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Problems Afflict U.S. Army Program To Advise Iraqis

Untested Americans Ship Out To Mentor Foreign Forces; Military Plans Changes

By Greg Jaffe

One of the biggest shocks for Lt. Col. Nick Demas and his troops came before they even deployed to Iraq.

The colonel's soldiers, most of them inexperienced reservists from Maryland, had been tapped to serve as advisers to the Iraqi army. Their job was to live with, train and mentor an Iraqi force buffeted by poor morale, desertions and corruption.

President Bush has touted such advisory teams as key to the U.S. strategy for stabilizing Iraq and bringing American troops home. So Col. Demas and his troops expected some of the best instruction the Army had to offer. What they got was a "phenomenal waste of time," the colonel wrote from Iraq last fall, in a report to his superiors.

"In my 28 years of military service I have never seen such an appalling approach to training," he wrote. "Nowhere else in the Army system would this have been acceptable." His soldiers received only a few hours of instruction in Arabic language, Iraqi culture and advising foreign forces, says Col. Demas, who had previously served in Special Forces units.

Other advisers have been just as scathing. "By the time the training was finished, soldiers were demoralized, motivation was nonexistent and the team motto came from the Jo Dee Messina lyric, 'my give-a-damn's busted,' " wrote Lt. Col. James Goodwillie, who led advisers in Iraq, in a review that was passed to senior Army officials last fall.

Senior U.S. military officers in Iraq and the Pentagon say their primary focus is getting Iraqi forces to take over more of the fighting as quickly as possible so U.S. forces can pull back. The 10- to 12-man advisory teams are central to that effort.

In recent weeks, Army officials overseeing the advisory program have begun to acknowledge the gap between the Army's words and deeds. This summer, after two years of biting reviews, the Army rushed to revamp the training advisers receive. It also has begun to assign more experienced troops to advisory teams. "I think we are going to be doing it much, much better than what you have seen in the past," says Gen. Richard Cody, the Army's vice chief of staff.

Internal Army reviews and interviews with dozens of advisers show that, thus far, the Army hasn't treated the advisory program as a priority. The job has often fallen to the military's less seasoned second team: reservists, guardsmen and retirees called back to active duty. A 48-page Army study, finished in May and marked "For Official Use Only," concluded that 10- to 12-man advisory teams are too small and "do not have the experience to advise in the various areas they are assigned."

The teams have had to scrounge for equipment that is routinely allocated to big combat units. Advisers going through training today are warned in a PowerPoint briefing: "You will not have all the radios, weapons, night vision devices and field gear issued to a U.S. battalion."

To date, the U.S. has trained and equipped about 307,800 Iraqi army and police forces, up from 196,600 a year ago. But three years into the war, these Iraqi forces don't seem to be improving fast enough to curb surging violence. Daily attacks in Iraq have risen to record levels, and attrition among Iraqi forces remains high. In areas like the restive al Anbar Province, Iraqi units have, on average, only 55% of the soldiers they are supposed to, senior U.S. military officials say.

Other factors, of course, are also contributing to the violence. Centuries-old sectarian grudges and political turmoil are feeding unrest. Both must be addressed through some form of reconciliation, military officials say.

For many advisers, the growing turmoil has been frustrating. "I know we've made a difference. But the insurgency has also become better, more lethal and more capable in my time here," wrote Capt. Phillip Carter, who advised Iraqi police, in an email last month as he prepared to return home. "In theory things should get better with the development of capable Iraqi Army and police units. That's not happening."

To oversee the new training for advisers, the Army recently tapped one of its 10 combat divisions, the 1st Infantry Division, which had been scheduled to return to Iraq. Instead, its top officers and senior enlisted soldiers will remain at Fort Riley, Kan., to train advisers. When rebuilding the training program, the service started with a "blank piece of paper," says Brig. Gen. James Yarbrough, the division's assistant commander.

Top Army officials also are trying to change a culture that discourages good officers from taking advisory posts. Over the past decade, the path to success has been through conventional combat jobs in big brigades. Gen. Peter Schoomaker, the Army's top officer, uses a track analogy to describe the problem. The Army, he says, is full of specialists, or "single-event people." To prevail in today's wars, he says, he needs "pentathletes" with a broader range of experiences.

Last month Gen. Schoomaker's vice chief of staff stressed in a memo to Army officers that serving on an advisory team was "the Army's No. 1 personnel priority" and was exactly the kind of broadening experience the Army chief had been touting.

To fix the advisory program, some military officials say sweeping institutional change is needed. "When there is a limited pool of people for both kinds of jobs -- combat and advisory -- it's clear where the best people will go," says Dale Andrade, a counterinsurgency specialist at the Army's Center of Military History. "The military will always keep its best and brightest in traditionally important combat jobs. Only when forced will this change."

One option under consideration is to double the number of advisers to about 7,000, from about 3,500, by tearing apart some traditional combat brigades and assigning officers and senior soldiers to advisory teams. That would ensure that some of the Army's best officers would take advisory jobs. It would also allow Army officials to double the size of the teams -- which the officials say are too small -- to about 20 troops each.

But doing so would require a change in mind-set for the Army, where training centers and personnel systems are built almost entirely around the 4,000-soldier brigades. It would also be risky. As the number of big U.S. combat brigades decreased, Iraqi units and their advisers would have to pick up the security slack.

The military has recently built a model advisory program -- on a much smaller scale -- for use in other parts of the world. In 2005, the Marine Corps formed a new "Foreign Military Training Unit" to train and mentor troops in places like Chad, Tunisia and the Republic of Georgia. Marines must compete for a spot in the unit. Those who are selected go through six months of intensive training in language, culture and advising foreign forces. Many follow up with two-month cultural immersion tours in places like Morocco.

"We are taking a long-term approach. We want the same people going back to the same places, building relationships and rapport," says Col. Michael Peznola, who heads the unit.

Starting From Scratch

In Iraq, the Army and Marine Corps have had to build a much larger program from scratch -- and in a hurry. When the war kicked off in 2003, U.S. officials had no inkling that an advisory program would be necessary. The last time the Army oversaw such a big effort was in Vietnam, and Iraq wasn't supposed to be anything like that war.

After Iraqi police and army forces cratered under insurgent attacks in the spring of 2004, the U.S. military began rushing advisory teams to Iraq. Their mission was to train Iraqi commanders, to track the development of Iraqi units and to try to prevent them from settling sectarian scores. If Iraqi forces were overwhelmed, the advisers were authorized to call in U.S. firepower to bail the Iraqis out.

To fill some advisory teams, senior commanders asked big combat brigades to give up some soldiers. Often the units gave up troops of a lower rank and experience level than desired, senior Army officials say. The brigades "had a requirement, but they often treated it like guidance and staffed it the best way they could," says Col. Sean Ryan, who served in Iraq with the command that oversaw development of the Iraqi army.

The Army also mobilized reservists for the mission, many of them part-time drill sergeants who had little experience in combat units. "They knew how to teach guys to march, dig fighting positions and fire weapons," says Col. Demas, who in 2006

led an advisory team of the reserve soldiers from Maryland.

The training was minimal. A class on how to oversee a large battalion and brigade staff, for example, consisted of a 90-minute lecture after dinner. Midway through, one sergeant, who hadn't ever served in a combat unit, broke in and complained: "I have absolutely no idea of anything you're talking about," wrote Col. Goodwillie, a senior adviser, in his review of the session.

Officers received only four hours of training on language and culture, and enlisted soldiers got two, according to soldiers who attended. To complete their training, advisers were instructed to guard mock ammunition dumps and to set up checkpoints to screen traffic for 12 days. Once they got to Iraq, advisers say, they never did anything like that.

Col. Demas says his team's primary duty in Iraq was to mentor the staff of a 600-man Iraqi battalion, teaching them to plan missions and analyze intelligence. But once the Iraqi battalion moved into heavy fighting north of Baghdad, the seven enlisted advisers on Col. Demas's 10-man team didn't have the experience to advise the Iraqi officers, the colonel says. Those seven Americans had never served on a U.S. battalion staff and lacked combat experience.

"They were superb soldiers -- dedicated and hard working. They could teach basic soldier skills, but not leader tasks," Col. Demas says. That job fell to Col. Demas and the two officers on his team.

Advisory teams elsewhere in Iraq spent much of their time worrying about even more basic problems, such as trying to get critical supplies for themselves and their Iraqi troops. The small teams are reliant on the big U.S. units for help fixing their Humvees and electrical generators. At Camp Taji, near Baghdad, Staff Sgt. Clyde Daly persuaded a friend to give him 15,000 bottles of Gatorade, which he kept in a locked supply room on the Iraqi side of the base. He traded cases of the drink to other U.S. units for supplies, favors, and help fixing equipment.

Master Sgt. Darren Williams, who served on a team in Diyala Province, says: "We had to beg for support. It was like pulling teeth."

Getting the Iraqis what they needed was even harder. "We'd spend more time

working to keep the Iraqis fed and fueled than we would war-fighting," says Col. Jeff Lamb, who returned in July from advisory duty in Diyala Province. It took two weeks to persuade the Ministry of Defense to fire a corrupt food contractor that was serving spoiled food to the Iraqis, says Lt. Jason Karluk, who worked for Col. Lamb. He says it took him 60 days to get the Iraqis decent tents.

The harsh conditions and lack of supplies led to desertions. By the time Lt. Karluk left Iraq, the unit he was advising had shrunk to about 400 soldiers from 700, and the brigade had gone to about 1,600 from 2,400. His team's biggest accomplishment, says the 24-year-old officer, was simply "holding the [Iraqi] unit together."

Amid a barrage of criticism, the Army has begun to beef up training of advisory teams, adding about 50 hours of language and cultural instruction. Commanders say the cultural instruction, although much improved, still has a ways to go. "I'd grade ourselves at a C," says Maj. Gen. Carter Ham, who recently began overseeing the advisory training effort at Fort Riley. "What we are doing is OK. It is Iraqi culture 101." He says he plans to tailor more of the instruction to the areas of Iraq where advisers will be working.

Shortage of Role Players

Training exercises have been hindered by a shortage of Iraqi role players. At its major training centers, the Army brings in 250 Arabic speakers to play townspeople, mayors and police chiefs in mock Iraqi villages. At Fort Riley, there were only about a dozen Arab-speaking role players last month, so American troops had to play Iraqi commanders and rank-and-file soldiers.

In early September, Lt. Col. Matthew Stanton led his 10-man advisory team through an exercise intended to teach them to advise Iraqi commanders as their troops search a small, hostile village for weapons and insurgents. When Col. Stanton and an "Iraqi commander" played by a reservist from Utah strode into the mock village, they were accosted by an Iraqi acting as the mayor. "We are sick of the Americans bringing Iraqis to search our villages," he screamed in Arabic. An Iraqi translated for the colonel.

Two dozen villagers began to chant angrily. The mayor demanded that Col.

Stanton call off the search. "You'll have to discuss this with the Iraqi commander," Col. Stanton replied. Then he began to walk away.

The Iraqi mayor exploded in anger. "Where are you going?" he screamed in Arabic. "I am talking to you!"

Afterward, the senior sergeant overseeing the exercise praised the team. But Col. Stanton and his men were less than satisfied. "I don't feel like we accomplished anything," said Maj. Eric Lindsay, the No. 3 officer on the team. Everyone nodded.

Over the next two days, Col. Stanton kept thinking back to his run-in with the Iraqi mayor. Finally, he tracked the man down in the barracks where he was living with other role players. The 47-year-old Iraqi, a Shiite Muslim who had left Baghdad in 2004, was dressed in a white mesh tank top, black shorts and sandals. A tattoo of a dagger, surrounded by Arabic script, adorned his arm.

"Why did you refuse to talk to me when the soldiers were searching my village?" the Iraqi asked. Col. Stanton explained that he was just an adviser, not the commander of the Iraqi forces. The Iraqi told him that it didn't matter. He said the colonel should have taken him by the hand and led him to the Iraqi officer he was advising. "I could have calmed down the entire village," the mayor told him. Col. Stanton scribbled notes in a green field notebook.

"We have been really thirsty for more instruction on how to be an adviser," Col. Stanton said afterward.

There is debate within the Pentagon over whether the advisory teams are too small to be effective. In May, the Center for Army Lessons Learned, based at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., recommended doubling the size of advisory teams to about 25 troops. The Army is built like a pyramid, with large numbers of inexperienced soldiers at the bottom. It has few experienced soldiers to spare. The suggestion alarmed personnel officials, says Col. Steven Mains, who led the study team, which traveled throughout Iraq.

As the situation on the ground in Iraq grows more dire, some officers argue the U.S. must improve the advisory effort quickly. In an article in a Marine Corps

journal this summer, Lt. Col. Julian D. Alford, who recently commanded a 900-Marine battalion in western Iraq, outlined a plan to cut sharply overall U.S. troop levels by bolstering the advisory effort.

Col. Alford's Marines had fought alongside an Iraqi army brigade and their U.S. advisers to drive insurgents from Qaim, which had been a main entry point for foreign fighters coming into Iraq from Syria. He says he left Qaim in June convinced that advisory teams were too small to help Iraqi forces stand on their own.

"The Iraqis can't make it with the [advisory] teams we have now," he says. "They will fall flat on their face." But if the U.S. military doubles the size of the advisory effort, embedding more advisers in smaller Iraqi units where most of the fighting is done, he says, the Iraqis in his former region could hold off the insurgency. To field the larger teams, he would send only some of the senior enlisted troops and officers from big U.S. units, leaving junior troops at home. He would also give them far more language and cultural training.

"The real question is: How should we be organized, trained and equipped to fight these 21st-century wars?" he asks. "This is a different way of looking at warfare."