

# HACC Baghdad:

## Civil Affairs in Action



by Landon Mavrelis

**A**s chief of operations for the 354th Civil Affairs Brigade's Humanitarian Assistance Coordination Center (HACC), Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Daniel L. Robey was the U.S. Army's middleman in Baghdad during the early months of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. He was the critical link between the Iraqi people, coalition forces, the international aid community, and the numerous U.S. government agencies tasked with rebuilding Iraq.<sup>1</sup> LTC Robey's mission was not a new one in the history of Army Civil Affairs, but its scale and scope did take the 354th into uncharted territory. The work was demanding, the pace relentless, and guidance often nonexistent; but, if the job was difficult, Robey's tireless diligence seemed equal to the challenge.

LTC Robey spoke to historians with boundless enthusiasm about the HACC's projects, which ranged from empowering local leaders to persuading an international organization to fix a broken sewer system. He ran the HACC from a simple cubicle in an unassuming building just down the street from one of Saddam Hussein's palaces. "It was literally a furniture warehouse," Robey explained matter-of-factly about the former republic guard facility that houses the center. A cluster of throne-like chairs and gilded sofas outside his makeshift office served as reminders of the building's recent use, and the unabashed decadence of its former occu-

pants. Robey's team, which arrived in Baghdad on 23 April 2003, worked quickly to transform the facility into an environment where the U.S. military, Iraqi nationals, and the international aid community could get down to the business of rebuilding the beleaguered capital.

The concept for the HACC did not exactly come with an instruction manual. Existing doctrine helped in part to define the 354th Brigade's mission by couching it in more familiar terms. The team decided early on that the HACC would function similarly to a civil military

operations center (CMOC) described in Field Manual 41-10, albeit on a much larger scale. "Think of it as baking a cake for six," said LTC Robey, "and now you're baking a cake for sixty." Operating as an oversized

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CMOC, the HACC would broker relationships between the international aid organizations and the Iraqi people. However, in a city of nearly six million, more than a central CMOC was needed. In order to increase access to Civil Affairs (CA) resources, battalions under the 354th CA Brigade, which were attached to maneuver units, began establishing satellite CMOCs in each of Baghdad's nine political districts. In less than two months, six of those facilities were operational.

Robey attributed the rapid rate of the HACC's success to the solid foundation laid by his predecessors. Three weeks before the 354th arrived in the Iraqi

capital, the 422nd CA Battalion was conducting daily meetings in Baghdad with international and nongovernmental organizations (IOs and NGOs). The battalion called its operation a Civil Military Assistance Center (CMAC), a term just as alien to CA doctrine as the HACC. Despite its unorthodox name, the 422nd CMAC established critical ties to the NGO and IO community in Baghdad. "Had [the 422nd] not done

Although the HACC was equipped to manage a heavy workload, Robey's goal was to no longer be needed in Baghdad. "Our measure of success is putting ourselves out of business," he joked. Robey was also keen on limiting reliance on the 354th because the brigade possessed neither the expertise nor the resources to undertake large-scale humanitarian projects on its own. The HACC's job was to identify projects and make

sure those projects were handled by the appropriate agencies. Consequently, the HACC devoted much of its time to coordinating with humanitarian organizations that were better equipped to identify the needs of the Iraqi people.

Despite the official end of active combat in Iraq on 1 May 2003, many in the international aid community were still hesitant to enter Baghdad because of safety concerns. In response, Robey's team implemented an "Adopt a Neighborhood" program that attempted to lure NGOs into less permissive areas of the capital. During fifteen-minute presentations at the HACC, soldiers from the battalion CMOCs provided aid workers with a "virtual" tour of a Baghdad neighborhood, using digital photos, character sketches of local leaders, and three to five featured

projects. The program was simple by design, and worked by introducing the human dimension into otherwise mundane repair and construction jobs.

Robey and his team also tried to "deconflict" all humanitarian agency meetings in the city in order to maximize the IO and NGO presence. "We [were] all trying to figure out... the best use of our assets," said Robey of the humanitarian aid mission, "because we [were] all on the same team; we [were] all in this together." As proof of his commitment to that philosophy, Robey rescheduled NGO meetings held on Tuesdays at the HACC when he learned the United Nations was



*Officers in the Humanitarian Assistance Coordination Center (HACC) regularly met with nongovernmental and international organizations in order to maximize cooperation between the multitude of agencies and programs trying to rebuild Baghdad.*

such good work to start with," remarked Robey, "we would have been way behind the power curve."

The HACC team also hedged its bets by taking notes on the Humanitarian Operations Center (HOC) in Kuwait City. They shadowed the Kuwaiti-run HOC for three days, gleaning pointers on daily operations. The experience provided the team with a working model for operations and a valuable contact in LTC Stuart Gordon, who later relocated to Baghdad to help establish another HOC known as the Iraqi Assistance Center. Running at full speed, the HACC officially completed 116 missions in just over a month and a half.

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holding its meetings during the same time slot. He also advertised meetings for the NGO Coordination Center in Iraq, a group that was opposed to military involvement. “Our mission [was] to support humanitarian assistance in Baghdad,” says Robey. “If that [meant] supporting an NGO that [snubbed] us then [we’d] do it.”

When the HACC was not meeting with international agencies, Robey was busy enlisting the help of maneuver commanders in the CA mission. Meetings with infantry commanders yielded important leads on local leaders who were eager to participate in the rebuilding process. When the commander of the 3rd Infantry Division’s 4/64th Armored Regiment thought he recognized a unifying political force in a man known as Mr. Mustafa, he told the HACC. Robey then contacted the Office of Coalition Provisional Authority (OCPA), the civilian agency charged with rebuilding Iraq, and within a week Mr. Mustafa was meeting with OCPA officials to discuss rehabilitating his neighborhood. Starting a dialogue with community leaders was key, because doing so accelerated the return of power to the residents of Baghdad.

During its short time in the Iraqi capital, the HACC noticed a decline in its daily business. Following Robey’s business model, this was a positive trend. Larger humanitarian agencies such as U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) stepped in with money to award contracts for rehabilitation projects. As the HACC moved toward transitioning out of Baghdad, it compiled information on local business people in hopes that some would receive contracts. Although the HACC’s role in Baghdad continued to wane, Robey and his team watched for issues that no one else had tackled. “These groups [of Iraqis] come in and if we simply turn them away ... we lose affirmative contact

with them forever,” predicted Robey. This ability to realize the effects of small actions on the big picture was the source of the HACC’s success amid the complex civil-military relationships of postwar Baghdad. ▲

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## Endnotes

- 1 Lieutenant Colonel Daniel L. Robey, HHC, 354th Civil Affairs Brigade, interview by Sergeant Landon Mavrelis, 15 June 2003, Baghdad, Iraq, tape recording, Oral History Interview, 126-OIF-I-0099, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

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