

Military Transition Teams

By Captain Andrew D. Swedberg

Since the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the United States has been searching for an exit strategy from Iraq. The withdrawal of U.S. forces must be timely, but must not be premature and allow the failure of the new Iraqi security forces. The military transition team (MiTT) concept is a method to meet both goals. A MiTT consists of 10 to 12 Soldiers embedded with an Iraqi army division, brigade, or battalion. Each team is led by a field grade officer—usually a colonel for a division, a lieutenant colonel for a brigade, and a major for a battalion. The remaining team members are a mix of officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) from varying branches and experiences. All MiTT members teach, mentor, and operate with the Iraqi army unit that they are attached to. As the Iraqi army gains combat power and logistical support, it assumes more of a role in counterinsurgency operations.

Each team covers all warfighting functions. MiTT members are chosen as subject matter experts in their field, to teach the Iraqi army our techniques. These positions include a team chief and experts in maneuver; mobility, countermobility, and survivability; intelligence; logistics; and communications, as well as various assistant positions. However, as the teams began working with new Iraqi units, it became apparent that a conventional staff would be more effective and realistic than teaching skills from the respective branches. One team had the following staff positions:

- A field artillery lieutenant colonel (team chief)
- A field artillery major (executive officer)
- An engineer captain (S1)
- A military intelligence major (S2)
- A military intelligence captain (assistant S2)
- An infantry major (S3)
- A field artillery captain (assistant S3)
- A quartermaster captain (S4)
- A signal corps sergeant (S6)
- A field artillery staff sergeant (noncommissioned officer in charge [NCOIC])

Training Phases

Training consisted of four main phases, after which each team would become a MiTT, a Special Police Transition Team (SPTT), or a Border Transition Team (BTT). A

MiTT would be embedded with the Iraqi army anywhere throughout the country. An SPTT would be embedded with the Iraqi special police force and would have a vital role in transforming the newly formed Iraqi police into a capable fighting force. A BTT would be stationed along the borders of Iran, Jordan, and Syria. They would be pivotal in securing Iraq's borders against terrorists from other countries. Team members came from all over the Army. Their command—the Iraqi Assistance Group—is a newly formed U.S. unit.

Phase One

The first phase, a fast-paced 15-day program at Fort Carson, Colorado, focused on learning the latest tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) from Iraq. The training included close quarters combat, room clearing procedures, improvised explosive device (IED) identification, and convoy procedures.

Phase Two

The MiTTs went to Kuwait for the second phase, where they continued training while acclimating to the hot climate. The 10-day training focused on advanced rifle marksmanship, traffic control point and entry control point operations, convoy operations, and the latest IED trends.

Phase Three

For the third phase, all of the teams flew to Taji, Iraq, for a 5-day cultural awareness program. They were introduced to the Arabic language and Iraqi customs, food, beliefs, and history. The complexity, risk, and importance of the mission became very apparent and more understandable. (The United States had a similar advisory program during the Vietnam War when U.S. Soldiers coached the South Vietnamese army on operations.) The success of this mission will be the Iraqi army's success, which will lead to U.S. withdrawal from Iraq.

Phase Four

The fourth phase was at Camp Victory in Baghdad. All MiTTs received final briefings and prepared for departure to their Iraqi army units. They received some guidance from General George W. Casey Jr., the commander of all coalition forces in Iraq. He referenced T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) in saying: *"Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not win it for them."* Some teams stayed close to Baghdad, while others

traveled far north to the Mosul area. Upon arriving on location, each team was assigned as many as three interpreters. The interpreters, usually from Iraq, learned English from various sources, ranging from American movies to studying at a university. They were paramount to success in advising the Iraqi army.

Iraqi Training

One MiTT was attached to the Iraqi 1st Brigade, 7th Division. Known as the “Defenders of Baghdad,” the unit consists mostly of Shias who supported Saddam Hussein’s removal from power. By far, most Iraqis wanted Saddam gone from power; only a few of his close supporters wanted him to stay and control the country. Imagine living where an invading army would not be considered an enemy, but welcomed and supported.

During the team’s stay in Fallujah, it instituted a basic training program, a junior officer course, and a staff-focused training course. Marching, marksmanship, teamwork, and discipline were topics in the basic training program. The junior officer course highlighted troop-leading procedures, the importance of planning, and leadership. The staff course focused on teamwork, how to conduct a meeting, the duties of each staff section, and a general introduction to the military decision-making process.

While many new Iraqi soldiers had no experience in the military, many higher-ranking officers served under Saddam’s regime for more than 20 years. In a brigade or battalion staff section in the old Iraqi army, very little authority was given to NCOs. Furthermore, staff sections did not hold thorough planning sessions for any upcoming operation. Most of the time, a brigade commander or higher would have supreme decision-making authority, and the staff sections would have very little input into decisions. This system is essentially the opposite of ours where NCOs are empowered to train and mentor Soldiers, and all staff sections have the ability to weigh in on a command decision. This concept was introduced to the Iraqi staff, and guidance continued throughout the year. After training for three months, the 1st Brigade, 7th Division—along with the MiTT—relocated to Ar Ramadi, a hotbed of insurgency in the western Al Anbar province.

In Ar Ramadi, the Iraqi brigade was partnered with a U.S. brigade combat team, and three subordinate Iraqi battalions were partnered with U.S. battalions. Each Iraqi battalion also had an attached MiTT. Each MiTT and its Iraqi unit were under the tactical control (TACON) of a U.S. division, brigade, or battalion. The attached MiTT was under the administrative control (ADCON) of a higher or lower MiTT. Orders would come through the U.S. brigade to an Iraqi unit for execution. In time, the Iraqi army will be capable of issuing orders to its own subordinate units without U.S. involvement.

A MiTT literally lives with the Iraqi army—often eating Iraqi food, sleeping in close proximity to the Iraqi soldiers, and teaching them our work ethic and problem-solving methods.

Some teams have a separate building close to the Iraqi unit headquarters and work with the Iraqis during the day, but have time away during the evening. Each MiTT has similar experiences. Most Soldiers who have deployed know about forward operating bases (FOBs). The Iraqi army also has FOBs, usually sharing a common wall with a U.S. Army FOB. While most U. S. forces in Iraq never enter an Iraqi FOB, a MiTT considers it home.

Cultural Differences

Although we had learned of cultural differences between the Arabic and American cultures, we could not imagine these differences until we experienced them firsthand. While most business meetings in the American culture (and especially the U.S. Army) are quick, with few digressions, meetings in the Iraqi army are nearly the opposite. It has the same structure, such as in a command and staff meeting, but the method of business is much different. The Iraqi culture puts emphasis on personal relationships and respect, often considering relationships over professional qualities. Iraqis are influenced by religious, tribal, ethnic, and political allegiances, unlike most cultures found in America. Timeliness is also not an issue. If a meeting is scheduled for 0900, the Iraqi officers might arrive between 0855 and 0920. When one officer enters, all the others stand and greet him, which usually involves kisses on each cheek. This severely disrupts the continuity of a meeting. We learned that these acts were not intended to be disrespectful, nor were they bad, but were simply different. Many similar customs permeate their culture.

We soon discovered a fine line between advising the Iraqis to change their army to our model and adapting our own techniques to better fit their customs and formats. The appropriate action was often an opportunity for each culture to learn more about the other. The Iraqi soldiers and staff were very respectful and impressed with MiTT members; simply being an American Soldier assigned to work with them carried a lot of weight. The two armies have never worked closely together before; we are paving the way toward preparing the Iraqi army to be capable of securing its country. Iraqi army and police units now control large portions of the country, run checkpoints, and conduct raids and searches. The Iraqi ability and capacity to control subordinate units has progressed in the last three years.

Iraqi Capabilities

Before the teams began helping the Iraqi army, it conducted business as we did many years ago. The brigade had one desktop computer, but no Internet capability or telephone connectivity. They relied on hand-written documents sent by courier. On payday, Iraqi soldiers lined up to receive their pay. The MiTT concept allows team members to be a liaison between Iraqi units that are otherwise unable to communicate. A brigade S1 advisor can assist on

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payday and report discrepancies to the higher headquarters via telephone or e-mail.

Each MiTT had two field ordering officers who bought items for the team and, more importantly, the Iraqi unit they were partnered with. Throughout the year, the Iraqi unit received new laptop computers, new weapons, and up-armored high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs). With each new equipment shipment, it became important to train Iraqi soldiers to use the items correctly. One big task was to teach the Iraqi staff to use Microsoft® Word®, Power-Point®, and Excel®. They began to use these programs in command and staff meetings, much like the U.S. Army does. Furthermore, weapon ranges and driver training programs were arranged to train the troops on weapons and vehicle safety and operation.

Conclusion

As Iraqi army units learn to successfully command and control their subordinate units, they will be given greater ownership of their operational environment. This power shift is vital to the U. S. drawdown in Iraq. Much like any deployment, there were low points and high points, but all were memorable. Witnessing Iraqi soldiers vote in the December 2005 Iraqi election was truly an unforgettable day. More somber memories will remain, however, including the effects of suicide bombers, IEDs, and insurgents.

The MiTT experience is unlike any other military assignment. Iraqi soldiers are motivated to make a difference in their country. As more Iraqi divisions, brigades, and battalions stand up and take over, more U. S. forces will be relieved of their duties in Iraq. It is a tough fight, but challenges are overcome every day. Iraqi units throughout their entire army are learning about the work ethic, professionalism, and prowess of the U. S. military. Their army and police force are growing tremendously and continue to gain greater control of the country. Through the training the Iraqi army has received—and will continue to receive—from the U.S. Army, Iraq will be able to mitigate the difficult insurgency. 

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