

A narrative on COVID-19 processes and their impact on operations, specifically Operation Inherent Resolve operating in Iraq and Kuwait.

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When I deployed at the beginning of February 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) was trying to understand COVID-19 and NZ had just banned travel from mainland China. I can remember there being a small amount of COVID-19 news but nothing that concerned me at the time. As I travelled to Kuwait through Sydney and Dubai on a mixture of civilian and military flights nothing appeared out of the ordinary. I conducted my handover at Camp Arifjan (AJ) in Kuwait. For those of you who are unfamiliar, it is an extremely large installation likened to a mini America in the desert. At AJ it was business as usual, COVID-19 was not on the radar.

Early March I flew civilian air from Kuwait International Airport to Dubai in preparation to move into Iraq. At Kuwait International airport COVID-19 was beginning to be taken seriously as masks were freely handed out and passenger temperatures were taken. I chose to wear a mask at the airport and on the flight and carried hand-sanitizer, which I had heard had sold out in NZ. On arrival at Dubai International Airport it was very different, I distinctly remember an OP Troy member asking why we were wearing masks.

In Iraq mid-March COVID-19 started to feature in command briefings 'ensure you wash your hands, use sanitizer'. In meetings the wearing of masks and sitting two metres apart was enforced, every second chair was removed or had a sign on it 'observe social distancing' then social distancing was changed to 'physical distancing' because there was a thought people would stop engaging with each other. Soon enough COVID-19 had its own slide in daily briefings, which was initially briefed by a Medical Officer until CJ35 (Ops/Plans) stood up a specific COVID-19 coordination cell. As coalition partners from many nations watched COVID-19 rip through their countries, the Commanding General stressed compassion for our loved ones back home and urged us to share our credible COVID-19 health information with them.

At the end of March the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic. In NZ people were queueing at supermarkets emptying shelves of toilet paper and baking basics. On deployment COVID-19 added to the already complex operational environment of ISIS, rogue aligned militia, violent protests due to political uncertainty and extreme economic instability. Operational capability needed to be maintained and as such protecting the Force was the number one priority for the Commanding General, consequentially a majority of operations were paused, some ceased and

thousands of troops (me included) retrograded out of Iraq to Kuwait or re-deployed home.

### **Direction Issued**

US Central Command (CENTCOM) issued COVID-19 process direction to Commanders in late February, what resulted was many reactionary orders due to the uncertainty and pace of COVID-19. The impacts of these orders were not seen on the ground until the end of March.

### **Command structure complexity**

Before exploring some of the impacts of COVID-19 processes it is important to understand the base Command structure in order to put issues into perspective.

AJ has its own garrison command led by a 3 Star General who commands both US military who complete 12 month postings and civilian contractors - both of the US State and migrant workers, a majority of which live off base. AJ is the largest transitional base in the middle-east.

Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) also commanded by a 3 Star General owns the Iraq Combined Joint Operational Area (CJOA) but is also a tenant of AJ, meaning those under CJTF-OIR also have to adhere to AJ garrison command rules when there.

Forward Operating Base Union 3 in Iraq under CJTF-OIR Command is a lot smaller, but protecting the force is arguably more complicated considering the high threat and unstable environment.

What both Union 3 and AJ have in common is their reliance on civilian contractors to provide basic life-support which during COVID-19, through my observation has been a major vulnerability.

### **Restrictions**

With a better understanding of COVID-19 transmission procedures it became obvious it was going to restrict freedoms and with that by the end of March all utilities, except the Mess and PX (which had restrictions) had closed in AJ and most other Kuwait bases. An example of Command discrepancy was an airbase close by which has kept its utilities open throughout. This has resulted in a number of military personnel who had the means, travel to this base for haircuts, workouts and coffee. This was not encouraged for obvious reasons but it appeared difficult to control. In Iraq Union 3 switches between facilities being open and closed (with restrictions) depending on risk assessment. Currently you are unable to dine in and 30 people are only allowed in the gym at any one time, with workouts restricted to 50mins.

Early on it was a priority to ensure health facilities were equipped to deal with any COVID-19 cases. CJTF-OIR had exceptional trauma facilities but nothing suitable for 1:1 extended care. Urgent acquisition of extra space to enable quarantine, ventilators and extra nurses followed. A known risk in the early stages was that testing kits were very limited, their accuracy was questionable and the turnaround for results took weeks. Coalition forces were forced to look at their evacuation plans and isolation processes, which could prove challenging with boarder closures and limited flights.

The reason base utilities had to close was due to city lockdowns and curfews which prevented contractors coming to work as well as an inability to effectively quarantine. The impact this has had on force sustainment is significant for example nations were required to put in returns for enough ration packs to last each person sixty days in the event that lockdowns would continue which meant food trucks could not get through and after 4months of restrictions facilities are deteriorating as no regular maintenance has been carried out.

For the deployed kiwi's here contractor restrictions directly impacted our mail that came via DHL Courier, access to the armoury and an inability to get phone data (essential for accountability) - hours have been spent figuring out alternatives. We have relied heavily on monthly Australian sustainment flights which have provided us with options. I was asked by other nations why I ran a cashbook, they were implying there was no need with credit cards these days – let's just say I smiled when the cash machines were out of order and when in Iraq they realised there was no trusted way for non-US coalition nations to get cash out.

In April for those posted to AJ under CJTF-OIR shift work was enforced to reduce concentrated numbers in the workplace and rosters were drawn up for cleaning workplace bathrooms due to the shortage of cleaners. A more thorough risk assessment saw these requirements ease in May.

It was Easter when panic buying began at the PX, soldiers managed long queues only able to let fifty people in at a time. Foodstuff shelves remain virtually bare due to limited staff and re-supply. This has resulted in restricted hours and rules around when and who entered.

Closed barber shops frustrated many in uniform which led to personnel taking things into their own hands, contradicting orders. Grooming standards were relaxed until Barbers came out of a base 14day quarantine. As of June Barber shops in AJ have opened and are operating under strict conditions.

Early on AJ was only able to keep two out of its three dining halls open. Dining hours were cut and as a result thousands of personnel queued on

2metre spaced floor markers for long periods of time in forty to fifty degree heat with no shelter. Orders switched back and forth about whether you could dine in or not. Masks and handwashing are compulsory as you enter the dining facility with soldiers stationed at the door controlling the number of people dining at any one time. Military Police frequently stood at the exit ticketing anyone who may have prematurely removed their mask. Initially all seating in the mess was taken away including outside, it was not uncommon to see personnel sitting on the side of a gutter in a sandstorm trying to eat. Currently in AJ all three messes are open and you are permitted to dine in but have to sit 2metres apart. There is no self-service and all food is served from behind plastic screens into polystyrene take-away containers, I cannot begin to explain the amount of rubbish this has caused. Rubbish bins are overflowing and are unable to be emptied regularly. This has led to rubbish blowing all around the camp and an increase in stray cats and dogs. For many in the past meal times were a chance to socialise and relax now people scuttle off to their rooms or offices with their meals. It could be considered an introverted persons dream but I am consciously aware that some people could be actually getting quite lonely.

### **Movement**

In March 'Stop movement' orders for all non-essential travel were issued and still continue. Thousands of personnel have been impacted as they are halted in place, this included relief in place (RIP) and people on mid-tour leave unable to return. Many people have had to extend their tour, many have had theirs cut short without replacement and many never even got their chance to deploy. Being unable to re-deploy or take some much needed respite poses a risk to mental well-being. I am not necessarily referring to those on 6month tours but those on 9 – 12 months plus.

The reality is there are thousands of displaced soldiers jammed into Kuwait bases, with limited to no work due to the relocation and shift in operations. Troops are living in large accommodation bunk bays which contradicts physical distancing rules, have limited to no data signal due to stress on comms and tech infrastructure, no welfare facilities, no sport or group PT allowed. Running is permitted as long as you are 2metres apart and pop up 'prison gyms' are a frequent sight. This overflow of people is not helped by those who arrive and are required to quarantine for 14days before moving on. Closed Base Facebook groups tell a candid story, my deduction is that many of the issues vented could be easily fixed with better communication and information flow from top to bottom.

US Military flights albeit few and far between began again mid-April and alleviated some pressure however it was short lived as the major US RIP occurs, also contributing to an increase in positive COVID-19 cases in the bases.

Boarder closures around the world had a significant impact on those coalition partners who relied on civilian flights into and out of theatre. I first hand witnessed Spanish and Portuguese colleagues come and go from the airport as flights were cancelled multiple times.

COVID-19 lockdowns and Ramadan temporarily stopped the issue of Iraq VISAs, we are now seeing the impact as many who are due to come into theatre are waiting on VISAs which for some nations are taking up to 3months. Despite this people continue to re-deploy home regardless which means no handover, for some nations this is mitigated with their larger footprint and NSE.

COVID-19 is dominating the information environment. It has been interesting to see how it has impacted the operational narrative. The surprise of COVID-19 has presented opportunity. Planners are working overtime to take this opportunity to re-structure towards a new phase of the mission.

In summary, after 4months of COVID-19 restrictions it has been operationally normalised. All the restrictions have been made for the right reasons but have come with unintended consequences that many have not been prepared for. Whilst NZ lives within level one, both Iraq and Kuwait's positive COVID-19 cases are rapidly increasing in line with the predicted apex being November 2020 emphasizing continued uncertain and challenging times ahead for deployed personnel on this operation.