

# Success of the Combined Forces Model in Tal' Afar, Iraq

*By Second Lieutenant Michelle A. Weinbaum*

Several years ago, Marines from the 1st Marine Division announced the revival of a successful program from the Vietnam War—the Combined Action Platoon (CAP) Program.<sup>1</sup> The United States began the CAP Program in 1965 by placing a squad of Marines in select villages throughout South Vietnam to train the village militias to defend their own areas. Although not a major component of the strategic plan during Vietnam, the CAP Program was extremely successful. When I first learned about the CAP Program in a classroom environment, I was persuaded by arguments that touted a strong emphasis on counterinsurgency tactics and less emphasis on search-and-destroy missions (as the method believed to result in the most improved outcome). A year later, as a military police platoon leader, I had the opportunity to draw firsthand conclusions on the application of combined forces.

The police transition team (PTT) does not fit the exact model of the combat action platoon, but it approximates its strengths and weaknesses. The PTT model pairs military police squads with several Iraqi police stations to conduct or supervise training, conduct joint patrols and missions, and supervise the administration and logistics for the stations. The strengths of the PTT model are that close relationships are built with the civilian police and information is gained from the communities. We are able to influence larger areas with fewer forces and train a force capable of defending itself. But, less kinetic operations do not seem to be inhibiting our progress in the area. Perhaps this is a way in which our PTT differs from the CAP Programs of the Vietnam era—our Iraqi police counterparts capture and detain anti-Iraqi forces on a regular basis.

I am not in a position to evaluate the impact of our combined program at an operational or strategic level, but I can offer a handful of experience from my squad leaders that suggests the same success seen in the CAP Program. All of my squad leaders have gathered useful information from contacts they met during day-to-day work at the stations—all have gathered names and addresses of enemies in their areas of operations. While the main goal of the CAP Program is to use positions in the community to gather information, the PTT goal encompasses a more permanent solution.

At a meeting with all station chiefs in the area for which my platoon is responsible, I discussed the importance of training a strong second in command. The chiefs lamented that their executive officers (XOs) are incapable of running the stations without them. I instructed them to use a simple but specific process for training their XOs:

- Allow the second in command to shadow the chief.
- Exchange rank with the second in command, and force him to make decisions for a week at a time while you stand by to offer feedback.
- Leave the XO entirely on his own for periods of time.

I explained to the chiefs that they will not always be available—they must train their XOs to make the decisions that they would normally make!

In western Nineveh, many of our Iraqi police stations are well into the second stage of operations. They are conducting training and leading patrols and missions while we stand by to offer guidance when requested, suggestions when needed, or to simply say, “Zayn” (meaning “well done”). When a vehicle-borne, improvised explosive device (VBIED) is discovered in Tal' Afar, the Iraqi police respond to the incident, establish a cordon, and call for explosive ordnance disposal (EOD). We assist with the treatment of casualties if necessary. On a recent dismounted patrol, we stopped in the evening at a local sheikh's house for tea. While the police chief, my squad leader, and I met with the sheikh, the Iraqi police secured the surrounding area. Our Soldiers stood by in their vehicles to respond if needed.

Iraqi police leadership is showing a strong entry into the third stage of operations—conducting training and missions on their own and making decisions in the absence of U.S. Forces. My platoon picked up a specific PTT mission when we first arrived in Tal' Afar—escorting 150 untrained Iraqi police. The concentration of personnel, equipment, and raw currency makes these convoys high payoff targets for the enemy. The turning point in this mission occurred when I arranged a linkup time in Mosul with the Iraqi police logistics officer for the last payroll trip. The impatient Iraqi police departed on the return trip without us. Following several similar missions, our commander convinced the Iraqi

police to conduct these convoys without our support. On the way back from Mosul, we reached Tal' Afar just in time to react to the detonation of a VBIED and a suicide vest attack at two checkpoints. When we arrived on the scene of the VBIED, an Iraqi police chief from my district had already taken charge of the situation. He had secured the perimeter with gun trucks, set up a casualty collection point, arranged for treatment and transport to the hospital, made contact with EOD on the forward operating base for a postblast assessment, cordoned off the immediate area, and directed investigators to take pictures and collect evidence at the scene. The successful reaction of the Iraqi police to this event is the result of years of combined training by the PTT model. However, this example demonstrates the most compelling strength that the CAP Program and PTT have over search-and-destroy and kinetic tactics—an exit strategy.

The success of PTT in western Nineveh is the result of a counterinsurgency strategy aimed at

equipping and training a foreign force. The Military Police Corps is best suited to this tactic because of the expertise we have in aspects of defending a community, such as police station operations, force protection, patrol distribution, investigations, and community policing. If the success of my squad leaders represents our counterinsurgency fight, the military police will continue to be the Force of Choice and the combined forces' models of CAP Programs and PTTs will continue to be our most effective tactic for restoring order in nations suffering from the threats of unlawful combatants.

**Endnote:**

<sup>1</sup>Mark Mazetti, "Good Marines Make Good Neighbors: Why a Vietnam Counterinsurgency Program is Being Tried Again in Iraq," 25 February 2004, <<http://www.slate.com/id/2096027/>>, accessed on 29 January 2008.

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