



LTG Austin takes command of MNC-I *Generals honor Odierno for efforts in stabilizing Iraq*

Story, photos by
Army Sgt. Laura M. Bigenho
28th Public Affairs Detachment

Army Lt. Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III assumed command of Multi-National Corps-Iraq during a transfer of authority ceremony at Al Faw Palace Feb. 14.

His predecessor, Army Lt. Gen. Ray Odierno, is scheduled to be the U.S. Army's next vice chief of staff.

Army Gen. David Petraeus, Multi-National Force-Iraq commanding general, spoke highly of Odierno's accomplishments and leadership as commander of III Corps and MNC-I. Petraeus said Iraq was a much different place when Odierno first took command 14 months ago.

"The situation was very difficult," Petraeus said. "The bloodshed had reached horrific levels. The very fabric of Iraqi society had been torn."

Petraeus said Odierno and his team had a lot of planning and hard work on their hands, but they stepped up and made the tough decisions the country needed.

"He forthrightly requested ad-



Army Gen. David Petraeus, Multi-National Forces-Iraq commander, Army Lt. Gen. Ray Odierno, outgoing Multi-National Corps-Iraq commander and Army Lt. Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, incoming MNC-I commander, salute the flag during the transfer of authority ceremony Feb. 14.

ditional forces and he and his staff began developing an operational concept for their employment," Petraeus said. "His recommendations for what came to be known as the surge forces has since been proven correct. They reflected a mastery of the operational level of war and they explicitly laid out the concepts that have guided our forces over the past year."

Odierno said he was humbled by Petraeus' remarks and for having served among the ranks of others.

"You restored optimism to a country once enslaved by the influence of terrorists and allowed a nation to take control of its own destiny," Odierno said. "I am humbled to serve in your ranks, and I salute each and every one of you. Thank you for being at my side and for being the Soldiers that you are."

Austin said he looks forward to working alongside the Iraqi security forces, with whom he said he shares the same ideals.

"Iraqis, like the Coalition soldiers by their sides, believe that there are ideals and responsibilities that transcend the individual and they are

denying the terrorists the freedom to launch their attacks from their neighborhoods," Austin said. "Every day, Iraqis are getting involved with the government."

Austin previously served in Iraq in 2003 and as assistant division commander (maneuver) of 3rd Infantry Division (Mechanized).

His other assignments include commander of Combined Joint Task Force 180 during Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and most recently as chief of staff for U. S. Central Command. He took command of XVIII Airborne Corps in December 2006.

Austin said he plans to help the Iraqis promote progress.

"We will help the Iraqi government integrate local volunteers into the Iraqi security force and other employment opportunities that will promote progress for this great country," he said.

The Iraqis' evident choice of peace over sectarian violence will be key in continuing to make progress, Austin said.

"It is clear that the Iraqi people have a new confidence in tomorrow and in their future," he said.



Army Lt. Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III takes the MNC-I colors from Army Gen. David Petraeus, MNF-I commander.

Family values take on new meaning

By Army Sgt. Laura M. Bigenho
28th Public Affairs Detachment

It took me 20-something years to realize that even though my parents may not have it all together, they aren't all that bad either. In fact, I believe them to be among the best. There were some serious family values at the core of my fully functional dysfunctional family and they helped shape me into the wife and mom I someday hope to be.

My parents taught me a lot. Perhaps the most crucial thing is to never go to bed mad — stay up and fight. It may sound harsh at first, but think about it for a moment. The old belief that one needs to sleep on it is so untrue. Mom and Dad taught me it's best to resolve a disagreement as soon as possible — even if it means staying awake a few extra hours. Putting off resolution only adds grief, headache, worry and ultimately delays resolution, happiness and of course a good night's sleep.

The second thing Mom and Dad taught me was to be a giver. Their generosity was evident to me as an adolescent who had foreign exchange students living in our house and continues to be years later as they open their



Bigenho

home to others. They always emphasize their doors are open — as long as guests can tolerate two big furry kids who have taken the places of their adult kids. Even then, they are quick to put the dogs in a “doggy resort” to ease guests if need be. My parents may not have much, but they've always shared what they have.

Another value they instilled in me was the importance of putting our family first — from immediate family to anyone who shares our family name to those unrelated who are somehow connected to our family. Regardless of how embarrassed others may have made us feel to be associated with the family name at times, my parents remind me that blood runs thicker than water.

Along the same lines, Mom and Dad showed me the meaning of standing by your spouse — not behind, nor in front of, but beside him or her. Doing so may come at a cost sometimes, as it can seem easier to take the back door when tough times hit hard. However, they've

shown me that the price of leaving is far greater than the price of standing by one's side, even in a relationship's darkest hours.

Lastly, and most recently, mom and dad showed me how to cherish family — particularly those who clearly don't have much time left here on Earth. This was especially true with my late Grandma. Her health failed quickly over the last few years, and being thousands of miles away, I wanted to make every visit and holiday count. I went home to Pittsburgh on R&R in May not knowing if it would be my last chance to visit grandma. Sure enough, those visits were indeed my last. She passed away this past November. I was terribly upset I could not be home for her funeral, but forever grateful for the values my parents instilled in me. They taught me to treasure the time I did have with her, and for that reason I don't have to live with feelings of guilt or regret.

After more than 33 years of marriage and four grown kids, I think my parents have this marriage thing figured out. They raised us the best way they knew, and instilled more values than space allows me to list. Hopefully, I'll be able to pass those values on myself.

Chaplain's Corner

Who packs your parachute?

Army Chaplain Mark Frederick
MNC-I Ops/Plans Chaplain

As I stand on the threshold of this deployment, I want to share with you a devotional article I found very helpful.

Charles Plumb, a U.S. Naval Academy graduate, was a jet pilot in

Vietnam. After 75 missions, his plane was destroyed by a surface-to-air missile. Plumb ejected and parachuted into enemy territory. He was captured and spent six years in a communist Vietnamese prison. He survived the ordeal and now lectures on the lessons he learned from that experience.

One day, when Plumb and his wife were sitting in a restaurant, a man at another table came up and addressed him.

“You're Plumb!” the man ex-

claimed. “You flew jet fighters in Vietnam from the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk. You were shot down!”

“How in the world did you know that?” asked Plumb.

“I packed your parachute,” the man replied.

Plumb gasped in surprise and gratitude. The man shook his hand and said, “I guess it worked!”

“It sure did,” Plumb assured him, “If your chute hadn't worked, I

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MNC-I Commanding General: Lt. Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III
MNC-I Public Affairs Officer: Col. Bill Buckner
MNC-I PA Sergeant Major: Sgt. Maj. Sharon Opeka
MNC-I Command Info Chief: Staff Sgt. Jacob Boyer
Editor: Sgt. D.A. Dickinson
Staff: Sgt. Laura M. Bigenho, Sgt. Abel Trevino

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Army Brig. Gen. Joseph Anderson, III Corps chief of staff, congratulates Capt. Tau Ahoelei, company commander, Royal Tongan Marine contingent to Iraq.



A row of Tongan Marines stands at parade rest during an awards ceremony held in their honor Feb. 5.

Royal Tongan Marines service honored

**Story, photos by
Army Sgt. Jeremy D. Crisp**
MNC-IPAO

A contingent of Royal Tongan Marines were honored for their service in Operation Iraqi Freedom during an awards presentation at Al Faw Palace Feb. 5.

Fifty-five Marines from the South Pacific island of Tonga were honored with three Commendation Medals and 52 Achievement medals for their support of the Multi-National Corps-Iraq mission.

The Tongans were tasked with providing 24-hour internal and external security for the 48,000 square-foot Al Faw Palace.

Army Brig. Gen. Joseph Anderson, III Corps chief of staff said they've done the job extremely well.

"You've been recognized by all for the expert manner in which you have carried out your day-to-day duties," Anderson said as he addressed the Tongans during the ceremony. "You do your jobs every day with a positive attitude. You are energetic, very enthusiastic and, by and large, very professional. We very much appreciate that."

Before the Marines were awarded their medals, however, a Camp Victory tradition was upheld.

The unit was called to attention by their chief of naval defense, when he simply said, "a song."

Booming voices from the Tongans had servicemembers from all three floors of the Palace coming out of offices and cubicles to take a look.

The Tongans set a precedent since starting their deployment in September 2007 by singing at numerous MNC-I ceremonies, such as this one, which brought cheers, applause and words of gratitude.

"You are dedicated to executing your duties, but as you've just demonstrated today, you're also an awesome chorus," Anderson said. "We thank you for making many of our ceremonies and services all that much more special."

Tongan Marine Capt. Tau Ahoelei, company commander, explained that the honor the unit received came from their ability to take any mission given and give it their best shot.

"Whatever mission it is, we work hard at it, we enjoy it and we are happy to do it,"

said Ahoelei, who hails from Nuku'alofa, Kolomotu'a. "We've made a lot of friends, learned about the culture here and we've even learned American footie," he said, referring to American football.

The ceremony closed out with the Tongans receiving congratulatory hand shakes from their Coalition partners.

This is the second contingent of Tongan Marines to be sent to support OIF. The first deployed in June 2004 to support operations in Iraq's Anbar Province.

The unit makes up approximately 10 percent of the total Tongan Defense Forces.

The Tongans will leave later this month to be replaced by 55 more of their fellow countrymen.

52nd EOD assumes command of TF Troy

Story, photos
by Army Sgt. Laura M. Bigenho
28th Public Affairs Detachment

The 52nd Explosive Ordnance Disposal Group, based at Fort Gillem, Ga., officially took the reins of Combined Joint Task Force Troy during a transfer of authority ceremony at Al Faw Palace Feb. 8.

The 52nd took command from the 71st Explosive Ordnance Disposal Group, which will return to Fort Carson, Colo., after a 15-month deployment in Baghdad that resulted in countless saved lives and thousands of responses to IEDs.

Army Brig. Gen. Michael Ferriter, Multi-National Corps-Iraq deputy commanding general of operations, noted a few of the 71st EOD's accomplishments.

"These courageous troopers responded to over 9,000 IED responses, 4,300 post-blast investigations, 1,700 explosive caches and 80 VBIEDs," Ferriter said. "This resulted in the destruction of over 2 million pieces of



Army Command Sgt. Major Timothy Udelhofen, Task Force Troy command sergeant major and Army Col. Kevin Lutz, TF Troy commander, uncase the colors for 52nd Explosive Ordnance Disposal Group during a transfer of authority ceremony at Al Faw Palace Feb. 8.

ordnance and hazards containing more than 1 million pounds of explosives."

Ferriter said their mission stretched far beyond Camp Victory. In addition to the 1,000-plus troops and Civilians within 71st, the group trained over 120,000 Coalition Forces in basic IED recognition, worked with 22 forward operating bases to establish training lanes and conducted 2,223 IED training events on those lanes.

"They have taken fighting the IED to a new level as they have continuously and creatively improved the way they fight," Ferriter said.

Army Col. Karl Reinhard, 71st EOD Group's commander, said it was an honor to lead CJTF Troy. He also praised his troops for their hard work and dedication to the mission.

"The credit for Troy's successes must go to its Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marine and Civilians," Reinhard said. "They epitomize champions — determined, persistent, excited, passionate and turned-on — champions for making a difference in the counter-IED fight."

Reinhard also welcomed the 52nd EOD Soldiers and new CJTF Troy commander, Army Col. Kevin Lutz.

"I have absolute confidence that you and your team will build upon our successes," Reinhard said. "Take it to the next level so that we can realize the full potential of this great capability."

Lutz said that his team is trained and ready to lead the CJTF Troy mission.

"We will continue and build on the incredible efforts and achievements of the 71st EOD Group of protecting the force and defeating the IED networks," Lutz said. "Their accomplishments are absolutely phenomenal, and without a doubt, they have saved countless U.S., Coalition and Iraqi citizens' lives while at the same time setting favorable conditions for a sovereign Iraq."

He also thanked the 71st for setting the standard and wished them a safe redeployment.

"I want to personally thank the 71st EOD Group for the warm welcome and for setting the conditions for success here in Iraq," he said. "Godspeed and a safe journey home."



Distinguished guests attending the Task Force Troy Transfer of Authority ceremony included Army Brig. Gen. Joseph Anderson, III Corps chief of staff and Army Command Sgt. Maj. Neil Ciotola, III Corps command sergeant major.



Army Lt. Col. William Wanovich, commander, XVIII Airborne Corps Special Troops Battalion, unfurls the unit guidon with the help of the battalion's senior noncommissioned officer, Army Command Sgt. Maj. Leeroy Chaney, as the unit takes the role of Task Force Dragon during a transfer of authority ceremony Feb. 11 at Al Faw Palace.

XVIII Abn. Corps STB takes the lead from III Corps' Task Force Phantom

Story, photo by Army Sgt. Jeremy D. Crisp

MNC-I PAO

Responsibility for the command, control and support of Multi-National Corps-Iraq changed hands Feb. 11 at the Al-Faw Palace as the Soldiers of Task Force Phantom, III Corps Special Troops Battalion, Fort Hood, Texas, handed the reins to Task Force Dragon, XVIII Airborne Corps STB, Fort Bragg, N.C.

Presiding over the transfer of authority ceremony, which hosted an audience of hundreds of Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines and Coalition Forces, was Army Brig. Gen. Joseph Anderson III Corps chief of staff.

Anderson praised the accomplishments of the TF Phantom Soldiers and thanked them for their diligent service.

"I'd personally like to recognize the Task Force Phantom Soldiers who have served with distinction these past 15 months," Anderson said. "They truly represent those who have passed before them, and I thank each and every member of this team for their efforts in their operations here in Iraq."

Anderson said he was there to honor the achievements of these warriors, and listed the accomplishments of the task force.

Some of those accomplishments included executing 2,287 convoy missions while transporting more than 31,000 passengers; encountering nine IEDs, one EFP and numerous small-arms fire engagements; conducting mass casualty events for six attacks and emergencies at the palace and provided daily operational management for the 46,000 square-

foot Al Faw palace.

As a result of the unit's dedication, 86 Combat Action Badges and 267 Bronze Star Medals were awarded.

"Overall, I can say that it was a great experience," said Army Col. Gregory Maxton, TF Phantom commander.

"I think all of us will have positive memories that we can look back upon for a long time, knowing that we made a difference while we were here," Maxton said.

"As Task Force Phantom departs, we turn over the reins to Task Force Dragon, led by the great team of Lt. Col. Wanovich, and Command Sgt. Maj. Chaney," Maxton said. "Over the past six months I've had the opportunity to work with them — and they are the right team to take what we have accomplished to the next level."

TF Dragon Commander, Army Lt. Col. William J. Wanovich, took the lectern and closed out the ceremony with confident words to those in whom he is in charge.

"It's time to roll up our sleeves and get busy," Wanovich said. "I'm confident in your abilities and honored to stand in front of you as your commander. Know I'll be with you every step of the way. Airborne, all the way."

This was the second deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom for the Phantom Corps Soldiers and is also the second time that the XVIII Airborne Corps STB will take the helm as TF Dragon here.

TF Dragon will be responsible for a number of operations which support the approximately 2,500 servicemembers in the MNF-I and MNC-I headquarters element, including personnel management, training, communications, convoy escorts and more.

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wouldn't be here today." Plumb couldn't sleep that night, thinking about that man.

"I kept wondering what he might have looked like in a Navy uniform," Plumb said. "A white hat, a bib in the back and bell-bottom trousers. I wonder how many times I might have seen him and not even said, 'Good morning, how are you?' or anything because, you see, I was fighter pilot and he was just a sailor."

Plumb thought of the many hours the sailor had spent on a long wooden table in the bowels of the ship, carefully weaving the shroud lines and folding the silks of each chute, holding in his hands each time the fate of someone he didn't know. Now, Plumb asked his audience, "Who's packing your parachute?"

Everyone has someone who provides what they need to make it through the day. Plumb also pointed out that he needed many kinds of parachutes when his plane was shot down over enemy territory. He needed his physical parachute, his mental parachute, his emotional parachute and his spiritual parachute. He called on all these supports before reaching safety.

Sometimes in the daily challenges that life gives us we miss what is really important.

We may fail to say hello, please or thank you, congratulate someone on something wonderful that has happened to them, give a complement, or just do something nice for no particular reason at all.

As we move through these months of deployment, it is important to recognize the people who pack your parachute.

It does not matter if you are left to keep the home fires burning or if you are the one on the front lines in service to your country. We all have people who are packing our chutes. We are not alone.

There are others who care and it is important to say thank you for those who are packing our chutes.

Let there be light



Photo by Army Master Sgt. Dennis Beebe

Mohannad Qramosh, Othman Alkhtaleen, Feras Salameh and Manoj Kumar, electricians from Flour Company, replace the light bulbs of the rotunda chandelier in Al-Faw Palace.

Announcements

IMO training

Training for information management officers is held Sundays at 3 p.m. in the Euphrates Conference Room in Al Faw Palace.

Tae Kwon Do

Take lessons from Grand Master Sung Bok Nam 8th Degree Blackbelt, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays from 8 - 9 p.m. at Camp Victory Gym Bldg 24M. Nam coached the 1993 United States Tae Kwon Do Team and the 2003 Iraqi National

Olympic Tae Kwon Do Team. All are invited to attend.

B.J.J./Mixed Martial Arts

Victory's Mixed Martial Arts class meets at the SFC Paul R. Smith Gym every night except Friday from 9-11 p.m. Wednesday night classes are from 9:30-11 p.m.

Tobacco Cessation

Victory Combat Stress Center offers a tobacco cessation class Saturdays at 10 a.m. For more information, call 822-2781.

5k Race

The First Class Petty Officer Association will host the Anchors Aweigh Navy Day 5k, March 2. The start and finish point is

the Camp Victory Stage. The race begins at 7 a.m. The race is open to all. Prizes will be awarded to the top male and female finishers.

For more information, contact Petty Officer 1st Class Anton Fitz at 822-4234 or anton.fitz@iraq.centcom.mil

7-on-7 Tug of war

A seven-on-seven tug of war competition is scheduled for Feb. 24 at Area 51's SSG Castle Field. Call Brian at 822-5501.

Camp Striker Poetry Experience

Camp Striker's MWR North will host the Poetry Experience every Wednesday at 8:30 p.m.

Steel Beach Picnic

An invitation is extended to all Sailors to attend the Steel Beach Picnic March 2 at MWR 124 from 1 - 4 p.m. For more information, e-mail Petty Officer 1st Class Anaesthesia Jackson at anaesthesia.jackson@iraq.centcom.mil.

Foreign disclosure training

Those in need of foreign disclosure training can call 822-2262 or go to mnci.intranet.iraq.mil/C12/FDO/default.aspx.

Operating Hours

Coalition Cafe
Breakfast 5:30 - 8:30 a.m.
Lunch 11:30 a.m. - 2 p.m.
Dinner 5 - 8 p.m.
Midnight Dining 11 p.m. - 1 a.m.
Sports Oasis
Breakfast 5:30 - 8:30 a.m.
Lunch 11:30 a.m. - 2 p.m.
Dinner 5 - 9 p.m.
Education Center
8 a.m.-midnight
Camp Liberty Post Exchange
8 a.m. - 10 p.m.
Fitness Center
Open 24 Hours
Victory Main Post Office
Monday-Friday 7 a.m.-5 p.m.
Saturday 8 a.m.-5 p.m.
Sunday 9 a.m.-3 p.m.
MNC-I STB Mailroom
9 a.m. - noon
5 - 7 p.m.
Al Faw Palace Post Office
Wednesday and Sunday
1-6 p.m.
Golby Troop Medical Clinic
Sick Call
Monday - Friday 7:30 a.m. - noon
Saturday & Sunday 9 a.m. - noon
Dental Sick Call
Monday - Friday 7:30 - 10:30 a.m.
Saturday 9 - 10:30 a.m.
Mental Health Clinic
Monday - Friday 9 a.m. - 4 p.m.
Saturday 9 a.m. - noon
Post-Deployment Health Briefings
Monday, Wednesday and Friday 1 p.m.
Pharmacy
Monday - Friday 7:30 a.m. - noon;
1 - 4:30 p.m.
Saturday & Sunday 9 a.m. - noon
Legal Assistance/Claims
Saturday-Monday 9 a.m. - 5 p.m.

Worship Hours

Victory Chapel (Bldg. 31)
Sunday
7 a.m. Collective Protestant
8:45 a.m. Collective Protestant
10 a.m. Catholic Confession
10:30 a.m. Catholic Mass
noon Gospel Protestant
2 p.m. Latter Day Saints
4 p.m. Episcopal/Lutheran
6:30 p.m. Contemporary Protestant
Saturday
11 a.m. Seventh Day Adventist
8 p.m. Catholic Mass

Mini Chapel (Bldg. 24F)
Sunday
8:00 a.m. Eastern Orthodox Divine Liturgy
9:30 a.m. Breaking of Bread
3 p.m. Church of Christ
7:30 p.m. Latter Day Saints
7 p.m. Knights of Columbus (1st & 3rd Sundays)
Monday-Friday
11:30 p.m. Daily Mass
Friday
6:30 p.m. Jewish Service

AFN Freedom Radio

Al Asad 107.3	Kirkush..... 107.3
Ali Base 107.3	Mosul 105.1
Ar Ramadi.. 107.3	Q-West 93.3
Baghdad 107.3	Taji 107.3
Balad 107.3	Tal Afar..... 107.3
Fallujah..... 105.1	Taqquadum.. 107.3
Kirkuk..... 107.3	Tikrit..... 100.1

All stations are FM

Black History Month Observance

A presentation for African-American History Month, "Carter G. Woodson and the Origins of Multiculturalism," will be presented Feb. 27 from 7 - 8 p.m. in the Al Faw Palace Rotunda. The guest speaker will be Command Sgt. Maj. Marvin Hill, MNF-I command sergeant major.

Camp Victory Bible Studies

Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.
Women's Bible Study 7 p.m. Bldg 24F	Smoke & Joe Bible Study 12 p.m. Victory Chapel Porch	Young Adult Bible Study 5:30 p.m. Victory Chapel	Spanish Bible Study 7 p.m. Mini Chapel	Foundations Bible Study, Mini Chapel 6:30 p.m.	SeventhDay Adventist 10 a.m. Victory Chapel	Men of the Bible Study 5 p.m. MLB Room, Oasis DFAC

Do you have an announcement about an event of interest to the Camp Victory community? Contact Sgt. D.A. Dickinson at derron.dickinson@iraq.centcom.mil with the information. Information for community announcements needs to be submitted at least two weeks prior to the event to allow for timely publication.

Anglers arrive on scene for **Operation: Catch Fish**

Story, photo
by Army Sgt. Abel Trevino
28th Public Affairs Detachment

The first Baghdad fishing tournament at Camp Liberty's Z Lake, dubbed Operation: Catch Fish, brought out a crowd of more than 250 anglers, who competed for bragging rights in four categories Feb. 9.

The tournament was hosted by professional anglers Joe Mercurio and Eric Maninno.

The only Marine fishing in the tournament, Chief Warrant Officer Bobby Carter, Iraqi Assistance Group maintenance officer, won the biggest catch by reeling in a 14-pound Carp.

Other anglers who placed in the competition were Aaron Garrett, second place; Chad Newcomb, third place; Karen Puschnus, top female fisher and James Gaskill with the smallest fish caught.

Carter, who caught the mammoth carp near the end of the tournament, said that his big catch didn't put up much of a fight.

"Towards the end of the tournament, it was a run and gun," the Smith's, Ala., native said. "I hit a little spot and moved on. I took a hunch and told the people I was fishing with to keep their pizza crusts. I put a piece on my lure and my friend jumped in the water."

Staying calm when the fish bit helped him keep the situation light and easily reel in the fish.

"When you get one like that, you do what you can to not panic," he said. "You just need to be calm. The assurances of my friend in the water helped, too."

Carter recognized the unique situation and joked that it was the first fishing tournament he had won.

"It's a great feeling to come to Iraq



Anglers competing in Operation: Catch Fish crowd around Camp Liberty's Z Lake hoping to reel in the big one and win the first Baghdad Fishing Tournament.

and win a fishing tournament," he said. "I can't win one at home but I can win one over here."

The memorable moment for Carter would not have been possible without a lot of work from the professionals who put it on and their contacts here in Baghdad.

"Joe Mercurio and Eric Maninno are the professional fishers who came over and did so much work getting their sponsors to sponsor the tournament," said Army Lt. Col. Brian Almquist, Multi-National Corps-Iraq Air Medical Evacuation plans officer.

Sponsors of the fisherman were able to donate all the equipment needed for the first 200 competitors and prizes for all competitors, which included hats, shirts, sunglasses and shower shoes.

Prizes were not the main objective of the competition. Many of the amateur anglers attended out of enjoyment for the sport.

"This gives you something to do, relax away all the busy stuff you have to do," said Army Sgt. 1st Class James Turner, 11th Psychological Operations Task Force. "If I did not catch anything all day, I'm still happy."

Months of preparation were involved for this tournament to take place.

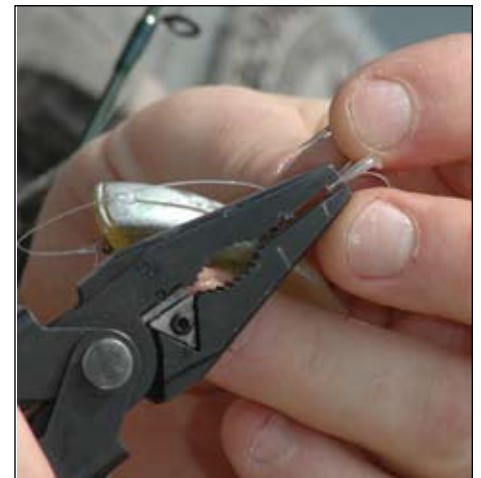
"This has been in the works for six months, as we coordinated with the sponsors in the states and Armed Forces Entertainment to bring these

guys over," Almquist said. "In the last couple of weeks we've been really busy with registration, making sure the word got out and coordinating with Morale, Welfare and Recreation."

Baghdad was the final stop for Operation: Catch Fish this year, which hit more than two dozen forward operating bases in eight days, Mercurio said.

"I know you guys get a lot of entertainers who come here, but I think fishing brought a lot of smiles to a lot of faces," Mercurio said, explaining the unique tour he helped spearhead.

Mercurio added that he would like for this becomes an annual event. This year's competition will broadcast on ESPN2 later in the year. More information can be found at the official Web site <http://www.operationcatchfish.com>.



A fisherman modifies his lure.