

Brigadier General  
VISARION NEAGOE, Ph.D.  
185 days in Iraq  
(Battlefield Journal, June-December 2007)

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Romania's role in the stabilization and reconstruction of Iraq took place in a highly complex context with approaches ranging from military to journalistic and journalistic ones.

The work hereby published by Brigadier General Visarion Neagoe, however, confronts us with a different type of analysis of military operations.

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Security Council mandate.

Readers should be aware of the fact that this was the first command position held by the Romanian Armed Forces within a major international war following the end of the World War II. The management of coalition operations implies exceedingly high requirements to be fulfilled in order to be assigned with such position, completed by almost professionalism. Additionally, this position ensured the interface between the Romanian Armed Forces and the other armed forces taking part in the operation.

The command position held by the author of this war journal within the Multinational Force Headquarters is an acknowledgement of the Romanian Armed Forces' significant contribution and consistent participation in such a mission through different theaters of operations.

Commanding General



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TOC – Tactical Operations Center  
 UAV – Unmanned Aerial Vehicle  
 USCENTCOM – US Central Command  
 VTC – Video Teleconference

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*"There is no security on this world. Only opportunity"*

Douglas MacArthur

## Flight to the conflict area

June 2-3, 2007

It is not the first time I go to Iraq. Between 2004 and 2005 I took part in three rotations of infantry battalions. In 2005 I spent the Easter holidays together with the Romanian contingency in Iraq. Nevertheless! Now, as I am heading towards the AN-26 aircraft, I am experiencing a feeling of sadness; I will be away for six months, I am leaving my family and friends behind, heading towards something that feels to be unknown. Then, I will be working only with Americans. In an important position, with high responsibilities, on a military base extremely targeted by the attacks of the forces hostile to the regime currently leading Iraq and especially to the Coalition Forces.

So, here I am climbing the stairs of the aircraft - it is past midnight - together with the detachment made up of three physicians and 17 nurses, most of them girls, with my aide-de-camp, Captain Dan Dinica, and with the liaison officer, Captain Stelica Mocanu. Our destination: Baghdad. The atmosphere is pleasant, animated by jokes which cease right after the plane engines start. Soon after the take-off, the spare crew, which becomes the main crew on the return, goes for a rest in the hammocks. We, the passengers, keep to ourselves, with our own thoughts and feelings, trying to doze off during a night which is wasted anyway...

The flight takes about six hours, with a stopover at the airport of Ankara to get fuel. We reach this place after a two-hour flight. An important issue is raised: people need to use a toilet. I ask

the Turkish operators who are filling up the aircraft tank where we can find a restroom. "No problem, sir. We'll call a minibus to take you there. It only costs 100 euros...", one of them nicely informs me. It goes without saying that none of us is willing to pay this money. "General, we have reported this situation many times", one of our pilots asserts. "But no one took it into consideration, as they have appreciated it as being less important. As we lack the 100 euros, the same thing keeps on happening to us every time we come here." So ... I recommend the passengers to use an improvised toilet on our plane.

In about one hour, we board the plane again, not before I notice that the telephone services in Romania function unexpectedly well – my roaming is operating. But whom can I call at 4 o'clock in the morning?

After crossing the barren mountains of Turkey, I realize that we have entered the Iraqi air space: clouds of dust, a reddish sunrise and a desert which, as we get closer to Baghdad, is gradually replaced by ploughed, irrigated, green fields. We land soon. It is half past six in the morning. This is an international airport (Baghdad) where numerous American military aircraft seem not to be in the right place and look solitary. We are met by almost all Romanians on the base: my colleague, General Brigadier Dan Ghica-Radu, his aide-de-camp, Major Iulian Berdilă, the Romanian liaison officer, Lieutenant Colonel Dan Marin, and by the Medical Detachment led by Colonel Daniel Șora, Ph.D., from Sibiu. We are also met by the commander of the military hospital in Camp Cropper, colonel Robert Nang, Ph.D., the American specialist Beatrice Florescu Vila Verde – of Romanian origin, an American editor for the Coalition magazine -, and by two Romanian women who work for the USA military. A very warm welcome! Each of us

lives it differently: some with the satisfaction of having completed their mission, some with the joy of meeting their fellows. To the Americans, it mostly means the routine of rotating another contingent.

However, there is anxiety floating in the air: we are on the front, everybody is tired and concerned (either with the beginning or with the end of the mission). There are almost no customs formalities, so we get in the cars soon and set off towards our accommodation. But who feels like having a rest at 8 o'clock in the morning? There is a heavy flow of information. It is our first contact with Camp Victory, the base on which we are going to work/fight and survive for the next six months: real military camps, with different types of American fight equipment, Corimecs, work places, heliports, Water Plant, palm trees, flooded channels. Everywhere we go, American Humvees, jeeps, helicopters, aircraft, and military personnel carrying all their equipment. Everything is on the move, although it is early in the morning.

We are led to the dwelling place that has been assigned to us, a small house made up of two bedrooms, a living room and a kitchen; here we chose our rooms, so that we could get a decent rest during the two days destined for turning and taking over the positions. The hotel on the base may be too crowded, so we sleep in the same building, which gives us the opportunity to spend some time together and to have an experience exchange while we turn and take over our positions. However, everything is going to take place in only two days – Sunday and Monday – which means a very short time.

Our plane left for Tallil, where nine members of the Medical Detachment (commander – the civilian doctor Claudia Oros, who was ranked as a Captain for the mission – and eight

nurses ranked as NCOs for the mission) are being transported to replace their colleagues in the penitentiary hospital in Camp Bucca (in the south of Iraq).

The span of time everything takes place is too short for the turning and taking over and for the experience exchange to give a complete view to those who come to the theatre of operations. The reason? Money... The plane is supposed to return home as soon as possible, and the daily allowances must not exceed a certain amount. This happens although the mission in itself should prevail over money matters..., as I am quite sure happens in other countries.

I should sleep for four hours, but I cannot do it. Out of curiosity, of the need to find out as much as possible. It is true that I do not take over too many people, equipment, battle missions, infrastructures, but the position is entirely new, requiring responsibilities I have never had before, and implying to have American soldiers under my subordination, etc.

Soon, my curiosity is met. My colleague starts describing in detail the environment, the attributions, the procedures, the schedule and the main responsibilities. Just as I have expected, it is a thorough briefing, but presented as such as not to make me feel the pressure from the very beginning. I ask questions, although I am determined to have my own perception and to adopt my own personal style of looking into matters. To sum it up, I try not to be influenced too much by someone else's opinions.

I want to keep my own leading style, adapted to the particularities of each situation, to find a solution to all the situations which, I am being told, are varied and quite often unpredictable. I am not quite fond of models, of wandered paths. It is obvious that new circumstances require new solutions!

Therefore, I ask for further details concerning the job description, the current activities and their frequency, the people I am going to work with, ( the staff comprising six American officers, an officer from Salvador, and an American NCO), as well as the liaison officers of the Coalition countries. I am also interested in the functional relationships on the base, in the logistic matters, in the command and cooperation relationships, as well as those with the Romanian contingent and with other contingents, the connections with the country, in communications and information matters, in administrative and security issues. As I get answers – a real information bombardment! – I realize how little I know from back home.

Everything or almost everything is new. That is why I do not write down anything and I decide that I have to learn it along the way. This includes the protocol, the contact with different structures, with the national seniors of the Coalition countries, the relationship with the American staff, etc.

At the end of the first day in Iraq, one beautiful and fortunately quiet Sunday (that is without explosions...), I appreciate the honesty and open-mindedness of the team that we replace and I try to get some rest after one sleepless day and night, feeling confident about my destiny, trusting God and hoping that the following six months will pass quick enough.

#### June 4

It is Monday, the beginning of a new week. My colleague, General Ghica is prepared to start this last day of activity in Iraq as usual, with his inherent sense of responsibility, as I understood that he did all the time since he had come here.

And there is one more reason for him to do so: the end of mission ceremony will take place today in front of the entire Coalition staff (MNF-I and MNC-I), he will say good bye to his commander and chief – the Coalition Chief of Staff, to his friends on the base.

So, we go to the office by the available Ford Explorer SUV. Then we head to the Al Faw Palace at the same time as tens of military men who work here and take part in the BUA (Battle Update Assessment).

The ground floor of the palace is impressive in its dimensions, architecture, the large number of offices and conference rooms, golden Koran inscriptions, chandeliers, huge walls. The Palace is situated on the terrain of a former resort complex, at about five kilometers for the Green Zone. The complex contains many villas and small palaces that are used nowadays as one of the largest American/Coalition bases in Iraq (Camp Victory/Camp Liberty). The palace, surrounded by an artificial lake, has over 62 rooms and 29 bathrooms. Many rooms have been turned into offices and, since 2004, the palace has housed the Multinational Force Command in Iraq (MNF-I), as well as the Joint Operations Centre used by the Multinational Corps in Iraq (MNC-I) for the conduct of the 'Iraqi Freedom' operation.

Taking into account the fact that the palace and the other structures in the area that make up the Camp Victory suffered very little damage, it is supposed that those who planned the invasion in 2003 intended to use this area as the main base and command after the liberation of Baghdad. The resort is surrounded by high walls with guard towers that contribute to securing and surveying the area.

We get into the BUA room; it looks like a lecture room, with the seats labeled to indicate each participant's position. We

sit on the chair of the Deputy Chief of Staff for the Coalition operations that is situated in the middle, on the second row, right behind the Commanding General (CG), General David Petraeus. I meet my neighbors on the left hand side (American Brigadier General Steve Anderson – Chief of Resources) and on the right hand side (Australian Brigadier General Gerard Fogart – the Commander of the Australian Contingent in Iraq. Greetings, exchange of polite remarks, smiling faces. There comes Major General Moore, the Coalition Chief of Staff who is going to finish his tour in a few days. After a few moments – it is 07.29 a.m. - there comes the Commanding General. Everybody stands up. He is a slim man, not very tall, sober, and dynamic. "Good morning everybody", he says with a large smile. He is accompanied, as usual, by a colonel and his aide-de-camp. Each of them carries a huge overloaded pack.

General Petraeus sits down after having looked at us, the Romanian Generals. This looks like a "Welcome!" to me.

In front of the lecture room there are three video conference monitors (our room, the MNC-I commander in the Joint Operations Centre and the Baghdad Briefing Room – the Green Area, from Saddam Hussein's other palace).

The BUA starts exactly at 07.30 a.m. Today it begins with the ceremony on the occasion of Brigadier General Ghica's leaving – the first Romanian high official that took part in a military operation/war after the World War II. It is a touching moment for us, the four Romanians (two generals and two officers), which was soon turned into a solemn moment for all the BUA participants.

General Petraeus and General Ghica are in front, standing. The commander beautifully presents the contribution of the Romanian general within his more than six-month working within

the MNF-I. He speaks warmly, with respect and gratitude about my colleague's accomplishments. With plain, sincere words, he highlights the efforts and commitment of the Romanian general in carrying out his responsibilities. He thanks and congratulates him, wishing him good luck in his future career. Then, an American officer reads the order through which the USA President grants general Ghica "the Merrit Legion", the most important American decoration granted to foreigners. We instinctively stand at attention. I try to understand as much as possible from what is spoken in English. It is not easy. It will become easier in time! Until then, I keep wondering when I am going to live this solemn moment. That day seems to be so far away..... They finish reading the order and then the CG puts the decoration on the Romanian general's chest. It is a special moment and I am sincerely happy for my colleague. He fully deserves the appreciation and honor awarded to him.

There follows General Ghica's good bye speech. Concise, straightforward, with thanks and respectful words, showing sincere admiration for his chiefs and for the American staff. The cooperation was excellent. This means a lot to me: it encourages me and, at the same time, it makes me do my best in keeping up with the successful activities by which my colleague stood up.

All the activities lasted for less than five minutes and then the BUA started. In fact it was an assessment of the situation in Iraq during the previous 24 hours. I pay much attention to the presentation, to the CG's questions, to the prompt and detailed answers given by those who are responsible of the respective fields of activity.

Few of the things that happened during this first hour of mission in Iraq met my expectations: the way the briefing took

place; nobody introduced me to the staff; the issues discussed were not exclusively about military operations, etc.

We are going towards the office. I let General Ghica finish his activities and I try to put my ideas in order and to start thinking, to understand what I have to do, how to do it and in what rhythm (program).

The two aides de camp are going for a reconnaissance of the Camp Victory and its surroundings in order to get familiar with the roads, the places, the buildings and the structures that we are going to work with. I remain alone with the two computers in the office and I get familiar with the documents and their circulation. Then I meet the staff. How well had General Ghica and his deputy understood colonel Rob Winters? The American speaks very fast, with a southern accent... Then I take part into the meeting with the liaison officers representing the 26 Coalition countries.

In the evening, the old team is preparing to leave. They already seem to be far away from the local issues. I stay in the living room with Major Berdila and Captain Dinica. We have a long conversation about what is happening in the Romanian Army, about how it performs in the theatre of operations compared to other armies, especially to the American one in terms of training, equipment, logistics, personnel policies and place in the society, etc. There is a great difference..... Not in our favor, obviously.

### June 5

We wake up early in the morning in order to be in time at the airport. We put our baggage in the cars, and the documents are checked. We take our personal weapons. I notice that, unfor-

Unfortunately, there is no one with a camera in the new team. But we are lucky because Beatrice has a professional camera from the newspaper. Moreover, Cristina – a girl from Oltenia who works for an American company and who came to accompany us to the airport – has also got a camera.

Our small group of four cars starts moving. We go through the check point situated at the airport entrance where an American soldier carefully checks our access papers. We arrive at the VIP building but we prefer to stay outside for a cigarette. We can drink coffee or Cola here. We are talking, but each of us is thinking about something else... The ones who are leaving are thinking about their homes and we, those who remain here, are thinking about what will happen here, in Camp Victory and in Iraq. And each of us seems eager to take the next step, no matter what it is.

So, there are different feelings and sensations... At about the planned time, the Romanian AN lands on the runway of the Baghdad international airport. Although we have been here for only two days, we meet the arrival of the Romanian aircraft with the same feelings of emotion. It looks like missing the country has got a different significance for Romanians than for other nationalities...

In the meantime, the Medical Detachment arrived from Camp Cropper. They brought a lot of luggage, an extra reason for our aviation crew to be stressed. As it usually happens, during the rotation of the Romanian contingents the weight and size of their luggage exceeds the stranding limits which causes a lot of trouble to the crew. I will refer to this issue later.

It is impressive that our medical detachment is accompanied to the airport by the commander of the American hospital in the Cropper prison, whom I have the pleasure to meet. He is

a doctor colonel of Asian origin with whom, as I found out later, the Romanian personnel had and they will still have problems, especially on matters regarding the principles and work methods.

All the problems are finally solved; the equipment is embarked, the people are on board...

Pictures are taken. Hugs, wishing well and... taking off towards Tallil, where they are to recover the rest of the medical detachment that worked in the Camp Bucca prison hospital.

Unfortunately, I spot another problem, caused by a faulty allotment established from the country by I don't know who (The Medical Directorate, The General Staff?!?). If in the group to be changed at Camp Cropper were nine people and at Camp Bucca eleven, the number of the ones who replaced them was reversed, that is: eleven people at Copper and nine people at Bucca. This intrigued the Americans and led to an intense correspondence through all the channels, including myself as the Senior National Representative. In spite of everything that we did, things could not be changed until the next rotation. Later I found out what had really happened: somebody found out at the right time that the living conditions in Camp Cropper are better than in Camp Bucca, and somebody else (two nurses) got the help to stay where it is better, that is in Camp Cropper... Typically Romanian, but this is against the agreement with the Americans, who are used to following the commitments, not the arrangements!

After the plane took off, we are going back 'home', that is in the camp. At the office I meet Colonel Whitters – my deputy for the following two-three weeks that is until his replacement comes.

He briefs me on the problems discussed at the BUA which I can also read on the computer connected to the network. I ap-