

The Chief of the Defence Staff, ACM Sir Jock Stirrup, has sent the following message to British armed forces:

Today is a significant milestone for our Armed Forces. After more than six years, we are handing over residual coalition responsibilities in Basra to our US allies. The British land campaign in Iraq, which started in March 2003, will come to an end and our remaining personnel will be coming home. In the same vein, the RAF will shortly end 19 years of operations over Iraq.

Whatever debate continues about the lead up to the invasion in 2003, whatever Coalition mistakes were made along the way, we can be clear on one thing: the UK Armed Forces have made an outstanding contribution to the transition of Iraq from

dictatorship and regional pariah to burgeoning democracy and constructive partner. Every one of the more than 100,000 British sailors, marines, soldiers, airmen and MOD civil servants who have served in the theatre – and their families - can be proud of the part that they have played in helping to bring southern Iraq, and its security forces in particular, to this point. I am certainly very proud of them.

Sadly, some who have made the greatest contribution to success are not here to see this day. 178 British Service personnel and one MOD civilian have given their lives during the campaign, and many more have been seriously injured. Every loss is a tragedy, but those sacrifices were not in vain. They have helped to make Iraq a better place for the Iraqis, and as a consequence have contributed to the security of the United Kingdom, its citizens and their interests.

Our relationship with Iraq will now move to a more conventional footing, with trade, diplomacy and cultural links to the fore, and defence taking less of a front seat. But there is still important business to be done. In the northern Gulf the Royal Navy will continue its task of helping the Iraqis to export the oil and gas which will drive its future prosperity. A naval detachment continues its task of training the Iraqi Navy at Umm Qasr. And I am pleased that the British Armed Forces will continue to play an important role in training the Iraq officer cadre.

We make this transition, with the thanks of the Iraqi and American forces we have worked alongside ringing in our ears. General Petraeus, for example, has said: "On behalf of the American service members who have served proudly alongside you in Iraq, I would like to thank you for your hard work and sacrifice over the last six years. You have helped produce important achievements. Your expert assistance has been instrumental in building and professionalizing the new Iraqi Navy and Marines. During Operation CHARGE OF THE KNIGHTS a year ago, British advisors and transition teams, medical evacuation teams, and combat quick reaction forces helped Iraqi forces achieve a decisive impact on the operational and strategic landscape in Basra and throughout Iraq. Our shared experiences in Iraq have brought our militaries even closer than they were before the operation in Iraq was launched."

The mission that we were sent to perform has been successfully completed. The job has been long, hard and costly, but it has been done, and done well. My congratulations and thanks to you all.

In a message to the Army the Chief of the General Staff, Gen Sir Richard Dannatt, said:

When I wrote to the Army about operations in Iraq last year, I concluded that the Iraq campaign remained broadly on track. I am very pleased to say that one year on we have made significant progress, and in some cases exceeded expectations. Thanks to your efforts the Iraqis are firmly in the lead for security in Basra and have proved to be fully up to the task. Having completed our military task we are now poised to bring this phase of our campaign in Iraq to a close.

It will still take time to complete the drawdown of personnel and equipment in Southern Iraq, and we cannot afford to take our eye off the ball during this critical phase; the devil will be in the detail. I am certain, however, that the professionalism and commitment demonstrated over the last 6 years will continue until this part of the operation is concluded. Looking further ahead, the Army will also play a part in Britain's enduring bilateral relationship with Iraq, taking the lead in assistance with Iraqi officer training and continuing to contribute high grade staff to the Coalition Headquarters in Baghdad.

You should be in no doubt that we have achieved a successful outcome in Southern Iraq, and that the key to that success was always going to be in helping the Iraqis to tackle and overcome their own problems. However, the road to success has been long and, at times, painful. As in any operation of this nature and complexity, things did not always develop as we might have expected. It is therefore critical that we, as an Army and within Defence as a whole, learn from our experiences in Iraq and implement those lessons for current and future operations.

Of one thing I have no doubt: throughout the last 6 years it has been the courage, sense of purpose, and sheer grit of the British soldier that has underpinned the success of Operation TELIC. I am immensely grateful for your commitment, and the support and patience of your families and friends. You can all take great pride in a job very well done.

This morning in Iraq, the men and women of 20 Armoured Brigade remembered the 178 Service personnel and one MOD civilian who have died on operations in Iraq. As you go about your work today, I would encourage you to do the same, reflecting on their sacrifice, and on the continuing challenges faced by those who have been seriously injured. It has been a high price to pay, but as we prepare to leave a stable and secure southern Iraq, I firmly believe their sacrifice has not been in vain.