

## Task Group Taji – X



*Task Group Taji – X, Iraq, November 2019 to April 2020*

Task Group Taji 10 (TGT-X) began its journey in Darwin with an uncertain mission ahead. Our predecessors, TGT IX, in their final few weeks, declared the Iraqi School of Infantry and NCOs Academy Two (SINCO II) as having reached Final Operational Capability (FOC). This made it the first and only Iraq school to achieve this level of operation within the Combined Joint Task Force. This saw the successful training mission draw to a close, and the transition from training to mentoring. This was to be achieved through the establishment of the School Mentoring Team (SMT).

TGT-X deployed in November 2019 to Camp Taji Iraq, ready for the challenges that lay ahead. The Task Group, under the call sign ‘ANZAC’ consisted of members from both Australian and New Zealand Defence Forces. Specifically, this comprised of Camp Taji Medical Treatment Facility, TG Logistic Coy (CSS Coy), Camp Taji Headquarters with attached Intelligence Cell, Camp Taji Quick Reaction Force (QRF) and the SMT (whom who was to be the Main Effort).

The deployment to Taji focused on two key objectives – train the Iraqi’s and protect the force. The regular battle rhythm activities included meetings, synchs, daily mentoring missions to SINCO II and the cherished Islamic day-off “Jumu’ah” (Friday). We undertook trips to ‘Range 7’ to maintain proficiency on our weapons systems, and conducted Key Leadership Engagements (KLE’s). Through our daily and weekly activities, the ANZACs developed strong relationships with the Iraqi Security Forces and the wider Coalition, which we would come to rely upon through the fast changing and geopolitically charged four months to follow.



*A SMT member mentors an Iraqi Soldier on the range.*

On 27 December 2019, a US contractor was killed at K1 Air Base (a Coalition Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) Base, 320kms north of Taji) by an indirect fire rocket attack. This prompted the US to conduct retaliatory airstrikes against the perpetrators, Kataib Hezbollah (KH). KH a militia group under Iraq’s Popular Mobilisation Force (PMF). This event began to further complicate the already heated political environment that TGT-X had to navigate to achieve mission success.

Following the strikes on a legitimate arm of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), the Iraqi Government and US military leadership ceased all joint training and divestment of equipment. TGT-X, as the commander of the largest coalition base in Iraq and as the mentors to the most capable Iraqi school, began carefully maintaining and upholding the relationships with the key ISF leadership on base to ensure coalition security.

The Combined Tactical Operations Centre (CTOC) staffed by ANZAC and US personnel 24 hours a day, received an intelligence update at 0130 on 3 January 2020. The intelligence update confirmed that Major-General Qasem Soleimani, an Iranian military general, had been deliberately killed in a US strike, 30km south of Taji. The tension between Iraq and the coalition had never been higher. The Base Liaison Team and SMT continued to work hard, ensuring and reinforcing the dominant narrative that the ANZACs were there to develop the ISF. During this time the ANZACs were also the only nation to conduct face-to-face liaison and engagement with the ISF which was a testament to the strong relationships they had built over multiple rotations.

The political tension was high for the rest of the deployment. There were several failed rocket attacks during this time, leaving us all hunkered in bunkers for hours. On 8 January 2020, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps of Iran fired numerous Theatre Ballistic Missiles at US bases in Iraq. Numerous impacts were recorded at Al Asad and Erbil Airbases and Taji received indicators that put all 4500 personnel under TGT-X responsibilities into bunkers, waiting for the 300kg warheads which never came. During this time of threat, the QRF was on around the clock patrols. They were on reduced notice to move which would allow them to react to incidents including fighting off drones, casualty evacuation or the close fight, if required.

After weeks of high tension and a few more failed rocket attacks, the coalition began to ease tension and the training recommenced. SMT received a new training audience, which they worked tirelessly with SINCO II to prepare for. Life as a whole returned to normal in Camp Taji. CSS Coy began to move freight out of country to assist in the drawdown. SMT worked with SINCO II on their instructor development and facility upgrades. QRF returned to normal notice to move timings and recall for drills.



*The QRF conduct incident security and casualty evacuation drills to hone their techniques and procedures*

At 1921 on 11 March 2020, the political tension was brought to Camp Taji. An Improvised-Multiple Launch Rocket System (I-MLRS) mounted to the back of a truck launched a volley of rockets within the Camp walls. There were multiple impacts recorded and the QRF were providing life-saving first aid and evacuation of numerous casualties. All available medical staff from across all nations bolstered the medical facility. The camp was in an organised frenzy to account for all personnel and prepare for further actions. SMT was rolled to assist in sector searches and enabled the accurate and timely report of all

personnel accounted for. Unfortunately, three coalition members were Killed-In-Action, and numerous other Coalition personnel were Aero-Medically Evacuated (AME) for higher medical treatment. At this point, SMT was to conduct no more training with SINCO II.

The Coalition banded together through language barriers and procedural differences to support the ANZAC led base defence. Shortly after ramp ceremonies and reviews of procedures, Camp Taji was put to the test again. At 1050 on 14 March 2020, in broad daylight, the camp was again struck by an I-MLRS. Fortunately, there were no KIA during this attack, and the injured personnel were quickly identified and evacuated for further medical treatment.

As was always scheduled, however, the ANZAC contingent handed over base command to the 168<sup>th</sup> MP Battalion from Tennessee, USA. This left nearly 200 ANZACs with no base command responsibilities or, training audience.

At the same time, an order from the Commanding General of OIR stated that all training personnel were to withdraw from Iraq due to the political turmoil. With bushfires having devastated Australia and with COVID-19 rapidly spreading across the world; it was time for TGT-X to go home. It was an emotional goodbye to the remaining coalition partners as we pulled out of Iraq.

The Commander TGT-X, Colonel Nick Foxall, AM, reflected:

*“Task Group Taji’s mission has finished, but our lasting bonds forged with coalition partners and the Iraq Security Force will remain.”*

*“The legacy we now all share is one that we can truly be proud of, having contributed to the stability of Iraq and upholding the reputation of the ANZAC’s and our nations”.*

