings to eight the number of outlying patrol bases. A ninth one is planned as well, he said.

The new Patrol Base Meade, north of Forward Operating Base Kalsu, where Brownlee is stationed, is in southern Arab Jabour, an insurgent hotbed, just south of Baghdad.

Soldiers sleep in tents in what was an old farm field about the size of a couple of football fields. They are surrounded by 12-foot concrete walls and sand-filled HESCO barriers along the perimeter.

A typical wall of the HESCO barrier, equivalent to a wall of approximately 1,500 sandbags, can be erected and filled by two men and a single loader in less than 20 minutes. An equivalent wall constructed of sandbags would take 10 men seven hours to build, according to HESCO's Web site.

"We bring in showers, tents for soldiers to sleep in, food, everything," Brownlee said. "We make it home away from home. It's part of the community. They are out there to intermingle with the people, to make them feel safe and secure, to rebuild their infrastructure if it was damaged because of the war."

The bases also are equipped with all the military implements necessary to get the job done. Bradley Fighting Vehicles, tanks and other hardware are all part of the base.

For security reasons, Brownlee could not say how many soldiers are positioned at a patrol base.

Staffing the new outpost does not require an infusion of new troops from back home, Brownlee added.

"These soldiers come from units that we already have," he said.

For instance, the troops at new Patrol Base Meade were part of a cavalry squadron attached to a Marine expeditionary force in Al Anbar Province in western Iraq.

"They have been reassigned back to our division," Brownlee said.

The new base location was thought to be a haven for al-Qaida, but Brownlee said troops have been well-received.

"We are running up against a lot of locals who are really embracing us," he said. "They are coming out and bringing us improvised explosive devices and old mortar rounds. They are tired of the intimidation and are ready to start over. They want us there."

When American forces eventually leave the patrol bases, most of the outposts will not be dismantled.

"The plan is to turn them over to Iraqi security forces," Brownlee said. "I couldn't speculate when that will happen. We are getting very close to turning some of them over. They are starting to do their own things and run their operations and go after the bad guys themselves."