Birth of an Army
David Bellavia; Owen West; Wade Zirkle
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Birth of an Army

With the Iraqi forces in Ramadi

By David Bellavia, Owen West & Wade Zirkle

Ramadi

On the fourth day of operation-no-name in Al Anbar's deadly provincial capital, Ramadi, an Iraqi infantry squad moves into a dingy alley on the eastern edge of the Mu'saab district. It's quiet. As their combat boots pick a trail along the garbage-strewn street, the crunch of glass can be heard. The operation is subdued, nameless by design. After two years and dozens of urban battles in Iraq announced with catchy titles, reverberating tank engines, and even rock music, this late-June operation is a slow squeeze. And Iraqis are leading.

American troops have heard that before, of course. Since early 2004, when defense department officials first began touting Iraqi leadership in battle, U.S. soldiers have been wondering where exactly this phantom was, sometimes bumping up against a group of insurgents and sarcastically shouting, "It's the ICDC [Iraqi Civil Defense Corps], leading from the front again!" Here in Ramadi, it's real.

Enemy mortars echo in a concrete canyon, too distant for accuracy, but plenty close for the shock waves to cause the Iraqi soldiers to hunch. The quick radio chatter that follows marks the new relationship; American Marines fighting on the flank are trading information with the Iraqis, who control their own large piece of the battlefield.

Their infantry skills aren't perfect. Iraqis carry their weapons every which way, and they enter buildings like horses out of the gate, often bumping into one another. American units drill urban movement to exhaustion; Iraqi squads may discuss it over sweet chai tea. Yet, when they search a building, they confidently rip detonation cords from under rugs and blasting caps from corners and belt-fed ammunition from hidden cupboards. Iraqis find in minutes all kinds of suspicious or incriminating items that even a polished American unit would have missed.

A junior Iraqi enlisted man, called a "Jundi," recognizes the signal to halt given by his sergeant, or "Areef." He kneels and immediately lights a cigarette. His mustache is the best indicator of his rank. The Jundies wear scraggly, almost pre-pubescent mustaches. The Areefs wear thicker ones, but not as bushy as the officers'.

It isn't your classic combat halt. Some Jundies remove their helmets to wipe their brows, and others ignore roads they should be securing. But they have the guts to look for contact. And in a Sunni city like Ramadi, where the populace is vacillating between murderous thugs on one side and the soldiers of a Baghdad government perceived as unfriendly on the other, the Iraqi army's willingness to brawl is essential to winning people to its side.

An Areef notices a young civilian ambling toward his platoon. "Why don't you join us?"

The local shakes his head, making a cutting gesture across his throat. Attrition for an Iraqi unit assigned to Anbar comes not so much via the sniper or IED as it does the relentless, deflating threat of retribution. If a face in a uniform is recognized, murder ripples through the soldier's entire social network. During a recent leave, 46 Iraqi soldiers out of 370 did not return to their unit. Half of the absent returned weeks later, but the permanent AWOLs are only replaced by constant recruitment, of the kind the Areef was doing.

"Relax. I still have my head," the sergeant jokes. He points to an American reporter accompanying him. "The Americans sew it back on that good, you don't see?"

The local laughs nervously and hustles down a street. In battle, the line between the humorous and the macabre is blurry. In the Al Anbar counterinsurgency, the line between inquisitive local and insurgent is even blurrier.

The first objective of the Ramadi "squeeze" is the Haj Dahr Mosque, whose minaret has been used to give American and Iraqi positions away under the guise of calls to prayer.

The mosque is entered and cleared by Iraqis who do not fire a single round. They're soon scrubbing floors, repairing broken windows, and filling two-week-old and two-year-old bullet scars with putty. They scrawl a mes-

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*David Bellavia, Owen West, and Wade Zirkle are infantry veterans of the Iraq war and cofounders of Vets for Freedom (*vetsforfreedom.org*). In June, Bellavia and Zirkle were embedded as journalists with the Iraqi army in Ramadi.*

sage on a sign near the entrance: "This is a house of prayer and will be used to worship."

A reporter asks one of the soldiers, "You guys know there is a war going on, right?"

"Some things are more important than war," he says.

On the Ramadi battlefield, the American military is torn between using firepower to destroy enemy strong points and befriending the family asleep next door. The Iraqi army has problems, but the perception of cultural destroyer isn't one.

As one American Army officer stated, "If the Iraqis want to enter a mosque that they believe is harboring the enemy, they can just do it. A U.S. soldier would need the approval of a three-star general to do the same thing."

The central battles of the counterinsurgency were fought in neighboring Falluja in April 2004 and again the following November after feckless decision-making by American and Iraqi politicians resulted in the largest U.S. urban offensive in 60 years. At the time, the fledgling ICDC disintegrated. Most Iraqi soldiers refused to fight. Others working with the Americans so unnerved their partners that they were told to stay away from U.S. lines. Worse, their loyalties were questioned.

The joke at the time was that before the Americans began training Iraqis to defend their own country, fire fights with insurgents consisted of masked idiots committing "suicide-by-Marine." When the new ICDC was formed, the insurgents grew more proficient, taking better shots from covered positions. Accusations of ICDC soldiers planting IEDs while on patrol were rampant in American infantry squads. During the second battle of Falluja, many insurgents were wearing Iraqi uniforms and Kevlar protection.

If 2004 was the year of the urban rebellion, 2005 was the year of the new army. What is perhaps most remarkable about the Iraqi army is that, crafted by the firm hand of General David Petraeus, it was formed in a vacuum of central governmental authority—yet it is now making slow but steady headway in the most difficult Sunni-controlled real estate.

In Ramadi, where the tip of the spear has been occupied by U.S. soldiers or Marines at heavy cost since 2003, Iraqis of the 1st Iraqi Division's 1st Brigade are the lead. The units are advised by U.S. Military Transition Teams (MiTTs). The model is simple: The Iraqi soldier-to-U.S.-adviser ratio is roughly ten to one, and teams embed with Iraqis at the squad level all the way up through the Ministry of Defense. There are almost 4,000 total MiTT soldiers deployed in more than 200 units in Iraq.

"The Iraqi army will never be the American Army, but they don't need to be better than us. They just need to be able to get the job done," says Lieutenant Colonel Mark Simpson from Manassas, Virginia, a senior MiTT adviser to the 1st Brigade. "Not our way, but their way." This is a refrain echoed in one form or another by MiTT commanders across Iraq: The Iraqi army won't do it exactly the way we want them to, but they "get it."

The concept of training friendly forces to fight their "own" wars is a tactic that has been over-debated in the free thinking seminar halls of war colleges and think tanks for generations but under-taught in traditional military education by officers stung in Vietnam. Now, experience in Iraq is suggesting circumstances under which an American adviser program can succeed. The MiTT program was created *after* coalition armies had occupied the country. Friendly forces are close, and the support structure is robust. Second, Iraqi soldiers have shown remarkable resiliency in the face of continued losses; Iraqi security forces have suffered twice the number of casualties as their American counterparts, yet their ranks and capabilities are steadily swelling.

"The bottom line is that they can operate. They can receive missions, plan, and execute them independently and effectively," says Marine Lieutenant Colonel Kris Stillings, who commands a Military Transition Team in the 7th Iraqi Division in western Ramadi. "This is the light at the end of the tunnel."

Unfortunately, no one knows how long the tunnel is. Before the Iraqi army emerges, two problems need to be addressed. First, the Iraqi army has no code of military justice. No matter how well advised, the Iraqi army will falter through indiscipline if there is no governing body and deserters go unpunished. This structural problem is compounded in Sunni areas, where the Iraqi army is seen as an instrument of Shia control.

Second, soldiers cannot occupy cities in perpetuity. Eventually police must step in to patrol the neighborhoods in which they sleep. This is an enormous challenge in Anbar. In Ramadi, there is no police force.

A subtler problem is that Iraqi soldiers, while brave, patrol with an underlying belief that life is predetermined. Divine intervention has its place, but fatalism on the battlefield often inflates casualties.

The Iraqi army's 1st Division, 1st Brigade commander, General Razaq, wears a thick mustache, an immaculate uniform, and perfectly trimmed hair when he agrees to meet with a reporter. Because of the insurgency's penchant for killing the families of government officials, senior civil servants often use a single tribal name—which means that the Iraqi army has more onenamed leaders than the Brazilian national soccer team.

Like his American peers, Razaq is disdainful of the press corps. Both the Arab and American media have given him headaches. Every few minutes, he offers the reporter a cold or hot beverage, a cigarette, or a candy mint. The offers serve as a buffer to questions, an effective technique that eventually causes the general's fellow officers to snicker out loud. Five cigarettes smolder near the general, each one with an inch of ash, a clue that he has no time for concentrated smoking but is affluent enough to start multiple cigarettes.

Razaq is a Sunni married to a Shiite. Because of his occupation, he has buried two uncles, a brother, a sister-in-law, and dozens of cousins. His unit has fought in every offensive since 2004. The 1st Iraqi Division is the oldest of the new Iraqi army, and it has shared battle space with Americans in places like Sadr City, Falluja, Mosul, Najaf, Karbala, Habbaniyah, Tal Afar, Hit, Khyme, and now Ramadi.

"Every day the enemy is getting weaker and weaker. They cannot win. Because the good in Iraq will not let them. I will not let them," he says with a stern face.

Razaq understands counterinsurgency. As a recent firefight dwindled, the rumble of approaching engines filled the streets. Soldiers smiled, sure that American vehicles were coming to reinforce. Instead, a fleet of garbage trucks arrived. Razaq was cleaning the dirty streets he had just secured, and the locals noticed.

This is not to say he shies from the stick. "If they shoot one bullet," he says, "we will shoot many more." While the Americans struggled with force escalation, the Iraqis we observed had fewer reservations.

Back on the street, Ramadi is enormously confused. True to General Razaq's assertion, the citizens clearly welcome the security force and its umbrella of protection. But Ramadi is a city under siege, not from outside but from a hard core of insurgents lodged within. When the Iraqi army is not there, says a soldier, the citizens allow the insurgents to do as they please. A year of unopposed intimidation has worked to the benefit of a fanatical opponent of the very security they covet. The question is, as the Iraqi forces encounter fiercer resistance, will the squeeze continue or will it fade?

A sniper's bullet cracks. American troops working with the Iraqis begin shouting frantically. In the distance a Marine falls, mortally wounded. The announcement is an immediate emotional ratchet. The main threats in Ramadi are the sniper and the IED. Gone are the days when roving gangs of thugs had the assurance to ambush American patrols. Though demoralizing, the loss of soldiers to snipers or IEDs indicates a hit-and-run insurgency, rather than a city that will die fighting.

Whether it be from ignorance or upbringing, the Iraqi reaction is unemotional. A man falls to a sniper, and his comrades mutter, "*Inshallah*"—it is God's will. When they eventually begin to patrol again, there is a strange sense of calm. A hardened U.S. Navy SEAL team approaches, their faces covered in sweat. The Iraqis greet them as equals; they don't know a SEAL from an Eagle Scout. To them, all soldiers are the same. This is part of the charm of the Iraqi army. They live and fight in absolutes. Civilians are good. Insurgents are bad. Civilians can never be insurgents: If something seems funny about a man, he's not a civilian, and he will be punished.

It's difficult to rate their profiling ability. Like Americans, these soldiers are strangers to Anbar. Given their upbringing in a brutal dictatorship and the lack of a rigorous military code of discipline, Iraqi soldiers tend toward swift, harsh judgment.

What is undeniable is that the MiTT-led Iraqis understand the tribal heritage and leadership structure of the areas they patrol. They have an instantaneous grasp of the different elements of the population and the nuances of the culture. What their American peers might not master in years of study, they incorporate automatically.

In all these ways, the Iraqi army has steadily gained in proficiency to the point where their bond with American soldiers is undeniable. Says First Sergeant Victor Lopez of Alexandria, Virginia, who runs the MiTT supply for the 1st Brigade, "It's like sometimes you don't notice your kids are changing when you are around them all the time. You tend to focus on the things they aren't good at and when you get away from them . . . only then do you see how far they've come."

A forklift interrupts the silence of a slow morning. Americans from the 101st Airborne living in far better quarters are low on water and have come to "borrow" four pallets of bottled water from the Iraqis. The Iraqi supply sergeant and executive officer of the brigade are upset, and complain to Major Timothy Powers, an American adviser.

"They need water. They give to us, we give to them," Powers says, referring to Americans as "them."

There's tension until General Razaq hears about the exchange. He laughs out loud. "So now we are supplying the Americans? How long before they will be able to support themselves?"

Everyone laughs uproariously, a vision of the promised future that seems at once both distant and attainable. ◆