

Keeping the peace in the streets

Story by

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The residential areas in Kirkuk, Iraq aren't the safest places to live. It's not unusual for a resident to walk around with prayer beads in one hand and a fully loaded AK-47 assault rifle in the other.

That scenario is changing with the help of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry (Airborne). Charlie Company is conducting patrols in their sector 24 hours a day by rotating squads in and out of the compound.

Charlie Company, along with soldiers from 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry (Airborne), is helping bring law and order to the citizens of Kirkuk.

"They just need a little help to get back on their feet," said Col. William Mayville, 173rd Airborne Brigade's commander.

Located in a deserted Ba'ath Party compound, Charlie Company is accomplishing this goal by helping to rebuild the Kirkuk police force in that area.

By recruiting locals to the police force and taking the officers on patrols with them, Charlie Company is helping to build the credibility and respect of the Kirkuk Police, which has a reputation of deceit and corruption.

"It's a big challenge to gain the trust of and respect of local residents after years of corruption under the Saddam Regime," said Mayville.

The 173rd Abn Bde is issuing police badges and defining police uniforms standards to help keep people from impersonating police officers to conduct criminal activities.

Charlie Company is also giving classes to police officers in tactical check points, snap check points, first aid, reconnaissance patrols, surveillance, and land mine detection and removal.

Mines are everywhere in Iraq. The Iraqi Police and American soldiers are working together for the safe removal of mines in the area.

All this is quite a challenge considering the local police forces aren't getting paid.

The money to pay the police is currently trapped in a bank, locked inside a broken vault, said Capt. William Jacobs, Charlie Company commander. Looters attempting to steal the money and broke the combination dial that open the vault.

Another problem is the amount of weaponry in the region.

"The other night we confiscated a semi-truck that was transporting new 81mm mortar systems, AK-47s and mortar rounds," said 1st Sgt. Toby Boland, Charlie Company. "The guy driving the truck told my soldiers the trailer only contained rice and flour."

Not taking the driver's word at face value, the soldiers search the truck. Hidden among the rice and flower they found the weapons. The entire truck and it's contents were confiscated.

Charlie Company unloaded the rice and flour and took the truck to Kirkuk Military Airfield.

"We're gave the rice and flour to our police officers and interpreters," said Boland. Each police officer and interpreter received a 50-pound bag of rice for his family.

Charlie Company has come across many different problems and situations between the police and local residents, explained Boland. Some of the problems are further complicated by ethnic discrimination among local ethnic groups.

"Residents are being evicted from their homes by criminals claiming to work for coalition forces," said Jacobs. "That kind of stuff isn't going to happen in my sector."

One of the more disturbing incidents involved a family that was murdered, according to Jacobs.

"Almost the whole family was killed--husband, both wives, including one who was nine months pregnant," said Jacobs. "They even shot a two-year-old boy, but he was taken to the hospital and survived."

With a sad look on his face, Cpl. John F. Wicks, a medic in Charlie Company said, "You know what's really sick? The pregnant lady was tortured before she was killed."

"Its not something you never ever want to see" said Jacobs. "I wish we could've caught the people who did it."

With the help of police officers and local citizens the streets may again be a safe place to live. Citizens are already stepping up to the plate by implementing their version of a Neighborhood Watch program and setting up roadblocks at night to deter thieves.

“Hopefully, between my soldiers and the Kirkuk police patrolling the streets day and night,” said Jacobs. “We’ll be able to stop some of the crime.”

“It’s a step in the right direction,” said Mayville. “But it’s a long walk.”