

Rebirth of an Army

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### Abstract

Shortly after the United States led Coalition defeated and dismantled Iraq's military in 2003, it became a high priority for us to stand up an Army for the newly liberated country. The US and its allies did not plan on staying in Iraq forever. We planned to insert a new government and remove our forces as quickly as possible, letting Iraqis take responsibility for their own affairs. Our leaders quickly realized that a serious security vacuum had developed and that the coalition lacked the manpower to fight an escalating insurgency. In the summer of 2003, the Coalition started to recruit citizens, many from the old regime's army, to rekindle Iraq's security forces. The New Iraqi army had been initiated.

## Arrival

As I hopped off the truck and pulled my bags down, I was suddenly struck by the strange sensation I sometimes get when I wake up suddenly from a deep sleep and can't figure out where the hell I am. I was surrounded by soldiers in combat gear, stripped down gun trucks with machine guns mounted in their cargo compartments, 5 ton troop carrying trucks, and Bradley Fighting Vehicles. This in itself was not an unusual sight for me, a 17 year army veteran. What was strange was that all of these soldiers and equipment were planted firmly in the courtyard of Saddam Hussein's main palace compound in Tikrit, Iraq.

I was assigned to the 1st Battalion, 22<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment (Regulars By God!), 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, out of Fort Hood Texas. The Division had been deployed since March 2003 and the first brigade had the responsibility for Saddam Hussein's home town. I was scheduled to arrive in this unit in March 2003 just prior to this deployment, but had to stay put in South Korea until June because of a stop movement order. I reported to Fort Hood in July, spent 60 days on rear detachment, and finally deployed in early October. By the time I hauled my bags into the Regulars' headquarters in Tikrit, I knew the first sergeant slot that had awaited me in March was long gone. I had no idea what I would be doing with this unit but I didn't care. I was tired of watching the war from the sidelines.

"You're going to train the Iraqi army", Command Sergeant Major (CSM) Salvatore Martinez, the battalion's senior noncommissioned officer told me about a week later. "Do I have I choice?", I asked. Three days later, in answer to my question, I was on a UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter headed east toward the Iranian border. About 2 hours later I

was again dragging all my gear from another military transport. I had landed at Kirkush Military Training Base (KMTB), just a stone's throw from the western mountains of Iran, and about 50 miles northeast of Baghdad.

I'm an infantryman, specializing in mortars, with over 17 years of service when I arrived at KMTB. I spent 15 of those years as a noncommissioned officer, training and leading soldiers. I've been in all kinds of units, from light and mechanized infantry companies, to armor battalions and cavalry regiments. I've also spent 2 years as a drill sergeant. I mistakenly thought that my time as a trainer of people just joining the United States Army would be helpful with my training of newly initiated Iraqi soldiers. I've never been more wrong.

#### First Battalion, New Iraqi Army

I was assigned to the Command Advisory Group (CAG). It consisted of Major (Maj) Richard A. Caya, the senior advisor, five captains (CPT), and five sergeants first class (SFC) who were company advisors. Additionally, two more captains (staff advisors) one first lieutenant (S4 advisor), and myself, the senior enlisted advisor, were also on the team. Another master sergeant, who served as the senior enlisted advisor for the headquarters company, rounded out our group of advisors. We also had seven junior enlisted soldiers who drove and maintained our small fleet of humvees. Our group was made up of soldiers from the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, that had its headquarters in Tikrit, and the 173<sup>rd</sup> airborne from Italy, who were stationed in Mosul. All of the advisors had been in country at least 6 months, or had previous combat experience.

For life support we were under the care of the 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron, 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry (CAV) who

had responsibility for our area of operation. Later on, when they rotated out, we fell under the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 17<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery (FA) Regiment when they replaced the cavalry in February 2004. Both were solid units and their assistance was invaluable to us for what we had to do.

Our Iraqi unit, the First Battalion, New Iraqi Army was an infantry unit consisting of five companies; four line companies, and a headquarters and headquarters company (HHC). Each line company was broken down into four platoons. One was the weapons platoon, and the other three were regular infantry platoons. Each line company had about 120 soldiers. The HHC had about 200 soldiers and consisted of all the battalion's staff, mechanics, medics, communications personnel, and truck drivers.

The battalion had roughly 700 men who were drawn from all over Iraq and from every religious sect and ethnicity, but who were mainly poor or working class people. Some were doing it because it was paying more money than they ever earned. Others joined because it was the only job they could find to support their families. A few claimed that it was their nationalistic duty to serve in their armed forces. Many were soldiers from the former regime's army.

They signed up through the locally established recruiting depots in their provinces, and eventually made their way to our somewhat isolated training base. They were sent through about six weeks of basic soldier training, led by current and former US and British soldiers. After finishing their initial training, they were sent to our team, for "advanced" training.

We were expected to teach them basic patrolling, marksmanship, and guard duty skills. Additionally, we were to instruct them on how to establish traffic control points,

set up ambushes, and conduct raids. We depended on our life support units to help us out a lot with executing these tasks. We had about five months to make the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, New Iraqi Army a fully functional, almost autonomous unit.

We also had to show them how to manage their soldiers on the platoon, company and battalion level. Their senior leadership was to be mentored into operating their staff similarly to how our staff sections are run. The NCOs on my team had one of the more critical challenges: how to get their sergeants to effectively lead and supervise their soldiers on the team, squad, platoon, company and battalion level. This had the potential to be very difficult due to the fact that officers ran pretty much everything in the former regime's army.

#### Issues

All sorts of challenges arose during my tour as an Iraqi army advisor. The biggest one initially was communication. When I got to KMTB, there was only one interpreter assigned to our team. Charles was a US contracted translator who was born in Baghdad, and was now a naturalized US citizen, living in Michigan. He spent most of his day bouncing from staff meetings with Maj Caya, on the rifle range with one company's advisors, or some other training event with another company's cadre. He also spent significant time translating paperwork from Arabic to English and vice versa. He was the busiest man in our corner of the world by far.

Along with the Arabic speaking Iraqis in the ranks there were also Kurds. Most did not speak the other's language and Charles did not speak or understand a word of Kurdish. Our trainers were limited to words or phrases that we learned from US generated language pamphlets. A lot of training sessions were filled with gestures and

“do as I do” mimes punctuated by our pitiful attempts at Arabic. A few Iraqis knew very limited English and they were able to help out, somewhat, during training events.

We eventually received the funding to start hiring locals to help us with translating to our Iraqi counterparts. Even a Kurdish interpreter was hired. After a short time of getting them familiar with military idiosyncrasies and jargon, things smoothed out significantly.

Communication got better, but in some ways it just made other problems even more clear.

### Equipment

Rather than saying our Charges complained a lot, let's just say they had very strong opinions about everything. A huge chunk of our time was spent listening to the Iraqi soldiers expressing their opinions about the quality of their uniforms, and their lack of a system to replace the stuff that got worn out. Everything they had for equipment was compared to our gear, and then derided for being inferior. From helmets and boots, to body armor and weapons, everything was fair game.

They initially had no vehicles. In November they started to receive small, street specs SUVs, and civilian cargo trucks to be used as troop carriers. Communication equipment was also an issue and they were limited to short range hand held radios. This became a problem as the unit started to leave the base for patrols and other missions. They had to report back to their command post (CP) by cell phones. (Ironically, during a more recent deployment to Iraq, we had to use cell phones a lot in Baghdad because of a number of factors). They initially had no night vision gear, and their weapons were limited to assault rifles and light machine guns.

### Pay

The pay scale for the new army was a huge issue. The average soldier in the New Iraqi

army earned about \$60 monthly at the start. This was a lot more than most of them had made prior to joining up, but they wanted more. They were taking an enormous risk by joining up and siding with the Coalition. Many were threatened personally and their families placed at risk as well. This was the main reason why they wanted more pay. I can't say I blamed them.

When I arrived at Kirkush in late October of 2003, the battalion had just been placed on leave for Ramadan. When they returned on 27 November we had a problem. As soon as we paid them, a significant amount of the soldiers headed toward the gate with the intention of quitting. We were forced to physically prevent them from leaving. Their concern about pay was the major sticking point. They felt the risk was not worth the reward. This immediately caused our leadership at the highest levels to take notice and shortly afterwards their pay was practically doubled. This persuaded most to stay but we still had a high rate of desertions.

#### Getting better

When the dust settled, we had about 500 soldiers remaining in early December, 2003. What was left was a willing and able group who were ready to get on with the business of learning how to be soldiers. We spent less time fielding complaints about inferior uniforms and more time teaching how to properly conduct searches. They asked less about pay, but more about how to set up a traffic control point.

As with most teams, they will get better with practice. Despite all the distractions, we did manage to get a lot of work done as far as training this battalion was concerned. The pace and intensity picked up as we came to the end of 2003. The rifle range at one end of our base stayed open-constantly occupied by soldiers from the battalion, under the

unblinking gaze and mentorship of American trainers. Their marksmanship skills went from extremely poor to competent.

Toward the end of December, we began sending platoon sized elements to the outlying American forward operating bases (FOBs), in our area of operations, that were occupied by 1-10 Cav and later on 1-17 FA. At these outposts they were given hands on training on how to conduct mounted and dismounted patrolling, set up ambushes and traffic control points, conduct cordon and searches, and even static sentry duties.

The staff and operations cells slowly became functional. They were systematically guided through the steps of the military decision making process. Increasingly, they started to plan, rehearse and execute their missions with less and less supervision. Some of the staff had experience from being soldiers before, and this sometime helped the process along.

Their noncommissioned officer structure also got stronger. Team and squad leaders started to get into their roles as supervisors and inspectors and butt kickers. The small groups that they led started to transform into definable and coherent sub-parts of a greater whole. Platoon leaders and sergeants were guided to be more involved in all aspects of their element and most took to it. The company first sergeants and battalion sergeant major began to understand that they had a very important role in defining their unit's success, or lack thereof. In the old regime they had been relegated to being man-servants to their commanders and making tea.

Unit cohesiveness, pride and competency increased steadily as the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion moved toward being fully operational. After the desertions (and a few dismissals) the unit was left with a motivated core of proud soldiers who were willing to do their duties

as protectors of their re-born homeland.

By the time I left Kirkush in early march 2004, the “New” had been dropped and the unit was now called the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Iraqi Army (IA), the Freedom Battalion. They had conducted numerous combat missions and had faced a number of enemy attacks and had performed well. More importantly, they were the first of many battalions of the IA that were becoming operational across the country. There were many improvements to be made and equipment issues to be worked out but we could see the huge strides that our Iraqi counterparts had made.

#### Ace in the hole

On Sunday January 14<sup>th</sup> 2004, I was roused from a nap after a long night of patrolling. The Iraqi soldiers seemed to be going crazy out in the battalion’s formation area. I grabbed my weapon and ran outside toward loud, Arabic chanting. I had visions of a mass revolt, similar to what we saw after Ramadan. One of our interpreters told us what the fuss was about: Saddam Hussein had been captured near Tikrit by the special operations guys, along with units from the 1<sup>st</sup> brigade 4ID.

Afterwards the soldiers of the 1<sup>st</sup> battalion, Iraqi Army really took to their training. They seemed more attentive and approached their business of learning to be competent soldiers in a more focused and purposeful way. It was almost as if it was their way of thanking us for nabbing Saddam.

