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## IN HARM'S WAY

### **A *Space Sentinel* Feature Story**

NRO Field Representatives Support Operation Iraqi Freedom  
by Jayson Sawyer



# In Harm's Way

"The office was up and running, people knew I was there and what I did, then things began to come in the door. People would call me and say 'you know, I've got an issue.' At the morning meeting, they would ask, 'Hey NRO Rep, can you look into this for us?'"

By Jayson Sawyer, MSD Corporate Communications

## A Soldier's Story

In February 2009, Army Lieutenant Colonel Jameson Riley "J.R." Johnson returned from service as the NRO Senior Field Representative on the staff of Multi-National Forces Iraq (MNF-I). "They called me the National Reconnaissance Representative to the MNF-I," explained Johnson. In August 2007, Johnson led the very first NRO team into Iraq. Twenty months later, Johnson is now a seasoned veteran of five deployments to Iraq with the NRO, and an earlier one in 2003 with the U.S. Army as the leader of one of the first Cryptological Support Teams "in country."

Johnson's primary mission during his more recent tours in Iraq was to establish a more permanent level of on-the-ground NRO support to the MNF-I. Since this had not been done previously, his six-week long mission established an NRO "home" within the command for both himself and the members of the NRO's follow-on contingents. "The first phase," remembered Colonel Johnson "was almost completely about the logistics of establishing a field office." He acquired workspace and housing for himself and eventual replacements, requisitioned a vehicle, established accounts, and arranged for access to the bases he supported.

In addition to developing mission capabilities, Johnson also secured creature comforts for the current and future teams. "The day I got to Iraq, I went into a 20-man open-bay tent," recalled Johnson. Conversely, when his replacement

arrived on January 26, 2009, thanks to Johnson's procurement staff work, the "new guy" was able to occupy a room in one of Saddam Hussein's "victory" palaces, a suite complete with indoor plumbing and a kitchenette.

"In addition," recalled Johnson, "during that first six weeks, I might have spent about two hours a day learning what was happening in Iraq, getting my name around, and taking in a meeting here and there. None of those engagements, though, were focused on the imminent operations that were going on. Instead, my initial goals were based on the notion that if somebody knew what I was, and knew where I was, and knew how they could get in touch with me — those were good building blocks for the future. The rest of the time in those early days was all spent setting up the field office."

The next chapter of Johnson's longest Iraq expedition was for him to learn all he could about the organization he and the NRO were supporting. His familiarization efforts were intended to build firm support relationships with the MNF-I. "The second phase was getting my foot in the door," reported Johnson, "establishing the rapport with the command. I went to many meetings that I knew I wouldn't go to again, but I introduced myself to many people and passed out many



*Lt. Col. Jameson Riley "JR" Johnson*



*U.S. Soldiers search for evidence of insurgency in the Maysan Province of Iraq.*

business cards. I also made many ‘cold calls’ on offices with no other reason than to leave my card and give knowledge to that person that there was an NRO guy in town. I traveled to the commands and Forward Operating Bases, and other facilities — all of the partners and joint elements in the theater.”

“The third phase comprised the last five weeks or so,” said Johnson. The office was up and running, people knew I was there and what I did, and then things began to come in the door. People would call me and say, ‘you know, I’ve got an issue.’ At the morning meeting, they would ask, ‘Hey NRO Rep, can you look into this for us?’ That’s Phase Three — and, hopefully, that’s where I’ve left my successor. He will have some more of the ‘repping’ portion of it, whereas I got only the last part of the four months to dig into stuff. Unlike in my rotation, I am hoping that he’ll get one month to establish himself and then three months to be a representative of what the NRO does, and can do for the customers.”

Johnson’s liaison with some MNF-I elements during that first tour was more difficult than he predicted, which he attributed to some naiveté on his part. He recalled, “I thought people would say, ‘Oh, cool — the NRO guy is here. Now we’ll totally change our IMINT [imagery intelligence] plan based on his knowledge.’ The opposite was the case.” Instead, Johnson found himself in a situation of constantly swimming upstream to gain advocacy and credibility before being able to favorably impact operations. Johnson had difficulty arguing with the “prove it” logic of talented operators experienced in

executing high stakes activities. “I can’t fault what they were saying,” he explained, “which was: ‘I’m open to listen to you, but we’ve got an 85-percent solution that’s been functioning for five years. Maybe there are ways that we could tweak this thing, but I’m really not interested in being the guy that messes with the successful 85-percent plan. So, until you can show me this thing that radically gets me something I don’t get right now, I am really not interested in tweaking an already good system.’”

About two-thirds of the way through Johnson’s tour, another member of the NRO Deputy Director for Mission Support User Engagement Group, arrived in country as the NRO’s U.S. 1st Corps Field Representative. “He is having a lot more success than I had in affecting collection management,” reported Johnson, “because he is working from within the process. He’s an actual member of the Collection Management Division in 1st Corps, so his ideas, his suggestions — they’re coming from within — not from the hands of a Lieutenant Colonel walking in the door, saying, ‘Knock, knock — Hey, I’ve got a great idea.’”

### **Making a Difference in the War in Iraq**

The number of NRO personnel deployed to support Operation Iraqi Freedom is approaching a significant level. According to Johnson, during the last two years the NRO total is somewhere in the neighborhood of 50 persons, including contractors. “On my various trips, I have probably taken a





total of thirty-three different guys into Iraq. I took five teams in, the largest consisting of ten and my smallest team — this last time — was three. On this deployment, I took a group forward for about ten days before my more ‘permanent’ staff tour began. We did our thing; I put those guys on the plane, and then I stayed and joined the MNF-I staff.”

His first deployments were about one month in duration. Contrast that with his longest deployment of 137 days. Whereas formerly the expeditions into combat theaters were scheduled against the predicted or actual time it would take to accomplish a certain mission, tour lengths are now becoming a standard 120 days in duration to give the NRO personnel greater immersion in direct, in-theater support and increase consistency of engagement with the organization they are there to help.

“We’ve now got the largest forward presence in Iraq and Afghanistan that the NRO has ever had,” NRO Deputy Director for Mission Support (DDMS) Brigadier General Jeffrey C. Horne reported earlier this year. “Now, instead of people having to reach back through time zones and deal with the multiple challenges of communicating from afar, we have NRO members engaging in the same challenges, minute-to-minute, that the analysts and warfighters are experiencing. Our folks are seeing it firsthand, talking to their buddies back at our labs, and solving problems in minutes, hours, and days, as opposed to dealing with a lengthy requirements system that sometimes takes years to produce something needed.”

Johnson contended that the NRO has made a definite positive difference in Iraq. “We have a daily impact,” he maintained. As proof, he described a particular 10th Mountain Division mission in which he was involved as an advisor. The NRO provided the overhead intelligence as part of related team efforts which resulted in seven ‘bad guys’ going to jail,” recalled Johnson. “That is the difference between “data only”

and “data with support.” Johnson is convinced that a more permanent presence is an open-and-shut case, saying, “We owe it to our customers to make any mission enhancements that we can bring to an operation.”

“In my mind, ‘Forward Presence’ is less than a definition and more of an affirmation,” said Johnson. You have to be forward if you are going to support combat operations,” he explained. “If you’re not forward, then you are not supporting combat operations. You can’t understand the people, the struggle, the hours involved, the personalities, the terminology — unless you are physically there to hear, understand, and grasp them and it.”

However, some have questioned NRO’s forward presence. “The NRO is not a CSA (Combat Support Agency),” critics maintain, “so why is it acting like one?” Johnson also recalled the words he heard from various intelligence analysts he encountered: “You don’t need to be forward to provide us with data.” In defense, Johnson stated unequivocally, “In effect, a virtual presence is virtually not being there. Providing data is one thing we [the NRO] do, but the reality is that we also provide other things and properly represent them to the community.” Deploying in-theater allows NRO Field Representatives to identify new capabilities that those in country do not know about and therefore cannot request. According to Johnson, in the final analysis, deploying NRO personnel into harm’s way “is securing a future position for us [the NRO] with the decision-makers. I think that is well worth our investment.” ■

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