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In Theater Heritage Training: Briefing Script

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Hello, my name is Dr. Laurie Rush. I am a military archeologist supporting the Mission of the 10th Mountain Division at Fort Drum, NY. It is my privilege to help develop training that is designed to help increase your awareness of archeological sites and sacred places that you may encounter when you deploy overseas. As many of you already know, Iraq and Afghanistan are some of the most archeologically rich areas of the world. But why would we ask you to take valuable training time to learn more about encountering archeology on the field of battle?

The first answer to this question requires a discussion of the American occupation of Babylon in 2004. When our personnel established a base at the ancient site of Babylon, they were there to secure the area and prevent looting. And, it is important to note that they accomplished this mission. United States military personnel certainly did not set out to do damage when they bedded down at Babylon. However, cultural resources professionals – like me - had failed to offer any training to soldiers or marines on how to minimize impacts to archeological sites when establishing a secure position in the immediate vicinity to a world heritage site. The extent of the problem became clear when Army civilian personnel, along with millions of citizens around the world, learned of American tank trenches cutting through ancient

Babylonian walls and sand bags being filled with fragmented artifacts.

Damage of this type not only brings terrible publicity, but the failure to show respect for heritage diminishes American efforts to win hearts and minds.

A second answer to why the Joint Staff has asked us to spend time on this issue results from experiences 10th Mountain Division soldiers have had in theater. During an Environmental Compliance Officer class, I showed a photograph of a damaged Moslem cemetery to a group of soldiers, many of whom were between deployments. As the slide came on the screen, one of the soldiers said, “Excuse me ma’am, but that’s not an abandoned cemetery, that’s a shot up cemetery.” He went on to explain that the insurgents had been selectively using Moslem cemeteries as firing points. From the insurgents’ perspective, there are multiple advantages for this choice of fighting position. Moslem headstones are often quite large and substantially built out of stone, concrete or other dense material. Early on in the fight, coalition forces may not have been expecting use of cultural properties as fighting positions so there may have been an element of ambush or surprise. The insurgents were also well aware of US rules of engagement and laws of armed conflict including the Hague Convention that outline concerns for cultural, sacred, and community properties. In addition to the use of

cemeteries as firing points, they also used schools and mosques, sometimes as stockpiles for weapons and explosives. Appropriate military response to insurgent attacks from grave markers resulted in damage to the cemetery property and probably excellent propaganda video footage.

We will take a moment here to discuss aspects of law that make these issues even more important. In 1954, the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict outlined expectations for measures that should be taken to protect heritage properties in war time.

Even though the United States is not a signatory, US military personnel have endeavored to follow the guidelines put forward in this agreement. The blue shield was agreed upon as a symbol to identify cultural property similar to the way the Red Cross designates hospitals, ambulances, and aid stations.

In 1964, the National Historic Preservation Act was passed. This law offers protection for historic property that meets the criteria of the United States National Register of Historic Places that are located on lands within the jurisdiction of the federal government. In 2003, after a law suit against the US Navy, the US Supreme Court determined, that under this law, the Department of Defense is responsible for the protection of cultural property

in overseas areas that are under the control or influence of the US military. As a result, the United States can be held responsible in federal court if US military personnel willfully damage these kinds of properties.

Other encounters with archeology have challenged the military mission in a variety of unexpected ways. After careful installation of an Air Force radar antenna on the top of a tell, or mound containing the layered ruins of ancient occupations, radar operations were delayed when attempts to install the security fence at the bottom of the tell yielded artifacts. The officer in charge did not realize that the remains within a tell go all the way to the base or original soil levels. Residents of the adjacent village asked that construction stop. US military personnel worked together with community leaders to preserve the artifacts that had been discovered and to support efforts to improve the local museum before the fence could be completed, and the radar became fully operational.

It is also important to know that returning soldiers are now describing situations where ruins have been booby trapped. Any area in theater, like interesting archeological sites, where US Soldiers show an interest or gather can become a situational opportunity for attack.

Last but not least, profits from sale of antiquities looted from archeological sites from across Iraq and Afghanistan are helping to fund the insurgency.

So what do these challenges have in common? All of them could have been avoided or managed better with more education and more effective military training.

So what is the critical information?

The key issues boil down to:

How do you know if you are located in the immediate vicinity of an archeological site?

If you determine that you are in the immediate vicinity of an archeological site, what are the appropriate actions to take to minimize negative impacts?

Where do you go to get the information you need concerning those actions?

What types of training will help deploying US military personnel anticipate the types of challenges associated with conflict originating from or in the immediate vicinity of a cultural property?

We will begin with the question of developing knowledge of site locations and significance. Prior to initiation of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, archeologists helped the Air Force establish lists of heritage sites and their coordinates that should be avoided if possible during aerial gunnery or bombardment. We are realizing that ground troops require this information as well. The Office of the Secretary of Defense Legacy Program is in the process of completing inventory and mapping of the 80 most significant sites in Iraq and the 200 most significant sites in Afghanistan for distribution to soldiers and for inclusion in courses like this one. There is also information about significant archeological sites for every region of the world to be found on the internet. However, 80 and even 200 documented places only represent a small proportion of the archeological sites out there. There are thousands of sites across these ancient landscapes.

What are some of the clues that you are in the vicinity of a site? Often changes in elevation on the river valleys or flood plains of the Middle East are indicative of previous human occupation. It was very common for people in these areas to build on the ruins of previous villages and cities. These mounds of rubble, as I mentioned above, are known as tells. As you

look across vast expanses of landscape, you may be able to distinguish the tells and note evidence of buried ruins.

Clearly, establishing a bed down site on the highest ground in an area would be eminently defensible. Again, one reason why US forces are encountering archeology is because a defensible position 5000 years ago is likely to be a defensible position today. Our returning leaders are telling us that their secure positions are often on archeological sites. Therefore, avoiding archeological sites when selecting bed down positions is often neither possible nor practical. The important “take away” from this training is the knowledge that an archeological site can be occupied without being destroyed or even seriously damaged.

When assigned to bed down on an archeological position in Iraq, Lieutenant Colonel Mark Warnecke of the New York Guard intuitively made a series of excellent choices. He:

Reminded his personnel that vandalism of ruins is forbidden – no initials, no insignia, no graffiti of any type.

He met with local elders and asked them to identify the portions of the site where it would do the least damage if digging was needed – then he took their advice –and that is where his people excavated the latrines

They only dug in where absolutely necessary

They were careful when digging

They tried to avoid filling sand bags with material from the site and tried to avoid moving earth and artifacts around the site using sand bags.

He reminded his personnel that personal collecting is forbidden.

All of these measures represent sound decision making and situational awareness.

None of us heard about the New York Guard on the news – that means it was a job well done.

Successful occupation of an archeological site is a logical extension of showing respect. When these places are approached from a perspective of respect many of the right decisions will follow even without subject matter expertise.

It is important to remember that archeological sites represent the ancestors and the heritage of the indigenous people. Many members of the local population will care deeply. Just as demonstrations of respect may elicit appreciation, carelessness may provoke anger and hostility. In the case of

Iraq, the sites also represent the heritage of Americans who study the Old Testament as a part of their religion.

We have discussed the challenges of bedding down in the immediate vicinity of an archeological site. The most basic rules again: no vandalism, no collecting, be careful digging.

Archeological sites can also be encountered when Soldiers and Marines are on the move. If there is an option – try not to drive over ruins and sites. If you encounter ruins, and the area is secure, GPS the location if possible. At the very least, note the location as accurately as possible on a map. Take photographs noting your direction and location on the map. Photograph and describe any artifacts or diagnostic features. Again, it is important to remember that collecting artifacts is forbidden.

Unfortunately, in war zones and places where there is disorder and unrest, protecting archeology and historic sites becomes extremely difficult. During the time period when sanctions were imposed on Iraq, many people turned to the archeology – looting and selling artifacts to support their families.

Unfortunately, looting continues. Just like any other black market, profits

from looting benefit the bad guys. In the case of Iraq and Afghanistan, profits from selling ancient artifacts are helping fund the insurgency. It is extremely important that at the very least, American personnel do not unintentionally support the insurgency by purchasing artifacts. Many so called antiquities found in the markets and by the side of the road may also be fake. Either way, the best advice is -- don't buy anything that looks like it might have been excavated from ancient ruins.

It is also very important to be careful in the vicinity of looted archaeological sites. The looters work like miners. They dig down and if they begin to find artifacts they dig sideways almost as if they were chasing veins of gold. On the surface, the site will look like a moonscape. However, because of the unpredictable directions of the tunnels underneath, it is very difficult to predict when and if portions of the site will cave in. It is also important to remember that some sites have been booby trapped by insurgents.

So how do we train as we fight? How can we prepare ahead of time for in theater situations where US personnel encounter heritage sites with or without insurgents using them as firing points?

First, it is important to know that every large acreage military installation in the United States has archeological sites and should have a resident

archeologist on the civilian staff. One of the most frustrating aspects of the errors made in Babylon is that up until that point, the standard method for managing archeological sites on US military installations was to make them off limits to military personnel. Some of these sites need to be protected while being made available for training so that our Soldiers and Marines can train as they fight. Also, it is important to remember that your installation archeologist, aka the Cultural Resources Manager is a subject matter expert on your payroll. Do not hesitate to work with them.

Installations can also create “fake” or “mock” archeological sites in the training areas that are similar to ones that will be encountered in theater. Addition of a Moslem style cemetery and a replica stone cone mosaic tower similar to a ruin found at Ur to the target area of Fort Drum’s Range 48 enable the pilots to practice strategies of angling an attack with a goal of minimizing collateral damage. Construction of imitation Moslem cemeteries enables training troops to experience being fired upon from a cultural property. Addition of cultural property to the built training environment increases the realism and the opportunity to vary the scenarios. Cultural heritage scenarios can also be added into simulated training. Mission

scenario events are not limited to firing points and booby trapping, there are numerous other possibilities.

In summary, it is important to be as informed and as careful as possible when encountering archeological site and sacred places in military theaters of operation. Showing respect supports the mission, represents the Department of Defense and your branch of the service in an honorable way and is the law.