

# The 101st Airborne Division in Iraq: Televising Freedom

Major John Freeburg, U.S. Army, and  
Sergeant First Class Jess T. Todd, U.S. Army

**D**URING OPERATION Iraqi Freedom, the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) participated in one of the most impressive military actions in history. Moving rapidly from Kuwait to combat in Karbala and on to Mosul, the 101st transitioned just as rapidly from combat to stability and support operations (SASO). Tactical psychological operations (PSYOP) were important to the 101st's success during combat, and operational PSYOP was vital to "winning the peace" afterward.

Area of Operation (AO) North, a large sector of Iraq that included three international borders, was the 101st's operational assignment. The AO, over 29,000 square miles in size, with a population of nearly 6-1/2 million people, included two distinct languages and three major cultures. Its vast, flat farmlands, lush river valleys, and jagged mountain peaks provided refuge for displaced civilians, smugglers, and Kurdish rebels. In such a setting, the 318th Tactical PSYOP Company (Reserve) and the 101st staff had the job of winning the hearts and minds of the population.

## Newspapers, Handbills, and Posters

Nearly everyone in Northern Iraq receives information via satellite television and, to a lesser extent, radio.<sup>1</sup> Newspapers are a distant third, and in many cases, surpass word of mouth. Although handbills and posters rate even lower, they are favorites of the PSYOP community and had their place in the AO North PSYOP spectrum. When posted in central locations, handbills and posters provided additional methods of conveying information to the population.

Newspapers were important in disseminating the coalition message within urban population centers. The 318th is purely a tactical company, so the mission change from combat to SASO required soldiers to learn different skill sets. The 318th accepted the challenge of publishing three separate newspapers, which quickly became the most popular and widely

read newspapers in the AO.<sup>2</sup> Troops on patrol in urban and rural areas often distributed informational material during routine interactions with locals, and newspapers fit the bill perfectly. Conversely, the newspaper with the largest circulation in AO North only reached a maximum of 3 percent of the overall population.<sup>3</sup>

## Television and Radio

Once electricity and water services were restored to relatively normal levels, the situation changed quickly. In AO North's population centers, members of Iraqi extended families and their neighbors gathered during the evenings to watch television in homes with satellite receivers. The messages they viewed through Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, and Al Manar conflicted with those the 101st and the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) presented. The former's messages were not overtly anti-coalition but mixed implied messages liberally with the facts of a given story.

By the end of 2003, satellite dishes were abundant in Northern Iraq with satellite television as the dominant source for information. Iraqis unfortunate enough not to have access to satellite television had only one local terrain station to watch.

In early April 2003, the only functioning television station in Mosul was on the University of Mosul campus, and tribal militia leader Meshaam Jabori controlled it. When the 101st arrived in Mosul, Jabori was broadcasting political messages without interference, and the station retransmitted Al Jazeera in the evenings. The 101st halted Jabori's message and discontinued the Al Jazeera transmissions. Unfortunately, the resulting "content gap" ensured the success of the highly polished satellite broadcasters at the expense of local broadcasters and, ultimately, the coalition.

In contrast to the sophisticated propaganda messages with which Al Jazeera and the like flooded Iraq, coalition messages were straightforward,



MG Petraeus takes questions on Ninewa TV7.



PFC Somma in an impromptu duet with a talent show contestant.



A scene from "Ninewa Talent on Display."



"Wakhazat" encourages safe handling of propane containers.

U.S. Army

simple, and blunt. Based on a national handbill program, thousands of products were pushed out to the divisions on a regular basis, but virtually no PSYOP presence was visible on the national television station, Al Iraqia, which the CPA administered through its media arm, the Iraqi Media Network (IMN). The fledgling network met little success throughout 2003 despite the U.S. Government spending over \$30 million to replace and revitalize the media landscape that had existed during Saddam Hussein's regime.<sup>4</sup> The

focus was necessarily on infrastructure repair and replacement, leaving little time or money for quality content production.

Technically, all Iraqi television and radio stations belonged to the IMN, whose initial position was that the U.S. military supported none of its stations, and it did not carry U.S. military-sponsored messages. The intent was to provide the Iraqi Government an independent voice because IMN believed any association with the coalition on the air would be seen as de facto U.S. control.

That Mosul television and radio stations would not be operational within the year if the 101st did not supply equipment and guarantee employee salaries quickly became apparent. The 101st's attached 22d Mobile Public Affairs Detachment began using revitalized broadcasting stations and filled the airwaves with pro-coalition programming.

Throughout the fall of 2003, IMN asserted its control over all previously state-owned television and radio stations. On most days, local radio and television stations retransmitted the IMN signal, but the IMN provided only 4 hours of local programming per day. To fill the four available hours, the 101st increased the television and radio content available to the public in both quality and quantity.

The 101st's commanding general, Major General David H. Petraeus, answered questions on a live call-in show. Brigade commanders also appeared on television and answered questions in their areas of responsibility. Colonel Joe Anderson, commander of the 2d Brigade, became a celebrity in Mosul through his Saturday morning radio call-in show. Anderson even received a marriage proposal from an enamored female listener.

The 101st's PSYOP staff developed contacts within the Mosul arts community to establish and encourage the production of independent television programs, which led to the first Iraqi-produced public service announcements (PSAs) since the fall of Hussein's regime. These 2- to 3-minute TV spots used comedy to convey specific messages the PSYOP staff dictated. The actors, who were local television comedians, successfully translated PSYOP messages into Arabic in the style and cultural fashion of Mosul, a technique commonly referred to as "Iraqifying" the message. The series, titled "Wakhazat" ("an itch that needs to be scratched"), aired from October 2003 to February 2004, and 12 PSAs were produced in digital format on compact disks. The PSAs became quite popular among Mosul citizens, and their effectiveness far exceeded expectations.

Initially, PSAs focused on normal, everyday city living issues such as how to properly dispose of garbage. Once their effectiveness became apparent, however, PSAs became a valuable PSYOP tool and covered everything from stopping looters, to reporting black marketers, to respecting traffic police. These initial successes were encouraging and proved local television could garner a significant audience despite the overwhelming dominance of satellite stations.

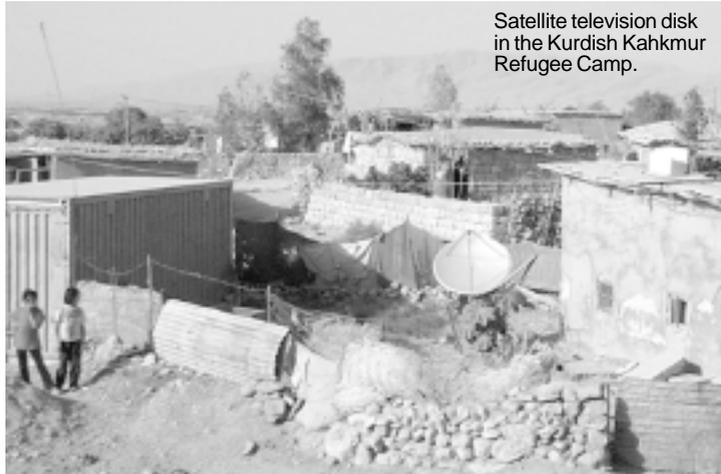
When the 101st moved to full-length mainstream programming, it was not interested in creating another status quo television show, so it invested much time, energy, and money to give the local station a boost and to draw a majority of the Iraqi audience away from satellite stations. Doing this required a new synergy between radio, print, and television media. The concept of advertising on other mediums was difficult to establish, had to be reinforced continually, and was absolutely vital to success.

### The Ninewa Province Talent Show

The idea for a Ninewa Province talent show emerged at the Division's battle update brief in mid-December 2003. The purpose of the program was to prove that Iraq had changed and opportunities were now open to all citizens, despite social or political standing. The idea was met with considerable skepticism. The link between civil liberties and a talent show was less than obvious. When the show hit the airwaves, the link became clear: the program was a vivid, colorful example of Iraqis discovering their newfound freedom of expression.

The talent show consisted of five 1-hour episodes, the last of which was the grand finale. Contestants included a country and western singer, a puppeteer, and traditional Iraqi singers, folkloric dance troupes, and poets. One comedian even impersonated Saddam Hussein. Word of the event spread quickly through informal channels as well as through television advertising, and Iraqis tuned in specifically for the show, which was quite a tribute.

Such successes were so remarkable that U.S. news media took notice. *The Chicago Tribune* ran



Satellite television disk in the Kurdish Kahkmur Refugee Camp.

US Army

a front-page story featuring a U.S. soldier and an Iraqi contestant performing an impromptu duet before a live audience. This led to coverage by National Public Radio, *The Washington Post*, and ABC News. Normally PSYOP personnel strive to avoid media coverage of their work, but in this case it only added to the event's prestige and legitimacy. One talent show contestant's father said, "When you came, they told us you would take our money and our homes. Instead, you have taken our hearts."<sup>5</sup>

At the talent show's final taping session, there was standing room only and a great deal of audience participation. Many in the audience broke into traditional Iraqi dancing as the contestants performed. This buy-in from locals was not planned but was welcome in all respects because buy-in was absolutely essential to the acceptance of the program's messages, such as, "We are making a better Iraq together," and, "Everyone is equal in the New Iraq." The program was one of those rare, elusive events a PSYOP officer dreams about and strives for—an initiative that truly won hearts and minds. **MR**

### NOTES

1. The Gallup Corporation conducted surveys from 18 August to 4 September 2003, and the Office of Research conducted surveys from 25 August to 10 September 2003 in Baghdad, Iraq.
2. The three brigade areas had such different populations that they required separate newspapers: the *New Hope* for Mosul proper; the *Iraqi Progress* for northern areas around Tal Afar, and the *Tigris Valley News* for Qayarra.
3. This calculation was based on 50,000 copies per issue and an estimated reading audience of 200,000 (including three pass-alongs) in a population of 6.5 million.
4. Stanhope Center for Communications Policy Research, *Iraq Media Developments Newsletter*, 15 (October 2003): 13-24.
5. Bill Glauber, "Iraqi Idol is on the Air," *Chicago Tribune*, 20 January 2004.

*Major John Freeburg, U.S. Army, is the Psychological Operations (PSYOP) Officer, 101st Airborne (ABN) Division (DIV), Air Assault (AASLT), Fort Campbell, Kentucky. He received a B.S. from the University of Wyoming and an M.S. from Troy State University. He has served in various PSYOP assignments in the continental United States, Germany, the Czech Republic, the Republic of Georgia, and Bosnia.*

*Sergeant First Class Jess T. Todd, U.S. Army, is the PSYOP noncommissioned officer, Headquarters and Headquarters Command, 101st ABN DIV (AASLT). His other PSYOP assignments have been Assistant Team Leader, Tactical PSYOP Team (TPT) 982; Team Leader, TPT 983; and Detachment Sergeant, TPD 980, 9th PSYOP Battalion (ABN).*