Introducing Cultural Heritage Management to the US Military

Laurie W. Rush

Abstract: The ability to identify and respond responsibly to cultural property is a critical skill for successful full spectrum military operations. Inclusion of material culture and detailed information about features and indicators of sacred space and valued cultural property provides an anchor for other aspects of cultural awareness training. Military personnel respond to objects and elements in the landscape that they can see, touch, and locate on a map. The US Department of Defense payroll already has over one hundred fully qualified anthropologists working as archaeologists and cultural resource managers positioned at every single training installation. This expertise can and should be utilized to produce the best possible deployment planning and preparation for protection of cultural property no matter where in the world our forces may go.

On June 6, 2004, NPR carried the story of damage at Babylon caused by the presence of US Military personnel. The Fort Drum archaeologist heard the story on the way to work, and during the 40-minute drive, decided that military archaeologists had a responsibility to use their opportunities and expertise to offer a solution. The problem, in essence, was that personnel deploying to Iraq had not had the opportunity to prepare and train for the challenges of bedding down in or adjacent to the ancient cities of Mesopotamia. Ironically, the Marine Corps unit assigned to Babylon had in fact been assigned there for the purposes of protecting the site.

Root causes

The domestic archaeology and cultural resource stewardship program is one of the best-kept secrets in the US Department of Defense. Part of the secret is the fact that there are several hundred highly trained anthropologists who work as archaeologists in all of the major domestic land-holding installations. These anthropologists serve in the role of cultural property protection managers under Section 106 of The National Historic Preservation Act. These individuals work as land managers with responsibility for identifying, evaluating, and then protecting significant archaeological sites that occur on military training lands.

However, as the role of culture in current conflicts began to be recognized in all levels of the military, this critical and valuable source of expertise – installation archaeologists – was completely overlooked. It is reasonable to ask why, and the answers are probably found in an array of factors and events. When the question was posed to LTG Caldwell, then Commanding General of the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas with responsibility for the Command and General Staff College and 17 other schools, centers, and training programs throughout the United States, in 2006, his response was that he thought that installation archaeologists “were those guys who keep putting training lands off limits to our soldiers.” It is true that early on in the Defense cultural resources program, one of the approaches to defense archaeological stewardship was to protect potentially significant sites by placing them off limits to training. The results included maps often referred to as “measles maps” where the sites became analogous to a disease infecting a military installation. It is understandable that the